



## A Tribute to Gary Paulsen

**W**hen I saw the email from Jennifer Flannery, head of Flannery Literary Agency, to please call her immediately, I knew it could only be about one thing. Gary Paulsen was gone. Jennifer, who handled each of the 200+ books of Gary's, answered the phone on the first ring, and said, "Hi, Jim. This is the phone call I have been dreading for years, but knew I would have to make one day. Gary has passed away, peacefully, at home. He was 82." She talked for a bit through her tears about how he had given her a start in this business and singlehandedly brought in author friends who, under Jennifer's guidance, won Newbery Medals, Caldecott Awards, even National Book Awards from the Library of Congress.

Jennifer was so right, although we all knew this would have to happen eventually, it felt like Gary Paulsen would go on forever, and I'm sure his books will. As the news of Gary's passing spreads out across the world, I continue to get emails from former students who took my Arizona State University Young Adult Literature class, like this one from a woman now pursuing a degree in creative writing:

I would like to say how sorry I am for the loss of your good friend, Gary Paulsen. Though I never met Mr. Paulsen, I read *Hatchet* several times when I was in elementary school. When I was in the sixth grade and my mother was in the hospital, Mr. Paulsen's wilderness narratives really helped me cope with the trauma I was experiencing. During that time, I was inspired by his books and began to write my own stories. Earlier this year, I was accepted into ASU's Undergraduate Program for creative writing (both in fiction and poetry), so I will never forget how books like *Hatchet* led me to where I am now.

In May of 2022, I will be the first in my family to graduate from college, and if I didn't love to read, I don't believe

I would have been motivated to do well in school. I also wouldn't have pursued an English degree, nor would I have chosen a career as a writer & teacher. *Hatchet* was a book that opened so many literary doors for me. Therefore, I will always be grateful for Gary Paulsen's stories.

Yesterday, when I devoted my ASU Young Adult Literature class to a Gary Paulsen tribute, I asked how many people had read one of his books. Everyone raised a hand. Almost every student in the United States reads *Hatchet* at some point, and for kids who love dogs, well, they found a kindred spirit in Gary, someone who expressed so well what they were feeling about their beloved furry companions. Gary Paulsen was practically the patron saint of dogs. Just a few of his dog books included *My Life in Dog Years*; *Puppies, Dogs, and Blue Northerners*; *Dogsong*; *Wind-song*; *Dogteam*; and *Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod*. When you met Gary for the first time, without fail, a moment would come when he would pull a wrinkled picture out of his wallet—a picture of Cookie, his beloved lead sled dog—and tell you how Cookie had saved his life, twice.

For many years, Cookie helped Gary compete in the Iditarod, the famous dogsled race from Anchorage to Gnome, Alaska—over 1,100 miles of treacherous wilderness, the last segment over the frozen Pacific Ocean. Gary participated for decades, only retiring from his annual attempt when he felt he was too old to be a safe driver . . . safe for the dogs, that is. He had no fear of putting his own life in harm's way, and had been in life-or-death situations many times: attacked by bears, attacked by moose (defending his dogs), cohabiting with rattlesnakes (not by choice, they moved in under his ranch house and into his

hay barn in New Mexico), sailing his sailboat through storms all alone. And these are just the instances I know about.

When I began writing a book about Gary (*Gary Paulsen*, ABC-CLIO, 2007), he agreed to let me come to Alaska to interview him for a week if his agent, Jennifer Flannery, gave me her blessing. After three days with Jennifer in Chicago, I was approved to head to Alaska in December of 2005, as long as I promised not to become a nuisance while Gary was trying to train sled dogs and write books. For one week, I (sort of) helped Gary and his dog handler, Leo Lashock, train several teams of dogs, and even drove a team of dogs across the frozen muskeg myself on my last day. Each night, I would interview Gary after supper. It was beautiful there; it was cold, but it was also heartwarming to be around this great and loving man for a whole week.

As rough and tumble as he was—military veteran, construction worker, foster child, north woods trapper—he was as nice a person as I have ever met. Over the last 15 years, and nearly 100 Gary Paulsen books, Gary would take me out on his sailboat from Ventura, California; have me as a guest at his remote, one-man operation ranch in the mountains of New Mexico; hang out with my students at various educational conferences where he was the featured author; and meet me for dinner in Gila Bend, Arizona, the point where he would cross from Interstate 8 to Interstate 10 and spend the night.

I could depend on getting a phone call from Gary once a month: “Jim, I’ll be in Gila Bend in two hours on my way from the boat to the ranch [or from the ranch to the boat]. Can ya come for dinner?” I would drive to Gila Bend on what is affectionately known as “Dead Cow Road,” across the Gila River Native American Nation (where wild horses still live), across the Sonoran Desert, past the abandoned WWII Japanese internment camp, and finally arrive at Little Italy Restaurant in Gila Bend. Gary would order spaghetti and meatballs, without fail, and the people in the res-

taurant would whisper to each other and make calls on their cell phones; then people would show up with their kids and books written by their favorite author, Gary Paulsen. Gary would sign books, as many books as it took, sometimes while his spaghetti got cold, but he never said “no.”

He loved kids, perhaps because his own childhood had been so hard. If you’re ever in Gila Bend, Arizona, I recommend (and Gary would, too), you go to Little Italy Restaurant. Try the spaghetti and meatballs in honor of one of the greatest children’s authors the world has ever known. At some point, take a look at the pictures of celebrity guests on the wall, find the biggest picture there—the one of Prince Harry from when he was doing his desert helicopter training in the Arizona desert—and look just below it. You will find a picture of Gary, signature flannel shirt and suspenders, flanked by a room full of smiling kids holding up their signed Gary Paulsen books for the camera. I imagine some of them are rereading those book this week.

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