

The BiblioFiles: Gary Schmidt

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is Gary Schmidt, author of many books, including *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, *Straw Into Gold*, *Trouble*, *First Boy*, and the two books we'll be discussing today, *The Wednesday Wars* and *Okay For Now*.

The Wednesday Wars features Holling Hoodhood, a seventh grader whose teacher, Mrs. Baker, is out to get him. Really. Why else would she make him pound erasers, clean out rat cages, and read Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, twice. And then there's Doug Swietek's brother, who is sworn to kill him, his infuriating older sister, the whole incident with the cream puffs, the wrath of the entire eighth grade cross country team, and the pressure of being the perfect son set to inherit the family business.

Okay For Now, the companion novel to *The Wednesday Wars*, follows Holling's former classmate, Doug Swietek, as his family abruptly moves to stupid Marysville, a stupid little town in upstate New York, where the stupid library is only open one stupid day a week. But on the second floor of the library, Doug stumbles upon a treasure. A huge book in a glass case that depicts a bird. A bird falling out of the sky, into the cold green sea, terrified. Doug looks at the bird's eye, and recognizes the fear and pain he feels in his own life. His abusive father, his sadistic older brother, his oppressed mother, and Lucas, his other brother, who returns from the war permanently disabled and haunted.

Both novels, set in America during the Vietnam War, could be called coming-of-age stories, but this would be a vast oversimplification. These books are a testimony to all that makes us human. And how, even in the face of adversity and pain, help, humor, understanding, and joy can come from unexpected places, such as the drawings of John James Audubon, a girl holding a dried rose with a ribbon around it, a phrase from Shakespeare, a game of horseshoes, a passage from Jane Austen, or the cool, green baseball field within Yankee Stadium.

Gary Schmidt is a multiple-award-winning author. *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* received a Newbery Honor and the Printz Honor in 2005. *The Wednesday Wars* received the Newbery Honor in 2008. And *Okay For Now* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2011. In addition to his accomplished authoring, Mr. Schmidt is a professor of English at Calvin College in Michigan. His newest book, *What Came from the Stars*, comes out this month. Gary Schmidt joins us from Alto, Michigan. Mr. Schmidt, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

GARY SCHMIDT: Thank you very much for having me.

DR. DANA: You wrote *The Wednesday Wars* first, so let's start with that book. Why did you set the story during the Vietnam War?

GARY SCHMIDT: I wanted to be about a generation or so in the past. I wanted to be pretty close to the age of my protagonist. Holling is a little bit older actually, than I was when I was his age. And I wanted to set it at a time when the country was in-- disarray is an easy way of putting it. A time when the country was at war. And so, with Vietnam, there are of course lots of wars going on. The Vietnam War in the late '60s that is going on, but there's a civil rights movement going on. There's a peace movement going on. There's a women's rights movement going on. There's a whole peace, love culture going on, there was Woodstock going on. Different cultural conflicts that are occurring in the '60s. It seemed to me to be a time that you could explore well.

That's also the time when really, for the very first time in a deep, deep, deep, way, Americans began to mistrust their government. It wasn't always that way, though it feels now that it was. But we really began to distrust them when things were being told to us that were palpably untrue. Watergate, of course was only a few years away, and the loss in Vietnam was only a few years away.

So I wanted it to be a time when a great deal of upheaval in the country, a great deal of conflict in the country, and wars going on, and when we are sort of losing faith in those institutions that we think we should have faith in. In other words, I wanted it to be about today, too. And what kids today are facing, exactly the same sorts of things, though it's all been dulled and hidden from them.

The war in Vietnam was in our faces every single night, as Walter Cronkite got on. Today, we've hidden that from our kids. The wars that are going on-- two wars-- that's being hidden from them. And some of the cultural conflicts are hidden, but they're still there. And I wanted that story told a generation ago to reflect some of the concerns that are going on for our middle schoolers today as well.

DR. DANA: There are also many connections to classic literature in both of these books. In *The Wednesday Wars*, Holling is a seventh grader inspired by Shakespeare. In addition to learning lots of colorful curses from the plays, he also performs the role of Ariel in *The Tempest*. And he compares his own experiences to those of Shakespeare's characters. So you are a professor of English, and I'm going to guess that somewhere in your formative years, a classic grabbed your attention and had a great impact on you.

GARY SCHMIDT: That's absolutely true. The books that appear in *The Wednesday Wars* and *Okay For Now* are books that I was reading and were really, really important to me in late middle school, early high school. So the Shakespeare plays, that's straight, I really did read those in seventh grade, and the interpretations that Holling gives to those books, the things that he takes away from them, were exactly the things that I was thinking about when I was reading those plays.

In *Okay For Now*, I was reading-- in ninth grade, which was junior high for us-- I was reading *Jane Eyre*, and I remember thinking, I'm really not supposed to like this, because I'm a guy. And

I'm not supposed to like this book. But I loved it. And I thought it was stunning and amazing. I still love it. I think it's because of the powerful narrator, this amazing narrator, who articulates the story for us.

And if you think about what some of those books are about, about finding your own identity, about finding your identity as opposed to the way a group is defining you, in *The Merchant of Venice*. About the instabilities of life, *Romeo and Juliet*. I mean, those are huge, huge classics that tell a lot about the middle school experience, About the adolescent experience that we have today. It helps, obviously, if you have fabulous teachers to bring you through those, and both of these kids do, as did I.

And of course, there's some books, there's some classics that get thrown at you in those ages, which are really inappropriate for you. I still can't understand, for example, why we still teach *The Scarlet Letter* in high school. I mean, really? Hawthorne never, never imagined that for a high school audience. Things like that just puzzle me as to why we continue to do that. And I get the sense that, this is a classic, and you should get it. But I really wanted to include, in these books, the classics that affected me deeply when I was pretty close to Holling's and Doug's ages.

DR. DANA: Doug Swietek is not a main character in *The Wednesday Wars*, but he is the main character in *Okay For Now*. Did you intend to write an entire book about Doug when writing *The Wednesday Wars*? How did his--

GARY SCHMIDT: Never.

DR. DANA: Really?

GARY SCHMIDT: Never, never, never. I don't do sequels, I don't do series books. Roger Sutton had a great article, an editorial, in *The Horn Book*-- oh, it must be a year, two years ago-- where he just railed against, why is everyone writing series books? Can't you do a single book anymore, is that possible? And I really tied with that. And so, for me, it's like, you write your book, you do your characters well, and at the end, you've done what you set out to do. And then you turn the page, and go on to a new set.

But I did sit down, two books after *Wednesday Wars*, or a book after *Wednesday Wars*, I wanted to have a beat-up kid tell a story. And I wanted to see how it is that this kid could move towards recovery. And I wanted it to be third person, because *The Wednesday Wars* was first person, and I wanted to be third person. A completely new set of characters. So I wrote it, oh, the first chapter or so, and it was really bad, just really boring, I just knew I was completely on the wrong track. And though sometimes, you can just keep going and you'll find the right track, this, I knew, was just really bad.

And I started again, and this time I did another third person, another point of view, and that stunk. And by now, a couple of months had gone by, and I tried, all right, first person, and that stunk. And the whole time was this process. I really did keep thinking about Doug Swietek. And, thinking of this kid, and the kind of story that lies behind *Wednesday Wars* that you don't really get.

And then, really, it was just like this-- and this doesn't really ever happen to me like this-- but it really was like this. I was just sitting down, and I finally said, all right, all right. I give in. And so I started to write it from Doug's voice, and it just went. It just really, really went well. And that was the beginning of that. It took, I think, about three months before I finally settled on doing it, and it just flowed from there.

DR. DANA: Doug's narrative is especially powerful because he directly addresses commands, and even accuses the reader during the book. It's a very intense and involving read. It sounds like you fought it, fought it, fought it, and then it just came to you.

GARY SCHMIDT: There was a lot of work and I had to figure, Doug is a kid. Because he's such a beat-up kid, he is not going to be this forthcoming kid like Holling is. Holling is willing to tell you just about everything. And, you know, Holling keeps saying, let me tell you. That's his repeated refrain, let me tell you. For Doug, it's the opposite. He really doesn't want to tell you, and even when he admits what has happened, he's not quite sure you're going to believe him, and so he'll say, I'm not lying. The opposite refrain from Holling.

But there are times when things come very close to him, and he doesn't want to talk about it. And so even though he's the first person narrator he'll pull back. And he will not give it to you, or he will make you try and figure it out on your own, or lead you to figure it out on your own. Because he's not going to hand everything to you, because things are rarely handed to him.

And the most difficult part of the book, when he's telling about what happens at the tattoo scene, he tells it only like three things removed. He's speaking it as if it's to a teacher, even though he's telling it to you, but he's not even telling it to you directly. He keeps removing you from it, because it's so painful for him. And it concludes with a half line, where he wants to essentially say, I wish my father was dead. But he can't bring himself to say that, even though his anger is great enough to say it. And so he stops. And it's up to the reader to see if you want to fill it in. And you'll never know if that's what he meant to say, or not. He's a much more beat-up kid, and the narration is much more halting because of that.

DR. DANA: Doug's home life is much worse than Holling's. His dad, for starters, drinks excessively, and is physically abusive. So Doug has a lot of anger, a lot of fear, and then he unexpectedly connects with an illustration of an Arctic tern by John James Audubon. It's really interesting how the drawing speaks to him. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read the passage in which Doug first sees the drawing?

GARY SCHMIDT: OK. "I got to the top and into this big open room with not much. There was a painting on the wall, a guy with a rifle across his chest looking as if he was having a vision of something. And in the middle of the room, there was a square table with a glass case on top. And that was it. All that space, and that was it. If my father had this space, he'd fill it with tools and boards and a drill press and a lathe and cans and stuff before you could spit twice. There'd be sawdust on the floor, cobwebs on the ceiling, and the smell of iron and machine oil everywhere.

I went over to the table to see how come it was the only lousy thing in the whole lousy room

And right away I knew why.

Underneath the glass was this book. A huge book. A huge, huge book. Its pages were longer than a good-size baseball bat. I'm not lying. And on the whole page, there was only one picture. Of a bird.

I couldn't take my eyes off it.

He was all alone, and he looked like he was falling out of the sky and into this cold, green sea. His wings were back, his tail feathers were back, and his neck was pulled around as if he was trying to turn but couldn't. His eye was round and bright and afraid, and his beak was open a little bit, probably because he was trying to suck in some air before he crashed into the water. The sky around him was dark, like the air was too heavy to fly in.

This bird was falling and there wasn't a single thing in the world that cared at all.

It was the most terrifying picture I had ever seen.

The most beautiful.

I leaned down onto the glass, close to the bird. I think I started to breathe a little bit more quickly, since the glass fogged up and I had to wipe the wet away. But I couldn't help it. Dang, he was so alone. He was so scared.

The wings were wide and white, and they swooped back into sharp rays. And between these, the tail feathers were even sharper, and they narrowed and narrowed like scissors. All the layers of his feathers trembled, and I could almost see the air rushing past them. I held my hand as if I had a pencil in it and drew on the glass case, over the tail feathers. They were so sharp. If my hand had shaken even a tiny bit, it would have ruined the whole picture. I drew over the ridges of the wings, and the neck, and the long beak. And then, at the end, I drew the round and terrified eye.

On the table beside the display case was a printed card. I put it in my back pocket.

When I got home, Mom had brought two hot dogs back from the diner, wrapped in aluminum foil and filled with ketchup and mustard and pickle relish and sauerkraut like in Yankee Stadium, and I know because I've been to Yankee Stadium, which you might remember. She was moving around the boxes and still cleaning in the kitchen, and we could hear my father downstairs clanking away at his tools and swearing that Mr. Big Bucks Ballard wasn't going to get away with being such a freaking cheapskate and what do they take him for? Some kind of a jerk?

Well, he wasn't some kind of a jerk, he said when he came back upstairs.

He wasn't some kind of a jerk, he said when he told me and my brother to carry all our stuff upstairs and sort it out, which I ended up doing by myself because my brother wouldn't.

He wasn't some kind of a jerk, he said when he hollered up at us to cut out the wrestling and turn out the light and go to sleep-- which hadn't really been wrestling but my brother trying to find out where I'd put the jacket, which he still didn't know belonged to Joe Pepitone and which he really didn't want anyway so he wasn't half trying.

That night, I lay in the dark and drew the falling bird in the air: the wings, the tail feathers, the long beak. The eye. I drew them all again and again and again, trying to feel the wind through the feathers, wondering how whoever drew it had made it feel that way.

I fell asleep.

The terrified eye."

DR. DANA: So why Audubon? When did you encounter Audubon's books?

GARY SCHMIDT: There's a copy, not a first, like Doug finds, but an 1861 copy in the library at Flint, Michigan. Flint, Michigan, the public library, there. Flint, Michigan is our most violent city in America. Flint, Michigan. And in the middle of that sea of violence, there is this wonderful, amazing public library with these dedicated librarians, who put on these great events. And I'm not sure how they make happen what they do, but they do. And they are this sea of calm and peace and beauty in the midst of a violent place.

And in the midst of that library, there is a glass case, just as I described, in a hall actually. And in the middle of that glass case, is this book, Birds of America, 1861. And it's worth a lot, it's worth a lot of money. I mean, a lot of money, not like a first, which would be like a \$14 million book, but it's still a lot. And I asked, when I was there, why don't you sell this? You've got so much money that you could get from that to put into the resources here. And they said, well, the day will come when things change here, and we want this book to be here for the next generation. And I thought, wow. This is called nobility. Really, the great, honorable noble librarian of the old tradition. If only our Congress had that same sense of nobility that these people have, we'd be in a very different place.

But that's how I first saw it. And as soon as I saw it, I thought, that's it. Because Audubons are destroyed, when a first has 435 plates, and most of them are destroyed now, because you take a razor and you saw one plate at a time, because an Audubon is worth more split into 435 parts, than if you keep it together. Worth more monetarily, I should say. And so I really want to honor those people who have kept it together. And I thought, here's the plot. This kid finds the book, nine pages are missing, he's going to get them back.

DR. DANA: Librarians, teachers, neighbors, friends, they all help Holling and Doug through the various obstacles they face in these books. It creates a very powerful feeling of connectedness and hope. While this could easily dissolve into something saccharine and unrealistic, your writing remains pitch-perfect and powerful. But I have to ask, is it difficult to write about optimism and hope without going overboard?

GARY SCHMIDT: Boy, what a hard question. That's a really interesting question. I think that the hope in this book-- I hope that the hope in this book-- is realistic. And here, my great influence is Katherine Paterson, who presents worlds in which really, really bad things can happen. I mean, *Bridge to Terabithia*, Leslie dies. *Jacob Have I Loved*, you have a broken relationship between two sisters. And on and on and on. Bad things can absolutely happen. But in the midst of all that there's this large belief in optimism, and she uses the word optimism rooted in reality. And she compares that to the ultimate hope that all wars will cease and that swords will be beaten in plowshares. If we look realistically at the world, that doesn't seem to be happening. But there can still remain a hope, even as we're realistic about its chances, as we're moving towards it. And I hope that that's true about me, as well. That you can look at the world around you, and it's so simple.

And maybe this is why we've got so much dystopian literature right now. It's so simple to say, wow, we are really heading to a worse and worse and worse place. I'm not sure that's even true. But that seems to be a simple response. And then the simple connection to it is, well, let me write a really bad story where I'm going to show you what a bad place we're heading toward. And I think what I want to try and do is to say, yeah, we really do live in a very broken world. Holling has a pretty hard father. Doug has a worse father. Doug has this awful tattoo on his chest, that he is getting past, but that he will always have on his chest. It's a very, very broken world, but in the midst of that broken world, it's possible to feel hopefulness about community, hopefulness about relationships. Hope that a father will just begin to maybe take the first step away from his alcoholism. Hope that maybe a brother will begin to take the first step away from letting himself be defined in a certain way. And that's what I want to write about.

I don't want to say everything happens-- there's a happy ending at all of them. Even in *The Wednesday Wars*, the happy ending of the lieutenant coming home was muted by the sense that Khesanh, which President Johnson had promised we'd never abandon, is abandoned. And the war is going badly for others. And, of course, in the end of *Okay For Now*, you don't know if Will is going to make it or not. But in both books, I think we can say we're OK for now, and that's why the title is there. That there is this hope, at this time, and this good thing in the midst of this brokenness and we should be celebrating that.

DR. DANA: Your new book, *What Came from the Stars*, comes out this month. Can you tell us about it?

GARY SCHMIDT: I don't want to do the same thing over and over again, so I decided to do a series of three projects that were things I hadn't done before. And one was a picture book, which I hadn't done for a long time, about a saint, whose name was Martin, and that one just came out in June. And then I wanted to have one with a female protagonist, an epistolary novel, and that was just sent off to the editor a few weeks ago. And then the third project I wanted to be completely different, was a fantasy.

I've never really done a fantasy, maybe a little bit in a book called *Straw into Gold*, but I wanted to try just a straight-up fantasy. I teach at Hamline University in the summertime, for an MFA program, and there is great fantasy writer who works on the faculty there, named Anne Ursu, she

has a great novel out called *Breadcrumbs* recently. And I always fluffed at her about it, and given her a hard time. I said, fantasy, I know it's the most popular genre, I get it, I get it.

But really, all these quests, you know, horses, the wise man who always wears the funny robe, he's got a long beard, he speaks slowly and wisely. He says enigmatic things. It can be high tech, I mean, it can be in this really amazing high-tech world, but what do you fight with? Swords. All the time, swords. It's just like, give me a break.

And so she finally said to me, well, why don't you do it? And I go, all right, I will. And she goes, all right, then do it. So I decided to try and write a fantasy that doesn't have any of that stuff. And it started out, though this isn't how it ended, in this high, epic, Tolkeinesque kind of language, all about a world far away. And the good guys are about fall, and the bad guys are about to win and blah, blah, blah, blah. So that's how it began. And then I'm back to my normal sort of stuff, with this kid, sixth grader in Plymouth, Massachusetts. And the two stories are told in different voices, and they're connected by this necklace, which goes out of this epic world and lands in Plymouth, and the kid puts it on, and Tommy Pepper suddenly has knowledge of a world that he shouldn't know, and a language he shouldn't know.

And it's really on that level of bringing together those two stories. But it's also about a kid who is different. Who is interested in different things, and how the world treats a kid that is different, which isn't too good. And so the struggles that he puts up with as he's gaining knowledge into this epic world, but in his own world, everything else seems to be falling apart around him. So that's the classic story.

DR. DANA: Gary Schmidt, thank you so much for coming on *The BiblioFiles*.

GARY SCHMIDT: Thank you, thank you very much for having me.

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