

Chapter 1

Introduction: David Almond and Mystical Realism

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Tyger, tyger, burning bright

In the forests of the night

William Blake, 'The Tyger' (from *Songs of Experience* 1794)

It has been both challenging and exhilarating to work with eminent researchers across the world in preparing this Palgrave Macmillan Casebook on the work of British writer David Almond. David Almond's books have somehow struck that elusive balance of appealing to both critics and readers, including and most especially young readers. In 2010 Almond won the highly prestigious biennial Hans Christian Andersen Award, which recognises the lasting contribution to children's literature of a living author. He has also won the Carnegie Medal (for *Skellig* in 1998), the Whitbread Children's Award (twice), based both on literary merit and popular appeal, and numerous other international awards and prizes. A complete list of books and awards may be found in Appendix 2.

David Almond is an author whose books may appear deceptively simple – they are not excessively long (some are quite short), the stories are usually told in simple language and indeed spare prose, and there is very little actual description of characters or place. (*My Name is Mina*, 2010, is more descriptive in these areas than the other books). Yet, as the contributions to this volume attest, his work attracts international discussion of highly complex issues; his prose is lyrical and likened to poetry; his use of landscape is evocative and mostly clearly recognisable, and his characters are unique and unforgettable. Somehow, this is achieved both nimbly and poignantly. For these and many other reasons discussed in this volume, Almond is an intriguing

and enigmatic writer whose work defies easy classification, and who requires and deserves robust and innovative scholarly examination.

A brief note about the use of lines from William Blake's 'Tyger Tyger'¹ in this

Introduction: Almond is such a richly layered writer and Blake such an acknowledged influence, it just seems fitting to add this beautiful coruscation of images as a sort of *thought provocateur* (*pensée provocateur*).

Brief biography and works

I live with my family in Northumberland. We live just beyond the Roman Wall, which for centuries marked the place where civilisation ended and the waste lands began.

(www.davidalmond.com/author/bio.html)

David Almond was born in Newcastle-upon Tyne, England in 1951, and grew up in Felling, which had been a coal mining town. He was one of six children in a large Catholic extended family, was an altar boy at the local church, attended primary schools in Felling and Sunderland, and later St Joseph's Roman Catholic Grammar School in Hebburn. When he was eight his sister Barbara died, and his father died when he was fifteen. He studied English and American Literature at the University of East Anglia and graduated with Honours.

Almond worked variously as a hotel porter, postman and labourer, then trained to be a teacher and worked for five years in a primary school in Gateshead, across the river from Newcastle. He began to publish short stories for adults, went to live in Norfolk for eighteen months, wrote literacy booklets, and took another job teaching children with learning difficulties. He published two collections for adults, *Sleepless Nights* in 1985 and *A Kind Of Heaven* in 1997, edited a fiction magazine, and as well as writing a novel that was not accepted for publication,

wrote a collection of stories as a memoir of his childhood, later published as *Counting Stars* in the United Kingdom in 2000 and in the United States in 2002. This book provides a fascinating and moving commentary or metafictional meditation (even perhaps a hypertext) to his later works.

His first book for children, *Skellig*, was published in 1998, to immediate public and critical acclaim. It has been translated into over thirty languages and has been made into a radio play, a stage play, an opera and a film. Other books followed: *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *Heaven Eyes* (2000), *Secret Heart* (2001), *The Fire Eaters* (2003), *Clay* (2005), *Jackdaw Summer* (2009), *My Name is Mina* (a prequel to *Skellig*) (2010); and *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean told by himself* (2011), which was published for both an adult and Young Adult readership and was advertised as his first book for adults. He has also collaborated with artists to produce picture books/illustrated books/graphic stories: *Kate, the Cat and the Moon* (2004), with Stephen Lambert; *My Dad's a Birdman* (2008), and *The Boy who Climbed to the Moon* (2010), with Polly Dunbar; *The Boy who Swam with Piranhas* (2012), illustrated by Oliver Jeffers; and *The Savage* (2008), *Slog's Dad* (2010), and *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf* (2013) all with Dave McKean. As well as stage adaptations of *Skellig the Play* and *Heaven Eyes*, he has written *Wild Girl Wild Boy*, *My Dad's a Birdman*, and *Noah and the Fludd*. Almond has received an honorary doctorate from the University of Newcastle.

Almond as writer

And what shoulder, & what art.

Could twist the sinews of thy heart?

As the following chapters demonstrate, Almond's literary world is unusual. Consider these opening sentences from *Skellig* (1998) and *The Fire-Eaters* (2003):

I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we'd be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby. (S 1)

It all starts on the day I met McNulty. I was with my Mam. We left Dad at home beside the sea. We took the bus to Newcastle. We got out below the statue of the angel then headed down towards the market by the river. She was all in red. She kept singing 'The Keel Row' and swinging my arm to the rhythm of the song. (FE 1)

There are certain characteristics here which I think provide an interesting context and prelude to the essays that follow. The writing style is simple – short sentences, simple words, conversational if not colloquial style, first person narration (often with Northern England idioms and cadences²), a family setting, and the ready sense of the beginning of an episode of events that will clearly be significant. Location is specific – immediately and very much so in *The Fire-Eaters* – it is Newcastle, UK. The *Skellig* sentences convey an informality that feels loose and contemporary; *The Fire-Eaters* has a nostalgic feel of slightly past times, and we are to find out quite soon that it is indeed a very particular time, clearly identified as 1962, the weeks of the Cuban missile crisis, and a time when the threat of a global nuclear war became perilously close.

Yet somehow, in the stories that unravel from these beginnings and the way in which they are told, the international researchers represented in this volume – some of the most respected children's literature scholars of our time – have been inspired to consider Almond's work through unusual critical lenses: that of philosophy and cognitive science; of a controversial type of theology; of religion particularly Catholicism; of the idea of class and its relationships to home place, identity and belonging. They have discussed his work as an ur-story with complex

variations; as the expression of radical landscape yet within the clearly identified region of Northern England; and as a reflection on words and truth and the writing process itself. In diverse ways, these perspectives may reflect not only Almond's singular contribution to the field of children's literature, but also, as the writers note, expand critical possibilities for that field itself.

These are big ideas but Almond is a big writer. As the contributors all comment in various ways, his work is different – sometimes strangely different (yet, as they also comment, strangely the same). How then can we – indeed, can we? – define the work of this complex and highly individual author?

Almond and the fantasy tradition

And when thy heart began to beat

What dread hand? & what dread feet?

The rich stories at the roots of modern literature– the myths of Greece and Rome, legends, folk tales, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, Yggdrasil (that giant tree in Norse mythology which connects to nine worlds), Gilgamesh, the South American Jaguar (the Master of Fire), and so on and so on - all bear various and varied historical relationships to fantasy. In considering fantasy in the children's literary domain, Zipes *et al* in the *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (2005) write:

Fantasy literature for children encompasses many kinds of works – legends, ballads, romances, myths, literary fairy tales, magic realism, animal fantasies, time-slip fantasies and science fiction.³

There is a long and lovely tradition of fantasy in children's literature, especially perhaps British children's literature, which is translated and celebrated across the world. Almond's work may be seen as part of this rich, even sumptuous, body of work, which includes Carroll's Alice and the magic of Wonderland, Kingsley's Water Babies, George MacDonald's Princess, Barrie's Peter Pan and Neverland, Lewis's Narnia, Tolkien's Ring trilogy, Susan Price's ghostly Drum, Sewall's talking Black Beauty, Grahame's Willows, Milne's Pooh and Christopher Robin, Potter's parade of little animals and Mr McGregor, Nesbit's 'It', Pearce's Garden, Garner's Weirdestone, Wynne Jones's Christomanci, and more latterly Rowling's Hogwarts and Pullman's Golden Compass. The very diversity of this list poses a critical challenge: what in this context are the defining characteristics of fantasy and how far do they relate to the work of David Almond?

The *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* notes that fantasy describes 'works of fiction, written by a specific author (i.e. not traditional) and usually novel-length, which involve the supernatural or some other unreal element'.⁴ J. R.R. Tolkien's well known study *On Fairy Stories* (1938) refuses to define but places these stories in 'Faërie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being'.⁵ Tolkien understood fairies as a manifestation of the supernatural – that is of a *Secondary World* (imaginative world), rather than of a *Primary* ('real') *World*. In this same essay he also notes the importance of the 'good ending' – what he called the *eucatastrophe*:

It is the mark of a good fairy story, of the higher and more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literature, and having a peculiar quality.'⁶

Brian Attebury rephrased Tolkien's 'turn', 'catch of breath', and 'beat and lifting of the heart' as *wonder*, 'not merely a meaning but an awareness of and a pattern for meaningfulness'.⁷

Tzvetan Todorov, writing about eighteenth and nineteenth century literature (not children's literature), identified three categories: the fantastic, the marvellous and the uncanny. In brief, his 'Fantastic' is any seemingly supernatural event that breaks the natural laws of the world, and the reader has to make the decision whether this event was illusion or 'real'. The 'uncanny' refers to supernatural events that turn out to be explained rationally; the 'marvellous' is when the supernatural element is seen as real but inexplicable. The fantastic is that moment of hesitation where the reader has to decide:

Whilst Todorov's work is controversial, it does have some pertinence here, particularly in relation to the idea of the reader's hesitation. Maria Nikolajeva proposes that Todorov would place children's fantasy in the category of the marvellous:

...since the young reader is supposed to believe what he is told, while the essence of fantasy for Todorov lies in the hesitation of the protagonist (and the reader) [when] confronted with the supernatural, which is anything that goes beyond natural laws..⁸

It is interesting indeed that these critics describe fantasy basically in terms of the effect it has on (or provokes in) the reader – that is, of the reader response. So does Farah Mendlesohn who, tracking the way in which the fantastic enters the narrated world, identifies four categories within the fantastic: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal,⁹ and picks up this idea of 'the reader's relationship to the framework', stressing the importance of the assumptions that readers bring to the text:

I believe that the fantastic is an area of literature that is heavily dependent on the dialectic between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder, that it is a fiction of consensual construction of belief.¹⁰

So, is Almond a fantasy writer? Some publishers in particular classify him as such and clearly there are strong grounds for this. In varying ways there is in his writing that sense of the supernatural, of wonder, the fantastic, the uncanny, and the marvellous. There are, with some provisos, 'good' if not always 'happy' endings (and debating that difference is a book in itself). There is that 'intrusion' of the apparently unreal. However, there is also a strong sense of the real, and I think a reader relationship that in most cases sets up expectations not of the fantastic but of the ordinary – but of a sort of 'poetic ordinary'. Almond's novels – like Pullman's I would argue – carry another, deeper element that does not fit easily into the idea of children's fantasy, or 'epic' or 'high' Rings-type fantasy, or the allegorical fantasy of Narnia, or the romantic fantasy of a boy who never grows up and a family whose nanny is a dog. Almond's 'secondary world' (if that is what it is) is not accessed through any magic wardrobes or doors or windows or rabbit holes but pertains more to ordinary worlds and to ordinary people (if there are such things, which may be Almond's point, or at least one of them). His fantasy world exists alongside or within or as part of the world of the everyday.

There are numerous examples in the books, and the plays, where this everyday is infused with a sense of Tolkien's supernatural 'Faërie': in the magic of the allotment in *Wild Girl Wild Boy*; in *Skellig the Book* but even more dramatically in *Skellig the Play* when Michael, Mina and Skellig join hands in the unity of their ghostly winged dance. Fantasy often has a sense of temporal distance, and I think that part of the impact of Almond's fantasy is an unusual sense of *pastness*, of a lost past but a past that is remembered, that has been

experienced, and that is now being viewed and recreated from the knowingness of subsequent events. It is past shadowed by its future. Consider again the opening lines from *The Fire Eaters* (quoted above) for example, and the opening lines of *Clay*:

He arrived in Felling on a bright and icy February morning. Not so long ago, but it was a different age, I was with Geordie Craggs, like I always was back then. We were swaggering along like always, laughing and joking like always. (C, p.1).

Several of the contributors to this volume refer to the little book, *Counting Stars*, which is a memoir rather than a novel, but in a way it illuminates these elements of Almond's literary vision, of his construction of the fantastic, his own brand of Faërie, his sense of the marvellous, and his sense of wonder at the everyday.

Indeed, it is the delicacy of Almond's ability to discern and depict the extraordinary in the ordinary that has inspired scholars to seek more precise ways of describing his writing. Zipes *et al* in the definition quoted at the beginning of this section include 'magic realism' as one of their categories or sub types of fantasy. This possibly confuses mode with genre, but it does open provocative ways of thinking about and describing Almond's work.

Magic realism

In what distant deeps or skies

Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

What is real? What *is*, and what is *not*? Perhaps this is the dilemma at the very heart of being human; at the very heart of intellectual endeavour. Northrop Frye writes:

Both literature and mathematics ... drive a wedge between the antithesis of being and non-being that is so important for discursive thought. The symbol neither is nor is not the reality which it manifests. The child beginning geometry is presented with a dot and is told, first, that that is a point, and second, that it is not a point. He cannot advance until he accepts both statements at once. It is absurd that that which is no number can also be a number, but the result of accepting the absurdity was the discovery of zero. The same kind of hypothesis exists in literature, where Hamlet and Falstaff neither exist nor do not exist ...¹¹

Much has been written about Almond and magic realism, and this is the generic description most commonly applied to his work. This follows on from the impressive contribution made to Almond scholarship through the work of Don Latham, in his book *David Almond: Memory and Magic* (2006) a¹²nd many other articles. Latham considered *Skellig* in relation to a short story by Gabriel García Márquez, 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings', not only comparing but demonstrating the influence of this story on Almond's book. His consideration went beyond narrative. As part of his study, Latham identified the Almond text as an illustration of magic realism¹³, making the point that magic realism can play an important role in children's literature and noting that part of the liminal territory explored by the book is the transition of Michael, the narrator, and his friend Mina into adulthood.¹⁴ These are significant ideas, although I am not sure that I agree with the last; in this particular book the transition to adulthood is not as clear cut as such as Latham suggests. I think that it is far more subtle.

The term ‘magic realism’ has an interesting history which, for what it reveals about its characteristics, it behoves us to explore. The concept was originally created by the German historian, art critic and photographer, Franz Roh (1890-1965), who applied it to describe the type of art, emerging after Expressionism, which portrayed scenes of imaginative fantasy through realistic documentary-style painterly techniques.¹⁵ For Roh, magic realism related to but was different to *surrealism*, because magic realism focussed on the things of this world, rather than on the ‘surreal’ things of imaginative or psychological worlds. The ‘magic’ was in the capacity of the artist to make apparent ‘the wonder of matter that could crystallise into objects’ so that they could ‘be seen anew’ (1925). In other words, Roh emphasised that the magic was in perceiving and visually representing the everyday (the ‘normal’) in different and special ways. It is fascinating to follow the tracers and spillovers and overlaps of international critical thought that both had preceded and then followed this idea as it grew and flourished into philosophy and literature. For example, from a literary/philosophical point of view, it could in some ways, in these early stages at least, be considered in relation to both the philosophical theory of *haecceitas* – *thisness* – proposed centuries before by the Scottish Franciscan monk Johannes Duns Scotus (c.1266-1308), and the idea of *inscape* as described by English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). Both relate to the concept of individualising difference, a sort of glimpse or subjective experience of final perfection or essence (of ‘deep down things’¹⁶) as part of a unique and almost ‘out-of-this-world’ observation of everyday life. It also could relate in this way to Irish novelist James Joyce’s (1882-1941) idea of the revelation of the *epiphany* (*quidditas*, ‘whatness’): ‘...[W]hen the parts are adjusted to a special point, we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is... . The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant.’¹⁷

After the 1927 translation of Roh’s paper into Spanish by Fernando Vela¹⁸, a disciple of the Spanish phenomenologist José Ortega y Gasset, Roh’s concept of magic realism was

adopted, albeit with differing meanings, within the artistic expression of literature. It was a ripe moment. Phenomenology – the science of perceptions, the ‘study of consciousness and its immediate objects’¹⁹ – was a 20th century school of thought that emerged from the work of the German philosophers Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Husserl believed that experience was the source of all knowledge and that a sense of fundamental essence could be perceived through phenomenological reduction; Heidegger argued that Being must be unhampered by preconceptions and knowledge of the world, but can be ‘unfolded’²⁰ through language.

I mention all these briefly as part of an international context that was ready to accept and nurture and evolve the ideas of magic realism. Its ethos and generative impulse gathered momentum with the publication of *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935) by Argentinian writer, essayist, poet and translator, Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), whose short stories were characterised by themes relating to dreams, animals, mirrors, God, philosophy, and religion.²¹ Another contributing idea to the burgeoning genre came from the Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980), who in a famous prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of this World* (1949), wrote: ‘What is the entire history of [Latin] America if not a chronicle of the marvellous real’ [*lo real maravilloso*]²² (1975, 107). For Carpentier this marvellous real was inherently Latin America and Latin American, and represented its multicultural and heady mix of the European (rational) and non-European (magical, such as voodoo). Venezuelan intellectual and writer, and contemporary of Carpentier, Arturo Uslar Pietri (1906-2001) described the movement as the ‘mystery of human living amongst the reality of life’ (Pietri 1949, 161).²³ Carpentier’s idea of the marvellous real – a sort of marvellous realism – was to hybridise with or perhaps blend into magic realism, but it is a lovely description and one that offers an *other* and richly tilted way of thinking about Almond’s writing. Critic Angel Flores, in his paper ‘Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction’²⁴ (1955), which was to be pivotal

in the international development of the genre, traced some of its characteristics – blends of history, myth and fantasy – back to the sense of ‘wonderment and exoticism experienced by the Europeans who first colonised Latin America.’ (Carpentier however has been criticised for perpetuating ‘exotic’ stereotypes of Latin American culture.) This offers an interesting sense of different worlds – of two worlds coming together – which also I think provides a rich critical focus for considering Almond’s work.

The term magic realism (sometimes magical realism) is now more commonly applied to literature than to art and is diversely and often vaguely defined. It is sometimes referred to as a genre, but as Macey points out, the discussion of genres is ‘one of the oldest discourses in the arts, and can be narrowly prescriptive or purely descriptive or classificatory’.²⁵ And any such label is an imposed mapping or label; as Mendlesohn notes:

Genre markers (whether tropes or patterns) are useful analytical tools but they are constructions imposed on a literary landscape. The same landscape may be susceptible to quite a different cartography.²⁶

The argument can go both ways but for our purposes here it is enough to consider magic realism as a literary mode; it is a way of telling, a way of writing, rather than for example, ‘a form of social codes governing individual texts’.²⁷ Basically, it is that literary mode in which magical and fantastic elements (relating to character or plot or location) are introduced into an otherwise everyday or mundane setting, usually without being remarked upon or attracting any explanation or comment, either from author or characters. These elements clearly break the ordinary rules of the real world but are simply accepted. Flores in his famous essay describes Magical Realism as a transformation of the unreal into part of reality and identified Cervantes *Don Quixote* and Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as

examples. As well as obvious fantastic elements, hybrid and multiple planes of reality, inconstancies of time and unexplained time shifts, and blurring of distinctions between everyday life and dreams, Carpentier noted an 'extraordinary plenitude' of unsettling detail, which the author does not explain or necessarily even comment upon. The idea of plenitude will be discussed below.

Magic realism was promoted in Italy by writer Massimo Bontempelli (1878-1960), poet, playwright, novelist and composer. Well known international writers subsequently identified with the genre include Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, and Angela Carter. The character Saleem in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) describes the genre as: 'Matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday' (303). Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora have made contemporary contributions to understandings of this genre through their book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995) and in other papers. Faris identifies as characteristics of the genre (and Latham also quotes these): an irreducible element of magic; a grounding in the phenomenal (natural, realistic) world; the production of unsettling doubts in the reader because of this mixture of the real and the fantastic; the near merging of two realms or worlds; and disruptions of traditional ideas about time, space, and identity.²⁸

This then is a brief synopsis of the narrative mode of magic realism, and highlights its international and complex heritage. How far does this describe the work of David Almond, or is there a more nuanced way of understanding and discussing this highly original author?

Mystical realism

What immortal hand or eye

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

As Almond's corpus has grown, I think perhaps there is a more enlightening way to consider his writings. At the least it is *another* way, which may offer different insights and a complementary schema of reference.

While the development of the magic realism genre as sketched above shows various elements that we surely may recognise in Almond's work, this does not seem quite to give the whole picture. Irrespective of a literary genre context, the idea of 'magic' carries semantic associations of illusion and conjuring, of not being real, of being deliberately distracted and not seeing the sleight of hand. In the discussion of magic realism, descriptive fantasy – with all its associated ideas – plays an important role: consider the scene describing the 'light rain of tiny yellow flowers falling' from the book frequently cited as a paradigmatic example of magic realism, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez:

They fell on the town all through the night in a silent storm, and they covered the roofs and blocked the doors and smothered the animals who slept outdoors. So many flowers fell from the sky that in the morning the streets were carpeted with a compact cushion and they had to clear them away with shovels and rakes so that the funeral procession could pass by.²⁹

This wonderful image carries that sense of the marvellous real, of the inexplicable; of the power of seeing something more, something other; of an extravagance of vision that defies ordinary convention; of alternative possibilities and phenomenology of perception, of a *thisness* or inscape of moment, of epiphany. Almond's writing also describes happenings that are mysterious, miraculous, inexplicable, but there is a difference. Firstly, his characters do not leave these happenings unnoticed; they remark on and question what they don't understand. Indeed, they are perplexed, confronted, in awe of it:

[Skellig] didn't move. She [Mina] slid the sleeves down over his arms, took the jacket right off him. We saw what both of us had dreamed we might see. Beneath his jacket were wings that grew out through rips in his shirt...

I felt the feathers, and beneath them the bones and sinews and muscles that supported them. I felt the crackle of Skellig's breathing. (S, pp. 89-90)

Michael then goes to the window and looks out through the shutters; when Mina asks him what he is doing, he replies: 'Making sure the world's still really there,' (S, pp. 89-90). Similarly, when they see that Skellig eats live animals and passes pellets like those passed by owls, Michael cries, 'What does it mean?' and Mina replies: 'We can't know. Sometimes we just have to accept there are things we can't know' (S, p.131). In other words, both children are fully aware that these are strange and inexplicable occurrences, somehow set apart. Amaryll Beatric Chanady argues that magical realism can be distinguished from the fantastic by differences in narrative stance: the narrator of/in magical realism accepts occurrences of the supernatural without question; the narrator of a fantastic text questions but the questioning is left unresolved.³⁰ *Skellig* does not quite fit either category – the children question, the questioning is not so much unresolved as perceived as being part of something mysterious, supernatural, mystical: 'We'll remember forever,' Mina says after their farewell dance with Skellig, 'hearts and breath together', turning higher and higher, with 'ghostly wings' rising from their backs (S, p. 158).

The second major difference is in the authorial symbology – the authorial backdrop, if you like, even the symbolical *mise-en-scène*. This does not necessarily refer to the author's personal life nor to his personal beliefs (Almond has spoken about these at length in various places and they do not concern us here) but rather to the conscious and unconscious imaginary

that can be detected through his works as feeding and inspiring that writing life, the reservoir or repertoire or creative archive of ideas into which he delves and out of which he writes. This imagery and these creative ideas, as Valerie Coghlan points out in her chapter, and indeed as each contributor has noted in ways pertinent to their essay, resonate with a sense of the religious, and particularly of Catholicism. As Almond has said:

When you stop being a Catholic you have no religion to fall back on, but you do have a sense of possible transcendence. And it seems to me that this is the transcendence. *Heaven is here*. The more I live, the more gorgeous and wonderful the world is, but it is also terrifying and constantly endangered.³¹

There is an echo of these comments in *Skellig*, when Mina tells Michael that William Blake used occasionally to faint, because of ‘great fear, or enormous pain, or too much joy’; she says, ‘It was possible to be overwhelmed by the presence of so much beauty in the world’ (*S*, pp. 142-3). Such comments invoke ideas of the *sublime*, described by the Greek Longinus writing in the first century AD as transport and rapture (*ekstasis*), and ‘the echo of a noble mind’.³² Longinus claimed that the greatest of works ‘leave more food for reflection than the mere words convey’, and that they make us feel ‘as though we had ourselves produced what we had heard’.³³ Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) concludes that while beauty is characterised by smoothness, delicacy and subtle variation, the sublime ‘is inspired by ruggedness, irregularity, vastness, power and obscurity’.³⁴

As has been widely noted, and as Almond himself acknowledges, the English poet, painter and printmaker William Blake has been a profound influence on his work. W.B. Yeats, in a Preface to the 1873 three volume edition of Blake’s works, wrote: ‘He had learned from

Jacob Boehme and from old alchemist writers that imagination was the first emanation of divinity, “the body of God”’ William Blake is seen as a non-conformist Christian mystic, mostly unknown and unpopular in his own time, but growing to exert a profound influence over many subsequent writers; he did not like organised religion but believed that imagination – and the work of artists and poets – was a God-given and God-inspired work. He revered the Bible and, like Almond’s Billy Dean, was taught to read through Bible stories. He believed in invisible worlds that are accessible through love. On the day of his death Blake, as noted by biographer Peter Ackroyd, sang hymns and verses,³⁵ a young painter who was present wrote:

He said He was going to that Country he had all His life wished to see & expressed Himself Happy, hoping for Salvation through Jesus Christ – Just before he died His Countenance became fair. His eyes Brighten'd and he burst out Singing of the things he saw in Heaven.³⁶

The events of *Skellig* continuously unfold against a rich and evocative Blakean intertext. As the children draw and discuss Skellig and the sick baby, Mina’s mother tells them that she sees them as ‘two angels at my table’; she says they are: ‘The kind of thing William Blake saw. He said we were surrounded by angels and spirits. We must just open our eyes a little wider, look a little harder’ (*S*, p. 122). She then sings the words of the poem from Blake’s *Songs of Experience*, ‘The Angel’ (*S*, p. 124):

Guarded by an Angel mild
Witless woe was n’er beguiled ...
So he took his wings, and fled;
Then the moon blushed rosy red ...

Almond's imagery emerges from a specific creative impulse that is more ontological than phenomenological (but includes both), that is eschatological, and that is symbolically inspired by Christian, and specifically Catholic, ideas, beliefs and practices. Christianity and Catholicism are his inspirational intertexts, his wellspring of words and symbols. And it is here that he can be seen as either exhibiting a very individual form of magic realism, or writing within a different but related genre that is more accurately and specifically described as *mystical realism*. The terms magic realism or magical realism brings opposites together (each in a slightly different way); so too the idea of mystical realism draws together conceptual opposites – the alterity and otherness of the imprint of the fantastic and the inexplicable on the conventional everyday. But here they emerge not randomly or as random events, but coherently, as part of a connected togetherness of figurative, other-worldly thinking. This coherence is a sense of a spiritual supernatural that becomes almost a semiotics of Christian symbologies: angels, Heaven, love, joy, praying, (“‘You still say your prayers for her?’ asked Mum,” (S, p. 148). Magic realism is mysterious and inexplicable but does not always have that edge of the spiritual (Isabel Allende is an exception that comes to mind; perhaps mystical realism would also be a better descriptor of her work). There is also as a sort of internal palimpsest, a sense that this alterity and otherness is somehow profoundly ‘real’, and somehow related to a Divine being and a place called Heaven. This sense of a religious supernatural is not commonly seen as part of magic realism; Roh himself in a sort of late postscript to his work wrote that his use of the idea of magic was ‘of course *not* in the religious-psychological sense of ethnology.’ (Roh, 1968). Almond is not conducting an ethnological study of human culture per se, but a study of human beings living on the edges of a cosmological abyss, on the rim of the cosmological sublime. For Almond, as the essays in this volume indicate, there is a sense of

a fullness, a living and lived reality that is infused with the hyper-real, super-real, meta-real, that informs the phenomenology of perception and even at times transcends it.

I want to pick up this notion of fullness. Philosopher Arthur Lovejoy identified a theory of plenitude, or a plenitude principle,³⁷ which he believed could be traced back to Aristotle, who said that no possibilities that remain eternally possible will go unrealised.³⁸ This may be seen as relating to the parallel worlds (Universal Wave Function) of quantum mechanics, but the idea that every possible explanation is also true if not in the current world then somewhere else in a universe that is infinite and eternal has tantalised many thinkers through the ages, and can be traced back as far as the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341BC-270 BC). Almond writes of a world that is rich in the way it overlaps with other worlds; in *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean: telt by hisself*, as I point out in Chapter 9, this is symbolised in the island of Lindisfarne, which is sometimes one world and sometimes another; in Billy's words, 'a little bit of Heven ... a plase that sumtymys floted on water & sumtymes rested on the land' (BD, p. 8).

All of this points to something that is not just fantastic but that at some deep level is, actually, real. Skellig is not a magical figure but he is a mystical one, portrayed as healing through love – not fantasy, not magic, but some sort of mysterious, mystical truth-inspired tenderness and compassion. He, like Jesus, was not an expected sort of saviour. Michael's mother describes how a man with 'a great hunch on his back' in 'filthy' clothes and 'matted' hair but with 'such tenderness in his eyes' suddenly appeared at the hospital, and lifted the sick baby out of her crib:

'They stared and stared into each other's eyes. He started slowly to turn around
... 'Like they were dancing,' I said....

‘... And then the strangest thing of all was, there were wings on the baby’s back. Not solid wings. Transparent, ghostly, hardly visible, but there they were. Little feathery things...’. (S, p. 150)

This is a depiction that can best be described as meta-real – it is a meta reality – an above and beyond reality, a second order reality-about-reality. I don’t think Skellig is a Christ figure, but he is an unlikely, superficially unlovely figure who brings about healing and love. In an appearance-obsessed secular world, he is something beyond appearance. Almond invites us to contemplate the overlap and tumble of possible worlds, not as science fiction, not as fantasy, not as magic, but as another form of realness, another real, a sort of ‘Heaven is here’ as another manifestation of reality.

Finding space for the spiritual

What the anvil? what dread grasp

Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

The idea of truth has been treated as a master narrative of suspicious intent in a postmodern world. And any idea of religion as a universal experience is even more suspicious. Of course there are reasons – some very good – for this, and a global world in touch with itself needs to rethink, embrace, and pluralise its philosophical syntagms (its traditional conceptions of linear strings of relationships) and paradigms (its vertical mindsets of possibilities). But as I wrote years ago, that rush to the head of 20th century postmodernism itself was itself a master narrative – a very pervasive and consuming one.³⁹ There has of more recent years been a subtle but growing review of the significance of religion in Western culture. This is a timely context when we consider that two of the most powerful children’s writers in England today (they are

of course Almond and Philip Pullman), in very different, unorthodox, superficially at least quite opposite ways, are bringing religion back to the artistic table. Several of the contributors to this volume comment on this. Is the work of Almond – emerging as it does from the strong Western roots of religion – unconsciously (or consciously?) prefiguring what Stanley Fish predicted after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on September 11, 2001? This respected and controversial American literary theorist, famous among other things for his work in reader-response theory and interpretive communities, and frequent contributor to the *New York Times*, wrote in 2005 that there is:

... a growing awareness of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of keeping the old boundaries in place and of quarantining the religious impulse in the safe houses of the church, the synagogue, and the mosque...

When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.⁴⁰

Terry Eagleton, in *After Theory*, writes that global political pressures and religious confrontations force the West ‘more and more to reflect on the foundations of its own civilisation.’⁴¹ But, as he goes on to say:

The West, then, may need to come up with some persuasive-sounding legitimations of its form of life, at exactly the point when laid-back cultural thinkers are assuring it that such legitimations are neither possible nor necessary. It may be forced to reflect on the truth and reality of its existence, at a time when postmodern thought has grave

doubts about both truth and reality. It will need, in short, to sound deep in a progressively more shallow age.⁴²

Jean Baudrillard warns that the West and indeed Western education have lost the unifying reason for values such as truth, justice, goodness, and beauty, and that the contemporary culture of knowledge is '*le cadavre en spirale*' - the spiralling cadaver.⁴³ Jean-François Lyotard claims that in this de-humanising and dehumanised postmodern world, humans 'are like Gullivers ... : sometimes too big, sometimes too small, but never the right size'.⁴⁴ He goes on to say that in the 'expressions of thought' that include 'visual and plastic arts', literature, philosophy and politics, the idea of 'a kind of work, a long, obstinate and highly responsible work', which was part of the true process of modernity and the *Avant-garde* (and by the way remember that Cuban writer Usler-Pietri believed that magic realism was an extension of the Avant-garde – *the vanguardia*) must be restored as part of human 'responsibility'; without this, 'we will surely be condemned to repeat ... the West's "modern neurosis" – its schizophrenia, paranoia, and so on ... '.⁴⁵

Jens Zimmerman cites all these to argue that: 'The identity crisis of the West, and the exhaustion of secular reason, has a number of philosophers and politicians calling for a return of religion into the heart of the academy and public policy.'⁴⁶ As Richard Lane notes in his introduction to the piece: 'Zimmerman turns to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida to show how these exemplary critics of logocentric thought also reignite debate about "the Divine Logos and the humanistic tradition"'.⁴⁷

Margaret Wertheim, in a book devoted to the exploration of cyberspace within a more expansive cultural history of space, also writes of the difficulties facing postmodern Western society:

Like the late Romans, we too live in a time marked by inequity, corruption and fragmentation. Ours seems to be a society past its peak, one no longer sustained by a firm belief in itself and no longer sure of its purpose.⁴⁸

Wertheim's thesis is that 'conceptions of space and conceptions of ourselves are inextricably intertwined,' and that 'it is the language we use – the concepts that we articulate and hence the questions that we ask – that determines the kind of space we are able to see'.⁴⁹ She writes:

[W]hile we have been mapping and mastering physical space, we have lost sight of any kind of religious or psychological space ...

How did such a monumental shift occur? How did we go from seeing ourselves at the centre of an angel-filled space suffused with divine presence and purpose to the modern scientific picture of a pointless physical void? What was at stake here was not simply the position of the earth in the planetary system but the role of humanity in the cosmological whole. How did we go from seeing ourselves embedded in spaces of both body and soul, to seeing ourselves embedded in physical space alone? And, critically, how has this shift in our vision of space affected our understanding of who and what we are as human beings?⁵⁰

Perhaps part of the growing receptivity to such a critical restoration has grown out of increasing knowledge, acceptance and respect for Indigenous spirituality and Indigenous religions. Indigenous peoples across the world have taught the sceptical and secular West that there is a place for the spiritual in everyday life, and they bring it to life in imageries of landscapes and mindscapes, spaces of being and belonging, cultures of immanence and

transcendence. The Australian Aboriginal artist of the Arrawar region known as Kame, expressed her life and being in a series of paintings of sweet potatoes: as tubers and deep tangled roots entwined underground; as shoots beginning to form and break through the dry, cracked earth; as a golden explosion of blossom. Kame was a Sweet Potato woman⁵¹. These are totems, spiritual connections to self, landscape, community and Dreaming – an ongoing spiritual community of past, present and future, perhaps another way of thinking about Ricoeur's idea of time as a public space⁵² (1984), another way of thinking about the work of a writer such as Almond.

Science and the spiritual

When the stars threw down their spears,

And water'd heaven with their tears:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Wertheim's deracinated world is a literary and cultural conception of physical space; a *scientific* conception of the physical reveals physical unity and connection rather than the postmodern disconnection Wertheim describes. The scientist Brian Greene, one of the world's leading string theorists, writes in his award winning book *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*:

[A]ccording to string theory, the observed properties of each elementary particle arise because its internal string undergoes a particular vibrational pattern. This perspective differs sharply from that espoused by physicists before the discovery of string theory; in the earlier perspective the differences among the fundamental particles were

explained by saying that, in effect, each particle species was ‘cut from a different fabric.’ ... String theory alters this picture radically by declaring that the ‘stuff’ of all matter and all forces is the *same*. Each elementary particle is composed of a single string – that is, each particle *is* a single string – and all strings are absolutely identical. Differences between the strings arise because their respective strings undergo different resonant vibrational patterns. What appears to be different elementary particles are actually different ‘notes’ on a fundamental string. The universe – being composed of an enormous number of vibrating strings – is akin to a cosmic symphony.⁵³

It is fascinating to compare a scientific explanation of the physical universe such as the above with the Australian Aboriginal idea of the Dreaming: Ancestor beings made a noise, the noise became singing, and the singing created land, landforms, and themselves as beings. ‘You dream, You sing, It is’.⁵⁴ This becomes even more significant when Greene goes on to discuss ‘the music of string theory’.⁵⁵

Like magic realism, like mystical realism, I have no conclusion to draw from this. It is all part of the mystery – the deep and real interconnectedness of the siloes of thinking we tend to separate as ‘science’ and ‘arts’ and ‘literature’ and ‘spirituality’. It just *is* – but awareness of it enlarges the way we think about the here and now, and the way that a writer such as Almond helps to make us think. Literary thinking needs to be expansive, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary – as literature is. Here are other descriptions of other possibilities and other worlds. Here are other ways of seeing. Apart from the obvious literary considerations, and as the number of respected theorists have declared in their different ways, there are certainly important

implications here for Western culture; as Lyotard says, it is in artistic ‘expressions of thought’ that ‘a kind of work, a long, obstinate and highly responsible work’ must be restored as part of human ‘responsibility’ for human progress.’.⁵⁶

The essays in this volume

On what wings dare he aspire?

What the hand dare seize the fire?

So, it should be no surprise that we have sought innovative thinkers as contributors to this volume. In remarkably different ways, and from very different perspectives, they have arrived at some similar critical places: in summary, that Almond’s books are not startlingly different to each other, that there are clearly discernible similarities across the whole corpus, yet that there is something elusively unique in each one.

Any study of Almond should not be limited to a single text, so there has been a deliberate effort to be wide-ranging and to consider those books which each author considers most appropriate for their critical purposes. This has released creative ideas and interesting applications that can enhance the reading not only of those particular texts but also of others in the Almond corpus.

The themes that emerge include the many manifestations of wildness (internal, external, lived and experienced, glimpsed and engulfed,), the tenderness of family relationships, the pervasiveness of Catholicism, and a fascination with the beauty of the natural world and the wonder of the act of creation and recreation. In a wide-ranging discussion that includes almost all of Almond’s texts, Perry Nodelman in Chapter 2 of this volume, ‘Living Just Beyond the Wall: Versions of the Savage in

David Almond's Novels', identifies an *ur-story* involving the author's plots and characters: 'Almond's novels tend to read as versions or variations of the same story, a story intriguingly and obsessively engaged with the border between civilization and savagery in the lives of young people – especially boys.' An *ur-story* (the German prefix '*ur-*' denotes original, ancient, primitive) is one that in literary terms can usefully be seen as archetypal; in Almond's case, this may be seen to pertain to personal archetypes but as Nodelman strongly argues, they are also the archetypes of children's literature. His description of the social and physical geography of the Almond *ur-story* complements Nolan Dalrymple's descriptions of landscapes in Chapter 6 and Carole Dunbar's description of class in Chapter 7. He also notes as part of that story the philosophical and religious resonances that are subsequently considered in different ways by Roberta Seelinger Trites in Chapter 3, Karen Coats in Chapter 4, and Valerie Coghlan in Chapter 5. The idea of the 'person, animal, or creature identified as being somehow savage, an exotic and often magical "other" who comes from or is otherwise connected with a wilderness beyond the borders', and the subsequent 'consideration of the wilderness within ...' also relates to Michael Levy's chapter on *Wild Girl Wild Boy* (Chapter 9), and to my own chapter which focuses on the idea of truth and the writing process in *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean; told by himself* (Chapter 10). Noting that despite common situations, concerns and character types, Almond's books represent a variety of different kinds of fiction, and that 'each one offers a quite different experience from the rest', Nodelman writes: 'The Almond *ur-plot* is essentially a story of incarnation--becoming one with the wild natural world, embodied as a beast – that leads to salvation ...'.

In 'Ontology and Epistemology: Cognitive Science in David Almond's *Skellig* and

My Name is Mina' (Chapter 3), Roberta Seelinger Trites offers creative new insights into the field of children's literature by exploring these two books through the lens of cognitive science, particularly examining the intersection of cognitive science with philosophy and how this plays out in Almond's works. She begins with an acknowledgment of the importance of children's literature as one of the significant ways that children learn philosophical and ethical values about what it means to *be* – ontology – and what it means to *know* – epistemology. She relates this particularly to the work of firstly F. Elizabeth Hart, who notes the significant influences of bodily, social and cultural contexts on the mind and the development of imaginative process, and secondly, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who in rejecting the Cartesian split argue that in an embodied mind philosophical questions emerge from three things: 'a reason shaped by the body, a cognitive unconscious to which we have no direct access, and metaphorical thought of which we are largely unaware'. As well as discussing Almond's multiple metaphorical imageries, Trites notes the contribution that 'deeply philosophical books' such as these make not only to children, but to their literature.

Chapter 4, 'The Possibilities of Becoming: Process Relational Theology in the works of David Almond', Karen Coats notes the idea of embodiment and goes on to break innovative ground both in the study of Almond and, notably, in the study of children's literature. Again there is that complex sense of Almond's almost contradictory similarity and originality: she notes: '...Almond was doing something with his characters that I had not seen before.' Coats goes on to identify this as a sense of the power of 'numinous possibility', and begins her study with a discussion of the 2013 book by Almond and Dave McKean, *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf*, a fable she sees as not only lending itself to multiple interpretations, but also as the author's most overt expression of 'an ideological thread' that can be traced throughout his oeuvre. She introduces the controversial idea of process theology, built upon the worldview of process philosophy, and applies this as a critical lens to Almond's work,

identifying its basic tenets as creativity, interrelatedness, free will, responsiveness to the past, and the lure of the divine. She notes that Almond's characters – 'Kit, John, Allie, Erin, January, Heaven Eyes, Blue, Harry, Sue, little Ben, Slog, Michael, Mina, and Skellig – all find the source of grace by following the lure of God into a darkness out of which they emerge remade.'

The complexity of religion in Almond's work is explored in a different way by Valerie Coghlan in 'A Sense Sublime': Religious resonance in the work of David Almond' (Chapter 5). Coghlan begins her chapter with this quotation from William Wordsworth, 'a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused ...', as one way of describing and seeking to understand the metaphysical qualities and 'lurking sense of the mysterious' in Almond's writing. She describes and places in context the rich imagery of what she calls Almond's 'literary Catholicism', the intersection of plots with Catholic ritual and belief, and the influence of Blake, and particularly of his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. She argues however that Almond's works express the idea that experience does not necessarily have to shatter innocence – that indeed the characters are not entirely innocent, and that experience is ongoing. She discusses Almond's belief in the power of story to offer hope: '[t]here are moments of great joy and magic. The most astounding things can lie waiting as each day dawns, as each page turns' (HE, p. 215). Almond's literary Catholicism is 'firmly centred on working-class communities in North East England', his characters are, in Almond's own words, 'ordinary people in ordinary places, but inside them are extraordinary things'.

Critical focus shifts in the next chapter to the significance of landscape in Almond's writing. Nolan Dalrymple's 'Birdmen from the Depths of the Earth: Radical landscape in the fiction of David Almond' (Chapter 6) describes and discusses the significance of Almond's radical vision and depiction of the landscapes of North East England. He sets in that different

critical context some of the themes discussed by other contributors to this volume – its modern and ancient influences, the edges and what he calls the ‘marriage’ of rural wildness and urban civilisation, the wastelands and wildernesses, the undercutting of natural spaces by mines, and the environmental and social legacies of industrial decline. He notes that Almond’s landscape imagery is essentially Romantic, and that the Romantics associate creativity with natural landscapes and wild places, including gardens and birds. Dalrymple describes a sense of ‘radical knowledge’ that evokes the sacred within the profane, and makes a particular point about the significance of the relationship between what lies above and what is below the ground, down in ‘the history of the landscape’. Almond’s is a North East in which the landscape is at one with its traditions, derelict though they may be.

In “‘They thought we had disappeared, and they were wrong’: The depiction of working class in Almond’s novels’ (Chapter 7), Carole Dunbar draws critical attention to Almond’s social landscapes and his continuing identification with the working-class life he portrays. Dunbar argues that this gives his writing a vibrancy, depth and individuality which is indivisible from his own social roots. She notes important parallels with the work of Alan Garner and Peter Dickinson, and particularly stresses the class emphasis on the value of education: in *The Fire-Eaters*, Bobby’s dad tells his son, the first member of the family to attend grammar school, ‘you can do anything ... you’re privileged and free,’ (FE, p. 60). As most of the other writers represented here also do, Dunbar refers to the autobiographical memoir *Counting Stars* as an intertext both to Almond’s writing and his life: Almond’s father believed, in the words of Almond himself, that his grammar school son ‘had the world in the palm of my hand’ (CS, p.47). She notes the ambivalent attitude of teachers to the working class poor; Mr Todd tells the new class: ‘You are half civilised. You are wild things. And you must be taught to conform’ (FE, p. 92). Here as in the preceding chapter there is a stress on the importance of history, and Dunbar notes the use of folk songs and ballads,

suggesting as they do the poor through theme and dialect. She notes the humanity and affection with which Almond recreates his place and his people through his creative works.

Nodelman's second chapter in this volume, "'Melting and Opening Underfoot': Almond's *Heaven Eyes* as a complex variation' (Chapter 8), follows on from the earlier one but draws attention both to the significance of the female protagonist (Almond's first, and the only one, excepting of course the play *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*, until *My Name is Mina* in 2010), and to this novel's similarities yet dissimilarities within a pattern that is intensely familiar in literature for children – the home/away/home story of escapes to dangerous freedoms and returns to restrictive safety. Nodelman points out the ambivalences that help to make this novel – on the surface a 'surprisingly Utopian fairy tale' – so mysterious and even problematical. He discusses themes relating to the idea of Tyneside landscape and history, the importance of story to identity, the use of pictures to recover the past, and the symbolism of the 'Black Middens'. He draws attention to the imaginative territory explored by Almond in *Heaven Eyes* but also notes its unsettling dissimilarities from Almond's other works.

Michael Levy, in Chapter 9, looks at Almond's plays, particularly *Wild Girl Wild Boy*, and identifies in them a sense of the transcendent.

This sense of unsettling dissimilarities amid similarities is amplified in the book examined in Chapter 10, *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean: told by himself*. In this essay I describe how Almond's tale is told, and what this reveals about words and truth, writing and language, and more importantly what Almond thinks about words and truth, writing and language. This chapter notes the continuing imageries of stars and dancing and birds singing and the power they contribute to the story, and the way they thread as leit-motifs through the narrative. It discusses the construction

of tale, teller and readers; the idea of an ethics of hope that permeates Almond's work; and how and what this book – his first for a dual readership – contributes to the Almond oeuvre.

Appendix 1 by Hannah Izod, outlines the invaluable resource to researchers that is available for Almond scholars at Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle, UK. It is an archive of original artwork and manuscripts, holds exhibitions, and runs events and learning programmes. As Izod points out, Almond has donated rough draft material for two of his books – *Heaven Eyes* and *My Dad's a Birdman* – to the collection. The latter book also has correspondence and notes in relation to preparing this book for publication in the United States. She outlines the fascinating way that this material – not huge in quantity – can reveal so much about Almond and the writing process. Indeed, it contains worthwhile tips that researchers could also apply in other contexts.

Hopefully these chapters will assist critical understandings and provoke further discussion about the work of this complex and highly individual author. Perhaps they will help explain why imageries that are used over and over again avoid becoming repetitive and instead become somehow enriched, enlarged, with every appearance – colours deeper, meanings more profound. Stars, dancing, larks, the 'ancient', mice, beasts, the dark, angels – they crop up again and again, with intense familiarity, and become part of a sort of collective conscious, if not unconscious. As Mina's mother tells her daughter, 'Your head holds all those stars, all that darkness, all these noises. It holds the universe' (*MNIM*, p. 282).

Perhaps Almond's skill is that he does not actually, as in popular literary parlance, *engage* with issues. Rather, he tells his stories and in the telling – out of the characters and events and their chronotopical relationship to time and place – issues and their associated philosophical and religious and theoretical and literary implications emerge, sometimes inconclusively, sometimes ambiguously, but always elegantly. There is a within-ness and a without-ness, reality upon reality

– meta-reality: ‘I close my eyes,’ writes Mina in her journal, ‘and stare into the universe inside myself’ (MNIM, p. 287).

So, read if you can each essay in this volume as part of the story of a children’s literature giant of our time. The authors have worked independently but there are surprising echoes in their critical examinations, and surprising, uncontrived, links between the essays.

This collection thus offers contemporary discussions of Almond’s work and provides critical material in order both to provide a sense of the whole of his literary oeuvre and to bring new ideas to the examination of individual texts. It also contributes new ideas into the scope and endless possibilities of children’s literature criticism.

*What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

Notes

¹ William Blake. *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*. (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1901 [1794]).

² To really appreciate the accents and idioms represented in Almond’s narration and dialogue, listen to some of the author’s readings on YouTube. There is a particularly interesting one of him reading the early pages of *The True Tale of Billy Dean told by himself*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhqzewH_UFo

³ Jack Zipes, Lissa Paul, Lynne Vallone, Peter Hunt, Gillian Avery, *Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature: The Traditions in English* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005) pp. 551-558.

⁴ Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard, *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*.

(Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 181.

⁵ . J. R.R. Tolkien, On Fairy Stories, in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Del Rey 1986 [1966]), p. 9.

⁶ Tolkien, p.14.

⁷ Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

⁸ Maria Nikolajeva, *The Magic Code: The use of magical patterns in fantasy for children* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988), p.10.

⁹ Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* <http://www.farahsf.com/extract.htm> accessed 24 Jan 2014.

¹⁰ Mendlesohn, *ibid*.

¹¹ <http://northropfrye-theanatomyofcriticism.blogspot.com.au/2009/02/tentative-conclusion.html> accessed 13 Jan 2014.

¹² Don Latham, *David Almond: Memory and Magic* (Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature, Book 24 (Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford: Scarecrow Press Inc, 2006).

¹³ Latham quotes the following as examples and notes that in interviews Almond has variously embraced and rejected the characterisation of his work as magical realism: Ilene Cooper, 'The Booklist Interview,' (1 Jan. 2000); and Mark Mordue, 'The Gentle Dreamer,' *Sunday Age* (Melbourne), 1 Jun. 2003. In a personal interview with Latham (21 Apr. 2005), Almond acknowledged both his debt to magical realism and the tendency of writers to resist all labels.

¹⁴ Gabriel Garcia Márquez, 'A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings', *Collected Stories*.

Trans. Gregory Rabassa and J. S. Bernstein. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 217-25.

Don Latham, Magical Realism and the Child Reader: The case of David Almond's *Skellig*, *The Looking Glass; New Perspectives on Children and Literature*, Vol 10, No 1, 2006.

¹⁵ Franz Roh. *Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism* [1925]. In Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1995), p.426.

¹⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins 'There lives the dearest freshness deep down things', *God's Grandeur*. [1877]. *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin), p. 27.

¹⁷ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1960 [1916]), p.213.

¹⁸ Franz Roh, *Realismo mágico: Problemas de la pintura europea más reciente*, transl. Fernando Vela, en *Revista de Occidente* 16-47 (abril-junio 1927), p.274-301.

¹⁹ *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, Letter on "Humanism", (1949). Available at:

<http://archive.org/stream/HeideggerLetterOnhumanism1949/Heidegger-LetterOn>

²¹ Jorge Luis Borges . *Historia universal de la infamia*, [1935]. Published in English 1972: *A Universal History of Infamy*. Translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, 1972. 2004 English edition: *A Universal History of Iniquity*. Transl. Andrew Hurley, (London: Penguin Classics,2004).

²² Alejo Carpentier, The baroque and the marvelous real. In Lois Parkinson Zamora, and Wendy B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1995), p.107.

²³ Arturo Usler Pietri, *Letras y hombres de Venezuela*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1949.

²⁴ Angel Flores, Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction. *Hispania* 38.2 (1955): pp.187-192.

²⁵ See, among others, David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin, 2000).

²⁶ Mendlesohn, op. cit.

²⁷ Richard Harland, *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), p.232.

²⁸ Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1995), pp.1-11.

²⁹ Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. (Wrights Lane London: Penguin Books, 1972 [1967]), p.144.

³⁰ Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved vs. Unresolved Antinomy*. (New York: Garland, 1985), pp. 30-31

³¹ Jones, *The Telegraph*, 2008, my emphasis.

³² Dorsch 1965, 109). Dorsch, T. S. *Classical Literary Criticism*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p.109.

³³ Longinus, On the Sublime <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/longinus01.htm> accessed 17 Jan 2014,

³⁴ Burke, Edmund. *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, [1757], [London : Routledge &Kegan Paul, 1958).

³⁵ Peter Ackroyd, Peter. *Blake*. (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p. 389.

³⁶ George Richmond was a follower of Blake and part of a group of young painters who called themselves ‘The Ancients.’ In later life he painted portraits of Cardinal Newman, Henry Hallam, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and many others. Geoffrey Grigson. *Samuel Palmer: the Visionary Years*. (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), p.38.

³⁷ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

³⁸ Aristotle. *Phys.* III, 4, 203b pp.25-30.

³⁹ ‘Postmodernism asked questions about perspectives (whose truth?) and sought new, inclusive ways of thinking, and new equities. Ironically, its pervasiveness has created its own grand narrative, and it has influenced and continues to influence not only literature but all the creative arts, engineering, architecture, religion, business.’ Rosemary Ross Johnston, *Literacy*, p.492. in G. Winch, R.R. Johnston, M. Holliday, L. Ljungdahl, L., and P. March, *Literacy: Reading, Writing and Children’s Literature*. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 4th Edition 2010), p. 492.

⁴⁰ Stanley Fish, ‘One University Under God’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 7, 2005.

⁴¹ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), pp.72-73.

⁴² Eagleton, p.73.

⁴³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations* – XVL The Spiraling Cadaver. Transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004 [1994]).

⁴⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The PostModern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, Afterword by Wlad Godzich, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 29.

⁴⁵ Lyotard, pp.79-80.

⁴⁶ Jens Zimmerman, Western Identity, The Exhaustion of Secular Reason, and the Return to Religion. *Global Literary Theory*. Richard Lane (Ed.), (London: Routledge , 2013), p. 798.

⁴⁷ Lane, 2013, p.798.

⁴⁸ Margaret Wertheim. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. (Milton’s Point, NSW: Doubleday, Transworld Publishers, 1999), p.23.

⁴⁹ Wertheim, p. 306.

⁵⁰ Wertheim, pp.38-39.

⁵¹ I wish to express my appreciation to Dr Pam Johnston for telling me of the work of the Aboriginal artist, Kame.

⁵² Paul Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*. Transl. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁵³ Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*. (London: Vintage, 1999), pp.145-146.

⁵⁴ As reported to me by community elders, 2002.

⁵⁵ Greene, p. 146.

⁵⁶ Lyotard, pp 79-80. '