

TWO YA TITANS TRAVEL TO TOPEKA TO CELEBRATE READERS, WRITERS, AND GREAT BOOKS: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN B. FRANK AND GARY SCHMIDT

Danny Wade
Washburn University

Kevin Kienholz
Emporia State University

Abstract

This article comprises two face-to-face interviews conducted with prominent young adult authors at the 2019 Literature Festival held on the campus of Washburn University. Writers Steven B. Frank and Gary Schmidt both discuss their approaches to writing, the unique challenges related to writing for young readers, and the important role that truth telling plays in their own writing—among numerous other topics related to young adult literature. Both Frank and Schmidt provide insight into their most recent novels, *Class Action* and *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*, respectively. The article concludes with an appreciation for the literacy outreach done by Professor Jack Bushman as the driving force behind the Literature Festival for the past 26 years.

Keywords

young adult literature, Steven B. Frank, Gary Schmidt

The Literature Festival

For the past quarter century, young adult (YA) writers and young adult readers have gathered at the Literature Festival to celebrate three things that make young adult literature (YAL) great: the books, the authors, and the young people who are passionate about reading. Scores of outstanding writers have appeared at the Kansas-based festival over the years, including greats such as Sharon Draper, Chris Crutcher, Robert Cormier, Jennifer Brown, and Kansas' own Claire Vanderpool. This year proved no different, as approximately 250 students from Kansas and Missouri met on the

campus of Washburn University on October 10, 2019, to meet with Steven B. Frank and Gary D. Schmidt, two remarkable figures in the field of YAL. The students in attendance enjoyed the opportunity to meet with the writers, have their books autographed, engage in conversations with Frank and Schmidt during two lively Q&A sessions, discuss their books in small-group discussions facilitated by leaders in the field of YA literacy, and preview the list of books that comprise this year's Heartland Recommendations list. Most importantly, the students in attendance had the opportunity to share their passion for YAL with other dedicated young readers who are excited to talk about the books they love.

The YA Authors

The Literature Festival organizers were particularly pleased to welcome both Frank and Schmidt to Topeka, as they represent both ends of the spectrum in terms of their years of experience writing for young readers. A relative newcomer to the world of YAL, California middle school teacher Steven B. Frank recently published two excellent books for young readers, *Class Action* and *Armstrong & Charlie*, with the former being a finalist for the 2019 Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction. Gary D. Schmidt, a true living legend in the field of YAL, is the author of numerous award-winning YA novels, including his most recent work, *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*. Over the course of an activity-filled day, both authors shared stories about their own lives as writers, encouraged those in attendance to continue developing their own reading and writing lives, and served as outstanding ambassadors for the field of YAL. It's not often that young readers get to devote an entire day to connecting with the writers and the books that they love, and year after year the Literature Festival provides the venue for this to take place right here in Kansas.

While the authors had extremely busy itineraries during their time in Topeka, both Frank and Schmidt graciously agreed to sit for interviews during their visit to the Literature Festival. Interestingly, even though we asked both writers an entirely different set of questions, both Frank and Schmidt ended up addressing similar themes related to young adults and YAL. Among other issues, they shared their concerns about different aspects of contemporary culture threatening young readers. They focused on the absolutely crucial role of truth-telling when writing for young readers. And they both discussed the vital role that reading can play in connecting the lives of readers with those who have come before them. Perhaps most importantly, both writers took time to remind us of the power that good books possess to remind us of the importance of hope.

The Interview: Steven B. Frank

Steven B. Frank's novel *Class Action* focuses on a small group of middle school students working together on a court case aimed at eliminating homework. With a little help from a retired lawyer interested in their complaint as well as their plight, the case makes it all the way to the United States Supreme Court, allowing Frank to explore one of the real dangers threatening young people today: excessive homework and the resulting loss of unstructured time. Early in our conversation, I took the opportunity to invite Frank to talk about what he sees as the biggest challenge to developing independent young people in a world always ready to structure their lives both in and out of school:

Kienholz: The fundraising organization in *Class Action* is housed in a website the book called "saveourchildhood.org," and I'm just asking, aside from excessive homework, what do you see as some of the main dangers facing young readers today—your young readers today?

Frank: I'm really glad you asked that question, because when I first talked about this book to people and said it's about kids suing to declare homework unconstitutional, there were two groups of people. One group would sort of laugh and say, "Oh, ha ha, that's very funny" and the other group would say, "Oh yeah, we totally get it." Because it's not just about homework is the big bad evil thing in the room. It's the anxiety that we are giving young people today about their futures, about their test scores, about their self-worth. Homework is just one piece of that puzzle, but I think we're going through an era of adults exerting too much control over the developing child but more importantly teenage mind. And by giving so much homework or over-planning the lives of young people, I think we're depriving them of that independence and space to decide who they are, what they think, what they're good at, what they want to do. And so, those are the threats to childhood today. It's not the internet so much as it is the fear of parents who are not giving their kids real independence.

While it's clear that Steven B. Frank sees a real danger in raising young people without the experience of free-time to play and exercise their independence, he went on to explore what might be viewed as the other side of the coin—the benefits of affording young people some agency and autonomy in their lives:

Kienholz: In *Class Action* the main character, Sam, recalls an elderly neighbor telling him that a kid can learn to do anything—I love that line by the way. That's a lesson in agency, a theme that runs throughout both of your novels for young adults. What do you see as the importance of young people understanding early on that they can learn to do just about anything that they want?

Frank: Well, for me, it's a . . . it's almost cliché to say that kids are our future, but really, it's the truth. We're in an era now where kids are emerging as a major force of political and social activism. From Greta Thunberg to the organizers of the gun control rallies. Regardless of where you stand on politics, it is so inspiring to see young people, first of all, be aware but more importantly care deeply enough to organize themselves to say, "Grown-ups, you're failing us on different fronts and we're going to take charge and exercise some political action." Those kids are going to be voting in . . . seven years or eleven. So, when I see kids aware and engaged, I feel so much safer for the planet's future, the country's future, so I think it's very important.

Frank's novel *Class Action* will almost certainly serve as his readers' initiation into the functioning of the U.S. Supreme Court. This novel trades out the everyday familiarity of middle school hallways, a common setting for many YA novels, for the infinitely more formal and less-familiar hallways of the highest court in the land. Our conversation turned next to Frank's interest in



YA author Steven B. Frank speaks to the audience at the Literature Festival on October 10, 2019, at Washburn University in Topeka, KS.

providing a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the mechanics of a Supreme Court case—as well as his sharp focus on the larger issue of social justice, which forms a thematic foundation for both *Class Action* as well as *Armstrong & Charlie*.

Kienholz: You have an abiding interest in the United States Supreme Court—I’m assuming that from the book—and it seems that you are interested in the impact that the court has as an institution on the daily lives of everyone, young and old. What’s the most important thing that you want your readers to understand about the Supreme Court?

Frank: I want people to know that the Supreme Court is there and has your back. When you look at the history of our country, there have been times when, democracy by itself pulls us one way, and sometimes doesn’t pull us in the best way. And by that I mean, in some states, laws were passed and practices were accepted that I think ran contrary to the spirit of what America is supposed to be. At least, embodied by that Statue of Liberty with her upheld torch. And when we’ve strayed from the real ideals of this country, it’s the Supreme Court that has brought us back in line with those ideals. Besides which, it’s an effective check on the power of the other branches of government. The Supreme Court is the quiet force that is there bringing balance to the direction this country heads. They make bad decisions sometimes, they are just human beings, and the majority shifts to one side or the other of the political spectrum. But they are, at least, a group of nine men and women who are carefully weighing issues of laws being passed and whether they fit the constitution. I think they’re there to protect the spirit, the best spirit of this country. It’s an important institution, and boy, they are hitting some very important issues as we speak.

Kienholz: Both *Class Action* and *Armstrong & Charlie* highlight the importance of social justice in concrete ways. In fact, Charlie makes a direct statement on this issue when he says, “When you see an injustice, you don’t look the other way.” So my question is, what advice do you have for young readers who want to get involved in social justice issues?

Frank: He’s thinking about something his dad had told him in the book. This business of looking away is, I think, the easy path. Take bullying: You could be a bystander and look the other way because it’s safer. But my advice, as it is, would be to find somebody who is an ally in standing up for something you believe in and join forces with them. At this age it can be really hard. I mean, it’s nice in fiction to see a kid stand up for what’s right on his own. But I think it takes a team at this age in particular. Someone has to start the conversation.

But my advice, as it is, would be to find somebody who is an ally in standing up for something you believe in and join forces with them. – YA author Steven B. Frank

Someone has to say, “Hey, that’s wrong that you’re not sitting with that kid because he’s from another country,” or whatever the issue is, “Let’s go together and sit with that person.” I think this idea that one person alone, it’s kind of rare. Greta Thunberg she’s almost a lone ranger in the battle against climate change or climate destruction. But, a lot of kids band together when one person starts the conversation, others come around. You just find your tribe of people and you take action.

Finally, my conversation with Steven B. Frank ended with two questions that might seem to be a bit juxtaposed—that is, we wrapped up the interview by discussing his tendency to include a focus on *elderly* characters in his novels while writing specifically for an audience of *younger* readers:

Kienholz: In today’s young adult literature, older characters are often nearly invisible if not entirely absent. In both of your novels, however, you feature elders who play crucial roles in the lives of your young character. In *Class Action* you include Mr. Kalman, a cantankerous retired attorney and in *Armstrong & Charlie* you incorporate the philosophical neighbor Mr. Khalil. Can you tell us a little about why you think it’s important for young readers to meet such influential older characters throughout your books?

Frank: In literature there’s a long history of the mentor figure. From “Chiron’s Cave” to Yoda. You just see the older character is important.

Kienholz: The wise old man or woman.

Frank: The wise old figure. It’s like an archetype. But I have to say that, for me, it’s much more personal than that. I love old people. It may be the absence of them in my early childhood because all four grandparents died before I was ten. I think emotionally I’m drawn to companionship of older people. But I also think that they have something to share. It’s not just that they’re wise so much. You get a perspective having lived through a lot. I notice this in my dad. He’s 90 years old. My dad won’t flinch at any conversation. So there’s a truth-telling. I had another friend, a dear woman who lived downstairs when I lived in Los Angeles. She had survived World War II; she was Swiss-born and lived in Germany and had saved some Jews from the Holocaust. She was the most brutally honest person I had ever met, down to the point where, if I cooked her dinner one night and I overcooked the salmon...and she would say, “It’s overcooked...you overcooked it.” And I loved that about her, and it made me a better cook. But it also gave me an appreciation for truth tellers.

Kienholz: Last question. Can you talk a little bit about your interest in writing for young adults? What are some of the challenges and some of the rewards that you’ve noticed for writing for young readers?

Frank: I can tell you, the absolute greatest reward is the fact that they still read. They can be really devoted readers if you give them the time and space to read. They’re very passionate about the characters that they connect with. The challenges for writing for that audience is something that Isaac Bashevis Singer said about children; he said that they are the toughest critics and you know right away if you lose them. What I think that says is that the child reader is very demanding of authenticity, emotion, and, well, those two in a clear-flowing story. We get away with adult writing with taking a more meandering path sometimes and I just think they’re brutally honest like the old people in life, but they’re emotionally very accessible.

The Interview: Gary Schmidt

During my interview with Gary Schmidt, I shared with him my nighttime routine of reading and telling stories to my seven-year old son before he goes to sleep. Oftentimes, I summarize to him stories of young adult novels I have previously read. On one evening, I summarized Schmidt's *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*. What was significant about this particular retelling was that it was the first time my son requested a copy of the novel so he could read it on his own. Like my son, I, too, was deeply moved by *Pay Attention, Carter Jones* and after reading it, I was excited to read more of Gary Schmidt's critically acclaimed novels like *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* that was awarded both a Newbery Honor and a Printz Honor in 2005. In 2008, Schmidt earned his second Newbery Honor for *The Wednesday Wars*, and its sequel *Okay for Now* was a National Book Award finalist. Schmidt's award-winning realistic, historical, and fantasy fiction has earned tremendous respect and admiration for its superb use of humor and wit while simultaneously telling stories of the tragedies and tough issues kids face. Schmidt currently lives on a farm in Alto, Michigan, and is a professor of English at Calvin College.

On learning that he earned a Ph.D. in medieval literature, I became curious about how one with expertise in medieval literature wound up becoming a prolific writer for children and young adults. Therefore, our conversation began with Schmidt describing his journey into writing for children and young adults.



YA author Gary Schmidt speaks to the audience at the Literature Festival on October 10, 2019, at Washburn University in Topeka, KS.

Wade: Since you earned a Ph.D. in medieval literature, I am curious about how you became a writer of children's and young adult literature. Briefly describe your journey of becoming a writer of children's/young adult literature. When did you realize you wanted to write for children and young adults?

Schmidt: I wrote my dissertation during the early days of word processing technology and was typing a series of about 100 Latin prayers. My Latin was not as great as it should have been, so my typing was laborious and slow. Once I finished typing the prayers, I hit "some" button and everything was deleted. I should have immediately started typing the prayers again, but instead, I decided to take a break from it for a few days. During that break, I began writing a horrible, horrible children's fantasy novel. I liked writing it and liked the process. I finished the book and sent it off to a prominent editor working for a reputable publisher. The editor said it was horrible but liked it enough to want to see something else from me. In the meantime, I met Katherine Patterson's editor and we really hit it off. I did write the second book but sent it to Patterson's editor instead of the other editor. She took it and it was the beginning of the whole thing. After finishing my dissertation and my degree, I applied to a college needing someone to teach children's and young adult literature. I accepted the position and loved it. At first, I felt I should do more in the field to give myself authority, so that when I am talking to my students about writing children's books, I can say

I have done this and they know I have done this. So, that was a series of odd, practical moments that led to something I really have come to love.

Schmidt's continued passion for children's and young adult literature has once again led to his writing another critically acclaimed novel, *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*. In the novel, the middle school protagonist, Carter Jones, answers the door one early morning to find a British butler now at his service. Carter learns that the butler was an employee of his late grandfather who bequeathed the butler's services to the Carter family. From this opening in the story, Schmidt mixes humor with tragedy in telling the story of the butler and Carter as they interact at home and on the cricket playing field. As his mentor and coach, the butler supports, challenges, and encourages Carter while Carter confronts the tragedies of his life head on.

Throughout much of the novel, Schmidt is not forthcoming about the tragedies Carter has suffered. Schmidt, however, skillfully uses recurring objects and flashbacks to create the tension necessary to engage and lead readers to a compassionate and heartfelt discovery of the root of Carter's pain. For example, in several places, Schmidt focuses in on a green marble Carter keeps with him at all times as a means of delivering clues about Carter's little brother who is missing. Secondly, Schmidt inserts flashbacks of a camping trip to the Blue Hills of Australia Carter takes with his father. Once again, during these flashbacks, Schmidt provides clues about Carter's relationship with his father, and like the green marble, the flashbacks increase curiosity as to why Carter's father is also not at home. During the last flashback, Carter pieces it altogether and uncovers his father's secret, delivering a blow to Carter he will truly never get over.

The green marble and flashbacks are artfully integrated and are effective in creating the engagement and motivation readers, especially young readers, need to keep reading. Our conversation turned to these techniques motivating readers to "pay attention."

Wade: How did you decide on the green marble and the flashbacks of the Blue Hills of Australia? What advice would you suggest to writers determining and developing recurring words, images, and events when writing a novel?

Schmidt: Writer Eliza Ketchum, a good friend, came up with this notion of working with an "endowed" object. You introduce an object that may have the same significance throughout or it may grow. The green marble has the same significance throughout. It is Carter's connection to his late brother, so he carries it almost as a totem, a way of remembering him. The object itself becomes something connecting to someone from the past in ways that others do not get. I personally have a lot of objects that connect me to my past. I lost my wife six years ago, and her glasses are right by my bed. I will always have them right by my bed. Her glasses are not an altar or anything, but a totem or way of continuing to connect to her. The green marble does not change throughout the book. The Blue Mountains of Australia do change, becoming more and more significant throughout the story. Carter begins to discern that his time in the Blue Mountains with his father is not just a memory, but a memory he must work through because there is so much pain and frustration there. I was in the Blue Mountains years ago with my son. I am color blind. I don't see any colors. Climbing down this valley, you notice it is very tropical. It is Australia, so all the flora is completely different from what you associate in the northern hemisphere. You come to these sandstone cliffs, and in the late afternoon, the sun breaks down onto these Eucalyptus trees. All the oils evaporate from those trees into a blue mist. So, it is not the mountains that are blue, but it is the air that is blue. Even I could see it. It must be extraordinarily bright, because I could see that blue. The blue mist is something I have never

forgotten. My son and I looked at the blue mist in awe over these sandstone cliffs with these tropical trees surrounded by this blue haze. You could feel it. It was such a vivid moment for me, so I thought I could use the setting of the Blue Mountains and have them become more and more significant as the story moves along. Finally, you see why it does. At the end of the story, the Blue Mountains represent connection, grace, and joy for Carter. He is ready to go find all of the blue spaces in the world. For me, that means he is recovering from the grief and losses he has had to bear.

Because Carter “pays attention” to and confronts his past, he is able to effectively move forward in finding the “blue spaces” of his future. This step of Carter’s development mostly happens while learning to play cricket. Cricket requires keen observation and attention to detail to be successful playing. As Carter’s cricket coach, the butler emphasizes that “paying attention” to the rules and plays is critical to winning a game. Cricket becomes the butler’s vehicle for encouraging Carter to confront and channel his pain in the present moment. Indeed, through cricket, Carter learns to trust and confide in the butler, and consequently, the butler helps Carter transfer the skills of “paying attention” he acquires from playing cricket to his personal dilemmas. The inclusion of sports to help characters process problems, channel pain, and mature emotionally like Carter is not unique to children’s and young adult literature. Young adult authors such as Chris Crutcher have used well known sports like swimming, football, wrestling, and basketball to develop characters in their stories. However, what makes *Pay Attention, Carter Jones* a unique sport story is that Schmidt uses cricket as Carter’s growth vehicle. I did not know much about cricket until reading *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*, and I enjoyed learning the rules of and “paying attention” to a sport unpopular in the United States. In fact, I viewed a few cricket games to better visualize the games Carter played. My eyes were opened to the fact that there is another sport in the world that is extremely popular. Therefore, during our interview, I asked Schmidt what inspired him to choose the sport of cricket in telling his story.

Wade: How did you decide on cricket for *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*? Did you have any previous experience with cricket prior to writing the novel?

Schmidt: When you’re writing, you don’t want a kiddo to say “Oh, I’ve read this before” or “I know this story it’s all ho hum,” or “here’s the motif.” And so, the obvious thing, if you’re going to write a sports book about an American kid, it’s going to be baseball or football. Well, I love baseball, but I didn’t want to write a book about a sport that’s just oh so familiar. So the opening image of the book is this butler who is standing on a stoop and it’s raining, and this kid likes to play little league and he would be a baseball player, but the butler isn’t interested in that. And so he comes to this and introduces cricket to them which he is already a strangeness. On that level, he wants to introduce a sport that he loves and that he’s also good at. So that’s just the beginning narrative level. But just like the Blue Mountains, I wanted cricket to get more and more significant. In cricket, what’s really important, as opposed to like an American baseball player, is that you have to depend upon the other guy who is on your team running back and forth. If I hit the ball out there, the batter has to know from what I say that he can get to this wicket. I love that metaphor. That you depend—you are forced to depend on someone else. You cannot be isolated. You have to be dependent. So that, I hope, comes through at least some and gets more and more important as he begins to recognize that he’s not going to be able make it alone. That felt to me exactly right. It works with the story, and it’s exactly what the butler would be interested in. I mean it could have been soccer too, I suppose, but I felt that would not be right...So it

works narratively but it also works in terms of his growing understanding of where he is and what he needs. The rules drove me nuts. I mean it just drove me completely crazy because I don't have experience with cricket other than watching some games in graduate school. But I had the extraordinarily good fortune of having a great British editor whose fifteen-year-old son plays cricket. It was just perfect. She worked with me because I got a lot wrong. There was a lot wrong when I first sent the manuscript to her. And then she had another expert in cricket review it and that helped tremendously.

Wade: I can see the metaphor. I also thought the cricket terms and rules that are used to introduce each chapter was really creative.

Schmidt: And I wanted that...I wanted the rules of Cricket to connect a little bit to what's going on in his life.

Schmidt's multigenre children's and young adult fiction instructs about various topics while also tackling tough issues young people face in truthful, non-condescending ways. As previously noted in *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*, readers learn about cricket while observing Carter navigate the effects of death and divorce. Our conversation turned next to Schmidt's writing interests and how he determines the genres and stories he wishes to tell from the adolescent perspective.

Wade: Can you talk a bit about your writing interests and how you determine the topics/stories you wish to tell from the adolescent perspective? What is it that you hope young readers take away from your works?

Schmidt: I keep learning by writing new genres. I want to keep trying new things. So right now, I'm trying to write a graphic novel. I recently wrote a Star Wars story because I wanted to force myself to try different things. There's a great fantasy writer, Anne Ursu, who I really like ... I gave her a hard time about how all fantasies always have the Gandalf character, a quest, the wise cosmic advice, and curious creatures. No matter how advanced a society is they always fight with swords. It's always swords. As I was going on and on, she said, "Well why don't you write one?" So, the fantasy was an attempt to write one that didn't have any

I don't ever want to give a kiddo the sense that I'm talking down to them or the sense that I'm holding something necessarily back from them. If I had one line on my gravestone I think it would be "He told the truth." I hope that my books are telling the truth. – YA author Gary Schmidt

of that stuff in it. And it was fun. It was really, really fun. But the other thing though is, I think, I mean—middle school is serious business. High school is serious business. There is so much that is happening to contemporary kids. They're exposed to so many different things because the internet has changed the game. They are so incredibly exposed in a very dangerous and strange time we live in. I don't ever want to give a kiddo the sense that I'm talking down to them or the sense that I'm holding something necessarily back from them. If I had one line on my gravestone I think it would be "He told the truth." I hope that my books are telling the truth. It is the case that parents abandon their children. It is the case that kids struggle with abuse. It is the case that there are

thirteen-year-old parents. It is the case that kids are taken from their parents. I don't write them to find only a plot motif. I'm trying to say to those kids I know this world. *Orbiting Jupiter* is about a thirteen-year-old who has a kid. It is told from the point of view of his

twelve-year-old foster brother, but I met those kids. I met them in a juvenile detention center in Northern Michigan. They were in eighth grade. They had been there for a year. A year. And in that year, neither of them had seen any biological relative—no parents, not anyone. They're kids that were thrown away. And there are thousands of them. When I left, I just knew I would write about those kids. So, I changed Jake's name to Jack and Joseph I just left. That became the book. It seems to me as a culture we need to start to tell the truth in very vivid ways, and storytellers can do that.

With our interview coming to a close on the eve of the Literature Festival, I saved what I felt was the most important question for last. Though Gary Schmidt's main audience would be children and young adult readers the next day, they would be accompanied by teachers dedicating their lives to motivating and encouraging their students to develop a love of reading. As a teacher educator, I value their profession immensely and believe they do save lives through the literature they lead students to discover. Gary Schmidt is a powerful example of how one's life trajectory was positively and dramatically altered by the care and concern of a teacher. Indeed, Gary Schmidt would not be the writer he is today had his fourth-grade teacher not intervened. In preparation for my interview, I read a snippet about Schmidt's teacher, but I wanted the full story so I could share it with my preservice English language arts teachers to encourage them and give them hope that their future profession is a life-saving endeavor where they will transform the lives of their students in positive and unimaginable ways.

Wade: From what I've read, you had a teacher who intervened and helped you discover a love for reading. How did this teacher help your passion for reading evolve?

Schmidt: In first grade, and I think this is a result of my color blindness but I don't know, we were tracked and that meant that you were divided into groups according to how smart you were judged to be. So then we were given vegetables. I'm not kidding. If you were the corn group, you were smart and you would go on to college. If you were the green bean group, you were not so smart, but you could still get to college. You were average. If you were the pumpkin group then you were stupid. We had construction paper cutouts on our desk indicating our groups. I was a pumpkin. I don't know how they did it, but what that meant is that the corn kids got the books, workbooks, and everything. When they were done filling them out and working with them, they were sort of erased and given to the green beans. They were rotated around the groups like this. So, by the time they got to the pumpkin group, the books had already been read twice and filled in twice, but we were stupid, so it really didn't matter. We didn't need to read. I didn't learn how to read in first grade or second grade or third grade and now we're in fourth grade, and then they took all the stupid kids and put them all together. We worked together and all that. All the really smart kids were in their own class and there were a bunch of average kids' classes too. So it was, you know, we'd learn how to be stupid. And we were good at it. But now, in fourth grade, I met this teacher, Ms. Kavikov, on the playground. She was smart and wonderful and taught the track one kids, the smart kids. But she liked me, and I liked her. And one day she walks into my stupid classroom and she goes, no kidding, she goes, "Gary, get your stuff." I thought, "I'm being expelled." Because once you're a pumpkin, there's no place to go. But she took me by the hand. I remember walking down the hall hand-in-hand with her and thinking how embarrassing it was as a fourth-grader to have your teacher hold your hand. We walked down to her room and every kid in the classroom looks at me because they all know I'm stupid. She had taken a desk and shoved it up against her desk. She had filled it

with all these books. They were way young, way too young for me, like Dr. Seuss. But I couldn't read them. And she spent hours and hours bringing me up to speed. Two years later I'm in sixth grade and reading Shakespeare plays because of her. I would not be here talking right now if it were not for Ms. Kavikov and Lee Avenue Elementary school.

The next day at the 26th Annual Literature Festival, both Gary Schmidt and Steven B. Frank mesmerized the audience with their inspiring stories, sage advice, and personal interactions. During Steven B. Frank's presentation, I gazed out over the sea of adolescent heads, spotting several teachers dispersed at various places in the crowd. I smiled knowing that many of the students in attendance that day would positively remember these teachers for investing in their lives much like Gary Schmidt's teacher.

In fact, we were there that day celebrating young adult books, young readers, and young adult authors because of the efforts and legacy of a very special teacher. Professor John "Jack" Bushman established the Literature Festival 26 years ago. He was an influential middle school and high school English teacher in Ottawa, Kansas, as well as a distinguished Professor of Secondary English Education at the University of Kansas. He was and still is a fierce advocate for the literacy of young people and for all teachers who spend their lives dedicated to supporting students in their reading and writing development. We have the Literature Festival and many other venues for promoting literacy because of Dr. Jack Bushman. Though this was the first Literature Festival without his leadership, his presence was still there and very much felt. Those of us who have had the great honor of working with him in various capacities will continue to honor him and carry his legacy forward in our own work promoting literacy and in future Literature Festivals to come.



Authors Steven Frank and Gary Schmidt sign books at the Literature Festival at Washburn University in Topeka, KS, on October 10, 2019.

Author Biographies

Danny Wade is an associate professor of English Education at Washburn University. He earned his B.S., M.Ed., and Ph.D. in English Education from the University of Oklahoma. He also taught middle school and high school English for six years (Oklahoma and Colorado) and served four years as the K-12 English language arts director for the Moore (Oklahoma) Public Schools. He currently teaches Secondary English Methods, Teaching Young Adult Literature, and Advanced College Writing for Teachers. He can be reached at danny.wade@washburn.edu.

Kevin Kienholz is a professor in the Department of English, Modern Languages, and Journalism at Emporia State University, where he works primarily with undergraduates preparing to teach middle and high school English. He joined the faculty at ESU in the fall of 2000 after having taught high school English for seven years in his home state of Oklahoma. He can be reached at kkienhol@emporia.edu.