

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Baseball Fever

by

### Johanna Hurwitz

### Book Information

Johanna Hurwitz, Baseball Fever  
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Interest Level: MG

Ten-year-old Ezra tries to convince his scholarly father that his baseball fever is not wasting his mind.

**Topics:** Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; Humor/Funny, Funny; Sports/Recreation, Baseball

### Main Characters

Bruce and Louis Ezra's friends who are twin brothers

Ezra Feldman the main character; a bright ten-year-old boy whose passion is baseball

Harris Feldman Ezra's nineteen-year-old brother, who attends Princeton University; he explains that Ezra must learn to compromise with their father

Mr. Feldman Ezra's father, a history professor who does not understand Ezra's interest in baseball

Mrs. Feldman Ezra's easygoing mother, who eases tensions between Ezra and his father

Professor Laurence Strauss a professor who teaches in Albany; he recognizes Ezra's intelligence and shares Ezra's love for baseball

### Vocabulary

**affixed** attached

**capricious** without good reason; impulsive

**indulge** to give in to one's taste or desire

**nepotism** favoritism shown to a relative

**passion** strong emotion

**rescinded** canceled or took back

**truce** a temporary agreement to stop fighting

### Synopsis

Ezra Feldman lives with his parents near Shea Stadium in Flushing, New York. Ezra loves baseball,

but his father, a history professor, thinks Ezra should spend his time on worthier pursuits like reading classics and playing chess. Since Mr. Feldman grew up in Europe, he does not appreciate this American sport. Ezra's mother is more tolerant of Ezra's baseball fever, but she is often gone because she works long hours at the hospital where she is a radiologist.

Two weeks before his tenth birthday, Ezra visits his brother, Harris, who is a student at Princeton University. When Ezra asks Harris's advice on convincing Mr. Feldman that baseball is not a waste of time, Harris advises him to bargain with their father: if Ezra beats his father at chess, his father must attend a baseball game with Ezra.

For Ezra's tenth birthday, his parents treat him and his friends, Louis and Bruce, to dinner at Chopmeat Charlie's restaurant. Ezra is embarrassed because his father continually talks about books when he and his friends would rather discuss baseball.

A short time later, baseball season begins and Ezra rushes home from school on opening day to watch the Mets game on television. When his father calls to ask him to buy two airmail stamps at the post office, Ezra postpones the errand so he can watch the game, which has gone into extra innings. When Ezra finally arrives at the post office, he finds that it is closed for the day. Mr. Feldman is furious when he gets home, and he sends Ezra to his room with the warning that he never wants to hear the sound of a baseball game in their home again.

Mrs. Feldman negotiates a peace between her husband and son. She explains to Ezra that the stamps are important because Mr. Feldman needs to mail his grant application on time. Mrs. Feldman arranges to use airmail stamps from Harris's collection to mail the application. At dinner, Mr. Feldman informs her that his weekend conference in Albany to discuss his lecture series proposal has been rescheduled for an earlier weekend. Mrs. Feldman, who has to work the weekend of the conference, tries to find someone to take care of Ezra. She is unsuccessful, and both Ezra and his

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father are disappointed that Ezra will have to accompany his father to Albany.

Ezra and his father overcome lingering tension from the stamp incident when they visit the new chocolate shop together. Mr. Feldman apologizes for losing his temper and says Ezra may watch baseball again.

Ezra and his father travel to Albany in May. When Ezra asks his father if they can visit the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, his father responds that there is not enough time. At the hotel, Ezra amuses himself while his father is in meetings by reading and playing the computer chess game his father gave him for his birthday. When Mr. Feldman calls Ezra to make arrangements for dinner, Mr. Feldman admits that he still does not know whether his lecture series proposal will be accepted.

He meets Ezra in the hotel lobby and takes him to an Italian restaurant, where they get the last available table. When Mr. Feldman realizes that Professor Strauss, the person who will decide about the lecture series, is looking for a table, he invites the professor to join him and Ezra. Strauss reveals that he loves baseball and is amazed at Ezra's knowledge. The professor suggests that Mr. Feldman take Ezra to Cooperstown and cancels the next day's meeting so they can go.

On the way to Cooperstown, Ezra strikes a deal with his father: if Ezra beats his father at chess, his father will take Ezra to a Mets game. Both Feldmans are impressed with the Hall of Fame; Ezra loves the baseball memorabilia and history, and Mr. Feldman loves studying the people who travel to visit the museum.

Two weeks later, Mr. Feldman learns that his lecture proposal has been accepted. Ezra is determined to beat his father at chess, but he continually loses because he impulsively touches pieces before he is sure he wants to move them. When Ezra asks Harris how he can avoid the "touch move" penalty, Harris advises him to sit on his hands. The technique works, and Ezra finally beats his father. Remembering the deal, Mr. Feldman promises to

take Ezra to the next sunny Mets home game.

At the game, Mr. Feldman is fascinated by the sociological implications of baseball; however, Ezra advises his father to learn the game first before he writes a book about it. Over the next few weeks, father and son watch baseball games on television and play a few games of chess, revealing that each is coming to understand and respect the other's differences.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why does Mr. Feldman's attitude toward Ezra usually make his dealings with his son difficult?

*Mr. Feldman is so concerned with Ezra's intellectual development and future success that he expects Ezra to use his free time to pursue only those interests that Mr. Feldman considers worthy, like playing chess, collecting stamps, and reading classical literature. He suggests that Ezra should be like his older brother, whose interests are closer to Mr. Feldman's interests. Since Mr. Feldman frequently disparages Ezra's interests and lack of skill in areas like chess, Ezra prefers playing chess with a computer rather than with a father who is critical of his every move.*

### Literary Analysis

How does the setting of the story contribute to the plot?

*The author set the story in Flushing, New York, the home of the Mets' Shea Stadium. Although a person can be a baseball fan anywhere, it is especially easy to get excited like Ezra does when there is a "neighborhood team." In addition, it is easy for Ezra to collect on his bet with his father, since Shea Stadium is within walking distance from their home. Also, Flushing is not far from Cooperstown's Baseball Hall of Fame, which allows Mr. Feldman to visit and gain an appreciation for baseball.*

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#### Inferential Comprehension

In what ways are Ezra's interest in baseball and Mr. Feldman's interest in history similar?

*Both baseball and history focus on important events. For example, at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, Ezra points out several significant dates in the history of baseball. In return, Mr. Feldman recalls events in world history that occurred on those dates. While Ezra is interested in famous baseball personalities such as Harvey Haddix, Mr. Feldman learns that President Eisenhower liked baseball. The Baseball Hall of Fame is filled with baseball memorabilia, much in the same way as history museums are filled with historical memorabilia. When Mr. Feldman recalls the tragedy of Fort Sumter, another man recalls the destruction of the Giants' Polo Grounds stadium.*

#### Constructing Meaning

In what way is baseball "like a disease" with Ezra?

*A disease is often more pervasive than an injury, because an injury is usually confined to a particular area of the body, whereas a disease can affect the entire body and its function. In this way, baseball is like a disease because it fills Ezra's thoughts constantly, even when he is engaged in other activities, such as school, conversations with his friends, or phone conversations with his father. Also, Mr. Feldman considers baseball as a disease because he feels it is unhealthy for Ezra's mind.*

### Teachable Skills

**Describing Actions or Events** Ezra sits on the edge of the sofa as the season opener between the Mets and the Cubs goes into extra innings. The author provides some details that describe the ninth inning, which ends in a tie. Have students work in pairs to develop a color commentary on one of the extra innings of this game. Students should present their commentary to the class as if they were television sportscasters announcing the game.

**Identifying Persuasive Language** Ezra defends

his baseball fever to his father, who sees baseball as a waste of time. Sometimes parents' perspectives differ from their children's, and it takes an outsider such as Professor Strauss to convince parents to reconsider their views. Ask students to name a passion of theirs -- playing video games, reading, playing football, collecting things, etc. Have them write an argument that would convince a skeptic about the value of their choices. The argument should include physical, intellectual, social, and other benefits of the activities.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Ezra plays a word game with the university names printed on his sweatshirts. For example, he claims that YALE means "You Are Large Enough" and COLUMBIA means "Can Only Ladies' Umbrellas Maim Big Intelligent Alligators." Discuss with the class how this game can be altered slightly and used as a mnemonic device. For example, the names and order of the nine planets of our solar system can be remembered using the following words: My Very Elegant Mother Just Sat Upon Needles and Pins.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Mr. Feldman was born in Germany but was sent to England prior to World War II. Ask the students to research what was happening in Germany at the time. Have the students pretend they are Mr. Feldman's childhood friends who remain in Germany after Mr. Feldman has moved to England. Ask them to write letters to Mr. Feldman describing conditions in Germany since Mr. Feldman left.