

# 2010 Hans Christian Andersen Author Award

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Author

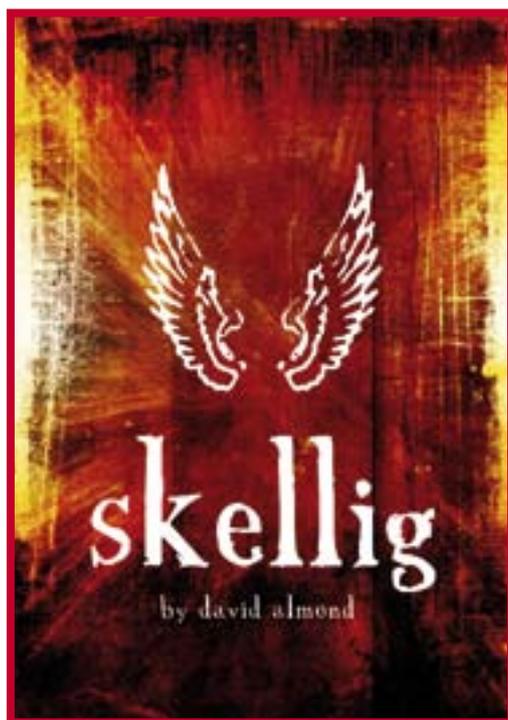
I never planned to be a children's writer. I thought, I'm a sensible grown-up so I'll write sensible grown-up books for sensible grown-ups. And then I was walking along the street one day and a new story, *Skellig*, started to tell itself in my mind. When I started to write it down I knew straight away that it was one of the most special things I'd ever done, that it was somehow the culmination of everything I'd written before and I realised with amazement that it was a book for the young. This brought a great sense of liberation that has stayed with me ever since. I gave a talk in a theatre recently and at the end I was asked: 'Do writers begin by writing for children and then when they grow up they start to write for adults?' I had to answer that, for me, the process was the reverse of that. I only began to grow up properly as a writer when I began to write for the young.

We hear this so often: kids don't read any more. They're the plugged-in generation, brains dulled by ipods and computer screens. Is that true? No. I want to drag the prophets of doom to meet the young readers that I meet all around the world - children who love books, stories, poems, plays. Children who ask the most perceptive questions about character and narrative, about the way words work, about the writing process, children with exploring minds and flexible imaginations.

I often go into schools and ask children to name their favourite writers. Hands go up and a whole range of writers are named. I also ask, Who likes writing? And again hands go up - no, not quite so

blatantly and publicly. But so often in the quiet moments a child will come to me to tell about the stories and poems they write, about the entire books they've completed. There they are. I meet them - we all meet them - today's readers, tomorrow's writers, the ones who will keep our culture alive.

I go on to say that if we went into the street and brought in 30 or so passing adults, sat *them* down and asked *them* the same questions, we wouldn't get the same range or depth or passion of response. And that's true. And it's true that many of the adults who moan about children not reading do not read themselves. Of course there's nothing new about tired and disappointed grown-ups bleating about the failings of the young. Sometimes such adults find themselves in positions of authority, as educationalists, as school inspectors, as the kind of politicians who peddle stifflingly mechanistic theories about the nature of reading, writing, learning, and about the potential of the human mind. It has always been so. Fortunately there are also many inspirational teachers, librarians, parents, and yes, even politicians, to counteract the pessimists. Pessimists. We encounter them everywhere. A couple of days ago I saw an interview with a well-known English novelist who came out with the statement: 'every writer thinks the world has reached its nadir'. He said that every writer believes that 'the world is getting infinitely less innocent'. What nonsense. Perhaps the writers who do not believe such nonsense are those who are drawn to write for the young. 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. That is particularly so when the words are written for children. Stories, like children, can restore innocence and recreate the world.

Young people don't recognise the artificial categories that we try to impose upon stories. Tell young children the story of **The snow queen** and pretty soon they'll be acting it out, feeling for fragments of ice in their eyes, turning from good to evil, feeling the icy kiss on their cheeks, taking sledded journeys across the snowbound living room to a palace of ice in the hall. I learned a great lesson about this just after **Skellig** was published. I was invited to a school in Newcastle to talk about the book. They ushered me into a classroom full of 5-year-olds. Aagh! There they were, dozens of them, sitting on the floor watching me, wide-eyed, waiting. But they're too young! I whispered to the teacher. They won't understand! But there was nothing for it. I had to crack on. I told them the beginning of **Skellig**. There was deep silence. I read how Michael stepped into the dilapidated garage to find the miserable bug-eating Skellig hunched at the back in the darkness. I stopped. There was deep silence, and all those watching eyes. Then they suddenly began to applaud. Great, I thought. That's enough. I started to back away, to make my escape, to get a cup of tea in the staffroom. Then I saw two boys stand up and hurry towards me. Yes? I asked. 'That was fantastic, David. We're going into the yard to act it out. He's Michael, I'm Skellig!' And they were off, with a gaggle of collaborators in their wake, to create the first adaptation of my tale in a Newcastle school yard, long before it appeared on a proper stage with a 'proper' script and 'proper' actors and with a 'proper' audience waiting for a theatrical experience.

For children, words don't sit still in orderly lines on the page. They work

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on the body and the senses. They move fluently into drama, into movement, into dance, into song. And the books that they read and love are similarly multi-faceted. The children's writer is allowed a degree of liberation

mostly denied to writers for adults. He is encouraged to explore forms that are loved by children but that to many adults would seem too demanding, too difficult, simply too weird. The children's book world is a place of abundance, abandon, experiment and play. Long books, short books, poems, plays; wonderful blends of picture and text; books that look like 'proper' books with page after page of print; books without a word at all; books with holes right through; books written in the voices of dogs, cats, rabbits and mice; books made of paper, plastic, cloth; books to chew, books that flash and books that squeak. I sometimes suggest to my 'adult' writer friends that the children's book world is the true hotbed of literary experimentation. I'm not quite sure if they believe me. But perhaps they should.

The children's book world is also *Where The Wild Things Are*. Maybe that's because children themselves are still part wild and not quite civilised and still driven to explore the wilder fringes of the world and of their own minds. Children are in flux, in a process of change, of discovery and exploration. Unlike many of the cynical adults, they know they don't know everything yet.

When I was a boy I lived in a town that rose steeply from the River Tyne to a high and windy top field from which the dark North Sea to the east and the moory coalfields of Durham to the west were visible. To get there, I had to leave the living room, leave the garden, leave the estate, pass by the allotments where chickens clucked and precious leeks and vegetables were

grown and where fires smouldered, then cross the wide playing fields at the top of the town - all the way leaving safety, cosiness and orderliness behind, stepping further uphill into openness and a kind of wilderness. Higher up, I remember how the larks would dash from cover and belt upwards and hang high above and fill the air with their songs, and how there were half-wild dogs and half-wild cats and Lasky's reeky pig farm, and the town tramp who lived his half-wild life up there in those regions - until I got to

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the Heather Hills themselves, a scruffy little area of wilderness at the top of the fell, with its ponds and abandoned mineral lines, the place where we dug our dens and lit our fires and re-fought ancient wars and ran, screamed, howled and laughed and whispered, and generally had a great time under the massive sky and the reddening dusk and the first stars. And when darkness came, the voices started, echoing out from the town below, across the rooftops and across the fields. The voices of parents calling their children back home. I can hear them now. Terrrry! Keviiiiiii! Alisooooo! Daaaavid! And we reluctantly began to disperse, to retrace our steps, to head home again. Back across the fields, past the allotments, back into the housing estate, into the garden, into the living room, into the house where it was warm and safe and civilised and food and bed waited. And what does it feel like to be a child like that, just returned from the wilderness and the dark? Safe at home, yes, civilised. The radio on, the TV on, smells of cooking. Everything at peace. But the skin still tingles with the cold outside air; the mind still seethes with what it has seen and what it has heard, and felt, and imagined. The house is a place of order and security but the child has brought the outside wilderness and darkness in.

And isn't a good book like that? It sits comfortably on our shelves in our comfortable home, but it is not tame. As you read it you realise that it's come back from somewhere wild. Inside it, there are echoes of wilderness.

Writing for children reminds us that stories have ancient roots. Yes, stories can be literature. They can be caught in print, bound neatly between pages and stacked neatly on shelves. But the best books reach beyond the print to the human voice, to chants and spells, to human movement, to the body and the senses. The first stories that children hear are murmured at dusk. Once upon a time, they hear. Long ago . . . Listen now and I'll tell you about . . . Did you hear the tale of . . . The stories recall the distant past, they draw us close to the first stories chanted and told by firelight in ancient caves. They play with the darkness and light, they comfort and entertain, they scare and they heal, they help the child to grow, to become more closely bonded with this astonishing world, and so they nourish all our futures.

It's evening now. The shadow moves across the turning world as it does each night. An ordinary and wonderful event. What would we hear if we could move with that shadow? A cacophony of noises, a babble of voices, deep gulfs of silence. Beneath it all we would hear the constant optimistic beat of adults murmuring stories to children. Once upon a time . . . Listen and I'll tell you of . . . The shadows at the end of every day can be a beginning not an end, a time when stories start, and no matter how old the stories might be, they are retold, recreated, and are heard for the very first time.

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