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## Bat Boy: A Novel for Grades 3-6

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## Bat Boy: A Novel for Grades 3-6

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### Abstract

The purpose of this graduate project was to write *Bat Boy*, a beginning novel for readers in grades three through six. The main character in the story is Ryan Basye, who takes a trip to his great grandmother's house in a small Iowa town during the Fourth of July holiday. On this holiday, the town (Holland, Iowa), has a celebration that includes a fastpitch softball tournament, games of chance, rides, lots of barbecuing and fireworks after the championship softball game. Ryan is the bat boy for his father's team and learns a lot about camaraderie between teammates and about the game of softball and baseball. Ryan also gets to go out on his own into the crowd to explore the celebration. He meets John, a boy who lives across the road from his great grandmother's house and together they have as much fun as two boys can have.

Bat Boy: A Novel For Grades 3-6

A Graduate Research Project  
Submitted to the  
Division of Library Science  
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in Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Ryan Basye

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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## Abstract

### Bat Boy

The purpose of this graduate project was to write Bat Boy, a beginning novel for readers in grades three through six. The main character in the story is Ryan Basye, who takes a trip to his great grandmother's house in a small Iowa town during the Fourth of July holiday. On this holiday, the town (Holland, Iowa), has a celebration that includes a fastpitch softball tournament, games of chance, rides, lots of barbecuing and fireworks after the championship softball game. Ryan is the bat boy for his father's team and learns a lot about camaraderie between teammates and about the game of softball and baseball. Ryan also gets to go out on his own into the crowd to explore the celebration. He meets John, a boy who lives across the road from his great grandmother's house and together they have as much fun as two boys can have.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Purpose Statement

For the last few years of my life, writing a book has been resting fairly silently within the deepest reaches of my mind. Only on occasion has the concept been bold enough to show itself and begin to produce a book. The feeling came about in the United States Army, no coincidence since that is when I started to read consistently. The more I read the more I felt that a book was within me. It is only having the courage to start and stick with it that holds the masses from doing their own books. Another reason besides courage may be the simple task of choosing the right story to tell or to come up with one in the first place. To choose the wrong story will most likely lead to writer's block and dead ends, something I experienced in my first attempt as a writer.

I believe that I have an answer to both problems, or at least a substitute for the first one. It could be said, however, that in this case the motivation to start and finish lies within the story itself, further proof that the right story means everything to how well the story is written.

The story comes from within. The best advice I was given was to "write about what you know" and so I began to search my memory. A story idea happened on one of my many trips to Alden, Iowa to coach baseball. Half highway hypnotized and thinking about baseball I stumbled across the thought of when I was a bat boy for my Dad's team when he played fastpitch softball for Geneva, Iowa. Fastpitch softball is a dying cultural tradition not only in Iowa but in the United States. In older days it was an alternative to baseball, a game with shorter base paths and home run fences. Now with the growing popularity of slowpitch softball, an easier game that everyone can hit the ball in, fastpitch is quickly losing players and having an increasing shortage of people who can pitch in the fastpitch style. Fastpitch softball means a lot to the players who still play it. The game is a source of pride in that they can still play a game that is far more challenging than slowpitch.

When dreaming about the story I thought of the Fourth of July tournament that was held at Holland, Iowa, every year. I thought of the activities that went on at the tournament, at my Great Grandma's house, and the memories of when I was playing fastpitch softball myself and other events that I associate with fastpitch softball while growing up. These memories became the framework for the book.

The memories that are the basis for the book include those of a man from an Ames, Iowa team

who had one arm and played even until I was old enough to play against him. I also remembered the boy across the road from Great Grandma's house and his cows and tree house. People barbecuing in the park area by the diamond and many other memories associated with the celebration give the book a realistic background to work from.

The purpose of writing "Bat Boy" is both deeply personal and with the hopes that the story will have a target audience of boys from grades three to seven, an audience that is traditionally a non-reading group. It might be said that to read is to have access to the world and beyond. While this book will hardly give them the world, hopefully it will entice the audience into the beginnings of the conquest. I hope to hook them on reading by giving them a book that will interest them. Once they start, hopefully, reading will grow and expand into other interests and fulfill and feed a desire to learn more, the humble start of a life-long quest.

The purpose for the reader is simply to provide entertainment and maybe some insight to the world on an athletic team. Along the way the reader may get a better view of why children should respect their elders, of the value of friendship and what the true meaning of playing the game is all about.

The limitations that will effect me and the story are few but may be important. This story is my first true attempt at a book. Hopefully, the factor of inexperience will not hurt the quality of the book. The biggest limitation would have to be the fact that I am only taking the story from my own memory. The book will be written mainly with the idea that boys will read the book; so the story is told from the boy's point-of-view. Most of the story will be set in the late seventies although the story really is timeless to a point. All these memories can be combined to give birth to a story that is pure pleasure to write and in which the main character learns a little bit about life and the author lives out some of his fonder memories of childhood.



## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

In her book Writing Juvenile Stories And Novels, Phyllis A. Whitney (1976) said about the eight to twelve year old age group, "This age is really fun to write for" (p.25). The reasons are left to speculation but a good case could be made for the fact that the eight to twelve year olds are the in-between stage from picture books to young adult problem novels. This stage still has a lot of care-free moments and also some opportunity for the facing of serious problems. They are still kids and love being kids but are starting to feel that they are higher in stature than younger children. Whitney also says that:

A point to remember in writing for this age group is that children like to read about characters who are older than themselves, or at least as old, so don't make your characters too young.(p.26)

Along these lines of thinking the two main characters, Ryan and John, are ten and eleven, respectively. At the age of ten it is very possible that Ryan will be meeting and discovering many things for the first time. He will have a first time to be responsible for his own actions and to have the ability to make certain decisions or have understandings about what he can and can not do about the way life is. At eleven years of age, John has already had much responsibility from his life with farm chores and brothers and sisters, giving him a much more mature outlook on life and what is expected from a person in life. That does not mean that he does not like to have a little fun once in a while though.

Whitney also says,

In the past, a distinction used to be made in this age group between books for boys and books for girls. It was claimed that girls would read 'boys books' but boys would not read books supposedly written for girls; the lines have become fuzzier, and it is probably advisable to mix the two. Though there is no way to avoid having a hero or a heroine, the role each plays is no longer stereotyped. (p.26)

Even though roles are not as stereotyped as they once were, boys still have certain genres or types of books that they prefer to others. When interviewed, a group of boys mentioned science fiction, sports, cars, real people and real things as being subjects they preferred to read about. (Koskinen, 1994, p.176) Other articles have given similar lists of common interests in this age group of readers. (Mellon, 1992, p.37).

Books that I have read that are written to the same audience as the one I am writing for are books by Gary Paulson and Robert Newton Peck. Both authors use main characters who are boys and are in about the ten to twelve age group. In writing the text to my book I have referred to Robert Newton Peck's books many times to learn from his style of writing. I believe that the first person account of his "Soup" stories will be a good style for my book as well. I do not try to copy what he does completely but I have learned a lot about how to phrase words so that they sound smooth when spoken aloud. I can also get a better idea of how a ten year old boy might express himself through his writings.

I believe that these two authors are successful because they write of real issues or of things that have happened to them. Both use the experiences from their past childhoods to bring out the substance of their stories. By using the memories from my own childhood I hope to be just as realistic and interesting as both Paulson and Peck are. One factor that I will have that neither Paulson or Peck have will be the setting of a fastpitch softball tournament. This could be a negative aspect to the story since there probably are not a lot of kids in these days who have had the same experiences since fastpitch is not nearly as wide spread as it used to be. It is, however, a game that can easily assimilated to baseball or slowpitch softball and readers may have traveled with their dads to be bat boys or just to watch them play. I hope that this fact will be enough to let readers relate their own experiences to the book. I also hope that girls might have an interest in the story because they are more likely to have played the game of fastpitch softball.

Keeping their interests in mind, I believe that the general setting and story line of the book will play a big part in attracting younger boys to the book. Softball and competition in general will be two areas that boys can relate to and identify with as it is already a big part of their daily lives. Kids who are very active and see reading as a passive activity need action in what they read or else boredom may turn them off to reading. For this reason I have included many softball game sequences to give them something with which I could identify. I also put in many new and different events and

experiences such as rides, carnival games and the tree house in order to keep a newness to the story as it goes along.

Looking back on my own experience as a non-reader I see two things that coincide with my research. One is that I only read what I chose to read myself, and that I chose to read something I knew about. I chose to write the book in order to get boys to read and so I chose to write about what most boys would be familiar with, and that is playing ball.

Whitney(1976) continues by saying,

Bear in mind, however, that while these readers are eager to learn and grow, many of them today are less than eager to read. Too many young people grow up passively watching television, where effort and skill are not required. So, if you are to reach young people at all and persuade them of the joy and satisfaction of meeting characters on a printed page, your skill must be greater than ever.(p. 5)

This is added incentive and a challenge in writing for boys in this age group. The way to steer kids toward books is to give them something they can relate to, identify with, and enjoy. To write a book that will do this even more than a television show is indeed a challenge. To write a book in the hopes that it does reach some children and either starts them off or continues their reading habits will be the main goal of the book. To let the reader see the self-discovery and growing maturity of Ryan as he experiences new things will be the hidden goal. Most importantly though, it must entertain. "It is every writer's task first of all to interest and entertain. Otherwise, no lessons we want to teach them will be listened to"(p.28).

To make the book entertaining it will have to have an emotional impact. "Readers of all ages expect to be moved by stories or poems. Young people repeatedly respond to books they can laugh with or cry over"(Moir, 1989, p.10). Two examples of events that happened in my experiences playing ball may bring about an emotional response; when I learned about my mother's feelings about father's playing fastpitch softball so seriously and also when I got hit with a softball bat by a person in the on-deck batter, breaking my nose.

"Perhaps no other characteristic of a story is more responsible for its lasting success than the

capacity to make the reader smile, chuckle, even laugh out loud"(p 10). Humor is a very big part of life and will be part of the story as well. I have fond memories of how I used to brag and laugh about getting spanked for the bad things I would do and listening to others do the same. I believe this will have a humorous effect on the reader as well.

Some sort of action and suspense will be achieved through the portrayal of the softball games and also when Ryan plays the games along the midway, trying to win a prize or to "dunk" a person at the dunk tank. Action is needed to keep the readers involved with the story, and to keep them on the edge of their seats wondering what will happen next in the game. Will Ryan's father hit a home run? Will John finally win a glass for his mother at the coin toss?

What is avoided in this book is the so called "formula plot."

If there is one fault common to most sports stories it is the formula plot; for example, the beginner, from school playground to professional team who can't get along with another member of the team or the whole team or the coach because he or she is cocky or wants things his or her own way, eventually rising to heights of glory and acceptance by all by saving the final game in the final minute of play... Another fault common to such stories is the thin plot wrapped around long and often tedious game sequences, some of which have unrealistic series of plays (Sutherland, 1991, p. 383).

The plot in this story has much to do with fastpitch softball and what goes on in the game. The story also will have a few game sequences, but instead of the game being the main focus of the story, the game is more of a supplement to the story, a vehicle of learning in some aspects and a common bonding point between boy and father in others. Of course the game sequences will also be put in for the simple pleasure that comes from the game itself.

The game of fastpitch softball also gives the reader some common grounds to work with. It is something that the reader has probably had experience with, or at least they have had the experience of playing baseball. This will help the below average reader in understanding the book since "It has

been found that good readers use their prior experiences to understand what they read, where as poor readers do not" (Dowhower, 1989, p.12). Many boys of the eight to twelve age range will have a very good knowledge of baseball and this obvious setting and plot device will make it easier for the poor reader to relate to the rest of the story.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

When producing this book, technical aspects of writing never really came into play as far as how I would shape the text. The plot, setting and characterization were so embedded in my mind from my past experiences that they came naturally as the story wrote itself. It was never a concern to me whether Ryan should be in a certain place and time while he was thinking about his own experiences, such as his knowledge of little league for example. The memories are with me and I know what happened. As a result, writing down the story was simply a matter of turning memories into text.

Holland, Great Grandma's house and the Fourth of July holiday are the three main aspects around which the story is shaped. The plot and setting depends entirely upon them and it is these special circumstances that give the story its own unique qualities. Because this manuscript is so dependent upon my memory, I asked my mother to read it. She confirmed the accuracy of the factual element of the story.

In writing the story, the plot, setting and characterization were not considerations, but to understand the book from a reader's point of view they are very important. They are what gives the book substance and a base for the reader's imagination. They give the reader a common ground and give the story credibility. Most everyone has been to the ball park or been in a community celebration of some sort and most people have spent the weekend at grandma's house. This is what is important about understanding the technical aspects of Bat Boy.

### Plot

The main storyline of this book will have to do with a young boy about nine years of age on the Fourth of July weekend during a small town festival that has a double elimination fastpitch softball tournament in which his father is playing.

Even though Ryan has been to a few softball tournaments before with his mom and dad, this is the first time that he will be allowed to go off on his own to see the sights and not have to be under the watchful eyes of his parents, for the most part anyway. Ryan still must tell his parents or relatives where he will be, but other than that he is free to roam. Ryan will also be able to sit with his dad's team and be the bat boy during the softball games. Being able to be with the "big boys" while they play their game and being around his father, is a "right of passage" for growing up.

These two main plot lines will lead into subplots such as the culture of the ballplayers, the mother's discontent with the continued lonely nights and weekends when dad is off playing softball, and lastly, the way the older relatives act and interact with each other.

The main subplot is Ryan's time spent with John, the boy who lives across the road. He will be Ryan's mentor, a boy who is a year older than Ryan and has more experience in life. He comes from a background that includes some farm responsibilities, household chores and he also has two older brothers and a younger sister whereas Ryan lives in town and has no brothers or sisters. Even though this is Ryan's first chance to be free of outside influence, he would rather spend his time with someone. This shows the importance of friendship and companionship that is portrayed through his willingness to give up solitary freedom for someone his age who actually may be taking care of him a little more than his parents would. This is only true because Ryan looks up to John as a friend and not someone who is trying to "boss him around" as a parent might. Through their friendship Ryan learns about how to judge other people, treat other people, handle money wisely, and have a good time with firecrackers safely, and play in a tree house.

Over all, the story is an experience in growing up; the journey from innocence to the beginning of maturity. Ryan begins to realize that there are other people with problems and that there is a much bigger world out there than what he had previously envisioned, if he had up to this point really envisioned an outside world at all.

### Setting

The setting is one of the more important aspects of the story. The small town, the proximity of Great Grandma's house with the ball park, and the Fourth of July holiday all are very important in telling of the story.

The Fourth of July concept is the most important influence on the story. In the town of Holland, Iowa, this holiday softball tournament has been a tradition since before most residents can remember. My father was a part of it as a player, and I also enjoyed the holiday celebration as a child.

The true magic of the holiday was not the two days of softball games, rather it was the dreams I had as I imagined playing in the tournament just like my dad when I grew up. It was the excitement of all the games that were on the midway of the ballpark grounds, such as the coin toss and the dunk tank, riding the horses and Pokey Pete's Train, and especially, chasing foul balls for the prize of a nickel from the concession stand. It was a wonderland that only happened once a year and to do anything less

than to make the most out of it would be a tragedy.

Of course, the most important thing about the Fourth of July holiday is the fireworks. After the day became dark and the field lights went on, every moment that the championship game lasted agonized me with anticipation. I cheered for every out no matter who was up to bat (unless dad's team was behind...sort of). I had blankets in hand, ready to rush out to center field to grab a prime observing spot when the last out was finally made. It was a joy to lie back and watch the fireworks burst straight above, seeing the Roman candles go off along the left-center field fence, and finally, the lighting of the flag at the end. This made a small boy cringe because he knew it was the signal that the show was over.

The Fourth of July time period gives substance to the whole situation. To take the story and give a setting of an ordinary tournament could be made into a very nice story concentrating on the relationship between a boy and his father. With the holiday and the celebration that comes with it, the opportunity to develop other characters such as the mother, John, the boy across the street, Great Grandma and Grandma, as well as Dad and the rest of the team give the story a more universal point of view.

The location of the house, being right across the ball park fence, and the makeup of the house itself is also important to the story. Being able to see the park from the house, the large backyard that leads to the back gate of the ballpark, and the design of the house itself all have implications of how the story will be told.

The old house, being much different than my own house back then, gives the story a whole new color. The narrow, steep stairwell, the broom closet and the pantry, the "spy hole" where the stove pipe came up from the living room, the dark and damp basement that was off limits to me, makes a very nice sub-setting that gives the reader a whole new perspective on what the weekend was like for the main character. This is also the setting in which the grandparents and other older folks in the story are developed.

Holland, being a small town, gives the story an atmosphere all its own, a friendly place where everyone knows everyone, or has at least heard of them. This familiarity is also a part of the "ballplayer community" where the players from opposing teams know some of the players on the other teams and almost all of the teams have been playing in the tournament for many years. This aspect gives a great sense of community and tradition, a comfort and familiarity among people that makes the



main character feel safe, or more accurately, that he never has any idea that anything could be remotely threatening, just good times to be had and new discoveries to be made.

### Characterization.

The main character is a young boy about the age of ten, genuinely innocent about most worldly things and with very little experience of being on his own. During the course of the weekend he experiences many firsts within his life, such as the first time seeing a handicapped person, a black person, having responsibility for money and being a bat boy. Also, through the people that his father talks to, Ryan discovers that there was time before he was born. The concept actually becomes real because of the history of the tournament and the fact that his dad had come here when he was a kid and Great Grandma has stories of tournaments gone by.

The most influential character will be John, a boy that lives across the road from Great Grandma's house. He is a year older and has more experience being on his own due to the way he was raised. Even though John lives in town many of his chores that he must do include farm work such as taking care of a 4-H cow. John also has older brothers and a younger sister whereas Ryan is an only child. John knows the people of the town and has a lot more common sense than Ryan has.

The father will also be a major influence on Ryan's life. Ryan can see a strain in his parents relationship and will know that sometimes parents go through problems. Divorce will never be an issue and Ryan will never know the full extent of his parents' problems but he will become aware of them.

The role which Ryan's mother and the other relatives play will be smaller and deal with mostly the love and responsibilities that parents or grand parents have for their kids. The idea of how the older folks are seen through Ryan's eyes will be well developed. Other minor characters such as Carl, the kid in the press box and Marion, the lady in the concession stand will be added for humor and for other little bits of wisdom.

During the weekend Ryan will see many things for the first time that will force him to broaden his horizons, take a look at life's little realities and even grow up a little bit. The discovery that there are people different than himself, such as the handicapped ballplayer will show him that there is a whole different world around him than just what he has experienced so far. The story could be called the beginning of his journey into adulthood.

Note: Pages 12-190 consisted of the manuscript for the original novel *Bat Boy* and currently are not being made available through UNI ScholarWorks.

## Chapter 5

Continuing to write and finally completing “Bat boy” has been an ongoing challenge of will and endurance. The time involved is incredible and once the story is done, then only half the job is truly done. I discovered that the story was endless because characters were constantly growing and changing; the story developed every time I thought about it or tried to rewrite part of it. The story has a life of its own. Even when I had not written a word in months, the next part of the story would always make itself known to me, like it had been waiting for me, dormant in my mind until I had the time to write it down. Looking back upon my writing this past year and a half I remember days of doing nothing but writing, constantly letting the words form on the page. I wrote in my apartment, in bars, outside in the sun, and finally, I wrote at the ball diamond where the story all takes place. People seemed to be quite curious about me when I wrote in bars. It was especially fun at The Lone Tree in Holland. I included them in the book since I needed a name for a restaurant and I just happened to be sitting there drinking a beer and putting pen to paper. People asked what I was doing and they were quite astounded to hear what I had been up to, writing about their local softball team. The word had even got back to my mother in Grundy Center by the time I saw her the next night.

I also remember the days, weeks and months that I was not writing. Other things seemed to be more important or had to be done and the flow of writing was interrupted. Those were days when I felt like I had so much more to write and couldn't bring myself to begin again because I feared I didn't have enough time to really “get into the story”. On these days the story haunted the back of my mind, reminding me to start again. The story was always with me, whether I was writing or not.

In the end, as the completion of the story was in sight, the urge to write a conclusion was overwhelming; I only needed to get it on paper. Being almost too excited to write, I found myself jumping out of my seat just to get my thoughts back into perspective. When I finally wrote about watching Great Grandma disappearing behind the houses, all I could do was look at the paper and feel amazed that at long last, this was the end.

However while one phase was at its rest, the next was full in front of me. Correcting spelling, typos and inconsistencies in the story went on for another few weeks before I even considered sending it

to Dr. Safford for the first time. Even then rewriting wasn't finished as the first chapter proved to be quite elusive. Trying to find a proper beginning turned out to be the hardest and most thought provoking part of the whole process. First chapters ran through me like water before I finally had the idea to begin in a game of my own, lending validity to baseball knowledge that I showed later on in the book.

As a librarian I was able to see the other side of books. The thinking and desire that goes into creating a book was instilled in me by knowing and experiencing the passion that goes with writing. The same passion that librarians show when they are trying to guide a student to a book also goes into writing books. It gives me a new insight on author studies. Knowing who wrote the book is as important as reading the book for students to understand fully what they are reading. Knowing the author will give greater understanding of the story and also the story will become more personal to the reader.

I believe that just the fact that I have written a book will motivate my future students. Writing always seems like a large task. Even writing a letter to a loved one can seem to require much effort. Writing a book then would seem insurmountable to most people. But to know someone who has actually done such a task and to receive encouragement from him/her can be a turning point in one's life. This would be much like a boy going to a baseball camp and being coached by a major league player. Though I may not compare to a major league player, the same principle holds true, even if I have not been published yet.

In conclusion the experience of writing a book has been an overwhelmingly positive one that I hope to do again in the near future. It has elevated my professional awareness to a new level and brought back many fond memories of my childhood as well. It also showed me that I have the courage to finish such a large undertaking, something I am very proud of doing. Even more so it has shown me that it is very important to teach kids how to express themselves and also to teach them how others express themselves so that they may be able to do so in the forms they choose. Librarianship is more than just information science and writing the book has helped me to understand that. In my understanding comes the knowledge of how important it is to pass that understanding on to students. This will be the most important lesson I will take away from my experience, one that I hope to continually rediscover.

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