

Winterdance Study Guide

Winterdance by Gary Paulsen

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Plot Summary

Gary Paulsen moves his family to Minnesota, drains their bank account, and begins running sled dogs. At first the dogs are a means of transportation and income, but Gary's relationship with his team evolves until he decides to run them for pleasure. It is not long before Gary realizes that he is destined to run the Iditarod Sled Dog Race.

Once Gary makes the decision to run the race he embarks on a comical lesson about himself and life in general. Gary has never run sled dogs except on his short runs to check his trap lines. He is also used to a team of four dogs but in order to run the Iditarod he will have to work his way up to a team of at least fifteen. The process of procuring viable sled dogs is an adventure in itself. Gary is given dogs by friends, people wanting to be rid of their animals, and older sled dogs. He purchases three Canadian sled dogs, one of which has a foul temper. Gary soon realizes that he knows nothing about dogs. As Gary relates the wrecks, long walks home after losing the team, and other numerous mishaps during training, the reader begins to doubt his ability to undertake such a grueling adventure as the Iditarod.

Gary finally arrives in Alaska and spends two months before the start of the race re-training himself and the team. He soaks up information from veteran mushers and tries to prepare himself for the unknown. Before long it is time for Gary and the team to cross the starting line. True to form the team is a mess and Gary begins the race off course and dragging behind the team. Throughout the race Gary encounters stunning views, tragic disasters, and the opportunity to re-evaluate his own life. Gary learns that simplicity is often better than being swept up in money and things. Gary studies the dogs to learn from them and become one of them. His life is absorbed by the dogs and the freedom they bring him. The Iditarod is a race through the wilds of Alaska and the trail takes Gary on the journey of a lifetime.



Prelude

Prelude Summary and Analysis

Gary is in Alaska three months before the start of his second Iditarod Race. One day, Gary misses crucial warning signs of a mounting storm and hopes to return to camp before the weather turns, instead of finding a spot to hole up with the dogs. The team moves away from the sheltered trail into the open with their back to the wind and Gary is still ignorant of the warning signs swirling around him. As they round the mountain to enter the wide open, Duberry, the lead dog, is swept away in a wall of wind and snow. Gary is caught off guard and ripped from the sled to be blown down the mountain landing against a rock outcropping.

As Gary digs a hole for a shelter, he realizes that the dogs have returned for him. Gary realizes that he has grown so close to the dogs that it is no longer just about himself and he must do what he can to save the dogs. Gary settles in with the dogs packed around him and is able to relax a little but realizes that all hope of rescue will have to come from himself.

The next morning, as Gary sets off, the snow is not deep and the team makes good time. Back at camp Gary is finally hit by the realization of his brush with death. He knows that a sane man would give it all up now but he also knows that he will never choose to stop sledding.

The reader is immediately told that this run takes place during his training for his second Iditarod, so it is a bit surprising that he misses such key indications of the brewing storm. The other astounding information the reader gains is the realization that this type of weather is common on the Iditarod trail. Alaska is not even giving its worst to Gary but does put forth enough effort to remind him who is boss.

The most important part of this introduction is that the reader understand Gary's commitment to his team. The dogs are more than his lifeline while out on the trail, they are his family and he cannot leave them behind.



The Dogs: Beginnings

The Dogs: Beginnings Summary and Analysis

Gary uproots his family and drains their financial accounts to start dog sledding. He starts with four dogs and a broken sled given to him. The team first serves as a means of transportation, then income and finally fun. The family lives simply, working to provide what they need through gardening, hunting, trapping, and farming.

One night Gary camps in a stand of Northern pines. The eight dogs are tied to individual trees and Gary beds down for the night in his sled bag. In the middle of the night he awakens and realizes that a wolf has joined the team but the dogs appear excited and not threatened. The wolf stays with Gary for three more days then quietly takes her leave. .

The time spent on this run alters Gary. When he returns home he does not immediately go into the house but sits near the dogs staring at the cabin. Ruth comes out with a cup of soup and senses the change in her husband. Ruth confidently states that Gary will run the Iditarod.

Gary and Ruth's decision to leave modern life behind in favor of a more laid-back existence is something that many people dream about doing, but few actually attempt. Gary and his family leave it all behind and still manage to find fulfillment. The reader cannot deny that the pull to do the same thing is very tempting.



Beginnings: Dogs from Hell; Major Wrecks

Beginnings: Dogs from Hell; Major Wrecks Summary and Analysis

Gary and Ruth travel to Canada to purchase three more sled dogs: Devil, Ortho and Murphy. Gary begins training for the race but has no idea what he should be doing. By trial and error he learns that no more than five dogs should be used to pull a light rig, no more than seven should be used on a de-engined car because an eighth dog adds a level of power that is truly amazing, and there is rhyme and reason to the order dogs are placed on a gangline.

Gary takes the team and a junkyard car rig out for an overnight run. Things are going surprisingly well until the team hits six skunks. At home Ruth gently suggests that Gary sleep outside with the team for a night or two. Gary stomps outside, not realizing that the experience will serve him well for the Iditarod.

These chapters are two of the most comical of the whole book. The reader feels a bit sorry for Gary as he must ride in the camper with his new hellion dogs, but at the same time this is what Gary wants. The insanity of Gary's endeavor continues as he loses the team, gets dragged behind the rig repeatedly, and becomes very personal with several skunks. The reader begins to wonder why Gary did not try to find better information regarding training sled dogs or if he really understands the outdoors. Gary does not state how long he used dogs on his trap lines, but the reader assumes that he would have known a great deal more than he demonstrates.



The Dogs: Becoming Dog; First Snow

The Dogs: Becoming Dog; First Snow Summary and Analysis

Gary's night sleeping in the kennel with the dogs teaches him how to start thinking like a dog. It is at this point that Gary decides to do more than just sleep in the kennel. The next day Gary moves in to live with the dogs and learn how to be a dog.

The next night Gary feels that if he and Devil can come to an understanding then he will have a good start. Devil is less friendly tonight and shreds Gary's foam pad and sleeping bag while he sleeps. Gary engages in "piss wars" with the dogs in an attempt to mark his territory. He urinates on the ground around the kennel but as soon as he does one of the dogs comes to cover the scent with its own urine. Gary makes a table on the fence posts and cooks on a hibachi no matter what the weather. One day when it begins to rain Gary runs for the house. The howling of the dogs stops him and he realizes that he must learn to roll with the punches if he is to compete in the Iditarod.

The first snow of the season arrives and Gary cannot resist the dogs' excitement. He stupidly decides to take all fifteen on a run and team them up in preparation for the race. The sled will not brake on the new snow and he should have only taken seven or eight at a time until more snow fell. By taking smaller groups at a time the dogs would have a better chance to become accustomed to their team.

The entire town has come together to support Gary by providing food for man and beast, gear, money and sleds. One sled is a sprint sled weighing only twelve pounds and the other sled Gary builds from donated lumber and weighs about twenty-five pounds. Gary decides that his old trapping sled is better suited to the first snow run because it is heavier. As he and Ruth begin harnessing dogs to the gangline, Ruth stops looking at them with the realization that although they still have a long way to go, they have finally become a team excited to run. Gary takes his place on the sled and motions for Ruth to let go of the gangline. The team screams out of the driveway. Cookie, in the lead, recognizes the old trap sled and leaves the road to follow the trapping path through the woods where Gary is promptly run into a foot thick oak tree. Gary hangs on for dear life just trying to stay alive. He is fearful that the powerful out-of-control dogs will hurt themselves. Cookie follows the old trapline. The trip used to take Gary four days but today the team runs it in six and a half hours.

Gary struggles to exert control over the team. All of the dogs he accrues are not of his choosing and he cannot afford to turn down a free animal. Gary is trying to assemble himself into a qualified Iditarod racer. Gary has an idea lodged in his brain that he is the master and should be respected by the dogs. One night in the kennel quickly teaches him the value of mutual respect. The dogs allow him to invade their territory but only on their terms. Gary has no hopes of out-peeing a team of sled dogs and must realize that being a team does not include a division between musher and dogs. If they are all to



survive the race, Gary needs to let go of his preconceived notions and allow the dogs to teach him. This is a difficult lesson for Gary to learn. He does not appear to hear the dogs as they try to reason with him, but Ruth's voice rings clear. Ruth gently points out that the dogs need a bit of wildness in order to undertake the race. Just as Ruth voices Gary's hidden wish to run the Iditarod, Ruth gives the dog a voice that Gary can hear and understand.



The Dogs: Alaska

The Dogs: Alaska Summary and Analysis

Gary trains long nights and days and when the time comes to drive to Alaska all hope of sleep vanishes. Gary will be accompanied by another gentleman and a boy working as dog handlers. The three men stuff themselves into the cab of the truck after stowing twenty dogs and all the sleds and gear in the trailer. The trip takes eight days driving day and night. Along the way the temperature drops so severely that they must scrape ice off the inside of the windows and disembark from the cab to battle chains on the tires whenever the snow becomes hazardous. Every few hours they must stop to feed and exercise the dogs.

They finally arrive at the Alaska border to sign up for the race. Gary soon finds that everything he learned was wrong. The race is about the care of the dogs and he has not been doing nearly enough for them. Gary arrives in Alaska in late December but the race does not start until the first weekend in March. This gives Gary two months to train with the dogs and learn from the seasoned mushers.

Gary is out of time. The two months of training are over and the race is upon him. Suddenly things begin to fall apart as Gary scrambles to finalize the team's needs and be at the starting chute fully stocked. More booties for the dogs' feet must be sewn, the dogs need to be checked by the race vet, and a man tells Gary that he should tire the dogs out before the race. Gary later finds out the man is not a musher and his advice backfires miserably. Gary decides to take fifteen of his twenty dogs and run them on back to back sixty mile runs. Instead of wearing them down, the runs excite the dogs and they leave for Anchorage full of adrenaline.

The reader begins to worry about Gary at this point. If he has not slept during training, how will he find time to sleep during the race or survive the race without a good starting rest? However, Gary has little time to worry about rest as he soon learns that all his time training has been nearly in vain. Although Gary knew that he did not know how to train sled dogs, he is still surprised to realize how wrong many of his methods were. The camaraderie exhibited by the mushers prior to the race will resurface at crucial points during the race. Gary has finally learned to sit back and watch others in order to increase his own knowledge. He still needs to work on his listening skills as he follows incorrect advice. At some point Gary will need to heed his own gut instincts to survive.



The Race: Pre-Race; Eagle River

The Race: Pre-Race; Eagle River Summary and Analysis

All the mushers must have their teams in Anchorage two days before the race in order to attend meetings where there is a great deal of talk about rules, gear and the trail. The experienced mushers, trail helpers and trail boss all give whatever advice and information they have. The pre-race banquet is required or the mushers risk disqualification. At this event each musher ceremoniously draws his start number, but the most important task of the night for most of the men is getting stupendously drunk. Gary works through the night checking and rechecking equipment. As the light from his headlamp begins to die, the sun comes up over the mountains.

The start of the race is staged in downtown Anchorage for the benefit of television crews and spectators. There is no way to get directly from Anchorage to Nome without crossing the freeway and that cannot be shut down even for the Iditarod. The scene becomes chaotic as the dogs excite one another and their excitement spreads to the mushers. There is danger in the raw power associated with the moment that leads Gary to make two critical mistakes.

Gary harnesses his dogs way too early and they must wait as the thirty-one teams in front of him are led past to the chutes. Six minutes before Gary's start time he switches leaders. Cookie has run the lead for two years but Gary suddenly worries that she will not be able to handle the pressure and puts Wilson in her place. Before Gary can fully contemplate what he has done it is time to take his place in the chutes. The excitement overcomes the team and they lurch from the start two seconds too early. This is a violation of the rules and Gary has just started his first Iditarod race illegally.

Two blocks into the race Wilson misses the first turn blowing through the crowd and heads deeper into town. The team tears through backyards and runs over a surprised cocker spaniel. Gary finally manages to hook a stop sign and stop the team long enough to move Cookie back into the lead. He asks bystanders if they know the way to the Iditarod trail and rejoins the race. At the first checkpoint Ruth and Gary transport the team by truck to the real starting point at Knik.

The reader held high hopes that Gary would have learned to be a little less naive after spending time among the veteran mushers. However, his questions at the pre-race meeting show that he is still happily uneducated on the finer points of the race. Gary's decision to snooze during the banquet is both prudent and foolish. Gary could have used the time to learn more about the trail, how to handle his dogs, how to sleep on the trail, or anything remotely helpful. At the same time, catching at least a few moments of sleep revives Gary enough to start the race. If Gary's mishap training was not proof enough that the race would not go smoothly, then the reader and Gary are disastrously delusional. At the same time the illegal start and rampage through town are par for the

course with Gary's team. If they had started legally and had no problems, the reader would have been more concerned that something tragic would happen during the actual race.



The Race: Skwentna; Finger Lake

The Race: Skwentna; Finger Lake Summary and Analysis

The chapter begins with a foreshadowing event as Gary kneels on the trail with another rookie who is holding a barely breathing dog. The dog shudders and dies as the man curses the bulky form of a moose laying to the side of the trail. Gary checks his watch to see it is not even midnight of the first day. The first day in which he has done everything wrong.

At the restart in Knik, Cookie takes a wrong turn that Gary does not notice because he is busy digging snow from his clothes after being dumped and drug at the previous turn. By the time he gets his head lamp out and realizes they are on the wrong path the team has gone sixty miles out of the way. To compound matters, once Gary realizes the mistake and gets the team turned around he sees dots of light from the headlamps of twenty-seven other teams behind him. These teams were mistakenly drawn onto the wrong trail by Cookie's scent. As Gary makes his way back down the mountain trail each team turns around too. Only the first team goes past Gary before turning around. It is this team that follows Gary that receives the brunt of the surprise moose attack. The moose materializes before Gary's team and starts to attack Gary. The moose then moves onto the lead dog of the team behind Gary. The other musher uses a handgun to shoot the moose but not before the animal kicks his lead dog to death. Gary reflects that if he were a sane man he would quit right then but the lack of sleep, the excitement of the race and the power of Alaska itself keep Gary sledding on. Gary offers to entice the other man's team with meat tied to a rope drawn behind him. The idea works and soon another lead dog emerges from the man's team and he surges ahead.

Gary watches the beauty of the mountains unfold before him. He realizes he will have to cross those mountains to get to the interior and the heart of the race. Gary becomes so absorbed in the mountains that he nearly misses the Skwentna checkpoint. Gary spends four hours at the checkpoint resting the dogs, cooking food, mending and repacking gear, and watching the team for the sign that they are ready to head back out. Once they hit the trail again Gary runs the team through the day and then suddenly it is night. This inexplicable passage of time happens to a lot of mushers. They function to snack and care for the dogs, put on headlamps, and eat themselves but they cannot recall doing any of it.

The leaders are a day ahead, especially with Gary's detour. Gary checks in at the next checkpoint and learns that another musher shipped in straw for his dogs to sleep in. That team has left but the checker offers the leftover straw to Gary. His team ignores the straw in preference of the snow and settle in to sleep while Gary works to replenish the food coolers. The team sleeps for five hours this time but again Gary takes no rest for himself. Gary places two packets of his own meat to thaw on top of the dogs chow while he works. When he returns to check them the heat has melted the plastic around his



meat so that some of his food is mingled with the dogs'. Gary stares at the meat, debating whether to eat it or not, but his hunger wins out. The last barrier between Gary and the dogs is erased when he chooses to eat meat tinged with dog chow.

The utter loss associated with the loss of a dog overwhelms the reader just as it consumes Gary. A musher cannot typically run with two lead dogs because they may fight one another and ruin the team dynamic. For the moose to kill the man's lead dog is near disaster at this stage of the race. The man can certainly limp into the next checkpoint but without a strong leader to guide the team the rest of the way, the man's chances of successfully completing the race are slim.

Gary now understands the importance of being one with his team. As he watches the man mourn the loss of his lead dog, Gary wonders what he would do if he were to lose Cookie. The realization that the team and he are one leads Gary to eat his meat despite its contamination with the dogs' chow. Why should Gary turn his nose away at the food that sustains his dogs? There is no reason except that people outside of the race will have difficulty understanding the level of brotherhood he has achieved with the dogs.



The Race: Rainy Pass

The Race: Rainy Pass Summary and Analysis

As Gary leaves the second checkpoint a fellow musher says he is waiting until dark so that he will not be able to see Happy Canyon when he runs through it. No one in the pre-race briefing mentions anything about Happy Canyon. The canyon comes soon after Finger Lake and is a near vertical cliff. Gary is occupied with his sled bag when he looks up to see Cookie disappearing over the face of the earth. As the sled tips up to follow the team, Gary can clearly see the extent of Happy Canyon. He mutters a curse and holds on for dear life as the team careens five hundred feet down the cliff face. Somehow the team, sled and Gary manage to land in perfect order on the frozen river below. Two other mushers are there to greet Gary with kudos for his risky decision to forgo the switchback trail. They look at him incredulously as he tries to pretend it was all intentional.

Gary pulls into the third checkpoint at Rainy Pass elated by the easy time he had coming up the mountain. He asks the checker why everyone says that Rainy Pass is so difficult and she replies that it is not the up side of the Pass but the down side that is a nightmare. The worst part of the Pass comes at Dalzell Gorge.

Gary is blissfully ignorant through most of the book. He does not know the first thing about running sled dogs beyond following trap lines and it shows in his approach to the race. Advice from other mushers seems to come too late or in sparse detail that does little to aide Gary. However, there is a sense of purity to Gary's style of racing. He is not racing for the money, he is not racing to prove a point, he is racing for love of the dogs and the adventure. If Gary knew and fully understood the hardships of the Iditarod trail, he probably would not have attempted the race or had such an overall rewarding experience.



The Race: Dalzell Gorge and the Burn

The Race: Dalzell Gorge and the Burn Summary and Analysis

Gary is awakened by indistinct shouts and blinding white light. Another musher has a hold of his own team and Gary's while shouting in Gary's face. Gary is planted in the snow face first as pain courses through his body. He slowly stands, takes his handlebars, and is promptly planted back on his face as the team takes off when the other musher releases his grip. Gary realizes that this is the position he has been in for most of Dalzell Gorge.

Gary stays at the Rainy Pass checkpoint for six hours but still does not rest. As he starts for the gorge, he is still having an easy time and does not understand what the checker fussed over. He hears a slight noise and looks behind him. As he swings back around he sees the true horror of the gorge. The gorge is narrow with a river raging over massive boulders. The only "trail" is an ice ledge barely capable of handling a walking team let alone an all-out one. Gary is struck by a branch or rock and goes down. He manages to grab and hold a catch rope but is dragged for several miles through the worst part of the gorge. Gary is lucky that the other musher is able to catch the team.

Gary limps into the Rohn River checkpoint bruised all over and suffering a slight concussion. The idea of quitting begins to take hold. He sweeps his lamp over Cookie who is already standing ready to begin the next leg as she looks down the trail ahead. Gary realizes that this is also a dog race and he has no right to quit on them. Three hours later after not resting and having his chest taped, Gary is back on the trail headed for the Burn, ninety-two miles through an area burned by forest fire. Every few yards Gary must use his ax to dislodge the team from a log they are stuck under. On top of the physical strain, Gary starts to experience severe hallucinations due to his lack of sleep. Gary ties his right wrist to the sled to keep from wandering off again.

The reality of the trail and dangers of the race have finally hit Gary, literally. Gary's blissful ignorance has done him no harm up to this point but his disregard for the checker's caution about the Gorge nearly costs him his life. The reader is in agreement with Gary's consideration of quitting. One man can only take so much and for his first attempt Gary has come farther than many other rookie teams. There would be no shame in quitting—except for the dogs. Gary's relationship with his team has only been strengthened during the race. As he watches them eager to continue, he knows that for all of them he must find the strength to continue. As much as the reader has come to understand the loyalty between Gary and the team, the next portion of the race again raises the idea of quitting. Hallucinations are very dangerous in the wilds of Alaska, particularly when they cause a man to wander from his team.



The Race: McGrath; The Interior

The Race: McGrath; The Interior Summary and Analysis

In McGrath, Gary is transporting food stores to the sled when the smell of real food beckons him to a small café where a waitress greets him warmly and serves five plates of ham and eggs. Gary is loathe to leave the warmth of the building but knows he must get back to his team and the race. As soon as teams leave McGrath, they face the battle to cross Alaska's interior. There is some snow to cushion the trail as it winds along the river. A bar along the route passes out food and drink to help mushers get to the next checkpoint at Ophir. There is little snow since constant wind keeps the snow from settling and Gary feels an overall sense of alien barrenness. Gary is infected with a mystical feeling where only he and the dogs matter and everything else does not exist.

The first stretch across the interior is 180 miles and is the longest stretch between checkpoints of the entire race. By mid-day the clouds have grown larger and the wind is picking up. As Gary rounds a bend into the open, the wind whips into his parka driving needles of snow into his skin. Rather than abating the gust picks up force blowing the sled off course. Now running with the wind, the dogs pick up speed despite Gary's attempts to slow and turn them. Finally Cookie brings them to a stop on a level spot. The dogs curl into balls for protection as Gary takes cover inside his sled bag while the wind rages around them. For the first time since the race began, Gary is able to catch a bit of sleep. When he awakens the wind has stopped and it is daylight again.

Gary is surprised to learn that there are ten other teams sheltering with him in a small basin. Each one pulled in after Gary arrived but the waist high snow hid them from view. The men gather for breakfast telling about their experiences. The group reluctantly breaks camp deciding to convoy together in case another storm arises. The idea is suggested by a man who brought donuts to share and Gary thinks he is a very nice man. Gary does not realize that this same man will commit murder only a few hours later.

Gary is run ragged and the bulk of the trip still lies before him. His brief stop in the café shows how much the villagers appreciate the mushers. The villagers live in these conditions year round and can sympathize with frozen starving mushers. The local people also know the terrain and the café owner probably recognizes that Gary still does not understand what he faces. There is an element of camaraderie between some of the locals and the racers.

The trail across the Interior is what the reader imagines when the word "Iditarod" is mentioned. Howling winds, extreme cold, no visibility—these are the components of a sled dog race in the Alaskan wilds. The Interior is where the musher is totally dependent on his team. A lead dog who cannot navigate will falter leading the rest of the team to disaster. Without Cookie's expert guidance Gary could have been led astray to die lost



in the Interior. The fact that eleven other teams have made camp in the same basin provides evidence of the dog's strong sense of smell and of the enormity facing the racers. Again the sense of camaraderie surfaces when the mushers decide to continue on together. Although they are running a race against one another, the reality of becoming lost and alone overshadows the competition.



The Race: Don's Cabin; Shageluk

The Race: Don's Cabin; Shageluk Summary and Analysis

Halfway to the town of Iditarod there is an abandoned cabin stocked with provisions by a man named Don who nearly died there during the race one year. Of the eleven teams traveling together, only Gary and the donut man stop to tend their dogs. Gary removes himself from the narrative to discuss the importance of the bond between a man and his team. Dogs rarely violate this relationship but some men work inexplicably hard to destroy it. Many expeditions into the Arctic and Antarctic, as well as the original Iditarod trail, have places named for where dogs were killed. The most common reason for the slaughter of dogs is for the meat to feed the other dogs and the musher. Explorers would take on extra dogs to pull the sled and use them for food instead of weighing down the sled with extra supplies. Gary notes that people who cannot learn to read dogs and adjust themselves to the animals' needs should not run dogs. Unfortunately many men who should not run dogs, do. Sometimes a dog becomes so broken by the lack of love that it will lay down and refuse to move.

Gary is ready to leave but the other team will not budge. The donut man becomes infuriated, screaming and pulling at the dogs who cower, trying to move away from him. The man's rage grows and grows until he repeatedly kicks one of the dogs until it lies dead. Gary is aghast as he stands staring at the man whose face is full of a hate Gary cannot understand. Gary thinks about killing this man for his crime but instead unhooks the team and urges them on to the next checkpoint. At the checkpoint he tells the officials what happened. His story is corroborated by another musher who was coming behind the pair and saw the killing from a small rise. The donut man is disqualified and barred from the race for life.

On the way to Shageluk from Iditarod, Gary nearly topples over the team when they come to a dead stop. In front of him is a complete team lined out for camp but missing a musher. They are in the middle of an open tundra in broad daylight but Gary sees no other signs of life. Gary sets his team and is standing trying to decide what to do when he sees movement in the distance. A person is coming toward him and as it gets closer he realizes it is a woman musher. She needed to use the bathroom and chose to take cover behind a bush a quarter of a mile off the trail. At Shageluk Gary is greeted by a young boy who brings him several bowls of moose chili.

The reader is not shocked to discover that men often treat their dogs cruelly. On long expeditions or races the reader can well imagine the frustration, exhaustion, and impatience that builds until a man breaks. However, the reader does struggle to understand how a man can reach the point of such rage that he will kill the very means of his survival. Gary aptly likens the donut man's rage to Nazis in a death camp.



There is a sense of wonderment and possibility to this chapter that tries to negate the tragedy at Don's Cabin. Only on the Iditarod trail will you find a full sled team waiting for their musher who has walked a quarter of a mile to use the "restroom." The female musher has thought more of her dogs than herself by choosing not to make her team run an extra distance just for her sake. The nine year old boy shows the promise of future mushers who will run the race appreciative of the opportunity and out of a true love for their dogs.



The Race: The Yukon; Unalakleet

The Race: The Yukon; Unalakleet Summary and Analysis

This portion of the race is run down the middle of the frozen Yukon River. Teams are exposed to wind and the temperature regularly falls to fifty or sixty below. The snow is too deep to run a team along the edge of the river. Every year there is talk of finding a different route but the Yukon offers a flat alternative to climbing the surrounding mountains.

Cookie enjoys running the river until she hits bare river ice and Gary must urge her on. The day is warm, about twenty below, and the dogs run well over the ice. As the team rounds a bend the wind picks up and the sun drops behind the mountains. When the sun begins to set Gary stops the team and layers on heavier clothes still ignorant of what is to come. As the sun sets and it is fully dark, the real cold attacks Gary, entering his clothing through any available opening like needles. The wind picks up and Gary worries about the team. He stops to check their feet and runs between dogs so they are not stopped long. The activity warms Gary slightly and once the team resumes the trail he periodically hops from the runners to run behind the team for warmth. Gary passes the night this way and is eternally grateful for the rising sun.

At Unalakleet the mushers are allowed to stay with the locals. Gary has been losing over a pound a day even though he eats all that he can and even scrounges from the scrap heaps of other mushers. Gary spends a whole night in Unalakleet resting the dogs and fixing gear. When he begins harnessing the team the next morning he thinks about his old life and how alien it all seems now. One of the old villagers ask Gary if he finds the simple way of life better. Gary says "yes" and the old man offers for Gary and his family to come live in the village when the race is over.

In the village of Shaktolik, Gary stays with villagers but this time he rooms with four veteran mushers. There is tension in the room due to the upcoming crossing of Norton Sound where people have almost died. Gary rests for four and a half hours. During that time each of the mushers reluctantly heads back out onto the trail.

These two chapters are more narrative material that allows the reader to feel the ebb and flow of the race. There is a slight pattern to Gary's adventures: something pleasant is followed by something unpleasant. Through it all Gary retains his even keel and allows the entire experience to wash over him. At times the reader wonders if Gary really understands that he is racing the Iditarod. However, as Gary mentions a few times, he is in no position to win the race and can afford to leisurely work his way to the finish. The reader wonders if those in the lead have the same experience as Gary. The way Gary runs the Iditarod mirrors his approach to life.



The Race: Norton Sound; Nome

The Race: Norton Sound; Nome Summary and Analysis

The day is clear and the wind calm as the team sails over the ice still ignorant of what lays before them. Cookie suddenly changes her pace. Her tail goes up in a question mark and she runs on her toes signaling bad ice. Gary knows that the possibility of falling through the ice is high so he grabs the catch rope and drops to his stomach to distribute his weight. Gary gives Cookie a command to bring the team around and after a few hundred yards the sled moves back onto the thicker, older ice. Later Gary learns that a piece of ice twenty miles across had broken off to float out to sea. New ice started to form but was only a few inches thick when Gary crossed over. If Gary had tried to cross an hour earlier he and the team would have certainly gone through the ice.

From the checkpoint at Kayuk it is only one hundred fifty miles to the finish line in Nome. The sea crashes into the land breaking up the ice. The team must thread its way through the crags. The wind picks up with such force that it suspends Cookie in mid-air. Gary is unable to keep his footing and bumps down the mountain to the sea ice at the bottom to check in at the next checkpoint. Gary quickly snacks the dogs and heads back out to run the final fifty miles of the race. Gary gives the command and the team pulls him down Front Street toward his waiting wife, son and the mayor of Nome. Gary stands at the end of the race ripped, bruised, bleeding and exhausted and states that he fully intends to come back and win the race.

Gary's blissful ignorance that has kept him forging ahead allows him to give the confident statement that he will return and win the race. The important thing to note is that Gary does not say he will win it the next year, just that he will win it. Given the relationship with his team and the lessons just learned, there is a distinct possibility that Gary could eventually win the Iditarod. At the same time, the reader realizes that Gary's ignorance will end once he reaches home. As he gathers himself to prepare for the next Iditarod he will be approaching training with new ideas and knowledge.

An End

An End Summary and Analysis

Gary learns that he has coronary heart disease. The doctor is hopeful that Gary will live a normal life but Gary finds his words a death sentence. He will never again run the Iditarod or his dogs for pleasure. Gary wonders how he will ever live without his dogs. He calls a friend to take all the dogs and pups except Cookie. Gary knows that for the rest of his life he will always wonder how he will live without his team.

The ending of the book is abrupt and almost tragic. The reader feels that in some way Gary is being punished for his decision to lead a simple life. The reader empathizes with Gary over the loss of his dogs. Gary's masterful writing ability allows the reader to form his own relationship with the sled team and now the reader is also forced to make a sudden, clean break with them.

Winterdance

Summary and Analysis



Characters

Gary Paulsen

Gary is the protagonist of the book. This book is his adventure into a new lifestyle and deeper understanding of the truly important things in life. Gary is in his mid-forties when he uproots his wife and son to move to Minnesota. There they set up house in a small cabin and begin farming, hunting, and trapping. They do away with luxury items like television or a car and survive on what they can provide on their own. Eventually Gary gives up trapping but keeps his small team of sled dogs to run for pleasure. The more time Gary spends running the dogs, the more he yearns for more. One day his wife says he will run the Iditarod in Alaska, and Gary realizes she is right.

Gary's conversational style of writing gives the reader a strong sense of what he is like as a man. Gary is an intelligent man although his many training blunders make the reader wonder about his level of common sense. Gary approaches training for the race with wide-eyed enthusiasm and blissful ignorance. He also has a warm heart that allows him to read the dogs and eventually understand that they have more to teach him than he does them. Throughout the race Gary drinks in his surroundings even though he is not always aware of them. Gary's simplistic lifestyle allows him to appreciate the race for what it is and what it has to teach him.

Cookie

Cookie is the lead dog in Gary's sled team. Gary has had her since he started running dogs for his trap lines. Gary trusts Cookie's instincts to lead him across the Alaskan wilderness. Only once does he falter in his trust of Cookie and it proves disastrous. Just prior to the start of the race Gary switches Cookie with Wilson who leads the team on a wild chase through downtown Anchorage. Once Gary is able to remedy the situation, Cookie leads the team over bad ice, around burned trees, and through blinding snowstorms. Gary comes to view Cookie as a close friend and when he makes the decision to give up the team, she is the only one he keeps.

There is a special bond between Gary and Cookie. Out on the trail Gary looks to Cookie for clues to the path ahead. Her tail raised in a certain manner or the way she holds her feet to walk indicate the level of danger posed by the terrain. Cookie must also look to Gary for clues about their journey and requires a bit of coaxing when she is unsure. As Gary becomes more and more like the dogs, the relationship with Cookie intensifies. As Gary admires the sun shining on the sea, Cookie turns toward the scene appearing to appreciate the view as much as her master. Cookie is the one who brings Gary back to reality at the end of the race. Gary stops short of the finish line contemplating his experience over the past weeks and wishing not to return to his old life. One look at Cookie and Gary realizes that the ride must come to an end, but she also holds the promise of more adventures whenever Gary is ready.



Ruth

Ruth is Gary's wife. She is the voice of reason in the book. Ruth maintains a surprising amount of calmness and humor as her husband hauls the family to Minnesota and then embarks on the Iditarod. In fact it is Ruth who appears to put the idea of running the race into Gary's head. At least she gives a voice to what Gary may have already been thinking. At no time does Ruth question her husband's decision or ability. She tries when she can to give suggestions although Gary often hurries off before hearing her entire idea. When Gary has had an extremely rough day dragging behind the sled and battling skunks, Ruth advises he sleep in the kennel with the dogs. Surprisingly this covert rudeness becomes a turning point for Gary and the team. At each step of the way Ruth supports Gary's endeavors. She is quiet and accepting, laid back and able to maintain a sense of humor. Ruth's soft demeanor mediates Gary's impatience and the team's wildness.

Devil

Devil is one of the three Canadian dogs Gary purchases to outfit his team. The other two are Ortho and Murphy. The trio have been running trap lines for four years together since they were puppies. Ortho and Devil have conflicting personalities, while Murphy is so laid back that Gary wonders if he is lazy. Of the three Devil emerges with a fierce attitude that often leaves Gary bleeding. On the trip back from Canada, Devil and Ortho set about destroying their plastic travel kennels. This results in Gary riding in the camper with them for the entire ride home. Gary compares Devil to the Tasmanian devil, deciding that the dog certainly lives up to his name. There is a small glimmer of acceptance on Devil's part when Gary spends his first night in the kennel. The second night Devil rips up Gary's sleeping bag but overall Gary feels they are making progress. Gary realizes that in order to run the race well, he will have to come to understand the power of a dog like Devil.

The Donut Man

The Donut Man is someone Gary meets along the trail. When Gary first encounters the donut man, it is after a severe storm that leaves eleven teams sheltered together in a small basin. One of the men has donuts in his pack that he shares with the other mushers. The donut man suggests that all the teams convoy to the next checkpoint for safety's sake. Gary feels that this is a nice man. However, only a few hours later Gary is alone with the donut man at Don's Cabin. The other teams have gone on ahead instead of stopping to rest. As Gary prepares to leave, he witnesses an act of brutality. The donut man unleashes a hatred so severe that he kills one of his own dogs by kicking it repeatedly. Gary leaves the scene and turns the donut man into the officials in Iditarod. The donut man is stripped of his dogs and barred from the race for life.



Marge

Marge is a brush wolf or northern coyote that joins the pack for several days while Gary is out running for pleasure. Marge comes during the night, confusing Gary as he counts nine instead of eight dogs in the dark. Marge stays mostly on the fringes of the camp coming close enough only to mate a few times with Typhoon. None of the dogs seem particularly bothered by Marge's presence and since she never acts aggressively, Gary makes no move to shoo her away. Gary is intrigued by the wolf and while she is mating with Typhoon he slips closer to study her. Gary sees that she has been trapped before and has a slightly deformed front paw. She follows behind the team, running forward only once to lead them through the woods to a burrowing site for grouse. Gary watches as Marge expertly stalks the birds and catches one for her dinner. A few days later Marge quietly takes her leave and Gary feels he is losing a friend. He never sees or hears about her again.

The Team

Gary does not list the names of his entire team. In *Major Wrecks*, he does list thirteen of them: Typhoon, Cookie, Yogi, Max, Storm, Steven, Bill, Devil, Murphy, Ortho, Big Mac, Raven and Byron. Elsewhere in the book he mentions Wilson, but the reader is told that he has a total of twenty dogs when he arrives in Alaska. Gary runs fifteen of the twenty but the other names are not noted. Throughout the book several of the dogs stand out for different reasons. Devil is a terror, Cookie is the leader, Wilson gets them lost out of the chutes, Murphy is lazy, and Typhoon mates with Marge. Besides these exceptions the reader learns little about the team. What is more important to the story is the relationship Gary forges with the team. He becomes so close to all of them that he cannot imagine his life without them. The reader does not necessarily need to know individual names because the focus is on the team, including Gary, working as a whole.

The Checkers

At each checkpoint along the race route there are official checkers who direct the mushers through the stop and have them sign in and sign out. This method assures that all teams are accounted for and records their time of arrival and departure. In this manner the checkers can keep track of where approximately mushers are on the trail. At Skwentna, Gary meets a female checker who gently assists him since he is too exhausted to think clearly. Gary meets her again as he breezes into Rainy Pass. Gary is exhilarated from the easy time he had coming up the Pass. The checker again calmly explains that it is not the up-side of the Pass that people consider difficult. She tells him that it is the down-side and Dalzell Gorge that causes mushers lots of trouble. Gary is too euphoric to listen but finds out the hard way what she means.



Skunks, Moose and Beaver

These characters add to the comedy and suspense of the book. Almost all of Gary's training runs involve some sort of comical event. Perhaps one of the funniest scenes of the book is that in which Gary encounters several skunks on a night run. Gary's interaction with the skunks is unbelievable and his mishandling of the animals should be attributed to lack of sleep. The beaver functions in much the same way as the skunks. Gary at first perceives the beaver to be a potential threat to the dogs. However, when he catches up to the runaway team he is proven wrong. The dogs want to investigate the unusual animal. The moose holds no comedy. There are two moose confrontations in the book. One occurs as Gary makes his way back from a meandering wrong turn. The moose suddenly appears and attacks another musher's dog. The result of the attack is the death of both moose and dog. The second attack occurs similarly. The moose appears out of nowhere and Gary is trying to decide how to handle the situation. When the animal disappears, Gary realizes he has been suffering hallucinations and has wandered from his camped team. The moose was very real although the reader does not know how Gary escaped without injury.

Alaska

The state of Alaska can be considered a character on its own if the reader allows that the rapidly changing climate and landscape alter the state's personality. Gary does not directly personify Alaska, but as the reader works through the story the state takes on a life of its own. Alaska is relentless and shows no love for the mushers invading it. On one day Alaska can blow fair winds, put forth clear skies, and warm temperatures. In a matter of hours Alaska can become angry and unleash its wrath on the mushers through blinding snow storms, driving winds, and dislodged ice floes. In the same way that Gary struggles to understand his team, he must also work to get to know Alaska's changing moods.



Objects/Places

Slumps

Slumps are unborn calves still inside a cow taken to a slaughterhouse. The unborn baby is removed from its mother and ground up to be used as dog food. This is the meat Gary feeds to his dogs on the race trail.

Minnesota

Gary moves his family to Minnesota to pursue a simpler lifestyle. They live mostly off the land gardening, hunting, and trapping. As part of their new lifestyle Gary obtains four sled dogs and a trapping sled that he uses to bring in money for the family. Minnesota is where Gary first toys with the idea of running the Iditarod and begins his training.

Anchorage

Anchorage, Alaska is where the Iditarod race begins. The starting chutes are located downtown where spectators and camera crews converge. Anchorage serves as more of a staging area that allows outsiders to feel they are a part of the long race. The real start of the Iditarod is in Knik.

Nome

The finish line of the Iditarod is located 1,180 miles from Anchorage in Nome, Alaska. In order to reach Nome mushers must cross terrible terrain including mountains, frozen lakes, and open tundras.

Don's Cabin

Don's Cabin is a rundown shack located on the way to the town of Iditarod. It became known as Don's Cabin after a man named Don stayed there while running the race. He was half dead and the cabin offered shelter that saved his life. Now each year Don returns with a crew of workers to make repairs to the cabin and stock it with food and coffee for mushers.

A Sledge and A Sled

Gary uses a sledge with the dogs in training. It is the same sledge he used for trapping and is heavier than the regular sled used during the race. A sled is the sled used for the race. It is lighter than the training sledge and has room to carry gear and supplies. The



supplies are zipped inside a bag which can also double as a sleeping bag for Gary on the trail.

Booties

Gary learns that the dogs need booties to keep their feet from freezing or receiving cuts from the ice. He manages to gather together six hundred pair but just a few days before the race starts someone tells him he should have at least eleven hundred. Gary becomes very busy trying to sew more booties.

Snow Hook

The snow hook is used as an anchor for the sled. Whenever Gary stops the team he sets the snow hook so that the team cannot run off. On several occasions the snow hook saves the team's and Gary's life. Once the hook almost pierces Gary's foot.

The Interior

The Interior refers to the portion of the race run in the interior of Alaska. This area is rather desolate and contains one of the longest stretches between checkpoints. The Interior also presents the area where mushers are most likely to be caught in severe weather, become lost, or encounter serious trouble.

Iditarod

Iditarod has two meanings in the book. Gary runs in the Iditarod Race, which is an eleven hundred and eighty mile trek from Anchorage to Nome. Iditarod is also a town in Alaska that is often one of the stops along the race. The original Iditarod trail was used to bring supplies to miners in the 1800s.

Themes

Becoming Dog

When Gary first moves to Minnesota and begins using sled dogs as part of his new life, he does not see them as more than necessary means for his work. However, his viewpoint changes when an old farmer tells about watching his cows work out a complicated system for protecting their calves and going for water. At this moment Gary begins his transition from human to dog.

After Gary stops hunting and trapping, he chooses to continue running the dogs just for the sheer enjoyment of the time spent outdoors. Each time he takes the dogs out for a run they show him new, beautiful things. Soon Gary is craving more beauty and spends more and more time out on the trails. Ruth is the one who first realizes that Gary is becoming more comfortable with the dogs and has reached the point of being able to lead a sled team for the Iditarod. Once Gary voices his agreement, the process of becoming one of the pack speeds up. The addition of Devil, Ortho and Murphy forces Gary to spend time in close quarters with the dogs. Not only does he ride in the camper letting the dogs take bites out of him, but he moves into the kennel following the great skunk event. Now Gary is not just the man who brings the food and directs the runs, he is down on the dogs' level living alongside them in all conditions.

As Gary spends more time out on the trails in training and then alone with only the team during the race, he learns to watch the dogs, taking cues from them. He begins to understand their way of thinking and learns to anticipate when they need rest, food, or should be allowed to run free. The final step in becoming one of the dogs is eating meat mixed with their chow. The idea of it sounds disgusting to readers, even knowing how hungry Gary must be to consider the act. However, Gary has finally reached the point where his dogs are family and friends. Their time spent enduring the obstacles of the race has brought them so close that he considers staying with them instead of returning to his regular life. The bond forged between Gary and the team is as strong as that between him and his wife. That relationship is what makes giving the team up in the end so difficult. He is in essence giving away a part of himself.

Insanity

There are two levels of insanity in the book. The first feeds into the second. Many readers may consider Gary as starting to lose his mind when he chooses to uproot his family and move to Minnesota, leaving behind all the luxuries of modern living. Life changes like this are unusual, especially when they are pre-meditated and not forced. However, this move away from the regular hustle of city life brings Gary a peace of mind and spirit that gives him the opportunity to appreciate the simpler points of life.



Gary and Ruth continue to take their new lifestyle to a new level when they give up hunting and trapping. Gary is again afforded more time to see the beauty of the world. As he grows more intrigued with the wonders the dogs find for him, Gary subconsciously toys with the idea of expanding his sledding. Not until Ruth gives voice to the possibility of running the Iditarod does Gary understand the direction his insanity is headed. Gary knows enough about running dogs to take a small team on a week long expedition to check trap lines. He knows next to nothing about running a full team of fifteen dogs over eleven hundred miles on the world's roughest terrain. Gary and Ruth do not have extra money to purchase dogs, buy sleds, stockpile gear, or fund the drive to Alaska and the actual race. They must be crazy to go ahead with the idea anyway.

Even the dogs Gary gathers together in a hodge-podge fashion are a little insane. Devil and Ortho have a conflict of personalities. Murphy does not mind when the others pee on him. Wilson runs about excited by everything but without any apparent boundaries. The entire affair seems destined for disaster until Ruth points out that maybe the dogs need to be wild to run the race. Insanity is not necessarily a bad thing. Not following the same path as everyone else leaves only the select few capable of running the Iditarod. If Gary had really researched the race and known all the difficulties of the course, he may have backed out. If he had decided to scratch early on, he would not have seen buffalo ice skating or slid through a gigantic herd of caribou. There is calmness coupled with the insanity that allows mushers to want to do it again. The excitement of the craziness of the race gets into the teams' blood and they need to experience it again to remain alive.

Alaska

Alaska is a character, a setting, and a theme in the book. The state's presence is so large that it can easily accommodate multiple roles. The theme of Alaska compliments those of Insanity and Becoming Dog. Alaska is one of the last expanses of true wilderness in the United States. A person needs to be a little crazy to want to brave the climate of Alaska for more than a few days. At the same time, that climate and the ever changing landscape offers peace and escape. In the barren Interior a person learns a great deal about himself. He comes to know how tough he can be when no outside help is available. Alaska allows a person to test himself to see if he can truly face the rest of the world. Those who find themselves capable may opt to stay with the old villagers and continue to live a simple and hard life. Those who are unable to survive without modern conveniences leave Alaska wishing they had more heart, but always with the memory of the effort.

Alaska can offer great rewards for those who choose to seek them. In the midst of a harrowing race Gary has the opportunity to view some amazing sights. The mountains greet him each morning at sunrise, posing both a challenge and a haven. Even the harsh interior shows Gary the wonder of wild animals in their natural environment. No one is likely to see ice skating buffalo anywhere else or sled through a herd of caribou so closely he could reach out and touch them. These experiences are the essence of life in Alaska, but they teach about life in general. Gary learns to navigate each difficult



situation and take time to enjoy the brief glimpses of incredible beauty. Although in the scheme of the race the winners must hurry in order to reach the finish line, the real prize comes from slowing down. Alaska forces a person to take life slowly by stranding him in a snowstorm or blowing him off course. Alaska has a mind of its own and appears to know what each inhabitant needs during their stay.

Style

Perspective

The book is told from Gary Paulsen's point of view. He writes in the first person so that the reader feels as if he is looking over Gary's shoulder throughout the entire story. Gary pulls the reader into his experience with intense clarity and personality. Gary's wife, Ruth, adds a touch of wit and practicality to the story. Gary has a nonchalant attitude that emanates from his narrative. At times the reader becomes more frantic than Gary. Since there is a distance between the reader and the events of the story, the reader is impacted by the immediate situation while Gary does not realize what has happened to him until some time later.

Gary has a true love of his team that the reader immediately picks up on. The warmth and respect with which Gary comes to view his team is movingly conveyed to the reader. The dogs are more than animals. In some ways the reader becomes a dog just as Gary does, although the reader does not feel the sting of skunk spray or the sharpness of Devil's teeth. The reader connects with Gary and his team because their experience is similar to what most readers would undergo if they chose to run the Iditarod. This realness is what the reader holds on to throughout the book. Gary does not portray himself as a know-it-all musher. He allows the reader to see his mistakes and faults. By permitting the reader to ride along on his sled, Gary gives the reader a real feel for the Iditarod and the emotional, physical, and spiritual journey that accompanies it.

Tone

The tone of the book is mainly subjective, although Gary tries at different places to step back and view his experience objectively. Since the story presents a spiritual and life-changing experience, it is difficult for Gary to truly see events from an objective standpoint. Gary's wife, Ruth, would be better suited to present an objective opinion, but her voice does not surface much throughout the book.

Gary writes as if he were telling the story over drinks to a good friend. He uses easily understood language and does not become technical in his descriptions of running sled dogs. As the reader progresses through the book it becomes obvious that Gary did not know the technical terms while preparing for his first race. Gary manages to remain true to his personal feelings and his interaction with others by maintaining a conversational tone in his writing. There are places where Gary or another character curses. Rather than being offensive to the reader, these epithets convey the intensity of the situation. The reader quickly becomes enthralled with Gary's story and laughs or cries along with him.

Structure

The book is divided into two parts: The Dogs and The Race. There are a total of twenty chapters, a prelude and a concluding chapter. The first part of the book functions as an introduction to Gary and his team. The reader gets a sense of wonder and anticipation in this section. Gary tells of his struggles, most of them comedic, as he works to pull together a sled dog team capable of running the Iditarod. The second part of the book is much more serious in nature as it discusses the actual race. Gary still provides plenty of comedy and the reader is often surprised that the team survives.

The prelude takes place after Gary's first Iditarod race and during training for his second Iditarod. There is some difficulty on the reader's part to remember this difference in setting, especially since his lead dog at that time is Duberry but for the rest of the book he talks of Cookie as his lead dog. Some of the chapters begin with a memory that foreshadows what is to come in that chapter. Since Gary explains the events leading up to the memory the device works well and the reader does not become confused.



Quotes

"Simple things, small things change lives," Prelude, p. 2.

"Some thought I still trapped and I let them think so—caught in a kind of guilt that just to be running dogs for the sake of running them was to fritter away time—but I was just going to go, and a change came with running them," Beginnings, p. 25.

"Right then I was probably one of the least qualified dog drivers on the entire planet to go up and run the Iditarod. Yes, I answered, listening to Cookie breathe in the silence of Ruthe waiting. I think I am..." Beginnings, p. 54.

"I was now in the position of going rabbit hunting sitting on a rusty 1957 Schwinn with a chrome tank and tattered handlebar tassels, being pulled through thick forest by five dogs," Dogs from Hell, p. 66.

"In subsequent runs I left the yard on my face, my ass, my back, my belly. I dragged for a mile, two miles, three miles. I lost the team eight, ten times; walked twelve, seventeen, once forty-some miles looking for them," Major Wrecks, p. 78.

"Alaska truly is wonderfully, viciously, terrifyingly, and joyously extreme," Pre-Race, p. 132.

"By this time I, too, was gone, caught up in the madness of it all, so immersed in the noise and insanity that if somebody had asked my name I would not have known it," Eagle River, p. 140.

"The man was crying and he wrapped his fingers in the neck ruff of the dog and held it—it was the same way I often held Cookie's neck for fun—a close, intimate gesture. As he held the fur, the dog died, and the man looked off to the side of the trail where a large form lay bulked in the snow," Skwentna, p. 149.

"It may seem somewhat irrelevant—all this over two meat patties—but it became important because in a very real sense, it was the crumbling of the last barrier between me and the dogs," Finger Lake, p. 172.

"I was beyond tired. Days and nights without sleep had put me into a dreamlike state," Dalzell Gorge and the Burn, p. 183.

"Seventy, eighty miles an hour, blowing clouds of snow horizontally into and past me—it was a staggering, killing wind," The Interior, p. 206.

"The dog's screams had gone on all this time but with the last kick—the blow must have almost literally exploded the dog's liver—the dog fell back and grew still and it was over, in seconds it was over and he looked up at me, directly at me, and I saw things I had never seen, never want to see again," Don's Cabin, p. 216.



"I was thirteen days into the race, but many more than twenty-one in training, being with the dogs, and it was an accurate statement—I had changed, reformed," Unalakleet, p. 237.

"But all I could come up with was a picture of him swirling down, tangled with his sled and the dogs, dragged down and down into the deep blue of the Sound..." Norton Sound, p. 246.

"... I could see the lights of Nome. I didn't want to go in," Nome, p. 250.

"My dogs. God. How can it be to live without the dogs?" An End, p. 256.



Topics for Discussion

Gary mentions several times that the race is about the dogs. Discuss what you think he means by this statement and what role, if any, humans play in the race.

Pick one of Gary's major wrecks during training and discuss the lessons learned from the experience and how they apply to the Iditarod.

Gary and his family give up everything and drain their bank accounts when they move to Minnesota. In modern society this is almost unheard of and sounds crazy. What do you feel the family gained from leaving behind all the trappings of a fast-paced life?

Why do you think Gary chose to give up the team after being diagnosed with coronary heart disease? Do you see any way that he could have managed to keep them?

Throughout the race Gary is confronted with breathtaking views often followed by near tragic events. Discuss how this aspect of Alaska factors into the race.

Several times throughout the book Gary talks about the spirituality of the race and Alaska, yet he staunchly denies any religious affiliation for himself. Is there a difference between spirituality and religion? Discuss this question in light of Gary's experiences?

Gary's wife, Ruth, appears very laid back as she watches her husband undertake this endeavor. At the same time she is undeniably supportive. Discuss the role Ruth plays in Gary's success with the team and his transformation over the course of the race.