

The Wednesday Wars

by Gary D. Schmidt

About the Book

Meet Holling Hoodhood, a seventh-grader at Camillo Junior High, who must spend Wednesday afternoons with his teacher, Mrs. Baker, while the rest of the class has religious instruction. Mrs. Baker doesn't like Holling--he's sure of it. Why else would she make him read the plays of William Shakespeare outside class? But everyone has bigger things to worry about, like Vietnam. His father wants Holling and his sister to be on their best behavior: the success of his business depends on it. But how can Holling stay out of trouble when he has so much to contend with? A bully demanding cream puffs; angry rats; and a baseball hero signing autographs the very same night Holling has to appear in a play in yellow tights! As fate sneaks up on him again and again, Holling finds Motivation--the Big M--in the most unexpected places and musters up the courage to embrace his destiny, in spite of himself.

Praise for the Book

"Schmidt ... [gets] to the emotional heart of every scene without overstatement ... another virtuoso turn by the author of *LIZZIE BRIGHT*."

— *Kirkus Reviews, Starred*

"Schmidt...makes the implausible believable and the everyday momentous...a gentle, hopeful, moving story."

—*Booklist, ALA, Starred Review*

"Schmidt rises above the novel's conventions to create memorable and believable characters."

—*Horn Book, Starred*

"[An] entertaining and nuanced novel.... There are laugh-out-loud moments that leaven the many poignant ones."

— *School Library Journal*

"An accessible, humorous school story, and at the same time, an insightful coming-of-age tale."

—*Bookpage*

Courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Books

About the Author

Title: Gary D. Schmidt

Known As: Schmidt, Gary David; Schmidt, Gary D.

American Children's writer (1957 -)

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Personal Information

Born April 14, 1957, in Hicksville, NY; son of Robert H. (a bank vice president) and Jeanne A. (a teacher) Schmidt; married Anne E. Stickney (a writer), December 22, 1979; children: James, Kathleen, Rebecca, David, Margaret, Benjamin. Education: Gordon College, B.A., 1979; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, M.A., 1981, Ph.D., 1985. Religion: Christian Reformed. Avocational Interests: Gardening. Memberships: Children's Literature Association, Early English Text Society, Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Alpha Chi. Addresses: Homeoffice: Alto, MI. Office: Department of English, Calvin College, 1795 Knollcrest Cir., Grand Rapids, MI 49546. E-mail: schg@calvin.edu.

Career

Author and educator. Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI, professor of English, 1985--, department head, 1991-97.

Awards

Honorable mention, Book Award Committee, Children's Literature Association, 1993, for *Robert McCloskey*; Best Books for Young Adults citation, American Library Association (ALA), 1997, for *The Sin Eater*; Newbery Honor Book designation, ALA, Michael L. Printz Honor Book designation, ALA, and Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book designation, all 2005, all for *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*; Newbery Honor Book designation, 2008, for *The Wednesday Wars*.

Writings

Juvenile

- *John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress*, illustrated by Barry Moser, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 1994, also published as *Pilgrim's Progress*, 2008.
- *Robert Frost*, illustrated by Henri Sorensen, Sterling Publishing (New York, NY), 1994.
- *The Sin Eater* (novel), Dutton (New York, NY), 1996.
- *The Blessing of the Lord: Stories from the Old and New Testaments*, illustrated by Dennis Nolan, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 1997.
- *William Bradford: Pilgrim of Answerable Courage*, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 1997.
- *Anson's Way* (novel), Clarion Books (New York, NY), 1999.
- *William Bradford: Plymouth's Faithful Pilgrim*, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 1999.
- *Saint Ciaran: The Tale of a Saint of Ireland*, illustrated by Todd Doney, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 2000.
- (Editor, with Frances Schoonmaker Bolin and Brod Bagert) *The Blackbirch Treasury of American Poetry*, Blackbirch Press (Woodbridge, CT), 2001.
- *Mara's Stories*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Straw into Gold* (novel), Clarion Books (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Wonders of Donal O'Donnell: A Folktale of Ireland*, Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2002.
- *The Great Stone Face: A Tale by Nathaniel Hawthorne*, illustrated by Bill Farnsworth, Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI), 2002.
- *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (novel), Clarion Books (New York, NY), 2004.
- *First Boy* (novel), Holt (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Wednesday Wars* (novel), Clarion Books (New York, NY), 2007.
- *Trouble* (novel), Clarion Books (New York, NY), 2008.

For Adults

- *Supplementary Essays for College Writers*, Prentice-Hall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ), 1988, third edition, 1993.
- (Editor, with Charlotte F. Otten) *The Voice of the Narrator in Children's Literature: Insights from Writers and Critics*, Greenwood Press (Westport, CT), 1989.
- *Robert McCloskey*, Twayne (Boston, MA), 1990.
- *Hugh Lofting*, Macmillan (New York, NY), 1992.
- (Editor, with Donald R. Hettinga) *Sitting at the Feet of the Past: Retelling the North American Folktale for Children*, Greenwood Press (Westport, CT), 1992.
- (Editor, with William J. Vande Kopple) *Communities of Discourse: The Rhetoric of Disciplines* (includes instructor's manual), Prentice-Hall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ), 1993.

- *Katherine Paterson*, Macmillan (New York, NY), 1994.
- *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century*, Susquehanna University Press (Cranbury, NJ), 1995.
- *Robert Lawson*, Macmillan (New York, NY), 1997.
- (With Carol Winters) *Edging the Boundaries of Children's Literature*, Allyn & Bacon (Boston, MA), 2001.
- (Editor, with Susan M. Felch) *Winter: A Spiritual Biography of the Season*, illustrated by Barry Moser, Skylight Paths Publishing (Woodstock, VT), 2003.
- (Editor, with Susan M. Felch) *Autumn: A Spiritual Biography of the Season*, illustrated by Barry Moser, Skylight Paths Publishing (Woodstock, VT), 2004.
- *A Passionate Usefulness: The Life and Literary Labors of Hannah Adams*, University of Virginia Press (Charlottesville, VA), 2004.
- (With Lawrence Kushner) *In God's Hands*, Jewish Lights Publishing (Woodstock, VT), 2005.
- (Editor, with Susan M. Felch) *Summer: A Spiritual Biography of the Season*, illustrated by Barry Moser, Skylight Paths Publishing (Woodstock, VT), 2005.
- (Editor, with Susan M. Felch) *Spring: A Spiritual Biography of the Season*, illustrated by Mary Azarian, Skylight Paths Publishing (Woodstock, VT), 2006.
- (Editor, with Susan M. Felch) *The Emmaus Readers: Listening for God in Contemporary Fiction*, Paraclete Press (Brewster, MA), 2008.

Contributor to books, including *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl Poet*, edited by Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Miller, and Julian Wasserman, Whitston (Troy, NY), 1991. Contributor of articles, essays, stories, poems, and reviews to journals, including *Christian Home and School*, *Lion and the Unicorn*, *Studies in American Humor*, *Christian Educators Journal*, and *Martha's KidLit Newsletter*. Guest editor, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 1989.

Media Adaptations

Several of Schmidt's works have been adapted as audio books.

“Sidelights”

Gary D. Schmidt has blended a career as a professor of English with one that involves writing for both children and adults. Schmidt's fiction and nonfiction children's books span genres from young-adult and middle-grade novels to picture books, and they deal with topics from biography to suicide. His novels include *The Sin Eater*, *Anson's Way*, and *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, while in other books, including *The Blessing of the Lord: Stories from the Old and New Testaments* and *Saint Ciaran: The Tale of a Saint of Ireland*, Schmidt mixes religious themes with biographical tales and retellings.

Schmidt's first books were for adults, but after writing a few biographies of children's writers, including *Robert McCloskey* and *Katherine Paterson*, he turned his hand to writing his own children's books. Ilene Cooper, reviewing Schmidt's biography of Paterson in *Booklist*, commented that he does "an excellent job of chronicling" the life of the two-time Newbery Award-winning author. Schmidt once commented: "My first two children's books, the retelling of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Sin Eater*, both came out of my own past. *Pilgrim's Progress* had been with me some fifteen years before I finally turned to a retelling. It seemed to me that there were strong reasons why children would have turned this into a child's story back in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and I was not convinced that those reasons no longer pertained in the late twentieth century. I wrote the retelling thinking of my own early responses to the book, cutting out the parts that bored and that struck discordant notes."

Schmidt's retelling of *Pilgrim's Progress* in *John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress* "is much more accessible than the original version," according to *School Library Journal* contributor Kate Hegarty Bouman, voicing a common response to the work. Bouman noted that Schmidt's "mix of both historical periods and ethnic groups is a fascinating way to extend the text spatially and temporally." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* similarly praised Schmidt's "masterly rendition" as "a treasure sure to delight young and old."

Schmidt's first young-adult novel was *The Sin Eater*. "For *The Sin Eater*, I reached back into my own family's past and that of my wife," the author later explained. "The house is not the same as, but is like a real house in Brunswick, Maine. Though the action of the novel itself is not based on real events, the responses of the characters mirror responses that I have had in my past to not dissimilar events and people. The places around the farmhouse are all real, though drawn from sites in upper New York state, the Catskill Mountains, the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and Cape Cod."

In *The Sin Eater*, middle-schooler Cole and his father move in with Cole's maternal grandparents in rural New Hampshire after Cole's mother dies of cancer. Cole delights in his new surroundings and in the village lore and tales of ancestry told him by his grandparents and other locals. His father, however, remains grief-stricken and ultimately commits suicide. "A work laden with atmosphere and meaning, this is a promising debut from an author who captures with admirable accuracy both the dark and light of life," asserted a *Kirkus Reviews* critic. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer also found Schmidt's novel "engrossing," adding that the plot forms a "point of departure for a profound and lyrical meditation on life and the importance of shared history."

The Blessing of the Lord includes retellings from "unusual perspectives," as Shelley Townsend-Hudson commented in *Booklist*. Schmidt retells the stories of Jonah, Deborah, Barak, Peter, and others, with a twist that gives the "often tired old tales ... new life," according to Townsend-Hudson. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer praised the "dramatic spin" Schmidt gives to these tales.

More religious and spiritual matters are served up in *William Bradford: Plymouth's Faithful Pilgrim* and *Saint Ciaran*. The former biography, intended for older readers, looks at the guiding light of the Plymouth Colony, painting "a warm and cohesive picture of William Bradford's role in that colony's foundation and growth," a critic for *Kirkus Reviews* observed. Bradford, an orphan from early childhood, embraced Puritan ideals as a teenager and ultimately led a group of Separatists on a perilous mission to found a colony in the New World. Schmidt uses Bradford's own writings as well as contemporary journals and prints to take the reader back into the religious beliefs of those early colonists. "The author clearly presents Bradford's religious views and shows how those beliefs affected his life and actions and those of the Pilgrims," wrote Elaine Fort Weischedel in a *School Library Journal* review.

Saint Ciaran is a picture book intended for younger readers. "In mouth-filling cadences of Gaelic ... Schmidt tells the story of the sixth-century Irish saint," noted GraceAnne A. DeCandido in *Booklist*. Having grown up a spiritual child, Ciaran went to Rome and discovered the Catholic faith in the city's churches. Sent back to Ireland by St. Patrick, he founded a religious community that attracted Christians from all over the island. DeCandido called *Saint Ciaran* a "beautiful picture book for older children," and Kathleen Kelly MacMillan, writing in *School Library Journal*, deemed the book a "gently moving tribute to a lesser-known saint."

Schmidt demonstrates the variety of his prose styles in the novels *Anson's Way* and *Straw into Gold*. Again using Ireland for a setting, this time in the eighteenth century, *Anson's Way* features a young Anson Granville Staplyton who follows his family calling and joins the Staffordshire military, the Fencible. Dreaming of glory, he is sent to Ireland as a mere drummer to help keep the peace. When he sees his fellow soldiers persecuting the locals, Anson begins to have mixed loyalties. When he meets an Irish hedge master--a person who illegally teaches the Irish their forbidden language and culture--he soon befriends some of the Irish rebels. Ultimately, Anson is forced to choose between his comrades in arms and his new Irish friends. This book "realistically portrays not only the tragedies of war but also the battle between the heart and mind of a young soldier," *Booklist* writer Shelle Rosenfeld remarked. Janice M. Del Negro, reviewing the title in *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, praised this "complex action/adventure novel" with its "shifting moral center." "Replete with drama and action," wrote Hilary Crew in *Voice of Youth Advocates*, "Schmidt's story presents a side of Irish history that is frequently marginalized in textbooks."

In his middle-grade novel *Straw into Gold*, Schmidt spins a new twist in the old Rumpelstiltskin tale, extending it to see what could have happened. In Schmidt's rendering, young Tousle leaves his forest cottage with his magical father, Da, to travel to the city and view the king's procession. He becomes separated from his father and then surprises himself by calling out for mercy for some rebels facing execution. One other voice raised against the execution is that of the queen herself. The king will spare the lives only if Tousle and a blind young rebel, Innes, are able solve the riddle the king sets for them: "What fills a hand fuller than a skein of gold?" "So begins a suspenseful quest that adds surprising twists and turns to the traditional fairy tale," wrote *Booklist* critic

Frances Bradburn. *School Library Journal* reviewer Ginny Gustin was also beguiled by the tale, calling *Straw into Gold* a "fantasy-flavored quest."

Based on actual events, *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* was named a John Newbery Honor Book and a Michael L. Printz Honor Book. Set in 1912, the novel centers on Turner Ernest Buckminster III, the son of a minister in Phippsburg, Maine, and his unlikely friendship with Lizzie Bright Griffin, who lives on nearby Malaga Island, which was settled by former slaves. Fearful that the impoverished community will hurt tourism, the town elders force the island's residents from their homes, despite Turner's efforts to intervene. Writing in *Booklist*, Hazel Rochman called *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* a "haunting combination of fact and fiction that has a powerful and tragic climax," and *School Library Journal* contributor Connie Tyrrell Burns remarked that the "novel will leave a powerful impression on readers."

In *First Boy*, fourteen-year-old Cooper Jewett decides to stay on his family's New Hampshire dairy farm after the death of his grandfather, who had raised Cooper. Soon, however, the teen is followed by black sedans, a barn on the farm burns to the ground, and a U.S. presidential candidate takes a strong interest in his life. "Cooper is an entirely appealing protagonist," noted Vicky Smith in *Horn Book*, and Rochman described *First Boy* as "a poignant account of one boy's search for home."

The Wednesday Wars, set in 1967 against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, concerns Holling Hoodhood, a seventh grader who spends every Wednesday afternoon alone with his demanding teacher, Mrs. Baker, while his schoolmates attend religious classes. The two find common ground when they begin reading the plays of William Shakespeare, and the educator becomes a positive force in Holling's life, in contrast to his often neglectful parents. Writing in *Kliatt*, Paula Rohrlack called *The Wednesday Wars* "a marvelous read, both achingly funny and deeply affecting," and *School Library Journal* critic Joel Shoemaker stated that the author "explores many important themes, not the least of which is what makes a person a hero."

The members of an affluent New England family find their privileged lives irrevocably altered by tragedy in *Trouble*, a work that examines loss, responsibility, and reconciliation. When Franklin Smith, a rugby star, is struck and killed by a car driven by his classmate, a Cambodian refugee named Chay Chouan, the residents of Blythbury-by-the-Sea react with anger toward the nearby immigrant community. According to Kate McClelland in *School Library Journal*, Schmidt's novel contains "compassionate examinations of the passage from childhood to adulthood and of the patterns of common experience that mark and unite us as humans."

Discussing his inspiration for the novel in a *Powells.com* interview, Schmidt explained: "I was in Concord, Massachusetts ... staying in a lovely bed and breakfast in that lovely town. One morning, I met a kid who, over breakfast, was receiving his final coaching from his mother and his grandmother. ... That morning he was to interview for admittance into a local prep school." He added: "This interview, they told me, would make his future. He would eventually go into law, and then into politics. ... They had no doubt he

would be accepted. He had no doubt that he would be accepted. He was ten years old." This incident stayed with Schmidt, and he stated: "I have wondered about this kid over the ten years since that morning. ... I have wondered how his privilege and rank has affected him. I have wondered if he came to believe that his status was an entitlement--or if he had ever imagined another kind of life. *Trouble* comes out of that wondering."

The novel was such a success that additional critical praise for the novel continued to appear in print periodicals and on the Internet. The word "rich" was used to describe the book by several reviewers. *Kliatt* contributor Ashleigh Larsen remarked that "a friendship and level of trust flower among unexpected people" and went on to commend Schmidt's "rich attention to detail." Robin L. Smith, writing in *Horn Book*, also applauded the book, noting that "rich secondary characters enhance a 1970s-set story that adds much to the discussion of how tragedy and racism affect individuals, families, and whole communities." To a *Publishers Weekly* writer, the novel is "tautly constructed, metaphorically rich, emotionally gripping and seductively told."

Booklist contributor Ian Chipman found that *Trouble* "focuses on the serious stuff, but handles teen levity well enough to keep readers involved." A *School Library Journal* reviewer was also impressed, remarking upon the "powerful narrative." In *Kirkus Reviews*, a writer stated that the book "stands as a deeply moving and pleasurable read," on the Web site *And Another Book Read*, a reviewer observed that "this book took my breath away! I felt like laughing, crying, and shouting for joy all at the same time." Applauding the novel on the *Reading Zone* Web site, a reviewer declared: "I loved this book" and added: "I would recommend this to an older audience. The story is beautiful and I couldn't put the book down! I wouldn't be surprised to see this novel on most shortlists for the Newbery in 2009." A critic for *Reading Rants* proffered additional applause, calling *Trouble* a "smart, literary character study" and adding: "Whatever you do, don't let the humdrum earth-tone cover dissuade you from digging into the crackin' good story underneath." On the *Teen Library Blog* Web site, a reviewer noted that "when I really like the characters in a book, I know I'm going to like the story. I know you will too."

"Teaching children's literature as I do, I have the opportunity to read many of the extraordinary children's books published each year," Schmidt once noted. "But teaching also means that I need to balance each day between my family, my writing, and my students. This, especially when the care of a 150-year-old farm is thrown into the balance, becomes a delicate act. It means that I can spend one to three hours a day on my writing, but that's all. Afterwards, there are other worlds to turn to.

"Working at a college also means that I combine several levels of writing. ... At the same time [as writing for children], I work on books that are slightly more arcane: a study of the medieval image of the mouth of hell and a biography of an eighteenth-century female historian. For me, these two very different kinds of writing (both creative, but one more scholarly than the other) help keep each project exciting rather than burdensome, even though there are the days when neither seems to have much energy.

"In thinking about my own work in children's literature, it seems to me that I am interested in showing the beatific and terrible complexities of our lives," Schmidt concluded. "I have had one reader tell me that *The Sin Eater* was sadder and funnier than he thought it would be. It seems to me that our lives are just that: often sadder and funnier than we ever thought they would be. They are also more beatific than we have any reason to expect, and my hope is to show that in the context of a world that is often dark."

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

- *Booklist*, May 1, 1994, Ilene Cooper, review of *Katherine Paterson*, p. 1611; December 1, 1994, Hazel Rochman, review of *Robert Frost*, p. 669; November 1, 1996, Ilene Cooper, review of *The Sin Eater*, p. 491; November 1, 1997, Shelley Townsend-Hudson, review of *The Blessing of the Lord: Stories from the Old and New Testaments*, p. 469; April 1, 1999, Shelle Rosenfeld, review of *Anson's Way*, p. 1428; April 1, 2000, GraceAnne A. DeCandido, review of *Saint Ciaran: The Tale of a Saint of Ireland*, p. 1459; August, 2001, Frances Bradburn, review of *Straw into Gold*, p. 2108; October 1, 2002, Kay Weisman, review of *The Great Stone Face: A Tale by Nathaniel Hawthorne*, p. 327; May 15, 2004, Hazel Rochman, review of *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, p. 1629; September 15, 2005, Hazel Rochman, review of *First Boy*, p. 60; March 1, 2008, Ian Chipman, review of *Trouble*, p. 61.
- *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, May, 1999, Janice M. Del Negro, review of *Anson's Way*, pp. 327-328.
- *Horn Book*, November-December, 2004, Betty Carter, review of *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, p. 717; September-October, 2005, Vicky Smith, review of *First Boy*, p. 589; July-August, 2007, Betty Carter, review of *The Wednesday Wars*, p. 403; May-June, 2008, Robin L. Smith, review of *Trouble*, p. 326.
- *Internet Bookwatch*, March 1, 2009, review of *Pilgrim's Progress*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, September 1, 1996, review of *The Sin Eater*, p. 1328; June 1, 1998, review of *William Bradford: Pilgrim of Answerable Courage*, p. 816; April 1, 2008, review of *Trouble*.
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- *New York Times Book Review*, December 16, 2007, Tanya Lee Stone, "Starting Out in the '60s," review of *The Wednesday Wars*, p. 23.
- *Publishers Weekly*, December 19, 1994, review of *John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress*, pp. 54-55; October 14, 1996, review of *The Sin Eater*, p. 84; August 25, 1997, review of *The Blessing of the Lord*, p. 66; March 1, 1999, review of *Anson's Way*, p. 70; April 10, 2000, review of *Saint Ciaran*, p. 95; March 31, 2008, review of *Trouble*, p. 62.
- *School Library Journal*, December, 1994, Kate Hegarty Bouman, review of *Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 130; October, 1997, Patricia Pearl Dole, review of *The Blessing of the Lord*, p. 154; April, 1999, Starr E. Smith, review of *Anson's Way*,

- p. 12; June, 1999, Elaine Fort Weischedel, review of *William Bradford*, p. 153; August, 2000, Kathleen Kelly MacMillan, review of *Saint Ciaran*, p. 175; August, 2001, Ginny Gustin, review of *Straw into Gold*, p. 188; November, 2002, Grace Oliff, review of *The Great Stone Face*, p. 135; May, 2004, Connie Tyrrell Burns, review of *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, p. 157; October, 2005, Connie Tyrrell Burns, review of *First Boy*, p. 173; July, 2007, Joel Shoemaker, review of *The Wednesday Wars*, p. 110; April, 2008, Kate McClelland, review of *Trouble*, p. 148; October 1, 2008, review of *Trouble*, p. 71.
- *Voice of Youth Advocates*, June, 1998, Kathleen Beck, review of *The Sin Eater*, p. 103; August, 1999, Hilary Crew, review of *Anson's Way*, pp. 185-186.

Online

- *And Another Book Read*, <http://andanotherbookread.blogspot.com/> (August 12, 2008), review of *Trouble*.
- *Calvin College Web site*, <http://www.calvin.edu/> (October 1, 2009), author profile.
- *Miss Erin Blog*, <http://misserinmarie.blogspot.com/> (May 23, 2008), "SBBT Interview: Gary D. Schmidt."
- *Publishers Weekly Online*, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/> (May 3, 2007), Sue Corbett, "Children's Bookshelf Talks with Gary Schmidt."
- *Random House Web site*, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (September 10, 2008), "A Conversation with Gary D. Schmidt."
- *Reading Rants*, <http://www.readingrants.org/> (June 15, 2008), review of *Trouble*.
- *Reading Zone*, <http://thereadingzone.wordpress.com/> (February 6, 2008), review of *Trouble*.
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Author Interview

After-school lessons in Shakespeare, and life

INTERVIEW BY DEBORAH HOPKINSON

Author Gary Schmidt's *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (2004) was that rare book that appealed to both teenagers and younger readers. An eloquent, beautifully written novel based on the destruction of an African-American community in Maine in 1912, it came as no surprise that it earned both a Printz and Newbery honor.

Now, with Schmidt's new novel, *The Wednesday Wars*, he has achieved something equally rare: a book that manages to be an accessible, humorous school story, and at the same time an insightful coming-of-age tale set during one of the most turbulent times in 20th-century America.

Like his 12-year-old protagonist, Holling Hoodhood, author Gary Schmidt grew up on Long Island. Schmidt's own school recollections include vivid memories of a middle school teacher named Mrs. Baker. Holling also has a teacher named Mrs. Baker, and as the book—and the school year—open, he's convinced she has it in for him:

Of all the kids in the seventh grade at Camillo Junior High, there was one kid that Mrs. Baker hated with heat whiter than the sun.

Me.

On Wednesdays, you see, everyone in the seventh grade—except Holling—is excused early to go to weekly religious classes. Half the class is Catholic; the other half, Jewish. Holling, being the only Presbyterian, is left behind to be the bane of his teacher's existence.

"Just as in the book, I really was the only one in class for the last couple of hours every Wednesday afternoon. But my Mrs. Baker really did hate me," notes the affable Schmidt, a professor of English at Calvin College in Grand Rapids. "After all, I was standing between my teacher and freedom—early release every Wednesday."

Like his young hero, Schmidt breathed in his share of chalk dust cleaning erasers on those Wednesday afternoons. But unlike young Holling, he most definitely did not spend the year exploring the plays of Shakespeare, gaining a fuller appreciation of his teachers as adults with their own trials and problems, and coming to terms with complex school and family relationships. Most especially, the author did not have to grapple with two gigantic, escape-artist rats named Sycorax and Caliban. "I haven't told you about Sycorax and Caliban yet, and you might want to skip over this next part, since it's pretty awful," Holling courteously warns readers.

Holling's year in seventh grade takes place in 1967-1968, a time of social upheaval in America. Although the timeframe does not correspond to Schmidt's own seventh-grade year, his choice was deliberate.

"This was one of our country's most violent years, with the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Vietnam dominated the evening news, with 250 soldiers being shipped home in body bags every week," says Schmidt.

To better understand this era, Schmidt did extensive research. "I read *The New York Times* for the entire time that is covered in the novel. And although this was not in any way meant to be a book about Iraq, over the past three years as I was writing it, I was struck by the similarities to headlines today."

Although the issues in *The Wednesday Wars* are serious—prejudice, the backdrop of Vietnam, uncertain family and school relationships—Holling is a self-aware, engaging narrator, and the situations he relates are often laugh-out-loud funny.

There are those rats, of course. And there's also the matter of Holling's costume for his debut as Ariel the Fairy in the Long Island Shakespeare Company's Holiday Extravaganza. "I got through the whole dress rehearsal playing Ariel the Fairy while wearing bright yellow tights with white feathers on the . . . well, I might as well say it—butt. There. On my butt!" Holling tells readers. "White feathers waving on my butt."

"I wanted to try something different by writing in a colloquial voice," says Schmidt, noting how different *The Wednesday Wars* is in style from *Lizzie Bright*. "I also wanted to show the mixture between drama and comedy, sad moments and silly ones. That's how we live our lives: really ping-ponging back and forth."

One of the most poignant relationships in the book is that of Holling and his father, an architect with ambition. Holling's father rules "the Perfect House," which is scrupulously maintained to outshine every other house on the block. He's also determined to be the head of a perfect family, which inevitably leads to conflicts with Holling and his older sister.

While at the outset Holling is simply "the Son Who Is Going to Inherit Hoodhood and Associates," by the end of the school year he has begun to develop the courage to stand up for the right to choose his own future.

"The idea for this book originally came to me as one simple image," Schmidt explains. "I could see a kid running, with a teacher standing on the sidelines, shouting encouragement."

That scene does, in fact, make it into this rich and multilayered story. It occurs toward the end of the school year, in April. And it is well worth waiting for, both for readers and for Holling, who has begun to realize just how special his Wednesdays with Mrs. Baker have been.

One thing readers will not have to wait too long for is another book by Schmidt, who somehow manages to balance being the father of six children, a professor of English and one of the most talented and thought-provoking writers for young people.

The next novel, he promises, is already done.

*Book Page Interview Retrieved on 12/03/2009 from:
http://www.bookpage.com/0707bp/gary_schmidt.html*

Discussion Questions

1. In the beginning of the novel, Holling is convinced that his teacher, Mrs. Baker, despises him. Why does he believe this to be so? What details help support his case? Do you think it is obvious which students your teachers like and dislike? Have you ever been justly (or unjustly) disliked by one of your teachers? What type of year did you have?
2. Why is Holling left alone on Wednesday afternoons with Mrs. Baker? What is he compelled to do for her? Finally Mrs. Baker starts assigning the plays of which bard? What is Holling surprised to learn about the plays?
3. Holling receives threats from many of his classmates over puff pastry. How does this transpire? How does he try to fix the situation? Why does Mrs. Baker say to Holling over the pastry incident: "The quality of mercy is not strained." How so? Does this change Holling's perception of Mrs. Baker? To whom do you offer mercy?
4. Why do you think the author chooses to call Doug Swieteck's brother by this moniker for the entire novel rather than name him? What other intentional choices did Gary D. Schmidt make about other characters? How do readers get to know the characters of a novel?
5. Discuss Holling's relationship with his parents, especially his father. What expectations does Mr. Hoodhood have for his children? Is he involved in Holling's life? Would you consider him a good father or not? Why? How does Holling finally stand up to his father?
6. Gary D. Schmidt creates an entire cast of secondary characters who flit in and out of the novel some of them are even rodents! How do their stories weave depth and comedy into Holling's story? Which of these minor characters is your favorite: Doug Sweitick's brother, Mai Thai, Meryl Lee, Danny Hupfer, Mrs. Sidman, Sycorax and Caliban.
7. How does Holling's Valentines Day date with Meryl Lee become entwined with Mr. Hoodhood's bid for the new junior high school? Why does Mr. Hoodhood refer to architecture as a "blood sport?" Does Mr. Hoodhood eventually get what he deserves? How?
8. Why is playing the part of Ariel a humiliating incident for Holling? What is the worst part of the whole experience? What new picture is finally pasted around the school? Who do you think posted them around the school the second time? What makes you think so?
9. Why does the section concerning Mickey Mantle inspire Holling to say that "When gods die, they die hard" (p. 92) Even though Holling is devastated over the treatment he receives from one of his heroes he is astounded by the loyalty of

- a friend. How does Danny prove his honor and friendship that night? Has a friend ever stood up for you? How? Are the boys ultimately rewarded? How?
10. What advice does Holling give Mrs. Baker about her teaching before the board visits the classroom? If you could give a teacher advice what would be the most important, most helpful instruction you might offer? Do you think his advice was given in a sincere attempt to help her or not? Would yours?
 11. Many important historical events occur as the novel unfolds like the assassination of both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Which events do you think your children one day ask you about? How are people shaped by the times in which they live and grow up?
 12. How does Holling's sister try to rebel against the expectations of her father? What does she want to do after graduation? How does this lead to her disappearance from the Perfect House? How does Holling come to his sister's rescue? Do you think they will remain close or not?
 13. Which of the many plays of Shakespeare has the most influence over Holling? Now that you've heard the summaries of many of the great plays which ones are you most compelled to read? Give examples of how Holling's life mirrors the play in which he is reading. How does it influence his actions? Can reading actually change the person you are? Which books have fundamentally changed your perspective?
 14. At the end of the novel what compels Mrs. Baker to say "Chrysanthemum" to Holling? Do you think she can take a good deal of the credit for this or not? How can one excellent teacher have a lasting impact on a child's life? What teacher has most influenced you? How did their lives become intertwined beyond the walls of the classroom?
 15. Predict what you think Holling will be doing ten years after the close of the novel. Will he become what his father expects? Will he be able to define himself despite the expectations that weigh him down?

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