David Almond and the First-Person Narrative

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In the Autumn of 2007 a group of friends and I decided to put on a show containing extracts from some of the latest children’s novels to take round schools to introduce their students to the very latest available in fiction. When the dust died down and practicalities intervened we found ourselves doing a performance based on several novels of David Almond presented to a class of undergraduates doing a module on David Almond as part of their degree. But the process remained the same of choosing extracts to get the students into the story and to leave them wanting more so they would feel inspired to read the books. Now adapting a novel into a piece of drama is a very insightful way into the construction of a book because drama cannot include everything a novel can and to cut and concentrate is to become aware of what you are losing and what you are focusing on. So this paper grew out of that experience of adaptation and lead to some thoughts about first person narrative in children’s books and its relation to the reader.

Ryan, a tutee of mine had recommended Kit’s Wilderness to start with since he’d done it in class and was very enthusiastic so that is where we began. And the first problem we had was the opening. In the novel the story begins with a game, a frightening, macabre, obsessive game called the Game of Death run by a troubled boy called John Askew and David Almond opens with the local children going down into Askew’s den to play the game:

We stumbled one by one down the crumbling steps. We crouched against the walls. The floor was hard-packed clay. Candles burned in niches in the walls. There was a heap of bones in the corner. Askew told us they were human bones, discovered when he’d dug this place. There was a blackened ditch where a fire burned in winter. The den was lined with dried mud. Askew had carved pictures of us all, of animals, of the dogs and cats we owned, of the wild dog, Jax, of
imagined monsters and demons, of the gates of Heaven and the snapping jaws of Hell. He wrote into the walls the names of all of us who’d died in there.

(Almond, 1999, p5-6)

Almond creates very cunningly the illusion of action on a very large scale, of a big open space underground and a congregation with mythical overtones of a Church ‘Doom’, the dog Jax as Cerberus and Askew as Minos or some other judge of the dead. But it’s impossible to do on stage. It’s too static visually for a start, too big for a small stage and too detailed for a set which has to change completely in ten minutes time. The processional effect of the children descending into the underworld is fine but needs a cast of thousands because what is being captured here is a child’s eye view of the world and as the designer of Terence Davies’ great film The Long Day Closes revealed in an interview ‘the film wasn’t a recreation of 50s Liverpool, it was a recreation of Terence’s memory’. I therefore went for a memory realism, which is not the same as physical accuracy, and tried to create a child’s eye vision of the world’ as Almond’s novel is also ‘slightly larger than life’. We found the answer in the next section where we are introduced to John Askew:

Askew wore black jeans, black trainers, a black T-shirt with ‘Megadeth’ in white across it. He lit a cigarette and passed it round the ring. He passed round a jug of water that he said was special water, collected from a spring that had its source in the blocked-up tunnels of the ancient coal mines far below. He crouched at the centre, sharpening his sheath knife on a stone. His dark hair tumbled across his eyes, his pale face flickered in the candle light.

(Almond, 1999, p.6)

And there it was – the action that would focus the ritual, deathly atmosphere and communicate to an audience the menace of a repeated action and the unnerving sound of metal being dragged across stone just as the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight used it all those years ago when Gawain is approaching the Green Chapel and hears the Green Knight sharpening his axe:

Thene herde he of that hyghe hil’ in a harde roche
Biynde the broke, in a bonk, a wonder breme noyse.
What! Hit clattered in the chyff as hit cleve shulde,
As upon a gryndelston hade grounden a sythe.
That is how we started the play with the actor playing Askew sharpening his knife and the children narrating their entrance as they came in to join him. Now Babette Rothschild in her book *The Body Remembers* defines two different types of memory: explicit and implicit or somatic memory. Somatic memory remembers feelings attached to the bodily sensations which were associated with them when they arose and both are stored as implicit memories, that is, feelings which the memory is not formally conscious of but can return with devastating and unforeseen impact when stimuli similar to those that originally evoked them are triggered:

> It is the internal sense that helps to identify and name our emotions. Each basic emotion – fear, anger, shame, sadness, interest, frustration or happiness – has an accompanying set of discrete body sensations stimulated by patterned activity in the brain.

(Rothschild, 2000, p.42)

So that, for example, in hearing Askew’s knife I remember dim associations of knives with the horror of having my skin peeled off and being boiled up in a pot for stew which then firms up as tales of Hansel and Gretel or the Russian Witch Baba Yaga. J.K Rowling uses the image of the skinned child to describe Voldemort’s soul in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Then knives being sharpened take on associations of Sunday Lunch which could be a family disaster if the Yorkshire Puddings had not risen or at worst make the traditional English Sunday look like a feast in the House of Atreus rather than a ritual of happiness and plenty. What seems to be happening is that, through the awakening of sensation memory by means of language, the feelings associated with the smells, sights, sounds, tastes, movement, position and those reactions which come straight from the viscera are bought into play as a nurturing bed of live feeling from which the author can build his/her new thing which does not duplicate our past experience but embodies it in its making. But where we start is with a memory of feelings reawakened and on the quality of the feelings brought to life depends the quality of the reading. To present sensation and its attendant emotion means that inevitably the reader will have to contemplate death since death is so inexorably tied to the life of the body and Almond does not shy away from this.

Life comes out of the facing of death in Almond’s novels and he constructs his novels round the cycle of the seasons with their underlying pattern of birth, death and resurrection. Almond’s heroes have to appreciate that personally very often in the form of a journey into the
underground which is a journey into oneself and a journey into the past as in Kit's Wilderness where the tunnels are the deserted workings of the abandoned mining industry but also contain relics of earlier and other creation:

‘There’s this as well.’ He put a black fossil on the desk. A spiralling horn-shaped shell. ‘Guess.’ He said.

‘Some kind of animal. Something that lived at the same time as the trees.’

‘Correct. An ammonite. This is the fossil of its shell. The creature lived inside like a snail does or a hermit crab. This too came out of the pit just like the tree bark.’

I held it in my palm.

‘Thing is, he said. ‘It’s a creature that lived in the sea.’

I imagined it squirming its way across sand, beneath the water.

(Almond, 1999, p.43-44)

So when Grandpa and his fellow miners got in the cage they dropped through time at a million years a minute. They were ‘Pitmen. Time travellers’ and Grandpa discovered the fossil by hewing the coal seam which preserved the past and has now passed it on to his grandson who has a sudden vision: ‘I stared out, saw the trees, the swamps, the sea flooding in. Then blinked and saw the wilderness, the falling rain.’ In Almond’s fiction there is very often a male figure who is the guardian of the past: Grandpa or Grampa in Heaven Eyes or father in The Fire Eaters who gives the hero and heroine their inheritance and interprets it to them through a symbolic object that has aura or manna: the fossil in Kit’s Wilderness, the gas mask and photos in The Fire Eaters and photos again and a make-up kit in Heaven Eyes. The objects usually have more than personal, more than family significance in that they relate the hero to his area and his culture so that through their transmission he is now a member but also responsible. Except that the make-up kit is somewhat different in that the other objects may bring back a community, this brings back a person: the heroine’s mother who died young and from whose death the heroine has never recovered. What happens on stage is that drama loves ritual and loves physical objects with a story. Brecht in his instructions for the performance of his plays insisted that the props used should show signs of use: ‘Furniture and props should be realistic (including doors) and,
particularly, should have social-historical charm.’ Stanislavski devoted a whole section of *The Actor Prepares* to teaching the actor how to create and draw out the story of the props he/she uses. Moreover as we discovered in working on these pieces there is an exquisite and profound tenderness in these moments, not only the adolescent suddenly having their eyes opened by a new vision of life being given them but also in the old man recognising his own age and therefore the need to pass on this responsibility and making the judgement that the child is worthy the gift. Unashamed male tenderness is very moving perhaps because we are unused to seeing it on stage, TV or film.

In several of David Almond’s novels the hero or heroine make the descent into the underworld to rescue and like Orpheus he/she is an artist and their creation is a means of healing or bringing back to life, particularly in the form of completing unfinished business. In a recent radio interview Almond said that ‘the Orpheus myth was always important to me’ and that it involved his past. Through the story that Kit tells, for example, his grandfather returns to life and his best friend Askew is turned from vengeance against his father who has abused him in drunken rages so that he can return from the underworld to the light and once more become part of life. The tension of the scene with Kit sitting with someone possessed by violent thoughts for a night is very reminiscent of Prince Myshkin sitting with Rogozhin after he has killed Anastasia in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*. Almond has said in a recent newspaper interview that ‘I loved Dickens and Dostoyevsky too’. It is significant as well how many Shakespearean echoes are contained in the characters; so Kit seems born like Hamlet to set the times right by bringing all the threads together and solving the problems for each character. In his turn Askew has many features in common with Caliban, in that he is half-human, half-animal and that animal side appears a very demi-devil. This mythical dimension to the characters appears in all Almond’s novels as in *Heaven Eyes* where Erin’s adopted sister is presented as an angel, the Heaven Eyes of the title, a figure very like Ariel. In *The Fire Eaters* McNulty the damaged war hero from the Burma campaign in which many northern regiments fought is also uncannily like a fire demon come to warn the crowds that flock to see his street theatre of the dangers of another war. The novel is set at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis amidst the threat of nuclear war:

‘Just like McNulty!’ I said.

‘Aye. Just like McNulty. There were lots of them in those wild days. Fakes and fakirs and magic men. Dervishes and quacks. Miracle-makers. We found them in the markets, on
the roadsides, at the frontiers. Mebbe it was all the wars and
disturbances that brung them out. And mebbe there was
among them that could work true magic and make true
miracles come to pass. But poor souls like McNulty sat at
their feet while the sun glared down and the bullers rattled
and the bayonets stabbed and the bombs fell and the sun
blazed down and the skin got scorched and the brain got
melted and the heart got broke. This is where McNulty
comes from, son. From a mad, mad time before your time,
from a time of blasted war.'

(Almond, 2003, p.59-60)

Bobby, the hero of *The Fire Eaters* has met McNulty on the streets of
Newcastle and taken part in his shows of strength and endurance: now as
a part of inducting him into his past Dad is explaining McNulty to him. In
the boy’s mind eye, however, the man is not mentally damaged but larger
than life: a prophet and a demon, a dreadful portent of the world to come
if the bomb drops. In dramatising this scene we became aware of how
much the one man dominates his audience as he snarls at them for money
and drives them to demand yet more dreadful tortures and sacrifices of
strength:

He held the Saracen’s head and pushed. The point of the
skewer entered his cheek. He blinked and sighed. He pushed
again. The skewer slid further in. A tiny trickle of blood fell
down his cheek. He smiled at nothing at no one. Many in the
crowd recoiled in fear and disgust. The skewer slid further.
Soon it pressed against the inside of his other cheek. He kept
pushing and the point broke through and another tiny trickle
of blood fell from his other cheek. Now he held the skewer
still, one fingertip resting on the Saracen’s head, the other on
the needle point. He grinned out at the crowd.

(Almond, 2003, p.7)

The inch by inch self-mutilation is tremendously gripping on stage but
made more impressive because McNulty seems to say that he knows more
than the audience, knows more about pain and has seen and endured
more than they will ever know. Yet he is a scapegoat: the sacrifice for their
sins which have led to the current state of fear of the ending of the world.
In performance it’s as if the actor is donning the costume of the character
he will inhabit, piece by piece, as he becomes the scapegoat the crowd
desire.
What must have become evident so far is that Almond works in terms of multi-layered creation and a very sophisticated approach to the ambiguity and complexity of characters and relations. In converting *Heaven Eyes* for the stage we chose another of Almond's journeys into the underworld where the heroine Erin descends further and further into a deserted warehouse which is at one and the same time a model of the seven circles of hell as well as a journey into her innermost buried past. In this descent she encounters ghosts or presences since Almond always operates on the edge between imagination and tangible evidence of the supernatural which could also be her own psychic fears and memories that haunt her:

I imagined ghosts all around me, watching me, the ghosts of those who had worked here and filled the place with noise and light and life. I felt their fingers touching me as I walked, heard their hollow breathing, their whispering, their sad laughter.

(Almond, 2000, p. 97)

In the end hopelessness is too much for her and she lies down in surrender to find her mother has come to her

I found her hand resting in mine. Her hand grew colder, colder. I held it as she closed her eyes for the last time. I held it as she disappeared, as she left me all alone. It grew colder, colder.

‘Why did you die?’ I said to her. ‘Why? Why?’
No answer.
‘Mum,’ I whispered. ‘Mum. Please, Mum.’
No answer. Just her hand in mine. Just her cold still, dead, hand in Mine.
I lay down at her side in silence.

(Almond, 2000, p. 98-99)

Erin's mother had died holding her hand and how well Almond uses the flickering real presence of the ghost as she fades in and out of the child's consciousness to convey the all-consuming need for reunion even in death. In translating this for the stage we converted the ghosts into the one ghost: the spirit of her dead mother which does make plain the deathward pull the dead woman exerts on the living girl who is always torn between existing in the present and living in the past, so that although the relationship is clearly a loving one it is also clearly a killing
one. However, dramatising mother as an enticing figure leading the girl further and further into despair commits the production into conferring more knowledge on Erin than she has, so that she knows too much and understands too well; it removes mother’s ambiguity and takes away the reader’s choice whilst intuiting what is causing Erin’s distress. But for the stage the clarifying does give you visual impact and the depth of the relationship with its attendant dangers. Presenting Erin’s mother in this way as so significant a character also furnishes a dramatic polarity with Maureen, the social worker who wants Erin for her daughter, so that the production can present a tug-of-love between the dead mother and the living one. Furthermore, Maureen is ambivalent in that her need for a child is suppressed and interfered with by organisational responsibilities and problems with seeing outside the organisation’s philosophy. In many children’s novels there is no sub-text between the characters, that is, no affect by the physical circumstances of the moment and no influence by the history that there is between them. Instead what we are given is an universal dialogue of all times and places. There is nothing between them of ‘I–Thou’ as the philosopher Martin Buber defined relationships between equals, a moment of vital communication and what Stanislavski called ‘communion’ on stage. A quality of ‘I – It’ is how the relationship between Erin and Maureen at first appears in the Friday session of circle time:

Maureen gave us the usual rubbish: how this was a safe place, how we all cared for each other how we could say anything we wanted and it would go no further.

‘We want you to be frightened of nothing,’ she said. ‘We want to heal your scars and wash your cares away.’

She made us do some visualising stuff. We had to imagine we were in a warm dark place, floating in warm dark water. Our mind and bodies were still. There was no future, no past, no trouble. The water I imagined was icy cold and running fast. Moonlight shining down, the raft spinning and rolling. Freedom. Freedom. Then Maureen told us to bring your minds back into the room. She started going on about damage, about unhappiness.……

‘You look anxious today Sean,’ she said.

Sean was the real name of Mouse. He jumped like a scared cat. He blushed, and tears came to his eyes.

‘What’s troubling you? Would you like to share it?’

(Almond, 2000, p.13-15)
How well Almond captures the tone and phrase of counselling ‘speak’. That is, Maureen is the mouthpiece of authority, and schools and state institutions are viewed ambivalently by Almond as places where horizons can be expanded but can also be centres of frightening tyranny. They can also be arenas of moral conflict where the demands of authority clash with the child’s loyalty to himself, his friends and his culture. However the most attacking lines come from Erin herself, a projection of what she thinks Maureen is thinking and not spoken by Maureen at all:

Maureen smiled. You could see what she was thinking: damaged child, wild mind, thinks she can do anything but she’ll come to nothing. Nothing. Just like that useless mother of hers.

‘We’re thinking of your happiness,’ she said.

(Almond, 2000, p.17)

When Erin runs away from the children’s home and then returns with her new found sister Heaven Eyes, the impulses of need have grown so strong between her and Maureen that they are compelled into acknowledgement. Both admit their faults and work to admit their faults which means rejecting the impulse to conceal and be safe so both expose themselves psychologically which is very challenging for the actors on stage:

We could find out about Heaven Eyes together. We could find out how to care for her, Erin……..as if she were your sister.

I knew how useless it would be. Circle time questions, counselling, investigations. It would be better to run off with her to the moors, to live up there and run wild and free like vagabonds. Better to make another raft and sail away again towards the sea. There must be other ways to care for children like Heaven Eyes, like myself, like January Carr, like Mouse Gullane.

Awful things have happened to her,’ I said. ‘But do you see how happy she is?’
‘Yes.’
‘But you don’t understand that.’
‘No, I don’t. But I could come to understand.
She reached across the desk. I let her hand fall into mine.
‘We could work together,’ she said.
I made no answer.

‘I’ll have to make reports. There’ll have to be investigations’.

‘Of course there will,’ I said. ‘You wouldn’t know how to just love her, leave her alone and let her be Heaven Eyes, and let her story come out as slow as slow.’

‘I could try,’ she said, and gripped my hand tightly, but I tugged away and left her.

(Almond, 2000, p.192-3)

Erin develops a critique of the authority and the code of management that Maureen upholds that is impersonal and therefore not a complete rejection. Maureen makes the naked offer to work together, to learn from one another and together put things right but Erin can’t make the final step because her mother is still too strong. For Maureen Erin is what she would have wished to be. She speaks a need demanding an answer: to be Erin’s mother but Erin withdraws her hand. She is not ready and may never be ready.

The central character in an Almond novel if male tends to be somewhat amorphous like the young protagonists in Dickens’ novels but surrounded by very definite and vivid characters, again like Dickens. But the hero is protean and gains in character throughout the novel. Openness and honesty are features of an Almond hero and therefore we have direct access to their thoughts and feelings. They tend to be conservative, a little timid compared to the risk-takers who come into their lives, well meaning, a bit like Mole, and very close to their parents and families. They have difficulty moving into individuality but once given a push by their more advanced, outspoken friends they can do surprisingly daring actions such as taking on the school establishment for example. Their prime virtue is loyalty – not letting a friend down and following them even into disaster. Almond’s heroes are innocent and experience life for the first time which gives the narrative the excitement of freshness; building on that excitement in the enhancement of self the story involves the hero wanting to go beyond his family so his more experienced friends take him there. The hero is shy, hesitant, unformed, uncertain but has depth whereas the girls in Almond’s novels are definite, outgoing, mercurial, funny, charming and eye-catching which links them with mothers in his novels who appear to be the seat of emotion: of grieving and of joy, of singing and creating and his girls seem to have the same gifts of acting or of making and of stimulating the hesitant, shy spirit of the hero into action. Erin Law in Heaven Eyes is however not formed in any supportive role but active, fighting against the system and unusually in Almond, without a family
though she has gained one by the end of the novel. But similarly as with the boys she too is wrestling with feelings overwhelmingly powerful and totally novel to them so that the reader acts as the trusted listener who asks questions which enable the hero/heroine to get their feelings into perspective. This accounts for the tone of spontaneous discovery which occurs throughout the novels as suddenly what has been pushing the child to act unknowingly is understood. There is an implicit invitation throughout Almond’s fiction for the reader to be the hero’s friend because he or she is needed. As in ballads or fairy stories what is told the reader is also told them that they may become a recorder of the truth which otherwise would be suppressed or devalued because the child’s side of the story is very often outweighed by the adult, particularly the institutional. Very often what the truth is has to be worked out in collaboration with the reader because the child is having to establish his own scheme of values in order to understand his experience for himself as opposed to accepting the official version. What damage the official version can cause is exemplified in this extract from the opening of *Heaven Eyes*:

> My name is Erin Law. My friends are January Carr and Mouse Gullane. This is the story of what happened when we sailed away from Whitegates that Friday night. Some people will tell you that none of these things happened. They’ll say they were just a dream that the three of us shared. But they did happen. We did meet Heaven Eyes on the Black Middens. We did dig the saint out of the mud. We did find Grampa’s treasure and his secrets. We did see Grampa return to the river. And we did bring Heaven Eyes home with us. She lives happily here among us. People will tell you that this is not Heaven Eyes. They’ll say she is just another damaged child like ourselves. But she is Heaven Eyes. You’ll know her easily. Look at her toes and fingers. Listen to her strange sweet voice. Watch how she seems to see through all the darkness in the world to the joy beneath. It is her. These things happened. January, Mouse and I were there to see them all. Everything is true. So listen.

*(Almond, 2000, p.3)*

When Ryan first read that he commented that it sounded rehearsed as if she has had to make this speech before so that at once a court has appeared and we are listening to the opening speech for the Defence. But the repetitions, the offering of evidence, the definition of the opposing
case and the appeal to the audience not to adopt it; all these devices are passionate, not manipulation, because of the cry not to be labelled ‘damaged child’. As Ryan said that sounds very disturbing for as any one knows who has had such a label passed on them or passed such a label on a child (they can be one and the same person), the effect is of a mark of damnation. And that is the appeal to a child reading: ‘Judge us fairly. Support us. Believe in us. Don’t damn us. Don’t do what adults do.’ If Heaven Eyes is free from damage then there is hope for the rest of the children that life may give back to them what it has taken away and they will not be left to lie in ‘damaged child’ forever. What one finds in reading aloud, which of course is strengthened on stage, is that the signs of welcome and invitation involved in a first person narrative become clear whereas if a child has little reading experience without drama he/she is not alive to them. One can tell that Erin is not very socially experienced or confident from her over formal introduction but then her need takes over and we are gripped. Almond of course is well able to extend a different sort of invitation for a new novel and a different purpose:

He arrived in Felling on a bright and icy February morning. Not so long ago, but it was a different age. I was with Geordie Craggs, like I always was back then. We were swaggering along like always, laughing and joking like always. We passed a Players back and forward and blew long strings of smoke into the air. We’d just been on the altar. We were heading for Braddock’s garden. We were on Watermill Lane when a red taxi rattled past us. Black fumes belched from it. The sign on the top said it was from down the coast.

‘What’s that doing up here?’ said Geordie.

A bit of communion wafer was still stuck to my teeth. I poked it free with my tongue and swallowed it, then drew on the cigarette again.

‘God knows,’ I said.

(Almond, 2005, p.1)

This is taken from the opening to Clay one of David Almond’s more recent books and made into a film for the BBC. Clearly the mood of the piece is much more relaxed precisely because it is the last time such security is known because the agent of change is about to get out of the red taxi and nothing will be the same again. The invitation is to share in a golden time of happiness, the last moment before it changes. The boys feel lords of all they survey: there is a showing off, a cockiness about their
behaviour as they blow smoke lines, the mark of the mimic adult and the stress is on what they do and the refrain ‘always’ as if this state of affairs had been created for them specially and could not shift. There is even an edge of jokiness, of cheeky blasphemy about finding the crumb of the Host stuck to his teeth a bit like T.F. Powys’s tale of ‘Mr. Pym and the Holy Crumb’ – it’s certainly not reverential to God’s body when they are Catholics. We learn later that they have snitched some communion wine as well. I wonder if it’s entirely by chance that the taxi is red and is belching out black smoke as if it comes from Hell and is bringing the devil to destroy Eden. But the invitation is there to relish the boys’ irreverence, the pleasure of being on your own turf which is yours forever, things the reader has in common but also perhaps, knows from experience that this is too good to last and pride comes before a fall and to enjoy that too. The boys find themselves very funny and that’s annoying and universal too.