

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Hang Tough, Paul Mather

by
Alfred Slote

Book Information

Alfred Slote, Hang Tough, Paul Mather

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Book Level: 3.7

Interest Level: MG

Twelve-year old Paul is determined to continue playing baseball after he is told he has leukemia.

Topics: Diseases/Disorders, Cancer; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Sports/Recreation, Baseball

Main Characters

Frank and Helen Mather Paul's parents

Jim Anderson the coach for Wilson Dairy's team

Larry Mather Paul's brother, most often called (affectionately) "the Punk"

Monk Lawler Paul's friend on the Wilson Dairy team

Paul Mather the narrator, a twelve-year-old leukemia patient

Red Kelly the pitching ace on the Ace Appliance team

Tom Kinsella Paul's doctor in Arborville

Vocabulary

agenda a list or plan of actions to be taken or considered

leukemia a form of cancer that affects the blood

pneumonia a disease that affects the lungs

remission in cancer treatment, a period of time when the patient's symptoms are absent

ringer in sports, players who enter a competition by falsely representing their experience or identity

Synopsis

Paul Mather is a twelve-year-old pitching prodigy and leukemia patient. His family moves from California to Arborville, Michigan, to be near a clinic

that may better treat his condition. Being in remission when they arrive, Paul is instantly tempted to join a local Little League team that is badly in need of a pitcher. Being cautious, his parents forbid Paul to do so until he has Dr. Kinsella's permission.

Unable to wait, Paul fills out a fake registration card and surreptitiously pitches for the Wilson Dairy team against their rivals, the Ace Appliance team. His duel with the ace of the Ace team, Red Kelly, demonstrates that Paul's skill and love of the game have survived his year of not playing. Then in the second inning, a collision at first base leaves Paul sprawled and helpless. The game is forfeited as the truth is learned, and Paul's remission is over.

Dr. Kinsella treats Paul with debilitating chemotherapy as well as bonds with him as a person. Paul sets the goal of leaving the hospital by late summer to help Monk Lawler and his other teammates win the revenge game against Ace.

Paul does so, but in a wheelchair. Still weak from his treatments, Paul helps win the game for his friends with his subtle heckling of Red Kelly, the "rabbit-eared" pitcher for the Ace team. He returns to the hospital in triumph, his prognosis (but not his "fighting spirit") still in doubt.

Open-Ended Questions

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

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Inferential Comprehension

When Coach Parker insists the Wilson Dairy team forfeit the game Paul started, Monk says to him, "You just want to win any way you can." How true are Monk's words?

While not completely fair, Monk's angry words are partly true. Parker's "by the book" mentality reduces the special circumstances involved in Paul's deception to the phrase "bad luck." His insistence on the forfeit comes off as more legalistic than moral. Only after the forfeit is enforced does Parker consider the supposed point of the game, namely giving the players a chance to play. On the other hand, it is doubtful he would do "anything to win." His admission that the situation is "bad luck" for Coach Anderson implies that Parker would do as the Wilson Dairy coach had--and expect the same results.

Inferential Comprehension

Which of the other players in the Arborville league is most like Paul?

Monk is clearly the one player with Paul's mental toughness. Not only is he feisty--in fact, more so than Paul probably ever was--but when his teammates watch Red Kelly warm up before the first game, he warns them off the false hopes they are expressing. Even with Paul on their side, he tells his teammates, "We're not counting on Paul to do it for us. We got to hit Kelly." His game strengths carry over to his interpersonal skills. Monk breaks the ice when Paul's wheelchair has everyone uncomfortable at first. "Pretty cool chair, Mather. You got a driver's permit for it?" Like Paul, Monk seems to be a born leader.

Inferential Comprehension

If Paul's treatments work before the next season in Arborville, how might his rivalry with Red Kelly turn out?

As a pitcher, Paul is clearly superior. His mature approach to the game twice gets the better of Red and likely will in the coming season. Their parting words, however, make it clear they are rivals, not enemies. Paul respects Red's talent, and the Wilson Dairy team justifiably fears his arm's pure strength. If Red's concentration problems are corrected--and Coach Parker will surely address them--their friendly rivalry will probably remain a lively one as well.

Constructing Meaning

Paul thinks Tom Kinsella is a unique doctor. Find some examples from the book that show Paul is right.

Apart from the parlor tricks such as juggling and the sheer time Dr. Kinsella spends with Paul, there are two things he does that doctors normally may not do. First, he helps Nurse Brophy clean up messes Paul makes when medication makes him nauseous. Second, he speaks directly to Paul about death.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The meshing between baseball terminology and Paul's medical predicament is so tight that young readers might miss Slote's hand at work. Students might be asked to consider whether baseball really does resemble life as closely as the book assumes. One way to examine the mesh would be to substitute another sport for baseball in the book's plot. If Paul had been a tennis or football player, how might his outlook on his illness and treatment have changed? Another point of comparison could be literary, or even cinematic. *Bang the Drum Slowly* remains another fine blending of the themes of death and baseball. *Pride of the Yankees* is an even safer choice.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Slote wrote *Hang Tough, Paul Mather* in the early 1970s. Treatment procedures and prognoses for

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leukemia have made some strides in the intervening years. As a lecture or as a research project, students can be brought up-to-date on any advances that have been developed. Those advances may in turn be extended to discuss the role of medical research and the pace of our progress in medical technology.

Understanding the Author's Craft Slote's descriptions, in Paul's narrative voice, of the play of the baseball games is particularly well written. He focuses on the mental situation, the "inner game," and avoids boring or redundant terminology. One way to help students appreciate his style would be to ask them to compare Slote's descriptions with those found in other sports books. Matt Christopher's work would be one place to start. Which author's descriptions of games are easier or more compelling to read and why?

Responding to Literature Paul and Dr. Kinsella have very nearly an ideal doctor-patient relationship. Young readers are likely to identify with that bond. As a discussion or writing topic, ask them to relate the relationship to their own experiences with doctors. Have their doctors been more like or unlike Dr. Kinsella? In what ways? When the students have had illness (hopefully minor ones), were they like Paul as patients? Are most doctors as good as Dr. Kinsella at "keeping up the patient's dobber"?