

Teacher's Guide

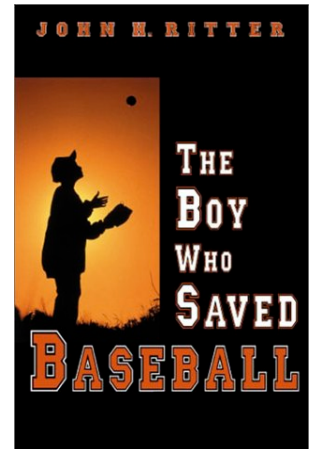
for *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*

by John H. Ritter

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I. Questions for Class Discussion

A. Tom Gallagher is a complexity of contrasts. Is he shy or bold? Resilient or easily defeated? Rash or thoughtful? What conditions or situations brought out each of these qualities in him?

B. María Flores is also hard to figure out. Is she patient or impulsive? Is she brave or reckless? Is she practical or a dreamer? Cite certain scenes from the story which show María as being all of these.

C. What did saving the ball field really mean to Tom? Why did so many people come out to support it?

D. What particular qualities and experiences did Tom have that supported his desire to save the Lucky Strike Park, and what qualities and experiences worked against those desires? Is there a connection between desire coming from one's soul and success?

Consider the unusual names of important characters in the novel:

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| • Dante Del Gato | • Graydog LaRue |
| • Cruz de la Cruz | • Oscar Calabaza |
| • Hollis B | • Alabaster Jones |

What might the author be suggesting by these choices? Is it possible that some of the names have double meanings?

E. What are all the implications of the book's title? Are there multiple levels of salvation—baseball or otherwise—in this story? If so, name a few.

F. What is accomplished by the author in naming the prologue?

The author dedicated this book to his father and to a man he called a second father. If you were to publish a story or a poem to whom would you dedicate it? Is there someone in your life whom you would name as a second father or a second mother? Why? What experience caused you to name this person?

G. Tall tales permeate this story. What is it about Cody's story concerning Del Gato's electric fence (page 34) that doesn't make sense? Can you come up with any other examples of "stretching the truth" in this novel? For example, as Tara suggests in the same scene, do mountain lions run in packs? Teachers: *Talk about the history and place of Tall Tales in Western American literature.*

H. Why does a boy have to read the earth? (See opening of Chapter Seven, page 59.) What does "earthen knowledge" mean? What about a "starborne hunch?" How do hunches and knowledge contribute to Tom's character? Cruz's character? Del Gato's character? To the outcome of the novel?

I. The author writes, "A boy kept distant from the earth is a boy dissatisfied." How does this philosophy play out in the novel? Find physical, concrete signs of it as well as mental ones. To what extent does Tom come to see this to be true?

J. Look at Doc Altenheimer's statements on page 6: "Jumpin' Jackrabbits, what do I need with six million dollars, man my age." And, later in the page, "Don't count them Pirates out of it just yet. Those young players've got more heart and hunger than all them overpaid millionaires combined."

Also consider Doc's philosophy, expressed on page 127: "We live a life out here that only poor, simple folks can enjoy, Tom. Rich folks can't afford to live like us. They don't have the time." What does he mean by that? Evaluate Doc's value system. What's more important to Doc than money?



K. What does Doc's inscription in Tom's Dreamsketcher mean? (Page 9) "Even in the dead of night, the sun is always shining." Teachers: *Discuss the idea of viewing a situation from near and far-away perspectives or from various points of view (such as the hawk's view from the trees).*

L. What purpose does Hollis B and his poetry serve in this story? Teachers: *Explain the use of the Greek chorus in the traditional Greek play.*

M. Evaluate the handling of the game of baseball in this book. Is there a culture of baseball? If so, does it have its own separate social rules, vocabulary, value system? How would you describe it?

N. Two groups—save-the-forest types and community promoters—square off against each other on the radio talk shows over the Dillontown dispute. When they state their arguments, do you sense that their motivation is the same as what they say it is? Can you think of a real-life situation when a controversial idea is actually supported or opposed for reasons that have nothing to do with the reasons given? Teachers: *Discuss the concept of a hidden agenda.*

O. How would you define the word, "hero?" Is a person a hero if no one knows or witnesses what the person did? Have you ever thought someone was called a hero without justification—that is, to you the person was no hero? What part does the person's motivation (or hidden agenda) play in determining whether one is actually a hero?

P. Del Gato talks to the team about "new pathways in the brain" and "how our brains are trained." (Page 104.) Then he says, "[But] we have no pathways for the unfamiliar." Think about this idea. How is this concept reflected in the run-down-the-mountain drill? How does it relate to hitting a curveball? Or to building our neighborhoods in a different way?

Q. Speculate on why Dante Del Gato left the game of baseball. Speculate on why Cruz left Dillontown on the eve of the Big Game. Is there any similarity? Upper level teachers: *Discuss the word altruism.*



R. Tom's mother says, "When I look out the window, I want to see mountaintops, not rooftops." (Page 14.) How important to you is a natural view compared to seeing houses or man-made structures?

S. Ultimately, what parts of the "Doom and Gloom Prophecy" (pages 55-56) came true? Does the very existence of a prophecy influence the outcome of human activities or situations? What does Tom's mother, the librarian, suggest to Tom about the importance of prophecies (pages 211-212)?

T. In the baseball lexicon, a substitute or "relief" pitcher—such as Tom in the Big Game— may get credit for a win, a loss, or a save. Make an argument supporting the idea that in this story, Tom seems to have done all three. What did Tom win, what did he lose, and what did he save?

U. Consider the last line of the novel. What does it mean? Who wrote this novel, according to the ending?

II. Collaborative Simulation Project

A. The people of Dillontown were faced with a problem that could potentially affect not just the baseball field but the character of the town itself. A group of people united to bring about a solution. Identify a problem that could potentially affect the character of your neighborhood or town. Some ideas are:

- High traffic congestion
- No place to play
- More highway noise
- A huge, mega-store moving close by
- Tearing down an old theater
- Building a condo project close by

Have a town meeting, led by a student chairperson to accomplish the following objectives.

1. Evaluate the seriousness of the threat.
2. Decide whether collective action is necessary.
3. Consider proposals for a solution.
4. Determine the steps to achieve that solution. (They could be concurrent or



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sequential.)

5. Determine the number of people to work on each of those steps.
6. Determine the measure of success.

If the collaborative action achieves success, design a celebration reflective of the community's character. If the collaborative action, comes up short, determine why. The reasons need not signal defeat. They may, but they may also offer a greater understanding of the problem, of civil law and politics, and the need for developing the skills of human interaction.

III. Writing Prompts on Individual Research and Inquiry

A. Text to self:

1. Of all the places on the planet, do you have a place as important to you as that ballpark was to Tom? Reflect on what it is about that place which gives you a good feeling. Try to name the feeling. Describe the place and the feeling in poetry, descriptive prose, narrative prose, or song. Include several details of sensory experience, and have at least one detail be kinetic (moving or changeable), such as the wind, the heat, or the people. Infuse the description with your feelings. Do not use "I like this place because..." but try for something like, "The tree behind our house is a stairway for me..."

2. Select someone you think of as a hero. This person can be known to you or not, living or dead. Do some research about this person. Consider what makes this person a hero. Write a narrative in which this person is working at his sport or art or occupation. Get inside the person's head and reveal the feelings and considerations that are involved with the activity. What thought processes might that person consciously have had while involved in this act of heroism? Find a photograph or take a photograph of your hero, if possible a shot while engaged in the creative art or occupation. Teachers: Either have students read their results aloud to the class, or have the photographs and written material posted around the classroom, and have students circulate to read each one.

3. Think about your own value system. Compare your values to what Tom values: reading the mountains; saving a part of history; thinking for himself. What are the values or rules you try to live by? Are your rules different from any of your friends'? Do you have a rule to



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follow which tells you what to do after not being able to live up to your rules? Teachers: Talk about the idea of making amends. Of humility. Of forgiveness.

B. Text to the world:

1. Think about the future of someone else in your class and make a prediction about what you think might happen based on that person's good and strong qualities. Write the prediction in the form of a prophecy as a gift to your classmate so that this prophecy will empower that person.

2. Write a prophecy for your neighborhood or for one you used to live in.

IV. Literary and Language Examination

A. Text to text:

1. A cornerstone of the oaths which many new medical doctors take is the promise that they will, "Above all, do no harm." Compare this command to what Del Gato decided to do when he quit baseball.

2. How does Doc live up to this directive in his everyday life?

3. Are there any professions which perform the task of being "doctors" to the earth and its natural resources? Can the earth's wealth be "harvested" and still "do no harm" to the earth?

4. Teachers: Find the Vachel Lindsay poem containing the line, "I am a tramp by the long trail's border," (from *The Santa Fe Trail: A Humoresque*, Section II, "In Which Many Autos Pass Westward.") on the Internet. How does Hollis B reflect these qualities in his answer to the news reporter on page 134? Try: <http://cruz-on.com/bbs/messages/3.html>

5. Also, have your students read Bob Dylan's song, "Blowin' in the Wind." Then discuss (perhaps in a Socratic Seminar) how the verses and, especially, the chorus of this song influenced the story in John H. Ritter's novel. Cite the journey in the first verse, the evolution of thought, realizing that brute power is not almighty. In verse two, remember how Tom has looked up many times, but on one night (page 125) he really sees the sky. Point out the natural erosion



in verse three compared to mountains being leveled and people pretending not to notice. Finally, compare the chorus to the presence (and prescience) of winds all through the novel and Tom's decision as to whether or not to pitch (page 184). Try:

<http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/blowin.html>

6. Upper level teachers: Find a copy of Vachel Lindsay's poem, *The Congo*. How has John H. Ritter, a great believer in the musicality of language, adapted several lines of this poem for use in his novel? (Be aware that this poem, which helped sustain Lindsay's livelihood as he roamed the country on foot in the early 1900s has fallen into disfavor for its naïve and negative portrayal of African citizens.) Try:

<http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/lit/poetry/TheCongoandOtherPoems/chap2.html>

B. Word Study: Specialized Vocabulary

1. In most sports or activities there is a specialized vocabulary that has grown over time. Words are made up or they are borrowed from the language in general and given a specific meaning in the context of the activity. For example, in baseball: strike, foul, laser shot, brouhaha, slider, or inning.

2. Have students select a sport or an activity they know something about and prepare a list of specialized vocabulary. Some ideas:

Sailing: luff, jibe, come about, spinner

Drawing/painting: tone, shade, hue, value, composition, stipple, wash

Ballet: en pointe, resin, pas de deux, grande jete

Tennis: love, advantage out, double fault, deuce

Other activities: soccer, skateboarding, surfing, skiing, rock climbing.

The activities can be less common, too: Stamp collecting, embroidering, woodworking, camping.

3. Students can make a two-part list of specialized activity vocabulary—one part, words unique to this activity; one part, borrowed terms. See who can come up with:

- a) the word farthest from its literal meaning
- b) the funniest word
- c) the strangest word
- d) the hardest word for outsiders to guess its meaning



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C. Word Study: Neologisms and Word Origin Trees

1. Inventing a word is called “neologism.” Explain the derivation of neologism, pointing out the root words from which it was “invented.”

2. In the novel’s “big inning,” the author writes, “No one, not even Blackjack Buck himself could’ve dreamed up a mind-whacking brain-snapper as wild and woolbacious as what really happened.” On his Website, John H. Ritter admits to making up the word “woolbacious.” Mr. Ritter writes, “I want to say that I am one who has, from time to time, expanded the American vocabulary, or lexicon, to be more precise. When I don’t quite find the right word for the emotions or descriptions I want to express, I do consider dreaming one up. That’s the case with ‘woolbacious.’”

3. He continues. “It is a blend of a word and a phrase. The phrase is ‘wild and wooly,’ often used in describing an outrageous or ‘tall’ tale or, more recently, a ‘shaggy dog’ story. I combined ‘wooly’ from that phrase with the word ‘bodacious,’ which is itself a blended word (probably from the words ‘bold’ and ‘audacious’) of English and French origin--my guess would be that it originated around the New Orleans area where there is a great French language influence on American English.”

4. Teachers: Ask what two words might have been combined to form “woolbacious.” Then, what two words might have been combined to form “bodacious.” Using the words “bold” and “audacious,” demonstrate how to find language origins of words in the dictionary. With a word tree on the board showing two generations of words resulting in “woolbacious,” ask students to make up another word combining two words, one of which is itself a combination of two other words.

5. Have students investigate and speculate on these other examples of neologism found in this novel:

- cyber-vato (page 1)
- shambalize (page 18)
- Dreamsketcher (or dreamsketch) (page 17)
- *bawk-bawking* (page 84)
- dorko-doofus (page 119)



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- whap-slap (page 161)
- graggely (page 214)
- *whisp-whisping* (page 210)

Teachers: John H. Ritter would love to hear about any successful activities of your own invention. Feel free to e-mail your thoughts or ideas to John at HeyJohn@JohnHRitter.com



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