

## The “Necessary Wilderness”:

Liminal Settings for Adolescent Emotional Growth in Four Novels by David Almond

From the earliest folktales to modern classics like *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), *Julie of the Wolves* (George & Schoenherr, 1972), *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 2007), and even the musical *Into the Woods* (Sondheim & Lapine, 1989), storytellers have sent their characters into wild, uncivilized places to confront the challenges and inspire the introspection that cause them to grow and change. Educators know the value of being in an unstructured outdoor environment for students of all ages. Forest Kindergartens in Switzerland have inspired a school in Vermont to hold every Monday of Kindergarten outdoors (Hanford, 2015), and in Washington, DC, an innovative community health program called DC Parks Rx issues written prescriptions for time outdoors to children and adolescents in urban schools—a program that has taken off in other major cities (Sellers, 2015).

At a 2010 conference on literature for young people held in Toronto, Ontario, the British author David Almond gave a talk stressing the importance for children and adolescents of having access to wild places in life and in stories. Entitled “The Necessary Wilderness,” the talk was later published as an essay in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Almond, 2011a). As described in that issue’s introduction, his speech proposed that “even in the center of civilization and technological prowess, children seek out spaces that evoke atavistic wildness and danger” (Russell, Westman, & Wood, 2011, p. v). In a speech accepting the 2010 Hans Christian Andersen Award, Almond (2011b) urged the same point: “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” (p. 78).

In his coming-of-age novels *Skellig* (2000b), *Kit’s Wilderness* (2000a), *Heaven Eyes* (2002), and *The Savage* (2008), Almond puts his conviction into practice, creating settings with real and metaphorical wild spaces and wildernesses that are central features of the narratives. In each story, his adolescent protagonist, between the ages of 10 and 14, seeks out or encounters these liminal spaces, all of which have an element of the magical or fantastic, and there confronts and explores his or her fears, losses, and desires. As a result of these experiences, each comes home with greater self-understanding and a new capacity for connection and joy.

Almond’s concept is compelling. While adolescence is a time of self-exploration and boundary stretching, in an urban and cyber-oriented world, access to an unstructured or undeveloped space in which to explore and imagine is hard to come by for many adolescents, and they lose the opportunity for emotional development that such liminality affords. But because research on the psychological impact of literature has shown that readers can and do internally model the feelings of the characters they encounter in fiction (Keen, 2006), teachers and librarians can provide a needed experience of real and metaphorical wildernesses in narrative fiction by recommending these novels and designing reading experiences that include them. This study examines Almond’s settings and the impact they have on his characters’ emotional

growth, suggesting that they can be powerful features of narrative that have meaning for developing adolescents.

## The Challenge of Urbanization and Google Maps

The effectiveness of unstructured space in providing an opportunity for self-knowledge is a fundamental tenet of wilderness challenge and therapy programs, where adolescents can spend time alone “to reflect on

their lives and to receive insight and inspiration” (Russell, 2001, p. 74). But outside of such programs, wilderness experiences can be difficult for some teens to access. The United States Census Bureau determined that in 2010, 80.7 percent of the US population lived in urban areas (US Census Bureau, n.d.). Nabhan and Trimble (1994) argue that “an increasingly large proportion of inner-city children

will never gain access to unpeopled places . . . [or] wildlands. They will grow up in a world where asphalt, concrete, and plaster cover more ground than shade-providing shrubs and their resident songbirds” (p. 11).

In her study of adolescent development, Hersch (1999) found that some young people felt even suburban life is stifling: “We’ve never touched anything real” (p. 344). But the wilderness feels real. “That’s a big thing about moving off to the woods. You can actually live your life” (p. 344). The boys profiled by Hersch dreamed about living in the woods—which was “not about dropping out or goofing off, but about seeking life’s meaning” (p. 344). The idea was not to leave forever, but to come back to share insights learned in the wild. “The trick is to establish a rhythm: you come back to civilization as long as you can stand it, and then you return to the wilderness” (p. 345–346). As Nabhan and Trimble (1994) suggest, “[B]eing *in* the thick of it . . . is the best way we can be in touch with ourselves” (p. 107).

Even an opportunity to head to the wilderness

is not the adventure it used to be, however. Where topographical or large foldout paper maps were once the norm and charting a course into the wild took imagination and courage, digital mapping has become the preeminent form of navigation and self-location. Garfield (2013) believes that “a large sheet map offers a perfect way to register where we have come from, where we are going, how we get there” (p. 378). But Google Maps has a different purpose—to demystify mapping. In a June 2012 speech described by Garfield, Brian McClendon, head of Google Maps, took on the classic “*hic sunt dracones*”—here be dragons. “Our goal at Google has been to remove as many dragons from your maps as possible” (p. 431). And on a digital map, people often search first for their own town or house, which Garfield calls “Me-Mapping, the placing of the user at the instant center of everything” (p. 429). He notes:

It is now entirely possible to travel many hundreds of miles . . . without having the faintest clue about how we got there. A victory for GPS, a loss for geography, history, navigation, maps, human communication and the sense of being connected to the world all around us. (p. 384)

A loss, too, for the concept of wilderness. In a culture in which it is possible to always know exactly where you are (and designers of technology are determined to take the mystery out of even the most remote wild places), young people must try harder to discover and experience liminal, unstructured landscapes or settings in which to explore and imagine.

## Almond’s Realistic Settings and the Fantastic Real

The writer Janet Burroway suggests that the setting in a narrative can, among other things, serve as a mirror for emotion. She notes that, besides defining a story’s physical dimensions, “setting must do more than one thing at once, from illuminating the story’s symbolic underpinnings to . . . reflecting emotion or revealing subtle aspects of a character’s life” (Burroway, E. Stuckey-French, & N. Stuckey-French, 2011, p. 165). In the novels discussed here, the wildernesses Almond creates specifically reflect the protagonists’ emotions. The settings, while strange and magical, are close to home—within walking distance and easily visited, sometimes daily. This structure is significant to Almond:

I think kids—and all of us—need to expose ourselves to danger and to trouble and kids know that they want to do that. . . . They want to go just over the horizon where it's a bit wilder. I mean, they need to know that home is nearby, but when exploring the unknown they want to feel as though they're a long way from home. (Richards, 2002, para. 8)

The landscapes in these stories, both home and wilderness, are realistic. As Almond has explained (Richards, 2002, para. 5), they are all set in places that he knows well and could actually show a reader. But Almond's stories are not what would be considered purely realistic fiction. In every setting, a subtle magic happens, helping to create the wild atmosphere of the liminal space.

While Almond's novels have been categorized as belonging to the genre known as *magic realism*, they may more accurately be included in the genre *fantastic realism*. Waller (2009) suggests that in magic realism, the impossible happenings are incorporated into the narrative world in a way that all the characters find natural or acceptable. She proposes that in fantastic realism, on the other hand, the fantastic is not an experience shared by the community, but appears specifically in the experience of the teenage protagonists, "in their own diurnal world, often within their own person" (p. 72). She notes that the experience of the magical is isolated: "It is thus how the *individual* interacts with the *fantastic* that is most significant in . . . teenage fantastic realism" (p. 55). In these novels, the events that take place in the liminal spaces emphasize the individual, rather than a societal, experience of the fantastic. In each of Almond's narratives, the magic is experienced by the protagonist and just one or two young friends (or siblings, or enemies) who share the transcendence, the doubt, and the joy. Only two grown-ups experience it, and in both cases (the mother in *Skellig*, 2000b, and the dying grandfather in *Kit's Wilderness*, 2000a), they themselves are in an in-between situation, an anxiety-filled suspension between life and death.

Almond himself does not categorize his work as belonging to any genre. Asserting that his books are realistic and not fantasy, he explains that while his novels are set in a very real world, that world may contain more than meets the eye: "I suppose what they do maybe tend towards is to show how extraordinary the world *can* be" (Richards, 2002, para. 7). He says: "Actually this world is miraculous. If you look

at certain things in this world, it's actually amazing what's in this world. . . . I think our world's got everything we need" (Odean, 2001, para. 23).

## The Wildernesses of Almond's Coming-of-Age Novels

### *Skellig*

In *Skellig* (2000b), Almond creates two metaphorical wildernesses located in buildings, perilous spaces to which entry is forbidden: one is a decrepit garage, and the other is an attic in an empty house. The events that take place in each are transformative to the protagonist, 10-year-old Michael, and both spaces serve as a reflection of his internal state as he changes: the garage invokes feelings of death and giving up, and the attic reflects his desires—new life, resurrection, and hope. As the narrative begins, Michael's family has just moved. Unhappy about the transition, Michael descends into near-despair when his sister is born prematurely and with a defective heart. So afraid the baby may die that they do not even name her, Michael and his parents are deeply uncertain, and Michael feels paralyzed.

The garage is at the end of the garden; ramshackle and dangerous, it is the story's first liminal space. Almond creates it through an accumulation of sensory details. It is "a demolition site or a rubbish dump" (p. 1); the roof is rotten, and the floor has cracks and holes. The space is full of spiders, desiccated insects, small dead animals, and trash—rotting cloth, carpet, bags of cement, water pipes, rolls of cracked linoleum, ancient newspapers and other detritus, all stinking and covered with dust. There is no order; it cannot be used for its intended purpose. The garage is between life and death, between the past and nonexistent future.

Forbidden to enter, Michael dares himself and crosses the threshold. He finds what appears to be a half-dead man—bony, arthritic, and filthy—whose name we later learn is Skellig. Michael starts caring for Skellig, discovering wings on his back. He realizes that his baby sister and Skellig both lead marginal existences; his sister clings to life, halfway between heaven and earth, while Skellig clings to life without a past or future.

Through his friendship with his neighbor Mina, Michael is introduced to the other wilderness—an

empty house soon to be renovated. Mina takes Michael to the bare attic, open to the sky through a window. Wildlife lives there—a fierce family of owls with healthy babies, full of life, a symbol of Michael's desire. This is also a liminal space, but one of energy and hope. It houses babies that will soon take flight, and in time, it will become a real home. After Michael has seen the attic and the owls, hope begins to grow in him for himself and for Skellig. Michael tells Skellig about his fragile sister and asks him to think about her getting better, hoping this will help her. Skellig agrees, and soon Michael brings Mina to meet him. The two move Skellig from the garage to the attic; he is so light they can carry him. They realize he is not old, but young and beautiful. As soon as they reach the house, Skellig tells them his name, thereby regaining his identity. In the attic, they see his wings unfurl for the first time. One can be one's self and find one's desires in this more hopeful metaphorical wilderness. Skellig's resurrection and Michael's healing begin.

Mina and Michael return in the middle of the night to find a strong, tall Skellig standing at the window being fed by the owls. Together they dance, their feet lifting off the floor; Michael and Mina suddenly have transparent wings and experience a momentary fusion with Skellig, who is warm, reassuring, and tender. When Michael's hopes and fears come together as his sister has an operation on her heart, Skellig goes to the baby in the hospital, dancing with her in a similar way. They give each other "glittering" life and strength (p. 166).

The last time Michael and Mina see Skellig in the attic, they repeat the transformative dance. Skellig finally answers Michael's question about what he is: "'Something like you, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel.' He laughed. 'Something like that'" (p. 167). Skellig draws the liminal experience to a close, telling them: "Thank you for giving me my life again. Now you have to go home" (p. 168).

Michael and Mina do go home. During one last attic visit, they find the baby owls fledging—and a heart carved in the floor with a thank you from Skellig. The attic is just an attic once more. At Michael's home, contractors knock down the garage, and a garden takes its place. His fears are gone; his desire has been achieved. He is transformed by his experiences in the two wildernesses, which, having served their purpose,

no longer exist in the same way. Like Skellig, who could say his name when he reached the metaphorical wilderness of hope, Michael's sister has healed to the point where he and his parents can name her: Joy.

### ***Kit's Wilderness***

There are four wildernesses in *Kit's Wilderness* (Almond, 2000a), three places in the landscape around Kit Watson's village and one that Kit creates from his imagination, inhabits in his mind, and describes in a story that he writes. Similar to those found in the other novels, these wildernesses reflect the inner psychological states of Kit and the other main character, John Askew.

Kit is a 13-year-old who has moved with his parents to his ancestral village to care for his ailing grandfather, a former miner in the coal pits nearby. Kit has three desires: to make friends; to find his identity; and to understand death. He has two fears: that his grandfather will slip into dementia and die, and that the artistic, troubled village boy, 13-year-old John Askew, who challenges Kit but with whom Kit feels a connection, will destroy himself.

The first wilderness is a meadow-like space near the village, a neutral place where children play. It covers old mining tunnels where Kit's ancestors worked and sometimes died. This everyday wilderness has magic: Kit's grandfather, and eventually Kit and John, can see the flickering shapes of ancient pit children who were buried there in accidents. Here Kit learns about the part of himself that is deeply connected to the past. The second wild place is a deserted coal mine where adolescents from school play Askew's terrifying game called Death; in this game, the chosen player "dies" and is left alone in the darkness. Kit wants to play Death, desiring to "see what really happens" (p. 41). His experience is transformative: he blacks out, but then sees the ghosts of the ancient children.

The third wilderness in the novel comes from Kit's imagination. He writes a story that unfolds in a wild landscape during the Ice Age (p. 106). It tells of a boy his age, Lak, who rescues his baby sister from a bear, then searches through the frozen wilderness to find his family again. Kit inhabits the story in his dreams, and Lak's mother begs Kit to find Lak and the baby and bring them back. When he wakes, impressions from stones given to him by Lak's mother are

on his hand; the wilderness has broken the boundary between worlds (p. 132). In real life, Askew has disappeared, and Askew's mother wanders the meadow, the ordinary wilderness, with her baby, looking for him. She begs Kit to help bring Askew back (p. 157). Kit realizes he is writing the story of Lak for Askew: Lak never loses hope of finding his family, and Kit holds the same hope of reconnecting with Askew and saving him. The Ice Age wilderness—though the most savage and unforgiving in the story—is a wilderness of hope.

To reach the fourth wilderness, Kit struggles through snow and cold to the distant entrance of an abandoned mine. Inside is a narrow tunnel with a cave-like area beyond, ominous and threatening. Askew, waiting there, characterizes the space as Death; in a way, both Kit and Askew have disappeared from the world. It is primal and liminal, suspended: "Down here . . . there's no day, no night. You're half awake and half asleep, half dead and half alive. You're in the earth with bones and ghosts and darkness stretching back a million million years into the past" (p. 185). But it is also a space for truth, for ritual and resurrection. The fantastic enters: the ancient mine children and Lak's mother appear. Kit sees Askew as Lak and tells him the story; Askew draws strength from the tale. This wilderness represents hope, life, and determination.

Together these four wildernesses enable Kit to achieve his desires and conquer his fears by providing liminal spaces for the learning he wants and needs to do. They are complex, vivid reflections of Kit's emotions. Almond gives them a numinous quality, including in these spaces the fantastic events of the narrative. Ultimately, the pits are boarded up, no longer needed. Kit and Askew return home, transformed, to their families and a happy life.

### **Heaven Eyes**

There is only one wilderness in *Heaven Eyes* (Almond, 2002), but it is as compelling as any that Almond has created. Erin Law is a young teen who has lived in a group home for orphans since her mother's death. Erin's desire is to find a happy emotional connection like the one she had with her mother. Deciding to leave, she sets off on the river that runs through the city with another orphan, her best friend January. Taking along Mouse, a younger boy, their transport is

a raft that January has constructed from cast-off doors marked, symbolically, "Entrance," "Danger," and "Exit" (p. 37).

The ride on the river is initially free and joyful, but it ends quickly when darkness falls and the young people run aground on the Black Middens, a trash-filled outcropping adjacent to an abandoned printing plant and a derelict warehouse district. Mired in stinking, oily mud, Erin, January, and Mouse are found by a girl with webbed fingers and toes who speaks in a poetic cadence and syntax. She is Heaven Eyes (p. 56). The wilderness in this narrative is the muddy shore, the warren of warehouses, and the printing plant, with its shattered skylights, giant machines, and rubble and typeface on

the floor. Heaven Eyes lives there in squalor with the ancient, mentally unbalanced former caretaker, whom she calls Grampa. Their lives are marginal. They live as they would in a true wilderness, foraging and excavating, as if they were far away from civilization.

Erin is immediately drawn to Heaven Eyes and connects deeply with the atmosphere of the Middens, but to January, the place feels like a nightmare—mad, evil, and death-like—and he believes that if they do not leave soon, they will never get away (p. 97). To return to the orphan home would thwart Erin's desire, however, and Heaven Eyes does not want to leave the only place she has ever known. When Erin and January starkly disagree, Erin's internal state suddenly reflects the Middens. Disconnected and disoriented, she gets lost in the darkest part of the ruined building, a cellar full of rot and slime (p. 103). Heaven Eyes saves her, calls her back to life and the world, and their connection solidifies.

Through hidden evidence found by January, they learn that Grampa has withheld from Heaven Eyes her history as the sole survivor of her family's nautical disaster, and they confront Grampa. Then January and Erin find the decades-old preserved body of a workman in the mud of the Black Middens (p. 163). They

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decide to lay him out, honoring him with typeface that spells out “The saint” (p. 166).

Hearing heavy machinery and walking through the derelict buildings to find the source of the noise, Erin sees a crane and realizes that construction crews will begin to raze the buildings on the site the next day (p. 172). The wilderness, so mysterious and potentially lethal, will be civilized by new construc-

tion. At the end of his purpose, as the wilderness is doomed, Grampa dies. In a mystical scene, the saint rises up gracefully and escorts Grampa’s spirit across the mud and into the river (p. 181). Heaven Eyes is free to leave with Erin.

Back at the orphans’ home, the four friends realize with surprise that they can see the Black

Middens from the windows. The wilderness has been about time and truth and the construct of reality, a nearby space for learning and not an escape to a distant haven. The presence of Heaven Eyes, known at the orphans’ home by her real name, Anna, brings everyone closer, and she and Erin consider themselves sisters. Erin achieves her primary desire for connection and is happy.

### *The Savage*

In this short, metafictional story of loss and healing narrated by the protagonist, Blue Baker, Almond creates two parallel wildernesses. The first is Burgess Woods, a lovely, bucolic site outside Blue’s town where a ruined chapel stands; the other, born from Blue’s unconscious and an objective correlative for Blue’s grief and anger, is a different Burgess Woods, dark and fearsome. This second wilderness appears in the story Blue writes called “The Savage,” and there the savage lives in a cave under the chapel (Almond, 2008, p. 7).

After his father dies suddenly, leaving him with his mother and younger sister Jess, Blue has two desires: to feel less grief and to vanquish the town bully, Hopper, who mocks Blue for grieving. When the school counselor only makes Blue feel worse, he

begins to write about the savage, a split-off part of himself, a creature that can contain Blue’s rage and grief and be invulnerable, which Blue cannot. The writing of the story is therapeutic, and one day, “without really thinking about it” (p. 31), Blue puts himself into the story and dreams he is with the savage.

Blue writes that the savage leaves the wilderness for town. The savage recognizes Blue’s house with positive feelings, then breaks into Hopper’s home intending to kill him. But Blue cannot make the savage kill Hopper in his story. Instead, he writes that the savage terrifies Hopper, punching him and splitting his lip, and dances in triumph in the street (p. 60). Then, before returning to his cave in Burgess Wood, the savage breaks into Blue’s house and gently caresses his sister on her brow. From that point on, the narrative is infused with magic. The injury to Hopper’s face and a dirt smudge left by the savage on the sister’s brow are real. Empowered, Blue confronts Hopper and tells him he knows the savage hit him and that he will send the savage again if Hopper does not leave him alone. The confrontation brings him the first of several experiences of joy (p. 66).

Then the wilderness in Blue’s story, representing both his unconscious and his imagination, and the actual ruined chapel in Burgess Woods come together, and Blue is healed. In school, he is overwhelmed with the experience of writing his story, and, becoming savage-like, grunting and growling, he runs to the Woods and to the ruined chapel (p. 68). There he sees the savage “like a reflection, and he was just like me, only weirder and wilder and closer to some magic and some darkness and some dreams” (p. 73). Deep in the cave, Blue is astonished to learn that the savage has been painting Blue and his family, including his dad, on the cave walls—in “works of wonder” (p. 75)—since before Blue began writing him. Together they grunt and stomp, and Blue knows “how it felt to be the savage, to be truly wild” (p. 75).

In a transcendent moment in this spiritual space, the savage touches Blue, and the reintegration is complete: “Somehow I knew that my wounds would heal, that my sadness would start to fade, and I knew as well that somehow, in some weird way, everything that was happening was true” (p. 76). Together they hear Blue’s father telling him to be happy and that he’s with him always. Suddenly, Blue is outside the cave and can’t find his way back in, because he

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no longer needs the wilderness or the savage. He is changed, and they will never meet again. He returns to his mother and sister, and laughing together, his mother declares: “Here’s the savage come to life in the real world” (p. 77).

Across these novels, David Almond shows adolescent readers a way to imagine for themselves a wilderness space not far from their homes in which they can explore and cross thresholds in order to grow. His home-away-home structure is a classic one for such transformations. As Bridges (1980) notes:

The transition process is really a loop in the life-journey, a going out and away from the main flow for a time and then a coming around and back. . . . The isolated person returns from . . . the wilderness to set about translating insight and idea into action and form” (p. 149).

Or, as Almond (2011a) describes the classic story structure, “you go out into danger, and you come back home again. You keep going out, and coming back home again” (p. 111).

Almond emphasizes that young people need not go far to find an unstructured place where they can have insights or discover something valuable about themselves:

I often explore with kids in schools the notion that there could be a garage like Skellig’s in their own surroundings, a coal mine like Kit’s, an attic like Mina’s. And I do see their eyes widen. A new sense of possibility seems apparent—possibilities for their own writing, but also for their own thinking/imagining. Perhaps they look at their day-to-day “ordinary world” with new eyes. (D. Almond, personal communication, April 4, 2013)

## **Almond’s Narratives Model Growth and Transformation for Adolescent Readers**

Even if no wilderness is easily available to them, simply reading literary fiction can give adolescents an opportunity to experience the feelings they are reading about and to extend the exploration in the narratives to their own lives. Research by the novelist and psychologist Keith Oatley (2011) supports his hypothesis that, when reading fiction, readers create a model or a simulation in their own minds of the experience in the narrative. He suggests that we go beyond just an emotional response or even an interpretation of a narrative when we read. Instead, Oatley states, “We create our own version of the piece of fiction, our own dream,

our own enactment. . . . We run a simulation on our own minds. As partners with the writer, we create a version based on our own experience” (p. 18).

Oatley (2011) grounds his theory on brain research that has shown that when humans hear (or read) and understand a sentence involving the making of an action or movement, areas in the brain concerned with hearing and language are activated—but so are the areas of the brain that are specifically concerned with the neural signals necessary to make that movement. Applying this research to the experience of reading, he concludes: “The researchers in this study describe reading as a process of simulation, based in experience, and involving being able to think of possible futures” (p. 20). Preliminary research in five other studies also demonstrates that reading literary fiction in particular increases readers’ abilities to detect and understand others’ emotions (a skill known as Theory of Mind) and enhances interpersonal sensitivity, because it forces the reader to engage in mind-reading and character construction and to develop more flexible interpretive resources (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

This simulation process and the reading of literary novels may be particularly effective for supporting the emotional growth of young readers. Discussing research on the adolescent capacity to sympathize with fictional characters, Sklar (2008) suggests that a sympathetic emotional response can be formed when two necessary events occur: first, observing a situation, and then forming a judgment about it. Reading is, by its nature, observing others in a narrative. Sklar theorizes that because adolescent readers imagine themselves as invisible witnesses to the action in a narrative, they can process and experience narrative texts in ways that are similar to real-life situations. Citing the value of “emotional intelligence,” or a capacity to understand and apply emotional experiences within

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the context of one's life, Sklar proposes that novels enhance adolescent growth by providing "absorptive experiences" (p. 492). Because adolescent development includes an increasing "ability to conceptualize and apply experience, including experiences that take place while reading fiction," adolescent readers can draw implications from novels and stories that earlier would have remained purely on the level of experience (p. 493). By identifying more empathetically with others, adolescents can expand their experience and increase the potential for who and what they can become.

### Potential Implications for Educators

The fantastic realism and the evocative wildernesses in these novels suggest that there are opportunities for group and individual classroom activities for readers that go beyond more structured lesson plans for these texts (of which there are many available); these activities have the potential to engage adolescents, enrich their reading experiences, and encourage personal discovery. Given the sometimes emotionally tentative nature of adolescent readers, these novels can offer reassuring, structured opportunities for reflection and self-recognition.

#### Pre-reading Activities

- Since the concept of wilderness varies among readers based on personal or shared history and may include environmental, spiritual, cultural, emotional, ecological, and recreational associations and values, personal definitions or qualities of a "wilderness" could be developed in small groups or written reflections, then shared.
- Students can be introduced to Almond, his novels, and the landscape of northern England, where "magic is all around," through his articles and interviews describing his keen sense of place, as well as accompanying photographs.
- Fantastic realism can elicit a number of responses in a classroom, from connections with very personal experiences to a struggle to engage imaginatively with the text. A whole-class introduction to fantastic realism as a genre could be followed by small-group discussions (with voluntary sharing) of individual experiences in realistic or familiar places that have perceived elements of the fantastic, such

as a thunderstorm in the woods, a landscape after a blizzard, a magic space from childhood, or being physically lost while alone. Alternatively, students could write about those experiences using sensory details. As Erin says in *Heaven Eyes*: "The most extraordinary things existed in our ordinary world and just waited for us to find them" (Almond, 2002, p. 194).

#### Post-reading Activities

- Students could write, in role, about the emotions felt by the protagonist or another character during a selected scene in one of the wilderness settings.
- Students could discuss or write about the fantastic qualities of one or more of the wildernesses in the novels and their effect on a character or characters.
- As a group, students could list the words used by Almond in the sensory description of a wilderness from any of the fiction described in this article. They could then each write a poem using those words.
- In *The Savage*, Blue writes a story in which he turns a familiar landmark into a wilderness, a wild place. In their local area, students could create and describe a wilderness—a park, a woodland, empty buildings, or a secret place in a landmark that is otherwise well-known. How do they get there, using only general topographical descriptions (no street names, no Google Maps)? What is it like? The description of the wild space must be realistic and include details experienced by all five senses. Why would they go there? Would they add fantastic features that could break the boundary into real life? What would those be?

### Conclusion

The wilderness settings in Almond's novels provide a rich opportunity for adolescent readers to explore and to imagine possibilities for themselves. By simulating in their own minds a version of the wildernesses that appear in Almond's novels, or by conceptualizing and imagining the experience of being in a similar wilderness, adolescent readers can not only share Almond's protagonists' experiences in the liminal spaces in the novels, they can also apply those experiences to their own lives. We, as teachers, librarians, writers, and mentors can recommend these books to adolescents

or even include them in our schools' language arts curricula. We can provide students who may not have access to a wilderness with, if not a physical liminal space, then a fictional one for their imaginations to explore, to give them a different kind of chance to discover what is within. As Almond has said about his readers: "They want to know what lies beyond the ordinary façade. They want to know what might really lie inside themselves. They want to strike out for the wilderness. And books can help take them there" (Almond, 2003, p. 18).

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