Sarny: A Life Remembered Short Guide

Sarny: A Life Remembered by Gary Paulsen

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Overview

Sarny is a sequel to Nightjohn (please see separate entry), also narrated by Sarny. In Nightjohn, Sarny is a twelve-year-old girl who is taught to read and write by an imposing man named Nightjohn. According to Paulsen, he has been asked many times about what happens to Sarny after the ending of Nightjohn, and Sarny is an answer to the questions.

Sarny is an historical novel about the end of slavery in America and the years in the South thereafter, and it is narrated by Sarny, who is ninety-four years old and living in a convalescent hospital to which she committed herself several years before when she realized she could no longer take care of herself. Her story is about the horrors of slavery and the Civil War, yet also fortitude, determination, and intelligence. She is a memorable figure, devoted to her friends, as well as to Nightjohn's mission to bring literacy to African Americans.

About the Author

Gary Paulsen was born on May 17, 1939, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His father served in the military, and in 1946, Paulsen met his father for the first time when he and his mother joined him in the Philippines.

Paulsen remembers running wild at age seven, learning about street life firsthand.

Eventually, in 1949, he and his parents returned to America, moving frequently about the country as his father's postings were changed. He recalls being antisocial and a very poor student until he was a teenager.

He sold newspapers to patrons of bars and learned that if he gave them time to have a few drinks they would pay twentyfive cents instead of ten cents for a paper.

On a cold day while waiting for the right time to start selling his papers, he entered a library to get out of the cold. An elderly librarian asked whether he had come for a library card, and Paulsen defiantly said he had. According to Paulsen, the library card made him feel important, and he became a voracious reader. He can recall reading only one book before that time.

When he was seventeen he joined the army, and although he did not see action himself, he served with veterans of World War II and the Korean War and absorbed their accounts of combat. He used these accounts to create realistic experiences for Charley Goddard in Soldier's Heart. While in the army, he became an expert in missiles, and after his discharge he found work as an engineer at Lockheed. He eventually worked on satellites.

In the 1960s, he changed his direction in life, deciding that he would become a professional writer. His first book was about the Vietnam War and was followed by a river of fiction and nonfiction—a river that was dammed when he was sued for libel for his book Winterdance (1977). His publisher gave him far less help than he expected, his finances were drained, and he was dispirited. Even though he won his case, he stopped writing and headed to the Midwest to live in the wilderness. His experiences from that period show up frequently in his young adult books about surviving in the wilderness.

In the early 1980s, his life took another turn, this time back to writing. Perhaps his third wife, artist Ruth Wright, helped him recover. In any case, he began turning out books for all ages, with his pace picking up each year, and he has become one of America's most prolific writers, and he has prospered, owning his own ranch in Wyoming.

During this period he has tackled controversial topics and often surprised readers with fresh points of view and resisting the stereotype of the tough-guy mountain man.

Setting

Sarny opens on a plantation where Sarny is a slave. She marries and has two children, but her husband Martin is worked to death, and later her children Tyler and Delie are taken from her and sold to help pay off her owner's gambling debts. The first part of the novel is devoted to her search for her children.

This search takes her south and southwest, and as she travels she puts her literacy to use by searching papers at a slave dealer's to discover who has purchased her children and where they have been taken.

They witness the terrible slaughter of the war. Sarny's companion Lucy is at first thrilled to see white men killing each other: "They all white, ain't they? I hope they all kill each other. Wouldn't bother me if every damn one of them died." After witnessing men blown to pieces, others with their insides spilling out, she has a dramatic change of heart. "Freedom sure costs a heap, don't it?" Lucy says over and over. Sarny reminds her that the men in blue are there to free the slaves, and as they walk long roads through the dead and dying, the sacrifice of lives is indelibly impressed upon them.

Even at age ninety-four, Sarny can name each of four young Union soldiers whom she comforted as they lay dying of belly wounds.

The scenes of death and misery include a plantation house, its grownups dead but a small white child Sarny calls "Tyler Two" still alive. The carnage is appalling, and Lucy wants to leave, but Sarny's strong sense of responsibility will not let her leave without the boy. Then Sarny and Lucy's luck takes a turn for the better when a generous white woman, Miss Laura, offers them jobs and takes them to New Orleans in her carriage.

They had heard that New Orleans was a great city, one so big that it could not be seen in one day. Yet Sarny's impression when she sees it is "New Orleans it wasn't much." She had expected towers, maybe castles. Still, New Orleans becomes her home for many years. She works for Miss Laura, remarries, founds a small school for teaching former slaves to read and write, loses her husband to a lynching, saves her earnings until she has enough to live on for several years, and eventually inherits much of Miss Laura's holdings, making her very rich. New Orleans is not described in much detail. There are Miss Laura's grand rooms, a market where Sarny shops and meets her second husband, a riverbank where Sarny reads Shakespeare to her children, and a nice, small cottage where Sarny's family lives and where her husband is snatched and murdered. Sarny says, "There was freedom but it wasn't anywhere near clean yet.

Some places the colored couldn't use and some places they weren't allowed to be and some things they weren't supposed to do."

Among the "things they weren't supposed to do" was hit a white man for burning down a schoolhouse, so her husband Stanley is murdered.

Sarny has a brief, unhappy look at St.

Louis, finding it crowded, hurried, and the people unfriendly. She prefers the slower pace of New Orleans. With Miss Laura dead, her son a doctor, and her daughter a fine businesswoman, Sarny takes up the cause of literacy as her full-time job. Her schools blur together as she travels through Texas, which seems somewhat more hospitable to educated blacks than New Orleans, and there she opens schools and teaches "until I was near eighty years old and had started maybe twenty schools."

Social Sensitivity

The three major social issues of Sarny are slavery, racial relations, and the relations between men and women. Even though slavery is ended near the beginning of the novel, it remains a presence throughout Sarny's narrative. Much of what she experiences is tinted by her memories of slavery.

One example of this is when she is in the plantation house where she finds Tyler Two.

She weeps when comparing it to the miserable slave quarters where she had lived before. But its presence is even felt when she is a wealthy woman, able to do what she wishes. Her constant companion is the memory of how her life had been and how it changed when she learned to read and write. Freedom and literacy are united in her way of thinking, and she devotes her later life to opening schools and teaching illiterate people to read and write. Reading had taught her that the world was much bigger than her plantation, that she did not have to live all her life a slave, that there were places she could go where she would be free. It is this expanded worldview that she wishes to give to others.

The relations between whites and blacks are complex in Sarny and not easily sorted out. At first Lucy just plain hates whites, all of them. Her pleasure at white men killing white men disappears after witnessing what white soldiers of the Union endure as they march through the South, freeing slaves.

Sarny and Lucy's views of racial matters are fairly narrow, at first seen from the perspective of young women who had known nothing of a world beyond their immediate neighborhood. The brutality of the Civil War and the sufferings of the soldiers are surprises to them. Sarny realizes that there are good white people and bad ones. This makes her open-minded enough to accept Miss Laura's offer of a job.

In New Orleans, the relationship between the races is at first somewhat mystifying.

Absent is some of the contempt whites showed toward blacks on plantations, but there is an edge to how some whites view blacks. Sarny notes that many white people are terrified that blacks will "get back" at them; perhaps the people in white robes and hoods are a product of this fear. When Sarny opens a school where she can teach reading and writing an hour or two a day, someone burns it down. The second school is burned down, too, and she sees the white men who do it. The term racism is not one she uses, but from a modern perspective, what she witnesses and endures is racism.

The relationship between genders is seen from the perspective of women. Two are former slaves, the other a prosperous lady of the evening. "I know many men. It is my business to know men," declares Miss Laura. She is sure that she can manipulate men to get what she wants, as well as to retrieve Sarny's children. Sarny expands on this: Men think they have power and some do but it's only show power. Like bulls getting ready to fight. All dust and pain.

Women have the underneath power. Little push here, littler push there and things happen. Men don't see it but it's so. They think they own everything can be done but it ain't that way.

There is friction between men and women throughout Sarny, and men are often presented as being easily manipulated. Certainly, Miss Laura gets her way with seeming ease. For instance, when her road is blocked by Union troops, she produces a letter from a general saying that she has free passage and the troops are cleared from her way. When she retrieves Sarny's children from Chivington, she says of him, "It's all right. I've got the silly fool thinking he's done a good thing, saving your children for you. God, men are so .. . so simple." The influence that Sarny and Miss Laura have over men is not always good. For example, when Martin wants to run away with Sarny to the North, Sarny wishes to remain on the plantation because she is not sure the children could handle the rigors of running away.

Martin does not run because of this, and he is worked to death. As another example, when Sarny tells Stanley about the men who burned her school, he gets worked up and beats one of the men she saw; he is lynched for this.

Literary Qualities

The narrator of Sarny is a ninety-fouryear-old woman looking back on events that were crucial to her becoming the woman she is. Very well read and proud of her literacy, she writes well, with her prose style colored by a few dialectical idioms such as following nouns with pronouns, as in "Miss Laura she ... " This makes the narrative easily readable, while the idioms give it a strong sense of place and time.

Themes and Characters

"The brain don't know it gets old," laments ninety-four-year-old Sarny at the start of Sarny. She remembers herself as a young woman who had learned to read and write while still a slave, and she remembers how she lived in the days right after the end of slavery in America. Her novel is not only narrated by her but is mostly about her. As her reminiscences progress, she matures, gains an ever better understanding of the world, and manages to survive in a society that remains tilted against her, even though she is a free woman.

Her growth is bought with pain and love, as well as a burning hatred for those who have oppressed her. One thing she and Lucy are determined about is to tolerate no more abuse at the hands of white masters.

One thing Sarny painfully learns after her second husband is lynched is that her oppressors hide within hoods and are hard to find. She responds to their cowardice with courage; she builds her schools, and rebuilds them after they are burned. Even after years of hard, dedicated work have earned her the ability to rest and enjoy life, she presses on with her mission to teach.

She only quits working because of her body, which ages and stops cooperating with her.

Even so, her mind remains young, and her memories are fresh, and her narrative is proof that her spirit can even overcome an aged body, because by writing Sarny, she continues to be a teacher, to educate people about the past and hard-won freedom.

Lucy repeats, "Freedom sure costs a heap, don't it?" The price paid by soldiers is great, and there seems little doubt that whatever other reasons they may have for fighting the Civil War, the Union troops have also come to free slaves. When a Union soldier runs the brutal Waller through with a bayonet, he is symbolically putting slavery to death. Both Lucy and Sarny see this right away: "Lucy she took to freedom right smart and wasn't anybody going to step on it." They have suffered too much and have seen too much suffering on behalf of freedom to surrender even a part of it once they have it.

Sarny views Lucy as a daughter or younger sister, someone who needs to be watched after. Lucy's casual flirtation with men is something Sarny keeps a close eye on; times are dangerous, and not all men, even Union soldiers, are good men. What they find in a ravaged plantation house where they find Tyler Two is proof of that. On the other hand, Sarny herself is unworldly at first.

She and Lucy were kept ignorant by their owner; they read only books and pieces of newspaper they stole. They are ignorant of many of the basics of American society; Miss Laura even has to teach them how to use a fork. Bartlett must teach them such rudimentaries as how to shop for food and how to cook on a stove.

Bartlett is a symbol of the worst of slavery. "He's [Bartlett] a eunuch," Miss Laura tells Sarny. At first, Sarny does not know what eunuch means; when she does, she is horrified. A slave owner had "cut" him, she realizes. There is much sadness as well as horror in this, because "Bartlett he turned out to be the finest, most gentle and understanding man I ever knew," and he is good with children: "Bartlett he was like a gentle bear." He might have made a fine father. As his life stands, Miss Laura and Miss Laura's friends are all the family he has. It is no wonder that Miss Laura's sudden death breaks him apart.

Sarny says that Miss Laura was the "Prettiest white woman I ever saw. Oval face, black hair pulled back with a silk scarf over it, brown eyes as big as a plate and white teeth." Miss Laura is more than fashionable good looks and Southern gentility; she is courageous and keeps her word. She hires Lucy and Sarny at twenty dollars a month to work for her at her New Orleans home.

When she learned how Miss Laura earns her money from her men friends, Sarny says she just chose to ignore that aspect of Miss Laura, who was a good friend even more than a boss. Even though Lucy and her first husband head north where blacks may find better jobs, Sarny stays with Miss Laura.

Neither of Sarny's husbands lives very long, and they are not well-rounded characters. Martin fathers Tyler and Delie, wants to run away north, where his reading tells him there is no slavery, remains on the plantation because Sarny does not want to risk the children, and dies from outright overwork. Sarny points out that this was more common farther south, where working field slaves to death was considered economical. Martin made Sarny's stomach jump when she saw him; he is the great passion of her life. Second husband Stanley is a bit more fleshed out than Martin. He sells fish at a stall in the marketplace where Sarny shops. When she sees him, she notes that he "Carried himself straight up and down. Deep black with a wide smile and eyes that seemed on the edge of laughing.

Found myself looking on my next husband.

But I didn't know it then." They seem destined for a comfortable marriage; if Stanley did not make Sarny jump the way Martin did, she nonetheless loves him. Miss Laura buys them a nice cottage, and middle-class contentment seems theirs. When Sarny wants to teach reading and writing to people who can do neither, he encourages her; Miss Laura discourages her. When Sarny's schools are burned twice and she sees who does it, Stanley chooses to have a man-toman confrontation about it. He assumes that as a free man, he is allowed, and he believes white people will recognize the justice in his action. But those who burned the schools are not manly; hidden in robes and hoods, they murder Stanley. Sarny (and Paulsen) leave a mystery about Miss Laura unexplained. When trying to talk Sarny out of starting a literacy school for blacks, Miss Laura says, "There are many who do not want us colored to learn reading and writing." "Us colored"? Perhaps this pertains to Miss Laura's earlier remark that she knows about slave quarters, that there are different kinds of such quarters.

Sarny's adventures are motivated by her desire to be reunited with her children, and they are the happiest part of Sarny's life of hard, devoted work. Miss Laura throws a party to lure Chivington, the man who purchased the children, to her home. One of Sarny's jobs was to answer the door and check coats, and "Tyler and little Delie walked right past me into the room full of people." Out of the suffering of Sarny stands her two children, to whom she is a fine mother. One of her fondest memories is of sharing her love of Shakespeare with her children by reading his plays to them while sitting on a riverbank. One of Sarny's characteristics is a passion for learning; she reads almost anything she can, and Shakespeare was a particular revelation to her.

Her love of reading also shows in her love of introducing others to reading, and her children seem to have picked this up. Tyler goes to medical school, and "was a doctor for over thirty years." He has children and grandchildren. Delie marries Isaac, a nice man, and they have children of their own.

Delie turns out to have an excellent head for business and runs her mother's affairs while her mother establishes schools in Texas.

Delie dies too young, at sixty: "Too short to live, sixty. You don't really learn much on life until then and it's a shame not to get to use it," says Sarny.

Paulsen says that "everything in it [Sarny] is true in the sense that it happened to someone." Of the characters in the novel, Lucy comes closest to speaking for Paulsen, whose hand is otherwise hidden behind the characterization of Sarny. For instance: "War don't care," Lucy said, sitting under the oak with the blanket over us. "Don't care about people, don't care about horses, don't care about weather—war it just goes on no matter."

This echoes sentiments in Paulsen's The Rifle (please see separate entry) and Soldier's Heart (please see separate entry). Lucy also gives voice to some of the anger Paulsen has said he feels about the treatment of Sally Hemings and perhaps others like her.

Her rage at white people becomes tempered by her recognition that different white people had different attitudes toward her and toward slavery. Even so, she swears she will cut anyone who tries to treat her like a slave again. Otherwise, Paulsen does an excellent job of keeping his voice out of Sarny's narrative. There is a magical feel to Sarny, as if she is a real person telling a true story. Perhaps Paulsen's careful use of true events in people's lives makes Sarny seem to have had real experiences, making her seem real. Or perhaps Sarny is the happy joining of an author to a character that is so intimate that it is if she is speaking through him.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why would Lucy and Sarny think skirmishes between a couple of hundred men were big battles?

2. When does Lucy stop hating white people? Why does she? How does this develop the themes of the novel?

3. Why does Miss Laura leave most of her wealth to Sarny and not to Bartlett or to one of her other friends?

4. Why does Sarny remember the names of the four dying Union soldiers in 1930, about sixty-five years after they died?

5. Why does Sarny think of Lucy as a "cross between a daughter and a younger sister"?

6. Lucy seemed to be in a good situation working for Miss Laura. Why would she wish to go to the North to live?

7. Why would being in the large plantation house make Sarny cry?

8. Is Sarny's life ever happy? 9. Why would Sarny be convinced that literacy is important to freedom?

10. Why would Sarny think that reading the works of Shakespeare was almost like reading the Bible?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. When was New Orleans captured and occupied by the Union? Does this fit in with the events in Sarny?

2. Sarny's children are taken to a slave market and sold. How was a slave market in Georgia run in the 1860s?

3. Paulsen explains that "everything in it [Sarny] is true in the sense that it happened to someone" in real life. Can you find any of the events in Sarny in history books? What do you discover, and where do you discover it?

4. The Ku Klux Klan murders Stanley.

Where was the KKK founded? What was its purpose in the years just after the Civil War? Why did it lynch people?

5. Why would it have required money and political connections in New Orleans to have a guilty white man convicted for murdering Stanley?

6. Sarny mentions that Stanley had to be interred aboveground because of the water. What kind of land is under New Orleans? Why would water in the ground be a problem? How does New Orleans cope with the problem?

7. Why was it illegal for slaves to be able to read and write in some states before the Civil War?

8. Why would Texas have been a good place to open schools after the Civil War and into the 1910s or so, when Sarny retired?

9. Tyler becomes a physician. Where would he have gone to be educated in the 1870s and 1880s? Where would he have earned his medical degree?

10. What would New Orleans have looked like in the late 1860s? Where might Miss Laura have lived? Where were the marketplaces where Sarny would have shopped and perhaps met Stanley? Where would the riverbanks be that Sarny and her children could have sat on while Sarny read aloud? Where might Sarny and Stanley's cottage have been?

11. Are there any ideas in Nightjohn that are expanded or further developed in Sarny?

12. The phrase "sold down the river" does not appear in Sarny, but it is relevant to some of the events in the novel. What are the origins of the phrase? What did it originally mean?

For Further Reference

Beavin, Kristi. Horn Book Magazine (November 1998): 768. This is a review of the audiocassette version of Sarny. Beavin says that Lynn Thigpen does a fine job of narrating the novel.

Buchholz, Rachel. "My Life's Work: Author." Boys' Life 85, 12 (December 1995): 28-30. Mentions how Paulsen uses his personal experiences in his fiction.

DeCandido, GraceAnne A. Booklist 94, 3 (October 1, 1997): 331. DeCandido says that Sarny "is a great read, with characters both to hate and to cherish, and a rich sense of what it really was like then."

Deveraux, Elizabeth. "Gary Paulsen: A Taste for Adventure and an Obsessive Work Ethic Are This Versatile Writer's Hallmarks." Publishers Weekly 241, 13 (March 28, 1994): 70-71. Mentions Paulsen's participation in the Iditarod.

Diehl, Digby. "Author, Author!" Modern Maturity 38, 4 (July-August 1995): 12. A profile of Paulsen.

Gale, David. "The Maximum Expression of Being Human." School Library Journal 43, 6 (June 1997): 24-29. Commentary with an interview on Paulsen's career.

Paulsen, Gary. "The Booklist Interview: Gary Paulsen." Booklist (January 1, 1999): 864.

In an interview by Stephanie Zvirin, Paulsen mentions the importance of reading when he was young. "I was an 'at risk' kid, as they are called now, and a poor student," says Paulsen. About Soldier's Heart, he says, "It's truth I'm after.

No part of the Civil War was nice."

. Eastern Sun, Winter Moon: An Autobiographical Odyssey. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993. An account of Paulsen's life during World War II and in the Philippines. Its style is as blunt as that of Soldier's Heart. There is an analysis of Eastern Sun, Winter Moon in volume 8 of Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults.

. "Write What You Are." Writer's Digest 74, 7 (July 1994): 42-45. In this interview by Cheryl Bartky, Paulsen talks about experiences that are sources for his books.

Publishers Weekly 244, 33 (August 11, 1997): 403. A positive review of Sarny.

Roback, Diane. "Paulsen Inks Long-Term Deal with HB." Publishers Weekly 240, 6 (February 8, 1993): 10. About Paulsen's relationship with his publisher Harcourt Brace.

Shook, Bruce Anne. School Library Journal 43, 9 (September 1997): 224. Highly recommends Sarny.

Weidt, Maryann N. "The Fortunes of Poverty." Writer's Digest 72,1 (January 1992): 8. According to Paulsen, the best writing advice is "Learn to live with poverty."

Related Titles/Adaptations

Paulsen says that he wanted to write a biography of Sally Hemings, a slave who may have been Thomas Jefferson's mistress. He could not find enough information on her to write a biography, but during his research, he found a book of interviews with former slaves. This book inspired Nightjohn, which in its turn inspired Sarny.

Nightjohn is narrated by Sarny, a twelveyear-old girl. An adult male slave named Nightjohn is brought to the plantation of Clay Waller. Nightjohn is an escaped slave who has voluntarily returned to slavery so that he may teach slaves how to read and write. It is his belief that literacy can help make slaves free. Sarny learns to read and write from Nightjohn, and as the novel Sarny makes apparent, she is inspired by his vision of literacy as a weapon for freedom.

A recording of Sarny: A Life Remembered was released by Recorded Books in 1998 on three cassettes. It is read by Lynn Thigpen.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996