

## Are YA Novelists Morally Obligated to Offer Their Readers Hope?

John H. Ritter

Dear Mr. John H. Ritter,

Hi, my name is Riley W. and I am in the sixth grade. I want to tell you that my teacher read your book *Choosing Up Sides* in class. Why did you call it *Choosing Up Sides*? My best part was when Luke strikes out Skinny Latmann. It was all cool except for at the end, it was sad.

At first I didn't know why the dad had to die. I wish that after his son saved him, his father and him would get close and spend time together and do things together like baseball. My teacher told me to look at the story again and try to think why you did that. It took me two days to think about it. Then I remembered how my dad used to hit my mom. But he never hit me. They always would fight then we moved away. I did not want us to go. That was the worst time in my life. But now I know why my mom had to leave.

I can relate to the book because I feel like the mom. My dad used to hit my mom so hard that I would sit in my room and cry all night. I never knew why he never hit me, but the book helped me figure it out a little. My mom would stand up to him, but I couldn't. When I started writing this letter, I started to cry.

I also want to thank you for writing this book 'cause it taught me a lot about life and told me without saying it. For instance, when "Pa" broke Luke's arm it told me what could have happened if we would have stayed. Now I know why my mom left. I mean I knew but now I understand. When you write your next book I would like for you to remember this letter.

Your friend,  
Riley W.

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Dear Riley,

Thank you for your letter. You have a great gift for making connections and understanding how stories can relate to real life.

You asked me why I called the book, *Choosing Up Sides*. One reason was the fact that life is full of choices. Often difficult ones, with many sides to the issue. I think your mother made the right choice, though I'm sure it was difficult.

So I hope you can use your gift of understanding to see



why I made the tough choices I had to make in this story.

I know it's hard to feel much sympathy for a man who hits his son—or his wife. But it was something I had to do in order to write truthfully about "Pa" Bledsoe. The toughest part was the fact that I had to go back into my own childhood to do it.

When I was four years old, my mother died from breast cancer. And my father, who deeply loved her, fell into a depression and began to drink heavily. After being left with four young children, my dad feared he would not be able to handle it. I learned quite early what fear and alcohol can do to a man's brain. When a man drinks, he morphs into someone else.

I didn't like that drinking man. And I hated that he was so scared. I hated the late night arguments that filled our house, the screaming, the breaking of furniture, and the

many sleepless nights I would lie in bed praying for peace, praying that my father could see the pain he was causing, how he was harming his children with his tirades, and driving the housekeepers away.

In the morning, sober again, my dad would return to being the gentle, loving soul I knew him to be. And sometimes it would last all day. But never all week. Before long, I'd see his car roll up the driveway, see him climb out drunk and belligerent, and I would disappear into my room.

I never went through what Luke did. My dad never hit me or anyone. And like Luke, deep down I knew he loved us all. As your father loves you.

But we had no mother to swoop us away. And no place to go.

Besides, I always held out hope that my dad would change.

That on every day, not just some days, we could, as you write, "get close and spend time together and do things together like baseball."

But the fact was, in one way or another, he'd "broken the arm"—or weakened the spirit—of all his children.

As time went on, my dad did coach our ball teams, and we did have some great times. He even remarried. But he never stopped drinking. And on the days when he came drunk to my high school games, I shuddered as the other players laughed at "the crazy man down the foul line" yelling and whistling at the opposing team. Eventually, his second wife divorced him. His children grew up and moved away. And my dad

retired into a dark and lonely house.

Then one day, my older brother called to say Dad was in the hospital, near death. He had given up. Deeply depressed, my dad had stopped eating, stopped taking his heart medication, and merely waited to die.

After a week in the hospital, he had stabilized some. But we knew that if he was discharged and returned home, he'd fall into the same old pattern again.

It was Thanksgiving Day. But instead of gathering together for a big family dinner, my older brother and I sat in a bare, green hospital room while I wrote out a note to the doctor.

And when I started writing, I started to cry.

I told the doctor that our father had been depressed for as long as we could remember. I told him that unless he was treated for depression, he would be right back here in no time. Or worse. We walked to the doctor's office in the next building and left the note on his desk.

That was nine years ago. Today, my dad is alive, upbeat, and sober.

He is the father I had always wished for.

He treats us well, with kindness and appreciation. We enjoy our visits and relish being entertained once again by his masterful storytelling.

Then, a few days ago, he told me something he'd never been able to say before.

"The doctor showed me your letter," he said. Then his voice caught. But he seemed determined to speak. "You know, it could've gone either way." Now he spoke in a forced whisper. "Well, I appreciate what you did. I'm grateful. To all of you. And that—that you didn't give up on me."

Together, my brother and I were able to take the right action. And, unlike Luke, we were able to save our dad.

It could've gone either way.

Riley, there is a man out there who loves you deeply. He probably loves your mother, too. Some day he may be able to come to you both and say so. With actions and words. Maybe not.

But until then, it's important that you and your mother are safe. And that you never give up on him.

That's why I wrote *Choosing Up Sides*.

Thanks for asking.

All best wishes,  
John H. Ritter  
April 5, 2003

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The letters above are included in a compilation of author/reader correspondence called *Letters of Hope*, to be edited by Dr. Joan Kaywell, of the University of South Florida, scheduled to be published by Philomel Books in 2004, and aimed especially at Young Adults.

And the timing could not be better. At a point in our country's history when the economy is bleak, when mass media programming has turned "reality" into vulgar insults, backstabbing, and scheming for love or money, when the moral values of our national leaders appear to be as bleak as they've been in decades, and when large publishers deem it necessary to bring out lines of dark, self-indulgent books which push grace and courage out of the picture in the minds of young readers, our children certainly could use a fresh dose of fearlessness and hope, i.e., love.

As I write these words, U.S. troops have just opened fire

with machine guns on a cluster of Iraqi civilians protesting the American military presence in their neighborhood school, killing 15 and wounding scores more, some—according to Reuters—just for "shouting."

The idealistic hopes and dreams for a better, more balanced, and peaceful world which guided so many of us in the '60s and '70s seem to have evaporated into thunderclouds of arrogance, self-indulgence, and anger.

In other words, the same *fear* that overwhelmed my father in the letter above. And our country's reaction to terror has been that of a panicked man's aggression.

I know I'm old-fashioned in my thinking, but I was brought up by a wonderful church pastor to believe that we should love our enemies—as Jesus taught repeatedly—not bomb them. And I'm not talking about the lip-service "love" that is so popular today among the conservative religious groups, who easily sanction war. I mean an actual, demonstrative love that includes the risking of one's own life in order to bring a sense of security, dignity, and hope to one's enemies. That is to say, when trouble begins to brew, I believe the first action is to allay the enemy's fear. And our own.

According to recent polls, that thinking puts me in among a 9% minority in our nation. And that sounds about right, as I look around about me.

So, in the context of our times, *The ALAN Review* Editor, Sissi Carroll, put this question to me: "What obligation, if any, does a YA writer feel for providing kids with at least some sense of hope through one's novels?"

Before I give my answer, let me take a little consensus among my peers:

"Actually none," says Chris Crutcher, veteran author of many YA novels, including his latest award-winner, *Whale Talk*. "The obligation of any writer is to tell a good story, a thought provoking or funny or sad or tragic tale. We have exactly the same obligation to our readers that any writer of adult fiction has."

Yeah, I say, but you always tend to slip some hope in there, don't you?

Chris nods in agreement. "Personally, I always put some sense of hope into my stories because I believe there is always some sense of hope in the world, and I want to reflect that. But a writer who doesn't share that view may tell a different kind of story...and that's the beauty of stories; that there are all kinds."

I put the question to Joan Bauer, Newbery Honor winner for (of all things, in this quest) *Hope Was Here*.

"I certainly feel an obligation to provide hope through my novels," says Joan. "I couldn't work on a story that didn't have hope. Which is not to say we should only write happy endings, because life can be bitterly hard. My dad committed suicide when I was in my early twenties. Suicide is an act devoid of hope...It took a long time for me to pass through that sorrow. Maybe because of it, I look for hope when things get dark—I look for the way out of profoundly hard places."

Proactive writer and speaker, Catherine Ryan Hyde, brought the whole world new hope with her bestselling novel, and later, hit movie, *Pay It Forward*, which addresses the renewal of hope in the lives of an English teacher, a homeless man, a single mom, and others, all brought about by the imagination of an idealistic young boy.

Though Catherine has written for the adult market for over ten years, her latest novel, *Momma Lion*, due out in 2004

from Harcourt, is a strictly YA effort. To the question at hand, she states that, "I believe it's important to leave readers of any age with a sense of hope. The reader becomes immersed in the fictional world you have created, and takes it on—if only briefly—as reality. And for a young adult audience, the element of hope is far more crucial, because the young reader's view of the world is still forming."

Verse novelist, Sonya Sones agrees. "When I'm writing about tough situations, I feel a deep responsibility to make it clear that things can, and probably will, get better. Why write stories for teens that present a bleak view of the world? Aren't things tough enough for them already?"

Like Catherine, David Lubar also believes that, "In a novel, the reader has invested a substantial amount of his own time and emotion. The characters have become part of his life. The fictional world has merged with his world. To let him walk this path and then say, 'Sorry, life sucks,' is contemptible. It's cheap and easy drama."

Ah, yes. I could not have said it better. You see, I'll let you in on a little secret. Most writers know, whether they'll admit it or not, that bleak stories—sad and dark and hopeless stories—are far easier to write than upbeat, funny, or hopeful ones; that is, to write them well and to actually pull them off. That's why you see so few really good upbeat stories and far too many dark "literary" ones—even among the classics. And that's why "dark" authors—particularly young writers—have so much trouble inserting any ray of hope into their novels. Even if they wanted to, they simply don't know how to do it well.

Good fiction writing requires, minimally, an 8-10-year apprenticeship. And as I tell my writing students, it's generally best for all concerned if it's not done in the public eye. This allows time for the fledgling writer to learn the craft of storytelling while acquiring the requisite and substantial battering of one's ego, through having one's talent constantly questioned from the mountaintops, and coming to realize at several points in the process (typically around the third and seventh year) that, "I really am horrible at this and I don't know a damn thing about writing a good story, do I?"

So who can blame the author who chooses to travel the easy road? Besides, as English professor and YA author, Chris Crowe (*Mississippi Trial*, 1955), noted in NCTE's *English Journal*, "Dark is deep." Or so, he pointed out, the thinking goes among many literary critics, high school teachers, and college professors. Many teens also buy into the corollary idea that "Dark is cool."

In the same article, highly acclaimed author, Kristen D. Randle (*Breaking Rank*, 1999, and *Slumming*, 2003), chimes in with an essay.

"Bleak' books," Kristen writes, "allow only one focus, often claiming that they do so in order to offer comfort to the wounded and introduce compassion to the uninitiated. But the solution to drowning has never been, to my understanding, to push the face of the struggling swimmer deeper into the water." It's this, "Misery loves company," aspect of YA Lit that has Kristen baffled.

"Many of our stories," she continues, "are no longer about healing, about reconciliation, about harmony and honor and courage and honest interdependence. At their best, they offer

almost no hope. 'Those *bleak* books,' my sixteen year old daughter sneers. 'Just a bunch of adults who think they know how we feel—like all we do is sit around indulging in angst. How lame.'"

I agree, but we all know how sappy a poorly written "hopeful" story can be, as well. So, for many writers, it's best not to take the chance and risk exposing themselves to the ridicule of being labeled a lightweight or sentimentalist, when a self-indulgent, alcohol/druggie, or angst-ridden story is so easy to write.

Basically, it all comes down to that great suppressor of talent and imagination: *fear*. They're afraid they will not be able to handle it.

Do you note an underlying trend here?

The role of the storyteller, I've always believed, is to make the invisible visible. To tell the untold story, to shine a light on hidden truths. And one of a novelist's most sacred charges is to bring forward the marginalized souls among us and somehow, in a credible and fearless fashion, add definition, value, a spotlight, and a song to their lives of quiet (or loud) desperation. At least once in the story, we need to expose the innate sense of goodness that even the least among us is born with.

In my first novel, *Choosing Up Sides*, ultimately, it was

Luke Bledsoe's own sense of right and wrong that gave him not only the hope for a better life, but the courage to act on it.

Tyler Waltern's dad in *Over the Wall* was hopeless, too—seemingly, a suicide waiting to happen. But again, it was an innate sense of fairness—of

what's right and wrong—that Tyler eventually used to quell the *fear* and reignite the spark of hope, not only in his own life, but in his father's as well.

Hope burns eternal inside Tom Gallagher, in *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, even against great odds. Of all my fictional characters, he is unique in that way. I'm beginning to see another trend here, in my own evolution as a writer.

And I think that trend reflects my growing belief that *no* person is without hope. It only takes the shining of a light into that sometimes bruised and buried, innate sense of hope we all carry within us. And who better than the storytellers of a nation to do so?

But are we obliged to do so? While I personally believe, as Chris Crutcher does, that I will "always put some sense of hope in my stories," I would never want someone to tell me I was obliged to do so. We should be able to write freely, and if dreary stories get popular, the rest of us need to smother them with love, with hope and grit, guts and grace—or however we choose to approach the matter.

Henry David Thoreau, perhaps the very first Young Adult author—certainly the very first hippie—may actually have said it best, some 175 years ago, when he wrote in *Walden*, "While we aren't obligated to rid the world of all its wrongs, we must not personally participate in anything wrong." Amen. But as he notes, too, it is a *personal* choice.

Joan Bauer's comment about the hopelessness of suicide reminds me of something I realized when I was seventeen, during the height of the Vietnam War. Suicide and war have a lot in common. That's why it didn't surprise me to learn later in life, as Tyler Waltern discovers in *Over the Wall*, that far more Vietnam vets died from suicide, after they returned home, than the 58,000 American soldiers who died *in* the

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war. By some estimates, over 100,000 U.S. military personnel of that era took their own lives.

Going to war is just another form of giving up, both morally and spiritually. It's pure hopelessness. (Though, ironically, as Mark Twain shows us in *The War Prayer*, the entire process, from the flag-waving parades to the chest-thumping speeches, is embedded with hopeful clichés.) It's like saying, no use in trying to salvage the situation in a humane way, to do the fiercely hard work it takes to preserve human life. "Kill 'em all," as the bumper stickers shout on the pick-up trucks in my town, "and let God sort 'em out."

Where, then, do I find the hope in my own life so I don't give up entirely on this country or this world? One source has always been in the books I read.

From the time I could decode a baseball boxscore in the morning paper, I've loved reading. But I've never been a so-called voracious reader. Call it the boredom factor, call it impatience, call it a lust for a certain music on the page, but from as far back as I can remember, I've been so picky about what I want from a book that, even today, I finish reading maybe one novel out of every twenty I start. And it's not for lack of trying.

In my early years, biographies topped my list. Wild and crazy Dizzy Dean, crazier still, Jimmy Pearsall, and beer sucking, hot dog chomping, cigar puffing Babe Ruth, to name a few. And every one was a character. By the time I was nine years old, I'd read all about their lives and so many more.

And I had a reason. With the added hope that some day I could be a pro ballplayer myself, I needed to know what each one was doing by age nine (when I was nine) and at age ten (when I turned ten), and so on, year-by-year, until well into my teens. I needed to know their tricks and philosophies. I needed to know how wild I could be. I needed to know each turn and juncture in their lives, so I could measure the progress of my own hopes and dreams.

Ah, but dreams can change. And lucky thing. Because so did my ability to hit a left-handed curveball, coming at me, as a lefty hitter, about head high, making me duck and close my eyes just before it magically broke right over the plate. Somewhere around my junior year in high school, somewhere between the time a Charlie Company 1st Battalion 20th Infantry unit slaughtered some 450 unarmed villagers in the hamlet of My Lai and my senior prom, I realized that whatever gift I'd had for hitting a baseball—and the dreams tied to it—were no longer important enough or relevant enough for me to pursue.

It was right around that time when a certain black book fell from heaven into my hands and changed my life. An amazing book—full of crazy characters, of sadness and love,

of desperation and revolution, of insight and morality. It was political and poetical, religious and surreptitious. It was a biography of the world and it was pure fiction. I was captivated by it, motivated by it, undressed, unblessed, and depressed by it. All that summer, I'd been teaching myself primitive piano, had fancied myself a bluesy, outraged rock star or an actor maybe or anyone with an audience, anyone with a voice. Then on this one particular hot, dry October afternoon, my older brother left for college and left behind his copy of *The Bob Dylan Songbook*.

It was long, lean, shiny and black, a paperback, over a hundred pages full of musical notes and chords and the most surprising poetry this sixteen-year-old had ever read. All of a sudden I had a new dream. I tore the baffle off my electric organ, cranked up the tiny Sears and Roebuck mail order amp, and sang that raggedy book from cover to cover, memorizing beat street lyrics, adopting the wail of a moaning man of constant sorrow, a tambourine man, a weather man, only a pawn, only a hobo, but one more is gone, leaving nobody to sing his sad song, and on and on. And I knew what I wanted to be.

I would be the storyteller, the historian, the biographer of mixed up, dreamed up characters like these, who push fake morals, insult, and stare, whose money doesn't talk, it swears. Or those who sing in the rat race choir, bent out of shape by society's pliers. Characters with eyes, with guts.

And so I wrote. Dear God, I wrote. I began carrying around a spiral notebook in my back pocket, cover torn, metal spirals flattened from school desk seats, pages bent, half-ripped, but all filled with blue pen lines scribbled out, fast paced, double-spaced, into crumpled civil rightist protest war love songs about *jack the pauper earnin money now sellin plants he grows around*. Or, *the welfare girl who lives next door, sleeps with poisons on her floor*. Or, *judy and the gypsy drinkin shot after shot, screamin out the backseat, what hath god rot?*

Stuff like that. Stupid stuff, but, like Dylan's work, it always had hope.

John Updike once said that of all the fine arts, writing is the most self-taught. I agree. You learn to write by reading what other thinkers have thought, what other writers have wrought, by studying the struggles and battles they've fought. You watch them riff, then you try it yourself.

A book may show you something brilliant, new, and amazing, or it may not. Depends on the words. Personally, I look for the ones that do. For my money, that's what a book should do. It should tie you up, it should work you up, make you think, make you see, make you feel extra happy and sorrowful, extra nervous, scared, and bold. It must be dream laden,

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Text © John H. Ritter, 2003. Portions of the above essay will appear in *Making The Match: The Right Book For The Right Reader At The Right Time*, edited by Dr. Teri Lesesne (Stenhouse, November 2003).

## Ritter's *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*

A Review by Pamela Sissi Carroll

With *The Boy Who Saved Baseball* (2003), John H. Ritter ends the long quiet inning that followed the publication of *Over the Wall*, his eloquent, award-winning novel of baseball and the moral consequence of the Vietnam conflict. Readers will cheer this endearing new novel, which features with a cast of likable locals from a dusty small town at the base of the mountains in the Southwest. In *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, Ritter walks confidently to the mound, grins at the batter, stretches into a graceful wind up, and delivers perfect pitches through each of 216 pages.

As readers of *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, we are introduced to a rag-tag group of 12-year-old friends—male and female—who comprise the local little league team, the Wildcats. The team, which lacks baseball prowess, has bigger powers: It is able to draw Dante Del Gato, a scruffy near-hermit who is a former professional star, out of his mountain retreat to come coach them, and it summons Cruz de la Cruz, a mysterious, charming, and exceptionally talented 12-year-old to the ballpark, too. Cruz, a modern cowboy whose saddle is emblazoned with *Cruz-on.com*, appears in town just in time to help the Wildcats prepare for the biggest little league game in its history. And in the end, the Wildcats demonstrate the power to face up to huge challenges and to conquer them.

When the Wildcats gather for summer baseball camp in Dillontown, they find themselves in quite a fix: the fate of the entire town rests on their shoulders. Here is how it happens: Many of the town's leaders want to sell Dillontown land to developers who promise to turn the dying community into a thriving oasis—new homes, stores, roads, and a proper recreation center. Most of the land has already been sold when we meet the group, but there is one hold-out: old Doc Altenheimer, a baseball fan, owns the land that the ballpark sits on. After he is courted by the mayor, who begs him to sell, the historical society, who urges him to protect the field, and Tom Gallagher, his 12-year-old friend whose parents run the baseball camp for local kids every summer, Doc makes an odd decision: He will keep the field if the local team of 12-year-olds can beat their archrival team, a group of kids from the more affluent town south of Dillontown. If the local team loses, he will sell his land, and the developers will tear up the old field to make room for new development, new growth.

The situation looks hopeless to the despondent Wildcats, at first. Tom and his friends, including feisty and strong María, cocky Frankie, quiet Rachel, and brainy Ramón, have a lot of heart, but they cannot hit—or catch—and the big game is only five days away. But while they

Then, as it magically crosses home plate, you swing. And if it's a good book, you *connect*—with such grace, insight, heart, and hope that it humbles, crumbles, and amazes you.

For my money, that's what a book should do. But, hey, writer, it's up to you.

are standing in the field on the first day of baseball camp, where they train and live together, Cruz de la Cruz appears in the outfield:

The stranger rode in from the east.

Under the rays of the rising sun, through the dust of a swirling wind, the horseman rode downslope, down Rattlesnake Ridge, just as Blackjack Buck had seen in a vision, dreamed in a prophecy, a century ago. In his rifle scabbard, laced low and tight, he carried a baseball bat made of hand-cut mountain maple, custom-lathed, and sanded to a shine. (page 11)

As the story unfolds, we begin to understand that Cruz de la Cruz, who hits every pitch hurled at him, catches every ball hit toward him, and injects his teammates with confidence, courage, and a new sense of joy in playing the game of baseball, is no normal kid.

On his first night at camp, Cruz takes Tom with him on a secret adventure: they ride their horses to the mountain hideaway of reclusive Dante Del Gato. Del Gato had held the batting record for professional ballplayers, but he quit just before the World Series, and refused to talk about why. After years of living in the mountains, alone, he had earned a reputation of being slightly crazy, anti-social, and mean.

Cruz wasn't stopped by that reputation; he and Tom asked Del Gato to come coach the team, adding that with his expertise, his secrets, he was surely their only hope. Del Gato surprises even Tom and Cruz when he appears at the ballpark and agrees to be the coach. His training methods are unusual, to say the least: he has the kids scramble down the mountain during free form runs, has them follow the blinks of a string of Christmas lights with their eyes, in order to help them retrain their neural pathways so that they will follow the baseball with their eyes and their minds, and has them do batting practice against a softball pitcher, so that they learn to anticipate the spin and timing of the ball.

Cruz, too, teaches his new friends some secrets; he has developed a computer simulation that helps them learn how to judge the speed and spin of a baseball when they bat; the team spends their nighttime hours in the school library at "batting" practice. Encouraged not only by Del Gato and Cruz, but also by the adults who march into the camp to the tunes of the school band, and with "platters of *mango y jalepeño* salsa, crumbled goat cheese, fresh *cilantro con limón*, lettuce, tomatoes, an iron skillet of Spanish rice with diced tomatoes and black olives, another with refried pinto and black beans smothered in cheese, three kilo baskets of warm tortillas under white

cloth, and grilled chicken strips kept warm in a pan of bubbling brown sugar, tequila, ginger, and lime juice marinade" (105), the Wildcats start to think and act like one body—a true team. They work harder than they ever have during the week of baseball camp, and slowly begin to think that with their two special weapons, Coach Del Gato and Cruz de la Cruz, they might just have a chance at winning the big game.

Then, as quickly and mysteriously as he arrives, and on the eve of the big game, Cruz disappears. When he rides his horse away from camp, he leaves Tom and the others to prove to themselves that they can be winners—by themselves.

The game itself is an epic one; Tom, who is the worst player of the group, has to play, and ends up pitching when María, the team's best pitcher, is hit by a line drive and is in too much pain to continue on the mound. In the final inning, as series of hits and errors accumulate, the Wildcats actually win. The kids and their supporters are jubilant—until all realize that in the excitement, old Doc has suffered a fatal heart attack. Because he had no will and no family to claim his estate, his land would not be protected after his death.

Tom and his teammates were inconsolable, sad about Doc's death and discouraged that their efforts to save the town by winning the game have been useless—until Tom looks in the back of his "dreamsketcher" notebook at the "words of encouragement" that Doc had penned there a week earlier, on the day that he and Tom sat on his front porch and discussed the future of the ballpark and the town with him.

This uplifting novel is a joy to read and to carry in the mind. It is a treasure that will bring energy, laughter, and thoughtful discussion to middle school classrooms. Like Ritter's previous novels, it is about baseball, but also about friends, families, and heroes, and about the ways that the past and present inform the future.

Even the most reluctant adolescent readers will have

fun finding the puns and word play that Ritter sprinkles throughout. Some of my favorite examples include these: The title of the prologue is "In the big inning." A newscaster explains to Tom, "Don't you see, kid? This Big Game, your situation here, has caught the attention of the entire nation. It's David and Goliath! It's loyalty versus big bucks...It's a metaphor for the entire game of baseball" (154), then adds emphasis, "I'm telling you buddy. It's more than a metaphor. This could be a *metafive!*" (154).

Adolescents who like to keep notebooks of their own thoughts will find a kindred spirit in Tom, who hides from his classmates to draw and write his thoughts in his dreamsketcher notebook at every opportunity. Young writers will be sure to notice the figurative language and the symbols that float across the pages with the red-tailed hawk. Those who like to meet unusual characters among the people of fiction will delight in watching the antics of Hollis B, who wanders around town with a pretend cellular phone at his ear so that he can comment on all of the action on the streets. Those who are drawn to computers will be pleased to see that even the mysterious Cruz—a kid who seems to be made of legend as well as flesh and blood, is computer savvy; in fact, he creates a computer simulation that allows the team to practice its hitting while sitting in the school library. And savvy readers are encouraged to meet Cruz, and author John H. Ritter, at [www.Cruz-on.com](http://www.Cruz-on.com) and [www.JohnHRitter.com](http://www.JohnHRitter.com).

In the movie, *Jerry Maguire*, the female lead character tells Jerry, "You had me at 'Hello.'" I feel that way about John H. Ritter and his young adult novels. Like others who are among the finest of today's writers for young people, Ritter addresses the realities that trouble today's teens and the forces that shape and reshape local and national cultures. Yet John H. Ritter's game is unfailingly hopeful and encouragingly positive. This book, like the best games, is a joy to experience. He had me at "In the big inning..."