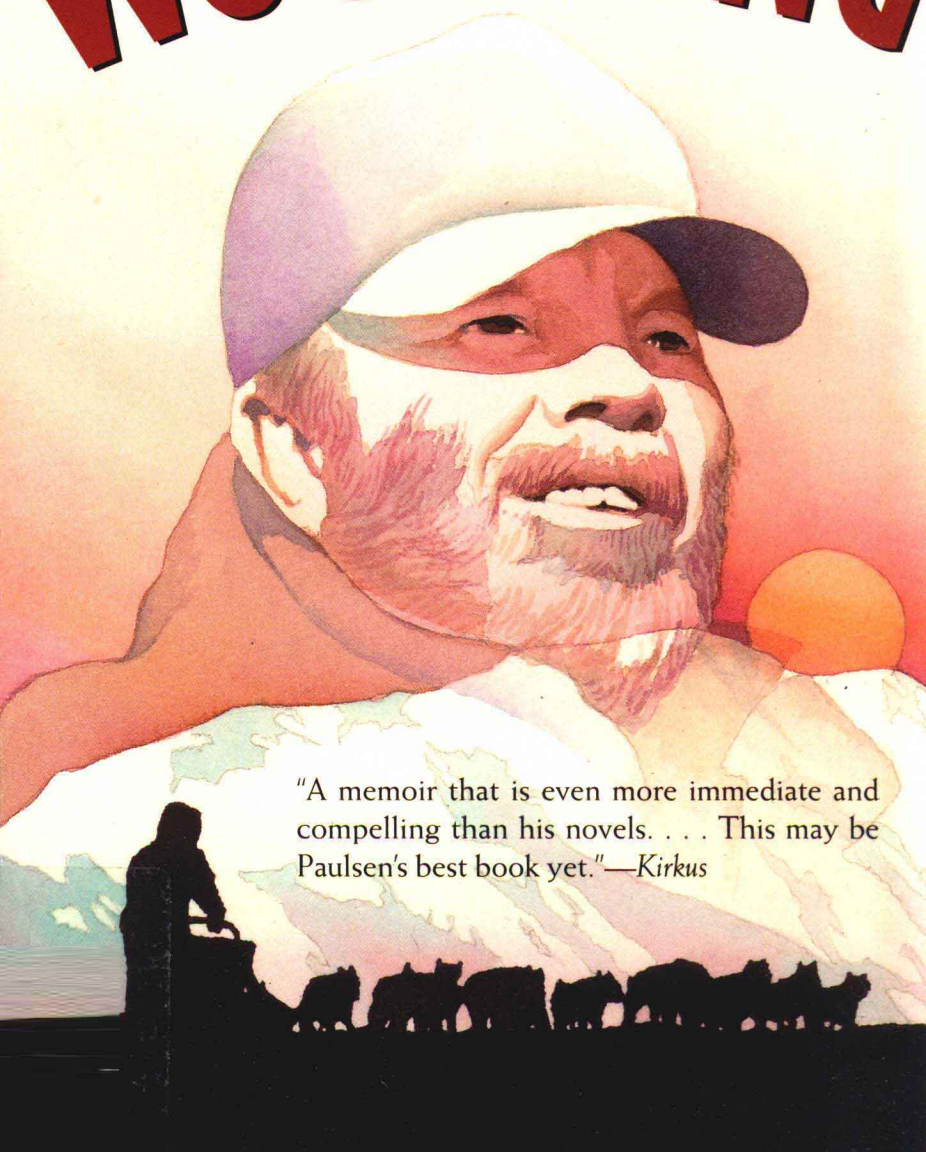


GARY PAULSEN

# WOODSONG



"A memoir that is even more immediate and compelling than his novels. . . . This may be Paulsen's best book yet."—*Kirkus*

# WOODSONG

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藏书章

written by **GARY PAULSEN**

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**WOODSONG**

**ALSO BY GARY PAULSEN**

Dancing Carl

Dogsong

Hatchet

Sentries

Tracker

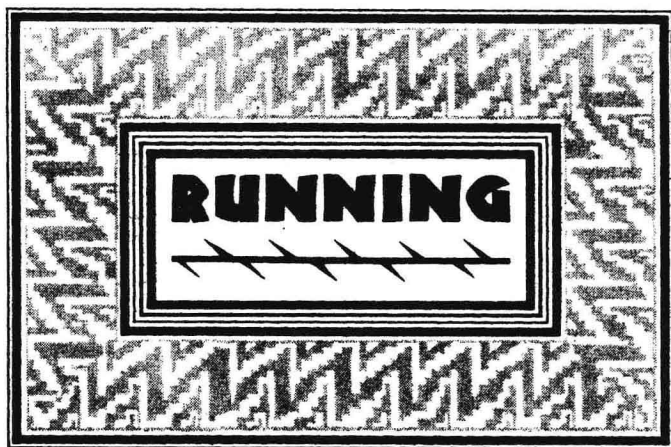
This book is dedicated to Cookie,  
who died on September 10, 1989.

*"Her soul is on the raven's wing. . . ."*



1. Anchorage
2. Eagle River
3. Settler's Bay
4. Rainy Pass
5. The Gorge
6. Rhone River
7. The Burn
8. Nikolai
9. McGrath
10. Iditarod
11. Shageluk
12. Yukon River
13. Kaltag
14. Unalakleet
15. Shaktolik
16. Norton Sound
17. Koyuk
18. Elim
19. Nome
20. Bering Sea
21. Arctic Ocean
22. Pacific Ocean
23. Mt. McKinley  
(Denali)
24. Alaska Range
25. Kuskokwim  
Mountains
26. Brooks Range
27. Fairbanks
28. Siberia (USSR)
29. Canada







# • 1 •



**I** UNDERSTOOD almost nothing about the woods until it was nearly too late. And that is strange because my ignorance was based on knowledge.

Most of my life it seems I've been in the forest or on the sea. Most of my time, sleeping and waking, has been spent outside, in close contact with what we now call the environment, what my uncles used to call, simply, "the woods."

We hunted. Small and large game. We hunted and killed and though I think now that it is wrong to hunt and kill, at the time I did not think this and I spent virtually all my time hunting.

And learned nothing.

Perhaps the greatest paradox about understanding "the woods" is that so many who enjoy it, or seem to enjoy it, spend most of their time trying to kill parts of it.

Yet, it was a hunter, a wild one, and an act of almost

unbelievable violence that led me to try to understand all of it, and to try to learn from it without destroying it.



I lived in innocence for a long time. I believed in the fairy-tale version of the forest until I was close to forty years old.

Gulled by Disney and others, I believed Bambi always got out of the fire. Nothing ever really got hurt. Though I hunted and killed it was always somehow clean and removed from reality. I killed yet thought that every story had a happy ending.

Until a December morning . . .

I was running a dog team around the side of a large lake, just starting out on my trapline. It was early winter and the ice on the lake wasn't thick enough to support the sled and team or I would have gone across the middle. There was a rough trail around the edge of the lake and I was running a fresh eight-dog team so the small loop, which added five or so miles, presented no great difficulty.

It was a grandly beautiful winter morning. The temperature was perhaps ten below, with a bright sun that shone through ice crystals in the air so that everything seemed to sparkle. The dogs were working evenly, the gangline up through the middle of them thrumming with the rhythm it has when they are working in perfect tandem. We skirted the lake, which lay below and to the right. To the left and

rising higher were willows and brush, which made something like a wall next to the trail.

The dogs were still running at a lope, though we had come over seven miles, and I was full of them; my life was full of them. We were, as it happens sometimes, dancing with winter. I could not help smiling, just smiling idiotically at the grandness of it. Part of the chant of an ancient Navajo prayer rolled through my mind:

*Beauty above me*

*Beauty below me*

*Beauty before me . . .*

That is how I felt then and frequently still feel when I am running dogs. I was in and of beauty and at that precise moment a doe, a white-tailed deer, exploded out of some willows on the left side of the team, heading down the bank toward the lake.

The snow alongside the trail was about two feet deep and powdery and it followed her in a white shower that covered everything. She literally flew over the lead dog who was a big, white, wolfy-looking male named Dollar. He was so surprised that he dropped, ducked, for part of an instant, then rose—almost like a rock skipping on the trail—and continued running. We were moving so fast and the deer was moving so fast that within a second or two we were several yards past where it had happened and yet everything seemed suspended in slow motion.

Above all, in the deer, was the stink of fear. Even in that split part of a second, it could be smelled. It could be seen. The doe's eyes were so wide they seemed to come out of her head. Her mouth was jacked open and her tongue hung out to the side. Her jaw and neck were covered with spit, and she stunk of fear.

Dogs smell fear at once but I have not always been able to, even when I was afraid. There is something coppery about it, a metallic smell mixed with the smell of urine and feces, when something, when somebody, is afraid. No, not just afraid but ripped with fear, and it was on the doe.

The smell excited the dogs and they began to run faster, although continuing down the trail; I turned to look back from the sled and saw why the doe was frightened.

Wolves.

They bounded over the trail after the doe even as I watched. These were not the large timber wolves but the smaller northern brush wolves, perhaps weighing forty or fifty pounds each, about as large as most of my team. I think they are called northern coyotes.

Except that they act as wolves. They pack and have pack social structures like timber wolves, and hunt in packs like timber wolves.

And they were hunting the doe.

There were seven of them and not one looked down the trail to see me as they jumped across the sled tracks after the deer. They were so intent on her, and the smell of her, that I might as well not have existed.

And they were gaining on her.

I stood on the brakes to stop the sled and set the snowhook to hold the dogs and turned. The dogs immediately swung down off the trail toward the lake, trying to get at the wolves and deer. The snowhook came loose and we began to slide down the lake bank. I jerked the hook from the snow and hooked it on a small poplar and that held us.

The doe, in horror now, and knowing what was coming, left the bank of the lake and bounded out onto the bad ice. Her tail was fully erect, a white flash as she tried to reach out and get speed, but the ice was too thin.

Too thin for all the weight of her on the small, pointed hooves and she went through and down in a huge spray of shattered ice and water.

She was up instantly, clambering and working to get back up on top of the ice next to the hole. Through sheer effort in her panic she made it.

But it slowed her too much.

In those few moments of going through the ice and getting out she lost her lead on the wolves and they were on her.

On her.

In all my time in the woods, in the wondrous dance of it, I have many times seen predators fail. As a matter of fact, they usually fail. I once saw a beaver come out of a hole on the ice near his lodge in the middle of winter and stand off four wolves. He sustained one small bite on his tail and inflicted terrible damage with his teeth on the wolves, killing one and wounding the other three. I have seen rabbits outwit foxes and watched red squirrels tease martens and get away with it, but this time it was not to be.

I had never seen wolves kill a large animal and indeed have not seen it since. It was horrible and I was not prepared for it. I thought I had great knowledge of how everything in the woods worked. I had hunted and trapped and I had been in the army and seen and done some awful things, but I was still not mentally prepared for the killing.

Largely because of Disney and posed "natural" wildlife films and television programs I had preconceived ideas about wolves, about what wolves should be and do. They never really spoke to the killing.

Spoke to the blood.

In films they would go to the edge of it, and then show the carcass being eaten. In books they always seemed to describe it clinically and technically.

And it is neither clinical nor technical.

There is horror in it.

Wolves do not kill "clean." (If there can be such a thing.) It is a slow, ripping, terrible death for the prey and only those who have not seen it will argue for that silly business about the prey actually selecting itself.

Two wolves held the doe by the nose, held her head down to the ice, and the other wolves took turns tearing at her rear end, pulling and jerking and tearing, until they were inside of her, pulling out parts of her and all this time she was still on her feet, still alive.

I did not have a gun or I think I would have used it. I was having some trouble with the dogs as the blood smell excited the wolf in them. They wanted to be at the kill. They were jerking and pulling on the gangline so hard I thought it

would break, and I stumbled down in the deep snow along the lake bank and held them—one bit me on the hand—but I could not stop looking.

It was all in silence.

She was still on her feet though they had the guts out of her now, pulled back on the ice, eating and pulling, and I wanted it to end, wanted it to be over for her.

And she sank.

She somehow did not die then and still does not die in my mind. She just sinks. Over and over I can see her sinking as they pull at her. When I could stand it no longer, when I was sick with it and hated all wolves for the horror of it, I yelled.

“Leave her . . .”

And I think I cursed as well but it didn’t matter. When I yelled it was as if a film had stopped. The wolves somehow had not known I was there. They had been so intent on killing, on the smell of it, that they had not seen me or the dogs and the sound of my voice stopped them.

But it did not frighten them.

The doe was down now, spread and down and steaming out the rear, and all the wolves stopped dead and turned to look at me and the dogs.

Just that. Look.

And I knew that it was wrong for me to have yelled, that I was interrupting something I did not understand, some ancient thing I did not know any more than I knew what it was like to live in the Ice Age.

They stopped and studied me.



One of them, I think a male because he was larger than the others, raised on his hind legs to see better over some low willows in front of me and when he raised—standing like a man—the morning sun caught his head and I could see that it was completely covered in blood.

Steaming with it. He'd been inside her and he was soaked with blood and the snow all around the back of the doe was soaked with blood, a great red apron of blood. He stood for two, three seconds, staring at me and through me, knowing me, and I began to understand some of it then.

I began to understand that they are not wrong or right—they just are.

Wolves don't know they are wolves.

That's a name we have put on them, something we have done. I do not know how wolves think of themselves, nor does anybody, but I did know and still know that it was wrong to think they should be the way I wanted them to be.

And with that thought, with that small understanding, came the desire to learn, to know more not just about wolves but about all things in the woods. All the animals, all the dances . . .

And it started with blood.