Dancing Carl Short Guide

Dancing Carl by Gary Paulsen

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Every adolescent remembers the adults who were his or her most important teachers. Sometimes the most.influential are not the official ones in school, at church, at clubs, or in organized sports. Sometimes the adult who teaches best and influences most is the unlikeliest candidate in town.

Dancing Carl is about the lessons in living and loving that two adolescent boys, Marsh and Willy, learn from Carl Wenstrom. Known to the boys as "Dancing Carl" because of his strange yet graceful movements on the ice rink, he is an unlikely teacher. He often appears drunk in public, seldom changes his clothes, lives in a corner of the warming house at the town skating rink, and is the subject of local gossip.

A hundred rumors fly about him: he is mentally unbalanced because of his war experiences; he drinks because of some deep guilt; he hides some awful criminal past; he escaped from a mental institution.

Yet Carl is admirable in many ways.

He drives bullies from the hockey rink by the mere force of his steady gaze.

Amid the chaos of the warming house he kindly helps children with skates and jackets. When a new woman comes to town and skates at the rink, Carl acts like a knight of the Round Table in wooing her. Gradually his reputation among the town's adults changes, but only Marsh and Willy learn the hidden story which his dancing tells.

About the Author

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

Paulsen did not meet his father until 1946 when he and his mother were reunited with his father in the Philippines. He spent his adolescence as an "army brat," moving frequently, staying no longer than five months in any school, and often spending long periods with relatives such as a grandmother or an aunt. Paulsen has summed up his childhood thus: "I didn't have a home life; frankly, my parents were drunks." Indeed, Father Water, Mother Woods (1994), a series of essays about hunting and fishing in the Nnorth woods as a child, relates how he used these activities as a substitute father and mother. His experience as a wandering self-reliant child set a pattern for his life.

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

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

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

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

The year 1983 brought two significant changes in Paulsen's life: a new direction in writing and an invigorating passion, sled-dog racing. Through the earlier gift of a ramshackle sled and a few dogs to help him trap game, he became interested in running the Iditarod, the great Alaskan dog sled race; his experiences with sled dogs and races transformed him. One alteration was that he was motivated to resume writing, concentrating on subjects that interested him—the wilderness, dogs, sledding, surviving off the land—instead of the category novels and nonfiction he wrote formerly. He began composing in longhand every day (although he now uses a computer), in the kennel or

by the campfire while the dogs rested. Dogsong, Hatchet, and several other books were written in this way. The same year Paulsen began to write for Richard Jackson, then at Bradbury Press, and developed a new focus: young adult fiction.

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

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

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

Setting

The story takes place in McKinley, Minnesota, in the summer and winter of 1958. McKinley, population 900 to 1200 (the Chamber of Commerce uses the higher figure to attract tourists), is a typical small, modestly prosperous Midwestern town of farmers and lumbermen. It is a town where everyone knows everybody else and everybody else's reputation. Most of the action occurs at the town's twin outdoor ice rinks. One is for skating and one is for hockey. Nearby is the warming house where skaters lace up or retreat to escape the cold. The rinks are the town's social center. Here the community gathers in the late afternoon for exercise, entertainment, gossip, and flirtation. Here adults, adolescents, and children mix freely, whether in the freefor-all hockey games with a dozen or so players on a side or on the skating rink where skaters move in time to waltzes and marches from a handful of scratchy old records.

Social Sensitivity

Unlike other Paulsen novels which concern adolescent protagonists forced to grow up too fast, the central character of Dancing Carl matures more leisurely. Marsh lacks the hardness or precociousness of other Paulsen characters because life has not treated him rudely and put him on his own too early. Instead, Marsh learns vicariously through Carl rather than by traumatic personal experience. Marsh also learns that there are lessons about life even in small events. A crisis will indeed confront an adolescent with the immediate need to act with wisdom beyond one's years, but knowledge also may be gleaned from slowly unfolding events and barely perceptible changes.

Happily, Marsh finds within himself the generosity to sympathize with someone very different, even foreign to his own world. In coming to understand Carl, Marsh realizes that his appreciation of the man is not shared by the adult world. He handles his awareness of this difference in opinion maturely. The adult perspective and the adolescent perspective are different, not automatically antagonistic. Marsh is a well-balanced young man, keenly aware of the good things that life gives him now but ready to grasp the good things that life promises in adulthood.

No wonder he knows it is "the best time ever to be twelve." Marsh is a refreshingly positive example of how to grow up.

Literary Qualities

Paulsen skillfully keeps Carl Wenstrom at the center of the novel. He is an original, offbeat, and fascinating creation. By using a narrator who is unremarkable—except for the ability to observe and interpret—Paulsen highlights Carl's remarkable individuality.

The novel beautifully balances contrasting worlds in plot and theme as well as character. McKinley is divided into the adult world and the adolescent world, not antagonistic but just different, each with its own passions and interests. In northern Minnesota the year really has only two seasons, soft summer and hard winter. Each season has its activity: soft summer has fishing, hard winter has skating. Skating has two opposite faces, hockey and dance. The first is communal and hectic, the second private and rhythmic.

Minor characters balance major ones.

Cully Fransen and Pisspot Jimmy are drunks who show what Carl is not.

Willy wonders about eternal philosophical questions while Marsh attends to today's worries. The flirtation between Mr. Melonowski and Miss Johnson throws Carl's courtship of Helen into relief, showing the special difference in Carl's attitude toward Helen.

Paulsen arranges these elements like a choreographer planning a ballet. The chorus repeats, echoes, and extends the steps of the lead dancer.

Themes and Characters

Events unfold through the eyes of Marsh, an average twelve-year-old. His life is contentedly ordinary: in summer his hours are filled up with chores and fishing; in the winter his days are given to school and his evenings to skating. Sometimes he likes the roughand-tumble of the hockey rink; at other times he likes to skate-dance with Shirley who, because she makes his knees hurt and gives him a stomach ache, seems destined to be his true love. At home Mom and Dad provide food, shelter, and—upon request— doses of ordinary adult wisdom about life's little problems.

He shares everything with his best friend Willy Taylor: making model airplanes, whispering about their teachers' private lives, thinking about the towns, states, and country beyond McKinley, talking about girls, and marveling at how weird ice is. Marsh and Willy inhabit a comfortable, narrow world from which they can observe the unknown wider world at leisure. They are boys ready, but not in a hurry, to learn the mysteries of adulthood; it is "the best time ever to be twelve moving towards thirteen."

In the case of Carl Wenstrom they discover mysteries indeed. Marsh and Willy begin to see in him what the adults have missed. He is not simply another graying, wrinkled, broken-down veteran of the Second World War; he is a man of fascinating paradoxes. Rumored to be psychologically damaged, Carl nonetheless has a strength about him that make supervisors and troublemakers alike back off. Often unkempt and drunk, he is suddenly transformed when he steps on the ice, in shoes rather than skates, into a graceful dancer whose arms, legs, and torso move in harmony. Although he seldom speaks to anyone, Carl communicates eloquently through his eyes, posture, and movements.

Quite by accident Marsh and Willy learn of the trauma that haunts Carl.

His eerie, enchanting dance re-enacts the fatal plunge of a B-17 bomber shot down during the war. Blown free of the damaged aircaft, Carl tumbled earthward beside it, all the time seeing his friend Jimmy still trapped inside. A parachute saved Carl; nothing saved Jimmy and the other airmen. Out of this horror and the helplessness of the experience, Carl has created something beautiful. Then Marsh and Willy also see Carl begin another dance, different in mood and intent, after Helen's arrival at the rink. Here too the adults of McKinley at first misunderstand Carl.

Although they regard him as showing off, Marsh and Willy see the new dance as a ballet of courtly gestures; they see movements of homage, adoration, and commitment.

Through Carl, Marsh and Willy learn about life's profoundest mysteries: war, death, and love. Young enough not to be blinded by adult custom or assumptions, they instinctively admire Carl's behavior at the rinks. On the hockey ice, Carl stands for fairness even amid mayhem undisciplined by rules. On the skating ice, Carl dances from the heart, careless of who watches and stares.

Carl is a model of what an adult should be: independent, tough, fair, and uninterested in what the world whispers about him.

Topics for Discussion

1. McKinley seems a town of two seasons, summer and winter. How do the seasons contrast in their effects on people?

2. Do children and adults in McKinley find different or similar values in life in a quiet town?

3. What bonds Marsh and Willy as friends?

4. What differentiates Carl from other town oddballs like Cully Fransen and Pisspot Johnny?

5. Is the idea that Carl can dance on ice in shoes rather than on skates unrealistic?

6. Why does Carl wear his leather bomber jacket all the time?

7. What does Carl's behavior in the warming house with skaters reveal about him?

8. What does Carl's courtship of Helen teach Marsh about love? Who else teaches him about love?

9. How does the death of Bill Krieg contribute to the story?

10. Why does Carl think of parachuting from the bomber as a "dance"?

How many different dances does he do?

11. What does it mean when Helen stoops to pick up the rose after Carl's final dance?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find pictures and diagrams of a B-17 bomber like Carl's Lucky Doll.

Study them to get a sense of how little space there was in the aircraft and how difficult it would be to move about quickly in an emergency. Write an essay or poem that expresses your impressions of Carl's experience during that fatal flight.

2. Research the role of B-17 bombers in the Second World War. Report on an issue like the strategy of bombing, crew training, offensive and defensive armaments, casualties, or the plane's contribution to victory.

3. Read what a philosopher or famous performer has to say about why human beings dance or what they feel as they dance. Compare this description to the explanation about his dance that Carl gives to Marsh and Willy.

4. The final paragraph ends with Marsh reporting rumors about the fate of Helen and Carl. Write a story, in Marsh's voice, telling what became of Helen and Carl. Use one of the rumors or invent your own scenario.

5. Imagine you are Helen. Write a diary illustrating how your impressions of Carl change as you get to know him.

For Further Reference

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

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

WFYI, Indianapolis. April 7, 1994.

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

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

Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 76-82.

Details of Paulsen's career and a listing of his writings through 1987 are included.

Devereaux, Elizabeth. "Gary Paulsen."

Publisher's Weekly (March 28, 1994): 70. Devereaux's interview with Paulsen yields information explaining his career's reversal of fortune in 1983, productivity since 1985, and newest efforts.

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

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

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

Includes reviews on a variety of Paulsen's work for children through 1988.

Serdahely, Franz. "Prolific Paulsen."

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

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

Trumpet Video Visits Gary Paulsen. Directed by Diane Kolyer. Trumpet Club, 1993. 24 minutes. This video introduces children to the author.

Paulsen makes brief comments on Canyons, The Cookcamp, Hatchet, The Monument, The River, and The Winter Room, but the true value of the video is the insight it lends into Paulsen's methods of writing.

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

Related Titles

Paulsen's plots frequently tell coming-of-age stories. The Monument, The Foxman, and Nightjohn are novels about an adolescent whose encounter with an unusual adult is a turning point in his or her life. The adults who shape the adolescents are outcasts or iconoclasts.

These extraordinary people teach the lesson that every adolescent must grow individually rather than according to the expectations of social acceptability.

Another common feature in Paulsen's fiction is the midwestern setting of small town or rural life. The Island, The Winter Room, and The Monument share this setting with Dancing Carl. While many writers use this setting to portray small town life nostalgically and lament its passing, Paulsen presents both the small town's simplicity and its provinciality.

A recent important theme in Paulsen's novels is the sensitivity to artistic expression. Carl expresses a philosophy of dance. The Winter Room and Nightjohn are about the power of words. The Monument celebrates the arts of sketching and drawing. To Paulsen the arts are sacred because they alone can reveal the external meaning of that which—in a person, place, or thing—lies within and hidden.

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