

Woodsong Study Guide

Woodsong by Gary Paulsen

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Contents

Woodsong Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part I, Running, Chapter 1.....	4
Part I, Running, Chapter 2.....	5
Part I, Running, Chapter 3.....	6
Part I, Running, Chapter 4.....	7
Part I, Running, Chapter 5.....	8
Part I, Running, Chapter 6.....	10
Part I, Running, Chapter 7.....	12
Part I, Running, Chapter 8.....	14
Part II, The Race, Days 1-6.....	15
Part II, The Race, Days 7-16&17.....	17
Characters.....	19
Objects/Places.....	22
Themes.....	24
Style.....	26
Quotes.....	28
Topics for Discussion.....	30



Plot Summary

Author Gary Paulsen, especially well-known for the young adult book *Hatchet*, uses *Woodsong* to communicate various stories about Paulsen's experiences with animals in the woods in Alaska over the ten or so year period where he trapped animals and ran dog sleds. The main themes of the book focus on the beauty of nature, both animate and inanimate. But it is especially focused on the beauty, depth and complexity of animal life and about how Paulsen came to appreciate the importance of treating animals with dignity and respect. The book runs the emotional gamut, from times of exaltation and joy to experiences of pain, despair and terror. Paulsen is often unusually lucid and at other times bogged down with injury and hallucination. But throughout the book, Paulsen's animals are always around, and his dogs in particular are always available to help.

Woodsong is divided into two parts. Part I, *Running*, is a collection of eight essays about Paulsen's experiences with animals. Chapter 1 impresses upon the reader that nature truly is shocking and often horrifying in its cruelty. This is especially true of interactions between predator and prey. Paulsen's description of a doe being ripped apart by wolves before his very eyes is meant to shock the reader into conceiving of nature in a different way. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the reader to Paulsen's most beloved animals, his sledding dogs, many of whom had unique and endearing personalities and whose emotional complexities convinced Paulsen that he could no longer trap or kill animals outside of extreme necessity.

Chapter 4 focuses on Paulsen's explanation of the deepest difference between humans and animals - the use of controlled fire. It takes the reader through a number of conflicts between Paulsen, fire and animals. Chapter 5 tells the brief story of a banty hen named Hawk who exhibited an unusual, fierce altruism in protecting chicks that were not her own. Chapter 6 explains the deep mysteries of the woods in a series of short tales. But chapters seven and eight return to Paulsen's deep, emotionally connected experiences with his sledding team. These build up to Part II.

Part II, *The Race*, is the tale of Paulsen's seventeen day trip in the Iditarod race, a race of dog sledgers along a thousand mile trail from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. The race combines many of the insights that Paulsen discusses in Part I and exhibits a huge range of emotional feelings and insights that Paulsen had into himself and his dogs. He completes the race but not without incredibly frightening conflicts and near-death experiences. His experience is so profound that he promises to do what he never imagined - running the race again.



Part I, Running, Chapter 1

Part I, Running, Chapter 1 Summary

Author Gary Paulsen begins *Woodsong* by explaining to the reader that he thought, up until age forty, that he understood "the woods." He had seen it all from hunting and trapping to trailing and the beauty of the forests, animals, and trees. But what he had not truly understood was the violence and horror of life in the woods. The Disney version of the woods is the opposite of the reality. His experience with horror began one December morning while Paulsen was running a dog team around a large lake. Out of nowhere a doe appeared, terrified, smelling of fear (actually displaying the scent of fear that only dogs can pick up but that humans can with training). She ran incredibly quickly but was being chased by wolves, focused entirely on her. Paulsen had seen many animals escape death, but not this time. The wolves caught her and ate her alive in an incredibly grotesque fashion while the doe was still alive. And Paulsen could not stop looking. Paulsen yelled for them to leave, but they only paused to notice him. Paulsen then realized he should not have interfered, as this was an ancient ritual. They are not subject to human standards of moral evaluation.

Part I, Running, Chapter 1 Analysis

Woodsong is a set of stories about Paulsen's experiences in "the woods," a generic name for woodland settings. This first chapter wakes the reader up with a tale of Paulsen doing the same. His naivete about the woods and the life within it was shattered as he had never really seen prey being eaten by the predator. It was not pretty and disturbed him considerably.



Part I, Running, Chapter 2

Part I, Running, Chapter 2 Summary

Paulsen loved the woods for a long time but only came to using dog teams by necessity. While at age forty he had made some money writing books, he no longer made enough to live off of. So he had to take odd jobs and one such job was working for the state of Minnesota trapping beavers to reduce the population. Some of Paulsen's friends gave him four older dogs (Storm, Yogi, Obeah and Columbia) and a broken sled. But Paulsen had to learn how to run them from scratch and did not initially realize how much he needed to know. Over time he learned more and expanded his team to seven dogs and his own tent and had tripled the distance of his trap line from twenty to sixty miles. He would camp out at nights along the path of tracking his trapline. It took him awhile to realize that the dogs could teach him how to trap. But he had to understand their cadence, their walk, as small variations in the snow and their food could affect their performance. They must be fed meat and fat and not dry dog food.

Paulsen learned this lesson the hard way when his dog Storm started spraying blood out of his rear end. He was screaming and lunging, ignoring his condition. Paulsen was frantic and let him loose but Storm quickly went insane when separated from the team and would not depart from his ways with the team. So Paulsen allowed this and the team took him forward another seven hours and was nothing to him. He did not die and never faltered and not for many years after that. Paulsen always wanted to know everything about his dogs.

Part I, Running, Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 is another somewhat harrowing tale about how Paulsen was confronted with the grim yet surprising reality of the woods. This time he learned a hard lesson from his dog team. The dog team had been sprung on him of necessity for money trapping beavers. But while he learned how to use them he did not know much about them until his dog Storm started spewing blood out of his behind. Paulsen thought it was a serious matter but for Storm it was in fact relatively minor. The fact that Storm pulled without fail for seven hours after spurting blood meant that Paulsen had a lot to learn about his dogs.

Part I, Running, Chapter 3

Part I, Running, Chapter 3 Summary

In times of boredom while pulling the dogs, Paulsen would often allow the dogs space to amuse themselves. He notes, however, that in cases of extreme cold, say at forty below zero Fahrenheit, the precautions you must take become severe and nature changes. Steel will become brittle and break and simple breaths of air threaten to burst the blood vessels in your throat. Well, to pass the time, Paulsen would often let his dogs play with meat bones. One of his dogs, Columbia, usually refused to engage in the "Bone Wars" with other dogs, instead burying her bones. That is, until one day when she moved a bone very, very close to a less intelligent dog, Olaf, and watched him struggle to get the bone which was not quite within his reach.

After that, Paulsen felt he could not trap or kill any longer. It was that fast. If Columbia could do that, then most animals probably could, which means that they exhibited sufficient intelligence to warrant not being killed. So instead of trapping, Paulsen simply took the dogs around the woods, trying to learn from them. This led to his third lesson from the woods. One day while running the team, he fell off the sled and was pierced in the knee by a piece of wood. The dogs kept running and Paulsen figured he was finished. But the dog team came back, led by Obeah, and Duberry licked the wound on his leg as she would have a puppy. He untangled the sled and led them home. He knew then that the dogs could teach him.

Part I, Running, Chapter 3 Analysis

It should now be clear to the reader that the book is set out mostly in a series of lessons that Paulsen has learned from living and doing in the woods. This time Paulsen's lesson was compound, that is, it had parts. The first lesson was that he could no longer kill or trap animals - they were simply too intelligent. Second, he learned that when he ascribed this new dignity to animals that they could teach him valuable lessons. This was a significant shift for Paulsen, as it fundamentally changed his attitudes about animals and their relationship to humanity.



Part I, Running, Chapter 4

Part I, Running, Chapter 4 Summary

In Chapter 4, Paulsen explains that what separates humans and animals in the first most case is the ability to use controlled fire. The other things, all the other inventions, come afterwards. Paulsen explains by recounting how his young pup dog team learned about fire for the first time. Initially they were terrified, but Paulsen soothed them and they gradually grew used to it. Paulsen imagined that cave people had the same experience.

Another experience with fire occurred when Paulsen had gone to sleep near a fire with a young adult dog team. He was woken up by their barking. A doe was standing very near the fire, terrified and standing still. She had decided to take a risk and walk through a dog pack to avoid some brush wolves that were chasing her and that she knew would not follow her.

A third experience occurred with bears, specifically a bear named Scarhead. Paulsen would often burn food for himself or the dogs but the smell of burning meat attracts bears, particularly in springtime. While they are initially scary, Paulsen had gotten used to them and even considered them friendly, so when he caught Scarhead rummaging through their food, he threw a stick at him to make him go away. Scarhead did the opposite, almost rearing down on Paulsen and killing him. Paulsen was terrified but when he did not die, he got his shotgun and nearly killed Scarhead. Then he realized he had no reason to, that the bear had spared his life and for this lesson Paulsen was thankful, to realize that he was no more or less than any other animal in the woods.

Part I, Running, Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 continues with lessons, this time further stressing the lack of differences between man and animals. In these cases, Paulsen mostly thinks our differences with animals result from our use of controlled fire. But the tales in the chapter, all related to fire, end up illustrating the deeper point of intelligence demonstrated in animal life. The talks of the pups learning fire safety, the doe taking a clearly calculated risk and the mercy and beneficence of Scarhead all point towards the point that Paulsen wishes to make, namely that our differences with animals are small in the grand scheme of things.



Part I, Running, Chapter 5

Part I, Running, Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5 is the brief story of a banty hen named Hawk. Banty hens are small chickens that Paulsen and his wife often kept around in order to feed the dogs, lay eggs and the like. But Paulsen respected even these animals. One day while running his dogs, Paulsen happened upon a dead grouse which the dogs quickly devoured. When Paulsen discovered that the grouse had laid a number of eggs that were still alive, he decided to have some mercy on her and take them home to keep warm and hatch. However, when he took the eggs home, he found that Hawk quickly adopted them. For Paulsen, this was a strange and surprising thing for a hen as difficult and irritable as Hawk to do. Nonetheless, Hawk sat on them until they hatched and treated them like her own. She would quickly ward off other hens and protect the eggs against animals, even against foxes and other creatures much larger than she was. Thus, she somehow managed to ferociously protect them against predators many times her size. For example, she brutally assaulted a fox who tried to take one of her chicks away. Once he put one of her chicks in his mouth, she immediately and angrily attacked him.

When the chicks were born, Hawk continued to carefully guard them. When they would run off, she would quickly find them and return them home. And again, when animals tried to take them, she would attack them. She was not even friendly to Paulsen about them. She remained this irate and difficult until after most of the chicks had grown up. Most of them went back into the wild.

However, when the chicks were gone, Hawk decided to quiet down. She was no longer as irate or difficult. Paulsen emphasizes that her personality nonetheless retained important common elements with her traits displayed most clearly when protecting chicks not her own.

Paulsen draws from this experience the lesson that animals are capable of surprising acts of altruism that do not seem to make sense in any other context than that they have the ability to simply care for other living things. In one way, Paulsen intends this amusing story to illustrate the emotional complexity of animals.

Part I, Running, Chapter 5 Analysis

A brief interlude, Chapter 5 tells the tale of a hen who exhibited unique character in both adopting chicks that were not her own and protecting them with her life. The main line that Paulsen seems to push is that, like the other animals he has discussed, many animals exhibit high degrees of emotional complexity, suggesting that they have great worth, perhaps not so distant from many humans.

It may seem strange to use a banty hen as an illustration of the emotional worth of animals. Hawk was not a pleasant creature or even mildly friendly. While she had

something of an excuse while she was taking care another hen's offspring, she was still difficult after they were gone. The point the reader should take away from this is that animal life can exhibit emotional complexity even in largely unsympathetic characters.



Part I, Running, Chapter 6

Part I, Running, Chapter 6 Summary

There are many mysterious animal behaviors, but one of the most stark and unique occurred when Paulsen was trying to feed a chipmunk and then a red squirrel, not a carnivorous animal, leapt down from a tree, killed the chipmunk, drug it away and started eating it. Paulsen was horrified but has never seen it since.

Another unusual occurrence fell upon Paulsen while he was riding his dogs at night when caught a branch to his face and was temporarily blinded. When he could see again, he saw an eerie green glowing light. The dogs began howling their "death song," the noise they make when they think something or someone has died. Paulsen was initially curious but stopped when he thought he saw the glow take the form of something like a human. When he got closer he found a stump emitting the gas, which he later learned was the result of it sucking phosphorus from the ground and holding it in all day. But that night the mystery disappeared when Fonzie, one of Paulsen's dogs, came up and peed on the stump.

The next story shows how despite the fact that new snow hides no secrets of animal movements that Paulsen nonetheless saw a hunt that led into a cave that was not empty, and yet no tracks leaving the cave appeared. Another mystery is raised by small cardinal-like birds known as Cedar waxwings, who always fly north early before the snow melts, despite the fact that there is little food around.

The final two stories concern does whose stillness stunned Paulsen. One experience occurred when Paulsen had taken a friend of his and his four-year-old son out on a canoeing trip. They saw two does, very young, reaching out to one another on the ice. But the odder story occurred when Paulsen's entire team stopped in front of a doe standing perfectly still. They were all unnerved, even after Paulsen discovered that the doe had died, frozen, standing up just as if she were still alive. The physics and biology of it made no sense to him. Both Paulsen and the dogs simply up and left. It made Paulsen want to leave the woods.

Part I, Running, Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 is a bundle of mysterious animal encounters, all of which seem to be wholly unique. The story begins with Paulsen recounting a non-carnivorous squirrel quickly killing and eating a chipmunk. Paulsen also puzzles over birds that fly north before food is available. And finally, he describes a pair of stories about still does and how they challenged him. The net effect of these stories is that animals are mysterious and emotionally complex and sometimes frightening despite their size or the threat of physical danger that they pose. In previous chapters, Paulsen explains how his experiences in the woods helped him to realize that he could no longer trap and kill

animals. In the present chapter, Paulsen explains how his experiences in the woods might lead him to leave them.



Part I, Running, Chapter 7

Part I, Running, Chapter 7 Summary

Chapter 7 tells the stories of the many dogs Paulsen has owned and interacted with (he had forty-one dogs at the time of writing the book, so there are many such cases). The first story is about Fred, a large dog who they had to fix when he impregnated too many of the female dogs. As a result, he gained an enormous amount of weight, going from around forty to one hundred and thirty pounds. They tried to force him not to eat as much, but his temper and defiance led him to hide food around the yard. Eventually he got so angry he bit Paulsen and so they decided to feed him more.

The lessons of the complexities of dog temperament continued. One day, before he learned to trust his dogs, Paulsen had been trying to fight for control of his pack, led by a dog named Cookie. In the end, Paulsen learned that they often had better judgment about which path to take than he did, but he learned this the hard way after forcing Cookie to take a path that ended with them going off of a cliff. Everyone was ok, but the dogs sat down and slept, refusing to obey Paulsen, until he learned his lesson.

The dog who taught Paulsen the most was named Storm, a beautiful dog who stayed with Paulsen for many years, even in old age when they used him for training. At his peak, he was beautiful and strong, but most of all, he was a prankster. One time he stole and hid Paulsen's hat and other times he simply refused to cooperate with the rest of the pack just because. They had traveled perhaps twelve thousand miles together and was one of his first dogs. Perhaps the most heart-wrenching story occurred as Storm grew old. When he was middle-aged, he and Paulsen often played with a stick that Paulsen had given him. He always remembered the stick and playing with Paulsen while beginning the game facing east. As he aged, he would become more forgetful, mellow and confused. Eventually they had to stop using him even for training. And one day, when Storm died, Paulsen had him tied up to a chain so he wouldn't wander into the younger dogs' territory, where they would attack him. When Paulsen found him, he had the stick in his mouth and had pulled the chain to face East. Paulsen blamed himself for not letting him loose, but he knew that Storm did not blame him.

Part I, Running, Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 is a tale of the endearing dogs that Paulsen knew. Unlike other chapters, this one does not contain the same harrowing tales of other chapters. There is no mystery here and the only sadness is one that comes from losing a friend. Paulsen sets out to explain to the reader how emotionally rich and complex his dogs are, continuing the theme that people underestimate the complex emotional lives and capacities of animals in the woods. He tells his story about learning to trust his dogs to choose a path and a story about how he tried to force a dog to lose weight and having success only when he cooperated with the dog. But the most heart-wrenching and deep of the stories came

from his experience with one of his first dogs, Storm, who was playful throughout his life and always remembered their connection.



Part I, Running, Chapter 8

Part I, Running, Chapter 8 Summary

In chapter 8, Paulsen opens with a story of running his dog team once more in incredibly cold weather. It had been around fifty below zero for three days and running his dog team was becoming difficult. They were low on their principal food, beef ravioli. The problem that arose was that Paulsen became violently ill from the food, which seemed to largely put him out of commission. He then hallucinated that a man came and helped him at a number of crucial junctures in the trip home, in getting him on the sled, untangling the dogs, keeping them orderly and so on. At the time, Paulsen thought he was an Eskimo. But now he knows there was no such man and doesn't speak of it too much. It must have been his own projection on himself about how some part of him survived long enough to get him home.

Paulsen, it turns out, had been training for an event called the Iditarod, a kind of madness where a man dares to take a musher from downtown Anchorage to downtown Nome, eleven hundred miles in the Alaskan wilderness. The Iditarod helps men remember that despite great technology, training a team and running them is still beyond any computer's power. Paulsen's first run took seventeen days and fourteen hours. This takes us to the last part of the book.

Part I, Running, Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 finishes up Part I of the book. It tells the story of how Paulsen seems to have survived illness and delirium from eating some bad food on a long, solitary trip with his dogs and how he hallucinated a man who helped him to survive the complicated trip home. He believed in the man at the time but has later realized that he must have done it all himself, somehow. Paulsen ends the chapter by setting up Part II, which covers the seventeen day trip that was the first time he rode the Iditarod.



Part II, The Race, Days 1-6

Part II, The Race, Days 1-6 Summary

In Part II, Paulsen runs the Iditarod, a very long run of sledding teams from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska (one thousand miles). It will take Paulsen seventeen days and he divides the story up into these days. On Day 1, Paulsen is exhausted. He has hardly slept the last two days due to his intense preparation. He regards the race as a kind of insanity as there are over forty sledding teams each with nearly forty dogs, all competing and traveling along the same paths. Paulsen has to be ready to fly out of downtown Anchorage, right in between teams he follows and those that follow him. He notes that the Iditarod is broken up into two tracks, as the trail from Anchorage to Nome is divided by an interstate. This is the first leg. Nearly all the major dog characters are there, and Paulsen has some initially starting troubles, but he is ready after he gets some sleep.

At the beginning of day two, the initial madness seems to have faded somewhat. Paulsen has to focus on keeping his team going. They're the real athletes, and magnificent ones at that. But they must be cared for constantly, fed once an hour, their feet oiled, and so on. The process creates a kind of rhythm that gets Paulsen through the day. However, he is still sleep-deprived and after the third day, as he was warned, he starts hallucinating and the hallucinations continually get worse until Paulsen and his dogs can stop.

On Day 3, Paulsen realizes that he will be lucky to finish and his dogs and the other teams slowly climb in altitude. He had somewhat secretly hoped to win but now he realizes that this is an impossible task. Plus, he is still incredibly tired, despite getting some rest at local checkpoints. Nonetheless, he describes himself as "steeped in beauty" and enjoying the Iditarod just for being able to experience the landscape.

On Day 4, Paulsen is injured when he is ripped off his sled with his left arm tied down to it. He spends the rest of the day recovering. And in Day 5, at Rhone river, he takes the twenty-four hour mandatory layover, sleeping on the ground with the dogs. The scenery still overwhelms him with beauty and helps him not get caught up in the rumors flying around the runners and the spectators.

On Day 6, Paulsen and his team must cross The Burn, an area where a forest fire burned everything up and where snow is shallow. The terrain, as a result, is very bumpy and dangerous. Paulsen survives it, but only after being knocked off his sled time and time again. The hallucinations persist, especially one with a man in a trench coat talking to him about incredibly boring educational grants. By the end of the day, the team reaches a canyon and Paulsen realizes that he is thirty or forty miles off course.



Part II, The Race, Days 1-6 Analysis

Woodsong is made up of two parts. The first part discusses what Paulsen learned from the Woods in his days running dog sleds across Alaska. The second part of the book is much more focused. It discusses, in direct chronological order, the seventeen days in which Paulsen completed the thousand-mile dog sledding race known as the Iditarod. It is an epic undertaking with the constantly dangerous terrain, the extreme personal and dog maintenance, and the sheer endurance of body and mind required to not only win the race but to finish it at all.

The first six days are pretty wild. Paulsen is constantly knocked off his sled, filled with hallucinations, constantly worried about getting off course, one of the dogs getting sick, in trouble or dying and navigating new and challenging terrain. Paulsen is particularly concerned with dealing with and sorting out his hallucinations. So the danger is present, but so is awe-inspiring beauty that he finds in nature, which seems to compensate for the costs of the race.



Part II, The Race, Days 7-16&17

Part II, The Race, Days 7-16&17 Summary

On day seven, Paulsen spends some time refueling himself and his team at a checkpoint and then takes off again. The beauty changes along the way as they reach the interior of Alaska which is like another planet. The trees are gone, though the hallucinations remain. On day eight, Paulsen continues through the tundra, which threatens even the dogs (especially Wilson) with boredom, leading one of them to fall asleep while running. Paulsen has to constantly keep him awake by saying his name. Day nine is a smattering of small events, from an offer to breed his dogs with a large, dangerous female to Paulsen's sorting through his various eats. Of note is that he passed through the empty town of Iditarod, for which the race is named. He has a horrible experience running up the Yukon River on day ten, which is a hundred and eighty miles straight into the wind. Paulsen hates the wind and the ice. Day eleven brings more "bone-chilling" cold. Paulsen has to run to keep his body temperature up and to keep his throat from freezing and then him choking on his own mucus. This leads him to throw up. But he reaches the end of the river that day.

On day twelve, Paulsen experiences a change in him and the dogs when they reach the Bering Sea. Paulsen feels as though he and the dogs are now more primitive and in sync. He stops in an Eskimo village to stay the night. The ocean begins to affect Paulsen emotionally on day thirteen, but he also realizes as he hits the last major checkpoint (with two hundred miles to go) that the winner has already finished and people are already cheering. But he and his team do not care. Only "the dance" counts and the beauty is still overwhelming. On day fourteen the team crosses Norton Sound, about sixty miles of sea ice. Many are rumored to have died or gone insane here, but the rumors are unfounded. On day fifteen, the team experiences the ice as a joy run. They fly quickly and happily. That night, the team stays with another Eskimo family, with a young boy who is kind to him and asks him about the race.

Days sixteen and seventeen are paired together with two minor checkpoints left. The ocean is breaking away the ice but the wind is long. The dogs know that they are at the end and have a new purpose. They run all day and at dark, Paulsen can see the lights of Nome. He does not want to finish the race and turns around briefly to take his dogs back. The Run is too grand to finish, but only to talk about. It seems impossible to reenter civilization and the race, the beauty and exaltation of it, seems to trap you in its gloriousness. When he crosses the finish line, he hugs his wife and son and his dogs, crying the whole time. He meets the mayor of Nome and tells him, much to Paulsen's own surprise, that he will be back to run the Iditarod again.



Part II, The Race, Days 7-16&17 Analysis

The last ten days comprise the remainder of the book. It is a challenging ten days though it is in many ways more stable and less crazy than the previous six. Paulsen is more well-rested and takes better care of himself. His hallucinations are in some ways less overwhelming. He reaches the tundra and the Yukon River, which are long stretches of terrain more boring than exciting. Paulsen does not win the race. He is at least a day behind the winner. But for him, this is no longer relevant. What matters most is the experience of the race, of seeing the intense beauty of Alaska's wilderness and of being united with his dogs. At one point, he describes himself and his dogs as returning to a primitive state via a kind of biological rhythm which allows them to cooperate without the mediations of deliberate, conscious thought.

The most important feature of this last portion of the book is the great difficulty with which Paulsen finishes the race. It is too grand of an experience to let it end so easily. The beauty of Alaska and the experiences he had were too overwhelming and inspiring to accept as real and done with. He finishes the race, but despite the madness of it and the risks involved, the beauty he experienced commits him to running the Iditarod again in the future.



Characters

Gary Paulsen

Paulsen is the author of over two hundred fiction and non-fiction books focusing largely on coming-of-age stories that take place in wilderness areas, often in Alaska where Paulsen spent much of his life. He is the main character of *Woodsong*, his story about his experiences with dog sledding and running the Iditarod. In the book, Paulsen describes himself without going into much detail about his actual life, though he has done so in detail in other works. Instead, *Woodsong* focuses on his thoughts and insights about the value of animal life, the meaning of bonding with animals, especially his dogs, and the challenges of running the 1983 Iditarod.

Paulsen displays clear qualities of ingenuity, survivability, determination, and wisdom. His insights into animal life will strike many as controversial, as he raises animal worth to a level almost comparable to that of humans. Further, many will find his evidence of the complexity of animal cognition and emotion anecdotal. But these judgments reveal a deep empathy that is perhaps Paulsen's most featured character trait throughout the book. In many ways, *Woodsong* uses Paulsen as a kind of window into life in the woods, but it is nonetheless his story and is focused on his thought and experiences. Throughout Paulsen is sure to record his thoughts and insights but does not shy away from describing emotions of fear, exaltation, amusement, concern, and even anger.

Paulsen's Dogs

Paulsen ran dozens of dogs on his sledding adventures over the years. They were all dear to him, but there were a few dogs that were especially exceptional. The dogs pulled Paulsen on his sled for many reasons, including his initial reasons (trapping beavers) and other considerations (training to run and running the Iditarod). But Paulsen's initial reasons to use the dogs soon became simply a starting point for the reasons he stuck with them and cared for them for many years. The dogs, Paulsen argued, taught him an enormous amount. At the most practical level, they taught him how to manage them, how to run them, but more importantly they taught him to trust them, as they often had better judgment about whether to go on their travels. Paulsen learned about their relative health needs and how to feed and care for them, quite an undertaking for the intense weather conditions they were run under.

But perhaps most significantly, Paulsen's dogs bonded with him emotionally. At times, he claims, they were so close that they could communicate in the most basic, primitive manner, locked into a rhythm of movement that in many ways unified their feelings. Further, a number of the dogs demonstrated impressive levels of intelligence. One experience of one of his dogs' inventiveness was so powerful that it convinced him not to trap or kill another animal again.



Storm

This is Paulsen's beloved dog who displayed an extraordinary love for and loyalty to Paulsen until the day he died.

Wilson

This is one of Paulsen's leader dogs who helped him run the Iditarod.

Cookie

This is the primary leader dog during the Iditarod.

Fred

This is sledding dog, prone to obesity. It was in his attempts to make Fred lose weight that Paulsen learned that dogs can often not be successfully coerced into doing what they do not want to do.

Hawk

This is a banty hen whose fierce protectiveness over chicks that were not her own illustrates unusual altruism to Paulsen.

Scarhead

A bear which almost killed Paulsen but who showed mercy, which taught Paulsen mercy in return.

Paulsen's Eskimo

This is a hallucinated character that helped Paulsen get through some very difficult and challenging physical predicaments when out in the woods alone.

Checkpoint People

Throughout the Iditarod, people at various checkpoints helped Paulsen to reenergize.

Does

A number of does are discussed in the book and often illustrated horrible or eerie events.



Objects/Places

The Woods

This is Paulsen's generic term for the wilderness, not merely in Alaska.

Alaska

This is the state where Paulsen spends most of the book.

Anchorage

This is the Alaskan city where the Iditarod begins.

Nome

This is the Alaskan city, one thousand miles from Anchorage, where the Iditarod ends.

Paulsen's Trapline

This is the line, first twenty then sixty miles, where Paulsen used his earliest dogs sledging teams to trap beaver.

Dogs Sleds

Paulsen uses dog sleds throughout the book for various reasons from trapping beaver to running the Iditarod.

Fire

The controlled use of fire is what separates man from animals, in Paulsen's view. A few stories illustrate this point.

The Iditarod

This is the annual dog sledging competition in which Paulsen participated in 1983.



The Burn

This is a seventy-mile stretch of the Iditarod where a forest fire cleared the land. It is a particularly dangerous area.

The Yukon River

This is the river along which a long stretch of the Iditarod runs.

The Bering Sea

This is a large body of water that can be seen during the last stretch of the Iditarod.

Hallucinations

Paulsen's sleep deprivation and illness when out in the woods often led him to hallucinate.



Themes

The Emotional Complexity and Worth of Animals

A majority of Part I of *Woodsong* is concerned with impressing the reader with the emotional complexity of animals. In Chapter 1, Paulsen explains to his reader that he had not truly understood "the woods" until he was forty years old, when he witnessed the brutal slaughter of a doe by a pack of wolves. But while this experience demonstrates how different the animal world is than groups like Disney might lead us to believe, it should be enough to shock the reader into wondering, as Paulsen did, whether animal suffering was not truly horrifying. Paulsen goes on to explain how observing the emotional complexity of one of his dogs, tricking one of the others for her own amusement, led him to no longer trap and kill animals. This is impressed upon the reader more by being faced with the great potential for animals to suffer.

But most of the stories are positive and even amusing, as Paulsen tries to demonstrate animals' capacities for loyalty, love, annoyance, frustration and mild meanness. Paulsen is not merely trying to wake the reader up to the worth of animals but to show their value for humans interacting with them. Paulsen celebrates animal interaction and the value of bonding with them. Paulsen even valued understanding Scarhead, the bear who nearly killed him, as he recognized that Scarhead showed him mercy and that in return he should do the same.

Bonding with Animal Life

Following up on the first theme is the second theme, bonding with animal life. Paulsen sees the emotional complexity of animals as enabling a special relationship with them, to be friendly with them, to be their kind master and to be their allies and teammates. The bonding that Paulsen explores in most detail occurs with his sledding dogs. Paulsen started running a dog sled in order to make money trapping furs for the state of Minnesota. His friends gave him an old sled and a few dogs, but he had to learn everything he needed to know by himself. He often describes the process in *Woodsong*, much of which was learning not only how to care for dogs but how to let them act as they will. For instance, Paulsen had to learn that despite bleeding, one of his dogs could keep on running to get the pack back to their home, and that he would not be ok until he was allowed to do so. So Paulsen had to learn his dogs' limits.

But most significantly was that Paulsen had to learn the hard way that his dogs had something to teach him. One day while navigating unfamiliar territory, Paulsen became convinced that he knew a safe path back home, but his dogs thought otherwise, especially the pack leader. In all likelihood, they knew the best path because they could directly feel how deep the snow was. But Paulsen fought his pack and they ended up going off of a cliff. The dogs eventually forgave him. The most important bonding tale is



that experiences Paulsen had with his dog Storm, who he played with for many years and who died with their favorite bone in his mouth.

The Beauty of Nature

Woodsong is mostly concerned with Paulsen's experiences with animals, but the experiences he has all occur against the backdrop of the Alaskan wilderness, which often fills Paulsen with a deep sense of awe. Paulsen seems to be one who is very happy to be alone for extremely long periods of time. One explanation for this is that Paulsen feels at home when surrounded by the enormity and restfulness of Alaska. At one point, Paulsen remarks that Alaska helps to take him to a primitive point before civilization came, which he seems to somewhat decry. Alaska is pure, unmolested, nature in its essence. And in this way, it helped Paulsen to come to appreciate how most human beings lived for thousands upon thousands of years.

But the beauty of nature becomes a more prominent theme in Part II, while Paulsen is running the Iditarod. Alone with his dogs, Paulsen must spend the vast majority of the one thousand mile trip faced with the challenges of the Alaskan wilderness. There are times where Paulsen is unnerved by its challenges, but in other cases Paulsen is full of awe at the beauty that surrounds him. This is clear at points before Paulsen reaches the tundra and while much of the tundra is monotonous, Paulsen is most impressed by the Yukon River and the stretch of land by the Bering Sea. The incredible beauty of the Iditarod is probably one of the many reasons that Paulsen decides to run the Iditarod again, much to his surprise.

Style

Point of View

Gary Paulsen is a (primarily) 20th century writer whose primary topics concern life in the wilderness, both as he actually lived it and in fiction writing for young adults. *Woodsong* is non-fiction, written from Paulsen's point of view. Thus, it is first-personal, with all of the writing being done from Paulsen's perspective. The book is not merely about his activities but mostly about the complex emotional responses he has to his various experiences in the Alaskan wilderness. Much of his descriptions concern his emotional states. For instance, Paulsen often hallucinates in the book due to sleep deprivation or injury. The book primarily focuses on his complicated hallucinations and, in many cases, his later reflections on his mental state at the time. To be more specific, Paulsen will describe the interactions he has with hallucinated persons.

Another aspect of the point of view of *Woodsong* is Paulsen's strong defense of the moral worth of animals. His primary arguments seem to run roughly as follows: what gives animals and humans moral worth is their emotional complexity, their ability to empathize, suffer and interact socially with others. He reports a number of experiences of discerning these complexities in his animals, especially his dogs, which convinced him he could no longer kill animals unless it was absolutely necessary. So his point of view is somewhat colored by his unusually strong understanding of the value of animal life.

Setting

Woodsong is set in "the woods" or the Alaskan wilderness probably between the years 1979 and 1983. The stories that Paulsen shares seem to build up to the first time he ran the Iditarod in 1983, though he appears to have developed some felicity with dog sledding for at least a decade prior. Paulsen was born in 1939 and he claims that he did not become fully aware of the emotional complexities of animals and the potential horror of the woods until he was forty years old.

Given that *Woodsong* is set in the woods inhabited by either one human or a small number of human beings, much of the setting is pictures of nature in conjunction with descriptions of animals and the activities that they are engaging in. By and large, Paulsen is hunting or tracking or taking care of animals almost the entire book and this mostly involves him taking his dogs sledding within sixty miles or so of his home.

But perhaps the most significant setting is the Iditarod or the thousand-mile race between Anchorage and Nome, Alaska. So Paulsen spends seventeen days in 1983 traveling across the Alaskan wilderness. Many settings arise along the way, especially in unusual tracks of the path, such as The Burn, the Yukon River and the Bering Sea. In



general, the land is largely inhospitable to life so much of the book is advice on how to handle it and explanations of how Paulsen did so himself.

Language and Meaning

Paulsen's writings are usually not too complicated in that there is little hidden from the reader. Further, the symbolism used in the book is largely explained explicitly in the text. When Paulsen interacts with an animal and learns something from it, he tells the reader what animal it is and what he has learned. Again, there is little mystery. The prose is simple and to the point, though Paulsen often makes the text suspenseful as it is unclear what will happen to him in the moment. The reader always knows that everything works out for Paulsen, but she is never quite sure how he is to survive the harrowing experience he is having at the time.

The language of the text is often offered in real time. Paulsen uses the language of the book to describe his heart-beat, whether he is presently nauseated, what he is afraid of, curious about, frustrated with, and in awe of. In many ways, the prose is very descriptive, especially of his animals and the Alaskan landscape, both of which he finds deep and beautiful in their own way.

In general, the meaning of the text is surface-level but Paulsen is sometimes subtler than others. In some cases, he leaves open explanations of what his hallucinations meant, for instance. And perhaps most importantly, he does not explain why he plans to run the Iditarod for the second time.

Structure

Woodsong is divided into two parts, "Running" and "The Race." Part I contains eight chapters, each of which tell their own story about life in the woods and, more specifically, about life in the woods with various animals. One point of Woodsong is to increasingly humanize the animals with which Paulsen interacts. He begins with a tale of radical animal difference, of the horror of watching a doe be torn to pieces alive by wolves. But as the chapters progress he focuses increasingly on his bond with his sledding dogs. The chapters contain a number of different stories about different animals but they mostly come back to his experiences with his sledding team and the various dogs that "served under" him. The stories include, among other things, Paulsen's near death experience with a bear named Scarhead, his amusement with Hawk, a banty hen whose irritability led her to fiercely protect chicks that were not her own and the lovable Storm, the tale of how they bounded so much that Storm remembered their games together until the day he died.

Part II is divided up into seventeen days, most of which occupy only a page or two of the book. Each day has its own challenges, some of which are much more severe than others. It is not quite right to say that Paulsen almost died, but he did have a few close calls, one of which occurred while he was hallucinating due to sleep deprivation. Paulsen does not win the Iditarod, but it so moves him that he promises to do it again.



Quotes

"Perhaps the greatest paradox about understanding "the woods" is that so many who enjoy it, or seem to enjoy it, spend most of their time trying to kill parts of it" (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"And I also learned - as with the wolves and the doe - that I wanted to know more, wanted to know everything there was to know about dogs and the woods and running with a team" (Chapter 2, p. 20).

"And I could not kill or trap any longer" (Chapter 3, p. 24).

"The adventure really begins in differences—the great differences between people and animals, between the way we live now and the way we once lived, between the Mall and the Woods." (Chapter 4, p. 30).

"For what he taught me, I hope he lives long and is very happy because I learned then - looking up at him while he made up his mind whether or not to end me - that when it is all boiled down I am nothing more and nothing less than any other animal in the woods." (Chapter 4, p. 41).

"Some people say that we can understand all things if we can know them, but there came a dark night in the fall when I thought that was wrong, and so did the dogs" (Chapter 6, p. 49).

"It is always possible to learn from dogs and in fact the longer I'm with them the more I understand how little I know. But there was one dog who taught me the most. Just one dog. Storm" (Chapter 7, p. 70).

"It is, of course, madness - a kind of channeled, focused madness. The Iditarod" (Chapter 8, p. 84).

"Finally, out of the chutes, really, really starting to run the Iditarod. The dream. The run. The Run" (Part II, Day 1, p. 90).

"I am steeped in beauty. It is like going back ten, twelve thousand years, running over these mountains with a dog team. Like becoming a true human - a human before we became cluttered by civilization. Like going inside and becoming a cave painting." (Part II, Day 3, p. 100).

"I have changed, have moved back in time, have entered an altered state, a primitive state" (Day 12, p. 122).

"You want the race, the exaltation, the joy and beauty of it to go on and on" (Days 16&17, p. 132).



"I turned to the mayor of Nome who was there to greet me and said the one thing I never thought I would say. 'We'll be back to run it again.' And I knew it was true." (Days 16&17, p. 132).



Topics for Discussion

What is the point of *Woodsong*? If you asked the author to explain why he wrote the book, what do you think his answer would be?

Explain how Paulsen can believe that he should no longer kill or trap animals. Were his reasons good ones?

How does Paulsen compare the intrinsic moral worth of persons and animals? On what basis does he do so? Do you find his method attractive?

Discuss the bond Paulsen forms between any two of his dogs and how they taught him some important lesson.

What is the Iditarod? Why is it a kind of madness, according to Paulsen?

Why did Paulsen decide to run the Iditarod again? Defend your answer in detail.

Explain two sources of Paulsen's hallucinations. What were they? What was their source, in your opinion?