An introduction to...

David Almond

“Every word written, every sentence, every story, no matter how dark the story itself might seem, is an act of optimism and hope, a stay against the forces of destruction [...]”

In 2017 Seven Stories acquired David Almond’s archive. The collection includes papers, notes, correspondence, and drafts that give a rich insight into David’s unique and highly creative writing process.

The Writer

David Almond was a story-teller even in childhood, and early visits to his local library sparked an ambition to one day find his own name on the shelves. His fascination with the written word led him to study English and American Literature at the University of East Anglia, and the manuscripts in the Seven Stories Collection show that he continued to experiment with short stories, novel ideas and poetry throughout his studies.

Some of the themes explored in this early work for adults—faith and doubt, loss, mysticism and the supernatural—crop up again and again in his writing for children, and the collection shows the development of these ideas as they are refined and clarified for a younger audience.

Finding a voice

The urge to write stayed with David throughout a series of jobs including stints working as a labourer, brush salesman and postman, and he produced numerous short stories during his free time. His first novel for adults was rejected by every major UK publisher, but undeterred, David ‘shrugged, spat and kept on writing’. He had just published his second adult short story collection when the opening sentence of Skellig popped into his mind—and with that story, his writing career finally took flight.

Since then, his work has found favour with readers and critics alike, and his output has been prolific—to date he has published a total of eighteen novels, four short story collections, three graphic novels and a picture book, as well as collaborating to produce stage and screen adaptations of his work.
Inspiration
David grew up on Tyneside, in a large Catholic family. Although David has described his childhood as ordinary, he came to appreciate the imaginative potential of his experiences when he began to write for children:

“I looked back at my childhood and things like my Catholic past and some of the people that I had known [...] Looked at in the right way, these things seemed pretty exotic and quite extraordinary and filled with potential magic.”

While David’s books are filled with glimpses of the magical and otherworldly, they are also firmly rooted in the landscape of the North East. References to mining and ship-building, stotties and saveloy dips—along with his distinctive use of language—bring Tyneside to life in his works. This is especially evident in The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean, which combines a fictionalised version of Lindisfarne with the distinctive voice of Billy, a ‘secrit shy aynjul’ whose words are presented in heavy dialect, using nonstandard spelling and syntax. Although David is no longer a practising Catholic, his background provided him with a rich seam of religious imagery, ritual and mysticism from which to draw inspiration. He has said that it is the religion’s physicality that has stayed with him: ‘You learn to move, touch, taste in a Catholic way until it becomes part of your body and you can’t shake it off’.

David has spoken of the freedom afforded to him even as a young boy, and his experiences of childhood exploration are reflected in his best-known novels, many of which feature children venturing beyond the world of their parents to encounter strange beings and wild landscapes. David’s early years were also marked by a great deal of sadness—one of his younger sisters died when he was seven, and his father died when he was fifteen. These early tragedies gave David a very personal insight into children’s experiences of grief and loss, and it is a subject he approaches in his work with great sensitivity.

Creative Process
David’s novels begin life in notebooks, which he carries with him everywhere he goes. They contain ideas for his work, including key scenes, characters or motifs which engage him, or observations from his surroundings. Often, these ideas are recorded scattershot, his notebooks a riot of scribbles, sketches and mind maps. David says of his own process:

“I’m deliberately allowing myself to make a mess. One thought follows another so quickly, so you have to get them all down. [...] It’s like a game, like playing, like being a kid again.”

Once his ideas are on the page, David begins drafting the story on his computer. He typically writes the first few chapters, prints them off to read through, and makes notes about changes as he reads. He then goes back to the computer and rewrites the story from the beginning, writing a little more than the first time, and repeating this process again and again until the story is complete. This iterative process results in numerous partial drafts which differ quite substantially from each other, but develop and build towards a cohesive whole, which he will send to his editor.