

The Quest for Clarity:

Gary Paulsen and His Writings

by

Dirk P. Mattson

Determination of one's self-worth is not acquired by revelation and that knowledge tucked away for life; it cannot be put on the list of "things to do today" and neatly checked off. Nor is it possible to complete this task by a certain time in life, such as adolescence or adulthood. Most people find that this search is never complete; it is a continuum that spans a lifetime. Such a search is important to all of us, but we are often not quite sure what should be sought. We are so many things to so many people that we may go through life not knowing our real self. There is a longing in each of us to find who we are, who we represent, who we want to be — often without knowing it. Realization of this longing may come through trials that help us discover a little more — not all, but a little more — about our selves. We undertake a journey to find this real self; it is a quest. Through the novels of Gary Paulsen, the characters, the author, and the readers find a clearer vision in this quest.

The writings of Gary Paulsen have simple plots. They usually involve only one or two characters. The confusion that the characters experience, however, is complex; they have difficulty understanding the reasons for their uneasiness. There is an internal awareness within the characters which creates a despondency, although they believe they are content. They find themselves looking deeper into their own person to resolve this conflict; they turn to what is inside of them to determine their purpose. The characters acknowledge the search for themselves by enduring their conflict; this conflict forces them to confront this yearning. Gary Paulsen is a fascinating man on a similar search through his writings. His readers are invited to join this search as well. His novels then have become a part of this quest for his characters, for him, and especially for his young readers.

In most literature, the characters in the story go through transition. The plot causes a change in the characters which leads them to live their lives in a different manner. The characters in Paulsen's books go through this period of transition as well, but the foremost transition affects their awareness. These characters may affect others through the findings of their search, but this effect is always secondary. Their inner self has to be changed before others can be influenced. The change takes place inside the characters because they have permitted this change; moreover, they have willed it to take place because they are engrossed in discovering its meaning.

To create conflict in a story, the environment of a character is disturbed. Paulsen's characters are afraid of this change; they may not want to accept it, but are aware that this change must take place in order to continue the

search. The confusion of the characters forces a continuation; they may wish to stop before they understand the search, but something inside of the character denies them this complacency.

John, the young protagonist in *Tracker*, stalks a deer to come to grips with his grandfather's impending death. He wished he did not have to go hunting that season because his grandfather would be too ill to be with him. Still, something internal takes him outside of the house; he follows the deer:

By the barn he could see the glow from the lantern and he thought of going to say goodbye to his grandfather, but he would be busy and it would bother him. Instead John wheeled left off the porch and walked straight north from the house across the pasture until he came to the trees that marked the edge of the woods. (43)

There is something mysterious about the deer and its environment; it calls him to track the deer so that he might understand more about the death of his grandfather. There is a pull — an attraction — which makes him leave his dying grandfather to begin his search.

Sue Oldhorn is drawn to Alan Deerfoot in *Sentries* in much the same way. She has a good job and a good boyfriend. But when Alan confronts her in Smitty's restaurant and asks "Are you whole?", Sue senses that she is missing a part of herself. Later Alan tells her: "If you weren't going to go [with me to see what I have to show you,] you wouldn't have let me in" (129). Sue does not want to admit her uneasiness because she thinks she is content, but she knows there is more that exists within her. Because she does not understand her grandfather and his ways, Sue sees herself as less of the person she wants to be. Alan and her grandfather draw her into this search and lead her on it.

Each of the characters in Gary Paulsen's books share this discontent. For example, David in *Voyage of the Frog*, the other three protagonists in *Sentries*, Sgt. Locke in *The Crossing*, and Russel in *Dogsong* (which is probably the most conspicuous example) all need to find more of this inner self; it can not be found from where they stand at the beginning of the novel. They must take a journey; they must go on a quest.

If you go on a quest to find yourself, what should you see when you get there? Does Paulsen expect the characters (and be association, his readers) to have some mystical experience of a higher consciousness? No, the search will not bring you the answer, but will make you aware of its existence. Sue Oldhorn knows, that she had found something inside her that was not there before:

And she wondered if she had really learned something about herself or only thought she had; wondered of the artist came again and did her portrait she would say she was Indian and but Samoan or whatever it was; wondered of she would ever be the same again a'

before the bark canoe and Alan and the smooth lake and the high-cry, the wild high-cry of the loon and this time when she turned she saw him sitting straight and even, the paddle dripping drops of silver into the still water, his eyes on her, evenly, knowing, all-knowing, and she know she would not be the same again.

Ever.

And she was glad. (*Sentries* 134-135)

This realization may be the start of another quest. In *Sentries*, Alan Deerfoot states that it is a wholeness which completes a person. All of the characters do find an insight to their own complete person waiting at the end of that search and, in some way, they are able to be more of that person.

In *Hatchet*, Brian finds this new person as well. He is confident in what he has found and the discovery gives him courage to face new challenges. Even at the pit of despair when Brian tries to take his own life with the tool — hatchet — that has kept him alive thus far, the discoveries revitalize the lost boy:

He was not the same. The plane passing changed him, the disappointment cut him down and made him new. He was not the same and would never be again like he had been. That was one of the true things, the new things. And the other one was that he would not die, he would not let death in again.

He was new. (123)

The characters are drawn to find this wholeness, but it will not come to them by simply wanting to be whole. They must go through a ritual or trial to find that which will help complete their person. There is an adversity in their lives which they must resolve. If they cease their struggle, they will not realize the search. While working through the divorce of his parents, Brian must survive physically as well as emotionally. The need to survive physically makes him deal with the divorce during his time in the wilderness. If he were to give up on this problem, his will to survive would disappear as well. Brian deals with the Secret (of his mother's lover) while fighting for survival, but the will to continue is not divided between them:

Come on, he thought, baring his teeth in the darkness — come on. Is that the best you can do? Is that all you can hit me with — a moose and a tornado? Well, he thought, holding his ribs and smiling, then spitting mosquitos out of his mouth. Well, that won't get the job done. That was the difference now. He had changed, and he was tough. I'm tough where it counts — tough in the head. (*Hatchet* 157-158)

Here, the duality of nature is represented. Brian first sees the natural world as his enemy, but soon realizes the potential it holds. A transition occurs when thick mosquitos suck the old Brian from him in the wilderness and a new Brian soon appears. He has become more aware of nature, but more so of himself, through the trial he is facing.

Essential to the quest of the character is that a natural element be the catalyst. The character may not be in the wilderness as is Brian in *Hatchet* or John in *Tracker*, but this natural element still exists. In *Sentries*, Peter Shackleton is as far away from the woods as possible: he is a rising rock singer in Hollywood. Yet within him there is something which creates this yearning to complete himself. The parties and the drugs which he has stayed away from only alienate him more from what he wants: the sound. He senses a sound which is deep inside him:

He wasn't sure until he got to the door just what he was going to do or where he was going, but he felt like moving. When he got outside he realized that he wanted to go work on a new song, more than a song, a new sound that had been kicking around in his head. (54)

The world that surrounds Peter in Hollywood tends to tear at him. He must find himself beyond this world. He retreats to his beach house to find the sound which he so desperately wants — the one which he so desperately needs. The search will show him what he needs to know and he must make this search alone. Peter had become "tired and lonely but not sad-lonely so much as rich-lonely. The loneliness that was supposed to be when the new sound came and he had to work alone, the filling loneliness that was so right because it fit the music" (99). This completeness was not found in the music studio, but by himself — alone.

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The author who brings his characters through these experiences has seen many of these experiences himself. Gary Paulsen is not a man who writes of dreams that should have been followed or lessons that should have been learned. Gary Paulsen writes of the experiences of his life; he writes of what has been learned. Gary Paulsen has lived throughout the world, although not by choice. The son of an army officer and his wife, Paulsen traveled extensively throughout the world, being reared by relatives and finally seeing his father for the first time when he was seven (Commire 78). As Paulsen moved on to high school, he became disinterested in school. Paulsen himself was in the army and, upon completing his service, took courses to become a field engineer (Commire 78). Even with this effort, Paulsen was not satisfied: "I worked at it for years, [but] when I was twenty-six I realized I wanted to be a writer and that I had wasted all that time" (*Authors on Tape*).

Gary Paulsen has come to realize that writing is a part of him. Even though he has had other occupations, writing has always been the center of what he has done. "I can't not write. I can't not do that now. . . . Maybe it's an insanity. It used to be called 'the fine madness.' It is a kind of madness. It's certainly not healthy" ("Children's Author"). The "madness" of writing may not be healthy for Paulsen, but what he sees through his writing is necessary.

There must be something which Paulsen sees: what he knows he needs is a clear vision. The ability to know, to see what is around him — and inside of him is important. In his twenties, Paulsen drank to the point where he was no longer had this focus. He had lost that vision:

I can't think of anything more horrible than that in my life. I kind of forgot how to write in the drinking. What happens when you drink is that you destroy your clarity —and I think it happens like after the second martini too-and I can't understand now how I ever would have allowed that to be destroyed: the clarity. I would never do that again. To have clarity to me is everything and why would you not want to see. ("Children's Author")

If Paulsen has gained his vision, then those things which he has seen have been worth the while. With what he sees, he can look for more.

If clarity can be inhibited, can it be enhanced? Paulsen believes that life itself will enhance clarity. Stay away from the negative and drive toward the positive. Leave the alcohol (or other mind-altering drugs) and seek what can be found. This brings clarity. Discovering what is not known enhances your vision as you now can see what was before unclear: "To know . . . to have a great thirst for knowledge and then just try to learn everything you can while you live" will enhance that clarity (Telephone interview).

The experiences in Gary Paulsen's life are many, but those which are closest to him are those which have occurred on the woods of his northern Minnesota home. There is a beauty which Paulsen finds in nature which cannot be found elsewhere — and it most certainly cannot be found without this clarity. Paulsen describes one of his first experiences on a run with a dog team:

There was a full moon shining so brightly on the snow you could read by it. There was no one around, and all I could hear was the rhythm on the dog's breathing as they pulled the sled. We came to the top of a hill, the steam from the dogs' breath all but hid their bodies — the entire world, seemed to glisten. It almost stopped my heart; I'd never seen anything so beautiful. (Commire 81)

Events such as these cannot be seen without clarity.

The dogs have indeed affected Gary Paulsen. So much so that he is now influenced by them in every respect. There is something about running with the dogs which brings him clarity:

You enter this sort of a primitive bonded state with the dogs and it is exalting. . . . It affects your life completely from that time — all parts of your life — like my work, my writing — whatever — had been changed by the dogs. It allows you to focus energy on things you want to do. ("Children's Author")

The quest has opened the eyes of Gary Paulsen a little wider —not completely, but a little wider — to where he can look for other things to learn. With clarity, he can search for the answers to other questions on the journey.

With his clarity, Paulsen has found rhythm and beauty in the very essence of life. Nature has shown him that it exists not as separate parts, but as an entity with a unity unto itself. He has not only seen what exists in nature, but recognizes it as well. Gary Paulsen's wife is an artist. As he watches her draw, he sees nature — all of its rhythms and changes and motions —within those drawings:

I love to watch things happen when she works: the miracle of starting with just a line and having it become soul. . . . Without knowing she's doing it, she'll trigger a whole concept. [While I watched her once,] she was listening to Mahler and I started playing with the rhythms. ("Children's Author")

Rhythm is a characteristic of nature which Paulsen recognizes. It distinguishes nature as would a fingerprint: "I think [rhythm] is in everything. I think it's almost like a soul-rhythm" (Telephone interview).

While Gary Paulsen needs a sense of clarity to understand nature and see its intricacies, he knows that this sensitive insight will never be the panacea to understanding his own self. The search for wholeness should never be entirely satisfied by the answers which are discovered. "If you can keep the search going — if you can keep reaching each time and try to find new things, [then] I think that's the most important thing of all —especially for young people" (Telephone interview).

Young people: this is the group for which Gary Paulsen writes. Through his writings Paulsen attempts to show to young people the journey on which his characters travel to find more of the person inside of them. Throughout life and now in his adolescent novels, Paulsen himself makes the same journey. He had moved through many of the same experiences as have the characters in the books. In a sense, a part of the mind of Gary Paulsen is in the minds of each of his characters. Through their experiences — and his — Paulsen depicts those things which are important in life.

Clarity can disappear. It can leave ever so subtly. The drinking that once affected Paulsen has that same hold over some of his characters. The author as narrator shows us the loss of clarity; he shows it to the young readers. Sergeant Robert Locke lost that clarity; he lost sight of anything that mattered —except the drinking: “Nothing was part of his life now but the drinking, the making of the fog to blind all other things” (*The Crossing* 30). Gary Paulsen and Sergeant Locke both lost their clarity once. It did not return to them until they were forced to realize the value of having it.

Gary Paulsen was able to find clarity through a medium; part of that medium is writing. Part is nature; part is the dogs and the sled. Paulsen has never found and will never truly find the end of his search. But each discovery brings him closer — and yet urges him to continue it. David, the young boy in *The Voyage of the Frog*, finds part of that clarity as well through that which is close to him:

“Well,” he said aloud to her — not to himself but to the boat, “I guess we should reef sail if the wind is going to keep getting stronger.”

And he meant we — he could no longer draw a line where he ended and the Frog began. He looked down at his bare feet, planted firmly on the floor of the cockpit, the vibration, the hum, the life of the Frog coming up through them into his legs, and he knew it would be we from now on. They were together, a thing of the sea and the wind and man all joined on a single dance. (113)

Only clarity can provide an insight such as this.

Russel in *Dogsong* has a similar experience, but his is with that medium which has meaning to him; that is, the snow, the sled, and the dogs. The importance of the environment that surrounds him is found through the clarity given to him by the journey:

He is not a man standing on the ground, Russel thought— he is growing up from the ground. His legs are the earth and they take strength from it, up through his ankles and into his muscles so that he grows with what he takes from it. More than strength, more than substance — all that the man would be is growing up from the earth through his legs and into his body. (112)

A search and a realization have brought these characters to know more than when they first began. This is part of clarity.

The beauty and rhythm in nature are things which Paulsen has seen with this clarity; so have his characters. The lines of his wife’s drawings have a soul which connect with the rest of nature. Their concept leads to something

deeper in nature; their image created an awareness. In *Dancing Carl*, Marsh sees the lines in the movements of Carl; these lines are a part of nature. Inside the lines, there is meaning: “We saw him at the rinks as having the power to make things happen, saw him making the lines go out and out of him, saw him as part of the ice, part of the warming house, controlling it all” (51).

Rhythm exists within Gary Paulsen’s writings. It is the “soul-rhythm” to which he refers. Finding this rhythm is a conscious effort for the author. It is a search which brings Gary Paulsen a little closer to answering some of the questions which have traveled with him over the years. His latest Newberry Honor Award book *The Winter Room* reflects these rhythms (Thomas 3E). It is done not only within the expression of the text but also in the exposition of the story itself:

I started doing . . . raw research into writing about three or four years ago . . . and I decided that I had been missing something with the use of rhythms and cadence and the whole music of writing. In fact, [*The Winter Room*] is composed as if it were a symphony . . . in movements — with a tuning section and the whole works. [The rhythms] are intentional and I’ve done it in four or five books now — experimentally. (Telephone interview)

Even when commenting in this aspect of his writing for which he is noted — one which Paulsen is said to have captured in many of his books, he still sees the search continuing. There is more to rhythms than he knows; there is more that he can learn.

Learning more is what Paulsen can always do. His characters see that this is possible. In *Dogsong*, Russel knows that his travels will give him knowledge: “Oogruk had said, ‘It isn’t the destination that counts. It is the journey. That is what life is. A journey. Make it the right way and you will fill it correctly with days. Pay attention to the journey’ ” (119). Paulsen’s novels share his belief that the search is the most important part of life. What is found should only further the search. Russel and Gary Paulsen have learned to respect that search:

I think the seeking itself is what I want to share. In fact, I think I said it in *Dogsong*: the journey counts more than the destination. And I think the journey is everything; it’s what life is. . . . When you learn something, you learn a thing. It doesn’t solve anything; it opens up ten new questions — inevitably — and I think that really focuses that clarity. (Telephone interview)

The characters in his books and Paulsen himself have found the search is to be valued. His books never give us a complete person at their ending, but show us that more can be added. This is a constant of life for

Gary Paulsen; it is a constant for us all — “especially,” as Paulsen was quoted earlier, “for young people” (Telephone interview).

All of these philosophies and all of these visions are more dear when they are for the young. The young people who will read Paulsen’s books still have not been altered by the values of adult society; the clarity may come more easily:

Early on in this writing thing I decided it was fruitless to write artistically for adults. . . . I can’t imagine what I can say to him? Or to somebody who’s worried about sex or car payments or house payments. . . . But the young people. They’re still whole. (Miller 12)

Moreover, Paulsen believes that hope rests in the minds of the young because they are not what adults have become. Knowledge from the journey can still be gained by the young: “[Young people] have to be better than us and the only way they can be better than us is to not be what we are” (“Children’s Author”).

The novels of Gary Paulsen bring together all that he claims to desire in his writings: the search is made; knowledge is found; questions arise; and the cycle starts again. But the number of participants involved in this process is greater than just the characters in the books. Gary Paulsen himself is involved in such a process. The young reader is as well. So too are the rest of us who still yearn for the clarity to know more. The hope which lies within the books of Gary Paulsen is that a part of that clarity might be found on our journey — if only to discover where new paths may lead.

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