



DAVID

ALMOND







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HHHA

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CONTENTS

	Skellig	4
	Heaven Eyes	6
	Kit's Wilderness	10
	Secret Heart	13
	Other Writing by David Almond	15

INTRODUCTION

David Almond is an exciting writer for children and young adults. His work has won critical acclaim: *Skellig* first published in 1998 won both the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year; *Kit's Wilderness* won the silver award in the Smarties Prize for the 9-11 category in 2000; won the Michael L Printz Award (U.S.) and was highly commended for the Carnegie Medal; and *Heaven Eyes* was shortlisted for the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award 2001.

Almond grew up in a small town, which overlooked the River Tyne in England. He talks about how life in this town was filled with a number of mysterious characters and unexpected events. These have provided a rich source of material for his stories. His varied occupations have included teaching and editing and he has been a salesman and a postman. He believes passionately in the magic and importance of 'story'. Much of his writing has an underlying theme of hope:

We come into the world out of the dark. We haven't got a clue where we've come from. We've got no idea where we're going. But while we're here in the world, if we're brave enough, we'll flap our wings and fly.

Heaven Eyes

The novels are suitable for students in their final year of primary school and/or secondary school. Many of the major themes can be considered on a number of different levels.

MAJOR THEMES

All the stories are about relationships, family and coming to terms with lives which are not always as we'd like them to be. There are a number of recurring themes in each of his books. They include:

- Light vs Dark
- The power of your imagination and dreams to take you beyond your everyday world and provide healing
- The cycle of life—birth, stages of life, death and rebirth
- Identity
- The relationship between all living creatures and the environment
- The inter-relationship between humans and animals
- Schooling vs education

Students could look for the different manifestations of these themes in his books.

INVESTIGATING DAVID ALMOND'S WRITING

The novels have been arranged in order of accessibility rather than chronologically. The themes in *Skellig*, for example, are more appropriate for senior primary children than some of the later books.

If all of Almond's work is being explored through an author study, students could be divided into small groups of 5—6. Each group could be assigned one of the novels/short stories to read together depending on reading ability/interest. They could be asked to read the novel, noting themes, characterisation, style, etc. *Skellig* could be used with the whole class to model the process and then students could work collaboratively on their assigned novel/story. Almond usually relates the story in the first person, from the perspective of the main character. It is interesting to reflect on why he chooses to tell these stories in this way.

The following are suggested questions and discussion topics for each book.



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BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

Depending on age/interests of the students, there are a number of possible ways to introduce some of the concepts/themes in the novel. One or two could be chosen for thorough investigation or students could work collaboratively with a partner or in small groups to investigate:

- the story of Persephone
- Darwin's theory of evolution
- some of the recent writing about angels. What is it that angels are created to do?
- the way angels are represented in some current movies (e.g. *City of Angels*, *Michael*)
- how birds fly
- the characteristics and behaviour of owls
- the home-schooling movement which is one of the fastest growing education movements in some western countries
- the poetry of William Blake
- the debilitating effects of arthritis

GETTING INTO THE NOVEL

- Begin by reading the opening descriptions of the house (p.2), the garage (p.1-2, 3-4,6-7) and the garden (p.5). Students can sketch their impressions of the new house and garden based on these opening descriptions and then discuss. What colours did they choose? Why?
- Discuss the whole process of moving. Students can share their own experiences and feelings about moving. Why is moving one of the most stressful events in our lives?
- The descriptions of Skellig (p.1, 7) can also be read aloud and translated to visual sketches or models.
- Students could discuss the possible identity of the person in the garage. How does the author suggest that he may be different to other human beings?
- Students could discuss what they think happened to Skellig.

CHARACTERISATION

- Script Michael's first encounters with Skellig as a readers' theatre and read aloud. How is Skellig portrayed initially? Why is he like this?
- Track Skellig's transformation as the novel unfolds. What changes him?
- Mina and Michael's conversations could also be read aloud. What leads to the development of Michael and Mina's friendship?
- Contrast Mina's friendship with Michael and his relationship with his two schoolmates, Leakey and Coot. Why is it different? What are the friendships with school friends based upon?
- There are a number of characters in the story who play minor or cameo roles. Some are very important. What image do we build of Mina's mother? Or the lady who Michael meets in hospital who is recovering from two hip replacements?
- Babies in general and Joy in particular are portrayed as having lots of determination to survive.

SYMBOL

David Almond makes use of many symbols in *Skellig*.

- What does the house in disarray, overgrown garden and dilapidated garage symbolise at the beginning of the story?
- Listen to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. What do each of the seasons symbolise? How are the seasons used in the novel? For example, the novel opens at the end of winter. Students can map the baby's recovery paralleled with the growth of the baby birds and the coming of spring.
- Students can record the use of light and dark throughout the novel. For example, Mina and Michael visit Skellig at dawn; the night before the baby's operation is moonless; the baby came home on a beautiful sunny day.
- Students can closely examine one of Michael's dreams or that of his mother. What do they symbolise?
- What do owls symbolise commonly in literature? What role does the owl play in *Skellig*?

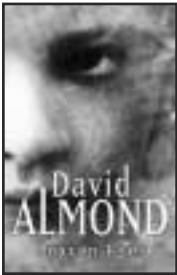
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AFTER READING THE NOVEL

- How are drawings and modeling used throughout the book? Do you use art to help you release your feelings/unpack your imagination?

- Sometimes we just have to accept that there are things we can't know (p.131)...we have to allow ourselves to see what there is to see and we have to imagine. What do you think this means? What things can't we know about? What things must we imagine?
- Do you agree with Mina that the mind needs to be opened out into the world, not shuttered down inside a gloomy classroom (p.47)? Is the contrast between school and being at home always so black and white?
- Why is William Blake's poetry used so frequently throughout the story?

RELATED BOOKS

Burnett, F.	<i>The Secret Garden.</i>
French, J.	<i>The Boy who had Wings.</i>
Nesbit E.	<i>Five Children and It.</i>



HEAVEN EYES

INTRODUCTION

This is an unusual story of three so-called ‘damaged’ children; Erin, January and Mouse, damaged because they have lost their parents. On one of their frequent attempts to run away from their institutional home, Whitegates, they meet Heaven Eyes, who has been rescued from the Black Middens by Grampa.

BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

- Students could research their family trees and, where possible, interview older members of their family about how life has changed.
- Students could investigate the history of their local area—perhaps through looking at old newspapers.
- It may be useful to visit a museum to find out about how an archaeological dig actually happens.
- Students could look at the words of Bobby Shaftoe.

GETTING INTO THE NOVEL

- Erin uses her treasure box to bring her memories of her mother close to her. Students could create their own treasure box or scrapbook to record their own special memories.
- Telling stories is an important theme in this novel, and indeed, throughout David Almond's books. Students could tell a story about their family. Just as Erin's, January's and Anna's stories slowly unfold, students could stage their stories. They could use timelines or story maps to structure their storytelling to their peers.
- Students could discuss their feelings about running away and the importance of talking with someone about their concerns. They could read the Biblical story of *The Prodigal Son*.
- A number of the conversations could be effectively scripted for readers' theatre. See for example, p.35 the exchange, which occurs when Erin and January decide whether or not Mouse can accompany them on the raft. Or one of Heaven Eyes' and Erin's conversations about mothers or sleep memories. Students could script several of these excerpts to read aloud and focus on Almond's skilful construction of dialogue.
- Many of the scenes lend themselves to enactment. In small groups students could depict some of the critical events. These could include setting off on the journey, Grampa and Heaven Eyes' encounter with Erin, January and Mouse, saying good bye to Grampa, bringing Heaven Eyes to Whitegate, January's reunion with his mother.

CHARACTERISATION

- Each character is drawn with great care in this novel. Students could select one of the characters to build up a character profile. They could keep a table as shown below to record important excerpts from the text, which focus on the character they have chosen for close study.

Plot Profile: January

Characteristic /Attribute	Relevant Quote/Incident	Page refs
Angry	<i>Jan's eyes were harsh and red rimmed.... I saw how he was ready to quarrel with me.</i>	p.63
	<i>I saw the anger in his eyes,</i>	p.94
Fiercely protective of Erin	Stands between Grampa and Erin when Grampa approaches them with the knife.	p.94
Curious	Explores Grampa's records in search of the truth.	p.133

- Do you think January becomes jealous of the friendship, which grows between Heaven Eyes and Erin? How do you know?
- Several characters show great development during the story. Students could examine the changes in Erin, January or Maureen as the plot unfolds. What factors contribute to this development?
- Grampa is a very interesting person. Should he have hidden Anna's history from her? Why did he decide to do this?
- What changes the antagonism between Maureen and Erin at the end of the book?

SYMBOL

- Water is a powerful symbol in Heaven Eyes. For example, Erin is floating in utero before her birth, Heaven Eyes has webbed fingers and is alone amongst her family after being rescued from drowning, Erin's mother is carried away on water (p.21) when she dies. Students could examine some of these descriptions closely.
- The river, in particular, is important in the novel. Students could find some examples of the descriptions of the river and think about why David Almond has chosen them. What does the river represent? What, then, does the raft symbolise?
- The black mud ensnares the raft. The water washes the mud away. Is water

used as a symbol of healing in the book?

- Other symbols can be explored in this way. See for example, the use of the sun and lightness to signal new hope.
- At what points in the novel do we read about the bird of life? Why?

SETTING

Place is extremely important in Almond's books. Students could discuss the contrast between the two settings: Whitegates vs The Black Middens.

STYLE

- Students can closely examine the stylistic devices used so effectively by Almond to build images. Read p.207, for example. Note the short, poetic sentences with images packed in tightly as in:

*Came to the wasteland. Sunlight gleamed on the arch of the greatest bridge.
The city's low rumble as the day began.*

- Repetition is also a key element. Sky brightening, brightening, brightening.
- What effect do the different fonts, mixed upper and lower cases and boldness used in the signs have?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Heaven Eyes has the ability to see through grief and trouble (p.69) and find the positive in everyone. Why do you think she is like this?
- A number of the characters have very important dreams or, in Heaven Eyes' words, 'sleep memories'. Students could discuss the importance of these dreams to the novel and relate to recurring dreams of their own.
- Do you think that one day we'll know everything there is to know about ourselves (p.141)? Can we know ourselves completely? What strategies help us to reflect on who we are? What crucial things do we need to know about ourselves?
- One of the criteria that Erin and January decide is necessary for a journey is a true friend. What qualities make a true friend? Are these exemplified in the novel?
- Freedom is an important theme in the novel. What different ways of finding freedom are explored in *Heaven Eyes*?

RELATED READING

Picture Books:

Browne, A.

The Tunnel

Hathorn, L.

Way Home

Wild, M.

Very Old Pig

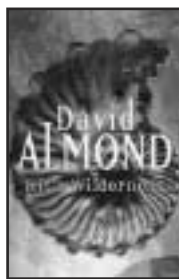
Fiction:

Martin, A.

Beyond Duck River

Holm, A.

I am David



KIT'S WILDERNESS

INTRODUCTION

This is an important book in that it confronts death from the perspective of thirteen-year-old Kit who watches his grandfather pass away. At the same time it addresses the eternal cycle of birth-life-death-rebirth in a very thought-provoking manner.

BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

- Students would benefit from researching how coal is formed and how it is mined. They could undertake an excursion to a coalmine, watch a documentary on mining or have someone talk with them about mining in the past compared with today.
- Students could investigate the geological history of the earth including the Ice Age. In addition, some understanding of prehistoric man and woman's way of life would be helpful. This could be accessed through videos such as *Before Time*.
- It may also be useful to examine some examples of prehistoric art.
- Students could read *The Snow Queen* and discuss its themes.

GETTING INTO THE NOVEL

- This novel also deals with moving, one of the most stressful things that can happen in a person's life. Kit and his family moved to Stonegate to be with his grandfather after his grandmother died. Students could share their own experiences of moving and discuss the issues that they needed to come to terms with. Were Kit's experiences similar?

- How are the teachers at school represented? Do you think their nicknames are appropriate ('Burning Bush', etc)?

SETTING

In Stoneygate there was a wilderness (p.5). Is it significant that the game of death is played where the ancient pit had once been between the houses and the river? Students could read the description of Askew's den carefully and try to sketch it.

SYMBOL

- The pervasiveness of the pit is evident throughout the novel. What does it symbolise? Students could keep a log of the descriptions of the pit and its effect on the surrounding country.
- Grandpa contrasts the darkness of the underground with the brightness of the world above (see for example, p.19).
- Compare Kit's family and house (pp.24-5) with John's. What do the differences symbolise?

STRUCTURE

- The novel begins with the ending of the book. Why do you think the author has structured the novel in this way?
- The novel is organised around the seasons. What do they represent?
- There are a number of stories within stories in the novel (e.g. Silky's story, Lak's story). Students could choose one to re-enact in small groups.
- What effect does Lak's story have on the main plot? How does David Almond weave the two together?

CHARACTERISATION

- Characters are very richly drawn. Students could contrast Kit and his family with John Askew's. Why do they think Kit was drawn into the game and into interaction with John?
- Students could construct a sociogram to depict the relationships between the main characters.
- What role does Allie Keenan play in the story? Is she like the ice girl she plays in *The Snow Queen*?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ‘Your stories is like my drawings, Kit. They take you back deep into the dark and show it lives within us still. (p.15). What does John mean by the dark?’
- What did the monument symbolise?
- One of the novel’s most powerful themes is about the magic of story and storytelling. How does David Almond demonstrate this through the novel?
- What do you think transformed John?
- Why is the novel called Kit’s Wilderness?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Depending on students’ abilities, interests and maturities, they may wish to find out more about dementia.
- Students could read accounts of near death experiences or those of the dying. This would depend on student maturity and the teacher would need to decide whether this would be appropriate.

RELATED BOOKS

Novels:

Disher, G.

Martin, A.

Cracknell, R.

Auel, J.

The Bamboo Flute

Beyond Duck River

Death in Venice

Clan of the Cave Bear
(prehistoric life)

Non-fiction:

Albom, M.

Simmons, P.

Tuesdays with Morrie

Learning to Fall

Picture Books:

Gleeson, L. & Greder, A.

Wild, M. & Vivas, J.

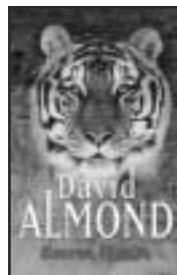
The Great Bear

The Very Best of Friends

SECRET HEART

INTRODUCTION

Joe Maloney is out of step with the world he lives in. His mother believes in him but wishes he would stop truanting. He is a dreamer who often finds a tiger both within and nearby. When the circus comes to town for the last time, Joe is drawn to its magic and with the help of his new friend Corinna, begins to find out who he really is.



If bullying is prevalent in your school, this novel could be an important vehicle in addressing the issues.

BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

- A visit to the circus would be fun to arrange!
- Students could research the history of circuses, their origins in Europe, their demise in the late twentieth century, their recreation in different forms more recently.
- Students could investigate the advantages and disadvantages of circuses and zoos. They could debate the views of animal liberationists.
- Build a concept map to record what students know about the gypsy way of life. This could also be a topic for exploration either before or during the reading of the novel.

SETTING

Students could consider descriptions of the town where Joe and his mother live. How is Helmouth represented in the novel? Students could compare descriptions of the town with the wasteland and the Silver Forest.

SYMBOL

- What does the wasteland represent?
- The tiger is present in Joe's waking and dreaming from the beginning of the novel. What does it symbolise? Students could think about what animal they identify closely with.
- The unicorn is an important symbol in literature. How is it represented in *Secret Heart*? Students could look at different myths and legends about the unicorn. (Even the recent use of the unicorn as a symbol in the *Harry Potter* novels and movie).

- Consider also the larks described in chapter ten. Why is it important that Corinna can see and hear them as Joe can?

CHARACTERISATION

- David Almond presents different kinds of masculinities through characters in his novels. Students could contrast Joe with Joff to see different kinds of masculinities. What about Stanny? How are the themes of the novel developed through these different characters?
- Look closely at chapter ten, when Corinna has lunch at Joe's and is in a house for the first time in her life. Is Corinna a younger version of Joe's mother?
- Who is Nanty?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you agree with Wilfred that we live in a cruel world? Students could discuss their own experiences of bullying and the different forms Joe experienced. Why do people need to put down others? How did Joe cope with it? What strategies can be used to address abuse by 'gangs'?
- '*Kids, eh? Dreams and games and heads that turn little gardens into whole new worlds.*' Joe's dreams were still very much a part of his life. Students could reflect on their own dreams and games as young children. What are their current hopes and aspirations?
- In this novel, Almond demonstrates the one-ness of human beings with animals. Is this an important theme from the students' perspective? Can they identify with Joe and/or Corinna?
- '*It's always been said that when the circus comes to an end, we'll need someone to take the beasts back to the forest*' (p.99). Why is it fitting that Joe is chosen?
- Nanty tells Joe that the forests are almost empty of their tigers.... '*our secret hearts are almost empty*' (p.148). What do you think she means? Why is the novel called *Secret Heart*?
- What does the gathering of the circus people at Joe's place at the end of the book signify?

RELATED BOOKS

Rubinstein, G.
Rubinstein, G.
French J.

Foxspell
Under the Cat's Eye
Walking the Boundaries

OTHER WRITING BY DAVID ALMOND

SHORT STORIES

Counting Stars

This is a selection of short stories that are glimpses of life and growing up in a large Catholic family. The themes of Almond's novels are also dominant in this collection.

PLAYS

Wild Girl, Wild boy

Elaine Grew is a brave and troubled young soul. Last year her dad died and now Elaine's in turmoil. She argues with her mum and often skips school. Shunned by her friends, Elaine spends most days in the overgrown wilderness of her dad's old allotment, where once she was so happy. Here she crawls like a lizard, slithers like a snake and works spells with spiders, just as she used to when he was with her. What is Elaine searching for, in this place of memories, dreams and magic?

- A gripping and emotionally engaging play by one of today's most innovative and exciting writers
- Ages 13+

'What a terrific writer David Almond is. The new play deals with a serious subject with a deep and moving understanding of a child's grief, but with the lightest possible touch. Almond's writing is full of everyday poetry'

— Times Educational Supplement

AUDIO

- Audio tapes of *Skellig*, *Heaven Eyes*, *Kit's Wilderness* and *Secret Heart* are available

WEBSITE

www.davidalmond.com

BOOKS BY DAVID ALMOND

<i>Skellig</i>	0340716002	14.95
<i>Kit's Wilderness</i>	0340727160	14.95
<i>Heaven Eyes</i>	0340743689	14.95
<i>Secret Heart</i>	0340743697	16.95
<i>Counting Stars</i>	0340784806	16.50

PLAYS

<i>Wild Girl, Wild Boy: A Play</i>	0340854316	16.95
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AUDIO

<i>Skellig</i>	1840322241	19.95
<i>Kit's Wilderness</i>	1840322802	20.95
<i>Heaven Eyes</i>	1840322888	16.95
<i>Secret Heart</i>	1840325658	20.95
<i>Skellig Unabridged Audio</i>	1840326298	22.95
<i>David Almond Teachers Notes</i>	999901447X	FREE

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