

About the Author: Gary D. Schmidt

Bio in Brief

Gary Schmidt, born in 1957 in Hicksville, New York, 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 150-year-old farm in Alto, Michigan, where he splits wood, plants gardens, writes, and feeds the wild cats that drop by.



A Writer's Life

In Hicksville, Schmidt grew up as a bit of an outsider. He describes his childhood: "All of my friends were Irish Catholic or Jewish, and there were some years I was the only Protestant kid in the entire class." Often, when December came around, and his friends went off early to prepare for the holidays at Hebrew school or catechism, Schmidt was often the only person of any faith tradition left sitting in class. This experience was the seed for *The Wednesday Wars*.

Schmidt attended Gordon College in Wenham, MA, and he was gravitating toward a career as a lawyer. During his senior year, just before he took the LSAT, his true calling came to him. "All along, I was taking English from amazing professors. So I switched to an English major first semester senior year and decided to go to graduate school."

Six years later, having earned an MA in English literature and a Ph.D. in medieval literature, he went in search of a job. Schmidt quickly settled into his teaching duties at Calvin College as a professor of English and he and his wife, Anne, had six children. The family eventually moved to a farmhouse, where Schmidt chops his own firewood and writes.



Early in his career, he wrote books about children's authors and illustrators Robert McCloskey, Robert Lawson and Katherine Paterson. "I loved and still love Katherine Paterson's work," he said about the author he now counts as a friend. "I think she's the most important children's writer of the 20th century."

In 1998 Schmidt wrote *The Sin Eater*, a novel for young adults that he sent to Paterson's editor, Virginia Buckley. "You start with the best," he explained, "and she took it. It was a miracle."



During 1996, Schmidt had a life changing experience. As he described it, "I had gone to the doctor and they had said infection, infection. And they had given me some medication which helped a little bit." Schmidt recalled, "I was actually in the lab theater, and I was watching the mystery plays, and suddenly I knew this was a lot more than an infection." His ailment turned out to be lymphatic cancer.

The routine of chemotherapy helped him beat the disease and provided him with new sources of inspiration: his fellow patients. "Maybe that's why today in my job, I cannot stand whining or fussing," he said. "I mean these were people who were going to die. They were hooked up to machines with stuff oozing out of them, and I never, never once heard them complain or fuss."

Ultimately, the experience shaped his writing career, he said. "I knew then that I would have two tracks. One would be an academic book all the time, and the other one would be creative. And that's what I've stayed with." Schmidt has written textbooks and picture books, biography and fantasy, folk tales and historical fiction. The Jewish influences of his childhood echo in books such as *In God's Hands*, a collaboration with Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, and *Mara's Stories: Glimmers in the Darkness*, a collection of Holocaust-era stories. He has also co-edited a popular series of seasonal biographies (*Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter*).

His wife has been quoted as saying, "I think that the projects that he's working on are never far from his mind, so that when he's chopping wood or shoveling snow or building a fire, he's writing. And I think that talking with the kids about their lives, what makes them laugh, helps him in his novels — inspires him."

Gary Schmidt's young adult novel, *The Wednesday Wars* was named a 2008 John Newbery Honor Book by the American Library Association. Schmidt, whose book is one of three awarded in the honor category, also received the honor award in 2005 for his novel *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*.

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