

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Choosing Up Sides

by  
John H. Ritter

### Book Information

John H. Ritter, Choosing Up Sides

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In 1921, thirteen-year-old Luke finds himself torn between accepting his left handedness or conforming to the belief of his preacher-father that such a condition is evil and must be overcome.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Children's Book Award; Misc./Other

**Topics:** Behavior, Superstitious; Character Traits, Self-Acceptance; Family Life, Fathers; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

### Main Characters

Annabeth Quinn a girl in Crown Falls who tries to persuade Luke to play baseball

Dexter Lappman a boy in Crown Falls who is an excellent baseball player

Luke Bledsoe the son of a Baptist preacher who wants to play baseball, despite his father's wishes

Pa Luke's very strict father, who is a Baptist preacher

Uncle Micah Luke's uncle, who tries to persuade Luke to make his own decisions and to play baseball

### Vocabulary

**caterwauling** making loud noises

**cipher** to calculate

**parsonage** the home for a parson that is provided by a church

**prophesied** predicted

### Synopsis

Luke Bledsoe is the son of a Baptist preacher. Luke is left-handed and his father continually tries to turn him into a right-handed boy, since he and his church consider the left hand to be the hand of the Devil. Despite his father's efforts, Luke knows he is much better at most activities when he uses his left hand, especially for throwing things like rocks and apples. In addition, his church and father believe sports are sinful since competition relates to vanity and pride. Luke has always respected this belief and has avoided playing sports. Now that his family lives in Crown Falls, Ohio, where baseball is like a religion, Luke is having a difficult time avoiding the game.

One day Luke throws a baseball back to some boys while he is watching them practice. This causes some of the children in his school to pester Luke to join the baseball team. One person in particular, Annabeth Quinn, wants to see Luke use his talent. She would like to play baseball but knows that girls are not allowed. Annabeth does not want to see Luke pass up his opportunity to play. Luke would like nothing more than to play and make Annabeth happy, but he knows how strongly his father feels about the subject so he refuses.

One day Luke's Uncle Micah arrives in Crown Falls. Uncle Micah is Luke's mother's brother and has a "rebel streak" in him. Uncle Micah is also left-handed, which further explains why Luke's father is so adamant that Luke use his right hand. He believes Micah's wild lifestyle is proof that left-handedness is evil. Uncle Micah is the sports editor for a newspaper and has come to town to write a story about one of Luke's classmates, Dexter Lappman. Dexter has gained a reputation in Ohio for being an excellent athlete and is expected to play professional baseball some day.

While Uncle Micah is in town he takes Luke to see Babe Ruth play an exhibition game. Seeing the kind of admiration Babe Ruth receives and learning how generous Babe Ruth has been in raising money for the local orphanage, Luke is drawn even further towards the sport. After the game Uncle Micah and

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Luke goes fishing, and Uncle Micah suggests that Luke's father might be "picking and choosing" which Bible quotes to live by. This discussion only makes Luke more confused about what to do.

Shortly after Uncle Micah leaves, Luke's father begins learning to fish, something he has never done before. As a result, Luke and Pa seem to get along a little better. Luke knows, however, that this new closeness is not enough to make Pa change his mind about baseball. While Luke is checking his rabbit traps one day, he comes upon a rabbit that is still alive in a trap. This bothers Luke since his father told him that the animals never suffered from the traps. The fact that this rabbit is alive makes Luke realize his father might not always be right. This thought makes Luke angry enough to defy his father and head for the baseball diamond, where he agrees to throw some pitches. Luke manages to strike out Dexter Lappman and gains even more admiration from Annabeth and the boys in town. Now Luke must figure out a way to tell his father that he wants to play baseball.

Before he tells his father, Uncle Micah comes to town again. This time Uncle Micah takes Luke up the river to ride an old riverboat. Uncle Micah buys Luke a ticket as a treat and tries to persuade Luke to let him write a story about how he struck out Dexter. Luke asks his uncle not to write the story since he has not told his father about it yet. Uncle Micah agrees to hold off on the story, and just before he leaves, Uncle Micah hands Luke a new rope for his boat anchor. The rope is specially made with a left-handed weave. As Luke rides down the river on the boat, he thinks about his own spirit and comes to the decision that he will tell Pa that he is going to play baseball.

When Luke arrives home, Pa begins yelling at him because he found out about Luke's pitching. In his rage, Pa hits Luke's left hand with a belt and finally breaks Luke's arm by hitting it with the belt buckle. Though Pa apologizes for hitting him, Luke decides he can no longer live with his father. Luke goes to town and gathers some of the supplies he needs in order to set off on his own. When he reaches the

dock, Luke finds that his boat is missing. He is told that his father is using it. When his father returns, Luke finds the courage to tell his father that he intends to play baseball when his arm heals. His father reacts angrily and tells Luke that he will not kick him out of the house, but as far as he is concerned, he will no longer have a son.

As Luke walks away he hears Pa trip on his tackle box and fall into the water. Since Pa cannot swim, Luke tries unsuccessfully to throw out a rope, using his right arm. Finally Luke uses his broken left arm to throw the rope but, as he does, the arm snaps and the rope never makes it to Pa. Luke then runs into the water to save Pa but passes out from the pain. Annabeth, who is watching the whole scene, pulls Luke from the water. No one is able to save Pa. The family must move out of the parsonage, and they arrange to move in with Uncle Micah. Annabeth convinces Luke to keep his dream of playing baseball. He agrees that it is right for him to do what his spirit carries him to do, and he promises to write to Annabeth when he moves.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

There are a number of aspects of baseball that appeal to Luke. What are some of them?

*Luke likes how the players can make the fans happy. He likes the attention they receive, especially from girls like Annabeth. He enjoys thinking about how much money he could make. Most importantly, Luke likes how good it makes him feel to do something he enjoys and is good at.*

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### Literary Analysis

The people of this time period are influenced by the historical changes that are happening at this time. What are some of the things that are mentioned in the book that have an influence on Luke's society?

*The Great War, or World War I, has just ended. Most people are feeling happy and relieved to have the war over. They are immersing themselves in pursuits of happiness, like watching sports. Prohibition is in effect, which makes some people very happy, but it makes others unhappy. In spite of the prohibition, numerous people are involved in illegally brewing and consuming alcohol. Cars are becoming more prevalent and thus people travel more freely.*

### Inferential Comprehension

The river is very symbolic in this story. By comparing himself to the river, Luke tries to explain why he cannot change his basic nature. Explain how he is like the river.

*Luke realizes that, like the river, he may change in some ways, yet he remains the same at his core. His spirit never changes. He is always the same person just as a river is always the same river. Luke recognizes that he cannot change his left-handedness any more than someone can change the direction in which the river flows.*

### Constructing Meaning

Luke has a hard time dealing with and understanding his father. How would you describe Luke's father? Is he generally a good or a bad person?

*There are people who would say he is being a good father by trying to teach his son the difference between right and wrong and trying to instill discipline in the boy. Others would say he is being unreasonably harsh and even abusive of the boy. Most people would agree he has a terrible temper and is set in his ways. He does show signs of wanting to change or become less disagreeable to his son. Luke recognizes that his father did not mean to hurt him, but he also knows he cannot trust his temper.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Luke's father's views are based on his religious beliefs. Have students write a paper about the influence religion can have in society, citing examples of situations in which religious leaders have spoke out publicly in an attempt to influence laws or societal behavior.

**Making Predictions** The ending of this story leaves the impression in the reader's mind that Luke would indeed become a pitcher. Ask the students to compose a newspaper article about Luke in the future.

**Recognizing Details** Dexter and Uncle Micah realize that the residents of Ohio treat baseball like a religion. Luke has been raised in the South and has not been exposed to baseball because it is not as popular in that area. Have the students research the history of a sport or pastime of their choice. Have them create a map of the United States and label where certain sports are most popular. Have them give a report about what they learned about the history of the sport they researched.

**Responding to Literature** Luke finds himself in a difficult position when his family moves to Ohio. He wants to play baseball, but he also wants to respect his father's wishes. He has many people trying to get him to do what they want to do, and it makes Luke very uneasy. Have the students write or share what they would have done if they had been in Luke's position.