

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## My Life in Dog Years

by  
Gary Paulsen

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### Book Information

Gary Paulsen, My Life in Dog Years  
Quiz Number: 18778  
Delacorte Press, 1998  
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137 Pages  
Book Level: 5.6  
Interest Level: MG

The author describes how dogs have impacted his life from childhood through the present day, recounting the stories of his first dog, Snowball, in the Philippines; Dirk, who protected him from bullies; and Cookie, who saved his life.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Booklist Editors' Choice

**Topics:** Animals, Dogs;  
Biographies/Autobiographies,  
Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Careers,  
Writer; Family Life, Pets; Read Now with  
Power Up Recommended Lists, Know  
Yourself; Recommended Reading,  
California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5;  
Recommended Reading, California  
Recommended Lit., English, 6-8;  
Recommended Reading, California  
Recommended Lit., English, 9-12;  
Recommended Reading, YALSA Quick  
Picks for Reluctant YA

### Main Characters

Caesar the enormous Great Dane the author acquires from a man who has to move away  
Cookie the dog to which the book is dedicated; Cookie saved the author's life  
Dirk the scruffy stray dog that protects Paulsen from a local gang  
Fred and Pig the Lab-mix dog and a farm pig that are great friends  
Gary Paulsen the author and narrator of the book  
Ike the black Labrador retriever who helps Paulsen hunt  
Josh the author's current dog, a Border collie; the most intelligent of all the dogs he has known

Rex the collie who watches over the farm on which the author works

Snowball the first dog Paulsen ever owned

### Vocabulary

**dysplasia** a disorder of tissue or bones

**isolation** keeping to one's self

**pit boys** bowling alley workers who set up pins by hand before pin setting machines were available

**solitude** a state of being alone

### Synopsis

The author, Gary Paulsen, begins this book with a dedication to Cookie, a dog who once saved his life by leading his dog team to pull him from the icy waters where he had just fallen through the ice. Each of the following chapters also relates a tale about his relationship with a special dog.

Snowball is the author's first dog. He acquires him overseas while his father is serving as an army officer in the Philippines just after World War II. When he learns that the local people eat dogs, he persuades his mother to buy a dog on the spot, rescuing it from certain death. The author's parents both have a drinking problem and spend little time with him, so Snowball becomes his best friend and even becomes something of a substitute parent for him. The dog heroically saves his life by killing a deadly snake a split second before it can strike.

As Paulsen grows older, his solitary life leads him to find solace in hunting. This is how he meets Ike, a black Labrador retriever that he encounters while hunting in the woods. At first, Paulsen thinks Ike is a stray, but he quickly spots his collar and name tag and discovers that he is a well-trained hunting dog. Ike becomes his faithful hunting companion until one day when the dog fails to meet him in the woods. Paulsen never sees the dog again, but many years later he discovers that the dog had belonged to a man who had been sent to Korea to fight in the war. The dog was willing to hunt with Paulsen as long as his owner was away, but once the owner returned, paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair, the loyal

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dog resumed his place by the man's side, never hunting again.

Dirk, a scrappy stray, protects Paulsen from a gang that steals his money. The author gives the dog a hamburger, and the dog becomes a friend who attacks the tormenting older boys whenever they get close. Eventually the boys stop chasing Paulsen and even try to avoid him. Paulsen later finds a home for Dirk on a farm, where he earns his keep protecting sheep from marauding coyotes.

Paulsen meets Rex while working on a farm. He is amazed to watch the border collie tending the animals, checking fences, protecting the chickens and the farmer's children, and bringing the cows in from the field for their milking and then back out again to graze. Rex is on constant vigil and does his duty with love and devotion.

While living in a small cabin in Colorado with his wife and baby, Paulsen impulsively takes in a Great Dane named Caesar, whose owner must move and leave him behind. The young couple faces a number of challenges in caring for an enormous pet in such cramped quarters. But he is a friendly and gentle pet who becomes a favorite of children in the nearby town.

Fred enters Paulsen's life as a frisky, mischievous puppy who is unequaled in his capacity for destruction. Fred becomes close friends with the family's pig that is, appropriately enough, named Pig. Pig raids the family garden, so Paulsen erects an electric fence to contain him. The fence works, and Pig no longer escapes. However, when Fred is knocked flat by the fence, he seeks revenge and breaks the wire in spite of being repeatedly jolted almost to the point of unconsciousness.

Paulsen develops a love for sled racing and travels to Alaska to enter the Iditarod. There, he meets a lady who owns a dog named Quincy. Quincy is a small dog with a lot of personality, but the woman really prefers a Siberian husky for her and her children. Paulsen, after discovering his newly acquired husky will only run for thirty miles, trades

dogs with her and becomes Quincy's new owner. Quincy shows his tremendous courage when he attacks a full-grown bear that charges Paulsen's wife. She pulls the dog off the bear and, miraculously, both escape unharmed. Paulsen remarks that Quincy is the second smartest dog he has ever known.

The smartest dog he has ever encountered is Josh, who currently lives with him in New Mexico. Josh is a Border collie he acquired from a lady who thought Josh was too "naughty" to keep because he kept herding her ducks. Paulsen and Josh develop an extraordinary relationship. Paulsen does not consider Josh a pet, but rather an equal. Josh understands many words, and he learns very quickly. He takes initiative, and he proves to be a good host by herding company into one room, then escorting them to their cars as they leave. Paulsen and Josh develop an uncanny ability to understand each other, and Paulsen feels he will "never truly catch up" to Josh's intelligence.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Paulsen states that Snowball was like a parent to him when he was a little boy. What kind of influence did Snowball have on Paulsen?

*She taught him to look for more than just the obvious. She taught him to look for deeper meaning in things and to not be fooled by appearances. She also taught him to be more independent and capable.*

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### Literary Analysis

From the information gathered in this story, what can you tell about Gary Paulsen's personality?

*The reader can determine that Paulsen is a kind man who cares about animals and his fellow human beings. When he is a small boy, he rescues Snowball from being slaughtered for meat. He also cares about the poor and starving Philippine people. He would "steal" from his own home in order to bring them food. He is the type of person who cannot stand for an animal to be without home or food. He will feed the dogs, even if he has little food himself.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Paulsen states that dogs "became in some way more than another person could be, perfect companions...." What does this mean?

*Answers will vary depending on each student's experience with dogs. Some answers that come to mind might include how dogs love unconditionally. They are not prejudiced and do not care about a person's appearance. They are unconcerned with things that many people would be concerned about.*

### Constructing Meaning

Which dog is your favorite and why?

*Responses will vary greatly depending on dog preferences and experiences. Some students might choose Caesar because of his comical nature. Some may choose Josh because of his intelligence and loyalty. Others may choose Quincy for his bravery despite his small size.*

### Describing Actions or Events

Paulsen participated in the famed Iditarod race in Alaska, a very grueling dog sled race. Have students research the Iditarod. How many miles is it? When is it held? What must competitors do to qualify? Students might want to learn about other dog competitions as well, such as sheepherding competitions and the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. Have students write a short report about their findings.

### Responding to Literature

In *My Life in Dog Years*, Gary Paulsen is able to pay tribute to his beloved dog friends by writing about each of them. Ask students if they have ever experienced the loss of a pet of any kind. Students can do a project in which they pay tribute to their particular animal friends. They may write a song, a poem or a story, draw a picture, make a photo album, etc. Students may also pay tribute to an animal they currently have, such as Paulsen does with Josh.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** There are many breeds of dogs featured in this book, some purebreds and some mixed breeds. Have students choose a breed of dog and research its origins and the purposes for which it was bred. For example, collies are herders, Labradors make excellent hunting companions and are great swimmers, and Siberian huskies are bred to withstand cold climates and can pull large, heavy loads. Have students give oral presentations to the rest of the class using visual aids such as charts, photos, diagrams, etc.

## Teachable Skills

### Understanding the Author's Craft

*My Life in Dog Years* is written by Gary Paulsen. Paulsen states that Josh is the smartest dog he has ever known. What would it be like if the story about Josh were told through Josh's eyes? Have students write a few pages about Josh and Paulsen with Josh narrating the story. How might things be different? What would be important to Josh to write about?