

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Children's Books Educator Guide

GARY D. SCHMIDT

Winner of a Newbery Honor for *THE WEDNESDAY WARS*

OKAY FOR NOW



Okay for Now

by Gary D. Schmidt

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Clarion Books

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A Guide for Book Discussion and Classroom Use

About the Book

As a fourteen-year-old who just moved to a new town, with no friends and a louse for an older brother, Doug Swieteck has all the stats stacked against him. So begins a coming-of-age masterwork full of equal parts comedy and tragedy from Newbery Honor winner Gary D. Schmidt. As Doug struggles to be more than the “skinny thug” that his teachers and the townspeople think him to be, he finds an unlikely ally in Lil Spicer—a fiery girl whose father owns a grocery and hires Doug as a delivery boy. As his friendship with Lil grows, he also finds inspiration in the illustrated plates of John James Audubon’s *Birds of America*. Discovering the rare book on display in the local library, Doug quickly becomes enamored with the illustrations and is encouraged by the librarian to draw the birds himself. A new passion for art is awakened in Doug as well as a mission to preserve the book when Doug discovers the town has been selling the plates to raise money. With this new purpose and Lil’s support, Doug finds the strength to endure an abusive father, the suspicions of a whole town, and the return of his oldest brother, forever scarred, from Vietnam. In this stunning novel, Schmidt expertly weaves multiple themes of loss and recovery in a story teeming with distinctive, unusual characters and invaluable lessons about love, creativity, and survival.

About the Author

GARY D. SCHMIDT is a professor of English at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He received both a Newbery Honor and a Printz Honor for *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* and a Newbery Honor for *The Wednesday Wars*. He lives with his family on a one-hundred-fifty-year-old farm in Alto, Michigan, where he splits wood, plants gardens, writes, and feeds the wild cats that drop by.

Discussion Questions

- There are some very funny and light parts in *Okay for Now*; there are also some very sad, serious parts. Would you call *Okay for Now* a hopeful book or a hopeless one? Why?
- The story is told from Doug’s point of view. The reader knows only what Doug is telling him. Would you say Doug is a reliable narrator? Why or why not?
- When Christopher takes the hat Joe Pepitone gave Doug, Doug’s father is no help when Doug tries to talk to him. “It was a wrong day. Most days are wrong days,” Doug says. What do you think he means?
- Describe Doug’s relationship with each of his brothers. How are the brothers alike? How are they different? How does Doug’s relationship with each change with the progression of the book?
- Why do you think Lil calls Doug a “skinny thug” when she first meets him? Is Doug a “hoodlum in training” as Mrs. Merriam calls him? Why or why not?
- Mr. Spicer says to Doug, “I pay salary every other Saturday,” and Doug responds, “Okay. That’s fine.” Then in the narrative Doug says, “I know. I’m a chump.” Why is he a chump? Give examples of times when Doug feels like a chump.

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- Doug initially tells Mr. Powell he doesn't draw when Mr. Powell asks him if he'd like to draw the Arctic Tern. Why do you think he changes his mind? How do his drawing lessons with Mr. Powell affect him?
- The townspeople and his teachers often view Doug in light of his older brother's actions. Is that fair? How does this affect Doug's behavior? Have you ever been judged for something you did not do? How did it make you feel?
- Doug describes the Arctic Tern as both terrifying and beautiful. Can something be terrifying and beautiful at the same time? How?
- Did you realize Doug was illiterate at the beginning of the book? What signs does the author give you? How does Doug's view of reading and literature develop over the course of the novel?
- Doug has a difficult family life. His father behaves less like a parent and more like a bully, but in Marysville, Doug meets other adults who show him kindness and compassion. Name a few of the adult characters in *Okay for Now* who offer Doug guidance and instruction. What does Doug learn from them?
- Why are Doug's relationships with his mom, Lil, and Mrs. Windermere so important?
- When Doug sees Lucas without the bandage over his face, he says that Lucas "lost the sky." What does he mean?
- Yankee player Joe Pepitone is mentioned in the beginning of *Okay for Now* and makes another appearance toward the end of the book, at the Broadway production of *Jane Eyre*. What role does Joe Pepitone play in Doug's life?
- How do Coach Reed and Lucas become important to each other?
- At the end of the book, we don't know whether Lil will be okay or not. What do you think will happen next?
- What does being "okay for now" mean? Who in the story is okay for now?
- How has Doug changed over the course of the book? What do you think contributed to these changes? How has he stayed the same?
- Doug is very passionate about the Audubon plates. Where does this come from? Is it all about the book or does it have a second meaning?
- Doug says Mr. Powell taught him that "sometimes, art can make you forget everything else around you." Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

Projects/Activities

Pre-reading

- Before reading, ask students to look at the Audubon prints and write about what they think is happening to the birds in each illustration. What might the birds be thinking and feeling? See if they agree with Doug's descriptions throughout the book.

Reading/Language Arts

- Each of the characters in *Okay for Now* changes dramatically over the course of the book. Ask students to work independently, in partnerships, or in small groups to describe how a single character transforms from the beginning of the book to the end. What factors influence this character's growth? Can students relate to the challenges this character faces? Ask them to write their thoughts and reactions in essay form.
- *Okay for Now* provides a wonderful entryway into reading other Vietnam War literature. Along with *Okay for Now*, you might wish to make nonfiction books, memoirs, and firsthand accounts of the Vietnam War period available to your students. Students will be fascinated to read archived newspaper and magazine articles about the Vietnam War written in 1968, the year that Doug's story takes place. You will, of course, want to choose materials that are appropriate for your students' reading level as well as maturity level. As students read from a variety of genres, have them compare

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and contrast what they learn from each. How is reading a memoir different from reading a newspaper article? How is it different from reading a novel like *Okay for Now*? How does genre choice change the reading experience? What different kinds of information does each genre provide?

- When Mrs. Windermere finds out Doug's class is reading *Jane Eyre*, she calls it "One of the world's great stories. Love. Betrayal. Jealousy. The search for the true and complete self." Have your students read *Jane Eyre*. Ask them to find similarities between Doug's and Jane's stories.
- Ask your students if they can identify the books that Doug is reading to the Daugherty kids. Have samples available in your classroom for them to read.
- Doug hates the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Share some of his poems with your class including the poem Doug refers to on page 278. Why does Doug dislike Shelley's poetry so much? Why does it elicit such a violent reaction from him? Ask your students for their honest reactions.
- Doug's class reads *Travels with Charley* by John Steinbeck, and students are asked to note Steinbeck's technique and then create their own travel accounts (fiction or nonfiction) for the end-of-the-year composition. Ask your students to do the same.
- *Okay for Now* is a companion to *The Wednesday Wars*. Read both books in your classroom. On the first page of *The Wednesday Wars*, Holling Hoodhood notes that Doug "once made up a list of 410 ways to get a teacher to hate you. . . . things became illegal around Number 167." Does this description fit with the Doug you see in *Okay for Now*?
- Doug often addresses the reader with questions like "Do you know how that feels?" Ask your students to write about one of those moments and if they know how Doug feels and why.

History

- Doug's story is set in 1968, during the Vietnam War. This book fits beautifully within the context of an existing Vietnam War study—it provides a very human context for the larger global events of the war. It also provides an accessible jumping-off place for students to begin inquiry projects of their own focused on the war and its effects at home in the United States. As your students read, think, and talk about how the war affected Doug's story. How about Lucas's story? Coach Reed's? You may encourage students to brainstorm more focused inquiries into the Vietnam War based on themes that emerge as they read *Okay for Now*. For example, students may want to research the way veterans were treated when they returned home and compare that to how veterans of the Iraq War are treated today when they return home.
- Students may want to research the Vietnam War protest movement. Ask them to research how people protest today's wars. Are the methods of protest different? How?

Art

- The Audubon birds figure prominently in Schmidt's story and in the book's structure. Obtain copies of the prints featured in *Okay for Now*. (Many are easily accessible on the Internet.) If possible, project or enlarge them so that students can see them clearly. Ask students what they notice about the prints.
- Do your students notice the same things that Doug notices? Doug examines every detail of Audubon's sketches and aims to re-create those details in his own drawings. Ask your students to attempt the same thing and re-create one of the Audubon plates, including as much detail as possible. Remind them how many attempts it took Doug as he was teaching himself to draw feathers.
- Draw Mrs. Windermere's kitchen based on Doug's description on page 57.
- Ask your students to research John James Audubon and his methods for capturing the birds featured in *Birds of America*. Why did Audubon kill his subjects in order to study them? What are the methods used by naturalists today?
- As Doug learns to draw, he is learning about art and terms to describe it. Ask your students for examples of the

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terms below.

- Horizon
- Point of view
- Composition
- White space contrast in spatial perception
- Crux points in a composition
- Artist drawing three-dimensionally on a two-dimensional surface
- Composition on several planes at once
- Stable and unstable compositions and balance

Geography/Math

- Doug's story is set in Marysville, New York. Is there a such a town in the Catskills? If so, how many miles is it from Long Island? How long would it take to get there from Long Island? How far is it from the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York City?

Music

- Introduce your students to music by composer Aaron Copland by playing a selection. Ask your students if they agree with Doug that "Copland knew how to say what he wanted to say." What do they think Copland was trying to say in his music?

Trivia Contest

Create a trivia contest for your students similar to the one held at the Annual Ballard Paper Mill Harvest Time Employee Picnic. Below are some possible questions.

What gifts were Doug and his brother given when they arrived at the picnic?

(Answer: Timex watches)

What is the significance of the number 216 in baseball?

(Answer: Stitches on a baseball)

What three jobs is Lucas fired from before he becomes assistant coach?

(Answer: Gas station, A&P grocery store, Bank of the Catskills)

What is the name of the theater where *Jane Eyre* is playing?

(Answer: Rose Theater)

What song do Doug, Mrs. Windermere, and Mrs. Swieteck sing on the way home from the theater?

(Answer: "Yellow Submarine")

How does Doug describe the feeling of the pencil in his fingers?

(Answer: "Spectacular")

How is the element silver noted in the periodic table?

(Answer: Ag)

How does Doug bring the god of creativity back to Mrs. Windermere?

(Answer: He tells her he's reading *Jane Eyre*.)

What is the significance of Mr. Ferris's toy horse Clarence rocking back and forth?

(Answer: Something good is happening.)