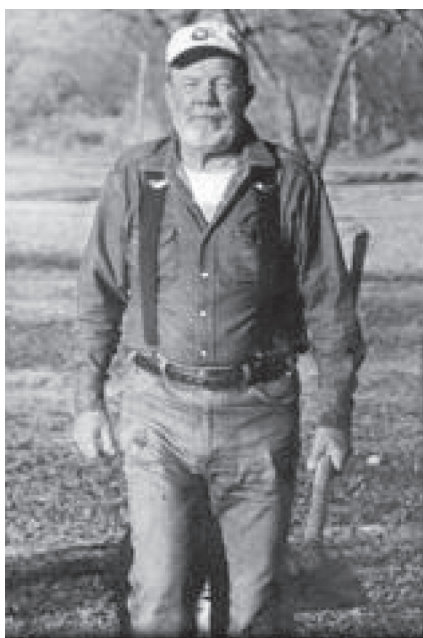


## Singlehanding: An Interview with Gary Paulsen

**P**opular young adult author Gary Paulsen, on hand as a keynote speaker for the 2003 ALAN Workshop in San Francisco, spent an extended period of time with the co-editors of *The ALAN Review* to visit about his dogs, his boat, his writing, and his own many adventures—not necessarily in that order. A master storyteller who lures every reader into his web, from the reluctant to the sophisticated, Paulsen conducts an interview in much the same way as he writes his books. We were spell-bound as we listened to a true giant in young adult literature share his tales of wonder.



**TAR:** How *Angel Peterson Got His Name* really brought back a lot of memories. What is this fascination that teenage boys have with army surplus stores?

**GP:** I don't know. At that time, it was the only place we could find half the gear that we needed to kill ourselves. And a lot of it was left over from the second World War, so you could buy, like, an airplane for three dollars or whatever. I mean, it was just crazy. I literally had a canteen cup that had bullet holes through it. Some poor guy got whacked. I had lots of stuff like that. You could get it for a dime.

**TAR:** You have said, "If I can get to the woods, I'm OK. I can make it." And by that, I think you mean you can survive on your skills as a woodsman. But I think you mean more than that, too. Do the woods mean something more to you than just a place where you can find food and shelter?

**GP:** It's away from the complications of humans. Humans are the big thing that cause damage in life—in war, or whatever—and if I can get away from that and into a wilderness situation, I'm OK. You can more or less live on your own merit.

**TAR:** In your keynote address, right after you described the demise of your wife's cat, you had an image in there—you talked about the thin ice and when you went down, and when you talked about that, I was thinking about my students, but a lot of them—they're on thin ice, too, in terms of wanting to turn to any kind of literature whatsoever.

**GP:** Well, the concept of survival—they love *Hatchet* and books like it because so many of them are trying to survive in almost impossible situations—the inner city, for example. It's very difficult to get through those kinds of things. And as readers they

relate to the concept of Brian surviving, or a dog saving you suddenly from drowning.

**TAR:** A lot of my kids—especially reluctant readers—become very snobbish and they say, “I only read Gary Paulsen books.” Then they say, “I want some more Gary Paulsen books, or I’m not reading.” So in writing about the survival issue, you’ve helped a lot of kids hang on and find some stories out there.

**GP:** Well, I was in the same position. My folks were drunks, and I had a rough childhood—really rough—in fact, rougher than I thought about. At one time, I was under the kitchen table, and my mother was trying to kill me with a butcher knife. And there was no machinery then to help—no foster home, no welfare, there was no attempt to help kids in troubled homes. I would go to the woods, and I would hide. And I would trap or fish. Or I would go to uncles’ farms. All over northern Minnesota were people I was related to, and they were glad to have me. It was free labor, and I would live on their farms. And a lot of that I write about now, too, of course, involves working on a farm as a teen. But I am lucky I survived.

**TAR:** Along those lines, *Clabbered Dirt* may be the best book out there expressing the relationship between people who work the land and the beauty and spirit of the land. Is that relationship between people and the earth important? And why?

**GP:** It’s all we have. Man is a mess—I mean the species. As a species, we’re not succeeding; we’re failing. Two examples: If you have dandelions in your yard and you mow your yard one time, they never come up over the mower blade again. They’ll be this high, but you cut them, and they go, “Whoa.” We haven’t learned that yet. Humans get in that mower blade over and over and over again. The other thing is we think we’re very successful, and in a one-acre area of suburbia, there are about 150 people living there. There are sixty thousand spiders in the same acre, and we think we’re the one, you know. Why? They’re raising families, having children, they’re feeding them, they’re retiring or whatever—they’re doing fine, the spiders that are there. We’re struggling just to

get the house payments done, and they’re just doing their thing. I think nature is elegant in that sense—it shows you how things can be right, and the human species shows you how to do it wrong.

**TAR:** Jack London went to the north woods and to the sea to find the edge of life. You’ve run the Iditarod twice and seen Fiji from the sea. How do those two extreme opposites—sailing and the Iditarod—compare for you?

**GP:** The maximum expression of running dogs is the Iditarod. You enter a state of primitive exaltation, and you never return. You’re never normal again. In fact, I just bought twenty-three dogs last week, and I’m going to go run it again. I’ve just picked up a new team. You become a cave man. You go back thirty thousand years. You can get some of that by having pets, dogs or whatever, but it’s not the same as when that dance comes, when they’re out in front of you.

London didn’t know anything about dogs—not a clue. He never ran dogs. He was drunk all the time. He talked to a lot of dog mushers on the Yukon. I stayed in his cabin once when I took a Harley to Alaska and back. I stayed in his cabin and wrote a forward—a new forward for his book, *Call of the Wild*. But, anyway, he was very tough and very into it and did go to Alaska but was not part of that dance. He was just a prospector, a drunk, a very rich writer—he made a lot of money writing. And when he sailed, he was drunk the whole time. He sailed to the South Pacific, or really, he got as far as Hawaii.

In sailing, I *single-hand*, and I want to do the Horn. The Horn is the maximum expression of sailing, the way the Iditarod is the maximum expression of running dogs. It’s not to write about it; it’s to experience the maximum thing. It’s like when I write. I don’t just write; I *write!* Jeez, it’s too hard—five books in one year I mean, I’m insane. I write the same way I run Iditarods—eighteen hours a day, I just work all the time and do research all the time. And when I’m sailing, I write. I wrote eight pages of *Hatchet* during the second Iditarod—during the race. I sat and wrote longhand at night while the dogs were sleeping. I

couldn't really read it. I was exhausted, but I did write. I write that way. I try to do the maximum expression of writing, the way I do the Iditarod or try to sail the Horn. I haven't sailed the Horn yet, but I'm working on it. The boat is in Hawaii now. I just took it to Hawaii in April, so it'll be ready to go.

**TAR:** Boys out in the country, they'll still pee on that electric wire?

**GP:** Yeah, I get letters: "You know, when I peed on it," they say. God love 'em. Why do they do it? I don't know! Maybe they think it's funny! I had a boy once tell me about the time he lit his hair on fire just to see what the hell it was like. And he wasn't a troubled child; he didn't have any emotional difficulty. He was just curious; he took the lighter fluid and went poof! And he said it hurt.

I have a scar here [pointing at his leg]. When I was a kid, I had a hunting knife, and somebody gave me a walnut. I put the walnut here [on his leg], I swear to God, and I went like that [stabbing at his leg]. It went through and stuck in the bone. And this kid sitting next to me said, "You've got a knife stuck in your leg." I'm standing there, it hurt like hell; it was in the bone! I said, "Yeah," he said, "Why did you do that?" I said, "I had to open the walnut."

But boys do that. Boys still pee on fences. They're always going to. God love 'em.

**TAR:** You place people in challenging situations, often in nature, and then you let them struggle. Why choose nature? Is nature fair or kind or heartless?

**GP:** All of those things. Man proposes; nature disposes. Sharks never got the memo about how we're superior. They just don't know. And if we're there, they eat us. The bear's the same way. Most bears will kill you, I mean, if they get a chance, they'll kill you. Actually, they don't kill you; they eat you alive. Only snakes and cats kill before they eat, and bears and wolves eat alive. ... it's a horrible death, but nature doesn't see the horror of it; that's just the way nature is. Sharks are the same thing—they just hit, you know. They're not trying to be humane; they're trying to fill their guts. I don't like

the horror of that, but I like the concept of man proposes, nature disposes. We all die to a predator, whether it's a virus or [something else]. Very few people just literally die because their body wears out. They die because their immune system goes down, and a predator gets them. Boom. You slow down a little going to the water hole, and boom, you're gone. You limp a little, boom. You eat too much lard (I have heart disease), boom. There's always a predator waiting.

**TAR:** In your book *The Rifle* you establish a different tone than in many of your other books. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**GP:** It's interesting, the mail I get on that. The gun nuts who read it like it at first, and then don't like it because of what happens at the end. And the people who are anti-gun read it and don't like the first part, but then kind of like it because I show what happens. It's kind of true. The early part of it is a true story about the rifle, and I had a friend whose son was killed by an accidental shooting—not with the same rifle.

I wanted to show that at one time rifles and weapons were extremely important to what we are—to the country, and that has become warped—insanely warped, and now they're like a disease. Weapons are just an epidemic—kids shooting people. I have weapons, and I'm sitting here because I've been able to use a weapon to protect myself, killing moose and bear when they attack me. But I never had to shoot a person. I was in the army, but I didn't get into a war situation. I've never had to actually use a weapon to defend myself against a person, but I have with bear and moose, and I'm really glad I had a weapon. But they're horrible. People do not understand that firearms are not toys; they're weapons—they are for killing.

Also, hunting is a very powerful experience for young boys. I always say that no man should hunt after he's about sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—somewhere in there it should become boring. The men who still hunt when they're older stopped their education about fourteen, and they never grew out of that. They still think like a fourteen-year-old, and they like hunting. I'll kill a deer if

I'm hungry, but it's not an achievement. [Expletive], you take a high-powered rifle that will stop a Volkswagen, and you knock forty pounds of meat off its feet, that's not manhood; that's a thing that kids do—boys, especially—mostly boys, but you should grow out of it.

**TAR:** A student teacher we observed in a tough, inner-city school in the Kansas City area started class every day reading just a little bit of *Soldier's Heart*. And some of these kids—who were members of gangs—wouldn't miss the start of the class because they wanted to get the next installment. But this is the Civil War. A north woodsman from Minnesota writes a Civil War story, and gang members in a tough urban school won't miss this class. Why is that?

**GP:** I think because it's true. It's a true story. Charley Goddard. That was really his name. He was really fifteen. In fact, yesterday [during the ALAN workshop last fall] a woman came to the booth where I was signing and said she'd found his grave. He died of stress disorders when he was only twenty or twenty-two. And all of those things in *Soldier's Heart* actually happened to him. And I think that, again, that crosses to where young people understand, *especially* if they're in a place where they're in a firefight themselves. Some of these kids today are literally in combat zones, and they have to deal with the potential of being shot by gang-bangers. They relate to that aspect of it. Charley's mother wrote every month and told him to desert—leave the army. She was terrified.

**TAR:** In *Dog Team*, this beautifully simple picture book, you run the dogs at night, and the sounds and the sights and the feel are hard to describe. You obviously love it. Most people would be digging deep under the quilts on a night like that. But not you.

**GP:** Well, it's not about accomplishing something against the weather; it's about doing this beautiful thing. If the weather gets in your way, you try to work around it, but it isn't about braving the elements. It's about that damn dance. That's why I'm going back. I'm going up to Idaho day after

tomorrow to see the twenty-three dogs I bought last week. I'm going to start training them for the Iditarod. I can't not run dogs, the [same] way I can't not write. It's just so elegant and beautiful.

Sailing can be the same, except during some storms when it can get pretty scary. I'm not out there to die, you know, and I'm not running dogs to prove anything except to see that dance again. Last January, I went up to Spokane—this is how it all started again—I got knocked off because of my heart, and my heart kind of came back around with diet stuff. But last January I went up to Spokane, and the Shriners' Hospital there has a thing called the *Ikidarod*; mushers from the whole country bring their dogs and give rides to the kids in the hospital. I was like a celebrity, and I would help each kid into the sled and sometimes tie them down—a lot of them were quadriplegics. Then they would go three or four miles through the woods with volunteers every fifty feet to help. It's just a wonderful thing, and I'm going again this year.

But, anyway, when it was all over, after three days, we all cried and cried—you know how you do, and this guy who had Alaskan dogs came up to me and said, "Do you want to take a run?" So I took his team and I just left. I was gone. I went thirty or forty miles.

A couple of months ago I started to put a sled team together. When the word got out it was me, all the dogs that should have been \$400 were suddenly \$3,000. I just couldn't afford it. I offered to lease a team from a guy, and he started out at \$18,000, and when he heard it was me, it went to \$50,000 for one year. And I said, oh, come on! So I quit trying. What happened next was that a friend of mine began buying dogs as if they were for her. She knew all these dog mushers who tried to help her because she's young—but they're really mine; I'm buying all these dogs.

**TAR:** That's that survival mentality.

**GP:** That's it. I went under the radar. I got twenty-three dogs, though.

**TAR:** Seeing the dogs become one as they move through the countryside must be incredible.

**GP:** They're amazing. They're absolutely amazing.

**TAR:** You were telling some good stories yesterday, including favorite dog stories, such as the one about a lead dog named Cookie, who kept you from drowning?

**GP:** Cookie—she was a dear friend and saved my life literally. I talked about it yesterday, I think, about going through the ice. That happened twice. I've got her photo in my wallet. She could read ice, and I trusted my life to her. If her tail went up in a question mark, it meant she wasn't sure, and she was trying to get light, and she would look for a crack. As soon as her tail went down, she was positive and she'd go. You'd just watch that tail. You can see ice move; sea ice, especially, is flexy. It can be three or four feet thick, but it'll crack and move and there's just [open] sea water. The dogs are across, and all of a sudden you've got five foot of water wide, and you've got to slide over it. She knew how to find her way around those leads [cracks].

**TAR:** And in the Iditarod, you've got to cut across quite a bit of water, don't you?

**GP:** Seventy five miles of open ice—sea ice; everything in you puckers up. You suddenly wish you weighed eight pounds. The dogs are spread out, and you've got eighty feet of dogs out there, and you're watching the front end to see if it moves with them. If it gets really bad, you lay down in the back of the sled and get your weight distributed.

**TAR:** A lot of people with your start in life would be broken down, in prison, or dead by now. But you seem to be just finding your stride and accelerating. What saved your life and sent you down the road you took?

**GP:** I had enormous luck. A big, dumb red-necked cop took me in for two years. I couldn't stay in his house, and every night at eight o'clock he'd run watch. I'd move in the back of the patrol car, and I'd sleep from eight to four in the morning while he drove around, and then we'd go hunting. We'd shine spotlights—jackrabbits and fox—and he'd let

me have half the money. We'd use ammo from the police department to shoot them.

His name was Nuts Meyers, and he lived up to it. For two years, he kept me out of trouble. He beat the hell out of me a few times. I tried to break into a garage once and steal some skis, and he caught me and just nailed me. We became friends. Later, another kid shot him and killed him. I did a book about it—*Winterkill*.

Then in the army a drill sergeant kind of took me in. I mean, he really, physically, straightened me out. It took him three or four days, something like that.

**TAR:** Sounds like you were a hard case to straighten out.

**GP:** Yeah, I was hard, but he was harder. You get those old infantry sergeants and they operate almost like doctors. It's not about proving macho stuff. It's just clinically I'm going to beat the tar out of you, and when you get up, you're going to be a new man. And then we're going to have a beer or talk and have coffee, and we're not going to be angry. And if you try it again, OK, kawhoomp! Down you go again. That's what they do.

These guys are just tough. He clinically brought me down. He said, "Are you done?" And I'd say, "Nope." He'd help me up and, boom, down I'd go again. [Many recruits were] worried about the kick of a rifle. At that time it was an M1, which has a lot of kick. He would hold a rifle up to his mouth and fire eight rounds like this and use his mouth as a recoil, and not a mark on him. I mean, number one, the rifle is ten pounds, and he's holding it like a pistol.

**TAR:** Has Thief River Falls in northern Minnesota changed much over the years, and do you have any hopes or fears for northern Minnesota?

**GP:** It hasn't changed much—a lot more farms. A lot of the woods have been cleared. I don't have any more fear for them than I do for species in general. We're just making mistakes as a species. For example, I've been sailing the Pacific for nine years. China is building five hundred fleet-sized factory boats; they're going to sweep the Pacific. It'll be a



dead sea in five years. They're killing everything—dolphins, whales, the whole works. They're taking it all. Nobody can stop that, unless you want a war, and that's just not going to happen. So they will wipe it out. And that's wrong—not just morally wrong, but it's stupid, because then it's gone, and it'll take centuries to come back, if it comes back. And the food, meantime, is gone, so it's just dumb. We're doing dumb stuff like that, too.

**TAR:** “Meeting the Challenge” is the theme for our upcoming issue, and this workshop’s theme has been “Striking It Rich.” These seem to fit you so obviously. What do you see as the greatest challenge that you’ve met?

**GP:** There are two ways to be rich—one is to make more, and the other is to desire less. And I lost everything to crooked publishers early on and wound up flat broke and with judgments against me and had no way to make it, [but I] was richer than I am now in the sense that I went back to the woods. I set up a trap line, I had four gardens, I made my own ketchup—everything. I had goats. And I had more quality in my life than I have now. Literally.

I’m very successful now, as far as selling books goes, but I don’t think of myself as wealthy at all. I mean, there are people around me that are spending a lot of money [that I have made]. I don’t see that as success. If a book’s done, it’s done. What’s the next book? What’s the next idea that I’m working on? Right now, I’m working on one called *The Amazing Life of Birds: Or the Puberty Journal of Howard Leach*. It’s humor, as you’ve probably guessed, and dirty, so we’ll have to see what happens.

**TAR:** One middle-school student wanted to know your technique for describing everything so well.

**GP:** I study really hard—writing. I still study writing. Hemingway was writing *A Movable Feast*, which was about his early days—about writing, actually. He’s talking about F. Scott Fitzgerald, and he says that when Fitzgerald lost it, his talent had been like the dust on a butterfly’s wings. And when the dust was gone, he kept beating his wings, and he

couldn’t understand why he couldn’t fly. I thought, God! Hemingway said that! Man, he could write! Describing Fitzgerald’s talent like that is just beautiful.

I learned a lot from studying things like that—just the way people have written. I mean, at one point, I was reading three books a day for about six years—and some books, many times. Patrick O’Brien, for example, I read all of his stuff at least four times. I study those books again and again—the nuances and the use of the language—the mastery of the language. He’s incredible—an incredible writer.

**TAR:** *Dog Team* is one that a lot of teachers read out loud just for the fluency of it—they’ll read it even at the high school level.

**GP:** Well, if it works, it works. If an idea will make a good sentence, it will also make a good paragraph, a good short story, a good novel, a good film, whatever. The same idea will work for all those things. It doesn’t have to be a big, sweeping Lawrence of Arabia type of thing. It can be just a simple, clean thing. Probably the best writing ever done was by Hemingway and several other writers—I think it was in North Africa. During a drunken discussion, somebody said that they should write the best and shortest story they could write. They all had stories.

Hemingway came up with six words: “For sale: Baby shoes. Never used.” Jesus. I mean, come on. Isn’t that great? That’s all there is. Six words. There’s a book, there’s a movie, there’s a short story, there’s a poem—anything you want to do with those six words, you can do it. It’s just amazing what you can do with your words. And if it doesn’t work, you can beat it to death with a club, and it won’t work. I mean, I’ve written books that I just hated—books on home repair.

**TAR:** Teachers often use your novels in the classroom. From the author’s point of view, how would you like to see them used?

**GP:** The only thing that kind of [bothers] me is the way they’re used as mandatory for study. A lot of schools are using *Hatchet* that way now. They have

a mandatory reading of *Hatchet* and mandatory discussion groups and they grade the readers of the book. And I think that's probably a mistake sometimes because it takes away the joy the child might have just discovering the book itself.

And I'm not talking about just my books. I mean, all books are like that. The worst I've ever seen was in Winnipeg, Canada. Years ago, I went up there to talk at a school. And, before I got up, the principal of the school came up to me. He said, "We teach the children that committees write the book." And I said, "Well, they don't." He said, "Yeah, but we teach them that, and we want you to teach them that, too. We want you to tell them that the committees sit around a table, four or five editors and you write the books together." And I said, "Well, I don't." And he said, "Well, you tell them that." I said, "Okay." And I got up and fired the mike up, and I said, "These people want me to lie to you and tell you that committees write books. That's all BS." I said, "I write my own books, and sometimes they're published and sometimes they're not." And the guy came around and pulled the plug, as I kept saying, "They're lying to you! They're lying to you!" They never paid me. But it's true, and it's wrong to do that.

**An update from the desk of Gary Paulsen's agent, Jennifer Flannery:**

*Gary has just relocated his kennel of two dozen dogs from Idaho to Minnesota, his old stomping ground where he knows the sled trails and where to get fresh beef hearts for the dogs. Not only is he preparing to run the 2005 Iditarod, but he's currently working on six new books:*

1. *The Amazing Life of Birds* (or) *The Puberty Journal of Duane Homer Leech*

A boy discovers life, love, joy, sadness, and sex—all at once—as his loving but bumbling father tries to help him through puberty.

2. *The Sky Child*

A Native boy living in an abusive, molested situation in a Northern village moves his spirit out of the village into the sky when he learns that the Northern Lights, which he calls SKYFIRE, are really the souls/spirits of abused and troubled and/or stillborn children.

3. *Jojo the Dog-faced Girl*

Lonely girl who thinks she's ugly is befriended by a stray dog that starts by following her and then later begins to lead her into a new way of seeing beauty in the world and herself.

4. *The Kennel*

Come with me, now, this last time, this final time, back into the world of sled dogs. I have learned...have learned that there is so much I do not know yet and wish to know now, a book, a dance of discovery with Elmira and Tippy and Ghost and Buckshot and Norman and thirty other, new, close, dear friends...once more into the diamond.

5. *The Day They Hang the Children*

A classic mystery about a street boy in Victorian/Dickensian London who must solve a mystery about who stole a silk handkerchief—which was a hanging offense—before he is executed for the crime. (Title comes from the fact that they had to hang children on a special day because of the need to readjust the gallows for the smaller bodies...)

6. *The Business* (or) *How I Started Mowing Lawns And Earned A Million Dollars*

Boy starts a lawn care business that gets wonderfully out of hand to the point where he has two hundred adult employees, offices with an accountant and tax problems.

Then he runs into the Mob.