

# Skellig Short Guide

## Skellig by David Almond

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## Overview

According to ten-year-old Michael, the protagonist of *Skellig*: I found him in the garage . . . 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.

Michael's family has moved to a new house on Falconer Road, and he sees things in the dust and darkness of the rickety garage on the property—including a body propped up against a wall in the shadows.

When Michael starts to touch it, the body of a cadaverous-looking man speaks: "27 and 53." Skellig's joints are almost completely locked by arthritis and he has strange, winglike lumps on his shoulders. As Michael buries his feeling about his sister in caring for Skellig, he gradually opens up to a new world around him and to new friends like Mina.

*Skellig*, with its air of mystery and the supernatural, is hailed as a modern Gothic for children by numerous admirers. Bolstering this conviction is the redemptive power of love exemplified by Michael and Mina's care of Skellig, which in turn leads to the salvation of Michael's newborn sister, Joy.



## About the Author

Previously published as an author for adults, David Almond became an overnight sensation before *Skellig* even hit bookshelves in his native England, and later in the United States. Of course, the term "overnight sensation" is ironic since he had been writing for over twenty years to critical acclaim for his adult work before achieving widespread praise and popularity for his first children's book.

Born May 15, 1951, in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to James and Catherine Almond, Almond grew up in the neighboring Felling-on-Tyne. He was surrounded by relatives, including four sisters and one brother, and he spent his early childhood in a large, staunchly Catholic family. Catherine took her new son to visit an uncle's printing press regularly where he found the motion of the pages produced by the machines highly entertaining. He mentions on his Web site, ". . . maybe I began to fall in love with print when I was just a few months old." Almond always knew he wanted to be a writer.

James Almond, a veteran who fought in Burma during World War II, supported his growing family by working as an office manager in a factory. His wife Catherine had been a typist until they started raising a family. Even though the family moved several times while Almond was a child, they stayed in the Felling-on-Tyne area. In addition to his fascination with his uncle's presses, Almond frequented the public library and imagined a future when his name would appear on the spines of books on the shelves. In the meantime, he lost himself in tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, T. Lobsang Rampa, and his sister's Enid Blyton novels. As a teenager, he discovered Ernest Hemingway and science fiction, and he expanded his reading to the works of Melvin Burgess, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Ted Hughes, Annie Proulx, Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, Philip Pullman, Gary Paulsen, J. K. Rowling, and Jacqueline Wilson as an adult. He claims Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* as a particular favorite. While growing up, he scribbled his own stories in handmade books. He still shows his notebooks with his story ideas to students when he visits schools to show them books do not appear on shelves without hard work involved.

While still a child, Almond's faith was tested by the deaths of his father and an infant sister, Barbara. His feelings of loss are apparent in his character Michael's struggle to deal with his feelings about the potential loss of his newborn sister. In *Something about the Author*, he says, "at times I was scared of what was happening in [*Skellig*] . . . Scared that it might all end dreadfully, scared that the darkness would gain the upper hand."

Almond grew up playing football (soccer to Americans). His assigned position was at centre-half, but like many young players, he dreamed of being a midfielder, and he is still an avid fan of the Newcastle team. He remembers his first plastic football as a favorite toy, and would put on a Newcastle jersey in a minute to live his dream of playing for them. Perhaps his dreams are realized in Michael who is considered one of the best players in his school.



After graduating from high school, Almond attained a bachelor of arts with honors in English and American literature. He subsequently worked as a hotel porter, a postman, a brush salesman, and a building laborer. At twenty-eight, he sold his house and moved to a commune for a year to focus on his writing. During the next twenty years, he struggled as a writer, earning critical acclaim for his short stories and thirty-three rejections for his great English novel before turning to teaching to earn a steady paycheck while writing. He thought it would be the best career choice for a writer. He was wrong. Most of his students were eleven to sixteen year olds with special needs. The work fascinated him, but left him too tired to write.

Then he submitted the manuscript for *Skellig* to Hodder Children's Books and carved out his niche in the field of literature. The first printing sold out in four days, and subsequent awards and high sales volume enabled him to quit teaching and focus on writing full-time. Most days, he works in his study at home on a regular 9:00 A.M.

to 5:00 P.M. schedule, writing to reach his goal of 1,000 words per day. Almond does not let his British editor see his latest work until he is satisfied with it, and then he sends his first draft. His American publisher, Delacorte, tends to publish his books exactly as they appeared in England, giving American audiences credit for understanding them as written. British phrases are not changed, unlike the revisions made to J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, most notably the title of her first book from *Philosopher's Stone* to *Sorcerer's Stone*. *Skellig*, which Almond says came to him while walking down the street one day, took seven months to write while most of his books take a full year.

Since its publication, *Skellig* has received the following accolades from critics: The 1998 Carnegie Medal; the 1998 Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award; the 1999 Booklist Books for Youth Editors' Choice Top of the List, Fiction; a 2000 Michael L. Printz Honor Book; an American Library Association Notable Children's Book; a Horn Book Fan Fare; a School Library Journal Best Book; a New York Times Bestseller; a Publishers Weekly Best Book; and a Parents' Choice Silver Honor Book. It has also received praise from authors Joan Aiken, Robert Cormier, Karen Cushman, Sid Fleischman, Richard Peck, Graham Salisbury, Zilpha Keatley Snyder, Philip Pullman, and Melvin Burgess, to name a few.

Currently, Almond spends his spare time walking, watching television, listening to music, traveling when he can, and spending time with his wife, Sara Jane Palmer, a sculptor, and their four-year-old daughter, Freya Grace Almond-Palmer.



## Setting

The appeal of Skellig lies in the commonality of the setting and characters. Michael could be any boy; his school, any school; his friends, anyone's friends; his home and neighborhood, anyone's home and neighborhood; his hopes and fears, anyone's.

Skellig opens in a shabby house on Falconer Road in a town that could be anywhere in England. The house is a fixer-upper purchased as a new beginning for Michael, his parents, and his baby sister who is born prematurely. The house has a toilet installed in the dining room since the previous tenant, an elderly man, did not have the energy to venture far to the bathroom. At the edge of the property is a crumbling garage Michael is warned to stay away from until it can be inspected. It is crammed full of discarded bits of previous tenants' lives, cobwebs, dust, and the corpses of mice, bluebottle flies, and spiders. Almond based Michael's house on his own home that has a garage on the property separate from the house, and a toilet was in the dining room when his family moved in. Even the name of the street, Falconer, reflects the overall flight and bird motif used throughout the novel.

The decay of Michael's new home and the garage is echoed in a nearby building owned by Mina, a new neighbor of Michael's age who received the building as a bequest from a relative. Mina has plans to repair her inheritance, plans in turn echoed by Michael's family's work on their house. The attic of Mina's house acts as an aerie (an elevated, secluded nest or dwelling) for a pair of rare owls, and later becomes an aerie for Skellig when the children move him from the unsafe garage.

Michael's school is mentioned rarely, with more attention paid to his efforts on the football field than on his assignments. Even his teachers are referred to primarily by nicknames such as Rasputin and the Yeti.

Slightly more attention is paid to Mina's house, with its warm, welcoming kitchen where Mina's mother welcomes Michael for a short stay when his father is called to the hospital unexpectedly. Michael is fascinated by Mina's "classroom," the room where she sketches pictures of birds and Skellig.

The hospital is a cold, barren place to Michael, who calls his sister's doctor by the nickname Dr. Death for his cold hands and cadaverous appearance. He hates the plastic box the baby is kept in, and the impersonal tubes attached to her body. Her fragility is all the more apparent as she lays with her pale, soft skin and fine, black head of hair exposed to the eyes of the doctors and nurses.

# Social Sensitivity

In Skellig there are several topics of interest to teens. Transformation and acceptance, as expressed by Skellig's physical and spiritual change, strikes a chord with teens searching for their own definition of who they are. As they experiment with clothes, hairstyles, new friends and trends, they begin to define who they are and who they want to be. Transformation is an important topic since teens are pulled in diverging directions by wanting to be accepted by their peers, yet at the same time express their individuality. Michael recognizes changes in himself as he transforms from the self-absorption of childhood to an awareness of the bigger picture of the world around him. His changing relationship with his carefree school friends and his need for them to accept his new friendship with Mina exemplify his growth. For her part, Mina needs Michael's friendship and acceptance as much as he needs hers.

When discussing Skellig, one should take into consideration cultural and societal views of death; the topic may be taboo for some students, in that a student may not be able to discuss death in public, or may be phobic to an extreme degree and find such a discussion unsettling.

The other side of the search for the meaning of life is to question why people die.

Michael struggles with the thought of his sister dying, seeing death as an enemy to defeat; Mina views death as simply another part of the cycle of nature. The debate between evolution and creationism is part of the issue of life versus death. It is an extremely sensitive issue for some teens caught between their own developing ideas and the already formed opinions and beliefs of the adults in their lives. Even Michael and Mina would be hard pressed to state which side of the argument they believe in after experiencing Skellig.

# Literary Qualities

Skellig is both a name and all-encompassing title filled with hidden meanings.

Almond rejects the label of fantasy for his work, finding it closer to the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Magical realism takes an ordinary slice of reality and infuses it with the supernatural. Other examples of magical realism are Charles de Lint's Newford series and Orson Scott Card's Tales of Alvin Maker.

Almond delivers the magic in Michael's reality with a seemingly limitless amount of flight and bird imagery. From the name of the road Michael's new home is on, Falconer, to Mina's endless discussions of the colors of the local birds, the owls, and the archaeopteryx, to Skellig's appearance and eventual flight, to the final three feathers Skellig leaves for the children, the literary motif is subtle yet solid, imbuing the novel with continuity and presence.





## Themes and Characters

Skellig is an enigma, a timeless being with no beginning or end. Skellig appears to be part human and part angel, capable of working miracles. He has a worn and beaten exterior. Almond named him after a group of islands off the coast of Ireland called the Skelligs, one of which happens to be named Skellig Michael, or Great Skellig, and hosted a monastery in the twelfth century dedicated to St. Michael, the archangel and patron saint of high places. Almond mentions on his Web site that the term skell is a slang term for a homeless person, a fact he did not know until after the book was published.

When—or how, or why—he came to sit in the corner of the crumbling garage is never mentioned. He apparently left his nest occasionally when the previous tenant was alive because he knew the previous tenant loved to order take-out from the Chinese restaurant around the corner, numbers 27 and 53 in particular, and Skellig would scavenge the remains from the trash bin. When Michael discovers Skellig, he can barely move. He is covered with dirt, dead bluebottles, and cobwebs. His skeletal appearance and white face make Michael believe he has discovered a dead man until Skellig shifts and speaks in a hoarse, croaking voice, giving his name as "Arthur Itis" in reference to the pain in his joints. Skellig's clothes consist of a tattered black suit that matches his dusty dark hair. When Michael tries to move him, he feels strange bumps on Skellig's shoulder blades where wings would be if Skellig were a bird—or an angel.

As Michael and Mina take care of Skellig, feeding him the Chinese take-out numbers 27 and 53, aspirin for the arthritis pain, cod liver oil capsules to lubricate his joints, and, most important, begin to believe in him and love him, his health improves. He stops calling himself Mr. Nobody, Mr. Had Enough, and starts taking interest in the world around him. The owls living in Mina's abandoned attic feed him as if he were one of their owlets, and his similarity to the owls is further enhanced by the owl pellets Mina finds in the old garage and the attic. When soaked in water, the pellets open up to reveal the skeletal system and skin of various creatures. Mina explains to Michael that owls swallow their prey whole and then regurgitate the inedible parts in a pellet. As Skellig grows stronger, he transforms into a being of unearthly beauty and wonder before flying off into the realm of memory and imagination.

Ten-year-old Michael is a solemn boy forced by circumstance to grow up faster than his friends, Leakey and Coot. While his friends embody the joy and live-for-the-moment attitude of youth, Michael lives for the future, for the day his sister comes home from the hospital and never has to go back. At night, he sneaks into his parents' bedroom, where the baby's crib is kept, to listen to her breathe and reassures himself with a touch of her black hair or soft skin that she still lives. He adores this little being so much he imagines her heart beating securely and safely next to his as he wills her to live so their family will remain whole.

As a result, he loses interest in school, and even in his beloved football, since how can they compare to the possibility that his sister might die?



The first crack in his composure occurs when he finds Skellig. He identifies Skellig's frail body with his sister's, and since he cannot help his sister, he transfers his need to be needed to Skellig. He also worries he is losing his mind since no one else has seen Skellig, but Mina's ability to see Skellig reassures him and opens his imagination.

Mina is a balance for Michael emotionally and intellectually, and he is comfortable showing his emotions around her since she understands. Michael's openness about his emotions is a refreshing counterpoint to current views that disparage men or boys for showing any emotions other than anger.

Mina challenges him to view the beauty of nature surrounding him by showing him her attic with its rare owls and owlets.

Michael learns to see nature as beautiful even as the owls hunt and Skellig grows stronger by eating weaker prey. In the end, Michael finds his place in his family and his personal circle of life with the help of Skellig.

Outspoken Mina lives just down the lane from Michael, and immediately starts opening his eyes to the wonders of nature surrounding them. As a homeschooled child, Mina criticizes the public school system as archaic and inadequate, stating that public schools would not let her pursue her interest in William Blake, a poet who believed in angels and supernatural beings. She is obsessed, for the moment, with birds and the archaeopteryx, the evolutionary step between dinosaurs and modern birds. She views Skellig with a budding scientist's eye, classifying him as a potential evolutionary step between man and flight, but even her calculated study is not impervious to the miracle she perceives him to be. In a sense, Michael's openness about his feelings enable Mina to open herself to feeling and experiencing, rather than just observing life. Just as Almond was not aware of the term skell as a possible derivation of the name for Skellig, he was not aware that Mina is the name of the woman pursued by the vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

Michael's dad and mom are minor characters flitting in and out of his life as they struggle to find a balance between caring for the house, the baby, and him. Dad, a big, tough man, hides his feelings of worry about the baby behind a facade of cheer and camaraderie that compels Michael to participate even when he does not feel like it.

Mum calls everything "stupid": the house, Michael's behavior, and life in general. She apologizes to Michael when her behavior hurts him, but the stress of worrying about her sick daughter keeps her tense and unreachable. She opens up at the end when the baby is safe, and shares her dream of an angel dancing with the baby on the night before the baby is allowed to come home.

Michael recognizes her description of Skellig, and she, in turn, realizes they have shared a unique experience when Mina gives her a sketch of Skellig.

The baby, the cause of the worry and concern throughout the book, is nameless until the end. Perhaps by refusing to name her until she is well, the family maintains a small degree of separation in case she dies.



Once she survives heart surgery and returns home to the loving arms of her big brother and parents, they name her after the feeling she brings to their home: Joy.

With ten years separating Michael and Joy, the reader is left with the impression Joy is a long-awaited miracle whose loss would devastate the family beyond repair. As he wrote, Almond never knew from moment to moment if the baby would live or die, and his own loss of a sister as an infant makes Joy's survival an ode to what might have been.

Joy is also tied closely to Skellig since Michael's mother tells him shoulder blades are where people's wings were attached before birth; another hint Skellig may have supernatural rather than biological origins.

Themes abound in Skellig: transformation, faith, love, the meaning of life, salvation, acceptance, the beauty and cruelty of nature, and independence. Skellig experiences transformation on a physical and spiritual level. The kindness of two complete strangers heals his broken body and spirit, giving him a new joy and meaning for his life. Michael and Mina think Skellig might be an angel, but, to him, they are the angels, offering him salvation and acceptance.

Michael exemplifies faith and love in his belief that if he wills Joy to survive, she will.

His faith and love encompass Skellig, his parents, and even Mina, until they return to him in the happy eyes of Joy. He and Mina are independent spirits also searching for a meaning for life, or Joy's potential loss of life, and they discover an answer as they witness the beauty and cruelty of nature as the owls and Skellig struggle to survive.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Michael believes his sister will live as long as he can feel her heart beating with his. Do you believe love is strong enough to influence a person's desire to live or die? How?

2. Mina is homeschooled. Should parents have the right to homeschool their children, or should all children be forced to attend public schools? Why or why not? Do homeschooled children learn more, or better, than their public school counterparts?

3. Do Michael's parents love him even though their attention is focused on his newborn sister? Does Michael resent the baby for stealing their attention, or does he understand why they are not paying as much attention to him? Should he resent the baby?

4. Michael and Mina watch the owls feeding baby birds and mice to the owlets.

Is nature inherently beautiful or cruel since species prey on each other for survival? Why or why not?

5. What or who is Skellig?

Skellig 361 6. Should ten-year-olds have the freedom to do whatever they choose like Michael and Mina? Or is their apparent freedom an illusion?

7. Are Michael's parents good parents? Is Mina's mother a good mother? Why or why not?

8. In American society men and boys are often ridiculed for showing their emotions. Are Michael and his father comfortable showing their emotions? In what ways do they show or disguise their emotions?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Baby Joy undergoes heart surgery to save her life. What are the possible heart conditions a baby could be born with that would require corrective surgery? How are the procedures performed and what are the statistics for survival? How is the baby cared for in the hospital?

2. What is the history of football, or soccer? Who invented it, why is it called by different names in England and America, and how have the rules changed over the years?

3. What is homeschooling? Are there any governmental guidelines regulating it?

Who teaches the students, and what are their qualifications? What percentage of students in the United States are homeschooled each year?

4. Discuss the evolution of birds from archaeopteryx to the present. What biological differences appear in birds that enable them to fly?

5. Discuss the theory of evolution and the theory of creationism. Give examples to back up your argument.

6. Experts have been debating for years whether nature versus nurture has the greatest effect on raising children. Discuss the main points of the debate and use examples to support your own theory about nature versus nurture.

7. Wings have intrigued mankind through the centuries. Is it possible for man to develop the ability to fly? What modifications would the human body have to undergo to make flight possible?

8. What are latch key kids? Discuss this growing phenomenon and its pros and cons.

9. How does the public school system in England differ from the public school system in America? Classes, grades, rules, clothes/uniforms, etc.?

10. Who was Icarus? How is flight depicted in various myths around the world?

## For Further Reference

"Almond, David." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 114. Detroit: Gale, 2000. This entry contains biographical information, a list of awards, his bibliography, and information about Skellig.

Burwinkel, Julie. Review of Skellig. *Book Report* (March/April 1999): 56. This positive review of Skellig discusses the themes in the story.

Cooper, Ilene. "The Booklist Interview: David Almond." *Booklist* (January 1 and 15, 2000): 898-899. This interview with Almond is about Skellig being Booklist's 1999 Top of the List winner for fiction, but it also discusses *Kit's Wilderness*.

———. Review of Skellig. *Booklist* (February 1, 1999): 974.

Deveraux, Elizabeth. "Flying Starts." *Publishers Weekly* (June 28, 1999): 25. This article provides biographical information and a brief interview with Almond about Skellig prior to its release in the United States, discussing the creation and development of the book.

Hainer, Cathy. "Feathered Friend Lifts Boy from Decay." *LISA Today* (August 5, 1999): 8D. Hainer calls Skellig a Gothic novel that covers major themes including the "fragility of life and redemptive power of love."

Klass, Perri. Review of Skellig. *New York Times Book Review* (June 6, 1999): 49. Klass states that Skellig possess a "simple but poetic language," and that Almond does not offer a neatly packaged set of mysteries or provide explanations. Klass also finds that it is a "story about worlds enlarging and the hope of scattering death."

Weeks, Jerome. "Otherworldly Aura Pervades Teen Novels." *Dallas Morning News* (May 29, 2001): 1C. Weeks calls Almond's novels "haunting and enigmatic." This article includes a brief interview, discusses the authors influences, and digs deeper into Skellig and *Heaven Eyes*.



## Related Titles/Adaptations

Almond mentions being influenced by Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," and readers may want to compare their own impressions of the story with Skellig. His work opens the door of reality to the unpredictability of the imagination in much the same way C. S. Lewis's characters stepped through the wardrobe door into Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and the Indian in the Cupboard awoke in Lynne Reid Banks's novel.

Readers may also find J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy entertaining, although the supernatural elements of these novels are more overt and attributed to the actual practice of magic with wands and spells.

Alice Hoffman's *Aquamarine* features the interaction of young teens with a mermaid, a mythical creature evoking the same sense of wonder Skellig does, although not quite in the same way. Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* sequence begins with a ten-yearold protagonist discovering he is the last immortal who will ever be born as the final clash between good and evil looms. The reactions of this boy to his changed circumstances echo Michael's reaction to the discovery of the magic in his life.

If the reader wants another dose of Almond, his *Heaven Eyes* is another novel named for the main character, an enigmatic young woman discovered by a group of children who are not quite sure exactly what she is. Almond also composed a version of *Skellig* as a play that was produced to acclaim in England, and provided the narration for the audiocassette version of the novel.

## Related Web Sites

<http://www.davidalmond.com>. Accessed July 9, 2002. This official author's Web site provides a biography, frequently asked questions about his books, book details and review excerpts.





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