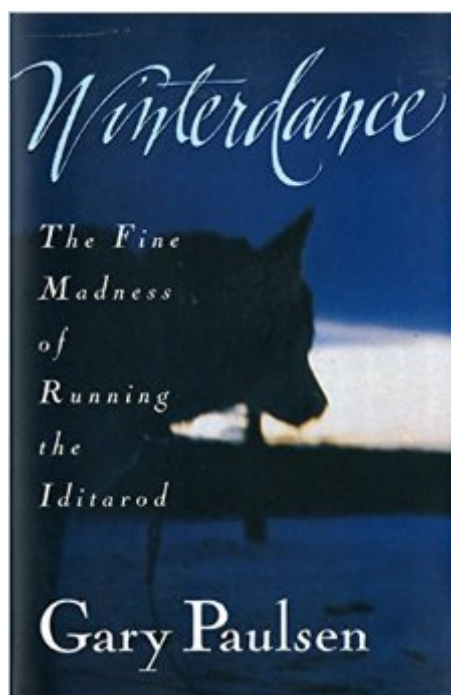


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Winterdance: The Fine Madness Of Running The Iditarod



Synopsis

Paulsen and his team of dogs endured snowstorms, frostbite, dogfights, moose attacks, sleeplessness, and hallucinations in the relentless push to go on. Map and color photographs.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I made the grave mistake of trying to read this book while on a public bus. It wasn't long before I realized the folly in this, as I repeatedly had to stifle the wild guffaws that threatened to pour forth without my consent. The other passengers probably came to the conclusion that I was either very sick or slightly deranged as I rocked back and forth in my seat and tried to pretend that I was, in fact, merely coughing. Gary Paulsen has offered us one of the most hilarious accounts of running the Iditarod that I have ever come across. Living in Minnesota, Paulsen had a small team of five dogs that he used to work his traplines. Over time he became more and more entranced with mushing, until he eventually realized that wanted to, needed to, run the Iditarod - the 1,100+ mile dogsled race stretching across the state of Alaska between Anchorage and Nome. The first half of the book deals with his preparation for the race - finding more dogs, training the dogs, getting the right equipment, etc. We soon see that he has quite a bit to learn. Over the course of this training period, Paulsen finds himself attacked by dogs, run away with by dogs, and often spending many miles being dragged along on the ground behind his sled by dogs. He manages to break his sled repeatedly, get separated from his team, and one night, get sprayed by five different skunks in rapid succession. He is, in short, one of the least qualified of all possible Iditarod candidates. The second half of the book takes us through the race itself. In the beginning, he makes every possible rookie

mistake. He gets lost before even leaving the city of Anchorage, after putting the wrong animal in the lead-dog position: "We went through people's yards, ripped down fences, knocked over garbage cans. At one point I found myself going through a carport and across a backyard with fifteen dogs and a fully loaded Iditarod sled. A woman standing over the kitchen sink looked out with wide eyes as we passed through her yard and I snapped a wave at her before clawing the handlebar once again to hang on while we tore down her picket fence when Wilson [the lead dog] tried to thread through a hole not much bigger than a housecat. And there is a cocker spaniel who will never come into his backyard again. He heard us coming and turned to bark just as the entire team ran over him; I flipped one of the runners up to just miss his back and we were gone, leaving him standing facing the wrong way barking at whatever it was that had hit him" (pg. 145). Much of the first half of the race is a series of such uproarious follies. Unbeknownst to him at the time, the other mushers had voted Paulsen the least likely competitor to get out of Anchorage. But he eventually did, and he ultimately manages to muddle his way through the entire race. As the journey goes on, the book becomes a little more serious as we see Paulsen undergo a transformation. He learns about himself, about the dogs, and about life. He feels himself become one with the frozen world of the north, eventually feeling more at home there than he had with his wife and family in Minnesota. There are sad parts, too. We see a beloved dog trampled to death by a moose before the first day is over. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon occurrence. Moose do not yield the right-of-way to dog teams, and can be extremely dangerous when upset. We also see a maddened musher kill one of his own dogs in a fit of rage. Killing or abusing dogs during the race is strictly prohibited, and the man was duly disqualified, but I still found this the hardest part of the book to read. 'Winterdance' is a magnificent story of a man following his dream and gaining a wealth of knowledge about himself and the world. Paulsen's easy, self-deprecating humor and vivid verbal imagery bring the story to life. It is also a fast read - I finished the book in one day. I have rarely read anything that has made me laugh so hard, or that has moved me so much by the end. Growing up in Alaska, I always watched the Iditarod start in Anchorage. I've met some of the winning mushers. But Paulsen's story is entirely unique. He was not a race champion or mushing hero, but the rankest rookie out there. And yet he endears himself to our hearts. For any fan of dog mushing, wilderness survival stories, or both, I recommend this book without hesitation.

Winterdance by Gary Paulsen is an absolutely fascinating and entertaining depiction about how one man lives out his dream of running in the Iditarod sled-dog race. From the moment we meet Gary and his dog team in a winter storm in Minnesota till the time he gets dragged down Dalzell Gorge in

Alaska, his optimism, his observations and his relationship with his dogs keeps one glued to the pages of this book. Paulsen's personal account is easy reading in that he does not dwell in complex literary style, use large words or go overboard in describing deep characters or flowery scenery. He merely relates what he sees and feels. Often his mission is just staying alive and attached to his sled. His descriptions about his summer training with a bicycle and a car body leave you laughing out loud and in wonder about his perseverance and dedication to his dream " You look like a toy", Ruth (his wife) said as I came back from being dragged out of the yard on my face, hanging on to the overturned rig. " A big doggie toy...." "Out of the first twenty runs, I didn't once leave the yard in one piece." His sense of humor is overwhelming as he tackles training a dog team without any instruction, without a book or manual but only his desire to run dogs to keep him going. "In subsequent runs I left the yard on my face, my ass, my back, my belly. I dragged for a mile, two miles, three miles. I lost the team eight, ten times; walked twelve, seventeen, once forty-some miles looking for them. The rig broke every time we ran...." "I once left the yard with wooden matches in my pocket and had them ignite as I was being dragged past the door of the house, giving me the semblance of a meteorite, screaming something about my balls being on fire at Ruth, who was laughing so hard she couldn't stand." Picturing this scene has got to put a smile on your face even if you can suppress an outward giggle. In between the excitement, thrill and adventure of the Iditarod is the story of the dogs. Each dog has its own personality, each has its role in the team. One learns to respect the lead dog and the decisions they must make for " their choices can literally mean life or death for the team and driver, often when the driver cannot see what is happening." However you often wonder why keep a dog like Devil who won't hesitate to pick a fight, bite the hand that feeds it or cause chaos within the team. Yet he is integral to the whole dog team and Gary reflects about the "bond" between driver and dogs as follows. " Dogs rarely violate this relationship(the bond)-virtually never. Devil may bite me, might kill other dogs, but by god he pulled and would die pulling and that was a kind of love. I have watched them work, always in awe-and not a little love- and sometimes what they are, out ahead of me, the curve from me up through the sled and gangline into the dogs, all of us moving for some new horizon, sometimes it becomes more, becomes spiritual, religious." It is these reflections interspersed between the gruelling physical pain of running eleven hundred and eighty miles in bitter cold, gale force wind and over terrain that makes the moon seem civilized that makes this book so special. Paulsen finishes the race, and we find out he runs it again. But in the end he is advised "You'll have to lead a normal life". A line on the final page sums up what the Iditarod and this fine piece of writing is all about. Gary says "How can it be to live without the dogs?" For those who love animals, have had a chance to work and play with dogs or for those who just like

a good book written from the heart and soul, Winterdance is a must read.

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