

# In His Own Words

## David Almond



“I was born in a hovel on the banks of the Tyne, as so many of us were back then. It was a three-room dilapidated upstairs flat... Rats slunk under the floorboards, mice scuttled in the walls. The bath hung from a nail on the wall, the toilet was at the foot of steep steps outside.

All hackneyed, all true.” *The Tightrope Walkers*

Well, maybe not quite all of it. It wasn't a hovel. But it was a tiny upstairs flat, in the centre of the town, and it had the mice, the bath hanging on the wall, the toilet at the foot of the steps outside. And like Dom, the novel's narrator, 'by the time I remember anything clear, the slums were gone and we'd moved into our pebbledashed estate.'

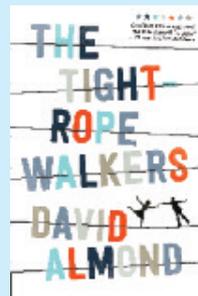
Some might say it was a life begun in disadvantage. For me, it has become a source of privilege.

Until I was thirteen, I lived on a council estate, surrounded by other estates built at the same time. There was a shared belief in the value of proper housing for all citizens, and that such housing might help create a better world. We had gardens, parks, playing fields, schools, swimming pools, churches, pubs, community centres, clubs. There were, of

course, newly-built libraries. We did not feel like second-class citizens. We were encouraged to believe that we could become anything we wanted to be, if we worked hard enough, if we aimed high enough.

A novel is a kind of estate: a group of characters in a drama in a time and place. Every character needs to be given life, to be honoured, not to be used by the author as some kind of cypher or tool, just as every person in our society needs to be honoured and supported. Writing is a political act.

In my family were bookies, welders, carpet fitters, waitresses, typists, labourers, firemen. My dad was an office manager, my mam a shorthand typist. My Uncle Amos was a printer, and was a writer, too. He wrote poems and novels that were never published, plays that were never performed. He didn't care. Write for the love of it, David, he told me. And don't let writing separate you from those you love.



Many of my family were shipyard workers. My novel, *The Tightrope Walkers*, has shipbuilding at its heart. Making a book is like building a ship, an act of engineering, labour, sweat and art. It is an act of welding, riveting, of carefully positioning huge steel sections in the correct place. Then it is nothing like shipbuilding at all: those moments when

the words seem to flow of their own volition, they sing for themselves, the writer disappears, the story writes itself. Then the moments of grace are over. It's back to the riveting again.

I come from the north. Yes, we think we all know the north - Jarrow marches, coal mining, shipbuilding, fading industry. But look deeper. Discover the rich culture that stretches back to St Bede, Cuthbert, The Lindisfarne Gospels. A frontier place of wildness and intense beauty, a place with its own harsh and tender language, a place of poetry, birdsong, music, a place in which Orpheus might sing, a place where all the ancient tales might be told and told again.

### LIST OF MAJOR AWARDS AND HONOURS

- The Hans Christian Andersen Award, Carnegie Medal, Eleanor Farjeon Award, Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, two Nestlé Smarties Gold Awards, two Whitbread Children's Book of the Year, Michel L Printz Award (USA), Michael L Printz Honor (USA), Le Prix Sorcier (France), Boston Globe-Horn Book Award (USA),
- Katholischer Kinder- und Jugendbuchpreis (Germany), two Silver Pencil (Netherlands), two Silver Kiss (Netherlands).
- Four Honorary Doctorates (Newcastle University, UEA, Sunderland University, Leicester University).
- Fellow of The Royal Society of Literature
- Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University.

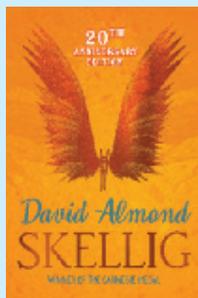
I was a Catholic altar boy, chanting the words, swinging the incense, beating the bells, helping the miracle of the mass to occur. We were fed tales and images of Hell and its torments and of a deeply tedious Heaven. I struggled to cast it off but in the end had just to relax and accept that it was part of me. Nothing to do with belief, but with the intensity of its imagery, the beat of its rituals, the physicality of it, the sights, sounds and scents of it, the downright barminess of it. Ah well, I thought, this thing is in me, let it have its place. And so along came *Counting Stars* and *Skellig* and the books that have followed.

Maybe it all began when I was a little boy, just after my baby sister Barbara had died, when my mam touched my shoulder blades with her fingers and softly said, "This is where your wings were, David, when you were an angel. This is where they'll be again."

Writing and reading are physical acts, and not just to do with the brain. Literary language is not an artificial thing. Black marks on white paper are beautiful: the marks they make, the shapes of paragraphs and pages. The marks turn to images and visions and dreams. They carry the sounds of ordinary speech, of human voices. They move with beauty and grace. They beat, they dance, they sing. They reach down deep and touch the heart. They move the mind. They draw out memories and sensations. They are living things. They link us to all the storytellers who have gone before, to all the storytellers still to come.

I never expected to write for young people until I found myself writing *Skellig*. I was half way down the first page when I knew it was the best thing I'd ever done, and that, to my amazement, it was a novel primarily for children. Writing for young people is often seen as a marginal activity. It is, in fact, central to our culture. The children's book world is a place of creativity and experimentation. Children's books exist in a range of forms denied to the writer for adults. 'Marginality' can bring a kind of liberation from conformity and stultifying 'seriousness'. My own freedoms include collaborating with artists, such as Dave McKean, Polly Dunbar, Oliver Jeffers, David Litchfield, Alex T Smith, Salvatore Rubbino, Eleanor Taylor and Levi Pinfold. These artists don't come along simply to 'illustrate' an already existing story, but to recreate that story with astounding images. Children's publishers work alongside us, collaborators, too. Writing becomes not a solitary act, but a communal endeavour.

We create work for children, who are natural artists. They are young citizens, and should be honoured and respected. Their creativity and intelligence can give our culture life. True 'grown-ups' retain a childlike playfulness and boldness within themselves. Many of the politicians who make decisions on our behalf have cast off childlikeness. They fear appearing to be tender and they are scared to be bold. The vote should be given to 16 year olds. Private schools should be closed down. Children of all backgrounds should be given the same expectations, support, hopes and dreams. Why should the children of those on universal credit subsidise the children of the rich?



Two schoolboys in a Newcastle primary school taught me how to be a playwright. When *Skellig* came out, I read some of the story to a class of 6 year olds. Immediately afterwards, those schoolboys dashed into the yard and started to act it out. For children, stories are not fixed. They leap from the page and take wing. Some time after my school visit, I was asked by Trevor Nunn if I'd consider adapting *Skellig* for the stage. I thought of those boys, took a deep breath and said yes, of course. Now it seems natural to write words that might be spoken or sung on a stage, to create characters that move in space as well as in the imagination. The real and the imaginary flow together as they do in the minds of children, as they do, when we allow them to, in all our minds.



My newest books are *The Dam*, *War is Over* and *The Colour of the Sun*. *Joe Quinn's Poltergeist* will be out in March. All of them are very different from each other. I write and keep on writing. I wrote long before I was ever published by a big publisher, long before I made, or expected to make, any money from my work. I write, as my Uncle told me, for the love of it, and I try not to allow my writing to remove me from those whom I love. I write because the world and the human mind are alive with stories and song. Like all of us who make work with and for young people, I write in the hope that we might help to create a better world."

#### Selected Bibliography

- The Tighrope Walkers* Penguin £8.99 ISBN: 978-0241003237
- Skellig* Hodder £7.99 ISBN: 978-0340944950
- A Song For Ella Grey* Hodder £7.99 ISBN: 978-1444922134
- The Colour of the Sun* Hodder £12.99 ISBN: 978-1444919554
- War is Over* Illustrated by David Litchfield Hodder £10.99 ISBN: 978-1444946574
- The Dam* Illustrated by Levi Pinfold Walker Studio £12.99 ISBN: 978-1406304879
- Joe Quinn's Poltergeist* Illustrated by Dave McKean Walker £10.99 ISBN: 978-1406363197



A new production of *Skellig* will be in repertoire at Nottingham Playhouse from March 22nd-April 7th.

[www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk/whats-on/family/skellig/](http://www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk/whats-on/family/skellig/)

Many thanks to Tina Massey for her help with this feature.