



## Paul Bunyan

**Darryl Wimberley**

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*Paul Bunyan is reimagined as a man, not a myth, whose personality is giant but whose challenges are all too human.*

Myth and plausible reality merge seamlessly in *Paul Bunyan*, Darryl Wimberley's fictional account of Bunyan as a mortal man who became the subject of legend.

The tale begins with Bunyan, elderly and illiterate, asking lifelong friend and lumber-camp accountant Johnny Inkslinger to write down the story of his life. The account takes us back to Paul's mysterious beginnings as a foundling abandoned in the winter woods, his upbringing with loving adoptive parents, and his growth into a redheaded logger "just under seven feet tall" with shoulders "two axe handles wide." Paul is a giant of a man, but not a giant; nor, as his life unfolds across the next two decades, does he enjoy special protection from grief, anger, love, or loss.

The author's decision to tell Paul's story through his friend puts the myth into a realistic context and allows for greater insight into his character. Bunyan begins as an eager innocent who butts up against—and slowly absorbs—the shocks of reality, including a murderous rival logger, a stillborn child, the loss of his parents and wife, and the industrialism that ultimately dooms his way of life. Though Paul never deserts his fellow loggers for long, emotional scars make him something of a recluse who disappears for periods of time in the sole company of Babe the blue ox. Like other folkloric characters and events in the novel, Babe is given a credible background: a calf born dead—i.e., blue—who was revived by Paul.

Though the Paul Bunyan of folklore is often envisaged as a solitary figure, camp life is intricately woven into this Paul's story. The loggers he works with are vivid and fully-developed characters, men doing dangerous work in the icy forests that once covered North America. They are rough-spoken and uneducated but capable of great loyalty, especially where Paul is concerned. The text incorporates realistic dialogue and metaphors that loggers might have used—a particularly brawny Irish logger is described as "the size of an ale barrel," while the impact of a tree falling creates "bursts of snow like shrapnel."

Working in isolated groups of a few dozen men with only their own tales for amusement, it's easy to imagine how the strongest among them might become fodder for endless stories, and how the stories, circulated from camp to camp, might grow to mythic proportions. *Paul Bunyan* strips away the myth to deliver an original, fully realized, and moving story of the men who took on the dangerous job of supplying the lumber that built the land.

SUSAN WAGGONER (January 12, 2016)

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