Skellig by David Almond – Text and Context

by Ian Brinton



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Text

In an interview from April 2000 David Almond talked with editor Shannon Maughan as he was completing his first US book tour. When asked what had compelled him to start writing books aimed at a younger audience he replied

> It was a kind of natural process. I had written a series of stories about my childhood and the town where I grew up, all from a child's viewpoint. I adopted the mindset of a child, revisiting all the vividness of those places and experiences. Not long after that, *Skellig* came to me as it had been waiting there to come out.

The dream-like sense of something lurking on the edge of consciousness haunts the opening to *Skellig* and in another interview Almond referred to the creation of the opening as being 'almost like a dream':

> I was walking along the street one day, and I heard that line in my head, "I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon." And as soon as I heard that line, I knew that there was a whole book waiting to follow it. So I kind of rushed home immediately and began to write the story. It was a very dream-like story to write, at times it seemed to write itself. It seemed as if I was just some kind of person that the story was coming through.

The novel's opening two paragraphs are dramatic in the way they introduce the reader into a world which is both familiar and eerily strange:

> 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 the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.
>
> He was lying there in the darkness behind the tea chests, in the dust and dirt. It was as if he'd been there forever. He was filthy and pale and dried out and I thought he was dead. I couldn't have been more wrong. I'd soon begin to see the truth about him, that there'd never been another creature like him in the world.

The sense of the growth associated with a new world is focussed by the act of moving house and the seasonal optimism in 'moving just in time for the spring'. The awareness of the continued presence of winter is brought into focus with the short sentences, the reference to 'winter was ending' as opposed to having ended and the appearance of the spectral Doctor Death. The feeling that there is something growing out of the ruins of winter is forcefully captured by the placing of 'darkness', 'dust', 'dirt' and 'dried out' before the more expansive last sentence which heralds there never having been 'another creature like him in the world.' The stirring of life from darkness, like a seed from the soil, is given wide-reaching importance with the recognition that 'It was as if he'd been there forever.'

Part of the infectious magic of this novel is the juxtaposition of the derelict and the safe. The description of the garage as Michael first explores it has suggestions of the sinister which promote an interesting contrast with the description of the old mill in Robert Westall's *The*

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Scarecrows. In *Skellig* we are presented with a world of rotting timbers and sagging roof and its dangerous possibilities are highlighted by the fact that 'The people that took the rubbish out of the house were supposed to take it out of the garage as well, but they took one look at the place and said they wouldn't go in it even for danger money':

> There were old chests of drawers and broken wash-basins and bags of cement, ancient doors leaning against the walls, deck chairs with the cloth seats rotted away. Great rolls of rope and cable hung from nails. Heaps of water pipes and great boxes of rusty nails were scattered on the floor. Everything was covered in dust and spiders' webs. There was mortar that had fallen from the walls. There was a little window in one of the walls but it was filthy and there were rolls of cracked lino standing in front of it. The place stank of rot and dust.

The rottenness is quickly associated with the trials facing Michael's family and, as Chapter Three opens his mother tells him that she is 'Sorry it's all so rotten and we're all in such rotten moods'. The arrival of Doctor Death and his ringing of the doorbell ('I called him Doctor Death because his face was grey and there were black spots on his hands and he didn't know how to smile') prompts Michael to visit the crumbling garage a second time. This time he steps over the threshold into another world:

> Something little and black scuttled across the floor. The door creaked and cracked for a moment before it was still. Dust poured through the torch beam. Something scratched and scratched in a corner. I tiptoed further in and felt spider webs breaking on my brow....i opened a cupboard an inch, shone the torch in and saw a million woodlice scattering away. I peered down into a great stone jar and saw the bones of some little animal that had died in there. Dead bluebottles were everywhere. There were ancient newspapers and magazines. I shone the torch on to one and saw that it came from nearly fifty years ago...I leaned across a heap of tea chests and shone the torch into the space behind and that's when I saw him.

Like a counterpart to Doctor Death, this figure has a black suit and when he laughed 'he didn't smile'. When David Almond was asked to describe the creature he said:

> Well, he looks like a kind of derelict old tramp at the beginning, but as Michael discovers more about him, he finds that he has wings, he finds that he is like an owl because he eats living things like mice and voles and beetles. So he has a very kind of gloomy and dark side to him, a very dirty side, but he is also quite angelic, he has very angelic characteristics.

The dream-like strangeness of this world is enhanced by the way that Michael is never afraid of the creature: he recognizes something that he cannot explain but realises that there is a quality of goodness and joy in the peculiar creature which is lying in the dust and dirt. It seems to fit entirely that at his second meeting with Skellig he should share the major worry which haunts him by saying 'My baby sister's very ill'. It seems just as appropriate that he should follow this with the question 'Is there anything you can do for her?'

Skellig is a very tightly woven novel with images which thread in and out of the narrative. The 'parcel' of four birds trapped in the chimney where 'even the feathers were hard as stone' merge into the picture of Michael's seriously-ill baby sister who is referred to by his father as 'little chick'. When Michael gets to meet Mina in Chapter Nine 'she was in a tree in another front garden' watching a blackbird near its nest with 'three tiny ones' inside. When Michael sleeps that night he dreamed that his bed 'was all twigs and leaves and feathers, just like a nest'. Even the old man ('I could see he wasn't all there') who was sitting next to him on the bus home from school refers to 'the loveliest lass on the trapeze. You could swear she could nearly fly.' The world of the fledgling which haunts the novel is interwoven with the

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myth of Persephone and the joyous affirmation of winter's end is given central importance in the opening of Chapter Thirty-eight:

> Mid morning. Mina's mother brought cups of tea for us. She sat beside us on the step. She talked about the fledglings, the flowers that were bursting into bloom, the air that every day became warmer, the sun that every day was a little higher and a little warmer. She talked about the way spring made the world burst into life after months of apparent death. She told us about the goddess called Persephone, who was forced to spend half a year in the darkness deep underground. Winter happened when she was trapped inside the earth. The days shrank, they became cold and short and dark. Living things hid themselves away. Spring came when she was released and made her slow way up to the world again. The world became brighter and bolder in order to welcome her back. It began to be filled with warmth and light. The animals dared to wake, they dared to have their young. Plants dared to send out buds and shoots. Life dared to come back.

The finely written account of that journey of Persephone takes us beyond any sentimental celebration of new life by realising the difficulty of the new birth where Persephone 'squeezed through black tunnels':

> She took wrong turnings, banged her head against the rocks. Sometimes she gave up in despair and she just lay weeping in the pitch darkness. But she struggled on. She waded through icy underground streams. She fought through bedrock and clay and iron ore and coal, through fossils of ancient creatures, the skeletons of dinosaurs, the buried remains of ancient cities. She burrowed past the tangled roots of great trees. She was torn and bleeding but she kept telling herself to move onward and upward. She told herself that soon she'd see the light of the sun again and feel the warmth of the world again.

Context

William Blake 'Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794): the importance of the poetry of William Blake to the context of *Skellig* is highlighted by the first reference to him in Chapter Fifteen. It comes directly after Mina's comments about her mother's belief in educating her daughter at home: 'My mother educates me...we believe that schools inhibit the natural curiosity, creativity and intelligence of children. The mind needs to be opened out into the world, not shuttered down inside a gloomy classroom.' The Blake references centre around the need to escape the vigilant eye of a rational adulthood and David Almond's first quotations are from 'The School-Boy'. This poem was included by Blake in *Songs of Innocence* and it registers a protest against the destruction of innocence and youthful joy in life by the dreary round of the world of school where fears and sorrows cause dismay.

The School-Boy

I love to rise in a summer morn,
When the birds sing on every tree;
The distant huntsman winds his horn,
And the sky-lark sings with me.
O! what sweet company.

But to go to school in a summer morn,
O! it drives all joy away;

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Under a cruel eye outworn,
The little ones spend the day,
In sighing and dismay.

Ah! Then at times I drooping sit,
And spend many an anxious hour,
Nor in my book can I take delight,
Nor sit in learnings bower,
Worn thro' with the dreary shower.

How can the bird that is born for joy,
Sit in a cage and sing.
How can a child when fears annoy,
But droop his tender wing,
And forget his youthful spring.

O! father & mother, if buds are nip'd,
And blossoms thrown away,
And if the tender plants are strip'd
Of their joy in the springing day,
By sorrow and cares dismay,

How shall the summer arise in joy
Or the summer fruits appear.
Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy
Or bless the mellowing year,
When the blasts of winter appear.

Blake's belief in the need for freedom from restraint informs other parts of the novel. For instance, in chapter thirty when Michael is dreaming that 'Skellig entered the hospital ward':

> ...he lifted the baby from her glass case. He pulled the tubes and wires from her. She reached up and touched his pale, dry skin with her little fingers and she giggled. He took her away, flew with her in his arms through the darkest part of the sky. He landed with her in the wilderness and stood there calling to me.

Here we have an echo of 'The Chimney Sweeper' from *Songs of Innocence* where an angel opens up the coffin-like chimneys to set the children free:

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a sleeping he had such a sight,
That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black,

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he open'd the coffins & set them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

David Almond also uses 'The Angel' from *Songs of Experience* to register the importance of seizing experience whilst it is there rather than arming oneself against love and ending up in a world of rejection.

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The Angel

I Dreamt a Dream! what can it mean?
And that I was a maiden Queen:
Guarded by an Angel mild:
Witless woe, was neer beguil'd!

And I wept both night and day
And he wip'd my tears away
And I wept both day and night
And hid from him my hearts delight

So he took his wings and fled:
Then the morn blush'd rosy red:
I dried my tears & armd my fears,
With ten thousand shields and spears.

Soon my Angel came again:
I was arm'd, he came in vain:
For the time of youth was fled
And grey hairs were on my head

The importance of embracing experience is highlighted by Mina when she tells Michael 'Sometimes we just have to accept there are things we can't know. Why is your sister ill? Why did my father die?...Sometimes we think we should be able to know everything. But we can't. we have to allow ourselves to see what there is to see, and we have to imagine.' Mina's words echo one of Blake's statements from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1793: 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is—infinite'.

Leo Tolstoy: 'What Men Live By' 1881. This short story for children by Tolstoy makes an interesting comparison with *Skellig*. A shoemaker named Simon living in poverty with his wife has enough money to buy a sheepskin coat before winter comes as long as he can collect the money owing to him from his customers. Having gone to the village to try to get these debts settled he is unsuccessful and has to return empty-handed to his wife. However, on his way back he has an experience a little similar to Michael's with Skellig:

> By this time he had nearly reached the shrine at the bend in the road. Looking up, he saw something whitish behind the shrine. The daylight was fading, and the shoemaker peered at the thing without being able to make out what it was. 'There was no white stone here before. Can it be an ox? It's not like an ox. It has a head like a man, but it's too white; and what could a man be doing there?'
>
> He came closer, so that it was clearly visible. To his surprise it really was a man, alive or dead, sitting naked, leaning motionless against the shrine. Terror seized the shoemaker, and he thought, 'Someone has killed him, stripped him, and left him here. If I meddle I shall surely get into trouble.'

Simon passes by the shrine and only later is struck with shame for leaving someone who 'may be dying of want'. He returns and takes the young man home with him to discover later that his name is Michael and that he is an angel who has been punished by God. The punishment involves being sent to Earth in order to discover three things: what dwells in man, what is not given to man and what men live by. As the story unfolds and Michael helps Simon with his business of shoemaking, he learns that (i) 'in man dwells Love'; (ii) 'it is not given to man to know his own needs'; (iii) 'that all men live not by care for themselves, but by love'.

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Richard Bach: *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* (1970): echoing Blake's proverb from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings', Richard Bach's short novel opens with an assertion of individuality:

> It was morning, and the new sun sparkled gold across the ripples of a gentle sea.
>
> A mile from shore a fishing boat chummed the water, and the word for Breakfast Flock flashed through the air, till a crowd of a thousand seagulls came to dodge and fight for bits of food. It was another busy day beginning.
> But way off alone, out by himself beyond boat and shore, Jonathan Livingstone Seagull was practicing. A hundred feet in the sky he lowered his webbed feet, lifted his beak, and strained to hold a painful hard twisting curve through his wings. The curve meant that he would fly slowly, and now he slowed until the wind was a whisper in his face, until the ocean stood still beneath him. He narrowed his eyes in fierce concentration, held his breath, forced one...single...more...inch...of...curve...Then his feathers ruffled, he stalled and fell.
>
> Seagulls, as you know, never falter, never stall. To stall in the air is for them disgrace and it is dishonour.
> But Jonathan Livingstone Seagull, unashamed, stretching his wings again in that trembling hard curve—slowing, slowing, and stalling once more—was no ordinary bird.

Ray Bradbury's comment on this book about the refusal of an individual to accept the limitations put upon him by others was 'Richard Bach with this book does two things. He gives me Flight. He makes me Young. For both I am deeply grateful.'

Further areas of interest:

1. Shakespeare's Sonnet 97 with its description of the bareness of Winter:

   How like a winter hath my absence been
   From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
   What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen,
   What old December's bareness everywhere!

2. The song from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* 'Fear no more the heat of the sun' with its sense of time's renewal:

   Fear no more the heat of the sun,
   Nor the furious winter's rages.
   Thou thy worldly task hast done,
   Home art gone and taken thy wages.
   Golden lads and girls all must,
   As chimney-sweepers come to dust.

3. Edward Thomas's poem 'But these things also' (1915) which centres around those delicate moments between Winter and Spring:

   But these things also are Spring's—
   On banks by the roadside the grass
   Long-dead that is greyer now
   Than all the Winter it was;
   The shell of a little snail bleached

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In the grass; chip of flint, and mite
Of chalk; and the small birds' dung
In splashes of purest white:

All the white things a man mistakes
For earliest violets
Who seeks through Winter's ruins
Something to pay Winter's debts,

While the North blows, and starling flocks
By chattering on and on
Keep their spirits up in the mist,
And Spring's here, Winter's not gone.

4. www.readingmatters.co.uk for a review of *Skellig* and a suggestions of other books to try, such as *The Wolf Sisters* by Susan Price and *The Leap* by Jonathan Stroud.

5. There is a David Almond website on www.randomhouse.com/features/davidalmond

6. www.teenreads.com has the full typescript of the interview between David Almond and Shannon Maughan

7. The film *Whistle Down The Wind*, 1961, is also worth looking at as an example of the moving and uplifting effect a strange meeting can have on the world of childhood. Screenplay by Willis Hall and Keith Waterhouse, directed by Richard Attenborough.

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