

## UNDER THE BASEBALL MOON

In the magical, organical California beachtown of Ocean Beach (which is a real place), tenth-grader Andy Ramos immerses himself in his music, playing his trumpet on his skateboard and jamming with his friends Tran and Lil Lobo in the studio owned by his musician parents. But then, Glory, a girl who used to embarrass him with her crazy behavior, reappears in his life. She is as passionate about softball as he is about his music, and they discover a magical link that lets them help each other excel. While the wack beach icon the Holy Jokester prophesies joy, the seeress Olivia Olivetti foresees doom, and the eerie Max Lucero promises Andy phenomenal success in exchange for—what?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the early part of the story, Andy cruises the streets of Ocean Beach on his skateboard, turning the rhythms he hears into riffs on his trumpet. Reread that section for inspiration, and then as you go through your own day, listen for rhythmic patterns in the sounds around you, beats that can be tapped out, or hummed as a short melodic phrase. Share some of these with the group. You might even want to try combining them all together into a fusion-style musical piece.
2. This book is rich in “tongue-in-cheek overspeak” as Ritter plays with the rhyming, punning language of young California surfer-town musicians. A particularly sly pun is the name of the bar-owner OB Juan Quixote (hint: pronounced key-hoh-tee). Spot some other puns and amusing expressions and explain their origins. Rhyme within a sentence is a characteristic of hip-hop and rap that shows up in Andy’s speech on nearly every page. Point out some of your favorites. Andy is proud of himself for getting good at Glory’s baseball talk, like DH for “designated hitter.” What are some of his “music talk” terms that she might not understand?
3. Long ago, Andy’s parents “decided to back off from the stress and strain of life in order to be happier.” Andy, on the other hand, wants to reach the top, to play his new brand of music as a world-class trumpeter. Which is better? Can a person have both? What differing advice do the various wise people in the book (Olivia Olivetti, the Holy Jokester, Andy’s grandfather, father, mother, and Max Lucero) give Andy about his goals? Which of them do you think are right?
4. Glory, too, is ambitious to reach the top. How does this goal make her happy? How does it make her unhappy? Andy says, “In a way we help each other reach a higher level.” Is this mystic bond good for them? What are its drawbacks, and what must they learn to make room in their relationship for both of them to be excellent?
5. Who is Max Lucero in this story? What other stories about “selling your soul” does he remind you of? Does the kind of “success” he gives Andy always involve somebody else losing? What does his last name mean in Spanish? How does this connect with the idea of the baseball moon as a new beginning?

## ABOUT JOHN H. RITTER

**John H. Ritter** grew up in the summer-dry hills east of San Diego, where lizards skitter through the brown chaparral and eucalyptus trees whisper in the Santa Ana winds. His father had been a sports writer in Ashtabula, Ohio, but when he got the job of Sports Editor for *The San Diego Union*, he moved the family to California just before John was born. Naturally, they were a baseball family, and because the other kids lived so far away, he and his two brothers, he remembers, “developed a half-real, half-imaginary game where we pitched and hit the ball, then dreamed up the rest, keeping the score, game situations, and full, major league line-ups in our heads”—good training for a budding storyteller. His older sister, and later his two younger half-sisters, often played, too.

His Irish-Native American mother had died of cancer when he was four, but he recalled the songs that she made up to fit each of her four children. “So from her,” he says, “I got a sense of how to capture a person’s spirit in a lyrical phrase.” His musical interests grew in high school, when Bob Dylan inspired him to write songs, and he played with a group called “The Bottles.” He was a “wild student,” he admits, “a high achiever, but a rabble rouser and a contrarian.” But teachers recognized his writing talent, and his work was so often read out loud in class that he admits to growing complacent and lazy about improving his skills.

At the University of California at San Diego he played shortstop on the baseball team, and also continued to write Dylan-style songs. But by his second year, he recalls, “I was anxious to get on with my life. And for the vision I had in mind, college didn’t have much to offer me. I knew I had to walk the streets, touch life, embrace life, gain experience.” He quit, got a job as a painter’s apprentice, and lived so cheaply that he could earn enough in three or four months to allow him to travel for the rest of the year. He did that for several years, until he married Cheryl, a girl he had met in college, and they had a baby daughter. With a family to support, he needed to work as a painter nine months a year, but the rest of the time went into writing.

Finally realizing that he needed to hone his craft, he joined a writers’ group led by YA author Joan Oppenheimer. In 1994 the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators honored him with the Judy Blume Award for a novel in progress, but it was three years later that his first novel, *Choosing Up Sides*, was published and John could leave house painting to become a fulltime writer. Critics immediately recognized his talent, and the book won many awards. Since then he has written three more prize-winning novels, and has been recognized as a leading young adult author, including being chosen Writer in Residence for the Oceanside, California, Unified School District.

Today John H. Ritter and his wife Cheryl live in San Diego, where until recently, when his travels became so demanding, John played on an amateur baseball team. And yes, he is left-handed—and right-handed. Being ambidextrous (he bats left and throws right), John is adept with both hands.

#### For more about John H. Ritter:

• John H. Ritter’s webpage — <http://www.johnhritter.com>  
Lots of information, photos, and fun reading about the author’s life and writing, plus some unexpected extras. Includes classroom plans and teacher aids.

• Crowe, Chris. “An interview with John H. Ritter” *ALAN Review*, Spring/Summer 2000, 5-9. [www.johnhritter.com/interviews.sht](http://www.johnhritter.com/interviews.sht)  
John Ritter talks about his growing up years and his life as a writer.

• Ladd, Patricia K. “Covering the Bases with Young Adult Literature: Implementing John H. Ritter’s *Choosing Up Sides* and *Over the Wall* As Touchstone Texts in a Middle School Language Arts Program” *ibid.*  
One middle school teacher’s experience using John’s novels in the classroom. [scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring00/ladd.html](http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring00/ladd.html)

#### For more about the subjects of the novels:

• The Left-Handed Page. [www.left-hand.org/](http://www.left-hand.org/)  
A wealth of information and curious facts about left-handedness, plus a list-serv for chatting with other lefties.

• “The War Prayer” by Mark Twain. [www.johnhritter.com/marktwainwarprayer.sht](http://www.johnhritter.com/marktwainwarprayer.sht)  
John Ritter makes available a devastating anecdote about war from America’s greatest satirist.

• Vietnam War Memorial — [www.nps.gov/vive/home.htm](http://www.nps.gov/vive/home.htm)  
History of the building of The Wall and other information about it.

• [www.vietvet.org/thewall.htm](http://www.vietvet.org/thewall.htm)  
Somber photos of The Wall and poems and stories written by visitors.

• Ocean Beach — <http://gothere.com/sandiego/OceanBeach/>  
A photo tour of the best sights in OB.

• Babe Ruth — [www.baberuth.com](http://www.baberuth.com)  
The official site for biography, statistics, photos, and more about the great southpaw.

• Skateboarding — [www.exploratorium.edu/skateboarding/](http://www.exploratorium.edu/skateboarding/)  
A fascinating site that explains incredible skateboard tricks in terms of the laws of physics.

#### Books by John H. Ritter

*Choosing Up Sides*. Philomel, 1998, \$17.99. ISBN 0-399-231-85-4.

Puffin paperback, 2000, \$5.99. ISBN 0-698-11840-5.

- International Reading Association 1999 Children’s Book Award and Young Adult Readers’ Choice
- An American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults
- Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books, Blue Ribbon Award
- Children’s Book Council “Adult Crossover” list

*Over the Wall*. Philomel, 2000, \$17.99. ISBN 0-399-23489-6. Puffin paperback, 2002, \$6.99. ISBN 0-698-11931-2.

- New York Public Library’s Books for the Teen Age list
- Texas Lone Star List
- Winner of the Parents’ Guide to Children’s Media Award

*The Boy Who Saved Baseball*. Philomel, 2003, \$17.99. ISBN 0-399-23622-8.

Puffin paperback, 2005, \$5.99. ISBN 0-14-240286-9

- Children’s Book Council Notable Children’s Book Award
- New York Public Library’s Books for the Teen Age list
- Texas Lone Star List
- Child Magazine’s “Best Book of 2003” Award
- National Council of Teachers of English 2004 Notable Book Award

*Under the Baseball Moon*. Philomel, 2006, \$16.99. ISBN 0-399-23623-6

#### Watch for more awards!

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## THE NOVELS OF JOHN H. RITTER

### A READER’S GUIDE

The young adult novels of John H. Ritter are often described by critics as “more than sports novels.” Such grudging praise is far less than this superb writer deserves. True, “the holy game of baseball” appears throughout each of his four books, and the Big Game is always the symbolic centerpiece of the action, giving the books instant appeal to young male readers. But these scintillating stories focus on other relevant and deeper issues, like the nature of war, the conflict between ambition and happiness, progress and tradition, and the struggles of young people to grow beyond what they have been taught and to take charge of their own beliefs and actions. Ritter explores these ideas with fast-moving, engrossing stories and memorable characters that are widely appealing to young teens of both sexes.

Another aspect of John H. Ritter’s writing that merits high praise is the variety and inventiveness of his language. Richly evocative metaphors gather layers of meaning as the stories unfold, and the verbal style of each novel is neatly crafted to the place and time of its setting. *Under the Baseball Moon* dances to a hip hop beachtown beat; *Over the Wall* wisecracks with a California kid’s take on New York; *The Boy Who Saved Baseball* draws on both Spanish and English to make up zingy new expressions, and *Choosing Up Sides* savors the naivete of the historic Appalachian dialect of southern Ohio. His settings, too, are vividly distinct and vary from the Hispanic/Anglo blend of his own Southern California hill communities to the “small town” neighborhoods of present day New York; from the eclectic oceanfront culture of the Pacific beach towns to the church-centered villages on the banks of the Ohio River during Prohibition.

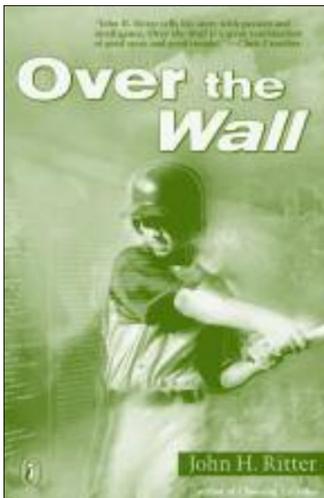
In an interview about his own work, Ritter told Brigham Young University professor Chris Crowe, “As a kid my greatest hopes and dreams were attached to baseball. . . . In later years, when it became time to pick subject matter for my coming-of-age stories, baseball leapt at me. Aside from my love for the game, it also lends itself so easily to literary metaphor.” However, he also explains that “the driving force behind all my stories comes primarily from finding something that really bugs me. And so far, it tends to be some sort of injustice.” Each of his lead characters learn, he says, that “it comes down to discovering what he really believes, then having the courage to act on it. . . . Kids dealing with hard choices. To me, that’s the definition of YA lit.”

In all of these wonderful novels, John H. Ritter steps up to the plate and hits a home run for teen reading with books that are fun to read, fun to discuss, and important in the difficult process of growing up to be an ethical human being.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The questions that follow can be used for sparking lively talk in a reading group or classroom, as writing prompts, or simply to help a solitary reader explore more deeply the issues and characters in these engrossing and relevant novels.



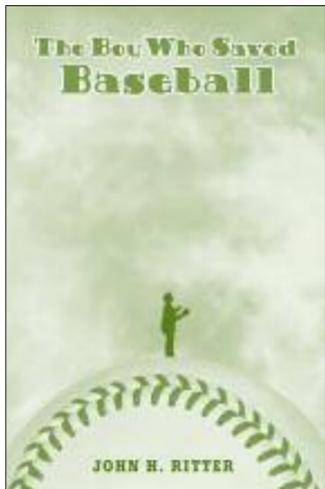


## OVER THE WALL

When Tyler, 13, is invited to spend a baseball summer in New York with his aunt and uncle and cousins, he is glad to leave his ramshackle home in the California hills and his depressed and withdrawn father. But on the ball fields of Central Park, Tyler is soon in trouble. When the pressure of the game mounts, he flies into a blind rage and even hits his good-natured cousin Louie. Coach Trioli is stern, but gives him one more chance. Meanwhile, Tyler's aunt has planned a family trip to the Vietnam Memorial in D.C., much to the disgust of his other cousin, the beautiful peace-activist Breena. Tyler learns some things from Breena and Vietnam vet Coach Trioli that change his ideas about anger and war—and push him to action.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the first part of the story we see Tyler fly into a white-hot rage when things don't go his way in the game. What does he tell himself about these incidents that justifies his fury? What effect does that have on his ability to deal with it? Coach Trioli offers him two explanations for his tendency to lose control when angry. What are they? Does Tyler think Coach is right? What could be some other sources for the roots of his anger?
2. When Louie plays his Blood Hawk Bomber video game, Tyler describes it as "perfect training for the military" because it "tested your reflexes and treated the enemy like targets instead of like people." Later he tells Breena that "the enemy is always some nonhuman nobody." Ask your grandparents or teacher about the names that the Germans and Japanese were called in World War II. Why were these people dehumanized? When Tyler comes to see the boy he has called "Dumbo" as a person with a real name and a family, how do his feelings change?
3. Breena believes in slogans like "It takes a lot more courage to step back from a fight than to step into one." How does Tyler react to this idea at first? How does he feel about it later, as he tries to control his anger? Coach Trioli tells Tyler that his Vietnam experience taught him that "fighting is like giving up." But Tony says, "We gotta stand up for ourselves." Discuss whether one, both, or neither of these two positions is right, and why.
4. Tyler knows that 58,000 American soldiers died in the Vietnam War, but he is shocked when Breena tells him that three million Vietnamese, most of them noncombatants, also died in that conflict. Louie, on the other hand, says, "Great! That means we won!" Is war like a game for which you keep score? Research the number of Americans who have died thus far in the Iraq war and the number of Iraqi dead, including civilians. Which figures are easier to find? Why do you think this is so?
5. Contrast the two bird symbols in the book: the dove on the windowsill and the hawk in Louie's video game. What does each represent? What symbolic vision about his father does Tyler have for a future time when he will publicly excel in baseball? Is this realistic? How does it affect his attitude toward the game? What better way to help his father does he learn in the end?



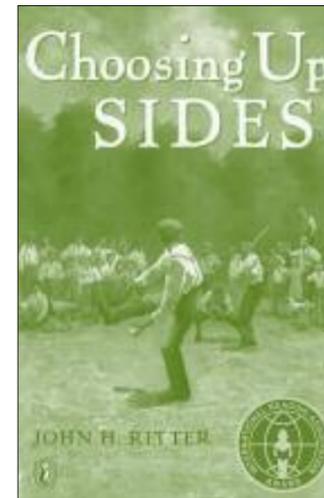
## THE BOY WHO SAVED BASEBALL

Dillontown isn't much, but thirteen-year-old Tom Gallagher and his friends, Frankie, Ramón, Wil, and María, are proud of the ancient baseball stadium where historic games have been played for a hundred years—even if their own team, the Dillontown Wildcats, hasn't been doing so well lately. When developers arrive with a plan to bulldoze the stadium for a housing tract, the town is about to reluctantly give in, when old Doc Altenheimer, who owns the land, comes up with a crazy scheme. If the Wildcats can defeat their rivals in one Big Game, he will refuse to sell. Tom is dismayed—he's a terrible player, and the others aren't much better. But the stakes are high, so they begin a baseball training camp that feels hopeless—until the mysterious Cruz de la Cruz

rides into town and helps Tom find the courage to entice the legendary but reclusive baseball star Dante Del Gato to come down from his mountain retreat and coach the team. Time is short, and there is so much they need to learn—and not only about baseball. Can they do it?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The central action in this story revolves around a decision: Will a developer be allowed to bulldoze and build new homes over the 100-year-old baseball stadium that is the center of Dillontown's identity? List the ways this might be good for the town and the ways it might destroy it. Describe some examples you have seen of "urban sprawl" or "country crawl." What are the benefits of large housing developments and what are their drawbacks?
2. John H. Ritter uses some made-up words to make the language in his story more vivid. Some examples are: "woolbacious," "dreamsketcher," "scandalize and shambalize," "yard-dog jitters," "tisked his horse," "turtlenecked a peek," and "graggely." He even combines Spanish and English for some of them: "cyber-vato desperado" and "Tompadre." Try putting these expressions into more ordinary terms. Notice how you need several words to catch the whole sense of most of them. Have fun making some super-descriptive new words of your own by combining two existing words.
3. "The stranger rode in from the east." Tom thinks this line from the Death and Doom Prophecy may be talking about Cruz de la Cruz. What are the other predictions of the Death and Doom prophecy? How do they come true and to what actions and people do they seem to refer? Do you believe in prophecies—the daily newspaper astrology forecast, for instance? How might people's reactions to prophecies work to make the prophecies come true?
4. Why does Cruz choose to disappear the night before the big game? What effect does his leaving have on the team? The outcome of the game? Dante Del Gato also walked away from his team at a crucial moment: he quit baseball because he believed he had learned how to bat perfectly. Do you think that individual super-achievement destroys the sport, as he is convinced?



## CHOOSING UP SIDES

Luke Bledsoe, 13, is a left-handed son of a preacher—and his Bible-thumping father believes the left arm is "the arm of the Devil." An example he often points out is Luke's Uncle Micah, a big, genial, cigar-chomping, drink-loving, left-handed newspaper sports editor. Luke tries valiantly to use only his right hand, but when he, and the new baseball team at his school, accidentally discover that he can throw a ball a phenomenal distance with his left, Luke has a serious problem. The boys, as well as the pretty Annabeth, pressure him to play, but he knows if he gives in it would mean disaster when his Pa finds out. Luke has long ago decided that thinking for himself is a sin, so he resolutely turns away from his attraction to the game. But when Uncle Micah takes him to see the Yankees play the Dodgers, and he learns that the famous, rich, and very generous Babe Ruth is left-handed, he begins to question if Pa is always right.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The metaphor of the river comes into the story in many ways, beginning with the name of Luke's church. He says he is content with wherever they live, "long's we had the river by." Why is this? How is the river part of his relationship with Uncle Micah? With his father? What does the river finally come to mean to him in terms of his inner struggles?
2. The rabbit caught in the snare is another striking metaphor in this story. Trace how it becomes a turning point for Luke's attitudes toward his father, a beginning point for his independence, and then a description of his own condition. How does the symbol of the muskrat's leg also vividly illustrate his feelings?
3. What does Luke learn about the negative picture of left-handedness throughout history? Why do you think people saw this normal human variation in this way? In baseball, on the other hand, a player who hits or pitches lefty is seen as especially valuable. Why? Ask the lefties in your group if they have had problems and/or advantages due to their hand preference. How does this historical prejudice that right is better than left compare to other pairs of ideas that have been the source of discrimination—white and black, or male and female, for instance?
4. "Uncle Micah was a walrus," says Luke, about his uncle's outward appearance. How does this describe him? Later, when they are fishing, Luke uses the quiet of the situation to notice some other things about his uncle's looks and behavior. What more do these details tell you about the kind of person Uncle Micah is? What does Luke get from him that is missing in his relationship with his father? What animal would you use to describe Pa? According to Luke, "Say what you will about Pa, but I believe all he really cared about was what was best for me." Do you think this is true? What broader meaning about his son does Luke's handedness come to represent to his Pa?
5. At the Yankees vs. the Dodgers game, Uncle Micah explains the basics of baseball in three sentences. What would you add to that, to give someone a complete guide to the rules? This story takes place in 1921, when baseball was a relatively new game. Check out its history: when and by whom was it invented? Annabeth is eager for Luke to play baseball because she can't. When did women begin to be allowed to take part in the sport?