

Okay for Now

Gary D. Schmidt

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Fourteen-year-old Douglas “Doug” Swietek lives in 1968 Long Island. He lives with a loving mother, an abusive father, and two abusive brothers, Christopher and Lucas. Lucas is fighting in the Vietnam War, but Doug portrays him and Christopher to be bullies. In the beginning, Doug explains his most prized possession, a baseball cap given to him by Joe Pepitone, a renowned baseball player who visited Doug’s school. Christopher is quick to find and steal this hat, passing it around to his friends until it’s lost in a storm drain. His father comes home to say that he got fired from his job, and they are forced to move away to a small town called Marysville. As a parting gift, Doug’s best friend, Holling, gives him Joe Pepitone’s jacket, since he lost the hat. Doug, feeling unwelcome and devastated after the turn of events, meets a girl named Lil, the daughter of a local deli owner. He begins to make deliveries for her father, and ends up visiting the library, where he is fascinated by James Audubon’s *The Birds of America*. He takes up drawing as a hobby, under the guidance of Mr. Powell, the librarian. Lucas returns from Vietnam, and his legs are amputated up to the knee. Mrs. Windermere, one of the deli’s customers, offers for Doug and Lil to act in a play about *Jane Eyre*. With all of this on his plate, the novel commences when Doug begins a journey to retrieve every painting in *The Birds of America*. The novel’s ending is something of a tragic ending that expertly displays the symbolism of Audubon’s paintings.

A 2011 National Book Award finalist, *Okay For Now* is a book that I read in the too-sweet strawberry ice cream of second-grade summer. The novel doesn’t have a concrete plot that can be described in one sentence, it’s more of a *this happens, this happens, and oh, this happens!* It’s a sequence of seemingly unrelated events that sing the perfect song. This novel asks the question: *Do we really?* It shows how the paintings reflect events in Doug’s life. This book really captures the essence of life, because not everything ties up at the end, and not everyone lives happily ever after. One thing I found really compelling about this book was that it has an odd relationship with antagonist characters. They don’t redeem themselves, but they don’t exactly stay bad. They are really deep characters who make real decisions that can’t label them as “good” or “bad.” The novel portrays Doug’s rollercoaster of emotions, and Schmidt’s writing style is something that differs from the rest, and Doug’s narration is genius, and so obviously his, with curious notes of humor. His writing style somehow embodies the inner poet and a teenage boy at the same time. This is unusually resonant for a coming-of-age story, combined with Schmidt’s fascinatingly short and sweet, Hemingway-esque way of writing, teeming with witty descriptions and adolescent prose.

One problem is Doug’s father. As I mentioned before, the author doesn’t make antagonists black-and-white, but Doug’s father throughout the whole book is portrayed as something of a psychopath, Doug describing experiences when his father almost tortured him. He is described to have “seen the light,” and is abruptly redeemed in a very rushed way. This book is a coming-of-age book that deals with issues like alcohol addiction, parental abuse, and prejudice in society and school, but it covers these themes in an understandable way. I would recommend this book to ages 10 to 14, because the character’s struggles, such as losing a baseball cap from his favorite player or moving away, seem trivial in a superficial light, but

people in that age group can really empathize with Doug and really understand him. *Okay for Now* is a curiously charming bildungsroman that captures the development of a teenage boy from wannabe “tough guy” to an aspiring artist who sees the beauty in everything, and goes to heights above the label of a “children’s book.”

Recommended Titles:

Wednesday Wars by Gary Schmidt

Bystander by James Preller

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen