

UKLA Author Case Study Series

David Almond

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“Did William Blake do writing tasks just because somebody else told him to? And what level would he have got anyway? Would Shakespeare have been well above average? And Dickens and Chaucer and Keats and Shirley Hughes and Maurice Sendak and Michael Rosen. Did any of them do stupid silly SATS? I SUSPECT NOT!” (Almond, 2010)

David Almond has professed a passion for writing that he claims may stem from the enjoyment he felt whilst watching the ‘printed pages coming off the rollers’ (Almond, 2013) when he was just a few months old. He dreamt vehemently of one day finding his own books on library shelves. Almond notes his most favoured books as a child ‘included the tales of King Arthur and his knights, the books of T. Lobsang Rampa and Hemingway’s stories’ (Almond, 2013) and his work often delicately mirrors the fundamental ideas he would have been exposed to reading these books. For example, the work of T. Lobsang Rampa is deeply spiritual, with instances of the occult; Almond’s characters possess inhuman powers, experience moments of extreme spirituality and mysticism and faith (or lack of it) at times. Ernest Hemingway’s themes of isolation and existentialism are also addressed in Almond’s work. His protagonists often suffer with personal, internal choices and the reader is left no option but to join them in uncovering a conclusion.

Almond lost his baby sister when he was seven years old and his Father died during his teens. As an author he addresses the issue of loss and bereavement in a large majority of his work. He confronts the effects of death in his novel for younger readers: *My Dad’s a Birdman*

(2007). Lizzie the protagonist is a young girl whose mother passed away. It had become Lizzie's duty to look after her Father who had unconventional ways of dealing with his grief; he regressed to a child-like state. She is portrayed as the stereotypical adult. She provides the stability in their lives and although young herself, she has taken on the parental role. Almond characterises Lizzie as being endowed with great strength and love; she supports her Father through his endeavors and insists 'I am not a poor child' (Almond, 2007:43). Almond seems to be expressing the message that people can cope with grief together. The book is not overcome with the sadness of loss, but occupied with a sense of hope, of continuing to live and imagine and appreciate the people who are still living. The artwork in the book (by the respected illustrator Polly Dunbar) fits perfectly with the themes in the story. In the beginning the pictures are bleak, and dull, reflecting the difficult time they are going through. As emotional shifts occur in the story the pictures reflect this and they become bright and colourful. This reinforces the sense of time being a healer, and the journey people go through whilst grieving.

Clay

O'Reilly (2010) describes Almond's work as similar to the style of William Blake (the poet's work is explicitly referenced in *My Name is Mina* (2010) and *Skellig* (1998)) as he observes the nature of life; 'exploring the interaction between good and bad, pleasure and pain' (O'Reilly, 2010). Almond lets the reader see his protagonists' inner struggle, as they grow to accept good and evil. Certainly in *Clay* (2005) Davie experiences the kind of confusion and disorder that Almond himself comments upon: 'Growing up [...] involves coming to terms with a world in which reality and myth, truth and lies, turn about each other in a creative dance, as they always have and always will' (Almond as cited in O'Reilly, 2010).

Almond toys with ideas of life and death in *Clay* (2005). He writes of a boy named Stephen Rose who has incredible powers of bringing clay figures to life. "Live!" he snapped. "Move, you stupid object! Live!" It squirmed in his cupped hands' (Almond, 2005: 92). The plot of *Clay* (2005) bears resonance to Jewish folklore which tells the story of a Jewish teacher forming a creature or Golem out of clay. Psalm 139 (as cited in Glinert, 2001) describes the creatures: 'My body is no mystery to Thee, How I was secretly kneaded into shape, And patterned in the depths of the earth.' It is said that these Golems, once created, became destructive, a message Davie conveys in the novel. He places blame on humankind itself: 'You can go too far. You can create too much' (Almond, 2005:211), Davie states, 'some of the things that we create are...destructive.' His teacher replies emphatically, 'It is the human paradox,'...'our passion

to create goes hand in hand with our passion to destroy' (Almond, 2005:212).

Stephen has a dark appeal for Davie, though he is unsure about what he has seen and suffers nightmares because of this. Davie wonders 'is it only God who can breathe life into the world, only God who can create?'(Almond, 2005:95). Almond has created an interesting character by establishing Stephen in this way. Readers are drawn in to believe that it is the bully Martin Mouldy who is the true antagonist. Indeed, in the beginning 'Mouldy' is threatening and it is Stephen who saves Davie and his friend. As the story unfolds Mouldy becomes more developed as a character. The reader learns of his Father's death and is forced by Almond to empathise with him and his mother. This gives humanity to an otherwise frightening character. Perhaps Almond's experiences as a teacher gave him the insight to understand that unwanted behaviours are often explicable.

As Stephen begins successfully to invoke curiosity and interest in Davie's imagination, his character begins to develop. Davie's friend Geordie gives the reader a clue quite early on of Stephen's true nature, but Almond carefully portrays this as idle gossip: 'They said Stephen Rose was an evil influence. They said there was some kind of devil worship involved' (Almond, 2005:43) builds suspense and arouses interest. Could Geordie's story be true? The reader may choose to dismiss Geordie's tale because it is presented as gossip. Even by the end of the novel it is up to the reader to decide whether Stephen is a type of devil, or if good and evil even exist. Stephen's guarded nature slips occasionally and he reveals a more sinister side. The reader is shown the menacing way in which he treats his Aunt 'Crazy Mary'. Davie objects to this yet still does not abandon Stephen; driven by his curiosity he continues to delve deeper into this dark world. It could be considered that Almond meant Stephen to be Davie's dark counterpart, that Stephen was a part of Davie. As they make the monster Clay together, Clay is unable to kill Mouldy. Stephen suggests this is because Clay had too much of Davie's goodness within him. This portrays the idea that Davie understands and respects life. Stephen however, who suffered loss (through the death of his Father) and abandonment (his Mother became mentally ill), is bitter and reckless and disregards the sanctity of life.

Male and female characters

The majority of Almond's work features a male protagonist although girls and women often occupy central roles. A common theme is of a boy who is seeking guidance (Clay (2005), Skellig

(1998), *The Boy who swam with Piranhas* (2012), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *The Savage* (2008)). The boys are all coping with adult situations and eventually they come to conclusion, through consistently, though not always explicitly, receiving guidance. In *Clay* (2005) Davie turns to the priest and his art teacher in an attempt to determine differences between or the existence of good and evil, of natural and paranormal beings. After witnessing the strange Stephen Rose instigating supernatural power upon a clay figure, Davie asks his art teacher if an artist is a type of God. His teacher insists that an artist's skill 'may indeed be God given, but nevertheless...human' (Almond, 2005:97). This advice does not completely satisfy Davie, nor do his confessionals with the priest. Eventually he finds peace with a girl named Maria; upon asking her if she thinks he is 'mad' she replies, 'This is you...sane and slightly barmy like all of us' (Almond, 2005:290). Maria offers simple, honest advice.

In Almond's first novel *Skellig* (1998), Michael, the troubled protagonist, finds guidance from a female friend called Mina. He trusts her intelligence and kindness enough to share with her the secret of *Skellig*. Mina is full of sensitive wisdom and when Michael worries that he cannot feel his sister's heartbeat she quotes William Blake to calm him. It is interesting that Almond's character Mina is strong and intelligent. In the prequel to *Skellig* *My Name is Mina* (2010) the reader is offered a deeper insight into Mina's life: the loss of her father and her departure from mainstream schooling. It seems as though Almond choosing for her Father to die helps to accentuate the feminine strength of both Mina and her mother. With characters such as Lizzie (*My Dad's a birdman* (2007)), Mina and her mother (*My Name is Mina* (2010)) and Maria (*Clay* (2005)) the reader is able to feel Almond's respect for women. The loss of his father at a young age meant that Almond was raised by his mother; he also has four sisters, all of whom could affect his representation of women in his novels. Women are portrayed by him as compassionate mothers, teachers and friends.

The Savage

Many of Almond's novels are set in the North-East of England and the characters and dialect reflect this. Almond has said 'I do feel like a regional writer but that doesn't mean I'm inward-looking, it is more about feeling a responsibility to get it right' (Almond, cited in Griffith, 2010). Although the majority of his work is deeply grounded in the language and setting of the North-East, Almond does not want to be typecast as a purely regional writer. In an article in *The Guardian*, he defends the use of 'commin langwij'. The piece is a response to a teacher who asked the parents of her pupils to correct their local accents and grammar. Some 'sed that the acsent must be purjed lyk the sownd of it was a sine of sin' (Almond, 2013); many may argue that, for example, in the case of *The Savage* (2008) the colloquial language is setting a bad example for

the young readers. Almond (2013) rebuts:

Langwij has to ecko on the air and it has to dyve doon to the hart an sole. The rite langwij can be the rang langwij for sum books. Sum ov the grate books of the world is rit qwite rong. Books by them lyk Billy Forkna, Russil Hoban, Jimmy Joyce. And the rong words is wot the aynshent tales were telt in, and how aal the songs woz sung.

Almond's belief that language has to 'echo on the air' and 'dive down into the heart and soul' echoes his own work which invokes spirit and passion through the language it uses: 'Yes the savage was startin to lern about words. Yes, the savge wos learning abowt what it felt like to be human, and yes the savage was lernin abowt good and bad in people, but the savage woz still the savage' (Almond, 2008: 51). Almond, as a teacher, understands the importance of children engaging with literature. He accepts the inherent need to give his readers something they can connect with and learn from. In *The Savage* (2008) a graphic novel (illustrated by Dave McKean) intertwined with a narrative, the use of colloquial language is a notable feature. Blue Baker, the novel's troubled protagonist had been encouraged by his school counsellor to 'explore [his] grief' (Almond, 2008:7). The novel begins with Blue telling his story to the readers, explaining that he was 'younger then' (Almond, 2008:7). He has been encouraged to express his feelings about the death of his Father so decides to write a story. Almond writes Blue's story in a different font. Appearing more like scrawling handwriting than the font expected in a book, it immerses the reader in Blue's consciousness. The spelling is phonetic, 'famly', 'rooined', 'nives' (Almond, 2008:10), this stylistic choice emphasising Blue's own 'savage', unrefined nature at the time of the loss of his father. By the end of the book, when his bully (Hopper) and his grief had been dealt with, Blue tells the reader, 'my spelling's much improved', thus representing his growth as a person.

So the argument as to whether Almond should reject using regional language (as the teacher in the article implored her pupils to do) is purely the decision of the reader or the educator. Does Almond want his work to be deeply critiqued, or simply enjoyed?

Almond's appeal to young readers

Almond has won a number of awards, including the most prestigious award in children's literature - The Hans Christian Andersen award. His first novel *Skellig* (1998) is now a staple in a young person's literary diet. It won the Whitbread Children's Award and the Carnegie Medal. Many of his other novels have been shortlisted, and there is no questioning his undeniable talent for creating poignant narrative, thought-provoking plotlines and rich characters. Although he displays extreme humility it is evident his childhood experiences have created a writer that it is imperative young readers are exposed to.

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