



# David Almond: a retrospective

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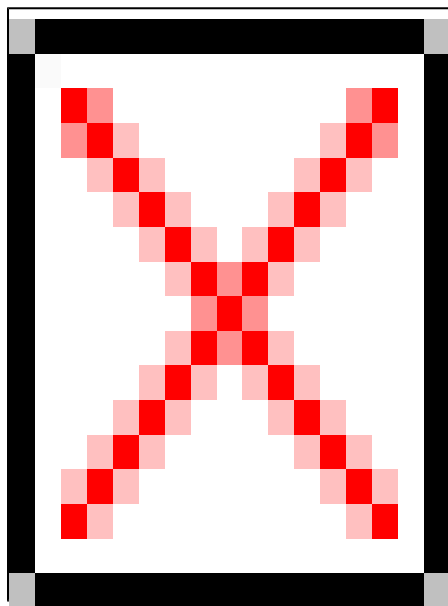
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**Clive Barnes** assesses Almond's contribution to children's literature.



In September, at the IBBY World Congress in Spain, David Almond will become the twenty-ninth writer for children and young people to receive the Hans Christian Andersen Award. He joins an illustrious international group. Some in this exclusive club – like Virginia Hamilton, Martin Waddell, Patricia Wrightson, Margaret Mahy, Maria Gripe and Tove Jansson – will be familiar to readers of children's books in English. Other Hans Andersen winners, because of the lack of interest in publishing books in translation in this country and the United States, are little known to us. Almond is only the third British writer to be given the award, following Eleanor Farjeon, the first winner in 1956, and Aidan Chambers in 2002. Illustrators Quentin Blake (2002) and Anthony Browne (2000) have been recipients of the illustrator's Award. **BfK** invited **Clive Barnes** to assess David Almond's contribution to children's literature.

David Almond is, of course, no stranger to awards. His first novel, **Skellig**, scooped both the Whitbread (now the Costa) Children's Book Award and the Carnegie Medal; and his subsequent work has been shortlisted for and honoured with major awards in this country, the United States, and in Europe. But the IBBY award is not just one more to add to the list, it puts him in a particular group of twentieth-century writers, and it points to some of his distinctive qualities as a writer for young people.

## **The whole body of a writer's work**

The Hans Andersen is one of the few awards which are given for the whole body of a writer's work: for work that has not only made, in the words of the Award's criteria, 'a lasting contribution to children's literature'; but that has 'taken that literature forward'. In a remarkably short time – it is, after all, only 12 years since the publication of **Skellig** – Almond has established himself as a writer with a distinctive voice whose work both entertains and challenges children.

The most obvious aspect of Almond's distinctiveness as a writer, and one that is mentioned by the judges on IBBY's international jury, is the particular mixture of realism and fantasy in his books. This was apparent in his first book for children. Skellig, discovered by Michael in the chaotic jumble of a dilapidated garage, is a broken, dirty and homeless creature who gobbles insects and the cold leftovers of Chinese takeaway dinners and yet, beneath his shabby suit, has wings on his back. He may be a man, a bird or an angel. Without telling anyone about Skellig, Michael and Mina protect and nurture him, drawing power from him, just as he does from them: a power that sets Skellig free to soar; opens Mina and Michael's eyes to the extraordinary world they live in and their own singularity; and somehow embraces Michael, his family and his ailing baby sister with healing love.

The familiar critical term that the judges use to describe Almond's vision is 'magical realism', linking him to writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, for whom Almond has expressed admiration. But the term barely conveys the power of a vision which has the spiritual intensity of William Blake, another of Almond's acknowledged inspirations, and is almost medieval in its acceptance of the miraculous and its significance. For himself, Almond tends to stress the realism of his work. His novels never stray outside the area where he grew up, the Northeast of England. Nearly all are set within a few miles of his childhood home, and all celebrate a particular regional and working class identity, including its distinctive language and way of looking at life. However, in his books, everyday situations draw their characters and readers towards amazing experiences and revelations. Often there are mysterious happenings or creatures, like Skellig himself; or like Clay, the golem like figure in the novel of the same name(2005), who has been created as an agent of vengeance and destruction by the deeply disturbed Stephen. In the novels, just as in medieval stories or plays, these manifestations are received with wonder and doubt, but not ultimately with disbelief. They grow from the characters' anxieties, needs and aspirations, and ask questions of their discoverers or creators. At the end of May this year, Almond's new version of the medieval mystery play, **Noah and the Fludd**, had its premiere at Durham. There could be no modern writer with better credentials for the job.

### **An international ideal of common humanity**

Almond's distinctive voice was not the only source of his appeal to the IBBY judges. The award is made by an international jury and there is no other award that has the same international dimension. To be considered, a writer doesn't need to be translated into many different languages or to sell well abroad, although Almond's books are and do. Some of the other winners have not been published outside their native country or language. What is essential is that a writer must address aspects of an international ideal of common humanity and cultural particularity. IBBY's present president, Patsy Aidana, a Canadian publisher, puts it most succinctly, talking about children's literature as providing both mirrors and windows: mirrors in which children see themselves reflected, especially important in those countries that do not have their own publishing industry; and windows through which children can see how other people live.

Almond has a remarkable capacity to engage and empathise with children and young people, particularly with those under stress. In **Kit's Wilderness** (1999), Christopher has to cope with his grandfather's illness and death, and with the erratic and frightening behaviour of his friend, John Askew, the victim of a broken, drunken father. The children in **Heaven Eyes** (2000) are on the run from a children's home. Sometimes, personal tragedy is compounded by catastrophes of deeper cause and wider repercussion. In **The Fire Eaters**(2003) it is the Cuban Missile Crisis. In **Jackdaw Summer** (2008), it is terrorist atrocities in the Middle East and genocide in Africa. Almond has the ability to meld the personal with the global, to make distant terror immediate, to draw out the individual responsibility for collective horror, and still, usually, to find hope 'and all within a young person's understanding.

The effect of the work on its readers was equally important to the Hans Andersen judges, and they stressed the way in which 'Almond captures his young readers' imagination and motivates them to read, think and be critical'. Almond prompts young people to look at the world in a new way and to discover and trust their own instincts and ways of thinking. While adhering strongly to notions of good and evil, he urges young people to examine the conventional shapes of these notions carefully and to realise how slippery and shifting they can be. His novels frequently feature disorienting experiences: for his characters, like the game of death in **Kit's Wilderness**; or, for his readers, like the brilliant opening chapter of the same novel, in which the exultant triumph of friendship and courage over danger is all, and place and time have become irrelevant.

## Children discovering who they are

Almond has argued that young people have a semi-independent world, with a timeless primitive quality: a world of ritual, glimpsed in children's play and games, which is drawn to danger and struggle, concerned with growing through facing trials, engaged with elemental questions, and imbued with imaginative and creative power; power to wound and power to heal. His stories frequently take place in wild places, away from adults, where, for better or worse, children make their own rules and form their own communities. Home, school, and the wider society are as important in these novels as in his readers' lives. Adults are important sources of love, reassurance, inspiration and advice, as well as anxiety and, sometimes, fear. But, most often, as in **Skelligor Clay**, adults do not know the whole story and cannot provide solutions. It is young people who make their own choices and discover who they are for themselves.

All of Almond's work acknowledges the importance of young people's imagination and creativity. The young people in his books devise games and secret rituals, act out fantasies, paint, draw and sculpt, write stories, and, most recently, in **Jackdaw Summer**, even create video installations. They engage intensely with the natural and social worlds around them as a way of understanding themselves and absorbing and expressing powerful feelings that threaten to overwhelm them. In **The Savage** (2008), illustrated by Dave McKean, Blue creates a story that enables him to deal with his anxieties both about a bully that threatens him and the death of his father.

Almond is not sentimental about young people. His books show how young people can as well be turned to cruelty and destruction as to hope and redemption. Stephen in **Clay**, and Natrass, in **Jackdaw Summer**, are young people who find meaning and fulfilment in violence and cruelty. Yet, underlying the darkest moments in Almond's work, there is a current of wonder in life, in friendship and love, and a tenderness to the young, the vulnerable and the wounded, that constantly holds out hope for his characters and his readers. This found a new expression in **My Dad's A Birdman** (2007), an illustrated story for younger children, dedicated in part to Almond's daughter Freya: a joyous surreal comedy in which the loving and resourceful Lizzie indulges her father's fantasy of being a bird. This was followed last year by a further collaboration with illustrator Polly Dunbar for younger children in **The Boy Who Climbed Into the Moon**.

As his work has developed, Almond seems to have become more aware of what he has to say and keen to take on new challenges. In response to the Hans Andersen Award itself, he says that he is encouraged to be even bolder. Work that is due to be published includes another illustrated book with Dave McKean and a prequel to **Skellig: My Name is Mina**. This is a journal kept by Mina before she meets Michael, in which she sets out her particular philosophy of life, many elements of which will be immediately recognisable to readers of Almond's earlier books. It's a way of looking at the world that is very much the author's own, and whose singularity and universal appeal has now been properly honoured by the Hans Andersen Award. In the author's own words: "Growing up is a passionate activity that engrosses the body, mind, senses, emotions, spirit. It involves seeing the world as it is, plain and factual, but it also involves exploring the wildness and great mystery at its heart. It 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."

**Clive Barnes** has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian. He is now a freelance researcher and writer and a member of the British IBBY committee.

**David Almond's** books are published by Hodder Children's Books and Walker Books.

**David Almond's** website is: [www.davidalmond.com](http://www.davidalmond.com) [3]

[David Almond's Authorgraph](#) [4] published in **BfK 142** September 2003.

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