

School and education in David Almond's selected children's fiction

Szkoła i edukacja w wybranych powieściach dla dzieci Davida Almonda

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Słowa kluczowe

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Abstract

The article analyses the motif of education in four children's books by David Almond from literary, and not pedagogical, perspective. In *Skellig* (1998), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *The Savage* (2008) and *My Name Is Mina* (2010) three areas of education are analysed: school, family and peer relations. While all three areas are important, peer relations are found to be the most salient for enlarging young characters' view of the world to include supernatural or even metaphysical aspects, and their understanding of themselves and others.

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje motyw edukacji w czterech powieściach dla dzieci Dawida Almonda. *Skrzydłak* (1998), *Powrót z bezkresu* (1999), *Dzikus* (2008) i *My Name Is Mina* (2010) ukazują trzy główne przestrzenie edukacji: szkołę, rodzinę i relacje rówieśnicze. Wszystkie te przestrzenie są istotne, ale najważniejsze są relacje rówieśnicze, bo tu postaci dziecięce poszerzają swoją wizję świata o aspekty nadprzyrodzone, a nawet metafizyczne oraz pogłębiają rozumienie siebie i innych ludzi.

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The question of value in literature can be understood in different ways. It may, for instance, concern the evaluation of literary works and thus invite reflection on the criteria (and values) taken into account while constructing literary hierarchies and canons. In this article I intend to focus on social and moral values inherent in a literary text. Such values usually appear in story worlds in connection with events and with characters that, as carriers of values, are perceived by the reader as "people" rather than textual entities¹ or signs in the semiotic whole of the text. The problem of values expressed by a literary text is particularly sensitive in the case of children's literature. The first texts especially designed to be read by (or to) children in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were obligatorily complemented with moral, educational and/or religious lessons considered as more important than mere entertainment. Since the middle of the nineteenth century this openly didactic character of children's literature was increasingly balanced by more attention devoted to aesthetic and ludic functions. However, even in contemporary texts for children, where open didacticism is rarely encountered, transmission of values is seen as an important function performed by literary texts and other cultural or artistic products for children.

My immediate analytical purpose here is to discuss values connected with school and education in David Almond's *Skellig* (1998) and its prequel *My Name Is Mina* (2010), in *Kit's Wilderness* (1999) and in *The Savage* (2008). While I employ the word education in its basic sense of "the process of teaching and learning, especially in a school or college"², I also find it important to recognise that "[e]ducation can be thought of as the transmission of the values and accumulated knowledge of a society"³. While there are many different divisions of education into stages and types, for my purposes a distinction into formal, informal and non-formal education is entirely sufficient⁴. My approach will be narratological in the employment of particular analytical tools drawn especially from Mieke Bal's *Narratology*, while my overall understanding of a literary text and its cultural context is rooted in the semiotic researches of Yuri Lotman.

¹ Compare James Phelan's approach to characters, where readers' tendency to treat fictional characters as persons is subsumed under what he calls a "mimetic component" of a literary character (*Reading People, Reading Plots*, Chicago 1989, p. 3).

² Dictionary.cambridge.org (access 12.10.2020).

³ www.britannica.com/topic/education (access 12.10.2020).

⁴ "Types of education..."

My choice of school and education as an object of investigation might suggest David Almond (a British author born in 1951) is one of many authors belonging to a long but relatively minor generic tradition of school fiction in English-language children's literature. In actual fact Almond does not write school stories albeit school is often an important spatial frame in his children's novels probably because it is a significant place for children and teens who appear as characters and who – it may be assumed – constitute his intended audience. School, however, is only a part of Almond's characters' lives. Equally important are their experiences connected with family and friends. The three areas of experience – school, family and friends – testify to generic complexity of Almond's novels, interweaving genre conventions of school story, family story and even problem fiction. Moreover, Almond consistently makes use of fantastic elements in his novels, which has led critics to link him with the literary trend of magic realism⁵.

As the basic dictionary meaning of the word education suggests, in contemporary culture it is the institution of school which is seen as primarily concerned with education of the young. However, Almond's novels seem to present a different picture. As I will attempt to show in this article, his children's fiction not only treats school as just one area of education among others, but also embraces a vastly broader view of education than just acquiring knowledge in various fields as well as academic and social skills, which school seems largely concerned with. In fact, the three areas of experience – school, family and peer relations – which appear as responsible for generic complexity of Almond's fiction, may also be taken as corresponding to three types of education with school representing the formal type, family – the informal, and peer relations – the non-formal one. In my discussion of education I will first briefly present Almond's complex image of school in the four texts selected for consideration and then broaden the discussion of education to show other areas and aspects of this process. Finally, I will address the issue of artistic creativity as a crucial motif linking the three types of education in Almond's fiction and particularly important for one of them.

Among Almond's children's texts considered here it is his first novel – *Skellig* – which is concerned with school and education in the most obvious way. It juxtaposes two characters – the protagonist-narrator Michael and his friend Mina – who are exposed to two different models of education: formal education at school and home education respectively. Merits and demerits of the two systems are highlighted by the two children's discrepant skills and

⁵ Compare, for instance Jan Lower's discussion of magic realism vs fantastic realism in his *The "Necessary Wildness": Liminal Settings for Adolescent Emotional Growth in Four Novels by David Almond*, "The ALAN Review" 2016, vol. 43, nr 2, [in:] <https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v43n2/pdf/lower.pdf> (access 21.07.2020), p. 13.

abilities. The juxtaposition of the two systems of education is not the main theme of the book but it seems to set the pattern for conflicts and/or contrasts of value systems embraced also in Almond's other novels.

In Almond's *Skellig* school education appears to embody such values as rational thought on the one hand and social relations on the other. Rational thought is highlighted by the fact that among the scenes taking place in the spatial frame of Michael's school the most extended and thematically prominent are science lessons concerning human anatomy and biological evolution which are then discussed by the characters in different contexts. Several other lessons in which Michael participates are mentioned but not presented in detail, except for the one during which he writes a story highly praised by his teacher. Clear-cut divisions into lessons, courses and subjects seem to point to an important feature of the school: emphasis on divisions and discrete or even separate units in all its aspects, which also appear to be characteristic of rational thought.

Another important – and conventional – aspect of school in the novel concerns sport⁶ (football) and friends with whom Michael plays the game. Football is quite separate from other school activities, such as lessons. It is more closely connected with physical exertion and – especially – cooperation in contrast to lessons which involve more cerebral activities, such as acquiring new information, understanding and reasoning. Playing football together seems to underlie Michael's friendship with his mates. Overall, school in *Skellig* appears as a positive environment for learning and developing social skills.

The presentation of school remains rather positive in Almond's later texts *Kit's Wilderness* (1999) and *The Savage* (2008). In both books characters are presented during school lessons and are required to pay attention, show interest, and perform tasks set by teachers. The stress (especially in *Kit's Wilderness*) falls on demands which some students fulfil effortlessly but which are seen as absurd or daunting by others. Thus Kit, the protagonist-narrator of *Kit's Wilderness*, is a quiet, thoughtful boy who approaches school subjects with genuine interest and is able to use what he learns as inspiration for stories he likes to write. His friend Allie, however, dreams of being an actress and has no interest whatsoever in, for example, geography which she sees as completely disconnected from her future career. The third important character of the novel, John Askew, is very far from a model student and

⁶ Playing sports is an established convention in school stories from the beginning of the genre in Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) with its rugby matches, to quidditch games in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007), which is not a school story but makes an extensive use of school fiction conventions.

is even expelled from school at one point. It is significant that the school does not seem to inquire into causes of his strange behaviour. In fact, his school problems are connected with his abusive father and lack of any support from the family, community or the school itself. Blue, the protagonist-narrator of *The Savage* is mourning his father's death and is not always able to comply with the school demands. In contrast to John from *Kit's Wilderness*, Blue is treated kindly by his teachers and even receives psychological support from the school, though it is not really effective.

In all the considered novels school as a social institution within the story world offers students distinct areas of knowledge presented during separate lessons. Students are expected to comply with school rules and teacher's demands, and study the required subjects even if they find them boring and irrelevant. Team games, such as football, are a conventional generic element of school fiction. However, playing sports is important only in *Skellig* where it seems to underlie the protagonist Michael's friendship with his school mates. Sports games are absent from three out of four books considered here, which suggests a reduction of the generic impact of school fiction on these texts. In *Kit's Wilderness* characters find friends in the school setting without the mediation of sports whereas in *The Savage* and *My Name Is Mina* protagonists encounter bullies at school and have to look for friends elsewhere.

In contrast to the previously considered novels, *My Name Is Mina* (2010) shows a mostly negative image of formal education at school. A prequel to *Skellig*, the book is an autodiegetic narrative telling the story of Mina to the point when she makes friends with Michael – a scene also present in *Skellig*. Mina's school experiences as described in her journal are different from Michael's. She is a sensitive, creative individualist who finds it hard to do things exactly as the teachers require. Mina's narrative particularly emphasises inflexible demands as the most salient feature of school. The asymmetry of power relations, also visible in *Kit's Wilderness* but never heavily underlined, is all the more emphatic in *My Name Is Mina* since in the latter book it concerns small children in early stages of education and not opinionated teenagers as in *Kit's Wilderness*. One of her teachers, whom Mina calls Mrs Scullery, strongly discourages her original approaches to school tasks. For instance, she dismisses Mina's story because it does not exactly conform to the original plan the girl drew. Mina explains the story wanted to develop differently but the teacher is unable to make sense of the girl's imaginative approach and flatly rejects the idea of a story as independent of its creator's will. The perception of a story as a living thing with its own will contrasted with the exact and inflexible adherence to a model or plan can be suggestive of a contrast

between the organic⁷ and the mechanical or formalised approaches to education. In the latter view school is an instrument of mechanical replication of knowledge and of desirable attitudes, as contrasted with spontaneous and undirected individual growth. In both *Skellig* and *My Name Is Mina* the organic model is connected with informal home education (a topic I develop in the next section).

Mina sees herself as a misfit and an outsider, similar to William Blake⁸ and is unable and unwilling to conform to school demands she perceives as limiting. Not only teachers see Mina as different. Also her classmates see her as strange and often make her an object of derision or even bullying. Bullying is also present in *The Savage*, where Blue eventually fights with the bully and frightens him away whereas Mina chooses to escape from the school system and thereby leaves bullying behind as well. Her conflict with school rules comes to a head during an exam when children are asked to write stories. In an act of rebellion Mina produces an apparently nonsensical one – full of words spelt phonetically or made up by her in the vein of Lewis Carroll. The examination crisis and Mina's refusal to conform to school rules make her mother attempt home education – its effects on the girl are more fully considered in *Skellig*. However, toward the end of her journal Mina seems to modify her strictly negative attitude to the school: she admits that not all teachers were horrid and that she has also good memories connected with her school.

To sum up: school as an area of education in David Almond's four books considered here is an example of formal type of education. It seems to be primarily associated with rationality and reason, owing to strict divisions into discrete areas of knowledge. Moreover, school is hierarchical: its asymmetrical structure of power requires students to obey teachers and fulfil their demands. As a social institution in Almond's story worlds, school is important for establishing social relations, especially peer friendship. The earliest of Almond's novels – *Skellig* – includes a conventional motif of sports games which help establish friendship bonds among pupils. A negative type of social relation characteristic of school is bullying, which appears in *The Savage* and *My Name Is Mina*. Overall, the presentation of school in the four texts considered here is rather ambiguous. Rationality and friendship are defi-

⁷ The word organic is employed here in the sense of “having the characteristics of an organism: developing in the manner of a living plant or animal” (www.merriam-webster.com), but the concept of organic education also looks back to the ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau; compare, for instance Patricia M. Lines' discussion (and critique) of Rousseau's educational theories in her “Shackling the Imagination: Plato and Rousseau on Education”. *Humanitas* Vol. XXII, Nos. 1 and 2, 2009, especially p. 48–51.

⁸ D. Almond, *My Name Is Mina*, p. 10.

nitely positive values associated with school, but they may become distorted by excessively mechanical approach to education (for example, in *My Name Is Mina*) and by serious disbalances in power relations between teachers and students (*My Name Is Mina*), and among students (bullying in *The Savage* and *My Name Is Mina*).

Mina's home education, as shown in *Skellig*, exemplifies informal education. As Mina explains to Michael: "My mother educates me [...]. We believe that schools inhibit the natural curiosity, creativity and intelligence of children. The mind needs to be opened out into the world, not shuttered down inside a gloomy classroom"⁹. As she frequently stresses, home education gives Mina freedom to pursue various interests whenever she wants and to explore various issues in what depth she chooses. Her knowledge seems more extensive than Michael's, for example, in relation to the evolution of birds with which she is fascinated when the events of *Skellig* take place. Being free from obligatory timetables of school, Mina is able to devote much time to, for instance, observation of birds in nature, to drawing them and making clay models of them. When Michael sees her copying a skeleton of a bird from a book, he assumes Mina is "doing science"¹⁰. The girl laughs at him: "See how school shuts you [...]. I'm drawing, painting, reading, looking. I'm feeling the sun and the air on my skin. I'm listening to the blackbird's song. I'm opening my mind. Ha! School!"¹¹.

Mina sees home education as a holistic and integrative experience in which, importantly, she is not an object of someone else's decisions and actions but a subject who makes her own choices of topics and activities. Conversely, school education with its unnecessary rules and supervision seems a prison to her. By pursuing her own interests the girl is able to develop her highly sensitive perception of the world of nature: for example, she can hear the sound of little "blackbird chicks cheeping in the nest"¹², and she teaches Michael to hear it too. He is then able to imagine the birds in their nest and the world appears to him as a richer place than he was previously able to perceive. Also, Mina knows a lot about William Blake, especially about his visionary experiences, and she often quotes his poems. Moreover, the girl's ability to define her interests and to pursue them through various activities marks her as an individualist and a strong personality. As Mina's case shows, home education seems to be connected with values of freedom of choice and independence, a holistic approach to knowledge, as well as stress on devel-

⁹ Idem, *Skellig*, p. 47.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 56.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 56.

¹² Ibidem, p. 58.

oping one's sensitivity and imagination through interest in nature, poetry and art.

Though Mina's home education, as presented in *Skellig*, is not encumbered by any formal requirements, the fact remains that it is approved by school authorities and thus retains a link with the formal system. In her case the largely informal home education replaces the formal education she would receive at school. For other characters formal education at school is complemented with informal education received in family contexts. The educating – or upbringing – within the family involves passing information, values, attitudes and abilities, and as such usually overlaps with the function of school. Almond's novels present informal family education as concerned with family lineage and local history (*Kit's Wilderness*), with abstract school subjects from a more personal perspective (*Kit's Wilderness*) and with shaping attitudes to oneself and others (*The Savage, Kit's Wilderness*).

Education within the family is particularly important in *Kit's Wilderness*. Family history in connection with local history become salient aspects of home education in the novel when Kit's grandfather tells the boy about his youth spent working in a coalmine and shows him a monument commemorating victims of a nineteenth-century pit disaster, which lists one of Kit's ancestors of the same name and age as the protagonist. Grandfather's memories enable Kit to imagine and understand the past by identifying with his ancestors. Moreover, grandfather compares going down into the mine with a journey to distant geological periods about which Kit learns in geography lessons. Thanks to grandfather's memories abstract knowledge about geology acquires a more personal and imaginative dimension for Kit.

Families are also responsible for shaping children's attitudes to themselves and giving them a sense of personal worth or worthlessness. Kit and his friend John illustrate contrasting results of family influence on personal growth. In Kit's family everybody is treated with love, understanding and respect, while John's life is mainly defined by verbal and physical abuse by his drunken father. Both boys are sensitive and talented, but while Kit is inspired to write his own stories by grandfather's tales, John tends toward imitating his father by resorting to violence and contemplating suicide, and seems to hate himself, his father and everybody else. Kit's family gives him a belief in loyalty and love, whereas John has no faith in anything and anybody. It is interesting to note that in the case of Kit school and home education seem to synergically work together, while in the case of John the synergy is entirely negative. The character of Hopper, a bully from *The Savage*, seems to be shaped by a similar family context to John's. Conversely, the characters of Michael from *Skellig* and Blue from *The Savage* illustrate positive education

within the family which shapes personality by transmitting values of love, mutual support, loyalty and understanding.

The third sphere where the characters receive education in Almond's novels is the peer group, which represents non-formal education¹³. As I have already mentioned, one of the functions of school is to establish a network of social relations whose significance reaches far beyond spatial or temporal limits of the school itself. The importance of social contact is perhaps most forcefully highlighted in *My Name Is Mina* by its emphatic absence, and in *Kit's Wilderness* by character equivalences. Though in the former book the narrator Mina often expresses her joy at escaping the oppressive aspects of school, she gradually comes to realise that one huge drawback of home education is loneliness resulting from her lack of contact with other children.

Mina's slow change from a radical individualist to a more socially-minded person can be illustrated by comparing suggestions for "extraordinary activities" the girl includes in her journal. The first of these "activities", clearly showing Mina as an individualist, appears after she tells about the disastrous SATS exam during which she produced a nonsensical story that so worried her teachers. This account is followed by a piece of text in a different type of script and boxed in a black frame, which addresses the reader in the imperative mode: "Write a page of UTTER NONSENSE. This will produce some very fine NEW WORDS. It could also lead to some very SENSIBLE RESULTS"¹⁴. Obviously, the "sensible result" for Mina was her own liberation from school and the freedom to follow her own unique ways of development. As a special message for the reader, this order (or suggestion) evidently has a certain interpersonal dimension: Mina seems to set her rebellious action as an example for the reader in asserting their own individuality in defiance of standardising rules. In other words, Mina (as the narrator) formulates a special message in order to make the reader more like herself.

Mina's last "extraordinary activity" in the book is strikingly different from the first one in its visual, semantic and communicative aspects. Firstly, it uses much bigger letters than the first activity and, secondly, it has no frame. Letter size emphasises a greater importance of this activity than others, which Mina confirms by calling it "the most important of all extraordinary activities"¹⁵. The lack of frame suggests a different relation with Mina's main text. Indeed, this time the girl addresses herself: "BE BRAVE!"¹⁶. She needs brav-

¹³ I adopt the term 'non-formal' education from "Types of Education..." web page, but I use it in a sense of unstructured and unsupervised process of teaching and learning.

¹⁴ Idem, *My Name Is Mina*, p. 171.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 298.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 298.

ery because she wants to do something very difficult for her: to make friends with a new boy in her street. The interpersonal aspect is here very different than in the case of the first “extraordinary activity”: though the message involves self-address, the call for bravery is to mobilise Mina to forge a link with another child while previously she was sure she needs no such friends. Because she was ridiculed and bullied by her peers at school, she needs a lot of courage to approach Michael and potentially expose herself to rejection again. The distance between the first and the last “extraordinary activity” indicates how much Mina has changed in the course of writing her journal. The final “extraordinary activity” – self-addressed but interpersonally directed – allows Mina to transcend the world of her own experience and sensitivity, and to reach out to another human being.

The task of meeting Michael is so challenging for Mina that she writes it out for herself – “Hello! My name is Mina. What is yours?”¹⁷ – and then realises the scenario courageously thereby initiating their friendship. It is significant that in performing her act of bravery, Mina employs the most trite and worn out formula of social intercourse. Mina, the rebellious individualist who refuses to play by the rules, finally play-acts an entirely conventional scene. It would be unwarranted to assume that Mina foregoes her freedom and individuality. Yet it seems that by the end of her journal she is finally able to appreciate the value of rules in interpersonal relationships. Without explicitly formulating it, Mina seems to have concluded that rules do not have to be entirely bad. The realm of individual growth which appears to be an area of complete freedom becomes supplemented by the rule governed social world. Social contact, or rather friendship, Mina seeks, is particularly emphasised by its total absence in the book – becoming a significant minus motif whose appearance at the end of the narrative points to a potential development which is realised only in *Skellig*.

In *Skellig* the two friends Michael and Mina learn from each other – in this way illustrating the idea of non-formal peer education. Firstly, Michael’s friendship helps individualistic and opinionated Mina acquire important social skills, such as cooperation, mutuality, or forgiveness. Further, peer education may also involve knowledge. For example, one of the topics of Michael’s lessons at school – evolution – is discussed by the two children, and Mina is able to tell Michael things about the evolution of birds he does not know. At school the boy learns about the human skeleton while Mina shows him skeletons of birds and other small creatures. The girl tells Michael about William Blake and quotes from his poems. The children also learn skills from each other: the boy instructs Mina in making a sound similar to the owl’s

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 299.

hooting while she instructs him in clay modelling. She also reveals to him aspects of nature unknown to him so far, for example, the colours on black-birds, the sounds of young birds, or the predatory habits of owls. Thanks to Mina's guidance the world appears as a different – richer – place to Michael. But Michael is able to enrich Mina's world too. Sharing an important secret with her, he tells her about a mysterious man, or rather being, he has found in a decrepit garage belonging to his new home. Almost dead and unwilling to live, the strange creature called Skellig has enormous wings at his back and is able to fly. The children help Skellig by bringing him food and medication and then by removing him to a safe place where he regains strength to finally fly away.

The character of Skellig is a semantic focal point of the novel: it links the children by bringing together Michael's school knowledge of evolution and Mina's understanding of William Blake and his poetry; it reiterates the motifs of illness and (possible) death pertaining also to Michael's baby sister and Mina's father; it connects the world of human (children's) experience with the natural world (of birds) and supernatural world (of angels). Finding Skellig, helping him, and trying to understand his nature is the central challenge the two children face. This experience cements their friendship and constitutes an initiation into hidden – supernatural or even metaphysical – aspects of reality¹⁸. This initiation, characteristically connected with liminal places and beings¹⁹, is definitely the most important educational experience of the two main characters in the novel. It is important to note that this experience belongs to the sphere of peer friendship.

Initiation seems to be at the core of peer relations also in *Kit's Wilderness* and *The Savage*. In the former novel, teens form an informal group under the leadership of John Askew and in a dark underground space play the game of death. This semi-ritual invented by John is treated seriously only by Kit, while other children only pretend their full participation. Obsessed with death and contemplating suicide, John wants to find a way to understand death. Actually, a trans-like state Kit enters while playing the game of death changes his consciousness and allows him to see aspects of the world previously invisible to him: similarly to John he becomes able to perceive the ghosts of children from the past who are present among the living²⁰. At the end of the novel,

¹⁸ Compare J. Węgrodzka, *Magia i metafizyka w brytyjskiej prozie dla dzieci*: Skrzydlak *David Almonda*, [in:] *Motywy religijne we współczesnej fantastyce*, Białystok 2014, p. 87–98.

¹⁹ Compare interesting discussion of liminal spaces in Almond's fiction in Jan Lower, *op.cit.*

²⁰ A more detailed analysis of the motif of ghosts in *Kit's Wilderness* is to be found in eadem., *Ghosts and Their Stories in Children's Fiction*, [in:] *Expanding the Gothic*

John runs away from home and hides in an abandoned mine from which he plans never to emerge again. Kit goes to him, offers his friendship and, by means of a story he wrote especially for John, manages to give him some hope for the future. Their stay in the old mine in emptiness and darkness abounds in supernatural motifs and constitutes another liminal experience for both boys. Thanks to Kit, the experience does not lead John ever deeper into mental and emotional darkness but opens a way to light, hope and life. In a complex process of mutual education, the boys open up new vistas in each other's life: John gives Kit a deeper insight into death and the past, while Kit offers John a new positive vision of his future. While school in *Kit's Wilderness* serves to develop the characters' intellect and artistic talents, it is the sphere of peer relations where the characters have the most powerful experiences shaping, or re-shaping, their personalities and radically changing their understanding of themselves and the world.

In *The Savage* the only peer contact of Blue is Hopper the school bully, who considerably adds to the distress Blue experiences after the death of his father. However, owing to his imagination, Blue creates a fictional figure of a savage boy – mute, violent and bloodthirsty – who personifies his anger and grief. By means of pictures and words Blue constructs a story about the Savage who gradually becomes more and more similar to Blue himself and then metaleptically starts to penetrate Blue's everyday world until the two meet personally in a liminal space of an underground cave²¹. It is in the encounter with his imaginary alter ego that Blue is finally able to put behind the most difficult stage of his mourning and to overcome his destructive anger by acknowledging his unity with the Savage and thus making himself whole again. The motif of an imaginary alter ego in *The Savage* seems to be a variant of the technique of character juxtaposition employed in Almond's other texts. Like all human encounters, peer friendship is based on the interplay of similarities and differences. Without negating their essential uniqueness, the young characters gradually learn to see themselves in others and others in themselves. In this way they achieve a deeper understanding and acceptance of problems, strengths and weaknesses – both their own and other people's.

Blue's multimodal story in *The Savage* – a narrative embedded into the frame concerning Blue's ordinary life – is just one example of stories created by young characters in Almond's books considered here. *Kit's Wilderness* contains extensive passages quoted from Kit's stories; *My Name Is Mina* is the

Canon: Studies in Literature, Film and New Media, eds. A. Kędra-Kardela, A.S. Kowalczyk, Frankfurt am Main 2014, p. 202-206.

²¹ Compare my discussion of liminal spaces and of metalepsis in *The Savage* in eadem, *Baśń ukryta w Dzikusie Davida Almonda*, [in:] *Naukowcy w poszukiwaniu pierwiastka magicznego*, eds. M. Zaorska, A. Grabowski, Olsztyn 2016, p. 234-235.

girl's journal which, in addition to homodiegetic accounts, includes poetry and narratives about the girl's important experiences written by her from a distancing heterodiegetic perspective. Also Michael from *Skellig* writes a story though it is not quoted within the novel. Actually all important characters display some outstanding talents: Kit's friends John and Allie are a talented artist and a budding actress respectively. It is repeatedly made clear in all four novels that the children's artistic abilities are rooted in their imagination which is an indispensable condition of creativity.

It can be claimed that the motif of children's artistic talents links the three areas of education in various ways. Firstly, school and family usually support and encourage the young creators: Kit and Allie (*Kit's Wilderness*), Blue (*The Savage*), Mina and Michael (*Skellig*). However, Mina (in *My Name Is Mina*) and John (in *Kit's Wilderness*) are notable exceptions with teachers either rejecting their efforts as worthless (Mina) or ignoring their exceptional talent because of bad behaviour (John).

It is also necessary to emphasise that the products of children's artistic talents in Almond's fiction seem to be endowed with considerable therapeutic power effective both in relation to themselves and to others. This is most clear in the case of Kit's Ice Age story written especially for John. It establishes a strong parallel between Kit's friend and the hero of the tale by means of such motifs as a brutal father, a baby sister, and losing one's home. Similarly to *The Savage*, the imaginative power of Kit's story is expressed by a meta-pleptic transgression, when a character from the secondary narrative appears in the primary one. The story strengthens the friends' bond and generates a powerful metaphorical scenario for overcoming John's problems and for his positive development.

The value of artistic creation for interpersonal contacts is emphasised even in relation to solitary creators like Blue (*The Savage*) and Mina (*My Name Is Mina*)²². Blue creates his fictional counterpart at a time when he is acutely lonely and vulnerable. The boy's complex relationship with his imagined peer emphasises his painful loneliness on the one hand, and the value of interpersonal relations (even imaginary) for overcoming trauma on the other. Though the Savage is primarily a projection of anger and despair engendered by the death of Blue's father, the imaginary boy does what a flesh-and-blood friend might do: Blue learns to see the other in himself and himself in the other.

²² One could draw many interesting parallels between *The Savage* and *My Name Is Mina*: both books present creations of lonely and traumatised children, both are multimodal and highly original, both use the technique of narratives embedded in a frame, both involve metalepsis and engage in metafictional reflection on the functions of art.

Mina's highly original journal uses a multitude of font sizes and formats, frames, word games, poetic and narrative formats, narrators, and styles²³. Conceived on the same organic principle as her home education, the journal is supposed to "wander and meander"²⁴. Paradoxically, the writing of the journal seems to lead the girl to the understanding of the value of rules: even the most free and associative composition requires making choices and decisions which impose rules and set limits. Mina learns that even apparently free organic growth is in way rule-governed. In structuring her writing she structures her experience and in a sense structures herself. After firmly asserting her unique individuality by writing the journal entirely according to her own rules, she no longer feels threatened by submission to social rules and thus becomes ready to find a friend. Mina's story asserts both the value of individuality and of social conventions but appears to give primacy to the former.

I have considered education in David Almond's *Skellig*, *Kit's Wilderness*, *The Savage*, and *My Name Is Mina* from the perspective of school, family and peer relations as representative of formal, informal and non-formal types of education. School seems to involve the most prototypical notion of formal education concerned with development of knowledge, understanding and academic skills, all of which in various ways apply to Almond's characters. As a social institution school is also vitally connected with establishing social relations – in the sense of institutional power structures as well as different types of peer relations (from friendship and informal groups, to bullying). Family as an institution of education appears most obviously in *Skellig* where formal education is contrasted with home schooling. But family is an educational milieu not only in the sense of replacing school but also in its own right, which all four texts depict in various ways. Both educational areas – school and family – are presented in Almond's fiction in complex ways as embracing various positive and negative aspects.

Interestingly, it is the non-formal education in peer relations that appears as the most crucial and formative for the young characters. In all the considered texts peer relations are presented as the area of the most educationally valuable and formative experiences of the characters. It is generally in these

²³ Compare an interesting analysis of the book in Eve Tandoi's *Unruly Girls and Unruly Language: Typography and Play in David Almond's My Name Is Mina*, "Barnboken – tidskrift for barnlitteraturforskning" 2014, nr 37, [in:] <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305191784> (access 21.07.2020).

²⁴ D. Almond, *My Name Is Mina*, p. 11. The word "organic" is suggested by Mina's multiple comparisons of her journal with trees, cats, owls, bats, or starlings. All these comparisons highlight the "naturalness" of the journal which should "grow just like the mind does" (p. 11), i.e. spontaneously and unpredictably.

relations that the characters grow as persons and acquire deeper insights into themselves and the world around. Moreover, peer relations are constructionally emphasised by several narrative techniques used in the novels. First, these relations are involved in important and suspenseful plot lines, particularly in *Skellig* and *Kit's Wilderness*. Second, they are enhanced by means of fantastic elements which either appear in connection with peer friendship (children's ghosts which become visible to Kit) or else are explored in such a context (the winged being in *Skellig*). Third, young characters are placed in semantically significant patterns of juxtaposition or even mirroring, which highlights the importance of characters' relations for textual semantics.

Interestingly, Almond presents peer education as un-structured and non-hierarchical but contextual and mutual. While school and family education are mostly concerned with existing knowledge and traditions, peer education appears to be the most creative. In Almond's novels it is often connected with the characters' artistic works, which become instruments of enlightenment and growth in both intrapersonal and interpersonal sense. These pictorial and verbal artistic texts created by the characters are highlighted by the narrative technique of embedding and/or by original displays of various modes of expression. By emphasising the non-formal peer education and connecting it with artistic expression, Almond's novels seem to ascribe the highest value to individuality and creativity which – importantly – always lead to establishing contact and communication with another person.

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