Stephen Schwandt: "Master of Conversation"

Ronald Barron

"The Last Goodie reads quickly but it's not fast food fare. It compels the head and heart to take notice of young lives" (p. 10G), John Solensten stated in his review of Stephen Schwandt's first YA novel. Solensten's observation could be applied to all of Schwandt's published novels. "In all of my books it is my primary assumption that young adult (and adult) readers are genuinely interested in puzzling, even troubling explorations of significant subjects. Such readers are looking for workable definitions of merit regarding values and behavior. My books attempt to pursue such definitions," Stephen Schwandt told the editors of Something About the Author. He went on to add that "I place a great deal of emphasis on voice in my writing, and I work especially hard to create believable, energetic dialogue. When one reviewer (School Library Journal) called me 'a master of conversation,' I took it as a supreme compliment" (p. 175).

Schwandt, a high school English teacher since 1972, follows the adage "write what you know." His experience teaching high school students has enabled him to write perceptively about them. He also makes effective use of his experiences as a high school and college athlete. "My first two young adult novels, The Last Goodie and A Risky Game, were clearly products or consequences of my many days in the classroom teaching writing to college prep seniors," Schwandt told Something About the Author. "And the first book pays particular homage to the notion that in sports (as in any highly competitive and intense activity) one can find one's self, that part which enables a performer to do for pride what should be impossible" (p. 174).

The Last Goodie, an effective blending of a sports story and a mystery story, was nominated by Holt, Rinehart and Winston for an Edgar Allan Poe Award in the YA mystery category. Schwandt's characters talk, act, and think like real people, a quality that both readers and reviewers have often noted. In fact, "when the book first came out, everybody came up and said they thought they were in it but none of them were," Schwandt recalls. "Not many people are interesting enough in real life to just use them as they are. You sort of build on what's there" (Ehlert, p. 10).

When The Last Goodie opens, Marty Oliver, a senior and star miler for Southwestern High School in Minneapolis, has been haunted for twelve years by memories of the kidnapping of Stacy Davis, Marty's favorite babysitter, from the Oliver home. Stacy was never found and Marty has experienced nightmares concerning what he heard the night of the kidnapping. However, while helping to move the old files of his track coach, who had also been Stacy's coach, Marty discovers a letter Stacy wrote to the coach that mentions a diary she kept and hid from her parents. Locating the diary enables Marty and his journalist father to gather evidence that ultimately leads to a final confrontation between Marty and Stacy's abductor. The mystery story by itself makes the book attractive to YA readers, but Marty's preparation for the state championship mile run and the pressure he feels from competing with his best friend Ted add an extra dimension to the novel that most YA readers will consider realistic and compelling.

A reviewer for Booklist called The Last Goodie "a well-done mystery broadened by fine track, classroom, and family scenes." And a reviewer for the English Journal claimed there was "not much chance of readers putting down this gripper until all 165 pages are read" (p. 96). John Solensten said, "It is Schwandt's ability to combine clarity of plot with a complex interweave of character and motif that makes this a convincing novel" (p. 10G). Since its publication, the book has been named a Best Book by the New York Public Library System (1985), by the Philadelphia Library System (1985), by the Child Study Association of America (1986), by the Tulsa Tri-County Library System (Sequoyah Competition Finalist, 1985), and by the Iowa Educational Media Association (1989).
Although Schwandt has been praised both by critics and his teenage readers, he did not achieve success as a writer easily or by a very direct route. The son of a Lutheran minister, Schwandt was born in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and spent his youth in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, where his father served a church until the summer before Schwandt started seventh grade. That summer the family moved to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where Schwandt's father became a vice-president for development at Augustana College. "It was during those lonely and awkward seventh and eighth grade years that I grew from 5'6" to 6'4" and discovered/developed my love for basketball," Schwandt recalls.

At Homestead High School in Mequon, a suburb north of Milwaukee where his father served a church, Schwandt became what he modestly calls "a respectable athlete." Schwandt was a Wisconsin state track champion in the high jump (and briefly a state record holder) and a good enough basketball player (he set the scoring record for his high school) to get a full-ride to Valparaiso University in Indiana. "I should make it painfully clear at this point that as a junior and senior high student I was a virtual non-reader," Schwandt says. He categorizes himself as a grade-savvy but unmotivated student.

At Valparaiso University Schwandt started for the 1966-67 team that played in the NCAA finals. The following year he played against the University of Houston, which featured Elvin "Big E" Hayes (later a player with the Houston Rockets), and helped hold Hayes to 62 points in thirty-eight minutes of play. However, Schwandt's basketball career was cut short because after the 1966-67 season his performance was hampered by a series of knee and hand injuries.

More significant than the end of his basketball career was how Schwandt's future life changed direction while he was a student at Valparaiso. Schwandt was a political science/pre-law major for two and a half years prior to meeting Dr. Arlin Meyer, an influential teacher who introduced him to modern fiction. With Dr. Meyer's help, Schwandt became an English major, earned a B.A., and gained admission to the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Minnesota where he was also awarded a teaching assistantship/associateship in composition. "In fact, my only moment of distinction in grad school, the only time I was ever mentioned by name in the department newsletter, came when I scored twenty-five points for the department's intramural basketball team (called An American Tragedy) in a championship game," Schwandt recalls.

Since few graduates were finding jobs, Schwandt cut short his graduate program, taking an M.A. and enrolling in an accelerated secondary education certification program. "Leaving early, however, was not the real story of my graduate school experience," says Schwandt. "The real story involved my being informed quite early on that I was mysteriously 'one of the most poorly prepared graduate students ever to slip by the admissions committee.' I came to the U far behind my classmates in experience with reading and analyzing literature, but even worse I came as a remarkably inept writer (and thus thinker). These deficiencies were no one's fault but my own, certainly not Valparaiso's. What I found myself having to do then that first year of graduate school was teach myself to write clear declarative sentences that added up to focused and worthwhile explorations." Schwandt says the experience of teaching himself to write "marked the beginning of my 'professional' interest in writing, and I was soon discovering what the activity of writing could be made to mean for the writer."

After completion of the teacher certification program, Schwandt taught for two years at Park Center High School, Minnesota, before obtaining his current position at Irondale High School (1974) in a northern suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has also taught college-level evening courses (1975-present).

Schwandt says "a quirk of scheduling marked my involuntary involvement initially" in Young Adult literature. He was assigned to teach two sections of Regular English Nine, a course that included reading and discussing YA novels and that provided Schwandt with his first exposure to Richard Bradford's Red Sky at Morning and Robert Cormier's novels. "When I saw the kind of technical and thematic freedom Cormier seemed to enjoy I thought that this kind of writing might someday be worth a try," Schwandt recalls. "That some day, however, was not quick in coming." It took a student challenge to actually get Schwandt writing. "One day, after I had just finished returning the latest batch of College English essays," Schwandt recalls, "a guy called to me from the back row (and without raising his hand!): 'You know, you gripe a lot about our writing, but I don't think we've ever seen any of yours. How about a sample?'" Schwandt
you gripe a lot about our writing, but I don’t think we’ve ever seen any of yours. How about a sample?’ “Schwandt promised the class that before the end of the quarter he would show them some of his writing, but he didn’t tell them that he would be sneaking in his sketches, essays, and dialogues anonymously. Schwandt would introduce them as writing done by “a member of the class.” Some of those sketches would become part of Funnybone, Schwandt’s first YA novel, which was sold in 1981 but never published until 1992 when it appeared in a radically revised and co-authored version.

After the sale of Funnybone, Schwandt entered what he calls “a year and a half period that has turned out to be my most creative and productive stretch of concentrated, focused writing.” Writing whenever possible, sometimes straight through the night, Schwandt finished first drafts of The Last Goodie, A Risky Game, and Holding Steady.

A Risky Game, Schwandt’s second published novel, puts more demands on YA readers than The Last Goodie, but for readers who are willing to do the close reading and the thinking the book requires, it offers riches that repay their efforts. Ray Anschel noted that “Schwandt's novel asks us to consider what it means to get an education and what we're willing to pay in the getting. He confronts us with the fact that the business of education can be a risky game” (p. 10G). English teacher Troy Conners’ “risky game” is a psychodrama he convinces senior Julie Lamar to participate in because he wants her to see, “as Schwandt would like his young adult readers to see, the duality or doubleness of reality, the blur line between fact and fiction, life and legend, rationalism and spontaneity. And to embrace the notion that only in personal relationships is there an absolute necessity to be honest and truthful” (Anschel, p. 10G).

Although Mr. Conners warns Julie that the psychodrama will involve risks for both of them, Julie agrees to participate because Conners helps fill the void left by her father when her parents divorce and because Conners is one of the few people who treat her as an adult. Ultimately participation in the psychodrama alienates Julie from her classmates and becomes more "risky" than she expected. Although Conners uses a Vietnam horror story to explain the point of the psychodrama to Julie, only after close reading (and possibly rereading) and reflection will readers fully understand what Conners is trying to accomplish.

Holding Steady, Schwandt’s next novel, was selected for “Youth to Youth Books: A List for Imagination and Survival” by the Baltimore Public Library (1988), but it deserves even more recognition. In fact, Judith Beckman and Elizabeth Belden contend “the book illustrates the high quality possible in adolescent literature” (p. 81). Set on Washington Island, near Wisconsin’s Door Peninsula, an area Schwandt knows well because of childhood vacations and because Schwandt and his wife built a summer home there in 1985, the novel explores a teenager’s response to the death of his father. Brendon Turner, 17, accompanies his mother and his brother to the island where his parents first met. Brendon’s father died in an auto accident the previous winter, and the summer on Washington Island provides Brendon with the time and life experiences to understand and cope with the loss he has experienced. Brendon also forms a relationship with Courtney Holmes, a high school senior who is learning to trust her father, a reformed alcoholic. A major strength of the novel is how Schwandt shows young adults interacting with adults -- in particular, Brendon’s relationship with his mother, and Brendon and Courtney's relationship with Courtney's father. Mary Lou Burket observed that “while this appears to be a book about a son and about his grief, it is really about much more.” Brendon learns that he, like his father, is attracted to what he calls “The Brink” -- challenges that are attractive because of their danger -- and that this attraction “can bring him close to destroying himself and others, but that it also brings a heightened sense of aliveness and makes him strong.” Burket went on to observe that “it is gratifying to read a young adult novel whose meaning isn’t patently clear and whose author, while far from didactic, seems intent on suggesting to readers the extent of their own resources” (p. 12F).

Guilt Trip, a compelling YA mystery, was named one of the four national finalists in the 1991 Edgar Awards Competition sponsored by the Mystery Writers of America. The ALA also selected the book for its list of Recommended Books for Reluctant Readers (1991). The novel quickly grabs the attention of readers as the car of Corey Howe-Browne, a former director of the New Energy Theater Troupe, crashes through the ice on a frozen lake, killing both Howe-Browne and an innocent ice fisherman. Howe-Browne had been convicted in a sex abuse scandal involving several young actors, thus making the parents of Howe-Browne’s victims, several of whom had made public threats on his life, prime suspects in the murder investigation. In addition to the murder mystery plot, readers will be attracted by the characters in this novel, in particular by Eddie Lymarek, a high school student who has transferred to
attracted by the characters in this novel, in particular by Eddie Lymarek, a high school student who has transferred to Minneapolis Nicollet High to escape his abusive father, and Angela Favor, an unpredictable (almost bizarre) fellow student whose erratic behavior and emotional outbursts keep Eddie off balance. While presenting a well-written, fast-paced mystery, Schwandt has also written a novel with a redeeming message for adolescent readers about a troubled adolescent's advancement toward social responsibility and personal morality. A reviewer for the English Journal said, "Schwandt understands what keeps upper-level high schoolers on edge. He writes with such insight into his characters that readers fear for Eddie's life as he is pitted against the rejected, viciously angry, self-centered Angela" (p. 86).

Funnybone , the first novel Schwandt wrote, was finally published in 1992 and quickly earned recognition by being cited by the American Bookseller as a "Pick of the Lists" book for 1992 and being named by Newsday to its "Recommended Summer Reading List" (1992). After only a few weeks at Valparaiso University, Christine Broughton's brother Walt officially withdraws from school, sells his car, and disappears. Christine's parents are frantic; and, after the police make no progress, they hire a private investigator named MacReedy to find Walt. When Walt's friend Blake starts to receive postcards from Walt addressed jointly to Christine, Walt's former girlfriend Kelly, and Blake, Christine convinces Kelly and Blake to keep their mouths shut about the cards. As the story progresses, readers learn about the problems Walt had during his senior year of high school -- a knee injury that forced him to quit football, losing a football scholarship, falling grades, and finally, an accusation that he was using drugs.

A secondary plot of the novel involves Christine's role as a self-styled avenger of injuries done to her and/or her friends. Funnybone, a character she created for her journal, becomes her inspiration for the anonymous practical jokes Christine uses to even the score with people she views as the enemy. Near the end of the novel, Christine learns that her image of her brother Walt is inaccurate and also that she has misperceived some of the "wrongs" she has sought to avenge with her practical jokes. She also sees that MacReedy is more than a private investigator -- he calls himself a "mediator," a role that becomes clear to her once MacReedy locates Walt.

One of the strengths of the novel is that the characters' complex problems are not solved quickly or easily. Although the book has qualities to recommend it, Mary Lou Burket points out one of book's liabilities when she says "Funnybone is undermined by its long, messagey dialogues and a plot based on waiting -- waiting for the brother to reveal himself and waiting while Christine resists action on her knowledge of his location" (p. 11F). Both of the liabilities of the book can probably be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that this novel is Schwandt's only collaborative effort.

An examination of Schwandt's novels makes clear why young adult readers respond favorably to them. Schwandt tells a good story and he tells it well. The Last Goodie , Guilt Trip , and Funnybone are mysteries, a genre which is popular with a wide range of young adult readers. In addition, Schwandt incorporates elements of the mystery genre into his non-mystery novels. Schwandt also presents teenagers' relationships with adults in a realistic fashion. Some of these relationships are positive -- Marty and his father in The Last Goodie is a good example -- but some of the relationships are either temporarily or permanently strained. What Schwandt presents are a range of relationships similar to those that young adult readers might see in their own communities.

However, the major strength of Schwandt's novels is the characters. Students have often told me that they found themselves or their friends in the novels, comments that indicate how well Schwandt has been able to use his experience teaching teenagers to create plausible characters. Two factors seem to contribute to the plausibility of Schwandt's characters. First, as the reviewer from School Library Journal was quoted earlier as saying, Schwandt is "a master of conversation." Or, as my students have put it, he creates dialogue that sounds like real teenagers rather than like characters in a book. In addition, Schwandt's characters have beliefs, values, and problems similar to those of his readers. Schwandt treats his readers as if they have intelligence and as if they think deeply about complex issues: coping with the death of a parent or determining what it means to be educated, to name just two of the issues. More importantly, when Schwandt does provide the resolution to his characters' problems, he resists the temptation to provide neat, simplistic solutions to complex problems. Teenagers know that complex problems cannot be quickly or easily solved in real life; therefore, they aren't surprised or upset if some of the characters in Schwandt's novels are working toward a solution, or achieving only part of a solution, in the end. For real people, life goes on after
Schwandt recently completed a novel about a high school student who wants to secretly make a "Senior Highlight Film," an unauthorized, unsanctioned video yearbook. According to Schwandt, he "becomes so inward and inventive that often his best and most interesting conversations are all imagined" and "the life he experiences in his fantasizing is much more compelling and engaging to him (and I hope the reader) than anything in his routine high school experience." Schwandt is also working on screenplay versions of both The Last Goodie and Guilt Trip. He has already received letters expressing interest in the scripts, "the most promising of which came from a local producer." In addition, Schwandt is working on study guides, assignment sequences, and discussion agendas for all of his books.

"My career should be an inspiration to others," Schwandt said in Something About The Author, "for as one student said after my first novel appeared, 'This must be fun and easy. I mean if you can do it, anybody in America can do it' " (p. 175).

**Author**

Ronald Barron teaches English at Richfield Senior High School in Richfield, Minnesota.

**References**


Author's Note: Portions of this article are based upon information supplied by Stephen Schwandt. The Last Goodie, Schwandt's first novel, will be reissued in paperback by Free Spirit Publishing (Suite 616, 400 First Avenue North, Minneapolis, MN 55401) in January, 1995. Free Spirit will also market study guides and other support material Schwandt has written for the book.
More than 250 conversation starters for your enjoyment! A list of great random conversation starters as well as questions organized into topics! I find that the most rewarding way is for everyone to pull up this list of conversation starters on a phone or tablet, and then take turns letting everyone choose a question to ask the group. Remember don't be afraid to delve deeply into the conversation. Answering the specific question isn't the goal, having an interesting conversation is!

General Information
Hannes Schwandt
Assistant Professor
Northwestern University
School of Education and Social Policy (SESP)
2120 Campus Drive
Evanston, Illinois 60208
366 Galvez Street
Stanford, CA 94305
Email: schwandt@northwestern.edu and hs1@stanford.edu

Research fields
Health Economics, Labor Economics, Economic Demography, Subjective Wellbeing

Citations: Google Scholar
Affiliations...