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My Name is Mina

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

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Media type:

Book

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A cat called Whisper, a school called St Bede's Middle, a former neighbour called Mr Myers, a friend called Sophie Smith, a part-time journalist mother and, most significant of all, a dead father whose grave is in the local churchyard: these are the principal signposts to the world inhabited by nine-year-old Mina, the wonderfully realised and immediately engaging heroine of David Almond's novel. Although it is being promoted as 'the prequel to **Skellig**' it stands totally successfully by itself, essentially because Almond's depiction of its central character is so convincingly true to life that, right from the opening sentence, she immediately jumps into the reader's consciousness. Fond of quoting Blake 'Blake the Misfit, Blake the Outsider' she argues vigorously for a child's liberation from societal and educational norms and wittily emphasises the case for the creative and linguistic imagination. (In a book with many brilliant set pieces there is a particularly hilarious but at the same time extremely thought-provoking episode relating the events of the day on which Mina takes her SATS tests: they will never seem the same again.)

The world as it is will, one suspects, always find its Minas difficult to accommodate. To her loving mother she may well be 'a girl with her own opinions and attitudes' but to the majority of others, such as the beautifully named Ms Palaver from the local 'Pupil Referral Unit', she will almost inevitably remain merely 'an impertinent girl with her pompous crackpot notions'. It is only when she meets some of the other children attending the Unit 'a bunch of misfits in a place that accepted them as misfits' that she begins to feel free from the constrictions of conventional thinking; it is also here that she realises the need to tell her own story in her own terms, a far cry from the artificial exercises of school 'composition'. It all amounts to a poignant, heart-warming novel, fuelled by Almond's generosity of spirit and his endorsement of childhood's individuality and quirkiness. As a footnote, it should be added that in terms of structure and presentation it is as strikingly original as Mina herself.

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