

Nightjohn

Gary Paulsen

Teacher's Guide

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LIVING
LITERATURE
SERIES

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Synopsis

Chapter One

Sarny is the slave of Clel Waller, a sadistic master handy with the whip and hounds. The cruelty of her master in particular and the slave system generally has rendered her parentless: when she was four, her mother, a valuable "breeder" worth the price of four field hands, was sold, and Delie, Sarny's foster mother, held the child up to watch her mother being driven away in a wagon. A quiet, contemplative girl who makes an effort to learn, Sarny lives in the quarters, sleeps on a pallet, and eats at a communal trough with the other slaves. She rejects the surname "Waller." Her age, recorded by ten notches on a stick, indicates that she will enter her own breeding period in the next two years. Still considered a child, she gathers eggs, tends children, and cleans the quarters.

Chapter Two

Sarny claims to have conjured the new hand, Nightjohn. While treating the flower beds with tobacco, she overhears conversations between the mistress, Margaret Waller, and Margaret's unmarried sister Alaine through the open window. Margaret declares that Waller spent more than a thousand dollars for Nightjohn.

Chapter Three

Waller often buys from speculators or drives a newly purchased worker home in his wagon from a slave auction. He walks Nightjohn home naked and in shackles with a rope tied to his saddle. Sarny, on her way to wash the trough for the evening meal, stops to examine the scars lashed into Nightjohn's back, buttocks, and legs.

Nightjohn is sent to the field without a pause for water or rest. At night, the slaves wolf down their second meal of the day and go directly to bed in unlighted hovels. Nightjohn stands out from the rest in his new canvas pants: he sits in the corner and asks for tobacco, for which he trades the first three letters of the alphabet. Sarny knows from mammy's warning that reading could cost her a severe lashing or the amputation of a thumb.

Sarny tests Nightjohn by scratching a term from a feed sack—"100 lbs."—in the dust. He recognizes the numbers and letters, but fails to decipher the abbreviation. Nightjohn explains to Sarny that knowledge of letters must come first, then reading. He emphasizes that literacy precedes a human yearning for a satisfying, fulfilled life such as white people enjoy. Sarny lies awake pondering the ay and ah sounds of A.

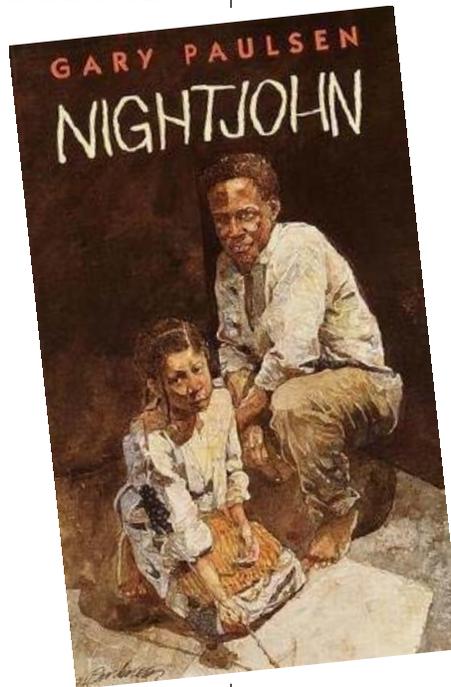
Chapter Four

On the evening that Nightjohn teaches Sarny the second letter, Delie hits him in the head before he can finish the lesson. She reminds him that Waller might whip Sarny or set the dogs on her for learning to

read. Nightjohn admits to having been whipped for running, but enlightens them with an amazing fact: his first flight took him to freedom. He learned to read, then returned to teach others reading and writing. Whites found him in the woods, where he had intended to set up "hidey-schools" to enable slaves to record their oppression by slave-owners.

Chapter Five

Nightjohn continues the lessons. After Sarny learns seven letters, she advances to writing BAG and, thrilled with her success, scribbles it often. Waller spies the word and demands to know where she learned it; she flees to the quarters. Waller follows her to Delie, whom he blames. He demands that



Delie divulge who has taught Sarny to read. To punish Delie and force her to divulge the information, Waller strips her naked, harnesses her to the buggy, and commands her to pull. As the lash forces her to strain against the weight, Nightjohn steps forward and admits that he is the teacher. Waller cites the law, which demands the “removal of an extremity” for a slave’s learning to read and count. He clips a toe from each of Nightjohn’s feet with a hammer and chisel.

Chapter Six

Delie binds Nightjohn’s feet with rags. On the night he teaches Sarny the letter H, Delie confronts Nightjohn for boldly defying the master, and he confides to her that he plans to escape in two more nights. The pair admire each other’s strength. To prepare for the escape, Nightjohn binds his injured feet and makes rawhide shoes, then coats the bindings and footwear with lard and pepper to confuse his scent so Waller’s hounds won’t be able to track him. He promises to return, but Sarny doubts this; she doesn’t believe anyone would risk more mutilation by the slave master.

Chapter Seven

That fall, Sarny’s menstrual period begins. She dreads the breeding shed. In winter, Nightjohn reappears and leads Sarny to a ditch along the river lit by three pitch torches. There, nine people from the Stankin and Placer plantations wait for lessons. In the few hours they have to study, Nightjohn displays a catalog; Sarny teaches what letters she knows.

Words

Late at night, Nightjohn makes his visits, leaving the tracks marked by the missing middle toes, and bringing with him “the way to know.”

Author Sketch

Prolific American author Gary Paulsen was born May 17, 1939, in Minneapolis, Minn., the son of Eunice and Oscar Paulsen. His father was a career military officer who fought in World War II under General George Patton; he and Paulsen’s mother were also alcoholics who made their young son’s life miserable and precarious. Early on, Paulsen’s unstable home life sometimes led him to seek shelter with relatives, some of whom entertained

him with storytelling; wilderness experiences also provided a refuge. Later, when family stress and the need to work an outside job contributed to poor performance at school, and low self-esteem nearly drove him to suicide, the young Gary took refuge in the public library, seeking to fill the gaps in his education by reading widely. He was aided in this quest by a sympathetic librarian. Of this “angel” in his life, Paulsen remembers, “When she handed me the (library) card, she handed me the world.”

After a year at Bemidji College in Duluth and three years in the Army, Paulsen worked as a field engineer for the aerospace departments of Bendix and Lockheed corporations. However, his real dream was to write, and one day he walked off his engineering job, never to return. While pursuing his writing dream, he worked as an editor and film extra in California. His first novel, *The Special War* (1966), drew on his military and engineering experience, and was so realistic that the FBI investigated his insider’s knowledge of missiles. Gary subsequently moved around the country, settling for a time in New Mexico, where his own struggles with alcoholism led to the break-up of his first marriage and the loss of his son and daughter (who were adopted by their stepfather). He finally started to gain control over his disease when he moved to Evergreen, Colorado, and began attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. His second marriage, to Ruth, a painter, has been lasting; they have a son and have collaborated on a book about Paulsen’s experiences with dog-sledding, *Dogteam* (1993). An avid outdoorsman, Paulsen divides his time between homes in Minnesota and New Mexico.

Critic’s Corner

Celebrated author Gary Paulsen has written numerous short stories, plays, screenplays, westerns, how-to books, and novels during a career that has spanned more than forty years and earned many awards, including several Newbery Honors. Drawing on his own hardscrabble early life, his books most frequently deal with survival and coming of age. In line with his stated goals to provide inspiration for kids and encourage them to read and get an education, he makes numerous school visits and guest appearances. Although he

takes a dim view of the adult world, he has great faith in children; he sums up his rapport with children when he claims, "We have been passive. We have been stupid. We have been lazy. We have done all the things we could do to destroy ourselves. If there is any hope at all for the human race, it has to come from young people. Not from adults."

Timeline: Slavery in the U.S.

- 1501** The Spanish bring slave to the New World for the first time when they settle in Santo Domingo in what is now the Dominican Republic.
- 1522** Slaves revolt on the island of Hispaniola (in what are now Haiti and the Dominican Republic)
- 1562** England enters the slave trade when John Hawkins becomes the first Briton to begin importing slaves; he makes a fortune transporting human chattel from Africa to Hispaniola.
- 1581** The Spanish bring slavery to the future United States when they settle in St. Augustine, Fla.
- 1619** Slavery comes to Virginia when the first Africans are brought to Jamestown. However, like indentured servants, these slaves were probably freed after a period of service.
- 1662** Virginia passes a law making slavery hereditary, decreeing that black children "shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother."
- 1705** Virginia passes a law formally decreeing slaves to be property, able to be bequeathed to others; masters are also given the legal right to "kill and destroy" runaway slaves.
- 1712** During an uprising, slaves in New York City kill whites. Nineteen rebel slaves are executed after the militia puts down the revolt.
- 1739** During a slave revolt in South Carolina, some 75 slaves take up arms and flee to Florida in a bid for freedom. The South Carolina militia crushes the revolt, during which 40 blacks and 20 whites are killed.
- 1775** The American Revolutionary War begins

in the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord on April 19 as colonists seek freedom from British rule, which is regarded as oppressive.

Anthony Beneze of Philadelphia founds the world's first abolitionist society. Benjamin Franklin becomes the society's president in 1787.

- 1776** The Continental Congress ratifies the Declaration of Independence, which asserts in part that the colonies "are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States."
- 1783** Revolutionary War ends with American victory.
- 1784** Congress narrowly defeats Thomas Jefferson's proposal to ban slavery in new territories after 1800.
- 1790** The first U.S. Census determines there are nearly 700,000 slaves in the nation of 3.9 million.
- 1793** The federal Fugitive Slave Act outlaws any attempts to interfere with capture of runaway slaves.
- 1794** Eli Whitney's cotton gin makes enables mass processing of raw cotton, turning cotton into a cash crop overnight. The result is a huge demand for slave labor in the American South.
- 1808** The U.S. bans importing slaves, but smuggling continues.
- 1820** In the Missouri Compromise, Missouri is admitted to the Union as a slave state, while Maine comes in as a free state. Slavery is forbidden in any future territories north of latitude 36°30' (the Mason-Dixon Line).
- 1822** In South Carolina, freed slave Denmark Vesey leads an ill-fated slave uprising; 35 participants are subsequently hanged.
- 1831** Nat Turner's Revolt, the bloodiest slave revolt in U.S. history, is led by Virginia slave-turned-preacher Nat Turner. The two-day uprising results in about 60 deaths, and is crushed by state militia. Turner himself was hanged after a two-month manhunt. Enraged white Southerners imposed new restrictions on slaves and free blacks as a result, and many Virginia slaves were traded into harsher servitude on the plantations of

- the Deep South. Nat Turner remains controversial to this day, because he counseled his followers to kill whites as they were freeing slaves.
- 1835** Southern states expel abolitionists and forbid the mailing of anti-slavery propaganda.
- 1846** The Mexican-American War begins. The two-year conflict results in a victory for the U.S. and the acquisition of vast territories in what becomes the American Southwest. With victory comes controversy: should the new territories be slave or free?
- 1847** Former slave Frederick Douglass begins publishing his newspaper, the North Star, in Rochester, N.Y. Douglass goes on to become a famed abolitionist and statesman, and one of the most sought-after public speakers of his time.
- 1849** Harriet Tubman escapes from slavery in Maryland on the Underground Railroad. She bravely returns at least 13 times to rescue dozens of other slaves, earning the nickname "Moses" after the Biblical prophet who led his people to the Promised Land.
- 1850** In the Compromise of 1850, Northern congressmen agree to a harsher Fugitive Slave Act—one forcing law officers even in free states to aid in returning escaped slaves—in exchange for letting California enter the Union.
- 1852** Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is published. It sells 300,000 copies within a year of its publication, making it a runaway best-seller for its time.
- 1854** By allowing the country's two newest territories to vote on whether or not to allow slavery, the Kansas-Nebraska Act overturned the Missouri Compromise and polarized the country, sending it on a collision course with civil war. In "Bleeding Kansas," Free-Staters and pro-slavery settlers clashed violently.
- 1857** In a decision that increased the inevitability of civil war, the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott decision that blacks could never be U.S. citizens and that Congress had no authority to outlaw slavery in any territory.

- 1860** Abraham Lincoln of Illinois becomes the first Republican to be elected president of the United States.
- South Carolina secedes from the Union.
- 1861** The rest of the South secedes in early 1861, and the American Civil War, or War Between the States, begins in April with the attack on Fort Sumter. The war continues until 1865. The bloodiest conflict in U.S. history, it claims some 620,000 lives. The war resulted in the deaths of 8 percent of Northern white males aged 13 to 43, and 18 percent of this group in the South. Fully 3 percent of the U.S. population was killed or injured in the war, and nobody was left unaffected. The current population of the U.S. is approximately 10 times what it was in 1861, so these losses would be the equivalent today of more than 6 million dead and more than 3 million injured.
- 1863** President Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves in Confederate territory.
- 1865** The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlaws slavery.

Selected Other Works by Gary Paulsen

- Mr. Tucket* (1968; 1994)
Winterkill (1976)
The Death Specialists (1976)
The Implosion Effect (1976)
C. B. Jockey (1977)
Tiltawhirl John (1977)
The Foxman (1978)
The Night the White Deer Died (1978)
Hope and a Hatchet (1978)
Meteorite-Track 291 (1979)
The Spitball Gang (1980)
The Sweeper (1980)
Compkill (1981)
Clutterkill (1982)
Popcorn Days and Buttermilk Nights (1983)
Dancing Carl (1983)
Tracker (1984)
Dogsong (1985)
Sentries (1986)
The Crossing (1987, 2006)
The Island (1988)
Murphy's Gold (1988)
Murphy's Herd (1989)

Night Rituals (1989)
The Winter Room (1989)
The Voyage of the Frog (1989)
The Boy Who Owned the School: A Comedy of Love (1990)
Kill Fee (1990)
Murphy's War (1990)
Canyons (1990)
Woodsong (1990)
The Cookcamp (1991)
The Monument (1991)
The River (1991)
A Christmas Sonata (1992)
Clabbered Dirt, Sweet Grass (1992)
The Haymeadow (1992)
Harris and Me (1993)
Sisters/Hermanas (1993)
The Car (1994)
Father Water, Mother Woods (1994)
Legend of Red Horse Cavern (1994)
Rodomonte's Revenge (1994)
Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod (1994)
Call Me Francis Tucket (1995)
Danger on Midnight River (1995)
The Rifle (1995)
The Tent: A Tale in One Sitting (1995)
Murphy's Ambush (1995)
The Tortilla Factory (1995)
Murphy's Trail (1996)
Worksong (1997)
Tucket's Ride (1997)
The Schernoff Discoveries (1997)
Soldier's Heart: A Novel of the Civil War (1998)
The Transall Sag (1998)
Alida's Song (1999)
Brian's Return (1999)
Canoe Days (1999)
Escape, Return, Breakout (2000)
Tucket's Home (2000)
The White Fox Chronicles (2000)
Sarny: A Life Remembered (2001)
Dancing Carl (2001)
Tucket's Gold (2001)
Canoe Days (2001)
Alida's Song (2001)
Captive (2001)
Puppies, Dogs, and Blue Northers (2002)
Brian's Hunt (2003)
The Beet Fields (2002)
My Life in Dog Years (2003)
The Glass Café; or, The Stripper and the State: How

My Mother Started a War with the System That Made Us Kind of Rich and a Little Bit Famous (2003)
Shelf Life: Stories by the Book (2003)
Caught by the Sea: My Life on Boats (2003)
White Fox Chronicles (2003)
Tucket's Home (2003)
Guts: The True Story Behind Hatchet and the Brian Books (2003)
Cookcamp (2003)
The Tent (1995)
The Quilt (2005)
The Winter Room (2005)
Brian's Hunt (2005)
World of Adventure Omni (2006)
Molly McGinty Has a Really Good Day (2006)
The Amazing Life of Birds: The Twenty-Day Puberty Journal of Duane Homer Leach (2006)
The Time Hackers (2006)
The Legend of Bass Reeves (2006)
Hatchet (2006)
Tracker (2007)
Woodsong (2007)
Captive (2009)
Dancing Carl (2009)
Lawn Boy (2009)
Mudshark (2009)
Notes from the Dog (2009)
Henry Moseley, Master of Disaster (2010)
Lawn Boy Returns (2010)
Woods Runner (2010)

Paulsen has also written volumes of short stories, nonfiction, books for children, the *Culpepper Adventures* series, the *World of Adventure* series, one-act plays, and screenplays.

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Related Reading

"Now Sheba Sings the Song," Maya Angelou
Souder, William Armstrong

"Bras Coupe," George Washington Cable
Slave Dancer, Paula Fox

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Ernest J. Gaines

Roots and Queen, Alex Haley

"The Negro National Anthem," James Weldon Johnson

Beloved, Toni Morrison

Tituba, Ann Petry

The Cay and Timothy of the Cay, Theodore Taylor

Jubilee, Margaret Walker

Except for Me and Thee, Jessamyn West

Black Boy and "Between the World and Me," Richard Wright

Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy, Annette Gordon-Reed

The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family, Annette Gordon-Reed

Sally Hemings: A Novel, Barbara Chase-Riboud.

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Gary Paulsen's style, present the following terms and applications in *Nightjohn*:

Universality: a quality or theme that applies to all people at all times. The struggle for freedom, dignity, and relief from abuse, and the heroic efforts to maintain human dignity in the midst of unspeakable conditions and unimaginable oppression, are transcendent themes.

Monomyth: also known as "hero's journey"; a sto-

rytelling pattern widespread across many cultures, in which a hero leaves the ordinary world for a supernatural realm, where he overcomes challenges and wins a victory, finally returning to the ordinary world with new powers that he can use to help others. The term was coined by cultural anthropologist Joseph Campbell and the idea set forth in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. There are elements of this form in the story of the title character, Nightjohn, who has a transformational experience—he undergoes a horrific maiming to save another person, escapes the plantation, then heroically returns to give the tools of freedom to others—and chooses to return to the "ordinary world" of the plantation, at great risk to himself, to give others the tools for freedom.

Melodrama: a work characterized by the use of stereotyped characters, exaggerated emotions and language, simplistic morality, and conflict. Nightjohn contains many melodramatic elements. There are no shades of gray in the portrayals of the slaves, the slave-owners, or antebellum Southern whites. Waller is a one-dimensional character, completely evil and entirely lacking in redeeming qualities; the black main characters—Sarny, Delie, and Nightjohn—are uniformly noble. Conditions on Waller's plantation would have been considered shockingly cruel even by his contemporaries, yet there is no suggestion they were anything but the norm. Similarly, no real concession is made to the idea that most people are a mixed bag—neither completely good nor completely evil. sensationalized dramatic or literary work: a dramatic or other literary work characterized by the use of stereotyped characters, exaggerated emotions and language, simplistic morality, and conflict

General Objectives

1. To comprehend the savagery of slavery
2. To isolate incidents of retrieval and punishment for runaways
3. To enumerate incidents of dehumanization
4. To compare Sarny's yearning for knowledge with Nightjohn's desire to teach
5. To contrast details of light and dark, pain and comfort, sorrow and joy
6. To analyze the symbol of the bag, the empty receptacle into which Sarny channels learning

7. To characterize Paulsen's confinement of setting to the plantation microcosm
8. To account for the treatment of slaves as animals, or worse
9. To locate examples of dialect and substandard English
10. To connect the date—the 1850s—to significant historical developments among abolitionists and supporters of slavery

Specific Objectives

1. To express Delie's brief attraction to Nightjohn
2. To describe Nightjohn's history as slave, fugitive, and teacher
3. To characterize Waller's need to punish slaves without wasting his investment
4. To account for Sarny's lack of understanding of currency
5. To contrast the vengeance of Waller's dogs with the hatred of his slaves
6. To describe Sarny's role as teacher and role model
7. To describe Delie's need to pray to and honor God
8. To analyze the irony of the spring house as the source of cool water and the site of degradation and torment
9. To project how Nightjohn and Sarny will utilize learning
10. To describe Sarny's joy in "knowing"

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in this historical novel. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers are given to find the context in which the item appears.

1. Mammy keeps a stick for each one of us and in the summer she cuts a notch on the stick for each of the girls so as to know when it will come time for the troubles and then the breeding. (Chapter 1, p. 16)
(Like prehistoric record keepers, who notched beams and knotted ropes, Delie, titular mother of all of Clel Waller's slave children, notches sticks annually to provide a rough accounting of birthdays. The significance of the "girls only" system reflects on the nature of life for slave women: once a girl becomes fertile, she can

expect "the troubles" a crude but accurate idiom for menarche in a system that treats women like breeding stock.)

2. Sometimes they come in not so bad. Spec'lators bring them to sell sometimes all in a wagon, sell them from the wagon and Waller he buys them one or two or whatever, right from the wagon. (Chapter 3, p. 25)
(Buying slaves from a market, speculator, or fellow plantation owner was a risky business. In crowded markets, slaves were hustled through rapidly, bid out before buyers had a chance to examine the merchandise, and transported near or far, sometimes killed in the act of eluding their captors. From barracoons, slave ship holds, and auction pens, whole coffles often contracted infectious diseases that killed them rapidly or spread disease to the plantation. Auction companies regularly burned out the pens with sulfur and sprinkled the ground with lime, but failed to eradicate insidious diseases like tuberculosis, which took years to kill. Speculators often profited from an auctioneer's plight by buying up infected coffles and selling them at bargain prices before symptoms of disease appeared. Thus, plantation owners were taking a chance in purchasing from unknown itinerant sellers.)
3. Other places, near here; other places have what they call overseers to use the Whip and to use the gun and go to get them. (Chapter 3, pp. 25-26)
(The use of an overseer had its assets and liabilities. If plantation owners relied on hirelings, the owners could live apart from the quarters in elite splendor, avoid unsightly quarters and misery, and leave the worries of missing, disobedient, thieving, or lazy slaves to the manager. If owners chose Waller's system, they had to spend more time supervising work, counting laborers, and dispatching patrollers or bounty hunters to return the escapees. According to Paulsen's depiction of Waller, he enjoys the role of bounty hunter and the blood sport of punishing and tormenting his prey.)
4. Even do they have to do their business they dig a hole with their hoe and do it standing and cover it with dirt and get back to work. (Chapter 3, p. 30)
(In numerous instances, the behaviors and purpose of slavery mimicked animal husbandry, and personal value for slaves was reckoned in

terms of work and potential revenue. Like plow mules or oxen, slaves had no privacy for their bodily functions. Trained to expect the whip for making human choices about defecating, urinating, resting, or taking refreshment, the slaves were forced to behave like plantation animals, or face cruel punishment.)

5. "What's a letter?"

He smiled. "You sound like you've got tobacco."

"Not until I know what a letter is. . . ." (Chapter 3. p. 34)

(Although Sarny has grown up in the constraints of slavery and possesses a single penny buried in the dirt and removed only for polishing, she values her trade item—tobacco leaf—and spends it wisely for something she can understand and utilize. Her business acumen suggests that the details of her birth give the false impression that she is "backward.")

6. I helped mammy clean Alice. We took her in the quarters and mammy she rubbed grease on Alice's back and I sat and held her hands because she kept trying to reach around and push mammy's hand away. (Chapter 4, p. 45) (Without salves, disinfectant, or soap, Delie has little choice but to rub Alice's wounds with salt to stem infection and to wipe away the fly eggs that can develop into maggots, which will gnaw the flesh and spread the damage done to muscle and skin. Like a pain-crazed animal, Alice, an imbecile who is unable to grasp the reason for the treatment, resists the hand that cleanses her wounds.)

7. The last bit, when he heard the dogs singing him, baying on him, Jim climbed a tree. (Chapter 4, p. 48) (Jim's abortive escape takes him a half day's run from the plantation. The voices of hunting hounds thin out to a single note, a plaintive, high-pitched whine that announces to the trainer that the quarry is within reach. Jim is unable to outclimb the dogs and is killed. He is even denied burial when Waller decides to leave his carcass as an example to others.)

8. "Fetch the salt," she told me. "Get it in these cuts and 'fore I pass out for God's sake cover me with something so I ain't naked before the Lord." (Chapter 5, p. 76) (Delie willingly anticipates the salt that will free her flesh of infection and fly larvae, even though she knows she will pass out from the pain. Her next objective is to recover her person-

al privacy and modesty, which have been violated by the sadistic Waller. She thinks of these things in religious terms, as honoring God by keeping covered.)

9. There is light, bright yellow from three pitch torches being held by three people. (Chapter 7, p. 86)

(Pitch, a gooey resin obtained from pitch bogs of decaying plant matter or from the ooze of conifers, burns with a hot flame and a dazzling light. Except for the smell, the brushy roof covers all other signs of the "hidey-school.")

10. Be quick now. We only have a couple of hours and I want to give you some letters. (Chapter 7. p. 88)

(Because a slave's day is determined by the number of daylight hours, winter, when the nights are longer, is Nightjohn's best time for teaching. In summer, the arrangement of a brush-covered school and hand-held pitch torch would be less suited to a hot climate and short night.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the book.

Questions 1-5 Literal Level

1. Describe Sarny's life before "the troubles." (The ten-year-old daughter of an unnamed breeder, Sarny was born "backwards"—a so-called "breech birth"—four years before her mother's sale. Since children born this way without medical assistance often suffered brain damage because of oxygen deprivation, others expect her to show evidence of mental retardation, or "witchin"; but her commentary reveals her to be an intelligent, curious, resourceful child who loves learning. She remembers nothing of her separation from her birth mother when she was four, accepting Delie as her foster mother. Although she is cared for and loved by Delie, there is no spare time for learning, or for any activity other than working, sleeping, and taking care of basic bodily functions.)
2. How does Sarny's life change after Nightjohn arrives? (Sarny's eyes miss nothing of the shameful way

in which Clel Waller introduces Nightjohn to the slave quarters. She sees his nakedness, scars from former whippings, the shackles and rope that tether him to Clel Waller's saddle. At night in the communal sleeping area, she is the first to trade tobacco in exchange for letters. With the beginnings of the alphabet, Sarny eagerly fills in the yearning for knowledge that she is unable to put into words. By the time she has mastered the sound and shapes of a letter for each of her fingers, she eagerly scribbles "BAG" as she makes the connection between word and object. The danger of violating a law is not unknown to her, but she is only a child, and her joy in literacy fills her with daring far beyond her ability to control.)

3. Why does Delie push Nightjohn away?
(The hard times come after Alice is severely whipped and lies broken and remote on the shelter floor. Meanwhile, Nightjohn and Sarny, undaunted by Alice's experience, willingly continue the nighttime lessons. When Delie first realizes that Nightjohn is teaching Sarny to write, she defies him and challenges his audacity at risking another severe whipping or the amputation of a toe or finger. A wise old woman, she has seen enough of Clel Waller's savagery and sadism to know that he will not spare Sarny the loss of a digit if he learns that she has broken the law. Rightfully, she blames Nightjohn for the endangerment, rather than the innocent Sarny.)
4. What is Clel Waller's role on the plantation?
(An unusual owner who eschews an overseer in favor of more direct contact, Clel Waller likes to ride his horse, arm himself with whip and pistol, and intimidate and scourge slaves to satisfy a sadistic urge to control and torture. When a slave escapes, Waller delights in releasing his red-haired hounds from their stone pen to pursue the fugitive. The hounds' bloodlust results in torn flesh and wasted slave lives. Jim dies still clinging to a tree; Pawley bleeds to death from the butchery of castration. Waller, motivated by cruelty, insists on exercising his "right" to destroy slaves, even though it means destroying his investment. A one-dimensional character, he is clearly a sociopath, and is probably not typical of most slave owners, who were not sadists but businessmen. However, his brand of extreme behavior certainly did happen in the plantation system, and—perhaps even more

shocking—was perfectly legal.)

5. How do slaves pay respect to Delie?
(The mother of the motherless, Delie tends the children, honors God, and prays when she feels she must risk breaking a rule to communicate with the almighty. Delie is the shelterer and keeper of the smallest slaves and the closest thing Sarny has to a friend and protector. After Clel Waller hangs her in the sun and strips her naked, the slaves look at the ground while he harnesses her to a buggy and forces her to serve as his dray. The scene overcomes Nightjohn and causes him to admit that he and not Delie is guilty of teaching Sarny.)

Questions 6-8 Interpretive Level

6. Why does Nightjohn risk capture, torment, whippings, and pursuit by hunting dogs?
(Nightjohn recalls the first flight from servitude and his own introduction to freedom and the initial taste of literacy—the power of printed letters and numbers and the "knowing" that comes with being able to decode their meanings. Violating a significant law forbidding education for slaves, he returns to slave territory to hide in the ditch schools, scribble letters in the dust, and read from his text, a catalog. Although he lacks the education to deliver a moving address on the importance of literacy, he reverences the "knowing," his purpose in risking capture by whiter hunters and the likely punishment, mutilation, and/or death to teach.)
7. Why is the trough a significant detail?
(Like a farmer slopping hogs or feeding mash or hay to cows and horses, Clel Waller uses the trough as a means of controlling his slaves and simplifying his work. He pours two communal daily feedings of corn bread, pork fat, and buttermilk for the slaves and knows that their hunger will drive them immediately to the source of nourishment. If any are missing, he can count and identify the fugitives and set the dogs on the trail before many hours have passed. On horseback and led by his dogs' baying, he soon rounds up his quarry and returns to a brutal, efficient agricultural operation.)
8. Why does Nightjohn lose toes?
(Waller blames Delie for Sarny's ability to read. Delie, who holds no grudge against her foster daughter and expects a whipping for some charge someday, patiently soothes Sarny's concerns and orders her to bring water and prepare

salt and rags. After Waller alters his usual beating to the humiliating buggy ride with Delie as horse, Nightjohn admits that he taught Sarny to read. Waller cites a law that forbids slaves to read and write on pain of losing a digit. Carefully choosing the middle toe of each foot, Waller hammers a chisel edge into Nightjohn's feet, severing each toe.)

Questions 9 and 10 Critical Level

9. Why is Sally Hemings a significant choice for Paulsen's dedication ?
(One of the most famous female slaves in U.S. history, Sally Hemings was a mixed-race woman inherited by Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha; researchers now believe that Sally was Martha's half-sister, the daughter of Martha's father and one of his slaves. At any rate, Sally Hemings resembled Martha and was an attractive, educated, and bilingual lady's maid. After Martha's death, Jefferson eventually took Sally Heming as his mistress—he was 45 and she was 16, a not-uncommon age differential at that time—and ultimately had several children with her. In his will, he made arrangements for her support and the freedom of his children. The connection between Jefferson and Sally Hemings was a matter of debate among historians for years, and was ultimately proven using DNA testing.)
10. How does Paulsen honor Sally Hemings with a work about a black teacher?
(The story of Nightjohn carries the elements of legend in the description of a proud, defiant, ebony-skinned man so marred by the Whip that his lash marks look like knitting. The daring of a man who tastes freedom and returns to share literacy ennobles the story and complements the curiosity and delight, of a bright child who knows that there is more to life than the small amount of learning she has gleaned from Delie and from yard work in the quarters. Still pure because she is too young for service in the breeder's shed, Sarny is ripe for the meager skills of a man who recognizes letters and words and sets himself up in ditch schools to share his small stock of wisdom with the untutored.)

Questions 11 and 12 Creative Level

11. Contrast the work of Thomas Jefferson's Virginia plantation with the ragtag operation run by the vengeful Clel Waller. Draw a schematic

layout of Monticello, its orchards, outbuildings, walks, pastures, and fields. List the skills and accomplishments of Jefferson—music, astronomy, invention, animal husbandry, agriculture, education, statesmanship, international diplomacy, design, and architecture.

12. Read aloud from slave narratives and determine what aspects of freedom lure many to flee plantations and cruel owners. Contrast these accounts with the fictional depictions of individual slaves and their sufferings in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Across the Curriculum

Art

1. Sketch a frieze depicting slave life: arriving in shackles, hoeing, tending the flower beds, eating from a trough, drinking from a calabash, stitching canvas pants, treating wounds with rags and grease, reading by pitch torch in the ditch school, and hanging in chains at the spring house being whipped by the master.
2. Compose a series of words from the first ten letters of the alphabet. Write them with a stick in finger paint or sand. Begin with bag.

Geography

1. Indicate on a wall map of the Western Hemisphere the Southern slave states. Indicate in the progression of emancipation in the Americas and the Caribbean. Add arrows showing the most common routes taken by runaways.
2. Draw a map of the slave triangle, which involved rum and sugar in a complicated route that brought slave ships to the Bight of Benin for more blacks, and west to the rum markets of the Caribbean and the slave auctions of Savannah, Charleston, and New Orleans.

Social Studies

1. Discuss the meanings of emancipation and jubilee. Describe how freedom of slaves was only a beginning of the struggle for full civil rights. Comment on desegregated schools and affirmative action. What barriers still stand between nonwhite people and full equality?'
2. Discuss the role of the "paterollers" and bounty hunters in maintaining the dangerous busi-

ness of returning runaways to their masters. Include information about the Dred Scott decision.

Mathematics and Logic

1. Explain the logic of setting up a “hidey-school” in winter. Why is darkness of value to Nightjohn and his pupils? Why does the length of the work day in summer lessen the opportunities to learn?
2. Explain the logic of feeding insufficient rations twice daily at a trough. How does this feeding method enable a farmer or plantation overseer to keep count of animals and slaves?
3. Estimate the worth of Nightjohn in current dollar figures. Surmise why Waller risks so high a cost for a badly whipped black field hand.

Science and Health

1. Explain the effect of salt on wounds. How does it feel? What are the benefits?

Language

1. Explain how Sarny learns the value of words. Contrast her coming to knowledge with that of Helen Keller in William Gibson’s, *The Miracle Worker*.
2. Make a chart of examples of dialect, idiom, euphemism, elision, and nonstandard English. Define each.

History

1. Make a time line of American slavery. Begin with the arrival of the first slaves and conclude with the arrival of the *Clothilde*, the last slave ship to carry African slaves to the United States. Name and describe these and other important figures: Tituba, Dred Scott, Frederick Douglass, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thaddeus Stevens, Nat Turner, John Brown, Sarah and Evelina Grimke, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, and Sojourner Truth.
2. Compile information about the first educational institutions; the Freedmen’s Bureau; Howard University; the work of William Lloyd Garrison, Mary McLeod Bethune, James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, Charles Chestnutt, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Marian Wright Edelman; and other voices for equality, learning, and the arts.

Student Involvement Activities

1. Compose a worksheet of exercises suited to illiterate adults that will teach them their letters, simple words, counting, and sentence structure. Center your choices on terms that farm workers would recognize—for example, lbs.
2. Compare the folkloric image of Nightjohn with the legendary figures of John Henry and High John the Conqueror. Explain how and why real people pass from history into legend, as did Davy Crockett, Pocahontas, Sacajawea, and Daniel Boone.
3. Improvise a conversation between Sarny and the pupils from the Stankin and Placer plantations. Devise ways to express the importance of coming to the ditch school and learning to read the catalog and write letters and numbers.
4. Contrast the lifestyle and work schedule of these figures: wet nurse, breeder, child slave, field hand, house servant, speculator, driver, overseer, mistress, and owner.
5. In a small group read aloud from slave narratives, especially *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Comment on the necessity of hard work, guile, learning, skills, trust in white abolitionists, and unity with other slaves.
6. Compose a letter, telegram, online message, or phone call to Gary Paulsen asking about Sarny’s story, where he got the incident, and what parts are fiction.
7. Draw a layout of the setting. Label the river, Stankin and Placer plantations, quarters, white house, spring house, carriage house, horse barn, blacksmith lean-to, stone dog pen, flower beds, and trough.
8. Listen to the lyrics of Negro spirituals sung by Kathleen Battle, Mahalia Jackson, or Jessye Norman.
Summarize the composer’s comparison of servitude and the predicament of Biblical Hebrews enslaved in Egypt. In what ways is Clel Waller like Pharaoh? How does Nightjohn compare with Moses and Aaron?
9. Write a theme on womanhood as it applies to Sarny, Alice, Margaret, Alaine, Delie, and Sarny’s mother. Why is Sarny ambivalent toward the notches on the stick that indicate her age? Why does Sarny belittle Alaine? How does Sarny’s mother express her regret in leaving the plantation? How is the “breeding” of slave women a means of dehumanizing them?

10. Write a brief history of Sally Hemings and her relationship to Thomas Jefferson. Research historical fiction, biographies, and for facts about Hemings's life, children, travels, and enslavement. Possible sources include *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, and the follow-up book, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, both by Annette Gordon-Reed; and *Sally Hemings: A Novel*, by Barbara Chase-Riboud.

Alternate Assessment

1. List examples of deprivation, want, suffering, fear, intimidation, and curiosity on the plantation.
2. Compile lines that express Sarny's uniqueness to Delie and Nightjohn.
3. Compose a scene in which Sarny reaches the final letter of the alphabet.
4. Make a character list and explain the relationship of each to slavery. Include Pawley, slaves of the Stankin and Placer farms, Nightjohn, Sarny, Alice, Pawley's girl, Alaine, Margaret, Delie, Clel, speculators, Robe, Sarny's mother, and Jim.

Vocabulary Test

Using the terms in parentheses, complete each sentence below with a detail from the novel.

1. (catalog) Nightjohn explains that

2. (extremity) The laws governing slavery

3. (root tea) Alice lay on the floor

4. (shackled) Nightjohn arrives on foot

5. (breeders) Mothers who serve the plantation

6. (witchin') Sarny senses when Nightjohn

7. (lip of tobacco) Before Sarny agrees

8. (corn-shuck pallet) The smaller children

9. (horse harness) Instead of the whip

10. (bottom leaf) Inside the shirtdress

11. (chain and bracelets) The wall of the spring house

12. (chisel) Waller calls for a block

13. (wick) Using cotton and fat, Delie

14. (speculators) Buying from traveling

15. (sassafras) Sarny notes that Nightjohn's color

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (30 points)

Match the following descriptions with characters. Choose your answers from the list of characters below. You may use some of the answers more than once and some not at all.

- | | | |
|-------------------|----------------|-------------|
| A. Alaine | F. Alice | H. Jim |
| B. Clel | G. Sarny | I. Stankins |
| C. Margaret | H. Pawley | J. Placers |
| D. Pawley's girl | I. speculators | K. Delie |
| E. Sarny's mother | J. Nightjohn | L. Robe |

- ___ 1. Doesn't whimper while the torn flaps of skin are sewn
- ___ 2. Changes the rags and tends the children for Delie
- ___ 3. Slowly obeys the command to hold John's foot
- ___ 4. Sleeps in his girlfriend's arms
- ___ 5. Hides a penny in the quarters
- ___ 6. Knows the letters LBS but doesn't know the meaning
- ___ 7. Prays in a large pot
- ___ 8. Dreads "the troubles"
- ___ 9. Cites the law on educating slaves
- ___ 10. Dies from dog bites
- ___ 11. Kicks Sarny in the stomach
- ___ 12. Spits tobacco on the flower bed
- ___ 13. Fears Clel will spend too much on slaves
- ___ 14. Sell slaves from a wagon
- ___ 15. Worth four field hands

Part II: Fact/Opinion (30 points)

Mark each statement either F for fact or O. for opinion. Justify your answer on the line that follows.

- ___ 1. Sarny is able to teach the "hidey-school" pupils the first ten letters of the alphabet
- ___ 2. Waller follows Nightjohn and tricks him with pepper and lard on rawhide shoes.
- ___ 3. Pawley runs to the blacksmith shed to get the chopping, block used to decapitate chickens.
- ___ 4. Alice refuses to enter the breeding shed and wanders the yard in search of her mammy.
- ___ 5. Nightjohn admits to escaping to freedom on his first try.
- ___ 6. The calabash gourd helps the smallest slaves reach the bottom of the trough
- ___ 7. Women like Sarny's mother never see their children grow up.
- ___ 8. Waller enjoys the job of overseer.
- ___ 9. Mammy sews canvas pants for Nightjohn because he arrives naked.
- ___ 10. Mammy loves Sarny too much to blame her for the punishment.

Part III: Identification (10 points)

Explain the significance of the following details:

1. spring house

2. BAG

3. pitch torch

4. extremity

5. prints in the dust

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Explain the significance of the following quotations:

1. Account for a law that forbids teaching slaves to read or count.
2. Enumerate Delie's motherly qualities.
3. Describe the slaves' first view of Nightjohn.
4. Summarize ways that Waller oppresses and intimidates slaves.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Choose a correct answer to complete each statement. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- ____ 1. According to the notched stick
 A. Sarny's mother must be sold.
 B. Sarny will soon be a breeder.
 C. Alice must leave the breeding shed.
 D. speculators should arrive with a new slave.
- ____ 2. Margaret fears that
 A. Clel has spent too much.
 B. Alaine will never marry.
 C. Delie prays to God.
 D. Nightjohn lurks along the river.
- ____ 3. Clel's anger is directed
 A. at runaways.
 B. at any slave.
 C. at Nightjohn.
 D. toward the law that requires removal of extremities.
- ____ 4. The block is used for
 A. punishing slaves.
 B. the blacksmith's work.
 C. slaves to stand on while harnessing the buggy.
 D. cutting heads off chickens.
- ____ 5. Sarny was four when
 A. Nightjohn first asked for tobacco.
 B. her mother was sold.
 C. speculators recovered Pawley
 D. Alice roamed the yard.
- ____ 6. Unlike most plantation owners, Clel
 A. uses tobacco juice on the flower bed.
 B. rides a horse and carries a gun.
 C. prefers not to hire an overseer.
 D. allows his slaves to pray.
- ____ 7. The men display their respect by
 A. lowering their heads before Delie's nakedness.
 B. refusing to enter the breeding shed with Alice.
 C. carrying Jim to the slave cemetery.
 D. feeding the red-haired hounds pork fat and corn bread.
- ____ 8. Sarny is deeply moved by
 A. pictures in the catalog.
 B. Pawley's night with his girlfriend.
 C. the meaning of "lbs."
 D. learning all the letters of the alphabet.
- ____ 9. Clel blames Delie for
 A. failing to pull the buggy.
 B. burying a penny.
 C. taking the cooking pot to the quarters

- D. teaching Sarny to write "bag."
 ____ 10. Nightjohn returns because
 A. slaves clamor to learn to read.
 B. he believes that reading is worthless without writing.
 C. he knows that the dogs will not recognize his scent.
 D. he knows how much the slaves need to learn.

Part II: Fill-in (30 points)

Complete each statement with answers from the list below.

bracelets	chisel	harness
sassafras	brambles	corn-shuck
lamp	singing	brimstone
crackers	lip	tobacco pouch
calabash	extremity	maggot
troubles	catalog	gin belt
pitch	whip	

1. He grabbed mammy by the wrist and dragged her out of the quarters and across the dirt to the spring house and _____ her in the chain and on the wall.
2. "I'll trade," he whispered. "I'll trade something for a _____ of tobacco."
3. Then the master he whipped her his ownself with a rawhide whip cut from an old _____ used on the cotton gin.
4. Waller catch me and he'd make a _____ out of my skin.
5. I'm brown. Same as dark _____ tea.
6. We take turns on a _____ gourd for a dipper to get all the milk out except the little ones don't always get much of a turn and have to lick the bottom of the trough when it's done.
7. Time was, mammy said, when she had a small bowl and made a _____ with a piece of cotton and melted pork fat but up to the white house they saw the light and made her put it out.
8. They usually go to sleep as soon as they hit the _____ pallets on the floor.

5. My mammy say that my birthing mammy stood in the back of a wagon and watched back and waved and my mammy held me up so I could see the waving and hear her crying.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (30 points)

- 1. F 6. J 11. B
- 2. G 7. K 12. G
- 3. L 8. G 13. C
- 4. H 9. 8 14. I
- 5. G 10. H 15. E

Part II: Fact/Opinion (30 points)

- 1. O 6. F
- 2. F 7. O
- 3. F 8. O
- 4. F 9. F
- 5. F 10. O

Part III: Identification (10 points)

- 1. the site of beatings, Delie's humiliation, and Nightjohn's mutilation
- 2. the word that Waller sees Sarny writing
- 3. light for Nightjohn's "hidey-school"
- 4. the cost of a finger or toe for breaking the law that forbids educating slaves
- 5. evidence that Nightjohn has arrived and is going to hold a night class

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- 1. C 6. C
- 2. A 7. A
- 3. B 8. A
- 4. D 9. D
- 5. B 10. D

Part II: Fill-in (30 points)

- 1. bracelets 6. calabash 11. brambles
- 2. lip 7. lamp 12. crackers
- 3. gin belt 8. corn-shuck 13. chisel
- 4. tobacco pouch 9. maggot 14. brimstone
- 5. sassafras 10. singing 15. pitch

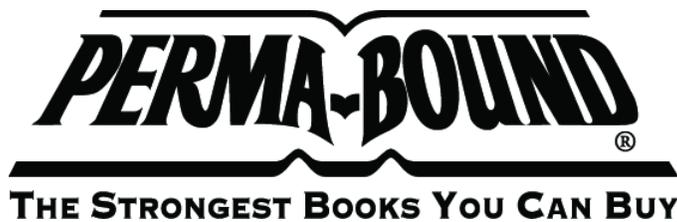
Part III: Setting Identification (20 points)

- 1. breeding shed 6. tree
- 2. wagon 7. flower bed
- 3. river road 8. springhouse

- 4. pallet 9. ditch
- 5. carriage shed 10. trough

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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