

Teaching Guides for *Hatchet* and *Dogsong*

By Gary Paulsen

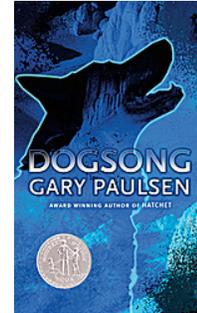


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About the Book

Among the most celebrated adventure stories in modern children's literature, these novels explore the wilderness experience from two strikingly different perspectives. In *Dogsong*, Russel Susskit begins his journey deliberately. An Eskimo teenager, he heads north by dogsled, searching to find himself by rediscovering the old ways of his people. For Brian, the hero of *Hatchet*, it all starts with a terrible accident. The small plane he shares with a seasoned pilot crashes in the Canadian wilderness. The pilot is dead and Brian, a suburban kid with almost no outdoor experience, must fend for himself for fifty-four days. Read separately, each is a haunting tale of personal survival. Read together, they brilliantly illuminate the universal experience of coming into maturity.

Discussion Topics

1. In *Dogsong*, Russel Susskit chooses to go into the wilderness. In *Hatchet*, Brian is forced into it by a plane crash. Yet both are able to survive in the wild. What are the important personal qualities that each brings to his experience?

2. Early in *Dogsong*, Russel wants to say, "Father, I am not happy with myself," but he doesn't. "It was not the sort of thing you talked about, that feeling he had, unless you could find out what was causing it." Why is Russel not happy with himself? Why is it so important for him to go into the wilderness?

3. Russel and Brian work hard not just because it's a virtue but because it's essential to their survival. Among most modern Americans, how strong a link is there between everyday work and physical survival?

4. Physical discomfort and experiencing excruciating pain are everyday concerns for Russel and Brian. How do they handle it? How do they put it out of their minds? How do they sometimes gain strength from it?

5. Both of these novels portray a rite of passage, exploring how two teenagers come into their maturity. All of us make that trip, although seldom as dramatically. In your own community, what are the significant rites of passage for teenagers?

6. Russel's journey is virtually driven by his dreams. Discuss how they sustain and direct him through his travels. In *Hatchet*, how does Brian profit from his dreams?

7. Even though his parents are divorced, Brian is determined to keep his mother's infidelity a secret from his father. Why?

8. Imagine that, like Brian, you've crash-landed in the Canadian wilderness. But unlike him, you've read *Hatchet*. Would knowing about his experience -- his mistakes as well as his successes -- better help you survive on your own?

9. "So fast," Brian observes in *Hatchet*. "So fast things change." Discuss the life-changing events that happen so fast to Brian as well as to Russel in *Dogsong*. What are the changes that come slowly?

10. In "The Trace," Part I of *Dogsong*, each chapter begins with a brief quote, usually a reminiscence of an elderly Eskimo. What purpose do you think these quotes serve? Why do you think there are no such quotes in Part II, "The Dream Run?"

11. Is Russel's journey a one-time experience, an adventure unlikely ever to be repeated? Or is it the beginning of a lifetime of solitary existence in the wild.

12. Pregnant and near death when Russel finds her, Nancy relies upon him for her survival. But does Russel also need Nancy?

Activities and Research

1. Brian's ordeal and rescue in *Hatchet* is the sort of story that the news media love. Write an article about it that would run in a newspaper or magazine. Or videotape a piece that might appear on television.
2. *Dogsong* was, in part, inspired by Gary Paulsen's experience racing in the Iditarod, a 1,049 mile race across Alaska by dogsled. Research the Iditarod. Map out its course. How many people begin the race each year? How many complete it?
3. Russel celebrates the old way of life -- his way of life -- by composing his own "*Dogsong*." Following the structure of his lyric, compose your own personal "*Dogsong*."
4. Create two brief scenes in which Russel and Brian appear together. In the first, they happen to meet each other before Brian lands in the wilderness. In the second, they meet after Brian is rescued.
5. Soon after he lands in the wilderness, Brian realizes he is looking and hearing with much greater acuity and attention than he ever did back home in the suburbs. All on your own, take a camera, a tape recorder, a notebook, or a drawing pad to a totally new environment, urban or rural. Keep a careful record of what you hear or see there.

Related Reading

Other books by Gary Paulsen:
Dancing Carl
Sentries Tracker

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