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Goodbye to Society, Welcomed by Nature

For class we read *The Modern Hunter-Gatherer* by Michael Pollan and *Higher Laws* by Henry Thoreau, and while reflecting for the forum question I began to think about different books I had read when younger that had a wilderness survival aspect, especially when it led to a significant impact or change on the one going through the experience. In both of their writings, they talk about Nature and different experiences in or connected to spending time out in Nature in various ways, with a focus on hunting. "Walking with a loaded rifle in an unfamiliar forest bristling with the signs of your prey is thrilling. It embarrasses me to write that, but it is true." (Pollan, 1) Something they both seemed to agree on is how when it comes to hunting and the way it is viewed in society, commonly it is seen as primitive in some way and exciting, as well as savage or macho.

As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented. (Thoreau, 140)

In the writing from Pollan, he seemed focused on his personal experience hunting pigs, the way he in a way became one with nature while waiting in a hidden position for any sign of the pigs he was there for, and the way his senses turned to a whole other level in a way he had never experienced before. Pollan talks about the hunter's "instinct" and how the hunter instinctively becomes more like the animal when trying to make himself less visible, less audible, and much more alert. There are observations on how Pollan felt at different points over the hunt, and how some interactions with the others in his hunting party made him feel as a result of things Pollan had done, or forgotten to do at some point or another. Whether or not you have hunted before, this experience is described very well in many ways so it is not hard to really feel, in some way, part of all that is happening.

Then with Thoreau, he talks about hunting and Nature as well, but in a very different way that still, in my opinion, hits just as hard and means just as much as the very personal and

descriptive story Pollan gave. In this chapter, Thoreau explores the idea of moral and spiritual growth, arguing that each person needs to try and live according to a higher law instead of the basic instinctual or physical needs of life. In some ways he compares humans to animals, but also going on to discuss how humans are not just animals driven by instinct, but also possess a higher spiritual nature that needs to be cared for and helped to grow. Nature is important in this as Thoreau talks about hunting and how boys should be taught to shoot, but as sportsmen, not hunters, who will at some point leave the fishing pole and gun behind to become men of intellect. In this chapter Thoreau does acknowledge that he finds himself in a spiritual life and a savage life, and that he loves and respects both of those sides.

After reading those two passages, I wanted to look into the wilderness survival narrative in young adults literature and the way that it is depicted, along with hunting for survival and at times, as a rite of passage. There are many books I remember having read for school, on my own or with one of my parents that have in some way an element of nature, survival, hunting, change and more. Among the many books that came to mind from my younger years, a series of books referred to as the Brian Saga by children's and young adult fiction author Gary Paulsen that starts with the novel *Hatchet* came to mind right away. Paulsen is most well known for his coming-of-age stories about the wilderness and was the author of more than 200 books, more than 200 magazine articles and short stories, and several plays, all primarily for teenagers.

The main character, thirteen year old Brian, becomes stranded in the Canadian wilderness on his own after a plane crash leaves him as the only survivor with only his new hatchet, a gift from his mother, attached to his belt as a tool. Over the course of the time spent on his own learning to survive by trial and error, Brian undergoes a change that leaves who he was before the crash in the past, something that does not bother him. "Not bad, he had thought, not bad for somebody who used to have trouble greasing the bearings on his bicycle. Not bad at all." (Paulsen, 130) Brian reflects at times on the things he has learned, the ways he has changed and how there are things he used to struggle with in his life before the plane crash that left him stranded on the lake alone. He welcomes how he has changed, how he has grown.

The author Gary Paulsen seems to write paragraphs that are made of a few long and short sentences which makes it feel more like a teenager is narrating the story. Thoughts running

together and going on and on, but still being very clear and easy to follow with what is going through Brian's head, as well as how he sees the things going on around him in this place that has become his home. Even if there isn't a ton of extremely detailed descriptions of the world around Brian and what he sees, it is still very clear how things look with the simple descriptions. Then with the way Paulsen writes the paragraphs, it splits up what is happening perfectly so it is clear when one thought has ended and another has begun and while these thoughts can still be connected, they don't all run together in an unnecessarily long paragraph. Paulsen is very good at using paragraph breaks to organize what is going on, and to make sure the story is easy to follow and keeps the reader interested.

What stands out to me the most regarding Paulsen's Brian Saga, is that for almost the entire story there is only really one character that exists in the environment most of the story takes place, more specifically a human character. Brian interacts with various animal species and types of plants, but the only humans he interacts with exist only in the first and last few pages. For the majority of the story, Brian is completely isolated from other people, and from all aspects of human society. When it comes to wilderness survival narratives, and is especially true for the Brian Saga, this type of story is one that seems to put special demands on its protagonist to create and rely upon relationships with nonhuman subjects. Then at times, the protagonist also needs to create and rely on unusual human subjects outside the typical reliance structure of the nuclear family as well in order to survive.

The broad subject area within "Posthumanism" I found myself wanting to explore is how nature, rites of passage, physical, mental and emotional change, hunting and survival are shown in young adult literature and possibly how it impacts those who read those books. The focus will be on hunting, nature and survival outside of human society and how that is part of literature written specifically for young adults. I decided to look for what impacts the characters actions and how they learn to survive, how the character survives in and adapts to the new environment, as well as the difference technology can make on how a character feels related to where they are. What message is being written into young adult wilderness survival narratives, and how is change or personal growth from problem solving shown throughout the story? What happens when a young adult is removed from their natural environment and placed in a setting and

situation that they never anticipated? How does a character learn to use their head when life gets out of hand and realize they are capable of more than they could have imagined?

Passage One:

The wolf watched him for another time, another part of his life, then it turned and walked effortlessly up the hill and as it came out of the brush it was followed by three other wolves, all equal large and grey and beautiful, all looking down on him as they trotted past and away and Brian nodded to each of them.

He was not the same now—the Brian that stood and watched the wolves move away and nodded to them was completely changed. Time had come, time that he measured but didn't care about; time had come into his life and moved out and left him different.

In measured time forty-seven days had passed since the crash. Forty-two days, he thought, since he had died and been born as the new Brian. (Paulsen, 117)

The environment a person spends a prolonged amount of time in plays a part in what they are like, how they see things, how they think, the way they interact with others, with animals and with nature. The experiences Brian has had leading up to the encounter with the wolves have changed who he is, because of how different the lake and forest is from where he grew up. From personal experiences in nature, I know how different it can be when in nature especially when it is in a place that is more removed from human society, a place that is so very different in its rules and way of running than the place you grew up. Within a summer camp I worked at for a number of years the environment there was a strange mix combining elements of modern society with camping and nature in a way that allowed kids to explore situations and activities they might not have ever gotten to where they grew up, but in a somewhat controlled environment. At this camp I was a Target Sports instructor teaching riflery, archery, axe throwing and shotgun shooting to the campers, boys and girls, between the ages six and seventeen. Many of the campers had never held a firearm, bow, or axe before and did not quite know what to do, what to expect, or what was expected of them since the only reference they had normally was from video games, films and television shows. Watching how the opportunity to try a target sport for the first time and being the one to help them through it safely was interesting for me, and I would notice how many campers would then act differently, even if only barely noticeable, after firing a rifle for the first time and realizing it isn't as terrifying as it was made out to be.

Those experiences change you, there is no way that they would not, but the change that happens and the amount of what changed that stays after returning to human society can vary from person to person. Brian was on his own at the lake and only had himself to rely on, Brian had to use trial and error in order to survive in a place that was so different from what he was used to, but that process of trial and error was not risk free. The wrong choice or small mistake could have serious consequences and often times it did, which led to situations he needed to navigate, but because of it, Brian was born again in a way that never would have been possible in the environment he grew up in, and in a way that positively affected him then and later in the future throughout his life and the book series.

Brian had been stranded on his own in the Canadian wilderness for forty-seven days at the time he encountered the wolves in the passage above, and he had to learn how to survive with little to no past experience or knowledge on how to do so. Within that time, the thirteen year old Brian had faced numerous challenges and learned many new skills through trial and error, and it is because of the things Brian had experienced and what he learned through the time on the lake that he changed. Mistakes were made and he learned from them because he had to, Brian's options were to adapt and survive or to die, leading to Brian taking things one day at a time and learning more each and every day. In the time before getting stranded at the lake and being born as the new Brian, it is likely that he had never seen a wolf in person or been that close to a small group of them. By being in nature, becoming one with nature in a sense and learning to exist following the rules all other animals followed, Brian opened himself up to encounters and possibilities that would not have been possible for the old Brian. One thing that was consistently on my mind while reading back through *Hatchet* as well as the various articles I had found, is that it is truly amazing what we are capable of learning and the chance a person can go through if they simply open their mind to it.

Brian understands that he is different at the time he is nodding to the wolves than when he first got stranded at the lake, and is acknowledging that difference, as well as how time no longer means as much to him. Even though Brian has been keeping track of the days since the plane first went down, as well as when he had died and been born as the "new Brian", the amount of time passing doesn't mean anything to him. It is no longer that important because

outside of human society, time does not have the same meaning or purpose since animals don't need to know what hour of day it is to find food or shelter. All they need are their instincts and all knowledge learned from experiences. For Brian time is no longer that important and keeping track of it is more of a habit as well as something to keep hope alive. There are other things that are more important to him as the new Brian that calmly stands his ground, lowers his handmade spear and bow, and nods to the four wolves walking away from him.

I believe that this is one of the passages that really shows how Brian has changed in the time that he has been stranded at the lake in multiple ways, mainly in how he interacts with the wild wolves and his opinion on keeping track of the time that has passed. "Time had come, time that he measured but didn't care about; time had come into his life and moved out and left him different." (Paulsen, 117) Time passes, but it no longer has the same meaning as it did, and this does not bother Brian, time has come and gone and left him different than he had been before, but it is the change that matters.

The days had folded one into another and mixed too that after two or three weeks he only knew time had passed in days because he made a mark for each day in stone near the door to his shelter. Real time he measured in events. A day was nothing, not a thing to remember—it was just sun coming up, sun going down, some light in the middle.

But events—events were burned into his memory and so he used them to remember time, to know and to remember what had happened, to keep a mental journal.

There had been the day of First Meat. (Paulsen, 133)

One thing Brian says sticks out to me the most here with how much it really means and how important it is going forward. "...since he had died and been born as the new Brian." (Paulsen, 117) The old him had died, and the new Brian is there, the time spent in the Canadian wilderness on his own has changed Brian in ways that can not be undone, and it doesn't seem like this is something that bothers Brian at all. It doesn't seem like he wants this change to be undone, and this is supported towards the end of the novel when going through the survival pack he recovers from the plane, noting how some items inside the pack were set aside because he didn't like how he felt holding them.

Passage Two:

It was a strange feeling, holding the rifle. It somehow removed him from everything around him. Without the rifle he had fit in, to be part of it all, to understand it

and use it— the woods, all of it. With the rifle, suddenly, he didn't have to know; did not have to be afraid or understand. (...)

The rifle changed him, the minute he picked up, and he wasn't sure he liked the change very much. He set it aside, leaning it carefully against the wall. He could deal with that feeling later. The fire was out and he used a butane lighter and a piece of birchbark with small twigs to get another one started— marveling at how easy it was but feeling again that the lighter somehow removed him from where he was, what he had to know. With a ready flame he didn't have to know how to make a spark nest, or how to feed the new flames to make them grow. As with the rifle, he wasn't sure he liked the change.

Up and down, he thought. The pack was wonderful but it gave him up and down feelings. (Paulsen, 180)

This passage shows what I brought up earlier about my belief that Brian does not want the change he has gone through to be undone in any way, that the ways he is now different compared to before the crash are actually welcome changes. Brian has been surviving in the wilderness on the lake on his own for some over fifty days by this point in the story, and all he had at the start of the story as a physical tool was a hatchet gifted by his mother. Everything else Brian used to survive were things that he had to make himself using nature and the resources that were there in the area available to him. And Brian was able to make and build many things that aided in his survival and change which is more impressive when taking into consideration the lack of prior knowledge or experience in building shelters and tools. Then for all the things Brian made, the only proper tool he had was the hatchet and with that over time and through trial and error Brian was able to build or make a shelter, fire, a spear, and a bow and arrows. To survive, Brian became part of nature and was accepted into it as he did not try and turn the lake into something it was not, did not try to make it look more like the city he grew up in, was not being influenced by human society. Brian's inspiration and influence came from that he had around him, from nature, and using that he created what would typically be considered a primitive shelter and crude survival tools or weapons such as the double pronged spear and small wooden bow and arrows.

Then towards the end of the story after a very strong storm comes through the area, the plane that had crashed and left Brian stranded on the lake was shifted in the water so the tail could be seen above the water. This brought back the memory of the pilot telling him about the

survival pack the plane carried, leading to Brian beginning to come up with a plan to try and retrieve that pack. Using the hatchet and all the skills and knowledge Brian had gained over the time spent at the lake, he was able to create a raft and a plan that led to him retrieving the survival pack. The part of the book that had the biggest impact on me when younger and when reading it again over break this semester, was when Brian had gotten the pack and was going through its contents that seem like treasure to him, feeling like the richest man around. But when looking at the passage above, the reader will see what impacted me the most, that there are two sides to how the items and tools Brian now has make him feel, that the pack is not full of only good things that Brian is happy to have.

Sure he is more than excited to see the large selection of dried and packaged food, the cooking pots and utensils that allow him to actually cook with water, a sleeping bag and foam sleeping pad, the bar of soap which gives him the ability to really wash his hair more than with lake water. But then comes specifically the butane lighters and the .22 survival rifle which he had only ever seen in sporting goods stores before pulling it out of the survival pack and figuring out how to assemble it. “It was a strange feeling, holding the rifle. It somehow removed him from everything around him. Without the rifle he had fit in, to be part of it all, to understand it and use it— the woods, all of it.” (Paulsen, 180) Holding the rifle changes Brian, he isn’t the new Brian he had become and he isn’t quite the old Brian either, he is simply different, removed from his environment and no longer part of the woods, no longer part of the natural world around him that had become his home.

To some degree this was a moment I was able to relate to, more so at my current age with the experiences I have had in nature and in the world, and this made me think for some time about how well humans seem to be able to adapt to new environments. And how even after they have adapted and changed in smaller or larger ways in order to survive and thrive, coming into contact with something helpful or someone familiar from the environment they used to be in can feel off or no longer as welcome. The person has changed and that change is not something that can just be undone, pushed down or forgotten, it is a permanent part of who they are and it will remain with them for the rest of their life even after leaving the environment that initiated the change. As mentioned above I was a Target Sports instructor at a summer camp for several years,

and the time spent at that camp certainly changed me in ways I didn't fully understand or notice at first, and I believe there are things that changed I haven't yet figured out.

One of the biggest things is the lack of technology to a degree, as campers are not allowed their phones or other pieces of technology and this applies to counselors as well unless they were on time off in the staff lounge or off site. Getting used to not having my phone wasn't too hard even if when off I would have access to it, but getting used to carrying it around with me at all times after camp had ended was a bit more of a struggle. The way the camp is run and the duties that I performed did not require me to use technology other than the occasional walkie-talkie when running riflery or shotguns in case of an emergency. Instead, I would rely on my own knowledge, the tools and equipments I had access to and the knowledge of those I worked with at the camp or on the range. Having been hired specifically my first year as an archery instructor due to my past experience with archery and the knowledge that I already possessed, I was the main instructor in charge of the maintenance of the bows, arrows and the archery range. I didn't need to use a computer to learn it, it is knowledge that I already had and was able to use in that situation. Knowledge that would not typically have ever been useful in the place that I had grown up because of it being skills and information I learned on my own, since I had an interest in archery that led to me having my own bow.

Being different and feeling removed from the environment we are in because of access to something that does not fit with how we have changed in that new place through experiences and the lessons learned is an interesting theme to explore. It is one of the themes that is explored in many of Gary Paulsen's books, and it was part of what I wanted to focus on for this research essay but also just something to think about on my own and hopefully inspire those reading this paper to think on. Brian has learned how to survive, how to adapt, has changed who he is and the way that he sees the world around him and all in it. Then the moment he is confronted with something that is very out of place where he is, Brian feels as if he has been removed from the place that has become his home and it is not something that he likes.

There was no conflicting feelings related to the dried food he never could have found or made on his own with what resources the lake provided, did not feel out of place using the pot to carry water for cooking or when he placed the hat on his head. Those are not items that remove

him from the world around him that he has been surviving in, they do not challenge the skills and knowledge he has gained from this experience. The new Brian would still have come to be if he had soap and a cooking pot at the start of the experience at the lake, but the rifle takes away the necessity of skills he has learned like being able to spot the birds hiding in the bushes before they take off. While this is not focused on long in the final pages of the story, this is what hits home the most and stays with me as a reader long after having put the book down making me think about how reading this when younger might have had an impact on me as someone that grew up in a more outdoorsy family. Makes me wonder about the impact that it could have on young adults who grew up in the city where the experiences Brian has are only things that happen within the pages of a book or the screen of a television.

Wilderness survival narratives are quite common in entertainment, literature and in young adults literature perhaps more so which is interesting to think about. Society might be steering the younger generation away from nature to some degree and instead offering up technology and other ways of spending money, but books like *Hatchet* and the Brian Saga are always going to be part of the world and have an impact on younger generations. The time spent in an environment will shape the way a person is, the way they see the world and interact with other people and creatures that live in the world alongside them. The change is not always going to be physical, it will not be obvious to all or at all times, and that change also will not always be present or directly effecting the situation. Sometimes it is the circumstances we find ourselves in that bring out the parts of ourselves that have become what they are through experience and moments of trial and error. Following the example of Gary Paulsen's character Brian is one that could have many positive and negative outcomes, but adapting to your environment is a natural part of life that should be encouraged and utilized more. The skills I have gained from the time spent in nature and out of normal human society are not always going to be applicable to the situations I find myself in outside of nature, but there are aspects of what changed that will stay with me and play an important part. After all, patience is an important skill to learn in life that will be needed in a vast number of different situations, and no one is quite as patient as a hunter.

Other Important Passages to Consider:

The following are some of the other passages from *Hatchet* that I felt were important and relevant to what I was interested in looking into, but due to a page and time limit, I was not able to explore these in detail. They are still passages that I feel are important and show how Brian has changed from his time at the lake, as well as some of the events that were responsible for the change that occurred. They provide insight on his mental state at times as well as highlight the differences in the importance and method of communication that Brian is used to and how it doesn't hold the same meaning at the lake. Each passage has something to do with Brian's relationship with nature, how he adapts to his new environment, and the way knowledge he had before the crash comes back to help him solve some new problem he is facing.

There was some sliver of a moon and in the faint-pearl light he could see the bushy tail, the white stripes down the back, and he had nearly smiled. He did not know how the skunk had found the eggs, some smell, perhaps some tiny fragment of shell had left a smell, but it looked almost cute, its little head down and its little tail up as it dug, kicking the sand back.

But those were his eggs, not the skunk's, and the half smile had been quickly replaced with fear that he would lose his food and he had grabbed a handful of sand and thrown it at the skunk.

'Get out go here...'

He was going to say more, some silly human words, but in less than half a second the skunk had snapped its rear end up, curved the tail over, and sprayed Brian with a direct shot aimed at his head from less than four feet away. (Paulsen, 125-126)

He could know what the sound was before he realized he had heard it. And when he saw something—a bird moving a wing inside a bush or a ripple on the water—he would truly see that thing, not just notice it as he used to notice things in the city. He would see all parts of it; see the whole wing, the feathers, see the color of the feathers, see the bush, and the size and shape and color of its leaves. He would see the way the light moved with the ripples on the water and see that the wind made the ripples and which way that wind had to blow to make the ripples move in that certain way. (Paulsen, 102)

Of course—he had forgotten that water refracts, bends light. He had learned that somewhere, in some class, maybe it was biology—he couldn't remember. But it did bend light and that meant the fish were not where they appeared to be. They were lower, just below, which meant he had to aim just under them. (Paulsen, 121)

Kind of like a pear, he had thought, with a point none end and a fat little body; a flying pear.

And that had been the secret. He had been looking for feathers, for the color of the bird, for a bird sitting there. He had to look for the outline instead, had to see the shape instead of the feathers or color, had to train his eyes to see the shape...

It was like turning on a television. Suddenly he could see things he never say before. In just moments, it seemed, he saw three birds before they flew, saw them sitting and got close to one of them, moving slowly, got close enough to try a shot with his bow. (Paulsen, 137)

He sat looking at the bird wondering what to do. With the fish, he had just cooked them whole, left everything in and picked the meat off. This was different; he would have to clean it.

It had always been so simple at home. He would go to the store and get a chicken and it was all cleaned and neat, no feathers or insides, and his mother would bake it in the oven and he would eat it. He mother from the old time, from the time before, would bake it.

Now he had the bird, but he had never cleaned one, never taken the insides out or gotten rid of the feathers, and he didn't know where to start. But he wanted the meat—had to have the meat—and that drove him. (Paulsen, 138-139)

When the pilot rescued Brian he had been alone on the L-shaped lake for fifty-four days. During that time he had lost seventeen percent of his body weight. He later gained back six percent, but had virtually no body fat—his body had consumed all extra weight and he would remain lean and wiry for several years. (Paulsen, 186)

Many of the changes would prove to be permanent. Brian gained immensely in his ability to observe what was happening and react to it; that would last him all his life. He had become more thoughtful as well, and from that time on he would think slowly about something before speaking.

Food, all food, even food he did not like, never lost its wonder for him. For years after his rescue he would find himself stopping in grocery stores to just stare at the aisles of food, marveling at the quantity and the variety. (Paulsen, 186-187)

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