

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Woodsong

by  
Gary Paulsen

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### Book Information

Gary Paulsen, Woodsong  
Quiz Number: 6950  
Puffin, 1991  
ISBN 0-14-034905-7; LCCN  
132 Pages  
Book Level: 5.6  
Interest Level: MG

This story features dogsledding adventures, capped by the story of the author's first Iditarod.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Margaret A. Edwards Award; SLJ Best Book; Spur Award/Finalist

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Animals, Dogs; Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Countries/Regions, Arctic; Sports/Recreation, Contests/Games; Sports/Recreation, Travel

### Main Characters

Columbia one of the original sled dogs, whose creation of a joke changed the author's attitude about hunting and trapping

Cookie a lead dog who led a strike when Paulsen refused to follow her

Gary Paulsen the author, who relates his experiences learning about dog sledding and running the Iditarod

Hawk the banty hen responsible for terrorizing the yard while protecting her chicks and fourteen grouse chicks she had fostered

Obeah the original lead dog, who brought the team back to Paulsen after he fell off the sled and was injured

Scarhead a large bear that did not kill Paulsen when provoked

Storm one of the original sled dogs, who seemed to have a sense of humor, used a stick as a means of communication, and was described as an honest dog

Wilson the lead dog during most of the Iditarod race

### Vocabulary

**banty** a species of very small chicken known to be fiercely protective of their young

**brush wolf** the northern term for coyote; smaller and more common than wolves, and not a protected species

**hallucination** an illusion created by the mind; a sensory experience that does not exist outside the mind, like a dream during a waking state

**the Iditarod** a race from Anchorage to Nome recognized as the most demanding of dogsled races and covering approximately 900 miles of Arctic terrain

### Synopsis

*Woodsong* by Gary Paulsen was written as a series of selections from the author's experiences in the north woods of Minnesota, which culminate in his participation in the Iditarod. Introduced to dogsledding in his early forties, Paulsen shares events which enlightened him about the dogs and their amazing abilities and about the unyielding character of winter in the north woods.

Through the first eight chapters, Paulsen uses specific experiences to explain how he came to the conclusions that hunting and trapping are not right; that dogs could express human feelings through vocalization, eye contact and body language; and "man is just another animal in the woods, no more, no less."

The last third of the book is a day-by-day summary of incidents, observations and crises Paulsen experiences while participating in the Alaskan Iditarod race. Intense cold, lack of sleep, and nutritional deficiencies result in periods of hallucination, compounding the difficulty of an already challenging adventure. Amazingly, one of the hallucinations, that of a helpful Eskimo man, appears to lead Paulsen back to the trail he had lost and saves his life for a second time.

As Nome and the finish come into view, Paulsen momentarily does not want to finish the run. He has

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been so completely engaged that he cannot imagine completing the adventure. At several points along the trail, he remarks that the beauty of the harsh landscape compensates for its unforgiving nature.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Paulsen argued that he could identify human feelings expressed by his dogs and other animals through their behavior. How did he support this argument?

*He described Storm's "joke" on Olaf and "jokes" Storm played on him. He cited Cookie's refusal to move the team after he had challenged her leadership. He described Hawk's unrelenting protection of the chicks. He discussed Scarhead's decision not to attack him.*

#### Literary Analysis

Consider the landscape/environment as an important character in Paulsen's narrative. In what different ways does this "character" influence and interact with the action of the story?

*It is the antagonist presenting the challenges. Its beauty provides motivation while its power and indifference provide danger. It may be considered symbolic of a supreme being.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

What was the dominant motivation driving Paulsen to race in the Iditarod? Did his goals change during the course of the experience? How?

*He ran it for the experience. He thought he might win. It was an excuse to run the dogs.*

#### Constructing Meaning

How did the appearance of the Eskimo hallucination fit into the "man against nature" theme? Considering that this story is supposed to be true, what do you think happened?

*The Eskimo was Paulsen's vision of a supreme being. Paulsen went into shock and saved himself without remembering. The dogs simply took over and saved themselves and Paulsen while he hallucinated.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The wilderness of northern Minnesota and Alaska provides the difficulties and danger that Paulsen encounters in his adventures. Imagine that you are "nature" or the wilderness watching Paulsen as he runs the Iditarod race with his dogs. Describe one of the days during the race from nature's point of view.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Paulsen used two different styles to tell his story. First, he provided personal descriptions of experiences with his dogs, as well as other wild and domestic animals. Secondly, he wrote a detailed chronological account, journal style, to tell of his adventures while running the Iditarod race. Discuss with the students how these two styles serve different functions in storytelling. Ask the students to give examples from the story to support their comments.

**Comparing and Contrasting** In the early part of Paulsen's adventure, he described a scene in which a deer was chased down and killed by wolves. He observed that, "Wolves do not know they are wolves." At other moments he observed: fear in his dogs when they encountered a glowing stump; decision making by Scarhead the bear when it threatened Paulsen; humor and danger expressed by the dogs. Have the class discuss differences and similarities between humans and animals with reference to incidents in Paulsen's tale.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Paulsen developed "personalities" for a number of the

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animals described in his story, but none more succinctly and clearly than the banty hen Hawk. In this context, have the students develop a personality for an animal of their choice, either one they know or one they imagine. Base the personification on observed behaviors or behaviors that their particular species is known to exhibit.