



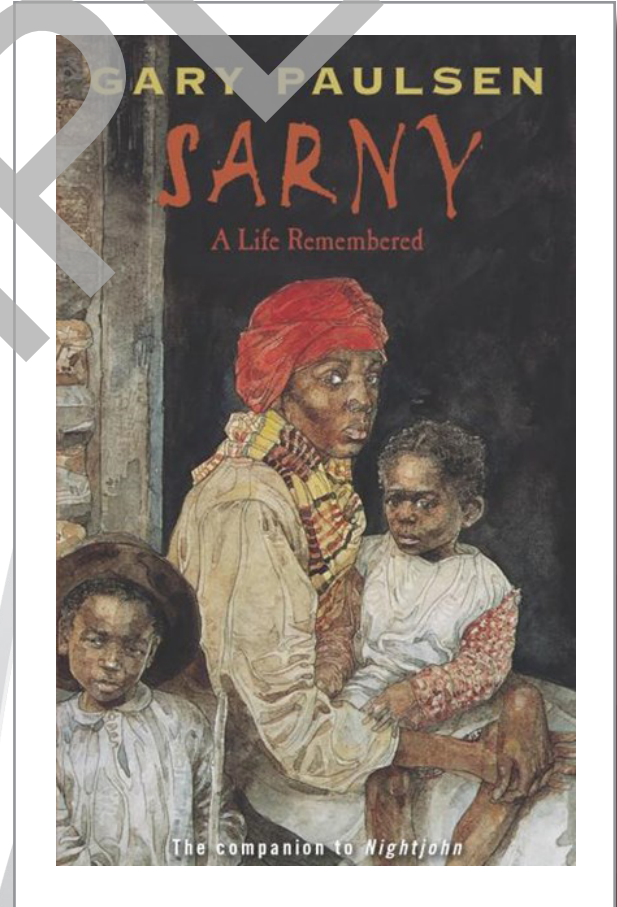
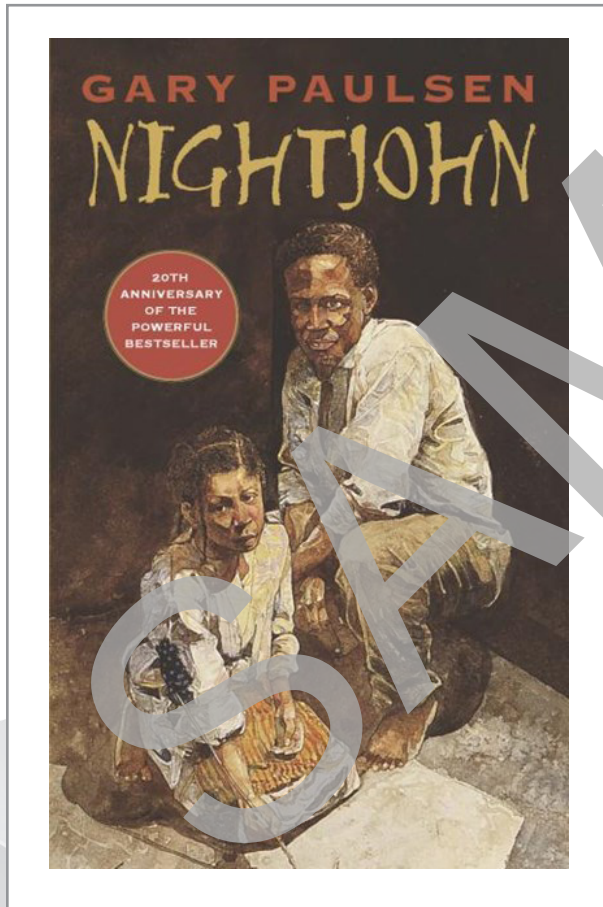
COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Nightjohn

Gary Paulsen

# Sarny

Gary Paulsen



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# Nightjohn

# Sarny

Gary Paulsen

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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## Skills and Strategies

### Comprehension

Creative thinking, identifying attributes, inferring, predicting, supporting judgments, concept map

### Literary Elements

Story mapping, characterization, setting, conflict, theme, author's purpose, cause and effect

### Vocabulary

Definitions, context clues, classifying, synonyms, target word maps

### Writing

Creative writing, personal narrative, letters and e-mail, dialogue, journalism, poetry, short story, biographical sketch, essay, report

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, debate, dramatizing, oral presentation

### Critical Thinking

Brainstorming, research, analysis, compare/contrast, fact/opinion, evaluation

### Across the Curriculum

Social Studies—culture, history, slave narratives, Civil War, maps, time lines, recipe, tracking dogs, current events, folk tale, museum exhibit; Science—natural pesticides, crops, Big Dipper; Math—computation, inflation, bargaining; Art—design, drawing, illustration, sand casting, slave quilt, models; Music—slave songs, “jazz funeral”

**Genre:** historical fiction

**Setting:** the South; 1850s to 1930s

**Point-of-View:** first person

**Themes:** slavery, racism, pride, sacrifice, courage, freedom, power of literacy

**Conflict:** person vs. society, person vs. person, person vs. self, person vs. nature

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** candid, conversational, informative, thought-provoking

## Summaries

In *Nightjohn*, 12-year-old Sarny begins her story and tells how she learned to read. The slaves on the Waller plantation are brutalized by their vicious owner. They know the punishment for reading is dismemberment. Sarny willingly takes that risk when Waller buys Nightjohn, a slave who escaped, but then returned to teach reading and writing—skills necessary for freedom and to record the cruelty of slavery. When Waller catches Sarny writing in the dirt, her mammy and Nightjohn suffer the punishment. Nightjohn escapes from the plantation, yet continues to teach Sarny and others in hidden pit schools, providing them with hope, knowledge, and the means for a better future.

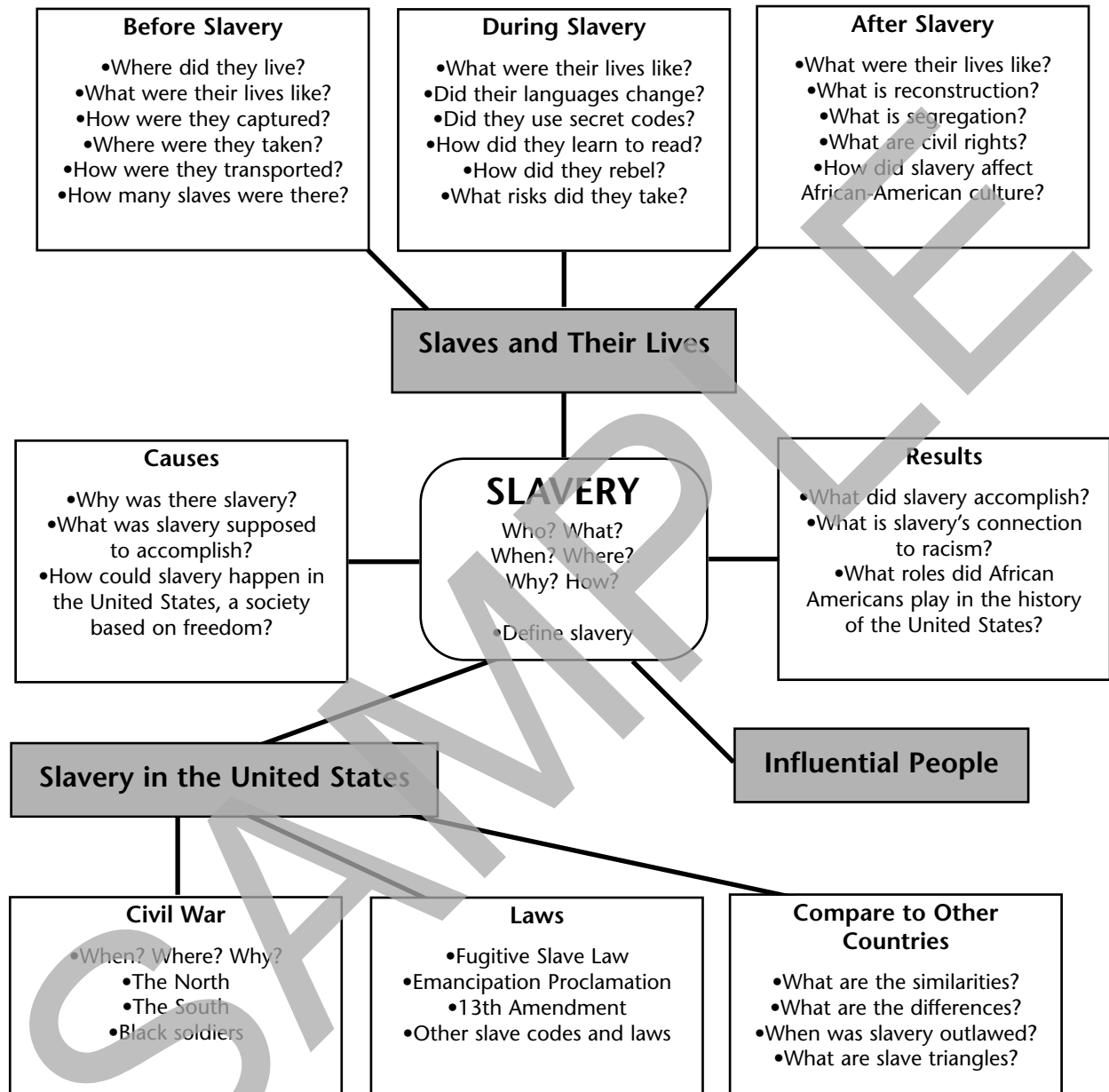
Ninety-four-year-old Sarny completes her story in *Sarny: A Life Remembered*. Waller sells Sarny's children just days before the arrival of Union soldiers. Newly freed, Sarny and her friend Lucy use their reading skills to discover the children were sold to a man in New Orleans. On the road South, Sarny and Lucy experience the horrors of war. They find employment with Miss Laura, a wealthy octoroon woman from New Orleans. Miss Laura helps reunite Sarny with her children and shows her a new world, a world with scented baths and books. Sarny remarries and opens a black school, only to lose both her husband and the school to the Ku Klux Klan. After Miss Laura's sudden death, Sarny spends the rest of her life in Texas, teaching reading and writing and showing others how to teach, just as Nightjohn showed her.

## About the Author

Gary Paulsen was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He and his wife now have homes in New Mexico and on a boat in the Pacific Ocean. Though Paulsen was an avid reader, he wasn't a dedicated student. At age 14, he ran away from home to join a carnival. A variety of mostly outdoor jobs and hobbies, such as two runs of the 1,000-mile Iditarod dogsled race, provide material for his writing.

Paulsen writes for children and adults and has won numerous awards, including three Newbery Honor Awards. Both *Nightjohn* and *Sarny: A Life Remembered* received awards, with *Nightjohn* winning the Young Hoosier Book Award and being made into a Disney Channel Premiere Film. Paulsen said he wrote *Nightjohn* after finding accounts of slaves teaching each other to read in chronicles and interviews of ex-slaves. *Sarny: A Life Remembered* came about from readers' requests to know more about the young slave girl in *Nightjohn*.

# Slavery Concept Map



## Nightjohn: Chapter Four, pp. 42–58

Sarny and the other slaves are forced to watch Waller whip Alice, a confused girl. Alice runs, something Sarny knows is wrong because no one ever gets away. Like others before her, Alice is caught and brutally punished. Mammy is angry when she catches Nightjohn teaching Sarny letters, thinking learning will only bring more grief. She changes her mind after Nightjohn explains he escaped and came back because slaves need to know how to read and write to record what is being done to them.

Vocabulary
addled (42)
rawhide (43)
maggots (45)
plantation (49)
cower (53)
scrabble (55)
gaggle (55)
crackers (57)
grief (57)

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the author's purpose for including graphic descriptions of the cruelty Waller inflicts on Alice, Jim, and Pawley? Would less graphic scenes be as effective? (*Suggestions: The scenes are intended to show what really happened during slavery. They stress the importance of literacy to Nightjohn, showing the risks involved and the sacrifice he makes by returning to teach reading and writing. Answers will vary. Discussion should cover how the scenes affect readers' emotions. pp. 42–58*)
2. Why do you think Waller makes the slaves watch when he punishes someone? (*Waller enjoys reminding the slaves that he is master. He is telling them that if they don't behave, they will be hurt. Answers will vary. p. 44*)
3. How does Sarny know running is wrong? (*Nobody gets away. She has seen two men try, and both were killed. There is nowhere to go. pp. 46, 49–50*)
4. Sarny doesn't think there is a place to run to even though she has heard talk of land to the north. Why does she say it's "Not something to know. Just something to hear" (p. 50)? Can you explain why she might not believe the "talk"? (*Talk of freedom provides hope, but it could be false hope. If slaves were certain about freedom in the North, they might be compelled to run, and the known result of running is death. Sarny's view is limited by her lack of education and experience; she only knows about life on a plantation. Answers will vary. Discussion should cover that slaves were intentionally kept uneducated so they wouldn't learn about places without slavery or how to get there. pp. 49–50*)
5. Sarny always wants to know "the bottom" to things. What does this tell you about her? (*She is curious, likes to learn, and wants to know and understand everything. Answers will vary. p. 52*)
6. Nightjohn is overworked and too tired to teach Sarny. What happens that causes him to continue Sarny's lessons? (*The trauma with Alice gives Nightjohn the strength and resolve to teach despite his exhaustion. Answers will vary. pp. 45–46, 51*)
7. How does Mammy surprise Nightjohn? How does he surprise her? (*Mammy knocks Nightjohn down when she catches him teaching Sarny. Nightjohn explains that he escaped to freedom, then came back to teach reading and writing. pp. 53–56*)
8. Why does Mammy think teaching Sarny to read and write is a mistake? Do you think Nightjohn changes Mammy's mind? (*Learning will bring grief because Sarny will know what she is missing and can't have, and that will bother her. Answers will vary, but should include yes, as shown by Mammy allowing Nightjohn to continue teaching. pp. 57–58*)
9. What motivates Nightjohn to teach reading and writing? Do you think this is important enough for him to risk his life? (*He believes the slaves must be literate to record what is done to them during slavery. Answers will vary. p. 58*)

10. **Prediction:** How will learning to read cause trouble for Sarny?

### Supplementary Activities

1. Social Studies: Waller uses dogs to track runaway slaves (p. 46). Create a poster about tracking dogs. Include pictures and captions explaining how tracking dogs are used today, both in sport and in work.
2. History: Research the narratives, or personal accounts, of ex-slaves. Look for experiences telling about reading and writing. The Library of Congress Web site is a good source for this information.
3. Writing: The quarters are suddenly quiet when Nightjohn tells Mammy that he returned to teach reading and writing (pp. 55–58). Imagine you are a slave listening in the dark. Write a letter to Nightjohn telling him how his actions make you feel.
4. Personal Narrative: Nightjohn sacrifices his freedom to teach others. Write about a personal sacrifice that you have made.
5. Social Studies: When Nightjohn escaped to freedom, he may have followed directions hidden in quilt patterns. Research slave quilts, and then design a pattern with a hidden map. You may create your design on paper or make a quilt out of fabric (instructions available on the Internet).

### Nightjohn: Chapters Five–Six, pp. 59–82

Sarny learns her first word, and Waller catches her writing it in the dirt. When Sarny won't tell him who is teaching her, Waller punishes Mammy. Nightjohn confesses to stop Waller from further hurting and humiliating Mammy. Waller tells the slaves it's against the law for them to read, and then he chops off two of Nightjohn's toes. Nightjohn continues to teach Sarny as he prepares to escape. Though Sarny doesn't believe him, Nightjohn promises to return.

#### Vocabulary

flicked (71)  
chisel (73)  
removal (74)  
extremity (74)  
swooned (76)  
brimstone (76)  
demons (77)  
lard (81)  
hobbling (81)

#### Discussion Questions

1. Why do some field hands have to be carried back to the quarters? (*It's planting season. Waller works the field hands until they drop. p. 59*)
2. Waller catches Sarny writing in the dirt. Do you think she forgot the time Mammy told her not to write in the dirt? (*Answers will vary, but should include Sarny is so excited about learning her first word that she isn't thinking about anything else. pp. 35, 60–61*)
3. Why do you think Waller punishes Mammy when it was Sarny who was writing? How does this make Sarny feel? (*Waller may think hurting Mammy will make Sarny tell who taught her to read. He may think punishing Mammy will make a bigger impression on the other slaves. Or, as Mammy told Sarny, Waller would have whipped her someday just because he likes to use the whip. Sarny hates herself for the trouble she has caused. Answers will vary. pp. 64–66*)
4. Why doesn't Sarny run to the fields to get Nightjohn? (*It wouldn't do any good. Mammy says Nightjohn can't stop Waller from whipping her. If the drivers see Sarny in the field, they will put her to work. pp. 67–68*)