

GARY PAULSEN

# NIGHTJOHN



*Gary Paulsen*



# O N E

This is a story about Nightjohn. I guess in some ways it is a story about me just as much because I am in it and I know what happened and some of it happened to me but it still seems to be most about him.

Nightjohn.

There's some to say I brought him with witchin', brought Nightjohn because he came to be talking to me alone but it ain't so. I knew he was coming but it wasn't witchin', just listening.

It happened. How it came to be was that Nightjohn he came and it wasn't me, wasn't nobody one or the other brought him except maybe it was that God did it, made Nightjohn to come.

God and maybe old Clel Waller. He wants that we should call him "master," and they's some do when he can hear but we call him dog droppings and pig slop and worse things yet when he ain't listening nor close. He ain't no master of nobody except that he's got dogs and a whip and a gun and so can cause hurt to be on some, bad hurt, but he ain't no master for all of that. We just call him that when we have to. Keeps him from whipping on us.

I'm Sarny and they be thinking I'm dumb and maybe up to witchin' and got a stuck tongue because when I birthed they say I come out wrong, come out all backwards and twixt-and-twinst. But it



ain't so that I'm dumb. I'm just quiet and they be thinking because I don't make noise and go to twattering all the time that I be dumb. But I ain't. I just be so quiet and listen all the time that I learn things.

I'm Sarny and the other part of my name be the same as old Waller who wants to be master but is nothing. Nothing. I don't count the back part of my name no more than I count old Waller himself. No more than I count spit.

My mammy she told me that my birthing mammy was sold when I was four years old because she was a good breeder and Waller he needed the money. My mammy said that my birthing mammy brought enough for four field hands and that she cried when the man bought her. My mammy say that my birthing mammy stood in the back of a wagon and watched back and



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Sarny, a female slave at the Waller plantation, first sees Nightjohn when he is brought there with a rope around his neck, his body covered in scars.

He had escaped to freedom, but he came back—came back to teach reading. Knowing that the penalty for reading is dismemberment, Nightjohn still returned to slavery to teach others how to read. And twelve-year-old Sarny is willing to take the risk to learn.



*Look for The Disney Channel Premiere Film, starring Carl Lumbly and Beau Bridges and introducing Allison Jones. Filmed on location in South Carolina under the direction of award-winning filmmaker Charles Burnett.*

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ISBN 0-440-21936-1



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