

Mr Chancellor

1998 was a good year for Angels up here. Gormley's Angel of the North was erected, and *Skellig*, David Almond's first and most celebrated children's book, was published. Children's book. Really? My husband and I - without a child in sight - chose to listen to David Almond reading *Skellig* while we were on holiday together, and sat parked in the car listening to the ending rather than wait another day. I've just listened to *Clay* - allegedly also aimed at young people - and wondered if it was really rather too scary - for me! The quality of Almond's writing works at every level - the language is poetic, the themes are universal, the psychology is exemplary (I should know, I am a psychologist). Almond's characters include ordinary children and extraordinary ones, children who are nice and ones who are not so nice. Children and adolescents who think they are ordinary but become extraordinary through their courage and belief and compassion. The boy Michael in *Skellig* internalises and monitors his sick baby sister's heart-beat, while helping a dusty arthritic angel regain his strength. The precocious Mina attunes Michael's listening powers so that he can hear the faintest of bird songs, and helps him to be strong as well as sensitive. We now know from Mina's diary, recently published as the prequel to *Skellig*, that speaking to Michael took some guts on her part too. Almond's writing deals not so much with the currently fashionable world of magic, but with more grown up themes of religion and spirituality- directly, as in *Clay* - or indirectly in *Skellig* - the creature who is sort of an angel, but perhaps also sort of an owl, in human guise.

Almond's children have lovely mams and dads and ordinary blokish friends who cannot always understand the complexities of the world or of growing up. We see Almond's rich fictional worlds simultaneously through the eyes of these nice kids and through the distant world of their parents too. A double vision. Extraordinary. Almond also creates monsters, and some of his monsters are human ones. This September will see publication of *The true tale of the monster Billy Dean* in a form suitable for adults as well as children - I expect it will be very scary indeed.

How does he do it? Where do the stories and insights come from? David was born in Felling to a story-telling catholic family. Like Davie in *Clay* he was an altar boy. Like Davie, he sometimes nicked his Dad's fags, and he used to play in an old quarry.

He started writing seriously after he had finished his degree in English and American literature at East Anglia. He came back to the North East to write, and at the same time he was a teacher. For several years he taught and he wrote, stories and novels, initially for adults. He supported himself by teaching children with learning difficulties and writing booklets for adult literacy schemes when money was short. He published two short story collections for adults and spent five years writing an adult novel that was rejected by every UK publisher. He finally found his authorial voice in a sequence of tender, unsentimental autobiographical stories about growing up in Felling, later to be published as *Counting Stars* in 2000. But before then, he started writing *Skellig*, and since creating his own northern angel, he has not looked back.

He says he didn't know what would happen after the start of *Skellig*. After Michael "found him in a garage on a Sunday afternoon". Authors say this – they don't know where their stories are going. Us mortals are always sceptical. But I'm sure he really did not foresee that *Skellig* would propel him onto the national and international stage. *Skellig* became a play, an opera and a film, and the book was listed in the ten best children's novels of the past 70 years in the 2007 Carnegie-of-Carnegie awards.

Unlike some other acclaimed children's writers - I name no names - David Almond does not just write great stories and develop believable characters, he is a truly great writer. David's language is lyrical – he makes poetry from dialect through the repetition of words and phrases. The monster Clay does "nowt" and "nowt" and Davie sees "nowt". Almond's observations are subtle and evocative. Of *Skellig*, we hear, repeatedly, that "he laughed but he didn't smile". This outstanding creativity was recognised in a string of awards for *Skellig* and many of his later books. He won The Carnegie Medal and Whitbread children's book award for *Skellig* in 1998, which also won the Michael L Printz award in America in 2001. The Whitbread children's award was also given for *The Fire Eaters* in 2003, and the Costa Children's book award for *Clay* in 2006. In 2010 David Almond was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen award for children's literature. This is a truly major achievement reflecting the highest possible international recognition. Every two years the International Board for Books for Young People presents this award to a living author whose complete works have made a lasting

contribution to children's literature. Each participating country nominates just one author and David is only the third UK recipient of the prize since 1956.

It is quite extraordinary that this can have been won in 2010 just 12 years after his first published novel. David's international reach does much more than underline his literary achievements on the world stage – it demonstrates that he takes our culture, our dialect, our geography, our history and habits, our extraordinary children, to the world. Almond's writing must be one of the region's most influential exports.

David is a wonderful friend of Newcastle University. He has been associated with the Children's Literature Unit here since its establishment. He attends events, has spoken at conferences and taught creative writing, and is helping us to develop links with Seven Stories: the Centre for Children's Books, at the Ouseburn here in Newcastle, of which he is a Patron. We are honoured to have this association with this incredible writer, and delighted that he will join our alumni.

Chancellor, for his contributions to children's literature and to the wider culture and reputation of North East England, I invite you to confer on David Almond the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.