

HC: 978-0-7636-5396-5

PB: 978-0-7636-6463-3

E-book: 978-0-7636-6207-3

Also available in audio

Button Down

BY ANNE YLVISAKER

About the Book

Ever since local boy Lester Ward got drafted by the University of Iowa Hawkeyes, Tugs Button's scrawny cousin Ned can think of nothing but football. Sure, Lester's younger bully of a brother is determined to keep Ned and his gang from ever getting near a real pickup game. But Ned has a few things going for him: he can catch and sometimes even throw, much to his surprise. And he's got his eccentric grandpa Ike, who has less get-up-and-go these days but no shortage of down-home wisdom to pass along—like that being a football star is less about being big and more about playing as a team and honing your strategy, and that having friends and family in your corner is a bigger prize than a lucky football will ever be.

Discussion Questions

1. Before your students read *Button Down*, study the title and cover illustration with them. Ask them what they notice. Point out the helmet the boy is wearing and its position on his head, and invite students to discuss what the story may be about and when and where it may take place.
2. If your class has read *The Luck of the Buttons*, ask: What do you remember about Tugs's cousin Ned?
3. "That's how it was with Ned Button," says the author on page 1. After students have read the first chapter, ask: What do we know about Ned? Did you think he would catch the ball?
4. Discuss the meaning of the words *optimist* and *pessimist* with your students. Ask: Do you think Ned is an optimist or a pessimist? Why or why not? Do you tend to be an optimist or a pessimist?
5. Define the word *mentor* for students. Ask: Which of the characters in *Button Down* is a mentor to Ned? In what ways? Do you have mentors in your life? How do they help you?

6. Read aloud this section from page 23: “Ned needed Granddaddy’s ear. Talking to him was like throwing a ball against the school wall. It’s not that Granddaddy said so much, but he listened in a way that sent Ned’s thoughts back to him with new bounce.” Discuss with students the traits of a good listener. Ask: Who do you talk to when you need a good listener? Are you a good listener? Invite students to give an example of a time when they were a good listener for a friend or family member.
7. Granddaddy Ike says to Ned, “It’s not the getting lost you got to worry about. It’s the not getting started” (page 29). Ask: What do you think this means? Why does Granddaddy say this to Ned? What is so scary about getting started? Invite students to discuss some of the new situations they have faced, such as starting a new grade, a new sport, and so on. Ask: What do you do when you are afraid to start something?
8. At the end of the chapter titled “The Weight of It,” Ned takes the football from Ward’s Ben Franklin (page 12). Ask: Do you think Ned intended to take the football, or was it an accident? Why do you think so? Have you ever been in a similar situation? What did you do, and how did it make you feel? Have you ever heard the phrase “Finders keepers, losers weepers”? What do you think of this phrase? Can it ever be an excuse to do the wrong thing?
9. Ned may not be good at catching, but he discovers he does have a valuable skill (page 57). Ask: What skill does Ned discover? How does this discovery change his perception of himself and of football? Have you ever discovered a skill you didn’t know you had? What was it? Did you discover it yourself or did someone point it out to you? How did you get better at it?
10. Strategy is a plan for reaching a goal. Granddaddy tells Ned, “You don’t have to be the biggest player if you know strategy” (page 60). Ask: What is strategy? What football strategies does Granddaddy teach Ned? Point out to students that strategy isn’t just for sports — we strategize to reach goals every day. For instance, we all have a goal of getting to school on time. Ask: What strategy do you use to make sure you reach that goal? What are some other ways that you use strategy in your life? How does Ned use strategy in *Button Down* besides in football?
11. Granddaddy’s death is sad for Ned, but the story does not end with the funeral. Ask: How does Granddaddy’s life and his relationship with Ned continue to influence Ned after his death? Ask students if they have experienced the death of someone they love, and invite them to share something about that person’s life and the time they spent with him or her. Ask: How does that person’s life continue to influence yours?
12. Thinking about Granddaddy gives Ned courage. Read aloud the last paragraph on page 175 (which begins, “Ned drew back his arm”). Ask students: When you need courage, who or what do you think about?
13. After students have read the last chapter, ask them to consider their earlier impressions of Ned. Ask: What do we know about Ned now? How has Ned changed? How has our perception of Ned changed?

Classroom Activities

GAME TIME

After reading about all of Ned's pickup games, it's time to play football. Have students skim the book to find the plays Granddaddy teaches Ned. Invite a student to draw the plays on the board using Xs and Os as Ned does. If you have students who play football, allow them to share their expertise with the class. Then take the class outside or to the gym. Divide the class into teams and play touch football, trying out the plays from the story as well as other plays suggested by students.

Most card, board, and dice games involve strategy. Have a game day. Ask students to bring a game from home or use classroom games. Invite students to share with the class some ways to use strategy in their chosen game. Then allow time for students to play the games. Alternatively, teach and play paper-and-pencil games of strategy such as hangman, dots and squares, or tic-tac-toe.

STRATEGIES FOR LIFE

Brainstorm with students to come up with one thing the class as a whole could improve upon. Together, write a simple three- or four-step strategy for reaching that goal and post it in a place the class can see regularly.

Revisit students' answers to discussion question 7. Ask them to write down one thing they are afraid of starting, one thing they would like to learn, or a skill they would like to improve. Then have them write a simple three- to four-step strategy for reaching their goal.

BIOGRAPHY

To Ned, Granddaddy Ike has always just been his old grandpa who lives next door. But when Granddaddy suggests to Ned that he could teach him something about football, Ned looks at him in a new way. Read aloud the last paragraph on page 59. Invite students to discuss the new things Ned learns about Granddaddy Ike.

Explain to students that biographies give us written accounts of the lives of people we'd like to know more about. Share biographies from your school library with students. Have students note what kinds of information are gathered in biographies.

Invite students to think about the adults in their life and choose a grandparent, parent, or other adult whose life they would like to know more about. Have each student generate a list of questions to ask. Then invite them to interview the person of their choice and write a short biography.

RADIO

There were no televisions at the time this story takes place (the fall of 1929). So instead of watching a distant football game, Ned listens to it on the radio, allowing his imagination to come up with the images. Revisit the chapters "Cutting Edge" (page 72) and "Hawkeyes Versus Carroll" (page 118) with students and note what this is like for Ned.

Let students experience the purely auditory experience of Ned's era by listening to a radio program together. If possible, find a local radio broadcast of a high-school, college, or professional sports game.

Or listen to an online audio program such as a story at <http://storycorp.org> or a podcast such as *Cabinet of Wonders* at www.npr.org or *A Prairie Home Companion* at <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org>. When the program is over, compare the experience of listening to the radio to watching television.

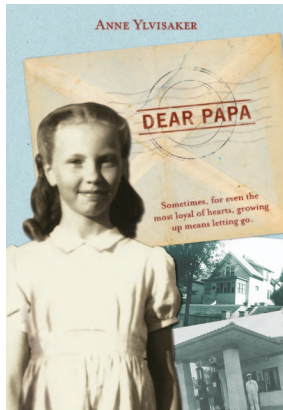
DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Using similes, metaphors, and sensory descriptions, “Into the Night” (pages 47–51) chronicles Ned’s experience of being outside alone at night. Review the meaning of *simile* and *metaphor* with your class then read this chapter aloud. Ask students to raise their hand when they hear similes and metaphors as well as sensory descriptions.

Ask students to think of a time when they were alone. Have them use a piece of scratch paper to jot down a list of things they saw, heard, felt, smelled, and (possibly) tasted. Ask students to choose four or five of the items from their list and write a simile or metaphor for each.

Then give students a fresh sheet of writing paper and allow them time to write several paragraphs describing their time alone, including their similes and metaphors as well as sensory descriptions.

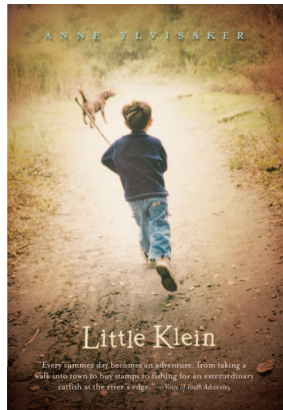
ALSO BY ANNE YLVISAKER



Dear Papa

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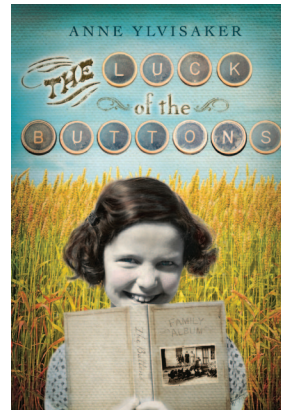


Little Klein

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PB: 978-0-7636-6061-1

E-book: 978-0-7636-5461-0

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