

Literature Circle Guide to  
THE BOY WHO SAVED BASEBALL by John H. Ritter

**Book Summary**

The future of the small town of Dillontown rests on the outcome of the baseball game, and the Wildcats are woefully unprepared for the challenge. Tom Gallagher, who would rather spend his time watching baseball than playing, feels especially responsible for the results of the game, and he dreams of asking for help from Dante Del Gato, a mysterious recluse who once played for the San Diego Padres. Tom lacks confidence to pursue help from Del Gato and has almost given up hope for winning the game until a new player rides into town on horseback, a boy named Cruz de la Cruz who claims to know Del Gato's secret of hitting. With the encouragement of Cruz, Tom begins to gain confidence, and with most of the citizens of Dillontown behind them, the Wildcats begin to prepare for the game. Even though Cruz mysteriously disappears the night before the game, the Wildcats manage to win with a final hit by Tom. The story ends with Tom inheriting the estate of his old neighbor, Doc Altenheimer, and discovering that he is braver than he ever imagined possible.

**Author's Information**

John H. Ritter grew up in rural San Diego County near the Mexican border, spending his time inventing stories and playing baseball. John credits his father with teaching him both his love for writing and for the "holy game of baseball." During college, Ritter played shortstop for the University of California in San Diego, and he is now a full-time writer whose books about baseball have won several awards. He also enjoys "playing baseball in an amateur league, playing guitar and writing songs, walking the streets, observing people, and walking in the country under the stars at night." He lives in San Diego with his wife, who is a teacher, and he speaks frequently at schools and teaches fiction writing workshops across the nation.

**Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. How is Doc Altenheimer going to decide whether to sell his property to developers?  
**Doc Altenheimer will keep his property if the Dillontown baseball team wins a game against the new team – the Lake View Vikings. If they lose, he will sell his property (pp. 11-12).**
2. Dante Del Gato has long been a fascinating but mysterious person to Tom. Who is Del Gato, and why is Tom so interested in him?  
**Dante Del Gato was an outfielder for the San Diego Padres in the early 1980s, and he was the only player to ever hit a home run clear out of the old Jack Murphy Stadium. Since he was born and raised in Dillontown, he was a hometown hero. Strangely he disappeared on the opening day of the 1984 World Series, in which the Padres were playing the Detroit Tigers, and no one has ever found out why. Tom is**

**interested in Del Gato, because he thinks he understands Del Gato's reason for disappearing (pp. 18-19).**

3. Why are the people of Dillontown so eager to see the outcome of the game? And why do so many reporters, photographers, and television crews, including some from ESPN, come to watch the big game?

**For many of these people, the outcome of the game will have a powerful effect on their lives. For example, many citizens of Dillontown have chosen their community because of the slower-paced lifestyle and small-town feel, and they fear the changes that development might bring to the town. Also, the story of the little Dillontown baseball team up against the Lake View Vikings has a David and Goliath quality that seems to have captured the imaginations of many.**

4. Tall tales fill this story. What is it about Cody's story concerning Del Gato's electric fence that doesn't make sense? Can you come up with any other examples of "stretching the truth" in this novel?

**Cody tells a story about a boy who got electrocuted by Del Gato's fence: "Fried his skin right off. Then the dogs ate him up before anyone could find the body" (p. 34). Electric fences, of course, are not meant to electrocute an invader, but rather to shock, and they certainly wouldn't fry someone's "skin right off." Some other tall tales: Cruz tells a story about his horse Screwball who watches television and uses the remote control (p. 30). Tara says that Del Gato runs with a pack of "bloodthirsty mountain lions" (p. 34).**

5. What does "earthen knowledge" mean? What about a "starborne hunch?" How do hunches and knowledge contribute to Tom's character? Cruz's character? Del Gato's character? To the outcome of the novel?

**"Earthen knowledge" and "starborne hunches" are ways of knowing or paths to wisdom as a result of paying attention to the natural environment. Cruz and Del Gato are the characters most in touch with these alternate ways of knowing, while Tom is learning to value this kind of wisdom more and more. "Earthen knowledge" also points to one of the themes in the novel: the importance of living simply in community and valuing the natural environment. In contrast, by becoming greedy and paying too much attention to the material world, one could lose touch with that inner wisdom.**

6. Do any members of the Wildcats' team remind you of anyone you've known before? Which of the Wildcats' team members – besides Tom – did you like the best?

**Students' answers will vary. The Wildcats are a diverse crew – in age, ability, and background, and each player is described in detail as Tom sees them.**

7. In the beginning of the story, Tom struggles with feeling confident, especially when playing baseball or talking to others. What advice would you give to Tom to help him with these struggles?

**Tom is a private boy who is most comfortable keeping his thoughts to himself, writing them in his notebook (p. 4). He spends a lot of time fantasizing about being a**

star baseball player or a winning speaker. Students' advice to Tom will vary; they may suggest that Tom stop putting great pressure on himself, or that he live less in his daydreams.

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

**Descriptions of the game of baseball in this novel are infused with religious language. For example, Doc Altenheimer actually refers to the upcoming baseball game as a means for God to enact his will upon the town of Dillontown (p. 11). The future of the town depends on the game. Also, Daisy Ramirez tells the Dillontown team, "You represent the history and spirit of this town" (p. 42). And when Cruz travels to seek help from Del Gato, he tells Tom, "We're here on a mission from God" (p. 71). Baseball has symbolic and spiritual importance to the destiny of the entire town and each of its players.**

9. What do you think the title of this book means? Who is "the boy who saved baseball," and how do you know?

**The opening page of the novel names Cruz de la Cruz as the boy who saved baseball. Some readers might say that Cruz is given credit because of the confidence he helped instill in Tom and the other members of the Wildcats. Other readers might see Tom as the savior of baseball, because his inheritance from Doc Altenheimer makes it possible for Dillontown to maintain its values and identity.**

10. What are some of the lessons that Tom learns through the course of this book – about baseball, about himself, about life?

**Tom learns from Del Gato that there is no magic secret to success in baseball (p. 173). He learns to trust his abilities and judgment, in baseball as well as in other aspects of life. He grows more confident (p. 141). He learns to speak up when necessary, instead of being silent, and he learns that others believe in him, too.**

11. What kind of person does Dante Del Gato turn out to be in the end? Does he change through the course of the story, or does Tom just begin to know him better?

**Del Gato is grumpy all through the story, but he turns out to be a man who truly cares about the future of the town of Dillontown. And Tom begins to realize that his crabbiness as "nothing more than armor" (p. 132). On the day of the big game, Del Gato explains his past to Tom, and confesses his regrets about quitting the Padres and his old habit of drinking too much (p. 173). He also thanks Tom and his family for "breaking down my wall" by involving him in the Big Game (p. 204).**

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

**Students' answers will vary. In responding to this question, students will probably discuss Cruz de la Cruz, who played an important role in "saving" Dillontown, even**

**though he missed the final game. The mysterious appearance and disappearance of the boy is never explained, and students will have a variety of opinions about how Cruz fills the role of hero.**

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

**The kind of lifestyle advocated by Doc Altenheimer, Maggie LaRue, and many others upholds this philosophy in direct opposition to the fast-paced, consumer-oriented, commuter lifestyle presented by the possibility of new development in Dillontown. As Maggie LaRue says to the press, "They [the commuters] don't want to stop and smell any roses. We do. And we don't just stop and smell these roses. We stop and *grow* these roses" (p. 136). So a life lived close to nature offers meaning and satisfaction that other ways of living do not.**

14. After saving the town of Dillontown, inheriting Doc Altenheimer's fortune, and beginning a business with HitSim, imagine what Tom Gallagher's life will be like ten or twenty years into the future. How has he handled his success and his wealth? Is he playing baseball? Did he keep his friends from the Wildcats? Is he still writing in his Dreamsketcher?

**Students' answers will vary, but if Tom is influenced by Doc Altenheimer's wisdom (p. 127), he will most likely stay in Dillontown and enjoy a simple life rooted in the same community of his childhood.**

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

**Tom's final hit at first is a pop-up ball, appearing to be easy to catch, and thus ending the Big Game with a loss. But then no one catches Tom's pop-up, and his hit ends up resulting in a win. Ultimately, Tom turned out to be Doc Altenheimer's heir, and therefore "saved" the old stadium and the town of Dillontown. Students may also list other possible answers.**

*Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-15.*

## **Activities**

1. Make a set of baseball cards - one for each member of the Wildcats' team. On each card include a drawing of the character as you imagine him or her. Instead of listing statistics for each player, describe each player's strengths on the team as well as important personality traits.

**This assignment is a good way for students to review the major characters in the novel as well as analyze their personality traits. Students could then meet in small groups to compare their descriptions of each player with one another and even take notes on each player.**

2. What do you think the front page of the Dillontown newspaper looked like the day after the Big Game? Write newspaper-style articles telling the story of the Big Game, Doc Altenheimer's death, and the town's reaction to both. Use headlines and photos to make your articles look like a real newspaper.

**With this assignment, students will review the climax of the novel and gain experience writing journalistic articles. Teachers may want to provide sample front page stories from real newspapers as models for students to study, and explain how to use headlines and "photos" with captions in their articles. This assignment also gives students the opportunity to describe the climax of the novel from different perspectives.**

3. Imagine that a few days after the Big Game Tom received a letter from Cruz de la Cruz. What would the letter say? How does Cruz explain his absence from the game? How does he feel about the Wildcats and their win?

**Students' ideas will vary about Cruz's mysterious appearance and disappearance, and it will be interesting to compare their letters. Most students will conclude that Cruz left early not out of fear, but rather to give the Wildcats an opportunity to prove themselves without him. This assignment provides a springboard for a discussion about the main unsolved mystery in this book, prompting students to make their own inferences about Cruz's motives.**

#### **Other Books by This Author**

*Choosing Up Sides*, Philomel, 1998

*Over the Wall*, Philomel, 2000

**Please visit the Author's Web site for further questions, lesson plans, and activities:**  
[www.johnhritter.com](http://www.johnhritter.com) Find a recommended activity on "neologism"—the art of creating new words.