Woodsong: Gary Paulson

Summary:
Gary Paulsen's "Woodsong" is a personal, detailed account of his experiences competing in The Iditarod Trail Dog Sled Race held in Nome, Alaska. The Iditarod race is enduringly intense, affecting the participants both mentally and physically. Throughout the race, participants may feel sleep-deprived and experience hallucinations worse than an ordinary nightmare. On the day that Paulsen competes, he is one of the seventy-three mushers who finishes number forty-two. By the end of "Woodsong," Paulsen has become a student of himself, the dogs, and the experience. With this in mind, Paulsen structures the first part of the work as brief vignettes. The novel lacks chronology, but is infused with descriptions of his life in northern Minnesota working with his sled dogs. The experiences he gained living here helped to prepare him for the Iditarod race. For example, during his time in the woods, he encountered wild animals, fawn, and timber wolves. He also learned how cold affects not only humans, but also the animals. It is in the second part of the book where we see these skills applied while he's running a seventeen-day race. While the first part of the book is not structured in terms of logically, the second part represents a chronological assessment of his thoughts and interactions with the dogs and the other participants of the race. Paulsen's "Woodsong" is mainly a coming of age story from an adult perspective.
Synopsis

In Woodsong, a spare but thrilling autobiographical account of a series of adventures that changed his life, Gary Paulsen relates how he arrived at a new understanding of the beauty, violence, and mystery of the natural world when he began training and running a pack of sled dogs. Although clearly drawn from the details of his life in the Minnesota wilderness, Woodsong is a series of reflections on the changes that took place in Paulsen’s life rather than a day-to-day account presented in a chronological time frame. In the opening section, Paulsen watches helplessly from his sled as a doe is caught and eaten by a pack of wolves. Confronted for the first time by the savagery of nature, he suddenly realizes that animals are not right or wrong, good or bad; they just “are.” Shortly afterward, his favorite sled dog starts bleeding profusely during a night run. The dog survives, seemingly unconcerned by the experience, but Paulsen realizes how little he knows about animals and the forces that drive them. Finally, a “joke” one dog plays on another brings the author to the realization that dogs are highly intelligent. After these experiences he decides to stop hunting and trapping wild animals. His decision is reinforced when he is injured during a run and rescued from almost certain death by his team of dogs. As Paulsen runs with his dogs in the Minnesota wilderness, he experiences a number of mysteries that he has never been able to solve, among them the source of a green light encountered during a midnight run, and a standing doe that has inexplicably frozen to death in the middle of a forest trail. The mysteries serve not only to deepen the author’s
awe of nature but also the growing realization of his own limitations as “just another animal in the woods.” On run after run, Paulsen slowly learns to trust his dogs and follow their lead. The book concludes with Paulsen’s account of the Iditarod, a dogsled race he entered with his team that begins in Anchorage, Alaska, and ends in Nome—almost 1,200 miles.

Author Biography – Gary Paulsen
Gary Paulsen, a renowned author of novels for young people, presently lives in New Mexico. Three of Gary Paulsen’s novels have been acclaimed as Newbery Honor Books: Hatchet, Dogsong, and The Winter Room. The River is Gary's exciting sequel to Hatchet. His other novels include: Brian’s Winter (sequel), Brian’s Return (sequel), Canyons, The Crossing, Dancing Carl, The Island, Popcorn Days and Buttermilk Nights, Sentries, Tracker, Woodsong, The Legend of Red Horse Canyon, Escape From Fire Mountain, Danger on Midnight River. Gary Paulsen is an avid outdoorsman who competed in the Iditarod, a dog sled race across Alaska. He also frequently sails the Pacific Ocean.

Themes which may be taught in conjunction with the novel include overcoming difficulty, courage and endurance, the environment, and personal growth.

Vocabulary Development will include:
Locating descriptive words / phrases, Identifying / creating alliteration, Identifying parts of speech, Identification of root words, Identify/create similes, Identify personification, Identification of a cliffhanger
**Setting Activities**
Summarize the details of a setting - Included within individual chapter breakdowns

**Character Activities**
Determine character traits, Relating personal experiences, Protagonists and antagonists

**Introduction**
Before you read the chapter:
The protagonist in most novels or works of nonfiction features the main character or “good guy”. The protagonist of Woodsong is actually Gary Paulsen, the author of this exciting book. Think back on some of your favorite characters from past novels you have read or movies you’ve seen. What do you think makes for an especially interesting protagonist?
Chapter 1

Gary is running a sled dog team in Alaska on the Ocean just off the shoreline and as he's running the dogs they start to bark and growl. All of a sudden a female deer (doe) fly's out of the woods, over one of the dogs heads and onto the ice not five steps from Gary! As he keeps running without stopping he looks back and all of a sudden the doe bolts farther onto the ice and out of the woods fly a pack of hungry wolves. With the team stopped gary watches as the wolves catch the doe and start eating her alive. With her internals on the ice Gary watches in horror and all of a sudden, the still-living deer falls through the ice and into the frigid waters. Gary looks on in horror and without thinking he yells "Leave Her Alone", with the wolves turning to face him, faces covered in blood, he realizes hunting/trapping is useless to him now.

Vocabulary - paradox, tandem, inflict, skirted, lope, preconceived, carcass, steeped

Questions

1. A paradox (p. 1) is a statement that seems to contradict itself or seems false. Why do you think the author feels the following statement about the woods is a paradox? "So many enjoy it, or seem to enjoy it, yet spend most of their time trying to kill parts of it."

2. What parts of the "woods" do people kill? Why? What is the purpose?
3. What happened in the first chapter that changed the narrator’s mood? Explain how his mood changed and why.

4. What was the most horrifying part of this chapter? Be specific.

Skill: Setting - Positive/Negative Connotation

Remind students that the setting of a book, whether it is fiction or nonfiction, is the time and place in which the action occurs. Before students begin reading the novel on their own, call on a volunteer to read the paragraph near the beginning of Chapter 1, in which the author clearly establishes the principal setting of the book. The paragraph begins with the sentence “It was a grandly beautiful winter morning.” After students have listened to the paragraph, discuss with them how the author paints the setting in a positive light. Then ask them to suggest some possible negative aspects of a winter setting in the deep woods of northern Minnesota.

Extension:

The Gangline

The gangline is a single line to which each dog is attached, usually in pairs, and it keeps the dogs in a tight formation ahead of the sled. This is better for forested areas or narrow trails, and is the typical harness system used in sled dog races such as the Iditarod or Yukon Quest.

**Brush Wolves**

The author explains that the wolves he saw in this chapter were not the big timber wolves that the north country is so famous for, but brush wolves. Brush wolves are described in this chapter as being smaller than timber wolves, weighing about 40-50 pounds each. Your task is to do an investigation of this sometimes misunderstood creature. Using resources in your school library or on the Internet, research the brush wolf and record three fascinating facts from your research to share with your classmates.
Chapter 2
Gary is exposed to dogs at age 40 living in Northern Minnesota in poverty in an old cabin with no plumbing, no electricity & no real prospects. He is selling a ton of books but not making any money in the process and working at any job that came available. Minnesota is in a hard time and during this rough patch Gary's friends give him four dogs when they hear he's running a trapline in the winter on snowshoes. He realizes he knows absolutely nothing about dogs while trying to harness them to the sled. He also experiences that dogs can teach with Blood.

**Vocabulary** - bounty, pelt, standoffish, falter, brindle, inversion, warped

**Questions**
1. Based on the events of this chapter, do you think Paulson is prepared for a major sleddog trip? Why or why not? Give reasons from the chapter.
2. Who is Storm? What does Paulson learn about him in this chapter?
3. Why wouldn't Storm stop working so hard?
4. Do you know of a person or individual who has this same "attitude" as Storm? Write about him/her/it.
Skill: Cause and Effect

An event in a story can have more than one effect. In Chapter 2 of Woodsong, Gary Paulsen gives his sled dogs dried food, and this causes one of the dogs to spray blood. But it also has an effect on Paulsen. He realizes after this event that he wants to learn all he can about dogs and about running a team. In your notebook, list some events from Woodsong and the effects they had, both on the plot and on Gary Paulsen.

See cause and effect .pdf in Scholastic - Novels of Gary Paulson

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Chapter 3

While running his team at night he figures dogs run better at night and while running home a dark red liquid sprays out of one of the dogs rear-end. With the sled stopped Gary walks up to the dog, pets him, shines a headlamp on the dogs rear end and is terrified by the sight that lays before him, Blood. With 'Storm' spraying blood he unhooks him, lets him run along side the sled but storm is determined to pull and runs back to his spot. The reason he is squirting blood is unknown but while running every ten or twenty yards a dark spot on the snow passes the sled that Gary rides on.

Vocabulary - passive, gully, clarity, mystified, musher, genetic, parka, petrified

Questions

1. What does this chapter reveal about Columbia and Olaf’s personalities? What does Paulson think about this?
2. How did the dogs react to the fall? What did Paulson learn?
3. Paulsen relates an anecdote about Columbia's sense of humor. Do you feel that animals have personalities? Does this have any bearing upon you position on hunting? Why or why not?
4. There aren't many dog teams that will return for their musher once they are loose. Why do you think this team did?
Skill: Poetry Writing

http://writingfix.com/Chapter_Book_Prompts/Woodsong2.htm
Also see Arroyo Poem examples .pdf
Chapter 4

As Gary is stopping to make camp for the night the dogs start going to sleep one by one. With a fire a-roar one dog awakens and is absolutely terrified of the fire. With all his growling, barking and snarling the other dogs awaken and follow there friend in his cry. With all the dogs acting crazy over the fire Gary awakens from his deep sleep inside the sleeping bag. After he realizes the dogs are mad at the fire he throws some snow on it and one of the dog starts to sing a sad song. This is another thing Gary will learn from dogs, they express feeling through song.

Vocabulary - marvel, melancholy, moguls, petrified, blundered, coherent, predators, scavenge, coherent, menace

Questions

1. What does Paulson say is the difference between man and animal? Do you agree?

2. What did Paulson learn from his contact with the bear?

3. "...I am nothing more and nothing less than any other animal in the woods." Do you agree with Paulsen's statement?
Skill: Character Traits

Begin a chart in your notebook to list character traits that could be used to describe Gary Paulson or his dogs. Be sure to provide examples from the text with page numbers to support your choice.

See characterization part 1 of Woodsong .pdf
Chapter 5

Hawk. The Banty Hen that roams the barn yard and runs the show. It's mid April and Gary is running the team on a sled with wheels down an old road. With a figure laying dead on the road he stops the team and walks up to the animal. A dead grouse is laying there and with Gary thinking she got hit by a car while getting pebbles for her gizzard he looks off to the side of the road in the underbrush and sees her nest. He thinks about taking the eggs and giving them to his wife who is an artists but has a thought about Hawk and decides to bring them home and put them in her nest. As Hawk adopts the eggs they hatch and think they’re chickens. So they follow Hawk and the real chickens around doing what they see. As her babies grow older she scopes out a spot to watch her babies. She finds a woodpile in the yard that is as tall as the roof of the house and if anything gets to close to her babies she fly's down from the woodpile and pokes them in the back of the head sending them to there knees.

Vocabulary - gizzard, brood, carnivorous, sustain, diffuse, plummet, keening

Questions:

1. Write three words that best describe Hawk’s personality. Write a paragraph explaining why you chose those words.

2. Tell about an "interesting" encounter you had with wildlife.
Chapter 6

While sitting on an old tree stump eating a cookie while the dogs rest, Gary has a chipmunk eating a piece of cookie out of his hand. All of a sudden a red squirrel fly's down from her tree limb and attacks the chipmunk. With Gary in shock, he thinks she attacked the chipmunk for the cookie but after one or two more seconds the squirrel flips the chipmunk on his belly, grabbed him by the throat, and killed him. As he sits there in amazement he tells himself that squirrels are not carnivorous. But there is a red squirrel sitting in the shadows of a log tearing the guts out of a chipmunk.

Vocabulary - carnivorous, ebbed, diffused, intricate, gratitude, horrendous, cowering

Questions

1. Summarize two of the unusual stories mentioned in this chapter.

2. What was so unusual about the behavior of the red squirrel against the chipmunk?

3. Why didn't Gary Paulsen stop this from happening?
Chapter 7

Fred, an old, extremely fat dog roams the yard. He loved to eat and so the Paulsens' put him on a special diet. He refused to eat the food and would dig up other dogs food or go fetch food that he hid over the years. As Gary and his wife notice this they take all the dogs food and throw it away so Fred didn't get to it. He started sneaking into the garden and eating potatoes and tomatoes so they fence off the garden and start taking Fred on two mile walks every day. He would literally have to be dragged down the road but when they started heading for home he would happily walk along with his tail waging around above him.

Skill - Sequence of Events

Vocabulary - regimen, floundering, mutiny, plummeted, bellowing, deftly

Questions

1. Do you believe that Storm was actually communicating with Paulsen, or was it coincidence? Explain.

2. Did you ever have a situation where you knew better than someone else? What was it? How did you handle it? Would it be wise to try to teach another a lesson if others could get hurt in the process?

3. Write a paragraph about a time you think you communicated with an animal that you were close to.
Chapter 8

Vocabulary- delirium, logistical, emit, hunkered, hallucinate, elemental

Questions:
1. What is the main theme of this chapter?
2. Dog sled runners know by word-of-mouth about the hallucinations faced on the trail. Would you put yourself into a similar situation as the one described by Paulsen?

The Race
Vocabulary for Race Days 1-6:
lunge, checkpoints, pandemonium, whiteouts, dilirium, deprivation, benediction, futile, careen, befuddled, enormity, logistical, gorge, mandatory, expanse, indignant

Day 1:
See - Woodsong Assignments - The Race .pdf

The Start of the Race! Gary leaves Anchorage, Alaska but that isn't the real start of the race. They fly down the downtown roads of Anchorage and as they turn off the main street they fly into the wilderness and come to a road not 50 yards from the city. A truck awaits the racers and brings them to Settlers Bay, that's the real start of the race.
Questions:

1. Locate the following places on your Iditarod Trail Map and label them "Day 1."
   a. Alaska Range
   b. Susitna River

2. Which similes and metaphors have the most striking impact on you?

Skill: Figurative Language - Similes and Metaphors

Days 2 & 3

Gary hears from the other mushers before the race that hallucinations are common among racers. Gary is experiencing these first hand on the cold night of day two. As he is running, little whites tuffs of snow fly from under the dogs legs and Gary see's them in flames! As he sets the snowhook and rushes to them to put the flames out they disappear and the dogs look at him like he's crazy. Not an hour later he has a man in his sled talking about politics/government, trees, etc. Gary can't take it anymore and yells into the darkness, "Shut Up"! The dogs look at him once more like he is crazy and he looks at the sled, no man.
Day 3: Exhaustion. That is what overwhelms Gary on day three. He passes three checkpoints and watches all the other teams resting but Gary keeps on his way. Up and up the mountains they go, coming in and out of consciousness. They stop at the forth checkpoint but aren't allowed inside the cabin. With all the beauty that surrounds him he decides to spend the night and head out in the morning. He doesn't sleep more than three hours when one of the dogs wakes up and signals it's time to go.

Questions:
1. Who were the Rick and Susan that Gary Paulsen was referring to on page 100? What information can you provide about them?
2. If you were exhausted as Paulsen obviously is, would you rest, or give in to your dogs? Why?

Day 4

As Gary approaches the finish line he thinks about not finishing the race and just turning back into the wilderness away from civilization. The only thing that makes him finish the race is seeing his wife in his mind. If he goes back into the wilderness he will not be with her and he doesn't want that.

Questions:
1. On your trail map, locate the "gorge" or "the chute" Gary Paulsen is referring to in this chapter.
2. Would you have gone down that gorge? Why or why not?
Day 5

Questions:

1. Locate where you think Gary Paulsen is at this stage of the race. Write "Day 5" on your map.

2. You are required to take a 24-hour layover in the Iditarod. When do you think you would take yours? Why?

3. Describe the scene that Gary Paulsen witnessed at Rhone River during his twenty-four hour layover.

Day 6

Questions:

1. Locate the "Farewell Burn" area that Gary Paulsen is passing through in this part of the book and label it "Day 6."

2. Most of the rules in the Iditarod protect the dogs and ensure equality amongst equipment, but very few protect the musher. Do you think this is fair and humane? Explain.

Vocabulary for Race Days 7-17:

tundra, stultifying, gastric, ptarmigan, virtually, abates, amiably, canter, lope
Day 7

Questions:
1. Locate the following areas on your map and label them "Day 7."
   a. Yukon River
   b. Kuskokwim River

Day 8

Questions:
1. Why do you think Paulsen compares running the Iditarod to landing on the moon? What similarities can you draw?

2. Gary mentions staying in a "caved-in" cabin. It is NOT a checkpoint. Where on the trail do you think this is? Locate it and mark it on your map.

Day 9

Questions:
1. The checkpoint of Iditarod has significance to the race other than it sharing the name of the race. What does the first musher to reach this checkpoint earn? What is the importance of this particular checkpoint?
2. Paulsen speaks of gear that mushers have thrown out. What would you pack in your sled so that you had the essentials, but no too much weight?

**Days 10 & 11**

**Questions:**
1. What would it take for you to put yourself through this difficult race?

2. What personal qualities would somebody need to run the Iditarod?

**Day 12**

**Questions:**
1. Locate the Bering Sea on your Iditarod Trail map. Write "Day 12" on it.

**Day 13**

**Questions:**
1. Gary mentioned he is at the fourth to the last checkpoint in the race. Which checkpoint is this? Locate it on your map and write "Day 12" on it.

2. Gary doesn't care that he is four days behind the winner. Would you care? Explain

3. After reading Days 10-13, write 5 interview questions to ask Gary Paulsen. In class, we will exchange journals and answer questions for one another as if we were Gary Paulsen.
**Day 14**

**Questions:**
1. Locate Shaktoolik and Norton Sound on your map and write "Day 14" next to them.

2. Would the gruesome rumors scare you off? Explain.

**Day 15**

**Questions:**
1. Why does the ice give Gary Paulsen’s a “joy to run”?

**Days 16 and 17**

**Questions:**
1. Why do you think Paulsen doesn't want to finish the race and go into Nome?

2. If you did the Iditarod once, would you do it again? Explain.

**Skill: Plot Mapping**
Writing Activities:

Victory Speech
Remind students that when Gary Paulsen crosses the Iditarod finish line in Nome all he was able to say to the mayor, who greeted him, was “We’ll be back to run it again.” Invite students to imagine that they have not only finished the Iditarod but have claimed victory. Have them prepare a victory speech graciously accepting the prize and acknowledging the achievement. Instruct students to make their speeches three minutes long, and encourage them to describe at least one major problem that was overcome during the race. Also suggest that they acknowledge their lead dog and anyone who provided assistance along the way.

Journal Entry
Ask students to put themselves in Gary Paulsen’s place as he runs with his sled dogs at the beginning of the book. Have them imagine that they are circling the lake with the team when suddenly the doe flies out of the woods, with the wolves close behind her. What would their reaction be? Would they try to intervene in some way? Have students write a journal entry in which they describe their reaction to this experience and what might be the result.

Mysteries of Nature
Review the “mysteries” of the woods that Paulsen describes in Chapter 6: The strange doe, frozen in the middle of the trail; the mysterious green light; the cedar waxwings passing berries from
one to the other; and the fox that “could not have been there and yet was.” Have students write their own explanations or solutions to one of these “mysteries” of nature.

**Exploring Character**
Point out to students that when Gary Paulsen describes the dogs he has owned, he gives each one a distinct personality. Some are extremely intelligent, and others have a great sense of humor. Have students write a character sketch of a favorite pet or a wild animal they have observed at home, in a zoo, or in a natural setting.

**Extension Activities:**

* Create an ABC book using: mixbook.com


* SLED DOG PROJECT

Alone or in groups of 3-4 you will choose one of the following projects...

Do a short research paper on one of the plants or animals mentioned in the book, such as choke berries or timber wolves.

*Write a ballad about the Iditarod sled dog race. Make sure to include the Alaska landscape and the nature that surrounds the Iditarod.*
*Make a mobile showing some of the plants and animals from WOODSONG

*Make a collage on a large piece of poster board depicting events and feelings from WOODSONG.

*Write a scene that might have happened but didn't. Act it out or read it to us!

*Act out a scene from the book and see if the class can figure out what scene it is.

*Write an essay in which you support or refute the idea that we have been "gulled" by Disney movies and cartoons into a false idea of nature.

*Make up a small booklet of math problems based on WOODSONG. For example, if Paulsen's dogs cover an average of 15 miles per day and another team averages 17 miles per day, how far apart will the two teams be in 4 days?

*Write a letter to Gary Paulsen, author of WOODSONG, and tell him what you have learned.

*Create a map of Alaska showing geographical features and the Iditarod route

*Design a Game
   Your group has been commissioned by Milton Bradley to create a board game that demonstrates your knowledge of the Iditarod Trail. The game must contain questions in the subtopics of Alaska, Iditarod, Dog Sledding, and Woodsong and answers to the questions.
*Math

How much would it cost to run the Iditarod? About how much would it cost to run the Iditarod Trail? Your group must decide what you need on your trip and calculate the expense. You may use the Internet and mail order catalogs to price equipment, dogs, and whatever else you decide to take. Be prepared to discuss your findings and sources in class.

*Math on the Trail

Each student will choose two mushers to track throughout the Iditarod Race and will create a spreadsheet. On the spreadsheet the student will record the distance between checkpoints, predict the time it would take the mushers to travel between checkpoints, compare his/her prediction to the actual time, calculate the average speed (mph) between checkpoints, and keep an ongoing average speed (mph).

*Social Studies Who Benefits?

Your group must carefully read the rules and policies for the Iditarod Race. Decide for each rule whether it benefits the musher, the dogs, or the race. You will share your findings with the class, and the class will come to an agreement for each rule.
*Travel Brochure

Using Activinspire, your group will design a travel brochure promoting a visit to Alaska in connection with the Iditarod for an imaginary travel agency. Do not forget to give your agency a name. You may wish to collect brochures from travel agencies to get ideas for your brochure.

*Illustrate a picture book for kindergartners and first graders. This book may be written in poetry or prose and will explain the topic in very simple terms.

Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights)
Iditarod (annual Alaskan dogsled race)
Dogsleds and sled dogs
An Alaskan landform or geographical area
Gary Paulsen’s life
Plants, animals, birds, or fish of Alaska
Susan Butcher (or another Iditarod racer)
Eskimo people/customs
Animals trapped for fur
Websites

Iditarod.com
http://www.iditarod.com

Iditarod
http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/iditarod/

Cabelas Iditarod Race Coverage
http://www.cabelasiditarod.com

Iditarod 411

http://www.randomhouse.com/features/garypaulsen/

Research Websites (Lots of Links)
http://home.centurytel.net/vanopst/Iditarod/research_websites.htm

Video about Sled dogs:
IDITAROD TRAIL

RACE ROUTE 1983

Nome
Shaktoolik
Unalakleet
Koyuk
Kalrug
Eagle Island
Grayling
Anvil
Sheeluk
Iditarod
Dion's Cabin
Ophir
Talotna
McGrath
Nikolai
Rohn
Rainy Pass
Finger Lake
Sleevetna
Yentna Station Lodge
Knik
Setlers Bay
Eagle River
ANCHORAGE