Recommended Reads – Focus on David Almond

The breadth of David Almond's work is in focus for this rendition of our recommended reads, for Almond, one of only three authors from the UK to have won the Hans Christian Andersen Award to date, is bold in his experimentation with radically innovative literature for young readers. The texts introduced here illustrate a range of formats: a picturebook, a play, and a young adult novel, starting off with one of Almond's extraordinary hybrid, richly illustrated texts, which will not conform to a recognized format.

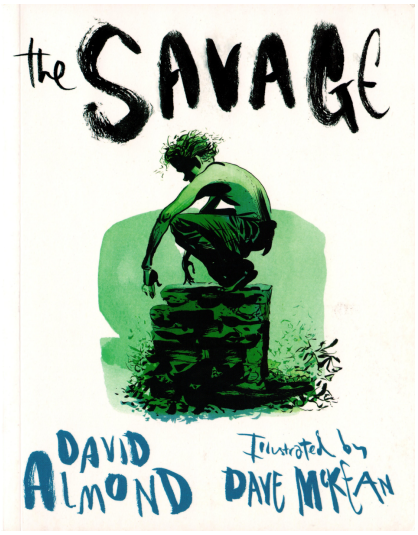
Almond, David (2008)

The Savage

Illustrated by Dave McKean

Walker Books

Recommended by Michael C. Prusse



David Almond's novella *The Savage* could probably be best described as a 'hybrid' (Hateley, 2012, p. 176), to apply an attribute that Kimberley Reynolds had previously used when writing about Philipp Pullman's *Spring-heeled Jack* (Reynolds, 1994, p. 66). The hybrid nature of Almond's text refers to the fact that it consists of two media formats. There is a text-based tale presented as detached autobiography in the first person and a graphic narrative, illustrated by Dave McKean, that portrays the 'Savage' in the third person.

The protagonist of the verbal text, Blue Baker, is the author of the graphic passages, which he writes to overcome his traumatic experiences, the loss of his father due to a heart attack and the bullying by Hopper, a nasty, smoking, older kid. Blue, who lives with his Mam and his sister Jess in 'the little town of Saltwell' (Almond, 2008, p. 12), is sceptical when his school counsellor suggests that he write about his thoughts and feelings to deal with the unsettling events. Hateley (2012, p. 172) links this to the problems of a reluctant boy reader, however Blue is not described as being generally averse to reading but as someone who has clear preferences –

he hates 'all that stuff about wizards and fairies' but enjoys 'blood and guts and adventures' (Almond, 2008, p. 12).

Instead of recording his emotions and reflections, Blue invents the 'Savage', a character that lives independently in the wilderness and is not afraid of anything – on the contrary, he is a figure that inspires awe and fear in others. At this point, the narrative consists of prose passages in which the narrator mostly talks about his situation and in what manner he was inspired to create the story of the Savage. Hence, readers are given a metanarrative on authorship, on how to write a story, the ways a protagonist can evolve, and on the 'healing power of storytelling' (Bland, 2014a, p. 94). The Savage's graphic tale is combined with annotations that are brimming with spelling mistakes and thus allude to the writer's younger age when first designing his tale.

As the narrative proceeds, the two genres, traditional novel, and graphic novel, gradually begin to merge: 'Sometimes, it was nearly like I was him and he was me' (Almond, 2008, p. 31). When Blue runs away from school and enters the Savage's cave in the forest, he realizes that he has found his *doppelgänger*, his alter ego, his wild side. In a plot reversal of Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the Savage becomes a part of his personality.

It is the two media formats combined with its shortness that make the text attractive for classroom usage. Before reading, students could be asked what associations they have with the noun 'savage' and then be given the task to draw or paint how they imagine such a character. The beginning of Chapter Two, in which Blue rhetorically asks what the use of swearing is if he is not permitted to do so in dire circumstances (Almond, 2008, p. 13), lends itself for a lesson on taboo words. In an ELT context, swearing is usually avoided, even though in extramural activities students are regularly exposed to it when they consume series, games, movies, music etc. While commonly familiar with the unspoken rules in their mother tongue, in English they move in uncharted territory and require a teacher's guidance on sociocultural appropriacy.

Blue's writing would probably not meet the expectations of most English teachers, but he is creative and poetic. A good example is the description of the bully Hopper: 'He walked around smoking and sneering and spitting and swearing' (Almond, 2008, p. 15). Another classroom task could consist of collecting adjectives or verbs with alliterative or onomatopoeic qualities and using them to portray people.

Young Blue's spelling is not perfect. More advanced learners could be asked to work in

pairs with (short) passages from the graphic narrative. They ought to look for misspelled words, and make suggestions, how they would correct them. In a teacher education environment, student teachers could explore the best ways to help students improve their writing skills: What would be an adequate method to turn Blue into a competent speller?

Finally, the hybrid nature of the text constitutes an ideal model of multimodalities and multiliteracies. Therefore, students might explore the difference between visual and verbal literacy, learn about narrative aspects such as mimesis and diegesis, and discuss the process of becoming a creator, an author, by means of Blue's example. How do the two narratives work?

Further suggestions for classroom activities can be found in Bland (2014b).

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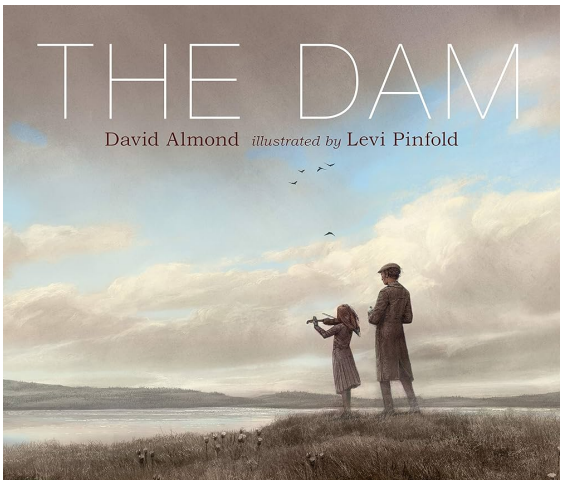


Almond, David (2018)

The Dam

Illustrated by Levi Pinfold

Candlewick Press

Recommended by Tatia Gruenbaum

To date, the works of David Almond comprise a small number of picturebooks, one of these being *The Dam*, illustrated by author and illustrator Levi Pinfold and published in 2018. It was shortlisted for the 2020 CILIP Kate Greenaway Award, and its Italian edition, *La Diga*, won the 2019 Andersen Prize for best illustrated children's book of the year and the Premio Letteratura Ragazzi 2019, for best children's poetry book of 2019. *The Dam* is set in Northumberland, UK, and is based on the true event of Kielder Water, a man-made water reservoir that was built between 1975 and 1981. This project included the construction of the dam in the Kielder Valley. When completed, the valley that lay behind would be flooded.

Almond tells the story of two musicians: a father and daughter who make one final visit to their home in the valley before it slowly fills with water. They rise at dawn and walk across the fields. They reminisce about the celebrations, the songs and sounds by local musicians, the fiddlers, and the pipers, and contemplate the nature that will be lost forever. By now, their village has been abandoned, houses have been boarded up. Undeterred, the father tears down the boards and they enter their deserted home. The daughter places her fiddle on her shoulder and begins to play; the father begins to sing. Their music fills the emptiness of their home and transcends the walls, flowing into the valley one last time. Once the dam is sealed, the water rises and drowns the village, turning the valley into a beautiful lake. The villagers continue to return to the shores of the lake to remember and hear the spirits of the music that rise from the valley and remain forever.

The Dam offers a range of ELT opportunities, especially for teachers working with

picturebooks in the secondary classroom. To begin with, learners can explore the author's notes at the end of the book. Here, Almond explains that the story is based on Mike Tickell, a singer and songwriter, and his daughter Kathryn Tickell, a world-famous folk musician. These author notes lend themselves to a number of research activities about Mike and Kathryn, the valley, Kielder Water, and the role of music in Northumberland. Then, more advanced learners can discuss the significance of music in historic and memorable events, personal or otherwise. When sharing their findings, learners may practise sequencing and the use of reported speech. Whereas the end in some stories offer students the possibility to continue, this picturebook offers the reverse. Learners can imagine the situation preceding the story, when the villagers were ordered to leave.

Almond tells an emotional story written in a lyrical language that moves between the emotions of losing and remembering a place once called home, and accepting the new. Pinfold's illustrations support this movement. His initial restricted, muted colour palette of brown and grey shades reflects sadness. The later introduction of lighter colours such as pale blue and green reflects the new present, perhaps hope. His darker colour background choices offer the possibility to visualise the spiritual side of the area and folk music. Pinfold allows the reader to become both emersed in wordless, full-bleed double spreads extending to the edge of the page and a series of smaller illustrations, separated by a gutter. Both approaches afford learners the space to explore emotions and make predictions. Moreover, Pinfold's colour choices stimulate a discussion whether colours represent mood.

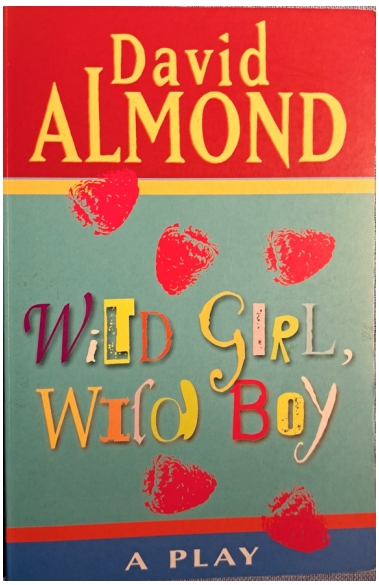
As this extract illustrates, teachers and learners will soon realise that working with lyrical, rhyme-based picturebooks does not necessarily mean navigating uncommon, low-frequency vocabulary chosen for the sake of rhyme:

> *The birds heard.*
> *The beast heard.*
> *The earth heard.*
> *The trees heard.*
> *The ghosts heard.*
> *The day was darkening.*
> *Out of the valley they walked.*

Learners can be encouraged to create a beat, extend the lyrics, and thus recognise the unity of the

song, spoken word, and illustrations to support oral literacy development. Finally, the past few years have shown the world that severe weather, which includes serious flooding, is occurring more frequently. This book can thus offer support for teachers and their classes living in areas where homes have been destroyed by flooding.

Dr Tatia Gruenbaum is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institut for Anglistik and Amerikanistik, TU Braunschweig. Her research focuses on the role of Holocaust picturebooks in ELT in addressing anti-Semitism. Her latest publication is a practical resource book written together with Gail Ellis for the British Council, titled *Picturebook lesson series: Exploring Social Issues* (2023). She is one of the four co-founders of Picturebooks in European Primary English Language Teaching (PEPELT), a finalist in the 2020 British Council ELTons Awards.



Almond, David (2002)

Wild Girl, Wild Boy

Hodder

Recommended by Janice Bland

Plays for children belong to the 'neglected dimensions of children's literature and its scholarship' (Arizpe, Styles & Rokison, 2010, p. 125). One of the reasons for this may be that published plays written with young people in mind are hard to find. David Almond's *Wild Girl, Wild Boy* is a play that is highly suitable for the secondary English language classroom, both for its marvellous language, which abounds in poetic-repetitive patterns, and for its themes of bullying and Othering.

The protagonist, Elaine, seems to be about the age when children move on from primary to secondary school, but, distraught by the loss of her father, Elaine is scarcely able to read and write. In Scene One we see her trying to write down her own story, then exclaiming, 'Agh!

Words on me fingers and on stupid paper slither and crawl and slip and slide and stagger like wounded things. Look at them. But words on me tongue can dance and sing like larky birds' (Almond, 2002, p. 12). Although Elaine is not yet functionally literate, she uses poetic cadences in her language, here for example a striking polysyndeton (slither and crawl and slip and slide and stagger) and similes (like wounded things, like larky birds). Elaine talks aloud, sometimes to herself, sometimes to her father who appears as a character when she imagines the past, and often to a Wild Boy whom at first only she can see. Elaine's father had taught her the wonder and mystery of nature while they spent hours together at their allotment:

> **ELAINE** The allotment. It was a wild place, a wilderness, and I was his little girl. The middle of it was all tame and neat, but all around: the long grass, the high weeds, where I crawled and wandered and got lost and called out to him. (p. 20)

As in the example above, there is much vivid 'word-scenery' in *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*, a concept that we know from Elizabethan drama, which hardly used any physical scenery (Pfister, 1988, p. 16). Thus, although the scenes change very fast, the settings can be imagined by students acting out the scenes and those watching the play. Almond is a magic realist writer, and it is not always clear what Elaine is experiencing, and what she is only imagining. Elaine uses a dried seedhead as a rattle, this lends rhythm to the changing scenes, but also seems to carry her back into the past, where so much was wild and alive on the allotment, as her father says: 'grow like mushroom, grow like magic, grow like happiness in the heart…' (Almond, 2002, p. 23). The references to nature reflect the miracle of life, as when Elaine finds a lark's egg, and echoes some of her father's earlier words:

> **ELAINE** Here's a lark's egg, Mum.
> See, speckled white outside, brilliant white inside. A little lark grew out of this. From yellow yolk and salty white and flew away. A miracle.
>
> **MUM** A miracle. You were once a yolky little salty thing.
> And look at you now, so lovely. (p. 78)

Without her father, Elaine is devastated by a reality around her that insists on order, discipline and convention. A neighbour, who seems to represent rigid patriarchal symbolic order, tells her mother:

> **McNAMARA** Give her rules and regulations. Discipline her. Tame her. It's like gardening. How d'you get the best plants? Proper feeding, proper watering, proper pruning. Start growing the wrong way and you pull them back. Start getting wild and you cut them back. You show them what's the right way and what's the wrong way to grow. You train them, and you keep on training them, otherwise there's just… wilderness. (p. 70)

Elaine's mother listens fearfully to McNamara, to a doctor she consults about her daughter, and to the voices of neighbours, classmates and teachers, who, in chorus, comment on the action while deriding, taunting and haunting Elaine. The chorus scenes in *Wild Girl, Wild Boy* are particularly interesting to rehearse in the English language classroom; students can speak rhythmically in unison, in pairs or with individual voices rising to a crescendo, as the mocking exclamations escalate to a climax:

> – Reading: accuracy?
> – Nil.
> – Comprehension?
> – Nil.
> – Reading age?
> – Elaine has not yet achieved a score in our current methods of assessment.
> – Writing skills?
> – Hahahahahahaha!
> – She's just out of it, man.
> – Round the bend.
> – Up the pole.
> – Doolally.
> – She's upset, man. She's in grief.
> – Why's that, then?

– Her dad… […]
– Hey. Listen: Dad's dead and she's losing her head.

– Dad's dead and you're losing your head,
– Dad's dead and you're losing your head,
– Dad's dead and you're…

ELAINE Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! (pp. 27–28)

Elaine is cruelly taunted by neighbours and schoolmates because she cannot move easily from her dream-like dialogue with her imaginary friend, the Wild Boy, to the discipline of school and literacy. The Wild Boy cannot speak, has fur on his hands and feet, and is at one with nature; he is the magic realist element in *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*, as he can be sensed by Elaine's mother too. The Wild Boy is like a forever child, reminiscent of Peter Pan (hero of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, one of the earliest plays for young people, and one of the few that is still regularly performed). He comforts and cares for Elaine, and shows tenderness to Elaine's mother, who learns to be able to see him when, at the end of *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*, she turns her back on McNamara and his rules and regulations. She runs up the hill with her daughter to the allotment, to wild nature and the Wild Boy, and to the memories of Elaine's father, his love of nature and his energetic chaos. This creates a radical ending in a work of children's literature, as literacy, schooling and order are not seen as the highest goal, but rather nature, wildness, and empathy.

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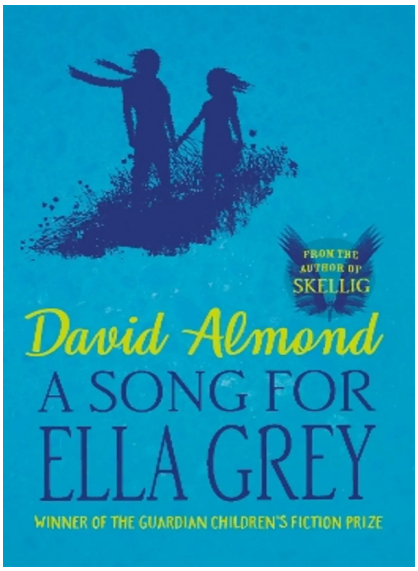
Almond, David (2015)

A Song for Ella Grey

Hodder

Recommended by Houman Sadri



The relative ubiquity enjoyed by modern-day retellings of myths and folktales is not, perhaps, hard to explain. We are, to borrow the title of Jonathan Gottschall's 2012 book, a storytelling animal: the stories we have grown up with – tales from myth, folklore, legend, and scripture – explain, modulate, and justify the world for us. As a result, mythological tropes and stories are integral to young adult fiction because folklore and mythology are themselves so ingrained within our traditions and storytelling, with story essentially acting as a 'universal grammar' (Gottschall, 2012, p. 52) due to the audience's shared base of knowledge about, and recognition of, the tropes and beats of the story being referenced. This, of course, also allows the author to subvert expectations – to take our understanding of familiar mythological patterns and beats and ever-so-slightly skew them, the better to breathe new life into the story and to make it speak both to and for new generations of readers.

A Song for Ella Grey is ostensibly a retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, albeit one set in modern-day Newcastle and Northumberland and populated by young people on the

cusp of adulthood, playing at being grown-ups while still nominally children. Unlike most other adaptations of the tale, though, both Orpheus and the Eurydice figure – the eponymous Ella Grey – are to some extent decentred. The novel's narrator and protagonist, Claire, tells the reader from the outset that she is 'the one who's left behind […] the one to tell the tale,' (Almond, 2014, p. 3), creating the expectation in the reader that the story and emphasis to come are familiar, and thus easily digestible. Almond, however, has other plans: this is Claire's story, the story of how she leaves behind the North-East and the loves of her childhood, and in doing so becomes an adult. The renaming of the Eurydice figure is important here: 'Ella Grey,' literally *grey girl*, is apt, as we have only Claire's adoring word that there is anything more to her than wispiness, than *greyness*.

Claire, on the other hand, watches with increasing clarity, is at times literally clairvoyant – most notably when she is able to view Orpheus' descent to the underworld through his own eyes, with the help of a hastily-constructed Greek Tragedy mask. In fact, this is the crux of the tale: the progress of Claire's understanding of the world around her from romantic – in other words that of a child – to clear – which is to say, through the eyes of an adult. Orpheus – tellingly not renamed here and stepping into the narrative directly from the collective unconscious – represents the opposite of the clarity Claire needs to progress, and Ella represents the negative space that keeps her moored to Tyneside, so it is fitting that the tale she narrates removes both from her path.

The frankness and honesty in which Claire and her group of friends are shown to straddle the line between childhood and adulthood is refreshing and, I believe, important. While it is true that an increasing number of novels written for 'young adults' – that most amorphous of labels – seem prepared to brave the waters of sexuality and desire in young people, Almond's take is clear-eyed and understanding. Kids swear here and have sex – but this is not in service of some kind of half-baked edginess, or an attempt to show how grown-up the characters are. Indeed, this behaviour is designed to show the opposite. On an Easter trip to Northumberland, for example, their attempts at wild and abandoned behaviour are clearly those of a group of children pantomiming adulthood, as opposed to acting truly grown up. They drink and copulate with one another, but still hoot like small children at the seals on the shore, make a sculpture of a man with a 'bulbous' penis out of jetsam (Almond, 2014, p. 38) and behave in an obnoxious enough

fashion as to leave local people wanting to avoid the beach altogether (pp. 60–61).

Claire is the first to leave the beach, ostensibly because she misses the absent Ella, but in truth because these dress rehearsals for adulthood no longer ring true for her. Frank too are the depictions of queer desire and longing, as well as the fact that the personal prejudices of parents can sometimes stand in the way of their fulfilment. Claire and Ella, it is clear, have a sexual relationship, one that Ella's parents are aware may be a possibility, and are eager to prevent: 'they say this sleepover thing […] It's getting out of hand […] They say it's fine when you're in junior school. But this is not appropriate' (p. 26). Indeed, there is an argument to suggest that it is the homophobia of Ella's adoptive parents that pushes her towards Orpheus, and therefore death. Interesting too is the experimental nature of the narrative, which is written in a mild Geordie vernacular and as such attempts to mimic the speech patterns of – admittedly middle class – teens from the Newcastle area. More experimental still is the section in which Claire dons the Greek mask and experiences Orpheus' descent to and exit from the Underworld – the paper stock switches from white to black and differing typefaces are used to denote the voices of different, unseen-in-the-dark, mythological figures of Hades, many of whom speak with specific accents and slang sets. This section becomes, in itself, an interesting linguistic and semiotic exercise, playing as it does with appearance, form, structure and voice, while still remaining entirely in keeping with the narrative itself.

A Song for Ella Grey is an important text, and one that would be extremely useful in the context of the secondary English language classroom. The writing can speak to young readers (as opposed to speaking *at* them), while still offering a voice that is uncompromising and frank. The use of the Orpheus story is key here, because the tropes and structures of classical mythology anchor the text in a familiarity within and against which it can work to get its points across. Repression – in the case of Ella – and abandon – in the case of Orpheus are both mistakes, and lead to ruination, disaster, and death. Claire represents clarity, and a middle ground, and only she will get to 'travel to the places where the ancient stories have their start' (Almond, 2014, pp. 273–274).

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