



# William Blake and angels? wings: Skellig fifteenth anniversary

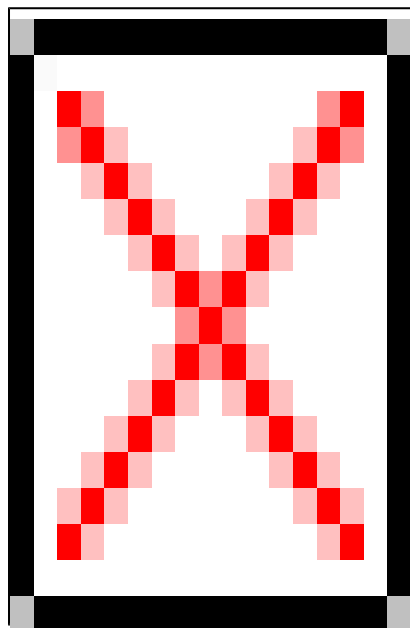
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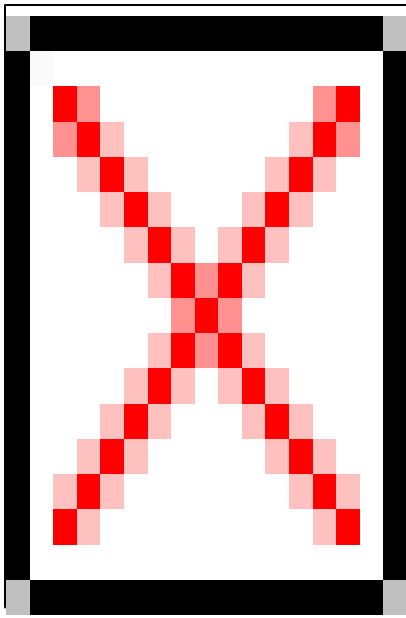
**David Almond** interviewed by Geraldine Brennan



It is 15 years since the publication of **Skellig**. David Almond's extraordinary novel was an immediate success and has now sold one million copies in the English language alone. He discussed the book and his writing with Geraldine Brennan.

If David Almond's output to date were a rainbow with **Skellig** at the beginning, his latest picture book with Dave McKean, **Mouse Bird Snake Wolf**, would be the pot of gold.

The story of three children finishing the work of the bored and lazy grown-up gods, **Mouse Bird Snake Wolf** explores all the highs and lows of artistic collaboration: the thrill of discovery and the creation of something greater than the sum of its parts, set against fear of the unknown and the need to trust both the work and the collaborators. The smallest child, Ben, is the George Harrison of the group, looking on anxiously at his older siblings? Lennon and McCartney act but eventually adding his unique achievements to the mix.



**Skellig**, the novel that captured David Almond unawares on a trip to the post-box in the Newcastle suburb where he lived in the late 1990s, brought opportunities that transformed his writing life. A series of fruitful collaborations (including those with illustrators Polly Dunbar Oliver Jeffers and Dave McKean) have been among the chief creative pleasures of the past 15 years.

'**Skellig** has brought me so much: the chance to work with actors and directors in particular. I still remember the thrill of seeing David Threlfall become Skellig for the first time [in the first stage adaptation at the Young Vic in 2003, directed by Trevor Nunn]. He was able to look very old and very young almost in the same moment.

'Also the theatre adaptations and of course the opera have shown me aspects of **Skellig** I hadn't fully noticed before, for example that it's full of sounds. Every time there is a new production the actors show me something new and some part of the story becomes nothing to do with me.

'You go into a rehearsal room thinking you know what the story is, because you wrote it, and then you find that anything can happen. You have to be ready to take what you find there and let the work start again, just as when you sit down to write you don't know what will happen. You can't ever assume that you know how to do it because you've done it before.

'Children show us the way on this, they just get on with it and don't let the fear of losing control stop them.'

Almond's work pre-Skellig (two unpublished novels and many short stories, some published in literary magazines) had been targeted at an adult readership. 'I was an intelligent grown-up so I assumed I would be writing for intelligent grown-ups. I was not widely published and working in a subculture that could be ignored. There were benefits and freedoms that came from that. I was just plugging away.

'**Skellig** was like nothing I had written before. It came to me like a gift and I changed it very little from the day when I rushed home and wrote it down.'

Through his day job as a teacher of children with severe learning and emotional needs he was aware of the importance of the creative arts to children's well being, but **Skellig** was his entrée to the children's literature world, tapping new artistic sources.

'It seemed that literature had become even more fertile, abundant and multi-faceted than I had realised and it was very liberating for me. The time of trying to justify and explain my life as a writer was over. Because Skellig was immediately weirdly successful, I was asked to travel and do amazing things. All the possibilities of the children's book world opened to me.

'I'd written **Kit's Wilderness** [his second novel] by the time **Skellig** was published so I didn't have the pressure of not knowing whether I could follow it.'

He enjoys showing children on the school visits that he still prioritises the densely scribbled notebooks where his work begins: 'They're full of scribbles and doodles. It's play, but serious play'. There is discipline about the practice but the outcome is playful. When the creative process shifts to the word processor, he works in whole-page view. Brought up visiting his uncle's printing works and sewing his own first stories into books as a child, he loves the physical properties of type on paper. 'I like to play with the length of sentences and paragraphs.'

As well as a mystery and adventure story about a boy, a girl and an ancient creature who could be a tramp or an angel, **Skellig** is the story of the nurturing of the creative spirit.

Michael, the 10-year-old narrator of **Skellig**, is in the perfect state for his imagination to take flight when the novel opens: overlooked by busy and distracted adults, cut off from his mates by a recent house move, bored enough to explore the out-of-bounds garage in the dead time of a suburban Sunday afternoon.

He's ripe for two important encounters: with Skellig, the creature who is almost part of the fabric of the derelict garage, and with Mina, the girl next door, who becomes his collaborator in Skellig's rehabilitation. Michael's family difficulties mean he steps out of his routine of school and football and dips his toe into Mina's imaginative world, learning about Greek myths, bird skeletons, William Blake and angels' wings.

'One thing I noticed when I was teaching is how much more free girls were able to be in expressing their imaginative side and how much boys envied that' says David Almond. 'Mina is a strong character, having had four sisters I wouldn't have been able to make her any other way. Readers asked so many questions about her that I realised there was more to say.'

**My Name is Mina**, the prequel to **Skellig**, was published in 2010, expanding on Mina's artistic vision and her unhappy relationship with formal education. Skellig does not appear in Mina's story but we see the garage, the empty house it belongs to and the arrival of Michael's family through her eyes.

Today's readers might well encounter **My Name is Mina** before **Skellig** and will be introduced to the themes and settings of the earlier novel through Mina's visit to the empty house she has inherited, where owls fly at night, and her exploration of the 'Underworld', the abandoned mine in her local park (a section that evokes **Kit's Wilderness**).

Although many of Mina's adventures are sparked by abstract ideas, they embrace tangible substances – coal and clay, pomegranates and fig rolls – all found in her home and the streets around it.

Chapters with titles such as 'Banana, Weirdos, A Beautiful Tree and Boring Heaven' set the reader homework for the imagination such as writing 'a page of utter nonsense' or doing some serious sky-watching.

**My Name is Mina** can be read as an explanation of some of the imaginative world of **Skellig** and Almond's own conviction that, 'Society is becoming more playful generally. There is evidence of children being immersed in art, music and literature. There is room for great optimism for anyone working in children's books. I can go to a classroom and ask 'Who here is a writer?' and 10 nine-year-olds will put their hands up.'

'People who say children don't read any more or have lost their imaginations need to visit some schools and find out what goes on there. We haven't got William Blake as minister for education, but despite that there is wonderful work going on.'

David Almond is artistic director of the Bath Festival of Children's Literature, September 27-October 6  
[www.bathfestivals.org.uk](http://www.bathfestivals.org.uk) [3]

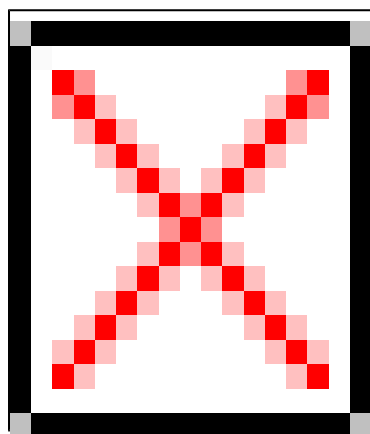
**Skellig**, David Almond, Hodder Children's Books, 176pp, 978-0-3409-9704-8, £6.99 pbk

**Skellig (15th anniversary edition)**, Hodder Children's Books, 288pp, 978-1-4449-1475-7. £12.99 hbk

**Kit's Wilderness**, David Almond, Hodder Children's Books, 233pp, 978-0-3409-4496-7, £6.99 pbk

**My Name is Mina**, David Almond, Hodder Children's Books, 300pp, 978-0-3409-9726-0, £6.99 pbk

**Mouse Bird Snake Wolf** David Almond, illustrated by Oliver Jeffers, Walker Books, 80pp, 978-1406322897, £9.99



Geraldine Brennan is a journalist specialising in children's books and education, regularly reviews for the **Observer** and has judged several literary awards.

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