

My Life in Dog Years by Gary Paulsen

Subjects: Paulsen, Gary—Juvenile literature; Authors, American—20th century—Biography—Juvenile literature; Dog owners—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature; Dogs—United States—Anecdotes—Juvenile literature

Book Lists: Grade 6, Middle School, Reluctant Readers

Props: Dog

JNF

Some biographies are just plain different. *My Life in Dog Years* by Gary Paulsen is one of those biographies. Paulsen had a very hard childhood. He was a lonely child of alcoholic parents and he basically raised himself. He attributes his survival to the dogs that were sometimes pets, sometimes trusted partners, and at other times protectors—a dog he named Dirk was one of his protectors. Paulsen met Dirk when he was living on the streets because his home life was unbearable. In order to have money for food he worked at a bowling alley after school setting up pins. But he had a serious problem. More often than not the local bullies found Paulsen each day on his way home. They would beat him up and steal his money. One day, a generous bowler bought hamburgers and cokes for the pit boys. Paulsen was anxious to enjoy his treat and went up to the roof and down the fire escape, hoping to find a way around the bullies. But when he stepped from the fire escape ladder to the ground he heard a low growl. (*Bring out dog*) A dog was there. It was either the bullies or the dog. He decided to try and get past the dog. He threw part of the hamburger into the alley, jumped down and ran around the corner right into the belly of the largest bully. His name was “Happy.” Paulsen, who usually ran from trouble, decided that this time he would stay and fight. He punched Happy in the face. Happy started swinging but. . . well I think Paulsen tells it best. (*Read from the book*)

There was a snarling growl that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, followed by the sound of ripping cloth, screams, and then the fading slap of footsteps running away.

For another minute I remained curled up, then opened my eyes to find that I was alone.

But when I rolled over I saw the dog.

It was the one that had been beneath the stairs. Brindled, patches of hair gone, one ear folded over and the other standing straight and notched from fighting. He didn't seem to be any particular breed. Just big and rangy, right on the edge of ugly, though I would come to think of him as beautiful. He was Airedale crossed with hound crossed with alligator.

Alley dog. Big, tough, mean alley dog. As I watched he spit cloth—it looked like blue jeans—out of his mouth.

“You bit Happy, and sent them running?” I asked.

He growled, and I wasn't sure if it was with menace, but he didn't bare his teeth and didn't seem to want to attack me. Indeed, he had saved me.

“Why?” I asked. “What did I do to deserve. . . oh, the hamburger.”

I swear, he pointedly looked at the bag with the second half of the hamburger in it.

“You want more?”

He kept staring at the bag and I thought, well he sure as heck deserves it. I opened the sack and gave him the rest of it, which disappeared down his throat as if a hole had opened into the universe.

He looked at the bag.

“That's it,” I said, brushing my hands together. “The whole thing.”

A low growl.

“You can rip my head off—there still isn't any more hamburger.” I removed the Coke and handed him the bag, which he took, held on the ground with one foot and deftly ripped open with his teeth.

“See? Nothing.” I was up by this time and I started to walk away. “Thanks for the help. . .”

He followed me. Not close, perhaps eight feet back, but matching my speed. (*Close book*)

Read more about Mr. Paulsen, Dirk, and the other unforgettable dogs he grew up with in (*Hold up book*) *My Life in Dog Years*.