



Authorgraph No.142: David Almond

Article Author:

[Peter Hollindale](#) [1]

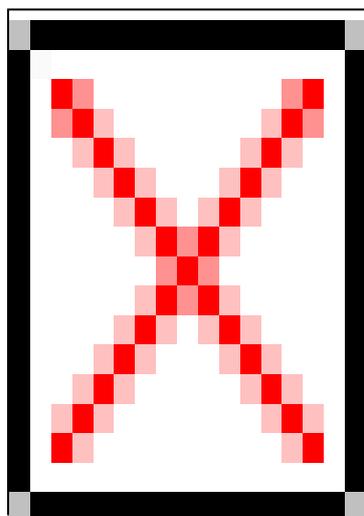
[142](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

David Almond interviewed by **Peter Hollindale**.



David Almond interviewed by Peter Hollindale

?When the books began to take off, it?s amazing how many people came up to me and said, ?Haven?t you moved to London yet?? I said, ?Well, no, actually I?m moving into Northumberland.??

A year ago David Almond moved with his family to their present house, down a quiet lane in an attractive village just a stone?s throw from Hadrian?s Wall. It is an old house, but his lofty study is modern and neat, with windows looking out across a peaceful and well-tended farming landscape. Just a few miles to the east is the city of Newcastle and the greater sprawl of industrial Tyneside down river to the coast. This is Almond country, the background of all his books.

Nowadays he takes pride in being a regional writer, but is only too aware that until his great breakthrough with **Skellig** it was a handicap when he was seeking publishers. ?One of the things that worked against me until these books was that I stayed in the north and wrote about it. There is still a cultural blindness about regional writing. Now it?s a great privilege to say I live in and write about the North-East. It?s also an undiscovered country, excluded from mainstream culture.?

Tyneside has been revolutionised in recent years. Newcastle is a buzzing, active city, busy with demolition and redevelopment, famous for its showpieces like the Baltic Centre and the new Tyne bridge. Almond?s stories repeatedly evoke the ghosts of the past as modern life takes over. On the first page of **Skellig** Michael compares the derelict garage at his new house to the warehouses that are being pulled down at the quayside. These same ruined warehouses are the mysterious setting for **Heaven Eyes**, while the opposite riverbank is resplendent with new cycle ways and running tracks, restaurants and clubs. In **Kit?s Wilderness** the abandoned pits, haunted by the ghosts of long-dead mining children, and perilously revisited by John and Kit, have become a visitor attraction by the end. In **Secret Heart** the chance of regeneration comes from the meeting of two old and dying communities, a down-at-heel town and a travelling circus. And in Almond?s new book, **The Fire-Eaters**, the world of the sea-coalers is celebrated in its final days.

It was a similar reverence for the past and consciousness of change that led Almond to commemorate his own family in the stories now collected in **Counting Stars**. A second collection will follow in due course. After thinking so long that family life was ordinary and mundane, looking back it seems quite exotic. I'd just turned forty when I began to write these stories. It was a coming home.

Born in 1951, Almond grew up in a large Catholic family on south Tyneside. Although marked by loss and bereavement a sister died in infancy, and his father in early middle age it was a childhood rich in love and close-knit family loyalties. The stories in **Counting Stars** are directly autobiographical, with real family names and places, and Almond sought the permission of his brother and sisters before publishing them. The family liked them, and after years of writing short stories, then an unpublished adult novel, Almond found as they appeared in magazines that they were attracting attention beyond anything he had written previously. Writing about insignificant events in an insignificant family in an insignificant town, I suddenly began to get the biggest audience I'd ever had, and to be taken seriously and that led to **Skellig**.

If home was happy, school was not. The title-story in **Counting Stars** records his emerging defiance of the Catholic teaching at his primary school, and the story 'Jack Law' savages the pious brutalities of religious education in an earlier age. But for Almond life at his Roman Catholic grammar school was especially unhappy, and the memory drives his angry portrayal of sanctioned schoolroom cruelty in **The Fire-Eaters**. I hated secondary school and they hated me as well. They were glad to see the back of me.

I point out that not all schools receive a bad press in his stories. Both Michael in **Skellig** and Kit in **Kit's Wilderness** are sensitively treated by their teachers and encouraged to work creatively. But these schools reflect Almond's adult experience as a teacher himself. His university entry delayed for a year by a Head's bad report, he went on to study English and American literature at the University of East Anglia, and then to teacher training at Newcastle Polytechnic. Like many others, he found teaching practice something of a shock. After lying on sofas for three years at university reading Dostoyevsky, suddenly to have to work so hard! Even so, with only two short spells of time out in East Anglia a year in an idealistic commune in North Norfolk, followed by another in a Suffolk farmhouse his adult life was spent teaching in the North-East until in his mid-forties the huge international success of **Skellig** and his later books allowed him to become a full-time writer.

One might expect that Almond's memories of growing intellectual doubts and educational conflicts would have alienated him from the Catholic traditions in which he grew up, but his early loyalties and affinities remain. Of course there were things that were dark and terrible about the Catholic tradition, but also there was so much to celebrate. I work on the exact line between denying and welcoming it, rejecting and celebrating it. And of course it has wonderful imagery and objects and rituals which are gifts for a writer.

Something of Almond's originality as a children's novelist lies here, in his acceptance of modern scientific thought but his refusal to let it place a boundary round existence and exclude alternative kinds of truth. In **Skellig** Mina tells Michael that evolution is 'a proven fact', but two pages later she also tells him it is 'a proven fact' that shoulder blades are 'where your wings were, and where they'll grow again'. The supernatural weaves in and out of the stories 'at the corner of the eye', like the skinny mining boys in shorts and boots whom Kit repeatedly glimpses in **Kit's Wilderness**.

One reason why I write for children is that they are actually interested in these questions. Children have a very natural and great religious impulse, a questioning impulse, a sense of wonder. So it's a great area to be working in, when they're learning science, which provides such wonderful explanations of the world, but their wonder goes beyond these explanations and they say, 'But there are other things, aren't there?'

Despite the supernatural elements, therefore, Almond does not accept the label 'fantasy' for his stories. I think they're very realistic. It's just that the kids in them seem to be almost heroic in the way they go to the edge, and even what's beyond the fringes of the world, and take themselves to the limit. Perhaps the modish term 'magic realism' is closer to what they are, though their tone and atmosphere remain unique. Things do not have to be fantastic in order to be magical in Almond's world. In **Kit's Wilderness**, a fossil ammonite is just as magical an emissary from the past as are the

ghosts, and the haunted darkness of the pit is no more subtly mysterious than the beautiful wave-like onset and recession of snowy winter that marks the stages of the story.

All the stories have their roots in Almond's past, and are often traceable to incidents in **Counting Stars**. Even so, there is a certain writerly magic in the arrival of **Skellig**. After writing the stories later collected in **Counting Stars**, Almond was 'literally walking down the street' when the initial situation came into his head. He started to write, and was half way down the first page when it came to him there this was a children's story. All he knew at first was that Michael would find something in the garage. 'In the first two chapters Michael keeps going in, because I had to keep going in myself to find out what he'd found.' When it unexpectedly proved to be an angel, this required some adjustment of orthodox angel nature, since the creature had already acquired a diet of flies and beetles. So the book grew. 'It almost wrote itself.'

And eventually it generated Mina 'clever, observant, guiding Mina' to be Michael's friend and ally. 'She was really useful. She gives the book a kind of sternness and austerity.' And also, one might add, she forms with Michael a relationship which is the childhood prelude to love.

In this they are precursors of a whole series of relationships which give Almond's books another special and distinctive truth. All his leading characters, if we leave aside Michael's frail baby sister, are only children. This seems strange in a writer with Almond's large family background, and appears to surprise him. But in practice they are not only children for long. A deep and crucial friendship between boy and girl is central to every book: Kit and Allie in **Kit's Wilderness**, Erin and January in **Heaven Eyes**, Joe and Corinna in **Secret Heart**, Bobby and Ailsa in **The Fire-Eaters**. They are friends, allies, almost brother and sister by mutual adoption (like Joe and Corinna, who perceive themselves as twins), and the older ones, like Bobby and Ailsa, are on the very edge of sexual love.

'Michael without Mina wouldn't have been a character,' says Almond about **Skellig**, 'so it's like a completeness: the boy needs the girl in order to function properly.' And this is true of them all. 'The sensation of writing about these relationships is that when they come together it is as if they've suddenly become a new character who is then the heart of the story.' Also truthfully and sensitively drawn in Almond's stories is another key relationship which is much evaded and misunderstood in children's fiction: the childhood blend of friendship and half-recognised love between boy and boy.

Almond country is not just a regional landscape but a magical imagined place, like nowhere else. He is now much interested in picture books, prompted by his young daughter Freya, but otherwise he does not mount a professional watch on the children's book world. 'I don't try to keep up with current children's books, though I do read them. I follow my own track.' It is a track down which thousands of readers, children and adults both, are happy to follow him.

Peter Hollindale, formerly at the University of York, is now a freelance writer and teacher.

The Books

(published by Hodder Children's Books)

Counting Stars, 0 340 78479 2, £10.00 hbk, 0 340 78480 6, £5.99 pbk

The Fire-Eaters, 0 340 77382 0, £10.99 hbk, 1 84032 681 6, £9.99 audio tape

Heaven Eyes, 0 340 76481 3, £10.00 hbk, 0 340 74368 9, £5.99 pbk, 1 84032 288 8, £7.99 audio tape

Kit's Wilderness, 0 340 77885 7, £10.00 hbk, 0 340 72716 0, £5.99 pbk, 1 84032 280 2, £7.99 audio tape

Secret Heart, 0 340 76482 1, £10.00 hbk, 0 340 74369 7, £5.99 pbk, 1 84032 565 8, £7.99 audio tape

Skellig, 0 340 76483 X, £10.00 hbk, 0 340 71600 2, £5.99 pbk, 1 84032 629 8, £8.99 unabridged audio tape, 1 84032 682 4, £14.99 CDs

Wild Girl Wild Boy: A Play, 0 340 85431 6, £5.99 pbk



[David Almond.JPG](#) [3]



[David Almond.JPG](#) [4]

Page Number:

8

Source URL (retrieved on Apr '20): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/142/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no142-david-almond>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/peter-hollindale>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/142>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/David Almond.JPG>

[4] http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/David Almond_0.JPG