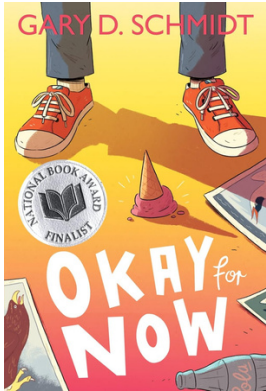


Finalist, Middle School Category



Essayist: Ethan, age 12, Cooper Middle School

Advocating for: *Okay for Now* by Gary D. Schmidt

It's 1968, the height of the Vietnam War. In *Okay for Now*, Gary D. Schmidt takes us into the chaotic life of 14-year-old Doug Swieteck. After moving to a new town with a troubled family, Doug is angry, withdrawn, and uninterested in the world around him. But as he begins to connect with others—classmates, librarians, and neighbors, he slowly opens up to the new community. Over time, Doug discovers new interests, improves in school, and starts to see a future he never thought was possible.

Doug's story has inspired changes in my own life. As I followed his journey, I realized how powerful it is to build positive relationships with others and how important that support can be during difficult times. Doug didn't become stronger by facing his challenges alone; he grew by letting others in. That trust was what helped him heal. I've had my own moments of feeling overwhelmed. Trying to keep up with schoolwork, tennis practices, and club activities has often left me exhausted and frustrated. Like Doug, I used to keep those feelings bottled up, only to find myself sinking deeper into them. Sometimes, I'd come home and shut my door, not wanting to talk to anyone. I felt no one could understand what I was going through. I felt stuck in those emotions, unable to find a way out. But reading *Okay for Now* helped me see the value of reaching out. Doug's decision to open up inspired me to do the same. I started sharing my anxiety about an upcoming tournament with my coach, talking to my family



about school pressure, and venting to friends when something bothered me. I've learned that I don't have to carry everything alone. Doug's decisions to change in the book inspired me to lean on the people around me, which, in turn, have helped me become a happier, healthier person. The story taught me that opening up isn't a weakness; it's a step toward strength.

This book's message can benefit many others, too. A lot of people, including kids like me, often feel alone in what they're going through. We live in a world where everyone seems expected to keep moving and push through, even when we're struggling inside. *Okay for Now* reminds us it doesn't have to be that way. Doug's story shows us that with the right support, we can rediscover strength and hope. This book taught me belonging and resilience. I believe it can do the same for others.

That's why I believe *Okay for Now* belongs in Planet Word's magical Library. Its message is one everyone needs to hear. Schmidt shows us that even in the most challenging moments---whether it's war, abuse, or everyday stress, kindness can break through. With the help of others, new doors in life can open; oftentimes, that is all we need to keep moving forward.