



Gary Paulsen

**TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth
Author Interview**

Gary Paulsen interviewed from his home in New Mexico, February 12, 2010.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You had a tremendously difficult childhood, one that many don't survive or recover from. However, you are now a highly acclaimed author of books for young people and hold three Newbery Honors, among others.

GARY PAULSEN: What saved me was a librarian. I'd gotten somehow to the age 12; my parents were drunks. I flunked everything and barely got out of school. I was a street kid in Manila and in northern Minnesota. I eventually surrendered myself to the woods and trapped, hunted, and fished to stay alive. A public librarian offered me a library card and encouraged me to read.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your sense of survival is very different from others', maybe because of what you went through as a child and young adult.

GARY PAULSEN: Yes, but my sense of survival is also different because the wilderness is my bedroom, my living room, and my study. It's my home. I am alien in New York City and in Madison, Wisconsin. The noise of the city is horribly offensive to me because of that time on the streets. I feel much more secure in the woods.

Eventually, my maternal grandmother took me in, became my mother, and was wonderful. At that point, I began to feel what would be a normal family-mother relationship.

Many years later, I felt much safer in the Iditarod than I had as a child. Running across bad ice and living to tell about it felt safer to me than my entire childhood.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What did your grandmother think of your becoming an author?

GARY PAULSEN: My father was Swedish and Danish, and my mother was pure Norwegian, as was my grandmother. After I had published a couple of books, I took my three-year-old son to see my grandmother.

She hated the Swedes, because the Swedes helped the Germans during the war. She said to me, "Are you still writing them damn books?" And I said, "Yeah, Grandma. I'm a writer." And she said, "That's the Swede in you." She just was horrified at my career, because she didn't believe being a writer was an honorable profession.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Children’s author Roald Dahl wrote that he always wanted to start his books with his characters in the worst possible situation and have them pull themselves out. They’re weak at the start and become stronger as the story progresses. Your characters are almost always strong to begin with, and they certainly end strong.

GARY PAULSEN: So much that I write about focuses on the very real things that happen to young people. When children are under extreme duress, they become incredibly strong.

For example, in German concentration camps, they gave the children colored chalk as they went into the gas chambers. The children drew pictures on the walls thinking it was going to be showers. They were always pictures of nice things. Here they are in this squalor, and they’re drawing things that are beautiful to them. The courage that they had surpasses anything I can even think about.

I once received a letter from a boy saying that early in the summer, he started to drown, and his aunt saved him. He wanted to write about that experience, but he said later in the summer, his aunt molested him. He wanted my technical advice as a writer—he asked if including the molestation would ruin the story; he wondered if he should make it two separate stories.

I go to juvenile halls and prisons, and one time a kid showed me the cigarette burns on his arm. Kids really go through these things. I write fiction, but it’s all based on what really happens to people.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk a little about your book *Nightjohn*.

GARY PAULSEN: When I started finding out things about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, they were unpleasant things to discover. I wanted to write about Sally, but there wasn’t enough information. Finally, I was able to read the *Slave Chronicles* in the Library of Congress. I read interviews with freed slaves, and learned that in captivity they had wanted to learn to read to help them become free.

Some were men who had escaped and would go back to try and teach reading to people, and I put their stories together to write *Nightjohn*, a story about this guy that was free and went back and tried to establish schools, got caught, and got dismembered for it. They chopped his toes off. One of the people he taught was a little girl named Sarny, who was 13 or 14. I dedicated the book to Sally Hemings, saying, “This book is dedicated to Sally Hemings, who never drew a free breath.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have had a very broad range of experiences, including employment as a carnival worker.

GARY PAULSEN: Yes. I worked one summer on the Tilt-a-Whirl in a traveling carnival. The guy I worked for was T-John, and his brother was Billy the Geek who bit the heads off of snakes and chickens and pretended to be a wild man from Borneo.

It was a real education. T-John got in a knife fight, and the cops came. I was a runaway, and they sent me back to my parents again.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you run away frequently?

GARY PAULSEN: Yes, I started running away beginning when I was about 11 years old. When I was 14 or 15, I would work on farms in the summers and trap stuff in the winter and skipped school. I was a horrible student. Teachers tried, but there was no way they could compete with my parents. When I was 17, I forged my parent's signature on Army enlistment papers, and I got out.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where were you stationed?

GARY PAULSEN: I went to basic training in Fort Carson, Colorado, and then spent almost the rest of my time either at nuclear warhead school in Fort Sill, Oklahoma or Fort Bliss, Texas teaching other countries how to use our missiles.

I was in for more than three years, and I hated every day of it. I wound up making sergeant, which just blew me away. I got out before Vietnam, but I had friends that stayed in and got killed.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was losing your friends to war like for you?

GARY PAULSEN: I was in Washington D.C. on a book tour one summer, and I decided I would visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. I was doing okay, and then I saw a name I knew, and I just busted down the middle. I remembered this guy. I started bawling; crying on my hands and knees. The waste in that war was appalling—53,000 dead Americans.

The same thing happened to me when I was on a book tour in New Hampshire. I came upon a little church just at daylight, and there's this stone obelisk with four or six names of boys who had gone to fight in the Revolutionary War and they never came home. It's the same as that wall in Washington D.C. There's no difference.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your research for *Soldier's Heart*.

GARY PAULSEN: At Gettysburg, the Minnesota First Volunteers went in with almost 1,000 men, and when it was over there were 47 left standing. Charley Goddard was one of them. The picture of Charley on the cover of *Soldier's Heart* was taken when he was 16, but he looks like he was 40. He died young—two years after the war from stress-related disorders.

When I was researching for the book, people would write to me. One man wrote that his great-grandfather fought in the Minnesota First Volunteers, and when he got home, all he could do for the rest of his life was split wood. He'd been an officer, and now all he did was camp in someone's yard and split wood. Then he'd move to the next yard and live in their yard while he split wood. He didn't talk to people; he never had a conversation again because he was so deeply affected.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You're a storyteller who writes.

GARY PAULSEN: Exactly. I put bloody skins on my back, and I dance around the fire, and I tell what the hunt was like. There's no substitute for personal inspection right at the source of what you are researching.

For example, I ran two Iditarods before I wrote about the Iditarod. I ran 27,000 miles on sled dogs in the Arctic and learned an awful lot about dogs and other things.

The same is true with my military experience. There's a direct link between the guys I knew who were killed in Vietnam and some who are still alive that are friends of mine to *Soldier's Heart* and *Woods Runner*—especially *Woods Runner*, because the way they fought those wars was very similar.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And *Hatchet* is about your experiences as a boy.

GARY PAULSEN: Absolutely. In *Hatchet*, Brian is running away, even though he's going to see his father and trying to figure out the divorce. A 13-year-old kid that was a friend of my son's told me that he'd seen his mother kissing another man in a shopping center parking lot. I started thinking about what that would do to a boy. Young people are always the victims.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What does the process of writing feel like?

GARY PAULSEN: I love writing the way you fall in love. I love the cave paintings in France. I'm a nut for ballet—not dancing it, but watching it. I just love the concept of story. The idea of jumping right in the middle of everything.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How about your wilderness experiences? Have those been easy to write?

GARY PAULSEN: All the time I spent in the woods came out in several books, many books about the woods, like *Guts*, *Hatchet* and all the sequels to *Hatchet*. I sometimes run into problems with the publisher over what I want to include in my books.

Brian's Winter imagined what it would have been like if Brian had not gotten rescued and had to live through the winter. I had arguments with editors telling me I can't have Brian sleeping in a snow cave because he would die. I told them, "No, I've been in snow caves. It's okay." I was trying to tell them that snow caves are safe for one night. You've got to move every day, because the ice starts to melt over your head. It can be 30 below outside, but if you dig a snow cave in a riverbank, it'll be 30 above inside. It is 60–80 degrees warmer inside for one night. The snow cave is in *Dogsong*; I had an Inuit boy stay in a snow cave.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about Iditarod life and writing about it.

GARY PAULSEN: Writing about the Iditarod is kind of like writing about combat in a weird way. If you have to tell somebody who's never seen or heard or understand combat at all, what combat is like, they'll never get it. There's nothing you can write that will make it even close. And if you meet people who have been in combat, you don't need to tell them. Nothing has to be said.

It's the same with the Iditarod. It's very hard to describe to people, and it's very hard to write about it, because it's so alien. You enter a state of primitive exaltation, and you're never normal again. A friend of mine is up there now. He gave up his huge medical practice in Spokane, and he's got 60 to 80 dogs living in the bush. I have 50 dogs up there, but I've got a friend taking care of them while I'm down here working.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where does your know-how for making things come from?

GARY PAULSEN: I worked in aerospace electronics for a couple of years. But mostly, I was raised on farms by people who didn't have Wal-Mart. They had to make their own sleds, harnesses, clothing, etc.

Look at Inuit clothing. Their stuff still works better than Cabela's. I've made my own parkas, mukluks, footgear, and it is good to 60 degrees below zero. All I did was copy the patterns that came down from the Inuits.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your family.

GARY PAULSEN: My son lives in northern Minnesota. He's married and has two children. My wife lives in New Mexico. She's a painter and does beautiful work. It's like I'm married to Sartre with a little more feminine power. I've been living alone now on the Pacific and in the woods for the last nine years. I come home, but I'm not good at living in towns.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When students ask you where you get your ideas, what do you say?

GARY PAULSEN: Most of them are from real people and things in my life. Some of them, like *Nightjohn*, are the research from the original *Slave Chronicles* and the diaries. And the Civil War information and the research for *Woods Runner* I dug into firsthand. For example, I went out on a range with flintlock rifles, cannons, and bayonets, and I shot pig carcasses using all the weapons until I was proficient with them. I wanted to know how they worked.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why do you want to tell these stories to young people?

GARY PAULSEN: So they'll know. There's so much that we don't tell them, especially with films. I just want them to know about art, life, and death with as much honesty as I can. The truth of what happened during our centuries of slavery is horrible. I want to make it so these things won't happen again.

It's horrible for little boys who have their families bust apart because of divorce. I was on my way to not a good life, and that librarian got me reading after working on me for a couple of years. Now, I study all the time.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are you studying these days?

GARY PAULSEN: I'm working on a book now that I've been studying for three years about London between 1780 and 1850. They had to have people to work in the mills, so they took a total of around 100,000 children off the streets and worked them to death. At that time, stealing anything was a capital offense. Executioners had a certain day when they hung children, because they had to adjust the gallows to their size.

I want to write about a little boy who's a street kid. A little girl gets caught stealing, and the boy goes to the gallows himself so the girl doesn't have to be hung.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is a typical workday like for you?

GARY PAULSEN: When I'm writing, I crank all day—directly onto a computer. But, I might do research for three years to get to that level. So when I wrote *Hatchet*, it only took me four months to write it. But I lived it; I was in the woods for years.

It's the same with the slavery or war books. My research goes on for years. Or the English book I'm working on. The research has been going on now for years. By the time I sit down and write it, it's all in my head. I've thought it out so often and in such depth that I can type it out at 100 words per minute. I work until I fall asleep.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

GARY PAULSEN: I have found that if get writer's block, you can simply type whatever's in your brain, and it'll blow the block. If I'm writing a book and I get a block, I just type whatever it is I'm thinking, such as, "I wish I had a taco," or "I need to get the car fixed." For some reason, that'll kind of trigger a thought, and my writing will flow again. I can erase those thoughts I typed and go on with my writing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your drive to write.

GARY PAULSEN: There came a point in my life that I realized that I HAD to write. I could not avoid it, so I started doing short stories that I would perform in little town halls in Minnesota. People would bring cake and cookies and stuff—that was my pay. My friend John Collins came with a guitar, and he'd play music that would kind of fit in with the story, and I'd do readings for no money. I didn't have a Newbery Honor then.

I was 42 years old when I started running dogs. I was trapping with dogs anyway because Minnesota passed a law saying you couldn't use a four-wheeler or snow machine to trap, but you could use a dog team. Somebody told me about the Iditarod. I wanted to run it, but I realized that I had to have some kind of income to be able to do that. I started writing again, and then everything went after that.

When I decided to write for young people, I bought an old Chevette for \$400, and I toured the country. I slept on teacher's front porches and in their guest rooms. I sometimes slept in the car, and I went all over the United States. During the day, I was always with the kids talking to them, even in the cafeterias. That's what I call personal inspection at zero altitude.

I know a lot about young people: how they think, how they talk, what they want to do with their lives, and what's important, and what's not important to them. A lot of it is amazingly humorous. I have a great time writing humor for young boys, especially, and a lot of my humorous material comes from spending time in those schools.

TEACHINGBOOKS: As an adventurous male, do you have a sense that what you're writing about is specifically needed for boys?

GARY PAULSEN: Well, I don't say, "What I need to do is write a book that boys will like." In fact, many of the books are not specifically for boys. I've done books with girl protagonists, books about cancer, and books about things that are real to all young people. Half the mail I get is from girls. It doesn't matter what kids read. If they read, whatever they read, it's great.

This In-depth Written Interview is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

For more information about Gary Paulsen and his books, go to <http://teachingbooks.net/>. Questions regarding this program should be directed to info@teachingbooks.net.

Copyright ©2011 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.

