



My Dad's a Birdman

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David Almond on his new novel.

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The winner of the Carnegie Medal in 1998 for his novel **Skellig**, David Almond is well known for his intensely imagined magic realist novels for older readers. Now with **My Dad's a Birdman**, a novel for younger readers, he has begun to write books that require collaboration with an illustrator. How did it come about? **David Almond** explains.

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My Dad's a Birdman started life as a play. It was commissioned by David Lan at the Young Vic. He wanted a play for younger children to be put on in the small studio space while **Skellig** played on the main stage. What kind of play, I asked. Anything you want, he said. We'd just like you to take some Skellig themes. Play around with them. See what you come up with. So I started doodling and scribbling and images of wings and flying were everywhere on the page. And Jackie Crow appeared, strapping home-made wings to his back, and his daughter Lizzie and dumpy Auntie Doreen with her dumplings, and Mr Mint and Mr Poop, and pretty soon there was a Great Human Bird Competition going on, and here came the Human Helicopter Hubert Hall and Elastic Eddie from Ellsmere Port and the play was leaping into life. It was a lovely thing to write. It came fast and fluently and there it was, a script on the page: loosely-spaced lines of dialogue, a few stage directions, and all around the words there was lots of white space. The space was for my collaborators, of course: for the director, the designer, the actors; for their interpretations of my words, for their own visions of what this play could be. And as we set off into rehearsals, I rewrote lines and adjusted the story to fit our wider vision, and the play developed and grew. And there it was again: **My Dad's a Birdman**, a play. My words, my story, but the story jumped off the page and came to life in front of hundreds of happy children and their parents.

[image:Dad+ Bird - Almond.JPG:left]

It ran to full houses for a fortnight over Christmas. Afterwards, the script lay in my drawer. Occasionally I took it out and pondered it. I knew I could do something else with it. I tried reducing it to a picture book text, but I couldn't get the story to fit.

By then, I'd already written one picture book: **Kate, the Cat and the Moon**, beautifully illustrated by Stephen Lambert. I was beginning to really enjoy writing for a younger audience, and I was beginning to really enjoy collaboration. All writing involves collaboration, of course ? a writer needs a reader if his writing is to live. I love black words on white paper. I spend hours, weeks, years getting words to work. I love to shape them and organise them. I love the way publishers bind them into books and make them appear to be perfect. The perfection is an illusion, of course. Every story is embryonic, unfinished. It only begins to achieve its full life when a reader turns the pages, when hard black print is transformed by the reader's imagination into voices and visions and dreams.

Most of my work has been for older children. Most of my books are long-ish novels. But one of the joys of being a children's author is the variety of possible forms: long novels, short novels, picture books, poetry, plays. The children's book world is a place of great creativity and experimentation. I tell my ?adult? writer friends and I suspect they don't believe me. But think of a children's book department. Where else will you find writers and artists playing and

experimenting so energetically with narrative, with point-of-view, with book size, book shape, word size, word shape, with adventurous blends of picture and text? There are books that look like 'proper' books, with page after page of closely-printed text. But there are also books where the words are hardly there at all. And there are books with flaps, books with holes in them, books that buzz, books that flash... The list is endless.

Anyway, I finished my most recent novel, **Clay**. It was probably the culmination of all the novels I'd written before. I didn't start another novel (usually, one book comes to an end and within a few days I'm scribbling notes for the next). My head felt pretty empty. I doodled about pretty aimlessly. Then I took out **My Dad's a Birdman** again. I tried a first line: 'An ordinary spring morning in 12 Lark Lane' and the whole thing burst into life. I couldn't stop. Within four days I had the first draft of a short novel. And yes, it worked as black words on white paper, but I knew it needed another collaborator - an illustrator to bring their vision to the story, just as my collaborators in the theatre had done before. I pondered with the people at Walker Books. 'Polly Dunbar!' said David Lloyd. 'Polly Dunbar!' said Jane Winterbotham. I already knew Polly's wonderful **Shoe Baby** and **Flyaway Katie**. 'Polly Dunbar!' I said.

So we sent it to Polly and we crossed our fingers. She was already so busy. She might not want to do it. But she did. And from the moment I saw her very first sketches I knew that her illustrations would be perfect for this book. And they are. And I can no longer imagine my story without them.

My Dad's a Birdman, illustrated by Polly Dunbar, is published by Walker Books (978 1 4063 0486 2, £8.99 hbk).



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