



The Beet Fields: Memories of a Sixteenth Summer

By Gary Paulsen

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The Beet Fields: Memories of a Sixteenth Summer By Gary Paulsen

For a 16-year-old boy out in the world alone for the first time, every day's an education in the hard work and boredom of migrant labor; every day teaches him something more about friendship, or hunger, or profanity, or lust—always lust. He learns how a poker game, or hitching a ride, can turn deadly. He discovers the secret sadness and generosity to be found on a lonely farm in the middle of nowhere. Then he joins up with a carnival and becomes a grunt, running a ride and shilling for the geek show. He's living the hard carnal life and beginning to see the world through carnal eyes. He's tough. Cynical. By the end of the summer he's pretty sure he knows it all. Until he meets Ruby.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The striking cover picture of a beautiful young man's bare, muscular back foreshadows the sensuality of this brilliant autobiographical novel for older boys by the author of *Hatchet* and *Soldier's Heart*. In this remarkable book, Gary Paulsen reworks material from his own life that has appeared earlier in his novels, to tell--with simple words and Hemingwayesque cadences--the story of a summer when a 16-year-old boy became a man.

Fleeing his mother's confusing drunken advances, a boy runs away and finds work in the beet fields of North Dakota. Wielding a hoe for long, hot days, he learns about cruelty from the farmer's wife and about kindness from his Mexican coworkers. Later an attraction to a girl glimpsed only once leads him into accepting a job driving a tractor, but a brush with the deputy sheriff sends him running again, only to be taken in by a sleazy carnival as a roustabout. He learns to shill for the geek, a fake wild man of Borneo who bites the heads off chickens, and yearns for Ruby, the voluptuous hootchy-kootchy dancer. During the summer the boy learns about life and people and his own ability to work and survive, and when Ruby invites him into her bed, his transition to manhood is complete.

While the sensual scenes and occasionally gritty language may make this novel problematic for adults, there is not a 15-year-old boy around who would not find that this poetic, powerful novel speaks to his soul. (Ages 14 and older) --Patty Campbell

From Publishers Weekly

No stranger to memoir, Paulsen (*My Life in Dog Years*; *Father Water, Mother Woods*) returns to a series of episodes he previously fictionalized in the 1977 *Tiltawhirl John* and now presents the material "as real as I can write it, and as real as I can remember it happening," as he says in an author's note. It is punishingly harsh stuff: 16 years old in 1955, "the boy," as he is called throughout, wakes up to find his drunk mother in his bed and realizes that tonight "something [is] different, wrong, about her need for him." He runs away and lands a backbreaking job on a beet farm in North Dakota, where his wages are cancelled out by the farmer's charges for the use of his hoe, for the tumbledown lodgings and for the only food available, sandwiches made of week-old bread that cost a dollar apiece. Eventually the boy starts working with a carnival, where he learns carnay scams and is initiated into sex by the carnival stripper, Ruby. In a mannered prose style, Paulsen serves up strings of studied, impartial observations in paragraph-long sentences. The technique calls attention to itself, as does the occasional circumlocution (e.g., the seemingly endless sentence describing intercourse with Ruby concludes with "sinking into the wetness, the forever-warm wetness of Ruby"). Paulsen fans, however, will probably respond to the vote of confidence in their ability to handle such gritty subjects, and no one can fail to appreciate the author's transcendence of the appalling circumstances he describes. Ages 14-up.

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From School Library Journal

Grade 9 Up-Twenty years ago, Paulsen told the tale of an unnamed boy who ran away to work as a migrant laborer and carnival hand in *Tilt-a-Whirl John* (Puffin, 1990). As a story for younger adolescents, it had few of the rough edges that one would expect in a portrayal of a young man on the run. In *The Beet Fields*, some of those characters and incidents resurface, but this time, the story is a memorable and powerful one. The unnamed protagonist leaves his drunken, amorous mother in the middle of the night and takes on the backbreaking work of thinning beets by the acre on a North Dakota farm. He respects the optimism and

resourcefulness of the Mexican field hands, and is welcomed into their community. The teen is keenly aware of his burgeoning sexuality and longs for the attentions of a farmer's daughter at his next job, but never gets to speak to her. While there, a corrupt sheriff comes looking for a runaway, and steals the boy's earnings. When he joins a carnival, one of the "carnies" educates him about women by day and performs in the "geek" show at night as a wild man who bites the heads off live chickens. Lust abounds when the boy meets a confident older beauty who performs a strip show in the carnival and who seduces him. A short epilogue tells of the young man's enlistment in the Army. Consistent with his trademark short sentences and fragments, Paulsen's simple but hard-edged prose strengthens this addition to his autobiographical odyssey.

Vicki Reutter, Cazenovia High School, NY

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Arnulfo Walls:

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