

Plumage From Pegasus: Survival of the Fannish

by Paul Di Filippo

“In case you needed proof that books can save lives—Michael Auberry, the 12-year-old who disappeared from his Boy Scout troop on Saturday in North Carolina, was found alive Tuesday morning in a remote mountain area, and a children’s book may have helped him survive. A few years ago Auberry read Gary Paulsen’s Newbery Honor novel *Hatchet*, about a boy who is deserted on an island after a plane crash and learns to live off the land, and some of its survival lessons may have sunk in. ‘I think he’s got some of that book on his mind,’ his father told CNN.”

—“Gary Paulsen, Lifesaver?”, *Publishers Weekly*, 3/20/2007.

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“—and here to answer all your questions is Patrolman Ordway Dollarhide. As you know, Patrolman Dollarhide, along with his K-9 partner, Peanuts, was the brave and resourceful rescuer who discovered our lost camper, Michael Valentine Atreides, after a five-day campaign involving hundreds of searchers. We had hoped to have little Michael Valentine himself present, but the boy is just too debilitated from his ordeal to attend.

“Now, please welcome Patrolman Dollarhide.”

“Thank you, Mayor Galliard. I appreciate the flattering introduction. But I was just doing my job. And to continue doing my job now, I find I have to take polite but firm exception to some of your characterizations of the case.”

“Why, I—”

“No, please, let me continue, Mayor. There’s no point in glossing over any of the details of this incident. It’s the sorriest mess I ever took part in, and if we hope to prevent anything like it from occurring in the future, it’s best to lay all the facts out straight.”

“Well, go ahead then, Patrolman....”

“First off, Michael Valentine Atreides is not no little boy. He’s thirteen and weighs more than me. I figure him at around two hundred and thirty pounds, give or take a Twinkie or two. Now, there’s plenty of sources of drinking water in the Yollabolly Middle Eel Wilderness Area, and the temperature never fell below sixty degrees, even at night. So he could’ve

lived off that fat of his for about another month. His life was never in no real danger then.”

“Still—”

“I know, I know, it’s no fun for a youngster to be lost all alone, even under those mild conditions. And his parents were going plumb crazy with worry and fear. But the facts of the matter are, Michael prolonged his own troubles and made ‘em worse by his irresponsible actions. And they all came out of his reading. Books! That’s what caused this whole dang misadventure. Nothing but books!

“I was in charge of debriefing the boy, and I took extensive notes. Notes which I’d like to share now with you all.

“First off, we got the reason why Michael wandered away from Camp Wanna-Beah-Ledge-Un in the first place. He claimed he was looking to find the Lost City of Opar. That’s some nonsense that comes straight outta those Tarzan books, stuff that thankfully never got in no Tarzan movie I ever seen. So right away you got him putting himself in harm’s way due to crazy notions he picked up from a book.

“What’s he do next, when he gets a few miles into the woods and can’t find his way home? He keeps on playing Tarzan and starts traveling through the treetops. Lord knows how a butterball like him even did it without breaking his fool neck. But through the treetops he went, making it impossible for our dogs to find his scent.

“So after a day or two he’s miles from where we expected him to be. Getting tired of Tarzan, he comes down out of the treetops. And what’s he do next? He decides that he’s living in—and I quote the boy without quite understanding what he’s talking about—’an S. M. Stirling post-apocalypse novel.’

“Now, he’s right by the Big Bongwater River at this point. He could’ve followed it downstream straight into Junction City. But does he? No. Instead of using the common sense that God gave a grasshopper, he sets about trying to make a crossbow, to protect himself from ‘the Lord Protector’s soldiers.’

“As you can imagine, he didn’t get nowhere fast with that project, so he switches to playing Conan the Dang Barbarian! The next thing we can figure, he’s climbing a set of cliffs with a stick for a sword, heading for a turkey vulture’s nest he’s seen, just so’s he can try’n bite the poor harmless

bird's head off! That little maneuver throws the dogs off'n his trail even worse. But he survives that climb and ends up on the Parched Plateau.

"By now it's day three, but Michael Valentine Atreides ain't done playing yet.

"He was in a good spot to be found. The Parched Plateau is pretty bare and wide-open. The aerial searchers would've spotted him right off. But Michael decides now that he's living in some book called *Dune*, that he's a 'Fremen native,' and has to hide from everyone, including 'sandworms.' He's got a desert-pattern camo tarp with him. Did I mention he's been lugging a knapsack full of *books* and whatnot around with him all this time? Like he needs more goldarned inspiration! So anyhow he uses this tarp to hide anytime a plane passes overhead.

"Now right here is where I want to call Michael's parents, Leia and Luke, to account. They're the ones who aided and abetted his bookishness. He would've been a normal kid if not for them. Turns out they're what're called 'fans,' second-generation fans in fact, making Michael third-generation. They even changed their family name to one outta of this here *Dune* book. The shameful way they raised that boy, without a lick of reality-based common sense, is almost a crime.

"But back to Michael. He makes his way across the whole width of the Parched Plateau and manages to get down into the Lonesome Valley. What's he do down there? Seems the sight of an anthill, of all things, sets him off! He decides he's living in some book named *City*. He sets up what he calls a 'huddling place' in a little cave, starts building a 'robot butler' outta sticks and vines, and tries training up the ants to do his bidding!

"That's where me and Peanut find him on day five, thank the Lord. But even then things couldn't go easy. When Michael spots Peanut, he flips out. Why? Well, you see, Peanut's wearing doggie saddlebags with his dogchow in it. Michael spots them innocent packs and starts screaming, 'Puppet master! Puppet master!' He hightails it for a quarter mile before we could catch up to him. Guess nearly a week in the Yolla Bolly done improved his stamina somewhat, because back at Camp Wanna-Beah-Ledge-Un he never done nothing except lay on his bunk and read.

"Even when I was taking him outta the Yolla Bolly, he kept on squirming and fussing, saying his name was 'Han Solo,' calling me 'Darth Vader,' and begging me not to 'freeze him in carbonite.' That part might be

movie talk, but I bet it's in a book somewhere too.

“And that, as I might put it, is all she wrote.

“Now, I'll be happy to take all your questions, if'n you can answer one of mine

“Any of your reporter-types know a good literary agent for my story?”