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The Wednesday Wars
By Gary D. Schmidt

Discussion Questions

September-November

Why did Holling refer to his home as the "Perfect House"? What happened in November that made the perfect house imperfect?

Describe Holling's parents. What was their relationship with Holling? Give details from the story to support your answer.

What did Holling do with the one cream puff Mrs. Baker gave him? What effect did the cream puffs have on the "Wives of Vietnam Soldiers"? When did Mrs. Baker realize that Holling never ate his treat?

Summarize how Caliban and Sycorax escaped their cage. Why did Mrs. Baker feel somewhat responsible?

Infer why Mrs. Baker wrote Mr. Guareschi a memo asking that Holling retake sixth grade mathematics.

What news did Mrs. Bigio receive and share with Mrs. Baker on Wednesday afternoon, while Holling remained to study “The Tempest” with Mrs. Baker? How did the news affect Holling?

List three curses and/or clever phrases Holling began using after reading “The Tempest”.

December-January

What opinions did Heather and her father each have on the Vietnam War?

Infer why Mrs. Bigio treated Mia Thi with so much hostility. Ironically, what did the two have in common?

Holling noted, "When gods die, they die hard. It's not like they fade away or grow old, or fall asleep. They die in fire and pain, and when they come out of you, they leave your guts burned." Explain what Holling meant. Thus far, who have been "the gods" who have "died"?
How would Holling view Mickey Mantle had he been able to change into his regular clothes before heading over to the Baker Sporting Emporium? In the end, what were the benefits of trying to obtain the baseball star's autograph in his Ariel costume?

How did Holling get revenge for the embarrassment Doug Swieteck's brother brought him?

While studying “Macbeth” with Mrs. Baker, Holling snapped, "It's not like it's your picture in the halls or that you have all that much to worry about." Why did he quickly regret his words? How did Mrs. Baker react to Holling's remark?

February-March

What was Holling's opinion of the characters Romeo and Juliet? How did he think they should have solved their family problems?

Why was Holling angry with Meryl Lee at first? How did Meryl Lee react to their "break-up"? At what point did Holling realize she was sincere and had not used him? How did he go about mending their friendship?

Holling's Jewish friend, Danny Hupfer, is very protective and understanding of Mai Thi. When the school suspended him for punching the eighth-grader, Danny's parents praised their son and took him on a trip to Washington D.C. What can you infer about the values of the Hupfers? How are the backgrounds of Mai Thi and Danny similar?

In what ways did Mrs. Sidman change since leaving her position as playground monitor?

Summarize how Holling came in first and set a school record during the cross-country tryouts.

How did Mrs. Baker try to disguise her emotions after receiving the telegram with news of her husband? How were students able to detect her disguised fears?

April-June

What did Holling come to realize after Heather left for California? How did Holling manage to bring her home from the bus station when his father refused to go and get her? How did the two celebrate their reunion when her bus arrived in New York?

Explain what happened to Danny Hupfer as he led the eighth-graders in the JV cross-country race at Salisbury Park. How did his situation help to motivate Holling to win his race?

Describe the classroom procedures followed during atomic bomb drills. How did Danny, Meryl Lee, Mai Thi, and Holling spend their time during drills?
After Danny Hupfer's bar mitzvah, Holling stood up for himself when he answered his father's question, "So who are you, Holling?" What was Holling's reply and how did his father react to his answer? How did his mother and sister treat Holling after his reply?

While talking with Mrs. Baker at Danny's bar mitzvah celebration, Holling asked her if teachers always knew the future. Explain the future she saw for Holling. In what ways did she feel he was like the character Don Pedro?

According to Mrs. Baker, what were the two things Holling could do to help prevent our country from being attacked by an atomic bomb?
THE WEDNESDAY WARS

By Gary D. Schmidt

Ah, the first day of school. Kids return, some eager and some reluctant, but all hoping for a good start to a long year. For Holling Hoodhood, though, the first day of seventh grade is not the beginning he had imagined. When Mrs. Baker looks at Holling, “this look came over her face like the sun had winked out and was not going to shine again until next June” (p. 4). This dislike is not rooted in anything that Holling has done; no, it is because Holling will be the only student in Mrs. Baker’s class NOT involved in either Hebrew school or catechism every Wednesday afternoon. Instead, he will spend the afternoons with Mrs. Baker. The Wednesday wars have begun.

From that day forward, Holling is sure that Mrs. Baker has him in her sights. She suggests to the principal that Holling retake 6th-grade math on Wednesday afternoons. He is sure that she encouraged Doug Swieteck’s older brother to flatten Holling on the soccer field. And she must have evil designs when she tells him to clean the cage of Sycorax and Caliban, the class rats, who are huge and make sounds “that were never heard anywhere else in Nature” (p. 41). However, after Holling and Mrs. Baker begin to read Shakespeare, Holling, like Hamlet, discovers, “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (Hamlet, Act I, Scene v). Holling’s real education has just begun.

Read-aloud hook: Holling is sure Mrs. Baker is plotting something against him, and he’s right. Start near the top of p. 17—“Mrs. Baker’s face was pinched when we came back into the class—” until p. 19—“But I saw that there was a song of victory on her lips already.”

Discussion questions:

• “When gods die, they die hard” (p. 93). How does Holling experience the metaphorical deaths of many gods in The Wednesday Wars?

• What new gods replace those who have “died”?

• How do the Shakespeare plays Holling reads with Mrs. Baker mirror events in the book?

• If The Wednesday Wars were a Shakespearean play, would it be labeled a comedy, a history, or a tragedy? Why?
Gary Schmidt, Professor, English

Educational Background

Professor Schmidt received his undergraduate degree in English from Gordon College in 1979. Thereafter he attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, receiving an MA in English in 1981 and then a PhD in medieval literature in 1985. He joined the faculty in the Calvin College English department in 1985.

Academic Interests/Areas of Specialization

Children's and adolescent literature, New England cultural history, old and middle English language and literature, creative writing, writing for children and young adults, Katherine Paterson

Recent Activities

Professor Schmidt is a prolific author of children's literature and young adult fiction. His most recent novel, Trouble, was published in 2008 by Clarion. He has received two John Newberry Honor Awards from the American Library Association, the first in 2005 for his novel Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy and the second in 2008 for his novel Wednesday Wars. Professor Schmidt recently worked with Susan Felch to edit two volumes on religiously-themed fiction called The Emmaus Readers. Professor Schmidt, originally from New England, regularly leads the New England Saints interim course in January.

Hobbies

Vegetable gardening, cutting and splitting wood, and collecting first editions of the Concord authors

Favorite Books

The Little World of Don Camillo by Giovanni Guareschi, The Aubrey series by Patrick O'Brian, Bleak House by Charles Dickens, Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli, Jacob Have I Loved by Katherine Paterson.
Schmidt Wins 2nd Newbery Honor
February 4, 2008

A Calvin College professor of English recently received one of the most prestigious national literary awards in the field of children’s literature.

Gary Schmidt’s latest young adult novel, The Wednesday Wars (Clarion Books, 2007), was named a 2008 John Newbery Honor Book by the American Library Association (ALA). 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.

“It was a different feel,” says Schmidt. “The first time around you feel, ‘Wow, this is amazing,’ as you’re getting a different recognition than you’ve ever gotten before. … It’s an affirmation of the work you do. It was a quieter sweetness.”

The Wednesday Wars, set in 1967, tells the story of Holling Hoodhood, a seventh-grade Presbyterian whose classmates are all Jewish or Catholic. Holling is forced to spend every Wednesday afternoon with his teacher, Mrs. Baker, while all his peers attend Hebrew school or catechism. The title refers to the “war” that develops between student and teacher (who could have two hours off each Wednesday afternoon were Holling not in her class) and also to the larger war that serves as the backdrop of the novel.

“The book begins with my own time growing up during the war in Vietnam. Society was really decaying,” says Schmidt. He recalls his childhood and early adolescent years in the 1960s when youth were drafted into war and three significant domestic assassinations—namely two Kennedys and King—took place.

The Wednesday Wars is directed toward young adults who, according to Schmidt, are living in an era that aligns, yet greatly differs, with Schmidt’s adolescent experience.

“That just strikes me as an interesting parallel, what it was like to grow up in that time and this time,” Schmidt describes. “If you were 16 or 17 in 1967, you knew that you were going to be in Vietnam in two years, something looming over you,” says Schmidt. “One thing that’s similar is that there’s still an Armageddon today; we think of global warming, the end of the oil age, the end of clean water. When you have reports that half of the world will be out of drinkable water within a generation or that the food you buy at the market won’t be good for you, how do we get to that point? That’s where we are. Those parallels are what raise the questions for me, ‘How do kids get to where they are?’”

In his literature, Schmidt likes to ask the questions that adolescents are asking to discover their identities. “That’s intriguing to me. Adolescence is a critical time in life when you really do
make decisions that develop who you are. How many adults do you know who are flexible and are rethinking the decisions they’ve priorly made?”

Schmidt received the news of his latest Newbery honor at the North Bridge Inn in Concord, Massachusetts during his annual New England Saints Interim, a January class that explores the historical settings of American literature. He and his wife, Anne, called their children back home, then celebrated with the students. “The students had bought us a cheesecake, and we went down to the Old North Bridge there and reenacted the battle. And that was our celebration.”

Schmidt’s next novel, *Trouble*, due in March, is a tragedy-romance based in 1976 about the relationship between two neighboring Massachusetts towns—one of the established middle-class and the other of Cambodian refugees.

~ Written by Communications and Marketing assistant writer Jacqueline Klamer
Opening the Book that is Gary Schmidt
Award-winning author, supportive colleague and dedicated father are chapters in the life of this Calvin English professor
By Myrna DeVries Anderson '00

The hero was born in 1957 in New York: in Hicksville, New York.

“I was the quiet kid who never gave anybody any trouble, always, like, three years behind in fashion,” narrated Gary D. Schmidt, Calvin professor of English, medievalist, country squire, devoted husband, author of six children and of 30-plus books — notable among them Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy, which was named a 2005 John Newbery Honor Book — and a man well-suited to the hero role, if you believe his colleagues.

Their shared opinion is neatly understated by Calvin professor of English William Vande Kopple, thus: “It would be rather hard to write an exposé, I think.”

In Hicksville, a bedroom community for Manhattan (where his father worked), Schmidt, born German and English and raised Baptist, grew up with people distinctly unlike himself. “All of my friends were Irish Catholic or Jewish, and there were some years I was the only Protestant kid in the entire class,” he said. In truth, when December came ’round, 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.

Which just made things interesting, he said: “It really meant that there were all of these other traditions that came in. And back then, it wasn’t a problem in public schools. There were Christmas trees up and menorahs up. I can remember making menorahs to hang on the Christmas trees. It was just part of the holidays.”
Schmidt danced the hora at his friends’ bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs (“To see your friends standing up front of a synagogue and reading from the Torah — that was a big deal.”) and held long discussions about the Holocaust. Come summer, he lit out for camp in the Catskills. Sunshine Acres was a Baptist camp for inner-city kids from Brooklyn, and right down the road was Rov Tov, a camp for Hasidic youth. “There were enormous tensions between those communities,” Schmidt said in explanation of the rock-throwing that sometimes occurred. He once tried to bring the two camps together for a Bible discussion. “That was my one attempt at ecumenism,” he said, “and it was shouted down.”

Despite these tensions, the camp was an idyll, where Schmidt worked his way up through the ranks from maintenance man through counselor to program director: “My junior high and high school years, I lived for those summers. The excitement of being independent, good friends, good work, up in the mountains: What could be better? You could lay on your back and watch hawks play with thermal winds — never moving their wingtips. And,” he added at the right point in the story, “there was a great bookstore up there.” He became a collector early on, buying his first Pilgrim’s Progress for 8 cents.

Schmidt attended Gordon College in Wenham, Mass., and he pondered a career as a lawyer or town manager or soldier. “It was funny,” he said of the last option. “I never thought of it as the rigors of a military school. I thought of it as a career on board a ship. That seemed really exotic or amazing.” In his senior year, just before taking his LSAT, he experienced a vocational sea change. “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.”

He also met Anne, a fellow Gordon student, on Nov. 1, 1978, on top of the John Hancock Tower in Boston. The pair got engaged five months later and were married Dec. 22, 1979. Together they attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “I didn’t like grad school too much,” Schmidt said. “I hated how important the political workings and chicanery were.”

Six years later, having earned an MA in English literature and a Ph.D. in medieval literature, the hero went in quest of a job. Though he had no plan of working in Christian education, Schmidt interviewed at a small Reformed institution in western Michigan (“When I first came, it was winter, snowy. I thought, ‘What in the world am I doing here? It’s so snowy.’”) and heard a peculiar siren song coming from the English department. It was the combined voices of the English faculty singing a birthday hymn to one of their own.

“I think anybody who walks into his class here at Calvin will have the experience of a lifetime, whether it’s children’s lit or Chaucer, because of his wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject.”
— Nancy Hull, English professor
“You come out of a Big Ten school,” he said, “and you come to a department where there are
people singing birthday hymns to each other. I mean, that’s a huge difference just in mood and
mutual support and pleasure in each others’ work.”

Schmidt quickly settled into his teaching duties and to the two children (James and Kathleen) he
and Anne brought from Illinois; they gradually added four more (Rebecca, David, Meg and
Ben). “Even now — especially if I meet someone — they say, ‘You have six kids?’ And they
can’t believe that. It’s as though we’re some sort of 19th century pioneer family. They can’t
imagine that we have six kids,” Schmidt said. “But for me, I can’t imagine having one or two.”
The family eventually moved to the Alto farmhouse belonging to the Old Buck Farm, named for
the stagecoach driver who once owned the place. Schmidt chops his own firewood. He also
writes.

His first work of fiction was a grad school diversion: “You’re writing this dissertation … and
reading the church fathers,” he recalled. “One night, really late at night, I was working on Latin
prayers, and I was sick of it, so I sat down and wrote the first page of a novel for children. And it
was terrible. It was really derivative and had no new ideas. And I sent it away, and it was
rejected, for which I’m very grateful today.”

His other books, whether solo efforts or co-authored, were more successful. Early in his career,
Schmidt was pressed into service as a teacher of children’s literature, and his early literary efforts
circled that field. He co-wrote, with English professor emeritus Charlotte Otten, a book on the
voice of the narrator in children’s literature and with English professor Donald Hettinga a book
on the re-telling of folk tales. 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.”

Around this time, Schmidt also experienced a miracle of another kind. “It was 10
years ago — ’96, I guess. 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.” It was
lymphatic cancer.

“You hear all the percentages, and they’re not fun to hear,” he continued. The routine of
chemotherapy helped him beat the disease, though, and provided him with manifold 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’s output remains as varied as his interests. He 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, with English professor Susan Felch, a popular series of seasonal biographies (*Spring*, *Summer*, *Autumn*, and *Winter*).

“What Gary has emphasized is adding to the culture and creating things for the culture — not just taking the Reformed view, sitting back and taking the culture apart and viewing it,” Vande Kopple said. “He sees himself as fulfilling the cultural mandate by creating things and adding to the culture.”

Schmidt also continued writing novels for young adults … and along came *Lizzie*.

*Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, the story of an unlikely friendship between an African-American girl and a white preacher’s son, is told against the backdrop of an actual historical event: the eradication of a black community in 1912 Maine. The story of Malaga, an island off the coast of Phippsburg, Maine, whose African-American residents were evicted to make room for urban development, was discovered by Anne Schmidt when the family was on vacation. It took Gary Schmidt three years to write the story of Lizzie Bright and Turner Buckminster against the larger history of Phippsburg.

In January of 2005, while in Boston for the New England Saints Interim, Schmidt learned that *Lizzie* had been named both a John Newbery Honor Book and Michael L. Printz Honor Book by the American Library Association (ALA) — a pair of the most prestigious honors in the world of children’s literature.

Schmidt and Calvin professor of English Nancy Hull sneaked into the ALA annual meeting to hear the awards announced and to witness the *Lizzie* book jacket flashing on the screen. “They said, ‘Lizzie Bright,’ and the image came up,” Hull reminisced, “and I heard him say under his breath, ‘That’ll do.’ And that’s just Gary.” The book has since won the Thumbs Up! Award from the Michigan Library Association, the Lupine Award from the Maine State Library Association and has been named a 2005 Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book.
“I know it’s not real, but it was nice,” Schmidt says of the *Lizzie* hullabaloo. “The Newbery Honor or the Printz Honor doesn’t help at all for the next manuscript. And actually, I think that for six or seven months after winning that, it was hard to decide what project I was going to work on next.”

"I think that his writing is also generous. It doesn’t avoid suffering and sadness, but it’s always looking for the goodness of the world, the abundance of kindness and love and beauty.” — Susan Felch

Yet he writes. “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,” Anne Schmidt observed. “And I think that talking with the kids about their lives, what makes them laugh, helps him in his novels — inspires him.”

Felch reflected on the defining quality of her four-time collaborator: “Gary is the soul of generosity, the model of generosity. He’s always looking for ways to collaborate with people on writing projects, and it’s not as if he needs someone to help him write or help him finish. He’s just generous that way. … I think that his writing is also generous. It doesn’t avoid suffering and sadness, but it’s always looking for the goodness of the world, the abundance of kindness and love and beauty.”

She pictured Schmidt at his most heroic. “It’s not uncommon to walk into his office and hear, ‘Did you see this?’ and it’s never something he’s written. It’s never something about him. It’s this infectious joy for living.”

— Myrna Anderson is Calvin's staff writer