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From the Stacks

Peter Butts

Where To Turn After Paulsen's Hatchet

As I write, it's the season of survival: June. Days counted down, lockers cleaned out, shelves inventoried. Everyone drags out his or her favorite survival techniques. In my first year of teaching I learned to use bell work as a way of surviving and making productive those awful first minutes of each class period.

As a media specialist I adapted the trick to use a pop quiz at the beginning of each new research activity: three true/false questions to remind students of what they already know and to put the arcane vocabulary of the media center back on the front burner of their brains. The fourth question is the hard one: "What is your current favorite book?"

Seven years later I have quite a stack of these half sheets of paper. Actually, it's become two stacks; early on I noticed the gender differences in the responses. To the extent that anyone can generalize by gender, I have found differences in the variety and the sources of titles cited. Girls regularly cite books found outside the media center collection. Responses from the girls of individual classes or grade levels demonstrate patterns of discussion and book sharing. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to cite books that have been booktalked or read to them. The titles most frequently mentioned by the boys have remained the same over the years.

The author boys most frequently cite is Gary Paulsen. The overwhelming favorite book is *Hatchet*. Why is this slim adventure so popular? Like many YA novels, the protagonist is in the midst of family problems. The action doesn't begin until all of the adults, including the pilot of

the small plane carrying Brian to visit his father in remote Canada, are out of the way. The pilot's heart attack forces Brian to take charge, crash land the plane, and survive for 54 days until he is rescued. Brian discovers that he can depend on himself, drawing on resources he never knew he had.

If the appeal of the novel as a literary form is the rich, vicarious experience, then the survival story is the perfect genre for adolescent males. The current crop of YA survival novels fit neatly in the traditions of Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Jack London, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Most are short in length, tend to fall at the fourth to sixth grade reading level, and depend on the growth of the main character for plot. The formula is simple (budding novelists, take note): (1) protagonist is alone, often both physically alone and emotionally alienated; (2) there are no adults to depend on or to inhibit the protagonist's emerging independence; (3) the protagonist must face his/her fears, doubts, and limitations; (4) physical change and accomplishments are symbolic of the protagonist's transformation; (5) the wilderness tends to be symbolic of the protagonist's personal challenges; (6) reintegration into society with a hero's welcome is inevitable, although dramatically unnecessary.

YA survival stories offer their protagonists exactly what their readers need: accidental rites of passage.

Teen boys looking for other books “just like *Hatchet*” won’t be disappointed although they will need to look beyond the prolific Paulsen. Experimenting widely with other genres, Paulsen has only three other novels which fit the formula: *Dogsong*, *The Voyage of the Frog*, and *The River*. While the Newbery Honor Book *Dogsong* is a treat for good readers and Paulsen fans, its introspective style makes it less appropriate as a follow-up to *Hatchet*.

As for the actual sequel, *The River*, the setting is intentionally artificial, a subtlety that can be as frustrating for teens as it is for many of us adults. The government wants Brian to go back into the wilderness, this time with a psychologist to observe him in order to teach the military how to mentally prepare for survival. But there’s no tension for 40–some pages other than Brian’s sense that the whole experiment is a joke. Finally mother nature steps in, and the psychologist is hit by lightning. Brian now faces a real emergency: get the man downriver to civilization before he dies.

True to the formula, in *The Voyage of the Frog* David sets out in the Pacific in a 22-foot sailboat to scatter the ashes of his beloved uncle Owen. Preoccupied with fulfilling his uncle’s dying wish, David is unaware of the approaching storm and finds himself blown hundreds of miles off course with no radio or flares and little food. Nothing can prepare you for shark attacks, a pod of killer whales, or near collision with an oil tanker. But David’s not alone; he comes to realize that the boat, *The Frog*—his uncle’s guiding spirit—is with him.

My first recommendation as a follow-up to *Hatchet*, though, is *Wild Timothy* by Gary Blackwood. Thirteen-year-old Timothy starts out a bit bookish and introspective for most readers, but it only takes two short chapters for the involuntary camping trip with his macho dad to turn into a fight for survival. Timothy gets turned around in the woods while hunting for firewood, slashes open his leg tripping over the ax, and smashes his glasses. His stomach rebels against

the water and berries. But with the inspiration of a paperback copy of *Lord of the Flies* (the pages ultimately must do double duty), he survives.

Arthur Roth’s first YA novel, *The Iceberg Hermit*, is based on the true story of seventeen-year-old Allan Gordon who survives the shipwreck of a Greenland whaling ship in 1757. Salvaging supplies from the ship, which had capsized and then frozen fast to the iceberg, Allan manages to survive several seasons on the iceberg along with an orphaned polar bear cub. Later Allan is rescued by an Eskimo hunting party. He stays with this strange group that he believes to be descended in part from Vikings for a few years before returning home to Aberdeen.

Arthur Roth also wrote *Avalanche* about youngest brother Chris Palmer. Attempting to prove himself as tough as his older brother, Chris goes after a coyote while on an early spring ski across the Salmon Springs valley. But the shot that kills the coyote also triggers an avalanche. For awhile Chris can ski down the leading edge of snow, but eventually it overtakes him. When the rumbling stops, Chris is still standing, he’s just covered by six or sixty—he can’t tell and it probably doesn’t matter—feet of snow. For the next week, Chris must figure out how to keep alert, how to keep from freezing, how to keep an open source of air, and how to let someone know where he is.

In *Snowbound*, Harry Mazer also uses that momentary lapse of reason, a moment’s hot-dogging, as a catalyst for disaster. At fifteen, Tony Laporte’s used to getting his own way. When his parents refuse to let him keep a stray dog, Tony runs off in his mother’s old Plymouth, unaware of a pending snowstorm. Along the way, he picks up a hitchhiker named Cindy Reichert. Automatically Tony starts showing off for her, and it takes them off the road into a snowy ditch. The dynamics of the survival novel change with two characters. All of the inevitable doubts and fears each protagonist feels begin to pour out of the mouth of the other character, creating tension and yet another obstacle to overcome. But each brings different talents; Tony knows how to get the car started again and Cindy has the courage to start and control a small fire inside the car. They

continue to rebel against each other and do stupid things but still manage to work together to get help after eleven days.

Mazer's *The Island Keeper* offers up a similar main character. Distraught after her beloved sister's accidental drowning, overweight, rich, and spoiled, Cleo runs away to her father's rugged island in Canada. Unlike most survival protagonists, Cleo comes prepared. She stops in Toronto and buys every gadget and gizmo the sales clerk recommends. Still she's unprepared for the sight of the cabin burned to the ground. And no gadget or gizmo can help overcome the voice inside that keeps reminding Cleo how fat, how spoiled, how pathetic she is. Determined to prove her independence, she stays through the middle of winter, finally crossing the ice to the mainland as a very different person.

In Edward Myers' *Climb Or Die*, Danielle and Jake must go for help when their parents are badly hurt in a car accident on a snowbound mining road in Colorado. Athletic Danielle has taken a mountaineering course, while the more intellectual Jake remembers seeing a map showing a weather station atop nearby Mt. Remington. Together they secretly decide that climbing the mountain is a safer bet than trudging through the snow back to the highway. A budding inventor, Jake ransacks the back of the Blazer for an

assortment of tools that he hopes will substitute for the climbing equipment they will need. With a healthy suspension of disbelief, the climb makes for an exciting read.

With an easily recognizable formula, survival stories painlessly teach the basic concepts of literature—plot, setting, and characterization—while offering a body of work to a group of teens who may not have discovered the pleasure of reading. Pack lots of supplies and enjoy the trip!

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