The Winter Room Study Guide

The Winter Room by Gary Paulsen

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

The Winter Room is a portrait of idyllic rural life. Its focus is a Minnesota family of six: a husband and wife, their two sons, and two bachelor relatives.

Although few dramatic events happen to this family, the book is one of Paulsen's most distinctive and original novels.

The novel has three parts that are interrelated by mood and theme rather than plot. The book opens with a short section entitled "Tuning," a lyric prose poem on the power of books as imaginative experience. The second section is composed of four chapters. Each one paints a portrait of one of the seasons of the year. Arranged like movements in a symphony, these chapters explore how each season brings its characteristic activities to the farm and creates its special feelings in the family. The year described is not a particular year but every year's common and inevitable happenings.

The third section has another four chapters. They are stories told by an uncle as the narrator recalls them. The last one inadvertently leads to the climactic crisis of the novel, a silent schism between the uncle and his nephews. The confrontation is a moment of truth for both sides: the boys learn a secret about adulthood, and their uncle reverses for a moment the irresistible march of time.

About the Author

Gary Paulsen was born May 17, 1939, in Minneapolis, Minnesota shortly after his father, a career-army officer, left for duty in war-torn Europe. He spent the years of World War II partly with his mother in Chicago (who worked in a munitions factory) and partly with relatives in Minnesota.

Paulsen did not meet his father until 1946 when he and his mother were reunited with his father in the Philippines. He spent his adolescence as an "army brat," moving frequently, staying no longer than five months in any school, and often spent long periods with relatives such as a grandmother or an aunt. Paulsen has summed up his childhood thus: "I didn't have a home life; frankly, my parents were drunks."

Indeed, Father Water, Mother Woods (1994), a series of essays about hunting and fishing in the North woods as a child, relates how he used these activities as a substitute father and mother.

His experience as a wandering self-reliant child set a pattern for his life.

In 1957 Paulsen entered Bemidji College but only stayed a year before joining the army. Serving until 1962, he attained rank of sergeant and took extension courses until he accrued enough credits to become an engineer.

During the next four years, Paulsen worked at a variety of jobs: field engineer, associate editor of a men's magazine, even a movie extra in Hollywood.

In 1966 he published his first book, The Special War, a nonfiction work based on interviews with servicemen returning from Vietnam. Paulsen continued a peripatetic career during the following decade as teacher, director, farmer, rancher, truck driver, trapper, professional archer, migrant farm worker, singer, and sailor. In 1976 he resumed his education at the University of Colorado and concentrated on writing; in this period he became one of the country's most prolific writers, publishing over 200 articles and more than threedozen books, including career guides, sports, and "how-to" books. Unfortunately, his work did not generate much financial profit; a series of "business reverses" with publishers in Colorado left him "totally broke and then minus broke."

A year later Paulsen went to Minnesota, one of his youthful homes, because he knew he could survive by gardening for food and burning firewood for fuel. Abandoning writing for a while, he lived in poverty, typically earning only $2,300 a year by trapping fur-bearing animals for the state.

The year 1983 brought two significant changes in Paulsen's life: a new direction in writing and an invigorating passion, sled-dog racing. Through the earlier gift of a ramshackle sled and a few dogs to help him trap game, he became interested in running the Iditarod, the great Alaskan dog sled race; his experiences with sled dogs and races transformed him. One alteration was that he was motivated to resume writing,

concentrating on subjects that interested him—the wilderness, dogs, sledding, surviving off the land—instead of the category novels and nonfiction he wrote formerly. He began composing in longhand every day (although he now uses a computer), in the kennel or by the campfire while the dogs rested. Dogsong, Hatchet, and several other books were written in this way. The same year Paulsen began to write for Richard Jackson, then at Bradbury Press, and developed a new focus: young adult fiction.

Since the publication of Dancing Carl in 1983, Paulsen's career has flourished. He has written numerous, successful books about the subjects that he knows the best: the wilderness, dogs, sledding, surviving off the land. A ma jority have strong autobiographical elements. Three of Paulsen's novels, Dogsong, The Winter Room, and Hatchet, are Newbery Honor Books; many of his other works have won various local and national awards. Paulsen is now successful enough to own a ranch in New Mexico (where he lives with his wife Ruth Wright Paulsen, photographer and artist) and maintain residences in several states. Paulsen wears his success lightly, believing that when people are living simply they really have what they need. He has decided he was as happy in poverty as he is now in affluence.

A popular speaker on the bookstore, library, and school lecture circuit, Paulsen nonetheless chafes at the restraints the demands of book promotions puts on his time. Although a heart condition forced him to give up running the Iditarod (and the as many as ninety-one dogs he kept), the lifelong adventurer, in his free time, pushes his own physical limits. One summer he took a team of horses up to 12,000 feet and did pack trips for a week; another summer he rode a Harley-Davidson motorcycle to Alaska.

Although survivalist themes dominate his novels of the last decade, recently he has tried historical and comic fiction also. Paulsen's popularity with adolescent readers results from their mutual identification. He frankly speaks his views on adults and children: "adults stink" and have "polluted the earth. . . . Kids haven't done that." Like Peter Pan, he wants never to grow up or old: "I kind of wish I wasn't an adult."

Plot Summary

The Winter Room is a short novel written from the point of view of Eldon, a boy who lives with his family on a farm in northern Minnesota in the first half of the 20th century. Eldon lives with his parents and older brother, Wayne, and two elderly uncles, David and Nels, Norwegian immigrants who came to America to work as wood cutters.

The novel takes place over the course of a year on the farm, beginning in the spring. It is a time of bad smells, Eldon recalls, as the world is thawing out from winter. The summer is passed with hard work on the farm, although Eldon is sometimes excused from the most strenuous labor because a childhood illness has left him weak. The family takes occasional trips into the nearest town to sell grain, purchase things and socialize with other farm families. At harvest time, they gather together to help their neighbors. One fall day, the family travels by wagon to a nearby lake for a picnic and some swimming.

As cold weather and the first snow approach in winter, the family spends its evenings in the corner room of the small farmhouse where they live, arranged around the wood stove, listening to the stories of Uncle David about his younger days in Norway as well as tales from Norwegian folklore. This room, which Eldon says others refer to as the "living room," is the "winter room" which gives the novel its name.

Uncle David's stories are a mixture of truth and folklore and Eldon assumes that his brother Wayne understands they are not to be taken as literal truth. When Uncle David tells a story about himself as a young woodcutter who could perform incredible feats with an ax, such as perfectly splitting a piece of firewood lengthwise with one ax in each hand, Wayne becomes very upset. He takes Eldon aside and tells him Uncle David is only a braggart and a liar.

Uncle David overhears Wayne's remark, however, and is devastated. For many days he only sits quietly with the family in the winter room, telling no stories. Eldon is furious with Wayne for having hurt Uncle David, and the two boys are fighting about it one day when they spy Uncle David at the woodpile, an ax in each hand. They watch in wonder as the old man seems to grow young again and swings both axes, perfectly splitting a log in two.

The boys do not tell Uncle David what they saw, but that night he is once again entertaining them with fabulous stories.

Tuning and Spring

Tuning and Spring Summary

The author opens the novel with a short foreword entitled "Tuning." "If books could show more, could own more, this book would have smells," he writes, "and sounds as well." He describes the smells and sounds of a farm that are missing from the written page and tells the reader that supplying these things is a task charged to the reader's imagination.

The first full chapter of the novel is called "Spring." A young boy named Eldon lives on a farm in northern Minnesota. It is springtime, supposedly a time of renewal and awakening, but as Eldon explains, on a farm it is a time when everything starts to smell bad. The manure pile is a specific example. In the winter it freezes and does not smell. In the spring, it thaws.

The farm also gets muddy, and one of Eldon's chores is to help the calves that get stuck in the mud, a task that inevitably ends with him falling in the mud himself.

Eldon lives with his parents and older brother, Wayne. There are two elderly men that also live with the family, Uncle David and Nels. Their farm has been cleared from the thick forest that covers most of the region, each tree cut and the stumps pulled out by Eldon's father.

The farmhouse they live in has four room on the main floor. The kitchen is Eldon's favorite room, and is where the family cooks and eats. Next to it is a "dining room," where the family never actually dines. The dining room has a nice table and an old piano, which Eldon has never heard anyone play. In the middle of the dining room table is placed the most recent copy of the "Farm Gazette," a colorful magazine that nobody is allowed to read. It is put there solely for decoration by Eldon's mother. Eldon's parents' bedroom is also on the main floor.

The fourth room on the main floor of the house is the "winter room." Other families might refer to such a room as the "living room," Eldon explains, but the name makes no sense to him since the family lives in the entire house. The winter room has a wood stove and is where the family passes the cold winter evenings. Upstairs are two bedrooms, one shared by Eldon and Wayne and the other shared by Nels and Uncle David. The room of the elderly men is decorated with pictures, but Nels' side has only pictures of horses while David's side has calendar pictures of pretty girls. David also has several books in Norwegian, the native language of David, Nels and Eldon's father.

The farm has a barn and granary, and several farm animals. One of the chores of Eldon and Wayne is to wean calves by teaching them to drink milk from a bucket, a chore that Wayne dislikes and tries to trade off with Eldon to avoid.

One spring day the family goes into the nearest town where Eldon's father and mother go dancing at a beer hall. The boys, bored with watching the dancing, explore the beer hall and discover a copy of a western novel by Zane Grey called "Guns Along the Powder River." They borrow the book from Mr. Engstrom, the owner of the beer hall, and are engrossed by the cowboy hero named Jed.

In one of the scenes in the Western novel, Jed escapes his captors by jumping from a second-story window onto his waiting horse. Wayne gets the idea that he would like to try the stunt himself and enlists Eldon's help. One day when their parents have gone visiting to a neighbor's, the boys take Stacker, one of the two gentle farm horses, and lead him under the door to the hayloft. Eldon is skeptical of Wayne's judgment, but holds the horse in place while Wayne climbs up to the loft. After calling out a line from the book, Wayne jumps down, but misjudges the distance and lands in the manure and mud, the wind knocked out of him. He is alright, but Eldon cannot keep from laughing, which angers Wayne. From that day on, Eldon would tease him about the episode.

Tuning and Spring Analysis

The introductory chapter, which stands apart from the rest of the novel, introduces a central theme. Language cannot exactly reproduce experience, the author writes. It is up to the reader to recreate the experiences using his own imagination. Each reader's experience will be unique. At the end of the novel, the character Wayne will have trouble reconciling his imagination with his own experience as he listens to his uncle tell a story about himself.

In the chapter Spring, the narrator and his family are introduced. Eldon proves to be a careful and opinionated observer of his environment. Although he is told that spring is a time of renewal and life, he instead associates it with the decay of the manure pile that warms up in spring and starts to smell bad. The relationship between Wayne and Eldon is established in this opening chapter. Wayne is the older brother who often gets his way because of his age and size, but Eldon does not allow himself to be bullied. The boys are close, constantly playing together and confiding in one another, but they occasionally fight as well.

The episode where Wayne jumps from the hayloft onto the draft horse below is a comical incident that also displays how Wayne becomes immersed in stories. The fictional description of the cowboy jumping onto his horse from a high window is real enough to him that he believes he could do it himself.

Summer

Summer Summary

Summer on the farm is a time of hard work, Eldon explains. He himself is excused from much of the hardest labor because of his age and also because he has been left in somewhat fragile health after a severe childhood illness. Wayne is older and stronger, and at an age where he is expected to work on the farm when he is not at school. Eldon is still young enough to be taken along in the family's old Ford truck to town with his father when he takes his plowshares to the blacksmith for sharpening. On these trips, Eldon is given a nickel to spend on candy and although he is supposed to keep some to share with his brother, he often does not.

Plowing is the only time Eldon's father uses a tractor. He spends long days slowly plowing, with Eldon's mother bringing food out to him at noontime. After the plowing is done, he uses the draft horses, Stacker and Jim, to break the soil down with a harrow.

The summer is the time for cutting hay, leaving the grass in rows to dry before gathering it into stacks to be used for livestock food over the winter. After the haying is done it is time to thrash.

Thrashing is when the harvested oat stalks are beaten with a large thrashing machine to remove the oats. It is a social event in which neighbors come together to help. Each family brings an enormous amount of food to share. Eldon describes tables bending under the weight of all the delicious food. Eldon notices that his father's mood during thrashing depends on the success of the harvest.

The thrashing machine spits out the oat straw in a large pile near the barn, and Eldon and Wayne enjoy jumping from the hayloft door into the springy pile. Their parents watch them in amusement.

After the thrashing there is another cutting of hay to take in, and then corn to harvest to provide more animal feed. The days are long and everyone works very hard, Eldon explains, describing how his father is sometimes near exhaustion at the end of the day and sits hunched over as Eldon's mother rubs his shoulders. Just as it seems like the work will never end, Eldon says, one day his father will tell the boys to hitch up the horses because it's time to go to the lake. This signals the arrival of fall.

Summer Analysis

The chapter called Summer is a description of the busiest time on the farm. The work is constant, with little time for anything else. As the weather begins to change, the work gradually increases, but for Eldon the real mark of the beginning of summer is when his father takes the plowshares into town to be sharpened. These changes between the seasons and how Eldon defines them are a recurrent theme through the novel. Each

season has a distinct beginning in Eldon's mind, but there are also periods in between the seasons where the previous one has dwindled away but the next one has not yet started.

The extremely hard labor of farm work is made clear through Eldon's observations. Although he himself is excused from the hardest work because of his health and age, he observes his aching father at the end of the day and describes days that do not end until after 10 o'clock at night.

There are social occasions involved with the hard work, however, such as when the neighbors come together to thrash oats. There are opportunities for play, as well. As one might expect from a narrator of Eldon's age, these episodes centered on eating and playing are central in his recollections.

The transitional point between summer and fall for Eldon is the family's annual trip to a nearby lake for a picnic. In the passage describing the picnic, a little is learned about the past of Eldon's parents, who used to visit the same lake when they were courting. Eldon's father had carved their names on a tree there, inspiring Wayne and Eldon to do the same. Eldon's father still makes complementary remarks to his mother, causing her to blush. Their continued love and attraction to one another is apparent, as seen through the innocent eyes of the young narrator.

Fall and Winter

Fall and Winter Summary

Fall starts off pleasantly enough, Eldon explains, but he actually hates the season. The trip to the lake is a break from the hard work and the family enjoys a leisurely day eating and talking and swimming. The spot they visit is a favorite of Eldon's parents, and a place they visited together when they were courting. There is a tree nearby on which his father once carved their names. The family eats steaks and pork chops and returns home well after dark.

After the trip to the lake, however, is butchering time, and this is why Eldon hates the fall. Each year his father kills a steer, shooting it with a rifle and pulling its body up in the barn to butcher it. This is horrible enough, Edlon explains, but butchering the pigs is much worse. Nels and Uncle David hold the pig down while Eldon's father cuts its throat with the butchering knife. The screaming of the pig and the blood is almost too much for Eldon, who is reminded of his childhood illness when he regularly coughed up blood.

After the pig, the chickens and geese are killed and Eldon helps his mother with the unpleasant task of plucking the feathers. It is a somber time of the year, with nobody enjoying the killing except the family dog, Rex.

In the chapter called "Winter," Eldon and his brother argue about whether there are "divisions in things." By this Eldon means a place between things where it is neither one thing or the other, like a time between days when it is neither yesterday nor tomorrow. Wayne argues there is not while Eldon insists there is, and the boys actually come to blows over it.

Eldon gives the example of the time between fall and winter when all the fall work is done and the days start to get cooler, but it still has not yet snowed. This is the "time in between," Eldon says. Winter comes with the first snow.

The snow changes everything, Eldon explains, covering things over and making a new landscape. In the winter is when the family spends their evenings in the winter room. After supper, Wayne and Eldon wash the dishes while their father fills the wood stove in the winter room. Each person has his place, with two chairs reserved for Uncle David and Nels near the stove and a large chair for Eldon's father. Their mother sits on the couch while the boys sit on a braided rug on the floor near the stove where they can look through the small window in the door at the fire. Uncle David and Nels chew tobacco and spit in cans near their chairs, while Father works on a wood carving.

Every night after everyone has taken their places and the fire is blazing, Uncle David begins to tell stories. He starts every night with the same one, the story of Alida, who was his wife in Norway.

Fall and Winter Analysis

The butchering season is an unpleasant time for everyone except the family dog, Eldon notices. Although his father and uncles say nothing about their distaste for the chores of slaughtering, he correctly interprets their silence.

After the slaughtering is finished comes the transitional time between fall and winter, according to Eldon. He associates each season with the activities that are specific to it, and this time between the slaughter and the first snow does not appear to have any significant tasks or chores that define it as part of one season or the other. The weather begins to get colder and the days shorter, but it is not until it actually snows that Eldon considers winter to have started. The snow signals the beginning of the season where the family spends its evenings around the wood stove in the winter room.

Alida and Orud the Terrible

Alida and Orud the Terrible Summary

Uncle David tells the story of when he was a young man in Norway. Considered too young to help the older men, he was made to sit and sharpen the woodcutting tools. While sitting and working at sharpening, a young woman named Alida walks by and David is immediately taken with her beauty. They soon marry, and David begins working as a woodcutter. They save money intending to go to America. Alida becomes pregnant, but she and the child both die during birth.

David is heartsick and goes wandering through the woods in the snow until his brother comes to find him. With his brother, he goes to America and works as a woodcutter. He never marries again or even looks at another woman, he says. His heart still aches for Alida.

This is one of many stories that Uncle David tells during the winters, Eldon explains, and one of the few that really stick in his mind. There are three others that have a similar importance to him, including one that had a great impact on him and his brother. He proceeds to describe the stories.

"Orud the Terrible" is a traditional Norwegian tale, related in this chapter in the voice of Uncle David. Orud the Red was a terrible viking who led men to sea to raid other countries. On one of the raids, the vikings capture a beautiful long-haired woman named Melena. As leader of the men, Orud had the right to claim Melena for himself, but so did the man who first captured her. Orud fights the man and kills him, winning Melena for his own. Instead of burying the slain man with honor, as he should have done, Orud puts his his head on an oar to boast of his victory and has his men sail for home.

As they are nearing home, Melena, who has been tied up, magically releases herself from the ropes and throws herself into the water. In a rage, Orud jumps in after her forgetting he is fully dressed in his heavy armor. He sinks and neither of them are ever seen again.

Bad luck falls on Orud's village after this. The crops fail and people become sick. The legend grows that Orud had found Melena under the sea and taken her for his wife against her will. They live under the water in a cottage. Melena, in revenge against Orud's village for taking her captive, had cursed the people into sickness and when boats were sent out she caught them in her long hair and sunk them.

Uncle David finishes his story, and the family quietly acknowledges it. Soon he has started another story, one about Crazy Alen

Alida and Orud the Terrible Analysis

The evenings in the winter room are almost like a ritual. Every person has an assigned place and performs the same role night after night. Each session of storytelling begins with Uncle David telling the same story that is related in this chapter, the story of how he met and lost his young wife in Norway before coming to America.

While David tells many other stories over the course of a winter, there are some that are especially memorable to Eldon. These stories, which are related over the last part of the book, are of distinctly different types regarding the mix of fact and fiction they contain. This first story is an essentially factual account of Uncle David's own experience. While he embellishes it somewhat with poetic description about the beauty of Alida, there is little question about the factual truth of it.

The next story of Uncle David's is more of a legend or folktale. Orud the Terrible may have been based on an actual person, but he certainly did not end his days living in a cottage under the sea with his vengeful wife. This story is at the opposite end of the spectrum of truth from the story of Alida. The next two stories that Eldon recollects will be somewhere in between the two extremes.

Crazy Alen

Crazy Alen Summary

Crazy Alen was a man that uncle David says he heard stories about when he was a young woodcutter. Alen had been a woodcutter long before David became one, and is legendary for his strength. He is also well-known for being a practical joker. Most of the men enjoyed his jokes, but one day he goes too far and drops a tree directly in front of the outhouse when the foreman is inside. Nobody is hurt, but the foreman is furious that Alen would do something so dangerous and so fires him from the crew.

Alen leaves the camp and builds a small cabin in the forest nearby. The foreman actually becomes good friends with Alen, and hikes out to his cabin to visit him and play checkers. Alen continues to play jokes on the foreman whenever he came, but the foreman only laughs and does not mind.

One winter, Alen falls sick and feels he is about to die. He decides to play the biggest joke of all, his last one. Alen is a very large man, six and a half feet tall. As he feels he is close to death, he opens his cabin door to the frigid cold, lies down on the floor of his small cabin and spreads his arms and legs out wide. He dies wth a smile on his face.

This is how the foreman finds him on his next visit, dead and frozen in position. Alen's cabin door was too small to get his body through with his legs and arms spread out. Alen had known that the foreman would not dream of sawing off his arms and legs or thawing his body out. He also knew the foreman would never just leave his body in the cabin. The foreman chops the door wider with an axe to get Alen through it. His body is so heavy he cannot carry it, and so has to cartwheel it down the long narrow path back to the camp.

Even though the story is about death, Eldon thinks, he finds it funny. He has never thought of death as funny before. He is skeptical about some aspects of the story and wants to ask David about them. He feels Wayne is probably a bit skeptical, too, but he adds that they never question Uncle David's stories. At least, they never questioned anything until one occasion, when he tells "the story that broke things" (p. 84).

Eldon discovers that even though he and Wayne somehow knew that Uncle David's stories were not completely true, they had in another sense come to believe them. The extent to which Wayne had put faith in the stories surprises Eldon when it is revealed to him after the story that "broke things."

Eldon sets the scene for the telling of this story. It is a normal winter evening for the family. After supper, Eldon and Wayne wash the dishes. Eldon's father splits firewood with one of the large shiny axes that once belonged to David and Nels, but which nobody but Eldon's father use any more. Eldon helps carry the wood inside. The family

all take their places around the woodstove and Uncle David begins to tell a story. For the first time, his first story is not about Alida.

Crazy Alen Analysis

The story of Crazy Alen is a "tall tale" that seems to be partly based on fact, but with some fanciful exaggerations added over the course of several retellings. Eldon explains that he had some doubts about some of the escapades of Crazy Alen, but he observes that nobody ever questions Uncle David's stories so he keeps quiet. The story sets up the final story, the story that "broke things," by introducing the form of the tall tale that it scarcely believable. It also develops the question of whether stories such as the ones Uncle David tells should be received as literal truth, as complete fabrications, or whether they exist in some kind of place in between fact and fiction.

After the telling of the story of Crazy Alen, the scene is set for the central episode of the novel, the reaction of Wayne to the story of the woodcutter. It is a typical winter evening and the family goes through it usual ritual. Uncle David breaks the ritual however, when does not start off the evening's session of story telling with the story of Alida.

The Woodcutter

The Woodcutter Summary

The story of the woodcutter opens the final chapter. Uncle David tells of the time when he was a young man working in the logging camps of Minnesota. The forest is thick and the woodcutters stay perpetually busy cutting down every tree they can until large sections of the forest are empty. The logs are moved by horses along the frozen lakes and rivers.

Among the many strong woodcutters is one who stands out. "It was said that no man could use an ax like him," Uncle David says (p. 90). Men stop their own work to watch him wield his ax and many stories rise up about his abilities. One story says he can put a wooden match in a stump and split it with his eyes closed, while lighting both halves of the match. Another story told that he shaved with an ax. Another said that he could take two axes, one in each hand, and swing them toward each other to split a four-foot long piece of firewood, with the ax blades meeting in the middle. All of these stories are true, Uncle David adds.

At this point in the story, Eldon's father interrupts. "But that was you. All of those things were about you," he says to Uncle David (p. 91). At this, Eldon senses his brother getting angry. Wayne stares at Uncle David with an accusing look. He is furious, but he remains silent. The boys never talk during the stories.

Uncle David finishes the story, which describes how the young woodcutter thought he would work forever, but it all ended as the forests were all cut and the woodcutter got old. Wayne remains quiet, his body stiff with anger. Eldon does not understand what has made him so mad.

Eldon hopes that Wayne will tell him what has angered him as the boys are going to sleep in their room that night, but Wayne stays quiet, although Eldon can hear he is still awake. The next day, Wayne calls Eldon to the granary, to a special place behind one of the bins where the boys sometimes sit and talk. The first words Wayne says when the boys reach the granary are, "He's lying" (p. 93).

This is what has upset Wayne. He tells Eldon that all of Uncle David's stories have been lies. When Eldon replies that they are just stories and not meant to be completely true, Wayne responds that it was that Uncle David had included himself in the story that made things unbearable. His unbelievable stories about splitting a match in two or cutting a long piece of firewood with two axes at one are simply empty bragging. Wayne begins to cry. Eldon has not realized until this point how much faith Wayne has put in Uncle David's stories. Wayne, still crying, begins repeating over and over that Uncle David is a liar.

Eldon looks up and sees Uncle David standing nearby. He has overheard what Wayne said, and Eldon sees hurt in his eyes. Eldon tries to warn Wayne, but it is too late. Uncle David walks away, crestfallen. That night, the boys hardly eat any of their dinner and afterward, Uncle David tells no stories. This continues for several nights, and becomes nearly unbearable for Eldon, who grows increasingly angry at his brother for hurting Uncle David.

Over the next few days, Eldon's anger at Wayne gets so intense he finally attacks him as the boys are playing in the hayloft. The boys struggle until Wayne, the larger of the two, has Eldon pinned. Eldon tries to get free, but notices that Wayne has stopped paying attention to him and is instead looking at something outside, through a gap in the boards of the barn. He lets Eldon loose, and Eldon sees what he is looking at. It is Uncle David.

Uncle David is standing near a pile of four-foot logs near the barn, staring at the pile. He looks sad, Eldon thinks, and he has an urge to run down and comfort him. Before he can, however, Uncle David goes into the granary and returns with two large axes, one in each hand. Eldon immediately sees what he plans to do and is afraid he will get hurt. He wants to call out, but Wayne silences him.

Uncle David carefully selects a log and puts it on the ground, standing to one side with the axes in his hands. He looks old and frail, Eldon thinks, but suddenly seems to grow. It is as if some kind of power comes up through the earth, and the old man looks young again to the boys, who are watching with fascination. It is as if time slows down as Uncle David raises the axes back and brings them down toward each other in a blur, striking the log on each end and splitting it perfectly, with the axe blades meeting each other in the center.

The boys are crying. Eldon wants to run to Uncle David to tell him they saw what he had done but Wayne stops him. "It was for him. All for him," Wayne says (p. 102). Eldon realizes Wayne is right. Uncle David carefully puts the split log back on the pile and takes the axes back to the granary. The boys stay where they are until he goes back in the house. That evening, they enjoy a good supper again and afterward Uncle David tells the story of Alida as usual, followed by another story from Norwegian legend. The boys listen.

The Woodcutter Analysis

The final chapter of the novel includes both the central conflict and resolution of the novel. The fourth story of Uncle David's, about a nameless woodcutter who could perform unbelievable feats with an ax, seems on the surface to be a tall tale of the Minnesota logging camps in the same vein as Crazy Alen. Eldon's father does what nobody has ever done before, however, and interrupts Uncle David's story to reveal that he is actually talking about himself and his own abilities when he was a younger man.

Wayne's reaction is immediate and puzzling to Eldon. He soon learns that the single story has changed all of Uncle David's stories for Wayne. Where Eldon has recognized that the stories exist on their own, independent of whether they are completely true or not, Wayne sees them more literally. Wayne's reaction has been foreshadowed by his earlier attempt to recreate the scene from the western novel.

By creating a story about himself, Uncle David has shattered Wayne's faith in his stories. Wayne cannot reconcile what he sees as the literal truth of the story with his own experience of the frail old man he lives with. In the end, Wayne's faith is restored when he witnesses the literal truth of Uncle David's claim that he could split a log end-to-end with an ax in each hand.

The scene where the boys watch Uncle David split the log is itself told by Eldon in the form similar to one of the folk tales that Uncle David tells. Eldon says it is as if a power comes up through the ground to transform David temporarily into a strong young man again. This is not literally true, of course, but it drives home one of the central themes of the novel, which is that the literal language of the story is only part of its existence. The story really takes place in the mind of the listener or the reader.

Characters

Eldon

Eldon is the narrator of the story. He is the younger of two boys who live with their family on a farm in northern Minnesota in the 1930s. Eldon and his family are of Norwegian descent, his ancestors having come from Norway to cut wood in the thick forests of Minnesota.

As a young boy, Eldon is stricken by a serious disease that causes him to sometimes cough blood. The disease has weakened him somewhat, but he is eager to be active and work on the farm. He is close to his older brother, Wayne, but is sometimes angered by him to the point of throwing punches. One of Eldon's favorite things to do is go to town with his father, where he enjoys drinking Coca-cola with salted peanuts in it.

Eldon is a keen observer, and notices the ways in which the passing seasons of the year affect the lives of his family. He has definite ideas about how each season is defined, and the narrative is structured around his account of a typical year on the farm. He does not complain about the almost constant hard work that occupies the family for much of the year, but accepts it as normal. Like the rest of his family, he dislikes the farm chore of slaughtering animals.

Wayne

Wayne is Eldon's older brother. He is of an age where he is expected to be giving serious help around the farm, but still enjoys boyhood activities with his younger brother. Wayne is an active boy who enjoys comic books and cowboy stories. In one of the humorous episodes in the novel, Wayne enlists Eldon's help to recreate a scene from a western novel where a cowboy jumps from a high window onto his waiting horse.

Wayne is easily immersed in fictional stories, as the cowboy episode demonstrates. When Uncle David's story about his days as a young woodcutter challenge Wayne's literal interpretation of David's stories, Wayne becomes angry. He hurts David's feelings by calling him a liar and a braggart and does seem sorry about it at first. When Wayne sees Uncle David preparing to split the log as he claimed he could, he immediately understands David's motivation for telling the story and that he intends to prove to himself that it was true. His understanding of the situation is correct, Eldon admits, and the two boys keep what they saw a secret.

Uncle David

Uncle David is an elderly man who lives with Eldon and his family. He is of the same generation as Eldon's grandfather. David was once married as a young man in Norway to a woman named Alida. Alida died during childbirth along with their child, devastating

David. He comes to America shortly afterward along with many other Norwegian immigrants who settle in Minnesota to work in the logging camps. He was a strong and able woodcutter, capable of some incredible feats with an ax. David is an avid story teller and his stories entertain the family as they sit in the winter room each night.

Father

Eldon's father is never named in the novel, but is simply called Father. He is of Norwegian descent and speaks Norwegian. Father is a hard worker, getting up very early and working very late each day. He enjoys woodcarving and dancing, taking his family into town on occasion to the beer hall where he always has exactly two beers.

Mother

Eldon's mother is not named, but called Mother throughout the book. She is apparently not of Norwegian descent or has simply never learned the language, for she does not speak it as Father does. Mother works hard at keeping the house and cooking for the family. She is proud of her housekeeping, as is evident by her careful decoration of the dining room, which nobody is allowed to disturb.

Nels

Nels is another old man who lives with the family, a former woodcutter of the same generation as Uncle David. He speaks very little in the book.

Alida

Alida is the beautiful young wife of Uncle David, who appears only in his nightly stories of how he met her and was taken by her beauty. She dies during childbirth.

Orud

Orud is the legendary Norse character in one of Uncle David's stories. He is a leader of vikings who takes a beautiful woman against her will to be his wife. She jumps from his boat rather than be married to him, and he jumps in after her. According to the legend, they both sink to the bottom of the sea where they live together in a cottage.

Crazy Alen

Crazy Alen is a character in one of Uncle David's stories. Alen is a skilled woodcutter who is fired from his job for playing practical jokes.

Jim and Stacker

Jim and Stacker are the two powerful but gentle draft horses who work on the farm.

Mr. Engstrom

Mr. Engstrom is the proprietor of the beer hall where Edlon's family sometimes goes. He lends the brothers the western novel that Wayne is taken with.

Objects/Places

The Winter Room

The main living room of the farmhouse where Eldon and his family live. It is called the winter room because it is where they spend the cold winter evenings, sitting around the wood stove and listening to Uncle David's stories.

Minnesota

A northern state of the United States. Minnesota is the destination of many Norwegian immigrants such as Eldon's ancestors who come there to work in the thick forests as woodcutters.

Norway

A Scandinavian country that is the homeland of many of the immigrants to Minnesota such as Nels and Uncle David.

The Lake

A lake near Eldon's home where the family goes at the end of each summer for a picnic. Eldon's parents visited the lake before they were married and carved their names on a tree there.

The Granary

A building on the farm for storing grain after harvest. The brothers have a special place behind the granary where they go to talk privately.

Uncle David and Nels' Room

A bedroom in the farmhouse shared by Uncle David and Nels. Uncle David's side of the room is decorated with pictures of pretty women, while Nels has farm scenes decorating his portion. It is as if a line has been drawn down the middle of the room, Eldon says.

The Dining Room

A room in the house with a piano and dining table, but which is never used by the family.

Cream Separator

A hand-cranked device for separating cream from milk. One of the regular chores of the two brothers is to crank the separator.

Silage

A form of animal feed made from stored grass.

The Beer Hall

A hall in the nearby town where Eldon and his family sometimes go for entertainment. Eldon's father always has two beers and enjoys dancing with Eldon's mother.

Thrashing

The process of separating oats from the stalks. Thrashing is done with a machine, and is also a social event as neighbors come together to help one another.

Setting

Both time and place are vividly realized. For these characters, time is not determined by chronology or calendar; time is known through the cycle of the seasons. Each season is known by its distinctive work and play. Time is precious too; it is the stuff of days which passes all too quickly yet has ample room for the rich variety of chores, games, and rituals. Time can be stopped in stories, however, through the power of imagination shared by a teller of tales and his listeners.

The farm is the center of the world in the novel. Although it is located on the edge of a Minnesota forest that stretches limitlessly northward into Canada, the family concerns itself only with its fields, animals, and buildings.

At the center of the farm is the house.

It is so old that no one recalls the original builder who carved his initials in the wall. Although it lacks modern conveniences, it provides shelter and society. At the center of the house is the winter room. Here the family spends the long winter nights around the wood burning stove. Mother knits, father carves, the uncles chew tobacco, and the young boys wait eagerly. At the center of the winter room's life are the stories.

Social Sensitivity

Without being sentimental in the least, The Winter Room communicates the richness, the beauty, and the poignancy of rural life in an earlier, simpler time. It presents many positive values: it urges how family life and hard work can be satisfying; it appreciates the role of the older generation in educating the younger generation; it lauds human life attuned to the patterns and rhythms of nature.

Unlike many young adult books that stress conflict between generations, The Winter Room accentuates harmony. The adult world is not a world of privilege and autonomy but of responsibility and community. Paulsen's view is not simplistic or idealistic. The adult world has its pains; growing up is not without loss (as the story of Alida shows) nor without its poignancy (as the Woodcutter's tale illustrates). It has its sacrifices too: compared to Eldon and Wayne's pranks and play, adult recreation is subdued and routine. What adults and adolescents share is imagination: the former tell stories while the latter invent games. Both satisfy the human need for something, as Mother says, to "be believed in." The Winter Room is that rare book that cultivates the aesthetic sensibility of adolescents.

Literary Qualities

The Winter Room is richly descriptive.

Paulsen creates an evocative, sensory language to communicate the mood and rhythm of rural life as shaped by the seasons. The language employs several devices that accentuate sound and rhythm. In the first part, "Tuning," the incremental repetition of the phrase, "If books could be more," acts like the verse of a song or the invocation of a chant. The phrase expands in meaning and grows in intensity until it leads to a starkly simple revelation and reminder. Throughout the novel the characteristic device is a cumulative, elaborated sentence. Nouns, verbs, and adjectives multiply to give different aspects of one impression. Phrases and clauses are connected by conjunctions rather than separated by punctuation.

The effect is a sense of assembling a rich collage. No one detail is more important than the other; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Winter Room may remind some readers of Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie in its attention to description of landscape and farm life.

Because young Laura was fascinated with Pa's construction of a door or building of a fireplace, she described the process in great detail. The reader sensed how easy it would be to imitate Pa's actions because the description was so precise. In Paulsen's novel, Eldon is similarly attentive to his father's plowing of the field with a tractor or to slaughtering animals for the winter meat supply.

The Winter Room is a book to be read the first time from beginning to end and to be reread in sections. Readers will find that certain passages above others capture their interest and can be read over and over with new appreciation and renewed pleasure. Some will enjoy the evocation of a season the most, others one of Uncle David's stories. It is not a book to be read for story and put aside; it is a book to be savored for impressions that can be experienced time and again. It is a book for a reader's reflective, quiet moods.

Themes

Annual Cycles of Change

Emphasized throughout The Winter Room is the perpetual changes that occur from season to season as experienced on a northern Minnesota farm. The author divides the book into four main sections, each named for a season of the year.

The story begins with spring, and the first thing noted by the narrator, Eldon, is how spring differs from winter. In winter everything is frozen, but in spring it thaws and things begin to smell. The ground gets soft and muddy, making the farm chores a nuisance. The work gradually increases as summer approaches, but for Eldon, summer begins when his father takes the plowshares into town to be sharpened.

Summer is a time of hard work for the entire family. They often do not eat their evening meal until late at night, and then get up early again the next morning to start working again. The work follows the cycle of the crops they grow, with plowing and planting in early summer, haying and thrashing and harvesting in later summer. Everyone is working so hard the time passes quickly, Eldon explains. Then suddenly one day his father will announce that the family will spend the day at a nearby lake. For Eldon, this marks the end of the hard summer work and the beginning of fall.

Fall begins pleasantly as the family enjoys picnicking at the lake, but it is also the time of year when livestock is butchered, an unpleasant but necessary task that nobody enjoys. Fall moves slowly into winter, which for Eldon is marked by the first snow. Winter is spent largely in the "winter room," the main room of the farmhouse where the family sits in the winter evenings around a woodstove as Uncle David tells his stories.

By structuring the narrative around the seasons, the author emphasizes the close tie that Eldon's family has to the natural changes that take place over the course of the year.

Immigrants in America

Eldon and his family are of Norwegian ancestry, and this connection to their ethnic past is part of their identity and experience. While Eldon, his brother and mother do not speak or understand the Norwegian language, Eldon's father and two elderly uncles do. Uncle David and Nels are themselves immigrants from Norway, and through the stories of Uncle David, Eldon learns about how he and many other immigrants came to America.

David had been married as a young man in Norway, but when his wife died during childbirth he decided to join the wave of young single Norwegian men who were going to the northern forests of America to work in logging camps, a work very similar to the work they were familiar with in Norway.

The forests were old and thick when David arrived as a young man, and the men were kept busy constantly cutting everything they could. They lived in camps, and were paid by how much wood they cut. Huge areas of dense forest were completely cleared, David recalls. As the amount of available work dwindled and as he got older, David came to live with his nephew, Eldon's father.

Eldon and Wayne, who are boys during the 1930s when the novel takes place, have grown up in America. They read westerns and drink Coca-Cola. They listen intently to the stories of Uncle David, however, which tell not only about his own experiences as a young immigrant but which are also taken from Norwegian folklore, such as the tale of Orud the Terrible. They remain connected to their immigrant ancestry even as they adopt new American customs.

Truth and Fiction

The central dramatic tension in The Winter Room arise when the narrator's older brother, Wayne, gets angry with his Uncle David over one of the many stories he tells the family. David's stories usually have some fantastic elements to them, and some are taken purely from folk legend. Eldon understands that the literal truth of David's stories are not crucial to their importance, but Wayne appears to have trouble reconciling this apparent conflict between truth and fiction.

Eldon focuses on four of David's stories, each one varying in its balance of truth and fiction. The story of Alida, with which David opens almost every session of storytelling, appears to be a straightforward factual account of his own experience falling in love and losing his young wife. "Orud the Terrible" is a folk tale about a man and woman who live in a cottage under the sea, where the woman catches ships in her long hair. It is obviously not meant to be taken as completely true. "Crazy Alen" is in the form of a "tall tale," a story that seems to be based on fact but has some fantastic elements mixed in that may be exaggerations of the truth.

While Eldon sometimes wants to ask David about the claims of some of his stories, he does not. He has somehow understood that to question them is not allowed and really is beside the point because the stories are not meant to exist as actual representations of truth. They exist somewhere between truth and fiction and stand independently on their own.

When David tells the story of the Woodcutter, it sounds like a tall tale in the same vein as "Crazy Alen," but turns out to be about himself as a young man. Wayne is no longer able to see the story as standing on its own. Alida, Orud and Crazy Alen only ever existed in his imagination and so they were capable of doing anything. The Woodcutter is Uncle David himself and Wayne cannot reconcile the feats of the amazing character in the story with the old and fragile man he knows personally. A line has been crossed for Wayne that has endangered the meaning of all of David's stories.

In the end, however, Wayne witnesses David performing one of the amazing feats from his story. This introduces some uncertainty into his mind and allows him to once again enjoy the stories with a sense of wonder rather than looking at them as representing literal truth.

Themes/Characters

The storyteller is Uncle David. He is indeterminately old, having immigrated from Norway many years before. All his life he has farmed; he gladly accepts the covenant that earning a livelihood from the earth is "work on work on work." Like all farmers, he knows the subtle workings of land, animals, crops, and equipment.

He has a few possessions, a Bible and four books in Norwegian that he reads privately for an hour each night in the winter room. He comes to life when the moment arrives in the rhythm of the evening for him to tell tales. Often he tells the same stories because they define the nature of life and love.

His adult listeners are like him. Nels, a fellow bachelor and immigrant, is a hardworking, taciturn steward of the farm. Nels is content to sit and listen to Uncle David's stories; he is a good listener who knows when to laugh and when to slap his leg with pleasure.

Mother and father keep busy as they listen, just as they always keep busy.

Their lives are defined by their chores: mother cooks, cleans, and sews; father plows, repairs, and reaps. They live wisely and contentedly in the rhythm of "work on work on work," just as Uncle David and Nels do.

The young listeners are Eldon and Wayne. Eldon, two years younger and still outgrowing frail health, defers to Wayne physically. Wayne chooses the games they play and initiates their pranks. However, Eldon does not defer to Wayne in all matters; he is a tough negotiator in trading chores for comic books and a fierce debater of insoluble questions (e.g., is there a time between Fall and Winter that is neither one?).

Eldon and Wayne are each other's primary companions—friends as well as brothers. Both listen contentedly to Uncle David's familiar stories until one night a new story annoys Wayne. The new story, about a young woodcutter who can split a log from both ends with two axes swung simultaneously, strikes Wayne as a lie. When Uncle David overhears with dismay Wayne expressing his doubt, the storyteller attempts to duplicate the woodcutter's feat.

From Uncle David's familiar stories the boys learn about adulthood: the pain of lost love, the inevitability of death, the joys of hard work and friendship. In Uncle David's attempt to re-enact the Woodcutter's deed, they learn how important dignity is to selfrespect and about the triumph of mind over matter.

The seasonal descriptions and Uncle David's stories are linked thematically.

Each story appreciates the rhythms of existence, the wonder of new birth, the joy of ripening, and the inevitability of harvesting.

Style

Point of View

The Winter Room is written from the point of view of Eldon, the younger of two boys who live with their family on a Minnesota farm in the 1930s. The narrative unfolds in the first person as Eldon describes the typical activities that occupy the family over the course of a year. The story is told in the immediate past tense, from a point in time shortly after the events of the narrative take place, as if the narrator is still a boy.

Eldon is an observant boy who pays close attention to his surroundings. He notices the small details that signal the changes in the seasons and ponders them deeply. From Eldon's point of view, there are times of the year that are transitional and are neither one season nor another.

Eldon does not understand everything he observes, and he recognizes this fact. He notices that one of the old men who live with his family has pictures of pretty women hanging in his part of the house, while the other man has only pictures of horses and farm scenes. His father gives him a cryptic explanation, which he accepts as another of the things the do not fully make sense to him.

By telling the story through the eyes of a young boy, the author introduces an innocent point of view that brings the small details of life on a Minnesota farm into unique focus.

Setting

The Winter Room takes place on a farm in Northern Minnesota in the 1930s. The farm is on the edge of a great forest that extends far to the north. It contains a barn and other outbuildings to house livestock and store grain, hay and silage.

The farmhouse has a large kitchen, where the family gathers to eat, and a dining room, which is never used but is nicely decorated. There is a main bedroom downstairs and two bedrooms above. In one corner of the house is the "winter room" that gives the book its title. This is a living room with comfortable furniture and a wood stove, and is where the family spends its evenings during the cold Minnesota winters.

The family works hard and enjoys simple entertainments. They occasionally go into the nearest town to dance and visit neighbors. There is a lake nearby where they picnic once a year after the summer work is over. It is a time when much of the farm work is still done using horses, although the family owns a tractor that is only used for plowing. The farm raises hay, oats and corn and the men also cut wood for sale and for their own use.

The family is descended from Norwegian people who came to America in a previous generation. The farm on which they live was cleared many years before by some of these settlers.

Language and Meaning

The Winter Room is written in the first person and takes place in the immediate past tense. It is written as a narrative told from the point of view of a MInnesota farm boy named Eldon who describes the typical activities on his family's farm over the course of a year.

Eldon's narrative is addressed directly to the reader and the prose is conversational and in language appropriate to a boy of Eldon's age. The vocabulary is specific to his environment on a farm and he frequently uses terms that are specific to farm implements and practices. These terms are not usually explained in the narrative, but their meaning can be determined in context. Eldon's narrative assumes the reader will have some familiarity with farm life.

In an interesting introduction to the novel, the author notes the limitations of language to completely convey the meaning of the story. The written word cannot convey the sounds, smells and light of an actual Minnesota farm, Paulsen writes, it can only describe their existence. It is up to the readers' imagination to complete the meaning of the story.

This is a theme that is developed as Eldon's brother Wayne reacts to the stories of Uncle David. As long as the stories are about people Wayne has never seen, Wayne is able to imagine them and can accept the stories. When Uncle David tells a fantastic story about himself, Wayne cannot reconcile his imagination with the factual Uncle David. The meaning of the story conflicts with his actual experience.

Structure

The Winter Room is a short novel divided into eight chapters with an introduction. With the exception of the introductory chapter, the narrative is told in the first person past tense from the point of view of the main character, Eldon, a young boy living on a Minnesota farm in the first half of the 20th century.

The introductory chapter, called "Tuning," is an appeal directly to the reader by the author that invites the readers to use their imagination to provide the aspects of the tory that writing cannot provide, such as smells, sounds and light.

The first four chapters, entitled Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter, depict the typical activities on the farm over the course of a year. While the chapters are arranged in the chronological order of the seasons, this portion of the novel does not encompass a single year, but gives examples taken from across several years to describe a typical year.

The second part of the novel, made up of the final four chapters, are about one specific winter. Each of these chapters is centered on one of the many stories that Eldon's Uncle David tells the family a they sit around the wood stove in the "winter room." The first of these four chapters is called "Alida," after the story Uncle David begins every session with, which is about his young wife who died in Norway before he came to America. The next chapter, "Orud the Terrible," is a tale from Norse legend. The third story is a tall tale of the Minnesota lumber camps called "Crazy Alen." The final chapter, called "The Woodcutter," is a story about Uncle David himself. It is in this final chapter that the novel comes to its dramatic high point as Wayne, Eldon's older brother, begins to doubt the truthfulness of Uncle David's stories.

Quotes

"If books could be more, could show more, could own more, this book would have smells..." Tuning, p. 1

"If books could have more, give more, be more, show more, they would still need readers, who bring to them sound and smell and light and all the rest that can't be in books. The book needs you." Tuning, p. 3

"It's a time for everything to get soft and melty. And when it all starts to melt and get soft the smells come out." Spring, p. 7

"We call it the winter room because we spend the winter there." Spring, p. 12

"Summer starts slow. You don't really see the work coming. One day it's spring, soft and sticky and stinking and the hard part of winter is done and you walk around looking for something to do. The next day Father is taking the plowshares to town." Summer, p. 35

"Many times we eat supper after ten, when it is dark, the Coleman lantern hissing and nobody talking, nobody saying anything, even Wayne and me, just eating and chewing and eating until we're done and then we go up to fall in our beds for the next day. Summer work." Summer p. 47

"But when all the grain is up and al the silage in and the hay stacked and the barn and yard cleaned it is time to kill. And I don't like the killing part." Fall, p. 53

"Wayne says there aren't any divisions in things. We had a big fight one time over whether or not there was a place between days when it wasn't the day before and it wasn't tomorrow yet. I said there were places, divisions in things so you could tell one from the next but he said no there wasn't and we set to it." Winter, p. 61

"Winter is all changes. Snow comes and makes it all different outside so things you see in the other times of the year are covered and gone." Winter, p. 65

"It was when I was young and a day came when a girl walked by as I was sharpening tools and she was so beautiful she made my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth and I could not speak. Yellow hair she had, yellow hair like cornsilk mixed with sunlight." Alida, p. 70

"Orud was tall and wide in the shoulder and had a helmet made of steel hammered to a point but soaked in salt until it was red, red like blood. They called him Orud the Red when they went a-viking and he was so terrible that it was said even the men in his boat feared him, and these men feared nothing." Orud the Terrible, p. 74

"He was finally known for his humor and the jokes became larger until one day he waited until the foreman - he disliked the foreman then - was in the outhouse and Alen

dropped a Norway pine so big you couldn't reach around it, dropped it right in front of the door so close the foreman couldn't get out." Crazy Alen, p. 79

"And I felt Wayne stiffen next to me on the rug. I turned to look at him and saw he was staring at Uncle David so hard he seemed to stare a hole through him. Wayne was mad." The Woodcutter, p. 91

"Some thing, some power passed from the earth up through the silver axheads and through the hickory handles and it started at his arms. A little movement, then the arms came up and filled and his back straightened and his whole body filled with it until he was standing straight and tall and I heard Wayne's breath come in and stop and mine did the same." The Woodcutter, p. 100

Topics for Discussion

How does the introduction to the novel affect the way the rest of the novel is perceived? What is the author's intent?

How does the author address the theme of literal truth in storytelling?

How does the structure of the story affect its impact on the reader?

Eldon argues with his brother that there are periods between the seasons where it is neither one season or the other. What does this say about Eldon and Wayne's characters? What does it say about how they each interpret the meaning of what a "season" is?

Three generations live in the same house in The Winter Room. How do the experiences of these generations differ? How do they interact in the novel?

Why is Wayne angry when Uncle David tells a story about himself? Did Uncle David intend for the boys to know the story was about himself?

Discuss the scene when the boys witness Uncle David splitting the log. Is it literally true? What is the importance of the scene in the novel?

Essay Topics

1. The chapter titles about the seasons are printed in italics; the others are in plain text. What does the difference imply?

2. "Tuning" wishes that books had smells and sounds and light, but they cannot. What do they have instead, which is ultimately better?

3. Does Eldon appreciate all four seasons equally?

4. Characterize the relationship between Eldon and Wayne.

5. Why is the winter room the most important room in the house?

6. Mother says that "stories are not so much for believing as to be believed in"? What is the difference?

7. Are there common elements of plot, theme, or characterization in the stories of "Alida," "Orud the Terrible," "Crazy Alen," and "The Woodcutter"?

8. Is Paulsen's device of letting the conflict between the boys and Uncle David be enacted indirectly better than having all three confront each other?

9. Were Eldon and Wayne right not to tell Uncle David they had seen him split a log with two axes simultaneously?

10. Uncle David seems magically transformed when he splits the log. Is the description convincing?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In a literary encyclopedia or dictionary look up the definition of a "Georgic." Apply the concept to The Winter Room.

2. Look up the definition of "pastoral" in a literary encyclopedia or reference work. Apply the concept to The Winter Room.

3. From Jim Trelease's Reading Aloud Handbook or a similar guide, get some advice on techniques of reading aloud effectively. Choose one of Uncle David's stories and prepare it for oral presentation.

4. The story ends with Eldon summarizing a new, enthralling Uncle David story. Write that story as you think Uncle David would tell it.

5. In a literary dictionary or encyclopedia look up the definition of a "legend." Apply the concept to David's story of "Orud the Terrible."

6. In the same source look up the definition of a "tall tale." Apply the concept to "Crazy Alen."

7. Write a description of a season as it happens in a certain environment: the city, the suburbs, a park. Write the description, imitating Paulsen's style.

Further Study

Brown, Muriel W. and Rita Schoch Foudray. "Gary Paulsen." In Newbery and Caldecott Medalists and Honor Book Winners. New York: Neal-Schuman, 1992: 324-326. This entry lists awards, includes a bibliography, and mentions background reading material concerning Paulsen through 1991.

Bruner, Katharine. Review. School Library Journal (October 1989): 136.

Bruner praises Paulsen's ability to pen "a mood poem in prose," and recommends the introductory chapter, in particular, to teachers "who seek to illuminate the use of ordinary English words with extraordinary descriptive power."

Coil, Marianne. Interview. Standing Room Only. National Public Radio.

WFYI, Indianapolis. April 7, 1994.

Coil's interview focuses on Paulsen's recent novel, Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod and his interest in the race, but it does include some recent personal information about the author.

Commire, Anne, ed. "Gary Paulsen." In Something About the Author. Vol. 54.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 76-82.

The majority of personal information about Paulsen found in this entry comes from an interview Marguerite Feitlowitz did for another Gale reference series, Authors and Artists for Young Adults. Details of Paulsen's career and a listing of his writings through 1987 are also included.

Devereaux, Elizabeth. "Gary Paulsen."

Publisher's Weekly (March 28, 1994): 70. Devereaux's interview with Paulsen yields information explaining his career's reversal of fortune in 1983, productivity since 1985, and newest efforts. The article also includes other commonly found background information about Paulsen.

"Gary Paulsen." In Authors and Artists for Young Adults. Vol. 2. Agnes Garrett and Helga P. McCure, eds. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 165-173.

This reference article lists the author's work through 1988 and draws biographical information from three sources: Marguerite Feitlowitz's interview for this Gale series, Maryann N. Weidt's August 1986 article in Voice of Youth Advocates, "Gary Paulsen: A Sentry for Peace," and Franz Serdahely's January 1980 article in Writers's Digest, "Prolific Paulsen."

"Gary Paulsen." In Children's Literature Review. Vol. 19. Gerard Senick and Sharon R. Gunton, eds. Detroit: Gale Research, 1990: 167-178. Beginning with a summary of Paulsen's work through 1985, this essay's authorcommentary section comes from Maryann N. Weidt's August 1986 article in Voice of Youth Advocates, "Gary Paulsen: A Sentry for Peace."

Readers will also find reviews on a variety of Paulsen's work for children through 1988.

McCormick, E. "Author Dedicates Latest Book to High School Librarian."

American Libraries (May 1988): 338.

McCormick's article describes the relationship between Paulsen and Topeka, Kansas, West High School librarian Mike Printz, to whom Paulsen dedicated The Island.

Serdahely, Franz. "Prolific Paulsen."

Writer's Digest (January 1980): 20-21.

This article is somewhat dated, but it includes still valuable material on Paulsen's early years as an author, his writing habits, and his tips for beginning writers.

Trumpet Video Visits Gary Paulsen. Directed by Diane Kolyer. Trumpet Club, 1993. 24 minutes. The purpose of this video is to introduce children to the author and interest them in his books. Paulsen makes brief comments on Canyons, The Cookcamp, Hatchet, The Monument, The River, and The Winter Room, but the true value of the video is the insight it lends into Paulsen's methods of writing.

Weidt, Maryann N. "The Fortunes of Poverty." Writer's Digest (January 1992): 8. Weidt's brief motivational article for struggling writers is based on Paulsen's recollections of the lean years of his writing career.

Related Titles

Paulsen has written extensively about growing up in the Midwest.

Small towns and farms in Minnesota and Wisconsin are frequent settings for his novels. The Cookcamp, Harris and Me, Dancing Carl, and The Island all use these backdrops.

An important theme in these novels revolves around an adolescent protagonist who is coming of age through interaction with an adult. Sometimes a relative, sometimes a stranger, the influential adult is different or odd. Often the adult is a loner or an outcast.

When the protagonist is able to get beyond society's assumptions about the adult or even behind the adult's defenses, the central character finds an important lesson about life.

The lesson is that in work or in love, adulthood often exacts a steep price for the privilege of independence. Paulsen's protagonists discover that beyond youth's voyage through new pleasures and temporary anxieties lies the adult pilgrimage into inescapable time and inevitable pain. The best traveling companion on the journey will be courage.

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