



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 6-8

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Dog Song

Gary Paulsen

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Dogsong

Gary Paulsen

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Analysis, research,
visualization

Literary Elements

Description, story elements

Comprehension

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Context clues, word
mapping, classification

Writing

Narrative

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, personal songs

Teacher Information

Gary Paulsen was born in 1939 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He never saw his father, a career Army officer, until he was seven years old. His mother worked long hours in a munitions plant, so Gary was raised by his grandmother and his aunts. During his school years, he led the transient life of an “Army brat.” He was shy, unathletic, and did poorly in his studies. His father drank too much, and Paulsen’s home life was miserable. His “safety nets” were his grandmother, his aunts, and a certain librarian who offered him his own card and opened up the world of books for him—a welcome escape from an unhappy life.

He worked at various times as a field engineer, teacher, editor, actor, farmer, rancher, truck driver, singer, sailor, and trapper. He has always come back to writing, saying “it’s all there is.” After a lawsuit over *Winterkill*, Paulsen quit writing. He lived in northern Minnesota and trapped for the state predator control program, walking or skiing the 60-mile trapline. He and his wife were so poor they didn’t even own a car, so when a friend offered to give him his four-dog sled team, Paulsen accepted. He used them to check the trapline, but one time stayed out for seven days, living off the land, and developing an almost mystical bonding with his dogs. The experience changed his life. The first thing he did was pull all his traps, vowing never to kill anything again. Soon after, he ran the Iditarod—a 1,049-mile dogsled race across Alaska. He was financed by the publisher of Bradbury Press, who wanted to see Paulsen resume his writing career. During the Iditarod run, Paulsen concluded that his dogs were far more intelligent than most people. He realized how important it is for humans to live in harmony with nature. And he began writing his best books.

Dancing Carl (1983) and *Tracker* (1984) were selected by the ALA as Best Young Adult Books. *Dogsong* (1986), *Hatchet* (1988), and *The Winter Room* (1990) were all Newbery Honor winners. *Dogsong* was also chosen as one of the Child Study Association’s Children’s Books of the Year for 1986.

Paulsen wrote *Dogsong* while he was field training his dogs for another Iditarod run. It was written in longhand in a notebook as he sat by the campfire. The temperature was often twenty below zero. *Dogsong* is about a 14-year-old Eskimo boy who struggles to find himself in a long run across the Arctic with the village’s only remaining dog team. The novel encompasses the themes of love, death, courage, and Man’s elemental relationship with nature.

Paulsen is an incredibly prolific writer who prefers writing for young people because “adults created the mess we are struggling to outlive.” He devotes much of his time to nuclear disarmament, feeling it is wrong for children to grow up in fear of their world blowing apart at any minute. Paulsen and his family live on a farm in Leonard, Minnesota. He often gives public readings in small towns in the area.

Source: *Something About the Author*, Vol. 54. Detroit: Gale Research Co.

Activity Sheet #1—*Dogsong*

Some of the unfamiliar words in *Dogsong* are not in most dictionaries, but they are everyday words to the people who live in the Arctic. The author gives you the context clues to help you understand what the words mean.

Turn to the page number listed for each word. Read a few sentences before the word and a few sentences after it. Write what you think the word means. Then check your dictionary to see if you can find the word and if your definition is correct. Mark words that don't appear with an "X."

WORD/PAGE NUMBER	MY DEFINITION	DICTIONARY DEFINITION OR "X" = NOT FOUND
ulu—8		
umiak—9		
muktuk—20		
ptarmigan—31		
mukluks—33		
gangline—34		
brushbow—35		
snowhook—35		
mushers—36		
gee—39		
haw—39		

Chapters 6–7, Pages 79–98

Chapter 6

Russel and the dogs run out, across the ice where everything is white and the land and sky are one. Russel finds the blue-purple light of day beautiful on the ice, and marvels at the dancing northern lights and the feel of the wind. He runs the dogs for eighteen hours, and when he tries to feed them they are too tired to eat. He fears he has pushed them too hard, and feels suddenly alone and afraid, so far away from land. He lets the dogs sleep, but is relieved when they wake and eat. Soon they find a caribou herd trapped in a kind of natural cul-de-sac. With the dogs' help, Russel kills four of them. A song about his arrows comes to him as he skins the deer and he and the dogs gorge themselves on the fresh meat. Later Russel lies between the warm deerskins, contentedly thinking that he is in "as much of a home as his people had had for thousands of years."

Chapter 7

This chapter recounts a dream Russel has as he sleeps on the ice with his dogs close to him. The time of the dream is the epoch of the woolly mammoth. Russel sees a happy family in a skin tent and watches as the man goes to hunt the mammoth, an extremely large elephant-like creature that could easily kill the man and his dogs if they don't kill it first. When the man's hood falls away from his face, Russel realizes that the man is an older version of himself. He watches the dogs and the man kill the mammoth and listens to the older Russel's exultant songs of luck and death and gratitude. Although he doesn't understand the words, he does understand the songs—in fact, feels them inside his soul.

Vocabulary

raggedly (83)
gullies (85)
marveling (85)
quiver (85)
confines (86)
hamstring (87)
lunged (94)
audible (95)
thrashed (96)
exultation (97)
gratitude (98)

Discussion Questions:

Chapter 6

1. By choosing descriptive phrases from pages 79–81, describe the area Russel went into after he left Oogruk. What was beautiful about it? (*the color of daylight, the shapes of the hills, the northern lights, the wind*)
2. Why was Russel worried when the dogs would not eat? (*He knew he was totally dependent on them.*) Do you think he mistreated them? (*various answers*)
3. What fears came to Russel? (*In the dark he was afraid of a ghost from the underworld coming up through the ice.*)
4. How did Russel use his own body to get warm as he traveled with the sled? (*He ran along behind the sled to generate body heat.*)
5. How did the dogs help in the caribou hunt? (*by tearing the animals' hamstrings and crippling them so that Russel could kill them*) Why are caribou also called "deer"? (*They are in the same family.*) Did it bother you to read about the hunt? (*various answers*)
6. What does "It was as much of a home as his people had had for thousands of years..." mean? (*Eskimos had lived off the land the way Russel was doing for centuries before the white man came.*)
7. What was the subject of the poem-song on page 87? (*the arrows*)
8. What two basic needs had Russel met for himself as Chapter 6 ended? (*food and protection from the cold*)

Chapter 7

9. In his dream, who did Russel see when he first looked into the skin tent? (*the children and the woman*) Who did he notice in the background? (*a man whose face was not visible*)
10. Why do you think Russel couldn't quite understand the language? (*This was a long time ago, when language was just starting to develop.*) Did he need to know what the woman was saying? (*no*) How could he tell how she felt? (*He could see the fear in her eyes and knew the man was going hunting.*)
11. What made the woman and the children especially beautiful to Russel? (*The children were "wonderfully fat" with grease on their faces and in their hair, and they laughed a lot. The woman smiled "the kind of smile all men look for in women."*)
12. How were the dogs in Russel's dream different from his own dogs? (*They were huge and gray, with wide heads and triangular jaws.*) What was so amazing about the way the man controlled them? (*He did it silently, with his mind.*)
13. Why were the woman, the man, and the dogs so fearful? (*The mammoth the man was hunting was huge and powerful and could easily kill the man and the dogs.*)
14. Why do you think the man in the dream turned out to be Russel himself? Why did the song seem so familiar to him? (*various answers*) Although he couldn't understand the words, the song was "inside his soul." Can you recall what his father told him about songs? (*"The song is always true."*)

Initiating Activity:

Check your school or public library for a book containing pictures of the now-extinct woolly mammoth, a Pleistocene elephant with long, curving tusks and a hairy body. Ask students if they can tell where the adjective "mammoth" came from. Anthropologists have placed humans in the Arctic area as long as 11,000 years ago. To give students a better concept of "11,000 years," point out that we now count time from only about 2,000 years ago.

Question for Writing:

Write a paragraph comparing the real events in Chapter 6 with the events of Russel's dream in Chapter 7. How are the chapters alike? How are they different?

Extension Activity: Sled Dogs

Find out more about sled dogs and sled dog racing by finding answers to these questions:

- What breeds or breed-mixes make the best sled dogs?
- Who was Balto?
- What is the Iditarod? Trace its route on a large map of Alaska.
- What states in the lower 48 have sled dog races and what are they called?
- Who are Leonhard Seppala, Arthur Walden, Libby Riddles and Susan Butcher?

Excellent resources for this activity include:

Racing Sled Dogs, by Michael Cooper (Clarion, 1988).

Sled Dogs, by Brigid Casey and Wendy Haugh. (Dodd, Mead, 1983).

For additional information, contact:

Alaska Sled Dog Racing Association P.O. Box 110569 Anchorage, AK 99511

B-r-r-r-r !

Directions: Work with a small group of your classmates. For at least three minutes, concentrate silently on what it feels like to be very, very cold. Then work together to fill in the chart below. Feel free to add more squares, circles, or whatever you want to as you toss around your thoughts like snowballs.

