

2003/Aug DAVID ALMOND - Publishing News

“For a time it seemed like I was quite prolific,” says David Almond, commenting on the two-year gap between his latest book, *The Fire-Eaters*, and its predecessor *Secret Heart*, “but that was because I’d actually finished *Kit’s Wilderness* before *Skellig* came out.”

The reason for the extended break? He was writing a novel called *The Apprentice* that was going nowhere. “It was up the creek, and I woke up one morning and thought ‘this is no good’. I came down [to London], supposedly with an almost completed manuscript, and said that I wasn’t going to do it. My editor, Isabel Boissier, who bought *Skellig* and has been fantastic from the start, took a deep breath and asked what I was doing.”

The answer turned out to be *The Fire-Eaters*, an extraordinarily simple yet complex and far-reaching story of a boy’s world at a time of personal desolation and potential global destruction - his father’s sick, he’s just started at a new, completely draconian school and it’s the autumn of 1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis makes all too real to everyone the horrific possibilities of nuclear war. Even small boys in Newcastle.

The boy, Bobby, is suddenly faced with a world outside the sureties of childhood. He meets McNulty the fire-eater, a man on the verge of losing whatever tenuous grip on reality he had; he meets a new boy, an outsider from down south with unsettling views on how things should be done; and he suddenly becomes aware of the kind of life an education will inevitably drag him away from, forever. The microcosm of his own life reflects the uncertainties of the wider world around him, a world he’s only just become aware of.

Was it autobiographical? “Some of it...the fire-eater was there on the Quay when I was a kid,” replies Almond, in that cotton-soft Geordie accent of his. “I remember being fascinated and terrified at the same time, and the character came back to me all these years

later with such a force...the school days as well. But Keely Bay is nothing like my home town. I grew up in Felling, which is now a part of Gateshead, on the border between city and rough countryside.”

But does a book set at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis have much resonance with an audience whose parents were probably still in nappies at the time it happened? “I remember it vividly. I wrote the book during the build-up to the Iraq conflict and it brought me back to the only time I felt in danger of being bombed and made me realize I’d forgotten about living with the constant fear of World War III.”

The book grew out of a short story Almond had written some years ago about the potency of confrontation, where meeting one man brings a whole strand of danger into someone’s life, and in *The Fire-Eaters* this is brought about by Bobby’s meeting with McNulty, a relationship that’s played out against a fascinating backdrop. “I always wanted to do something about the Cold War and about industries coming to the end of their lives, like sea coaling. During my childhood it was a flourishing occupation and I wanted to write about the sea-coaler’s life, about the self-sufficiency and living on the edge.”

Almond also writes about Catholicism, or rather the effect it has on the lives led in the story. Is he Catholic himself “Yes, though not practising...although I still know some of the Latin Mass by heart, but have no idea what it means,” Almond replies, breaking into the long-dead words of praise. “But if you’re brought up that way it’s bred into your bones and you think there’s nothing you can do about it - in the book I just let it back in and let it affect my writing. An Irish priest used to teach us the chants in a cold, dark church on a Saturday night...as a writer, what a wonderful memory.”

The Bible, he continues, isn’t a big influence in the Catholic church, but images of pain are. “The blood, the black nails...maybe now I’m just trying to accommodate the things I saw as a child. And I do think children will connect with Bobby and [his friend] Ailsa’s

yearning, and religion gives them a context for that to occur in. Children have a natural need for bigger explanations, a need to connect with the universe in a huge way. It's nothing to do with a belief in God, but an expression of their own astonishment."

This book, for all that it's set at a time when everything seems to be falling apart, is nonetheless a lyrical and affectionate portrayal of the time, the place and the people. Was it an accurate reflection of how he feels, looking back? "Not about school, no, but definitely the sense of living inside a community where people were close. I don't feel nostalgic, though...I'm saying, look, this was a wonderful time, don't forget it, it's so easy to forget. Like Iraq."

Almond is already working on his next book, which will probably be set in the North of England and has the working title of *Clay*. Probably? "I don't plot in the normal sense, but when it's going well, things kind of fall into place and as each new facet arises I deal with it," he says. "Books happen all around me and I plunge in at some point and sometimes it's not the right place...I'm always looking for the magic, like making a spell, which happened very early with *The Fire-Eaters* and almost immediately with *Skellig*. Each book has a part when it takes off on its own and you just have to go with it - you have to be in control, but allow yourself to be out of control enough for the story to go where it needs to."

There's one final question that has to be asked. Why, when there's just one McNulty, is it called *The Fire-Eaters*? "Because," he smiles, "everyone thinks they're about to eat the fires of hell...and Bobby's dad's a smoker." So now you know.