

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Little Lefty

by

Matt Christopher

Book Information

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Can the smallest pitcher on the team earn some playing time?

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Main Characters

Bill Bailey a young baseball player who is smaller than all his teammates but is a good pitcher

Coach Hanley the coach of Bill's team, the Blackhawks

Ken Larry's older cousin, who takes Larry and Bill horseback riding

Larry Fowler Bill's best friend, who wants Bill to stop playing baseball

Ray Colby an older gentleman who knew Bill's deceased father and tries to help Bill become a better pitcher

Tommy Wiggins Bill's teammate

Vocabulary

bull pen an enclosed area where a pitcher warms up before entering a ball game to pitch

bunt a batting technique in which the batter slides his hand up the bat and bats by putting his body and bat in front of the catcher

corral a fenced-in area designed to contain animals

frisky lively and playful

Synopsis

Bill Bailey lives with his mother. His father died when

he was a small child. Bill is on the Blackhawks baseball team. He goes to practice and tries his hardest but doesn't get much playing time in games. Bill feels it is because he is the smallest player on the team. After a game in which he gets to bat only once, he considers quitting the team. His best friend, Larry, also thinks Bill should quit the team.

Bill and Larry go swimming. While playing follow-the-leader, Bill gets a leg cramp. Larry helps Bill stay afloat until the lifeguard can get him out of the water. Once out of the water, the lifeguard rubs Bill's leg until it feels better. A man whom Bill had noticed earlier comes over to see what is happening. He introduces himself as Ray Colby. He says he watched Bill play ball and thinks Bill is a good player. Larry acts oddly and tries to make Bill leave instead of staying to talk to the man. Later, as Bill is thinking about how grateful he is to Larry for saving his life, Larry offers him a ship-in-a-bottle that he made. Bill gratefully accepts and feels he owes Larry something. Larry then asks Bill if he will quit baseball and only play with him. Bill agrees.

The next day Bill's teammate, Tommy Wiggins, stops to ask Bill to play catch. Bill is torn between his promise to Larry and his strong desire to play. He decides to play baseball but feels very guilty. Larry comes by the ball park and sees Bill. Bill tries to explain himself to Larry. Mr. Colby comes over to Bill and says Bill reminds him of Little Lefty, a pitcher he once knew. He wants to show Bill some pitching tips, but Larry wants Bill to leave. Bill decides to stay, and Larry walks away disappointed. The boys don't see each other for a few days.

When Bill is told that the starting pitcher has measles, he agrees to play baseball again. He pitches well, and the Blackhawks win the game. After the game he sees that Larry was watching. Larry runs home and Bill feels bad. The next day Bill goes to Larry's and explains why he played. Larry doesn't seem happy about the explanation, but the next day Larry invites Bill to visit his uncle's farm and ride horses.

Bill and Larry go with Larry's family to the farm for

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the weekend. Bill, Larry, and Larry's cousin, Ken, ride horses for two days. On the second day, they decide to jump a fence in order to let the horses drink from the creek. Bill loses his grip as his horse jumps and falls to the ground. He injures his arm and goes to the doctor for treatment. His elbow is chipped and Bill must wear a cast for three weeks. One day Larry gives Bill a new glove that his father bought and surprises Bill by showing him a new glove his father bought for him as well.

When Bill's cast is finally removed, Bill's mother mentions that his father had been a good pitcher and was nicknamed Little Lefty. Bill realizes that Ray Colby was his father's friend and catcher. Bill slowly exercises his arm and works with Larry on his new-found interest in baseball. Eventually Larry joins the Blackhawks and gets his chance to play in the last game of the season. Though he makes mistakes, Larry also makes good plays in the game. In the sixth inning, the coach puts Bill in as pitcher. The bases are loaded, there are no outs, and the Blackhawks are leading. Despite this pressure, Bill pitches well and with the defensive support of his team, he leads them to victory. Bill feels great and is happy to be thought of as a great pitcher like his father, Little Lefty.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

In two places in the story it is mentioned that the batter stands and waits for a strike. Why do coaches teach batters not to swing at a pitch until after the pitcher throws a strike?

Each batter is slightly different in size. Therefore, the strike zone changes according to the batter. It sometimes takes a pitcher a few pitches to hit the batter's strike zone. Coaches want their batters to swing at only the best pitches, so they teach batters to wait until the pitcher demonstrates that he can find the batter's strike zone. This gives the batter the best chance of connecting on a good pitch and getting on base.

Literary Analysis

Whom do you think is a better friend, Bill or Larry?

Students might choose either boy or neither boy. They might think it is Bill since he tries hard to explain himself to Larry, and he feels bad that he has broken his promise. He also tries to remain loyal to his teammates. Part of the reason he pitches in one game is because his friends convince him that they need him, and he doesn't want to let them down. Some might think Larry is a better friend since he is only trying to help Bill. He helps Bill at the pool and also gives him a prized possession. Bill expresses doubt about staying on the team, and Larry thinks he is helping Bill make the decision he wants to make. Some might not choose either friend since in some ways they are both being selfish. However, students might think both boys are good friends since they both care enough to keep trying to remain friends.

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Inferential Comprehension

Throughout the story, Ray Colby tells Bill about a pitcher he once knew, Little Lefty. He does not tell Bill that Little Lefty was Bill's own father. Instead, Bill learns this information from his mother. Why doesn't Ray tell Bill that his father was Little Lefty?

Ray might have thought by telling Bill that Little Lefty was his father he would put too much pressure on Bill to play baseball just because his father did. Ray also might have thought it wasn't his place to tell Bill about his father. Since Bill didn't know this information, Ray might have thought Bill's mother didn't want him to know. Ray may even have worried that Bill would resent him for knowing his dad since he does not know much about his own father. If Bill resented Ray, and subsequently wouldn't talk to him, Ray would not have been able to help Bill with his pitching.

Constructing Meaning

Was Bill justified in breaking his promise to Larry?

Students might say yes if they feel it was unfair of Larry to pressure Bill into making the promise. They might believe that a good friend would not have asked Bill to give up something he loves so much. Others might say no since promises are meant to be kept. They could argue that Bill should have gone to talk to Larry and explained that he felt uncomfortable about the promise. Larry and Bill could have talked it over, and Larry might have seen how important baseball was to Bill. Then they might have come to an agreement that would allow Bill to play without breaking his promise to Larry.

did a nice job of describing the action on the baseball diamond. In order to do this he must have had a good understanding of the sport. He knew the "lingo" used in baseball and the rules of the game. This knowledge helped him write in a way that allowed the reader to envision the action being described. Have the students choose a sport they are familiar with and write a scene describing the action in a game or competition. Remind the students to use appropriate terminology and vivid adjectives to accurately and clearly paint a picture in the reader's mind.

Responding to Literature Bill promised Larry he would quit baseball. Part of the reason he promised this was because he felt he owed Larry for the nice things Larry had done for him. However, it was a promise Bill couldn't manage to keep. Have pairs of students act out the scene between Bill and Larry. Ask them first to act out the dialogue as it is written and then to create alternative scenarios. For example, they might create other answers Bill could have made to Larry's request.

Extending Meaning When the story began, Larry did not seem to like baseball and wanted Bill to quit the game. Later in the story he sees how much Bill likes playing baseball. It seems that he must not have ever tried playing baseball before because when he did learn to play, he found out he liked the game. Ask students to write a journal entry describing a time when they did not like something until they actually tried it. Have them explain why they did not like it initially and what changed their mind.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The author used many slang words that are used to describe the action in a baseball game, such as "pill," "peg," "whiff," and "panned." Have the students recall and/or review the story to find and list at least ten baseball terms the author used. Then have them define each in their own words, looking up those they are unsure of.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author