

The Book Needs You: Gary Paulsen's *The Winter Room* as a Writerly Text

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Words mean more than we mean to express when we use them: so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant.—Lewis Carroll

As readers, teachers, and critics of children's literature, we are deeply involved in working with literary texts: We read books, we evaluate them, and we discuss them. We write reviews and we present authors with awards and rewards. We create novel units and we select titles for adoption. Ultimately, we try to assist children in finding (or in constructing) meaning. The pursuit of meaning, it seems, is at the heart of our serious consideration of literature—the decoding of meaning, the comprehension of meaning, and the making of meaning.

However, current literary theory suggests that it may be more interesting to look at *how* meanings are made than to look for *the* meaning or even *a* meaning in the text. And in order to examine this making of meaning, attention is turning toward the way readers shape and are shaped by the text—the reader's response.

This article will begin by reiterating some of the major tenets of reader-response theory; then it will turn to the "writerly" text as a source of activity rather than of meaning; and finally, it will examine Gary Paulsen's *The Winter Room* (1989) as an example of the active writerly text.

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Reader-Response Theory: The Story So Far

For many years we have assumed that we could look at what texts *say* in order to determine what texts *mean*. We have relied on common sense and shared values in interpreting literary works, and we have assumed that we could take a neutral, natural approach in reading and understanding literature. This common sense theory of literature finds its center in the belief that texts must conform to the standard of expressive realism: that is, that literature must reflect the *reality* of experience as it is perceived by one especially gifted individual (the author) who *expresses* it in a form which enables other individuals to recognize it as true (Belsey, 1980, p. 7).

The idea that there is a natural way of approaching literary texts that allows us to recognize meaning is, according to contemporary theorists, a fallacy. According to Terry Eagleton (1983), there is no such thing as a neutral reading of texts. "We always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns," Eagleton writes, and, indeed, it seems we are incapable of doing anything else (p. 12). All of our readings of texts move within an often invisible network of value categories, and since literature is so deeply tied to human ideals, beliefs, language, and so on, it should come as no surprise that theory about literature engages our broader, deeper beliefs about humanity and society, power structures, sexuality, politics, religion, and culture. For this reason, "there is no such thing as a purely 'literary' response: all such responses . . . are deeply imbricated with the kind of social and historical individuals we are" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 89).

If there is not a natural or neutral position to be taken in the reading of texts, it is likewise problematic to insist that texts must reflect reality or even to believe that they can. What we regard as real is bound up with where we happen to be positioned. In modern linguistic theory, reality is considered to be created by ideology and by language, rooted in a specific historical situation and operating within a particular social formation. In other words, what seems to be real is not necessarily so, for reality is not *given* but *produced* in a specific society by the ways in which that society talks and thinks about itself and its experience (Belsey, 1980, p. 3). As James Britton (1970) has put it, "we shape the objects of our perception in the act of perceiving them: thus, we regularize, simplify, give a more satisfying shape to what we look at in the very act of looking at it: and this ordering is reflected in the way we speak and write about our experiences" (p. 214). According to this model, language is the process by which we create and make sense of the world, and as a result, a work of literature does not so much reflect reality as help to produce it.

If we can no longer rely on a common sense reading of a text, and if we can no longer critique a text based on how well it is able to express reality, then it seems we must also question the assumption that the author is the source of meaning which can then be identified in the text. In the past, we were secure in the belief that meaning was constant, and that the text was able to embody a universal and eternal truth as it had been perceived by the author. As Belsey puts it, "Within the expressive theory the text could be seen to possess a single, determinate meaning, however complex, and the authority for that meaning was the author. Meaning was what the author put into the text" (1980, p. 17). This belief in the author's authority over the text confined the text for all time to a single reading, and a correct understanding became a search for proof in the text of what the author may or may not have intended.

However, the search for objective truth in literature posed a problem both for critics and for educators, since it was impossible to erase from the text some elements of interpretation and some subjectivity on the part of the reader. As Louise Rosenblatt postulated more than 50 years ago, meaning in the text cannot be determined by discovering what the author meant, for the reader is always actively interpreting the text, engaging his or her own interests and biases, constructing meaning rather than simply receiving it. According to reader-response theory, the text does not contain an exclusive meaning of its own that has been put there by the author for a clever reader to uncover; rather, "the text itself is really no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning.... Without this continuous active participation on the reader's part, there would be no literary work at all" (Eagleton, 1983, p 76).

Thus, the direction of our gaze has moved from the author and text as the sources of meaning to the reader as the producer of meaning. In the reader, various cultural discourses and codes meet, intersect, and compete, and as a result this site becomes the focus of attention. Jonathan Culler (1982) explains the critics' view of the conventions and operations of reading in this way:

. . . [critics] treat literary works as a succession of actions on the understanding of the reader. An interpretation of a work thus comes to be an account of what happens to the reader: how various conventions and expectations are brought in to play, where particular connections or hypotheses are posited, how expectations are defeated or confirmed. To speak of the meaning of the work is to tell a story of reading. (p. 35)

Put simply, the account of reader-response theory so far is this: Within the confines of traditional literary theories, readers were locked into locating meaning in the text that could then be ascribed to the author. Reader-oriented criticism has loosened those constraints, suggesting that meaning does not lie exclusively in the author or in the text, but also (or perhaps, primarily) in the reader. Far from being seen as neutral absorbers of text, readers are recognized as bringing to the work whole social contexts of discourse, tacit assumptions of sense-making that challenge the notion of one authoritative voice—the voice of the author. In the novel, the competing voices of the reader converge. Thus, reader-oriented theory not only empowers the reader as maker of meaning; it makes possible the production of a different sort of text as well.

The Open/Writerly Text

Recognizing readers as active producers rather than passive consumers of meaning in texts is a great theoretical distance from the common sense approach to literature and the insistence that texts be considered expressions of reality. If readers create individual meanings, then texts become openings, arenas, spaces for the many voices of the reader to sound. Not only does reader-response criticism make room for multiple readings of the text, it also makes room for the multiple voices of the reader that converge on and in the text.

Although in theory all texts must be constructed anew with each reading and by each reader, there are some texts that invite these multiple readings more readily than others, deliberately opening themselves to the production of many voices and interpretations. These texts are rich in possibility, for by resisting traditional readings they press the reader into the role of creator of meaning. Because they require the reader to produce answers to the questions they implicitly or explicitly raise, Catherine Belsey has labelled these texts "interrogative," while Roland Barthes uses the term "writerly" to describe those works that engage the reader in a productive rather than a consumptive capacity. The writerly text "permit[s] all of the voices on its premises to be heard" (Silverman, 1983, p. 248), and in the recasting of reading as writing, each reader is not only permitted but invited and even required to create a new and different text. Thus, each reading becomes a writing, and "variations in readers' constructions are no longer regarded as accidents but treated as normal effects of the activity of reading" (Culler, 1982, p. 38).

The writerly text differs from the traditional text in its absence of a single, privileged discourse; it overtly refuses a single point of view and offers multiplicity rather than consistency, variability instead of stable meaning, segmentation rather than linear progression. Writerly

texts do not simply demonstrate creativity or imagination; they open themselves to the reader and create spaces for interaction. Viewed in this way, the text becomes a process rather than a product, and texts become significant not merely for what they *mean* but also for what they *do*: how they affect readers and how they allow themselves to be read.

It seems there are not many texts for children that can be considered writerly or open texts. Author and critic Peter Hunt (1991) suggests that because most children's books are written for readers perceived by the author to be "less skilled," very often there seems to be "a deliberate attempt to limit the child-reader's interaction with the text" (p. 84). In a text in which the author exercises a high degree of control, little interaction is demanded of or even allowed the reader. In addition, because literature for children is most often evaluated on the basis of the traditional elements of character, setting, plot, theme, and symbol, most writers and publishers have responded by providing tightly woven, carefully constructed stories to meet these criteria—"closed" texts, as it were.

This is not to imply that traditional texts are inferior to open or writerly texts. To avoid constructing this type of good/bad opposition, Hunt has suggested that "instead of saying 'better/worse', or 'suitable/unsuitable', criticism would be more profitably employed in saying, 'This text has certain potentials for interaction, certain possibilities of meaning' " (p. 83). Thus, the terms "readerly" and "writerly" should be considered terms of description rather than evaluation.

At the same time, the distinction between readerly and writerly texts is often vague and inexact. There can be no "pure" readerly or writerly text—all texts depend on some degree of active meaning-making on the part of the reader, and conversely, all texts provide the reader with some interpretive cues and boundaries. To further complicate the issue, a text may function differently for different readers, allowing for various levels of interaction within the same work.

To better understand the characteristics and role of the writerly text, it may prove helpful to consider for a moment a more traditional (i.e. "closed") work by Paulsen—*Hatchet*, a Newbery Honor Book for 1988. *Hatchet* is the story of Brian Robeson, a 13-year-old boy who survives alone in the Canadian wilderness following a plane crash. The story is told in the third person from the perspective of the boy. The point of view is consistent, the progression through the novel is chronological, and the time frame is the 54 days Brian spent in the woods. In the final two-page epilogue, the story shifts and the voice of an unidentified omniscient narrator takes over, filling in the gaps of Brian's experience and tying up any remaining loose ends in the

story. The effect is one of closure: this is not a novel of spaces and gaps, it is a novel that catches things up neatly, revealing in its conclusion the things that may not have been available to the limited point of view of a 13-year-old narrator. Rather than multiple perspectives, *Hatchet* offers the reader a tightly woven narrative; rather than allowing creative openings, Paulsen in *Hatchet* is careful to explain and resolve. Thus, for the most part, *Hatchet* functions as a traditional closed text; its questions are answered, its gaps are carefully filled in.

Where the readerly text closes its gaps, the writerly text resists such resolution and opens itself to questioning and reader interaction. The purpose when examining such a text is to determine the extent to which that text may be said to “guide or offer resistance” to the activity of producing multiple readings (Scholes, 1985, p. 152), to identify its “potentials for interaction,” and its “possibilities of meaning.” As a result, attention shifts away from traditional literary criteria, centering instead on what the text asks of the reader and what it invites the reader to do.

The Winter Room as a Writerly Text

Paulsen’s *The Winter Room* (a Newbery Honor Book for 1990) is an example of a text that opens itself to the reader. Quite briefly: *The Winter Room* is a story told by Eldon, an 11-year-old boy growing up on a farm in northern Minnesota. Told in the first person, the book is divided into four sections that correspond to the seasons of the year: spring, summer, fall, and winter. The story contained in these four sections is, for the most part, one of description—description of what it is like living on a Minnesota farm throughout an entire year. Paulsen’s style is smooth, nearly flawless, but the tale itself is rather unremarkable. For those of us who are acquainted with the seasons of life in rural Minnesota, the narration rings true, but except as they correspond to our own personal memories, the scenes themselves are rather forgettable. What is not forgettable—at least not for this reader—is the textual frame that surrounds the novel, the scenes that introduce and that follow the book’s four-part cycle. Consider this excerpt from the opening “Tuning” section of the book:

If books could be more, could show more, could own more, this book would have smells....

It would have the smells of old farms; the sweet smell of new-mown hay as it falls off the oiled sickle blade when the horses pull the mower through the field, and the sour smell of manure steaming in a winter barn....—but it can’t.

Books can’t have smells.

If books could be more and own more and give more, this book would have sound....

It would have the high keening sound of the six-foot bucksaws as the men pull them back and forth through the trees to cut pine for paper pulp—but it can't.

Books can't have sound.

And finally if books could be more, give more, show more, this book would have light....

Oh, it would have the soft gold light—gold with bits of hay dust floating in it—that slips through the crack in the barn wall—but it can't.

Books can't have light.

If books could have more, give more, be more, show more, they would still need readers, who bring to them sound and smell and light and all the rest that, can't be in books.

The book needs you. (Paulsen, 1989, pp. 1-3)

This excerpt identifies *The Winter Room* as a writerly text, an open text, a text that recognizes its own lack and that invites and invokes the reader. Readers become engaged in an active, productive capacity, writing their own texts in the openings the novel provides. Rather than attempting to control possible readings and meanings, these lines clear a space, an arena where the various voices of the reader and the voices of the text can converge. This "Tuning" section acknowledges the gap that the text leaves for the reader to inhabit; as in a musical performance, the reader and text must be in tune (or at least must be conscious of their dissonance), and the tuning cannot occur in silence—the instruments must be heard before the actual performance can begin. Thus, *The Winter Room* opens with a melody that invokes a response, including the reader in a performance that can never be completed by the single voice of the author, a performance in which the many voices of the reader and the text need to be heard.

After this tuning is over, the cycle of seasons begins. Each section is brief (the entire year takes up only 65 pages), but despite such brevity the reader gets to know the residents of this Minnesota farm: Eldon, the narrator; Wayne, Eldon's older brother; Mother and Father; and two old and unmarried great uncles—Uncle David and Nels—who have come from "the old country." Uncle David is a storyteller, and on cold winter nights the family gathers around the wood-burning stove in the winter room (a sitting room used exclusively on winter evenings) and listens to Uncle David tell his tales.

The reader progresses through the seasons of the book largely uninterrupted. The text is straightforward; it conforms and performs for the most part like a traditional readerly text. However, at the end of the final season (winter), the text shifts and the reader becomes

involved in a finale of sorts, a coda in which the reader listens to Uncle David himself tell four stories: "Alida" (the story of Uncle David's wife in the old country); "Orud the Terrible;" "Crazy Alen;" and "The Woodcutter." In these stories the reader listens directly to the voice of the storyteller—the oral teller of tales—and although each of Uncle David's stories is artful, it is the fourth and final tale that, like the "Tuning" section, once again opens itself to the reader and performs as a writerly text.

The reader is readied for Uncle David's telling of "The Woodcutter" before the actual story begins. Eldon, the narrator, writes,

I always thought of them [Uncle David's tales] as just stories and didn't think they were real.... Once Mother said the stories were not for believing so much as to be believed in.

But it was different for Wayne.... Somehow the stories had mixed in his mind so they had become a real part of his thinking, so that he believed them. And even when he knew they couldn't be . . . even then he wanted them to be real . . . and by wanting them to be real somehow they became real in his mind. And that's how the trouble started. (Paulsen, 1989, pp. 84-85)

The trouble that starts is a direct result of Uncle David's story of the woodcutter. It is told one night in front of the stove while a Minnesota blizzard rages outside. Uncle David admits that "this isn't a story about the cutting so much as it is about a man who was young then" (p. 89), and his story begins like this:

"The young man would walk to a tree and swing and the chips would float off like they were made of air—chopping half the head and more deep with each blow so the tree would almost fly off the stump when he cut through.

"They said many things of him. They said he could put a match in a stump so the head was sticking up and swing the ax with his eyes closed and catch the match perfectly so that it would split and both sides would light.

"And it was true.

"They said he shaved each day with an ax and never cut himself and his cheek was as smooth as a baby's.

"And it was true.

"They said he could take a four-foot piece of cordwood and swing two axes, one in each hand, swing them into the two ends and the wood would split clean and the axes would meet in the middle.

"And it was true...." (Paulsen, 1989, pp. 90-91)

When Uncle David reaches this point in the story, Father interrupts him and says, "But that was you. All those things were about you...." (p. 91), and at his father's remark, Wayne becomes

suddenly angry—too angry for words. Wayne's anger lasts into the next day, and when at last he speaks to Eldon about it, Wayne begins with these words about Uncle David: "He's lying.... All the time he's been lying with the stories, just telling us lies" (p. 93). Eldon explains that Uncle David's stories are not meant to be real, they're supposed to be lies, but Wayne responds vehemently, "Don't you see? Father caught him at it. Uncle David told lies about himself and that makes it all lies, just lies and lies and lies" (p. 94). Wayne is crying, and when Eldon looks up, he sees Uncle David standing behind Wayne, listening. Uncle David slowly turns and walks away, and Eldon observes, "It was over, and Uncle David was broken and done" (p. 95).

After supper that night, Uncle David does not tell a story, nor does he for any of the nights that follow. Then one afternoon, four or five days later, Uncle David enters the barn while the boys are in the hayloft. Uncle David is carrying two axes, and he does not notice the boys watching him as he selects a nearby log that is nearly as big as he is. What follows reads like a piece of mythology:

He stood to the side of the log facing it and held the axhandles, one on each side with the heads of the axes resting on the ground and all of him was curved down onto the axes so that they looked like hickory crutches. He was a broken and tired and sad old man, and there wasn't a thing he could do, I thought, even to lift the axes....

But now he moved his head up and looked at the sky and the sun caught his face and we could see it plain, see his face in the sun. The wrinkles seemed to leave. The skin seemed to smooth as the sun covered his face.

And his hands tightened on the axhandles and the heads of the axes in the snow, the heads trembled a little and it was as if something came from the earth.

Some thing, some power passed from the earth up through the silver axheads and through the hickory handles and it started in his arms. A little movement, then the arms seemed to swell and his shoulders came up and filled and his back straightened and his whole body filled with it until he was standing straight and tall and I heard Wayne's breath come in and stop and mine did the same.

"He's young again," Wayne whispered and it was not just a whisper but more a worshipping thing, like part of a prayer, and he was right. (Paulsen, 1989, pp. 99-100)

What happens next, of course, is that Uncle David lifts the two axes, holds them over his head for what seems like hours, days, then swings them down in a blur of motion that slices cleanly through the log. The log opens and splits, and the axes meet exactly in the middle with a "small metal sound" (p. 101). Uncle David stands for a moment; then slowly his shoulders and back curve down again, and

he becomes once more an old, old man. He puts away the wood and the axes, never realizing he's had an audience at this performance, and returns to the house for supper. Eldon writes that after supper the family went into the winter room and Uncle David again told the story of Alida. Then "he told a tale about a man who lived in the forest who was so ugly he couldn't be seen and he sent messages of love to a girl on the wing feathers of birds and Wayne listened and I listened and I knew we would listen for always" (p. 103).

In each of Uncle David's four stories as recounted in *The Winter Room*, the reader is allowed to hear voices—the voice not only of the narrator, but also that of the storyteller. Eldon, the narrator, becomes at once speaker and listener, both producer and consumer of text. And the reader is cast into a similar role.

In the story of the woodcutter, there is an underlying current that plays on the reader's notion of truth and falsehood, fact and fiction. Stories, we are told, are not supposed to be true; yet we are at the same time shown Uncle David's compulsion to prove (for himself) the truth of his own tales. Thus, the text questions its own truth, its own authenticity, and it requires a similar activity of the reader as well. Old men do not wield heavy axes; they do not grow suddenly young, and they do not receive mystical powers from the earth. Or do they? Is the story that Eldon tells us true? Is it real? Is it to be believed, or simply to be believed in?

The text itself stubbornly refuses to answer such questions. Like Eldon and Wayne, readers can listen for always, but as passive recipients of the text they are never any nearer a sense of truth or meaning. Which is exactly the point of the writerly text: By opening itself to the reader's production of meaning and loosening itself from the authoritative control of the writer, the text allows itself to be rewritten, constructed anew. Instead of reinforcing our habitual ways of reading, the text may teach us new ways to make meaning, moving our attention from what the text is to what the text does.

In the final analysis, there is no single voice to hear in *The Winter Room*, no single meaning to be found. And in the end, meaning itself proves to be less important than the practice of making meaning; how readers produce meaning, how this particular text engages readers in the process of interpretation, becomes more interesting than the actual meanings that may result.

Did Uncle David *really* split a log to prove that his story was true? Some readers say "yes"; other readers argue "no." Ultimately, it does not seem to matter, for *The Winter Room* resists such a traditional reading. The novel refuses to be bound to notions of realism and common sense, demanding instead that its readers take a different stance, producing each time a new telling. Forever the text escapes us, cycling back to raise questions about itself that reverberate from

the early "Tuning" section: the text will never tell all it hopes to, it will never say or be what it would. The text needs the reader: the book needs you.

Note

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Passages from *The Winter Room* by Gary Paulsen are reprinted with the permission of the publisher, Orchard Books, New York.

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