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Study Guide

for

Hatchet

by Gary Paulsen



New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

Meet Gary Paulsen



[W]hat a way to make a living—writing about something you like and getting paid for it!

—Gary Paulsen

Gary Paulsen entered the field of publishing in an unusual way: he created an exaggerated résumé and got a job editing a Hollywood magazine. His new employer soon realized that Paulsen did not know the first thing about editing. Paulsen was willing to learn, however, so he was trained for the position. Paulsen remembers those years of working as an editor as the most valuable training he ever had.

With this unusual start in the early 1960s, Paulsen began his writing career. From 1966 to 1976, Paulsen published nearly forty books and about two hundred short stories and magazine articles. His long list of publications includes fiction and nonfiction, and he has written for both children and adults. His novels and stories have been translated into as many as eleven other languages.

In 1977 Paulsen took a break from writing, though not by choice. He had to respond to a lawsuit that was brought against him for *Winterkill*, a novel he published in 1977. He won the case, but his enthusiasm for writing

had disappeared. His next job was trapping animals for the state of Minnesota. He was responsible for checking sixty miles of trap lines on foot, on skis, and by dogsled.

Paulsen enjoyed working with sled dogs in Minnesota. After learning about the Iditarod, a rugged, twelve-hundred-mile dogsled race in Alaska, Paulsen was eager to try it. He put together a team, gathered resources, and entered the race twice, in 1983 and 1985. He calls the Iditarod “a mind-boggling experience.” Inspired by the race, Paulsen began writing again. Since the mid-1980s, Paulsen has published several novels that stem from his experiences working with sled dogs and trapping animals.

Some of Paulsen’s books are influenced by his childhood experiences. Paulsen was born in 1939 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His father was a career army officer, and his mother worked in a factory during World War II. As a young child, Paulsen spent much of his time with a grandmother and several aunts. In 1946 Paulsen and his mother moved to the Philippines, where his father joined them. Paulsen, who was seven years old, was meeting his father for the first time.

Returning to the United States three years later, the family moved frequently. Paulsen never spent more than five months in any one school. At times he lived with relatives.

Paulsen fondly recalls one particular childhood experience. When he entered a library one day to escape the cold, a friendly librarian offered him a library card and suggested books for him to read. Paulsen read them as fast as he could. He remembers this as a time when the whole world opened up to him.

After two years of college and four years in the army, Paulsen trained to become a field engineer. He worked for two large aerospace corporations. It was during this period that he decided to become a writer.

Introducing the Novel



Somebody was screaming, screaming as the plane dove down into the water. Someone screamed tight animal screams of fear and pain and [Brian] did not know that it was his sound, that he roared against the water that took him and the plane still deeper, down in the water. He saw nothing but sensed blue, cold blue-green. . . .

—*Hatchet*

The opening pages of *Hatchet* introduce readers to Brian Robeson, a boy from Hampton, New York, who is traveling to a Canadian oil field to visit his father. This is the first summer that he is going to stay with his father since his parents' recent divorce. Brian is the only passenger on the small single-engine plane that will take him to Canada. Little does he know that this trip will change his life forever. Over the Canadian wilderness, the pilot suffers a major heart attack and dies, leaving Brian to crash-land the plane by himself. With nothing but the hatchet his mother gave him before he left, Brian must now face the wilderness alone and find out whether he can survive.

Hatchet is the story of Brian's experience in the Canadian wilderness and of his becoming aware of his potential. Stripped of all the comforts and conveniences of his former life, Brian must find the inner resources that will help him fight for his life and ultimately move from childhood into adulthood.

Brian is a regular boy. It is easy to understand him. He makes the type of mistakes that any "city kid" would make. He laughs at his mistakes, but he also learns from them. Readers will be able to laugh and learn right along with him.

Many of Paulsen's novels are built around the themes of growing up and finding strength in one's own character. Paulsen uses his own experiences of camping, trapping animals, and

racing sled dogs to create authentic stories. His outdoor experience is obvious in this book and others. He would later write three sequels to *Hatchet*: *The River*, *Brian's Winter*, and *Brian's Return*.

THE TIME AND PLACE

Most of *Hatchet* takes place somewhere in the forests of Ontario or Quebec, in a region called the Canadian Shield. Carved out by glaciers long ago, the region is made up of ancient granite rock. It extends, in a horseshoe shape, from the southern edge of the Arctic Islands, around Hudson Bay, and over to the eastern coast of Newfoundland. The climate in the northern part of the Canadian Shield is extremely cold, with average temperatures in July ranging from forty to fifty degrees. The climate in the southern part is similar to that of the northern United States, with cold winters and mild summers. More than one hundred inches of snow fall in Ontario and Quebec every winter.

Low-lying hills and thousands of lakes form the landscape of the Canadian Shield. In fact, Canada has more lakes and inland waterways than does any other nation. Almost half of Canada, and most of the Canadian Shield, is covered with forests. The trees are a mix of evergreen and deciduous, or leaf-bearing, varieties. Within this terrain of lakes and forests live black bears, brown bears, wolves, coyotes, foxes, skunks, Canadian porcupines, beavers, and muskrats.

The Canadian Shield is rich in mineral deposits. Large amounts of iron ore are mined on the border of Quebec and Newfoundland. Deposits of cobalt, copper, gold, nickel, and uranium are found in Ontario. In addition, Canada has large reserves of crude petroleum and natural gas.

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Did You Know?

What comes to mind when someone mentions the word *airplane*? A big jumbo jet with hundreds of passengers? A sleek stealth fighter? Planes come in many different sizes and serve many different purposes. Small one-engine planes may be used for crop dusting, for carrying small cargo, or for recreation.

Cessna is a major manufacturer of single-engine airplanes in the United States. The Cessna Sky Hawk is a small plane about twenty-seven feet long, with a wingspan of a little over thirty-six feet. The height of the plane is just under nine feet. The plane has only two seats—for the pilot and the copilot. The rest of the plane's interior is designed for holding cargo.

The dials, gauges, and knobs on the instrument panel in a small plane basically serve the same purpose as those in a large commercial airliner. The instruments provide the pilot with information about the engine,

electrical systems, fuel, speed, and altitude of the plane.

An altimeter indicates altitude, or the plane's height above sea level. The most common type of altimeter measures air pressure. As a plane gets higher, air pressure decreases. The altimeter measures the air pressure and converts that measurement into a measurement of altitude.

Another important instrument is the air-speed indicator, which tells how fast the air is traveling past the plane. Many modern planes also have an artificial horizon, consisting of a small picture of an airplane and a horizontal line. When the plane is flying straight, the airplane in the picture is positioned with the horizontal line going straight through its wings. If the pilot turns, or banks, the picture of the airplane will tip one way or the other in relation to the horizontal line to show the angle at which the wings of the real plane are tipped.

Before You Read

Hatchet Chapters 1–5

FOCUS ACTIVITY

How do you get motivated to do something that seems almost impossible?

Quickwrite

Think of a time when you needed to finish a challenging task, like solving a tricky math problem or puzzle. Quickwrite for five minutes about the situation. Then reflect on what you have written. How did you resolve the problem? What motivated you to finish it?

Setting a Purpose

Read to see how Brian becomes motivated to help himself.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

A heart attack is often caused by a coronary thrombosis. The word *coronary* means “of or relating to the heart.” The word *thrombosis* means “the formation of a blood clot (thrombus) in the heart or in a blood vessel.” A heart attack occurs when a blood clot blocks one of the arteries that bring blood to the heart. Without a constant blood supply, heart muscle can be damaged. In a minor heart attack, the victim may experience only chest pain. In a very severe heart attack, the heart muscle stops working altogether.

Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) is a first-aid procedure for heart-attack victims. Its goal is to keep some blood flowing through a victim’s body and to supply the victim with oxygen. Pressing on a victim’s chest about once per second forces blood through the heart and into the arteries, allowing blood to flow into the body. Releasing the pressure allows blood to fill the heart again. Performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation about every thirty seconds gives the lungs—and, therefore, the rest of the body—a fresh supply of oxygen. Without a supply of oxygen, a person who stops breathing, for whatever reason, will die within four to six minutes.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

amphibious [am fib’ ē əs] *adj.* able to function on both land and water

audible [ô’ də bəl] *adj.* able to be heard

hummocks [hum’ əks] *n.* small, rounded hills

turbulence [tur’ byə ləns] *n.* irregular air motion, especially as felt by airplane passengers

wince [wints] *v.* to shrink back; to flinch

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Active Reading

Hatchet Chapters 1-5

Brian uses his skills of observation to take stock of his surroundings. Record what Brian finds as he checks out his possessions. Predict how he might use each possession to help him survive.

62 cents in coins – useless



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Responding

Hatchet Chapters 1-5

Personal Response

How did you react to Brian's thoughts and actions? Do you think that he is sensible or unreasonable? Explain your answer.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why is Brian visiting his father in Canada? How does Brian feel about his mother?

2. What is Brian's plan for landing the plane? What conclusions can you draw about Brian from the actions he takes before the crash?

3. What lesson does Brian recall from Mr. Perpich, his English teacher? How does that lesson help Brian as he sits beside the lake?

Responding

Hatchet Chapters 1–5

Analyzing Literature (continued)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Sometimes Brian's thoughts go back to an earlier time, when he was with his mother. What effect do these "breaks" have on the story?

5. Are Brian's reactions to the pilot's death and the crash realistic? Does Brian seem like a real thirteen-year-old? Explain your answer.

Literature and Writing

Positive Thinking

Many people believe that if they have a positive attitude, good things will happen. They believe that people with negative attitudes somehow prevent good things from happening. Write an editorial in which you support the "power of positive thinking." Use Brian's experience and your response to the **Focus Activity** as examples of how positive thinking can help people. At the conclusion of your editorial, encourage people to adopt positive thoughts and to see what happens.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In the story, the author often relates events or mentions details that become important later on. For example, the pilot allows Brian to steer the plane. At first, it seems like a minor event. Later, it helps Brian survive. Find other passages in which details are mentioned that become important later in this section of the novel. Discuss how this method of introducing ideas and topics helps readers follow the story.

Learning for Life

Suppose that you are part of a rescue team that arrives the morning after Brian wakes up from the crash. He tells you what happened, and you write an incident report. Based on the events as they are told in the novel, write such a report. Remember that the incident report is limited to the facts of the crash. Do not include Brian's emotions or your own guesses about what happened—just the facts.

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