

1996/June GARY PAULSEN - Publishing News

It's not often, when you sit down to interview someone, that before you've even asked a question they say "Let's go!" and don't stop talking wildly fascinating stuff for twenty minutes. But then Gary Paulsen is not your ordinary interviewee. He's the author of over 150 books, has sold more than 12 million copies and currently has six TV and film deals; on his last American tour he signed 35,000 copies of his latest novel *Hatchet: Winter*.

By anyone's standards, Paulsen is an extraordinary character. His life and times, which he's so open about, in the way only Americans seem to be able to get away with - and without sounding pretentious or maudlin - reads like a movie plot: rescued from an abused childhood and alcoholic parents by a chance meeting with a librarian that introduced him to the world of books, Paulsen went on eventually to become a best-selling author.

It's not that simple of course, nothing ever is, and Paulsen bears the scars of his journey - both mental and physical - with pride. He tells you everything in a deceptively soft accent, reminiscent of Garrison Keillor, but with a much more evident sense of humour. He was 13 when he met the librarian and four years later he finally escaped the violent confines of his north Minnesota tenement home by forging his parents' signatures and joining the Army. There he trained to be an electronics engineer.

The writing thing didn't happen until he dumped his electronics career and hit Hollywood. "I knew I wanted to be a writer," he says, "I can't explain it, but I was looking for the engine that drove me - I think it's something primitive - and there were writers in Hollywood." He stayed in LA for 11¹/₂ months, proof-reading by day and writing by night, and then left when the town got too much for him.

Making for the wilds of Minnesota, he settled down, wrote his first two books and sold them. "I thought I'd made it," says Paulsen, "and then I didn't sell another word for six years!" America is a country where it can seem that a significant proportion of the population is on the move, continually in search of a better place to live, and Paulsen was no exception: from Minnesota he went south to New Mexico and then back

north again, broke after a publishing deal went bad, and now with a family in tow.

It was in the cold wastes of the backwoods that Paulsen began working with a dog team as a trapper - a State law declaring it illegal to use powered vehicles - and it was here that he found out about the Iditarod (Native American for 'a distant place'). The race, all 17 days, 14 hours and 20 minutes of it, was, as the book he wrote about the experience, *Winterdance*, says, a fine madness; but during it he met a young Inuit boy and the result of that meeting was *Dogsong*.

Dogsong became his first Newbery Honor book. "Suddenly I went from starving writer to not-starving writer," says Paulsen. "Almost overnight I started getting royalty cheques, and when the first one arrived, for \$52,000, I thought someone had made a mistake." The change in his circumstances has been, he says, apologising for using such a clichéd word, awesome. "It's like being in someone else's life - I'm just a street writer, this kind of thing doesn't happen to people like me."

Street writer maybe, but Paulsen has a frighteningly tenacious nature, driven by a fear of ignorance. "I observed the way wolves hunt," he says. "They watch, learn and listen, and I thought I would try to do that, and once I'd started I became ravenous - and still am." Believe it, because this man wrote and published 27 books last year.

Writing, says Paulsen, is a weird job. "It doesn't have the reality of laying bricks to build a house," he states about a career that has encompassed non-fiction, self-help, adult novels, children's books and westerns - the latter, he says, can be likened to a 50,000 word haiku "a disciplined beauty".

It might be a weird job, but writing has gained Paulsen a huge following. "I get somewhere between 250 and 400 letters a day," he tells me, "and I answer them all, I feel obligated to do that - kids have been very good to me." This obligation goes much further than mere letter answering. If Paulsen feels a child is in danger of abuse, and many in that situation do write to him because they know he'll understand, he personally contacts the relevant authorities to get them the right kind of help.

The man at the table next to me is something of an anomaly: the hard-living, grizzled exterior hiding a sensitive, driven character committed to making the next generation better than this one. He knows children want entertainment from books and has nothing against series fiction - he breaks into his trademark giggle when he tells me RL Stine has let him know that his own kids read Paulsen and not *Point Horror*.