

“Ahoy, You Crazy Dreamers”:

A Conversation with John H. Ritter

Amidst throngs of teachers gathered outside the Opryland Governor’s Ballroom, I heard someone call my name. Above a sea of faces, I saw John H. Ritter as he politely but swiftly moved through the crowd. We had tentatively scheduled time to sit down and talk during an afternoon session of the November 2006 ALAN workshop in Nashville, Tennessee. John had spent most of the day speaking to middle and high school students in Nashville, and had just arrived at the workshop.

I read my first book by John Ritter in 2004. For sixteen years I had been a second- and third-grade teacher. I had used children’s literature extensively in my elementary classroom, but six years ago when I began teaching sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders, I realized that I had a lot of catching up to do if I were to become knowledgeable regarding adolescent and young adult literature. With the help of our school librarian, I began to immerse myself in literature for this age group, hoping to find titles to inspire my students to read beyond their daily assignments. I attended a workshop, *Igniting a Passion for Reading*, given by Dr. Steven L. Layne. One of the many books he “book-talked” was *Choosing Up Sides*. By the time he was finished with his review, I felt that if I failed to read that book, I no longer deserved to teach middle school! So I read the book! I book-talked it to my students one day, and from then on the book moved



from student to student, rarely making it back to the shelf. My students had gained a great story, and I had gained something even more precious; my students trusted me to point them toward great books.

Ritter, whose novels include *Choosing Up Sides*, *Over the Wall*, *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, and most recently *Under the Baseball Moon*, crafts his stories to show his young adult readers that they have choices when life throws

them a curve. He uses the game of baseball, the glory of music, and the power of the written word to illustrate how young people can overcome everyday, and not-so-everyday, challenges. Each book goes beyond the story of the game, beyond the story of the problem, right to the heart of Ritter’s message: What is really valuable in life? From the first page of *Under the Baseball Moon*, Ritter cries, “Ahoy, you crazy dreamers! Welcome to the water’s edge of North America.” Thus begins the tale of a young boy’s search for what matters most as he pursues his dream of becoming a famous musician.

As our conversation progressed, John H. Ritter, the author, revealed how the passion, pain, and purpose of John H. Ritter, the person, has brought depth and richness to the stories he writes. He shared with frankness his feelings about the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, and he told me how writing stories of hope helped pull him from depression and despair.

TAR: John, you have had a full day already! You spent the morning with students, and I'd be interested to learn about the workshops you conducted with them.

Ritter: Everything I do in schools depends upon the audience: What is the age range, the size of the group, their background? Have they read any of my books; which ones? I've done assemblies where they haven't even heard of me, and assemblies where the entire school has read one particular novel. Of course, the questions are always so much better when they have read the book.

This morning I spoke at a private middle school and a private high school. One thing I always try to do is give them a glimpse of what it takes to write a book. And I always tell them I've never known another writer who writes like me. And most writers could probably say the same thing. But I really warn them that I'm weird! I start off by saying that if I could talk anyone out of becoming a writer, then I feel that I've done some good

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today! It's not so much that I want to talk them out of it, but that I want to make sure that when I leave, they have a much firmer grounding as to what it takes to be a writer. So many people say, "Gee, I should sit down and write a book. Okay, then. How do you get an agent?" And that's what the general population thinks. But there is no "school," regardless of what these MFA Creative Writing programs say, especially when I was growing up. I discourage people from going into MFA programs to learn how to write because I think they can kill a good writer. I would take my chances on the street, gaining life experiences, rather than sitting down in college and learning from a barely published professor. Now, that's not always the case. I know T. C. Boyle teaches a writing class at USC. I don't know what it's like, but he doesn't qualify as the bitter professor.

But writing is still something for which there's no apprenticeship program. Every writer who comes along has to reinvent the wheel. And

now, when I give writer's workshops to adults a couple of weeks out of the year, when I'm talking to adults who want to become YA novelists, I try to save them about five years off of their road to becoming a published novelist with what I've learned along the way because it is probably a ten-year journey, or a ten-year apprenticeship, I usually call it. Sometimes, the apprenticeship happens in the public eye. Sometimes, you get published too soon. I've seen that happen with writers. They have a great idea, the book is pretty well executed. Then, BAM! Success—of some degree. So they start working on book number two, and they don't have a clue. The idea's not there, they're not that strong as far as writing goes, they're just lost. So they stumble, and the sophomore jinx comes up, and that second book doesn't do very well, and by the third book, they're out of the game. So what I'm saying to students is that writing is a tough trade. Don't rush into it. In fact, learn your chops while getting real life experience, because a writer not only has to write well, but has to gather a headful of good stories first. And you're kind of lucky if you don't have to learn your trade in the public eye.

TAR: Before you've had the seasoning time?

Ritter: Absolutely, so that you're not cringing when you read what you wrote in your first book. And a writer should continually evolve with each book. That doesn't mean each book is going to be better than the one before; it can be, but your skill level should be getting better because of what you've learned. If you just get to a certain plateau and level off, then I believe you are undershooting your stars. Because there's no reason why you can't continue to be a better writer until the day you put down the pen. The writers I read and the ones I want to run with are the ones who do that. They are constantly experimenting with form or with style, with voice, and they're getting their storytelling chops more finely honed and crafted.

TAR: That is a concept I'd like to communicate to my middle school students. Reading your novels, I've been struck by how you combine so many of your passions; your passion for baseball, your passion for music, your passion for art and writing; in each

of your books. You integrate these ideas in a different way each time. Is that a conscious choice or plan as you begin each book, or is it more of a natural result of pouring yourself into the story?

Ritter: Well, I've never thought about it before! That doesn't mean it wasn't planned, it just means that . . .

TAR: Maybe to you it seemed like a natural thing and we readers are the ones who are amazed at your craft!

Ritter: Well, maybe. I know I feel that as a writer, I feel like I can do anything. I mean that technically, craft-wise, I can do anything I want at the moment. And so if I want to tie together a baseball story with a Vietnam anti-war story, I can do it. I take that as a challenge. I was always one of those over-active, high-achieving kids who was bored with the everyday. But if I got the hint or the feeling that the teacher didn't think I could do something, then I was on fire, and I went for it! So that's why not only have I never written the same book twice, I've never written anything close to the same book twice. I'm constantly looking for new territory. I want to pioneer, to go there first, before it gets overridden with writers.

When I broke into fiction writing—short fiction—my stories were about abused children; this was in the early nineties. But by the time I got a book published in 1998, it was the status quo. They called them 'problem books.' "What's the problem in this book? This is the one with the alcoholic parent. This is the one with the kid who does drugs. This one is pregnant." Publishing *Choosing Up Sides* saved me a lot of bother, because now I can just push all that stuff off my desk and none of that "kid versus parent" or "destructive kid versus self" stuff is going to be on my agenda anymore. It's all being well-covered by tons of writers. And me, I'm constantly wanting to go into territory no one has worked before. So to put all my passions—the things I really care about—into my writing is pretty natural because, why else would you write?

There is also another level to this answer. That is, when I go into schools and talk about writing and being a writer, I never stop with that. I

always ask the audience, "Who wants to be an artist of any sort? An actor maybe? Is anybody in drama? Does anybody sing in church? Do you play music? How many of you are athletes?" And I lump all of those categories together, athletics as well as all the fine arts, because we are all essentially fighting the same battle. For anyone in those disciplines, it's going to take a miracle for you to make a living at it. So I want to talk in terms of practicality.

That is, "How do you achieve a life that allows you to be an artist?" When I decided I was going to be a writer, the first thing I started to do

was read biographies of writers. Not to find out their philosophies or their styles of writing, but I wanted to find out the answer to one question: How did they afford to be a writer?

Where did they get the free time? Mark Twain married money; his father-in-law gave him a house. Jack Kerouac lived with his mom

until he was 35. Both of those solutions are equal in my eyes, in the

sense that they bought the authors time. They were able to find a way to give themselves time to experience life, to travel, and then to come back and write about it without having to punch a time clock, without having to worry about how much income they were bringing in. So, when I'm in schools, I'm trying to get students to start to think about what professions are available to an artist so you can pay your bills while you write. Those other possibilities are there; you marry somebody who has a more normal occupation, you marry a school teacher, and you have your summers to travel and you have an insurance program!

TAR: Ah, yes, the insurance program!

Ritter: Yes, I was a contractor for many years. My wife was a secretary, and we bought two little

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houses in San Diego dreaming about the day when she would be a teacher and I would be a writer—which took fifteen years to achieve. I tell students that if you go to Hollywood, all your waiters and all your bartenders are actors and actresses. That’s a kind of job that allows them to be flexible enough

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that they can show up for a ten o’clock audition three days in a row, or whatever it takes to pursue their art, rather than just saying, “Someday I’m going to do this. Someday I’m going to”

And then I separate writing out and I tell them it’s the one art that you can arrive at in your thirties and forties and still be considered a young artist. We expect our

novelists to tell us something we don’t know, or that we haven’t thought all the way through. Kids hate to hear that, because nowadays, because of Harry Potter, they’ve all got a book in them; they’ve got three on the computer! But if you stop to analyze what these kids are writing, it’s all a retelling of *Eldest* or *Harry Potter* or *Inkheart*. Essentially, unless they’ve had a unique childhood, there’s really not much that they are going to discover that hasn’t already been discovered and written about by others for hundreds of years.

TAR: You are trying to help them understand what it takes to succeed as a writer.

Ritter: Yes, which goes beyond the gaining of years and life experiences. You need a highway of time in front of you so you can put it all down. And that’s the second level of passion I talk about in my books: Time. The artist needs more than dreams or talent or desire. We all do. We need unencumbered time.

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because I was so depressed and so angry—that’s the highest emotion I could muster above depression—and then I would fall back again into depression, for over a year.

When I started seeing the children we were killing in Afghanistan for essentially no reason whatsoever, except that an angry, panicked, vengeful nation just decided that’s what they wanted to do, it just saddened me that I was living among that many people who felt that way; and so I was really thrown off track. I was talking to Robert Lipsyte about this the other day, and I just said, “I can’t write in anger. The book that would come out would not be a book anybody would want to read.” And so I just kind of had to live through it.

I lost a year of creativity between *Over the Wall* and *The Boy Who Saved Baseball* because of that huge depression. It just knocked me off my feet. It literally did. I was in bed for days and days; I went weeks without going outside. And I needed something to buoy my spirits. And the solution ended up being just that—kind of a spiritual buoy. I wanted to write a book that was just full of joy and adventure and hope. Something that was uplifting, and I knew I didn’t want it to have anything to do with a dysfunctional family, no issues with father and son, none of this crap! I wanted to have that driving force of the story to be a band of kids grouping together in order to pursue some common goal that just had to be accomplished. It was like this instant family had to form, had to get together, and had to do something wonderful, something great out there, in spite of any petty little annoyances, which, of course, were inevitable between them. And that was just a direct reaction to the world I saw out my window. I wanted to let children know, let readers know, that this world that you happen to have been born into—or that you turned age nine, ten, or eleven in before realizing that you’re part of a bully nation that has taken on a third world country and is blowing them to bits—is not the only kind of reality or community that is possible. There is something else that you can strive for. Even in America. And maybe if just by metaphor, or by my storytelling, I could at least plant the seed of possibility into the minds of these kids, that striving for money, striving for

Under the Baseball Moon

by John H. Ritter

Reviewed by Vicki Sherbert

Andy Ramos rides a skateboard. Andy Ramos plays a trumpet. At the same time.

From the very first page, the reader gets the message that this is no ordinary sports story. It is a story about passion, ambition, reflection, and love. San Diego's Ocean Beach neighborhood, OB to the locals, is the setting for a rich tale of music and fast pitch softball under the baseball moon. Among other things, the term "baseball moon" is used to refer to a daytime moon shining down on a baseball game.

Andy Ramos, the protagonist in John H. Ritter's latest novel, is a musician with ambition. After spending his childhood in the backrooms of smoky nightclubs while his mom sang and his dad played electric guitar, Andy has determined that this is his breakout summer, the summer to launch his musical career. Since the fifth grade, he has had the reputation of being a weirdo, thanks to a girl named Glory Martinez. Glory's mother sang in the band with Andy's parents, and as her drinking problem escalated, Andy found himself being called upon to calm Glory down when her world pushed her over the edge. To his relief, the summer after his sixth-grade year, her mother checked herself into a rehab clinic and Glory moved to Tucson, but not soon enough for Andy to escape the ridicule he received for simply being associated with her. In the years since her departure, Andy has thrown himself into his music. He has spent every minute he could on the rooftop, on the pier, on his skateboard; playing his trumpet, blowing like a jazzman to the beat of whatever or whoever was around him. He saw it as "painting with music".

Now at last, at the end of his ninth-grade year, Andy feels he is ready to get his start. He comes up with the name "FuChar Skool," the informal version of Fusion Charge Sk8rs Rool, for his band. The other two band members get into the new name and the enthusiasm and determination of the group soars. One afternoon, after playing to the

beat of his buddies on their skateboards, Andy cruises off toward the ball fields. There, he begins to play. He notices a girl in a batting cage and pays attention to the "dance" of her body. As she swings away at the balls popping out of the machine, he "paints" her with his music. The pitching machine keeps popping, the girl keeps swinging, and he keeps playing. Determined to meet her, Andy hangs around until her practice is over. As he steps onto the ballfield grass, he cannot believe it: the girl is Glory Martinez.

Though compelled to stay away from her, Andy finds he needs to be near Glory. A close relationship grows between them, and both find they are closer to reaching their individual dreams when they are together; Glory pitches better when Andy plays for her, and Andy plays better when Glory is in the audience. But a mysterious and somewhat sinister figure, Max Lucero, arrives on the scene, and before he knows what's happening, Andy suspects he may have sold his soul to guarantee his musical success.

Young adult readers will be drawn to the image of Andy blowing one-handed on his trumpet while skateboarding around the town. Many will relate to Glory and her purpose and determination to climb to the next level in the sport she loves. But most will relate to Andy as he must decide between his desire to succeed and the person he has come to love.

In *Under the Baseball Moon*, Ritter gives the reader a taste of the laid back, almost hippie-like atmosphere of Ocean Beach. As the characters in all their uniqueness deal with the choices they must make, a stressfulness is introduced to their daily lives that is unfamiliar to them. In the end, this book is about so much more than music or softball. It is about deciding what is important in life, and how much a person is willing to pay to get it.

Ritter, John H. 2006. *Under the Baseball Moon*. Philomel. 2006. 224 pp. ISBN: 0-399-23623-6 \$16.99.

status, striving for position and power or global oil is not the only reason to get up in the morning; in fact, getting up for that stuff is probably the wrong reason. And so I wanted to show a town and a family, who were content with a simple life, who did not declare development to be progress, did not declare economic growth to be progress. Rather,

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they saw it as being threatening and detrimental to what they valued, and what they valued was free time. In *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, Doc says to Tom, "Rich people can't afford to live like us. They don't have the time." I wanted to put across that concept that there is something rich people cannot buy. And it's a very valuable

thing. It is time, it is family, it's community, it's contentment. All the things they had in Dillontown, beyond what Tom thought about the baseball field being magical and so on, beyond that, they had a life that wasn't driving them crazy. They didn't have to jump on the freeway and join that commute every morning.

Like Maggie LaRue says in the book, "Why not live where you work or work where you live?" Save yourself this hassle. You know, if that job that you want is so far away that you can't afford to live in that neighborhood, then wait a minute, how valuable is your life to you that you would leave this neighborhood to lose two or three hours a day to commute to work in that other neighborhood that you can't afford to live in? Maybe you haven't exhausted all the possibilities. Could you stay in your own neighborhood and do something else in life that will allow you to be close to family and meet your obligations, or if you love what you're doing, could you move to that other part of town and live in a studio and eke out a living?

What kind of example do we give our children when we spend an hour on the road everyday to and from work, and the traffic is horrible, and the development is out of control?

Although I think I've lost the parents, which is why I write for children, my idea is this: Kids, you still have a choice. So just by demonstration in my novels, I want to show that there is another way to go about life, and in *Under the Baseball Moon* I say it outright. Though it's an un-American suggestion in the sense that we are taught to always be striving; striving to go to the greatest college in order to get the greatest job in order to get the greatest income and live in the greatest house with the greatest blah, blah, blah; and then you come to the end of your life and see that you never had time to be yourself, you never had time to gather your thoughts in the evening or to walk in the woods, or to travel through Europe or South America, or you know spontaneously . . .

TAR: To really live?

Ritter: Yeah, to really live!

TAR: And your passions?

Ritter: The real passion in my life is this: Buying time!

I discovered it when I was in college. I worked construction, and we worked so hard in the summer because this was the big season for this commercial contractor that I worked for. This was their big season for out-of-town work, seven-days, fourteen-days-in-a row jobs, working twelve-hour days. At the end of that summer, before I went off to college, I had enough in my bank account to pay for my next nine months of life. And then the next summer I did it all over again. And it occurred to me fairly early on that you could go through life like this! If you lived very simply, which I did since I had the advantage of being a hippie—you could buy yourself time. My wife and I had a lot of roommates. In *Under the Baseball Moon* Andy's parents decided they were going to do the same thing—that they were going to buy a house and have a bunch of roommates who were more transitory at that time in the lives than they were. They were making this house payment that was going to be outrageous if it was just the two of them, but by sharing the home and renting out the rooms for five or six years, finally they got to the place where the payment was more manageable. It

wasn't so hard, and they could wind down, and then fifteen years later, it's like they were geniuses to have done that! My wife and I did it, and I think other young artists can too.

TAR: As I was reading the book, I realized I had really missed that boat toward financial freedom!

Ritter: And, that's why I wrote about it. When I talk to young artists, one of the things I urge them to do is to, early on, make a decision to create a life that allows you a lot of time.

TAR: I loved how in *Under the Baseball Moon* you wrote of Glory's dependence on Andy's music while she pitched and Andy's dependence on Glory's presence to enhance his music. In the beginning, Andy viewed Glory's reappearance in his life with dread. The characters then realized that they could function alone, but that they were better together.

Ritter: Right, but then it got to the point where Andy realized that he didn't need her, or that he was going to leave her behind and pursue his dream in the music world. To me, that became this critical point where he had to determine what was valuable in his life, what was important, and how important was it to be a big star if it meant living this kind of constantly irritated, constantly stressed, constantly striving lifestyle that it seemed like he had to get into in order to sustain the kind of success he was having. It meant leaving this girl behind. And so he makes this choice that I don't think very many boys would make.

He had to have come from that town and had to have come from that family in order for him to even consider making this sacrificial choice that he ends up making. And that was just part of my overall theme, and I tell you, it was driven by the war in Iraq. It sounds funny, but the whole idea driving this story is that sometimes we have to sacrifice something that is very dear to us in order to make good things happen in the world. And in America, fear became very dear to us, and we would not give it up. And when you become a vengeful nation, that's a very fearful act, and when that kind of thinking dominates the leadership of

the nation, the media of the nation, and the consciousness of the majority of the people in the nation, oppression takes over. It was my way of saying this is not the kind of country I want to live in; it's not the kind of world I want to support. And I wished I could demonstrate something, an alternative to that value system in such a way that didn't sound preachy, but had undertones of the message.

So I started the book off in the very first paragraph, "Ahoy, you crazy dreamers!" And then I talk about the wagon wheels of the Spanish fathers which cut across the Kumeyaay Indian migration trail and changed this land forever. It was an invasion that was parallel to a war; here we have the people with money

coming to take natural resources away from people who were content and were doing very well, thank you, but were told it was for their own good. Instead it did neither one of those cultures any good. It did not bring out the best in either one of those cultures, and it destroyed one of them. So, it was just my way of saying that what we're doing in Iraq is not a new thing; we're doing the same old thing over and over and over again. I carried that invasion

theme throughout the book to the point that it wasn't just this town that was being invaded, it turned out this boy's mind was being invaded by this outsider. And to me, when you lose your ability to think for yourself, as Americans did, to think critically, to compare and contrast and analyze the situation, and you're just going with the flow due to fear, you've lost the most important thing in life. And that's love. That's what drove me. Because clearly America was acting out of fear, not love.

So the book was about this whole idea that

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there are two different kinds of invasion. There are the aggressive armies that come in and destroy, bust through a border and destroy the land in order to occupy and control it. Then there are the immigrants—who come into this land, like the Mexican people who come across the border at great risk to their lives in order to do nothing more than to benefit our country, to benefit their families and enrich the community in which they end up settling by doing very humble and very necessary work for low wages. And so in California the same time this war was going on, there was this immigration battle, because the nationalism of the war

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spilled into everything, and so the right wing hate groups had this concept that now we have to seal those borders. And they're not going to say "from those dirty Mexicans," they are going to say "from the terrorists" who could easily come over, and it's ridiculous! It was just another way to hide their racism and to push the agenda of closing off the border to those who look differently, particularly from Mexico. There

has never been the cry to seal off the Canadian border. There's always the cry to seal the Mexican border. And I hope that this new Congress will be able to underfund that double wall that they've proposed, just let it go by the wayside, because it's insanity. Those people are not the enemy.

Anyhow, that's how I juxtapose those two different types of invasions in *Under the Baseball Moon*. One based on love, one based on fear. This is nothing any normal reader or any young reader needs to know, but that was how I was able to write this book and not feel like I was surrendering to fluff fiction in order to get through my depression. I still said something that was important, but I could say it in a way that I didn't have to wake up angry every morning.

TAR: You had mentioned during an interview with

Chris Crowe that you always feel that the potential impact with any work is greater on those who aren't so set in their ways. So you have the young adult audience, and you don't preach to them, but you create the scenario with the characters.

Ritter: Right. It goes back to that basic writing axiom: show, don't tell. Don't preach to me. If you think you have such a great idea, show me how it will work. That's why I create these towns and these situations.

TAR: I appreciate the depth of story you concoct with each book, the rich characters and the tough, out-of-the-ordinary-yet-oh-so-typical dilemmas and issues faced by adolescents today. Even though you write about incredibly serious things, there is so much fun in what you write. Is it difficult to blend the lighthearted with the heavy?

Ritter: I'm going to say "no" immediately, and I think that's the right answer. I think that's the proper way to go through life, to be lighthearted, even in the face of whatever natural or man-made disaster comes your way. I know that there are serious situations and you have to step up and deal with them, but you don't have to be crushed by them. It takes a real generosity of spirit to be a happy person. Depression is very selfish. I'm not saying that you can just recognize this and talk yourself out of depression, but it is a disease that feeds on selfishness, or creates a selfish person. I don't exactly know how it works. If you are going about very serious work, say in the medical fields saving lives, or on the street feeding the homeless or in school teaching children, whatever the serious work is, there is no reason you can't do it with an upbeat attitude and a joy in your heart.

Again, that's not something that I just want to stand up and tell you, because it does no good, but I would sure like to show that, and the way to do that is to prove it. I have a lot of fun on the page. I use a lot of puns and plays on words, but they are more than that; there's a playfulness that I put into the text that's not just for my own enjoyment. I mean, I certainly do enjoy writing that way, but I also use it to demonstrate that you can go through life this way; it's possible.

TAR: In each of your books, your characters deal with some incredibly difficult things; the death of a sibling, war, a parent's depression; and yet they still are able to laugh at themselves and to find humor and relief in the midst of some pretty tough trials. I think your young adult readers need that. They, too, face some very difficult, serious things. Many carry some pretty heavy burdens. Your books allow them to connect with characters that carry some heavy loads also.

Ritter: I see it all as a part of that big picture, that idea about pondering what's important in life. Hey, you may blow the SAT's, you may get turned down by three schools, two of which you thought you were dead certain to get into, or whatever, and does that crush you? Is that the end of the world? The answer is "No." But how soon do you find that out, how soon do you realize it? It may be a year or several years. You kind of learn that those are the types of things that you can shake off, those are the types of things that don't have to kill your spirit for months and years.

TAR: What does your week typically look like, or do you ever have a "typical" week? Has your working schedule changed with each successive book?

Ritter: I never have a typical week. And it was very insightful for you to note the fact that my writing schedule has changed with each successive book. I'll just say that the only time you are a pure writer is before your first book is published. Once that first book comes out, you become a promoter; you've got to go out on the road, introduce your work to the audience. There are two hundred to three hundred young adult novels published each year. And most publishers have a budget of zero for a first novel. They may publish one or two dozen debut novels and essentially what they're doing is throwing them against the wall to see which ones stick. Meaning, which ones get star reviews; which ones win awards, not the major awards, but just awards in general; which ones are on the ALA Young Adult Best Book list? Maybe then they'll take an advertisement out, or put that book in a group ad. In other words, you have to show them you have earning capacity before they want to put too

much more than the initial investment into your career. So, how do you do that? You do it by numbers, by making sure that you earn back your advance, that they don't lose money on you. As a matter of fact, you make sure that they make money on you. And that means that you, as a first-time novelist, have to sell at least 3,000 to 4,000 hardcover books in the first year. That's not easy to do with the giant competition that's out there now. Sometimes, you get a lucky break. In my case, *The Boy Who Saved Baseball* was featured in a small article in *People Magazine*. No way could you buy that kind of publicity. And my life has never been the same since. That was unexpected; I had nothing to do with that.

By and large, to break in, what you really need to do is be just like a musical group who has to go out and play the dive bars. You have to start with small regional conferences and introduce your work to an audience with the hope that they start to buy your book. It's like selling CDs out of your van. You then hope that by word of mouth, other people will buy the book, and over a period of time, you start to gather a following and therefore build a career. So, typically, in my case, my week isn't broken into sections, but my year is.

Springtime, in my case, from about March to the end of the school year, is when I'll be on the road doing school visits and conferences and so on. In the fall, from the beginning of school until Thanksgiving I'll

be on the road doing the same thing. I know some writers who do that all year long, but I won't. I need that wintertime to create a book. That's when I have to get into that dream shell. And that's another reason why my weeks aren't typical. I'm a binge writer, and when I'm creating a book, I need to have what I call a highway of time in front of me, two or three weeks where I will work ten to twelve hours a day for twenty-one days in a row.

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My wife will run interference on the phone and take care of the immediate concerns of the family so that I don't have to be dragged out of this

That's why I had to spend three hours with my editor, Michael Green. He has a degree in psychology and he studied screenwriting, which to me are the perfect qualifications to be an editor. He's not bogged down in literature; he's not an English major! By being a psych major, he understands character motivation.

fictional world that I'm in while I'm shaping this new story. Once I'm beyond that stage I can do my work in shorter spurts of time, two or three days here and two or three days there.

There will be days when I won't touch the manuscript at all. Then I'm in my email mode; I'm arranging my flights or my school visits, or whatever the business side of the business is. I hate to mix the two; it deadens, it adulterates my writing to mix those things in the same day. Then when the book is nearer the end, and I'm doing my simpler editing—not so much creationary stuff, but working as a chef correct-

ing the seasoning of a dish—then it's no problem to do that in two-hour periods. I look at the book as a seasonal product; the result of what I'm doing each season of my life. I'm looking at a yearly schedule, rather than a daily or a weekly deal.

TAR: And you said you usually start out with pen and paper instead of computer?

Ritter: Yes, I do. I feel like, originally, I'm painting the words; I'm tapping into that part of my brain where imagery flows. Really, all I'm trying to do is take that movie in my mind and somehow write it in some sort of short hand, as fast as I can dream it. I don't care about the writing craft, the skills, I don't care about the similes or literary devices. All that's easy for me. I can do that on draft number five or seven, later on down the road, but what's difficult for me is getting a good story in place—carving a

good story out of this lump of clay of an idea that I have.

TAR: Well, I eagerly await your next book. What can we look forward to?

Ritter: Well, you know, when I come to a national conference like this, my editor and I generally meet. We met yesterday at the hotel for a few hours over this next book. I'm working on a prequel to *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*. I've gone back to the Gold Rush days and Billy the Kid is in the story. It's really funny because my editor came to me with the idea of writing something about Billy the Kid, and I was against it because I was thinking, "Gosh, he's a gunslinger!" My perception was that he went out and killed people at random. But, because my editor suggested it and because I saw it as a challenge, I thought, "I wonder if I could tie Billy the Kid into a baseball story? Wouldn't that be amazing?"

It turns out that the Kid was an orphan, from an early age. He was bullied because he was a small kid. He was a hard worker and had to go to work at age fourteen. He was just trying to eke out a living, because his mom died and his dad was never on the scene. He saved his money and bought himself a gun because there was a full-grown man in the lumber camp where he was working who was bullying him severely. And so here's a kid who reminds me an awful lot of these kids who sometimes come to school with a gun. The first murder Billy the Kid was accused of was actually self-defense. But he wasn't going to get a fair trial because of who he killed, as well as other circumstances. So he ran away, and from the age of fifteen on, he was an outlaw. I saw this book, then, as an opportunity to give Billy the Kid this childhood that was stolen from him. So he's going to play baseball for a few weeks of his life, and he's going to come to Dillontown to do it.

That's why I had to spend three hours with my editor, Michael Green. He has a degree in psychology and he studied screenwriting, which to me are the perfect qualifications to be an editor. He's not bogged down in literature; he's not an English major! By being a psych major, he understands character motivation. By studying

screenwriting, he understands story, which is a weakness in most writers. Most writers love to write, but they're not very good storytellers. And the good storytellers tend not to be such great writers—however, they are on the best-seller lists! Which speaks to the fact that we want stories. I don't care how literary or how high-minded we think we are, we really want stories. That's what I'm working on now.

TAR: My students and I will eagerly await your next book. Thank you for giving me your story here today.

That afternoon in Opryland, John H. Ritter wove his way through a crowd of people and called my name. In each of his books, John H. Ritter weaves his way through the difficulties and

hardships that can crowd in and cause us to lose sight of what matters most. "Ahoy, you crazy dreamers!" he calls to his readers. He's calling to you. He's calling to me. He's calling to us all.

To learn more about the works of John H. Ritter, or to find reviews, a reader's guide and teaching guides, please visit his website at <http://www.johnhritter.com>.

Vicki Sherbert, B.S., M.S., teaches 6th, 7th, and 8th grade language arts at Wakefield Schools in Wakefield, Kansas. She previously taught 2nd and 3rd grades at Lincoln Elementary School in Clay Center, Kansas. She served as a Teacher Consultant for the Flint Hills Writing Project and is currently working toward her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Adolescent and Young Adult Literature at Kansas State University.

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Just Listen, Dessen
The Old Willis Place, Hahn
Sandpiper, Wittlinger
Shug, Han
Sleeping Freshman Never Lie, Lubar
The Christopher Killer, Ferguson

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