

# AGE IN DAVID ALMOND'S OEUVRE

A Multi-Method Approach to  
Studying Age and the Life Course  
in Children's Literature



VANESSA JOOSEN, MICHELLE ANYA ANJIRBAG, LEANDER DUTHOY,  
LINDSEY GEYBELS, FRAUKE PAUWELS AND EMMA-LOUISE SILVA

# Age in David Almond's Oeuvre

In recent decades, age studies has started to emerge as a new approach to study children's literature. This book builds on that scholarship but also significantly extends it by exploring age in various aspects of children's literature: the age of the author, the characters, the writing style, the intended readership and the real reader. Moreover, the authors explore what different theories and methods can be used to study age in children's literature, and what their affordances and limits are. The analyses combine age studies with life writing studies, cognitive narratology, digital humanities, comparative literary studies, reader-response research and media studies. To ensure coherence, the book offers an in-depth exploration of the oeuvre of a single author, David Almond. The aesthetic and thematic richness of Almond's works has been widely recognised. This book adds to the understanding of his oeuvre by offering a multi-faceted analysis of age. In addition to discussing the film adaptation of his best-known novel *Skellig*, this book also offers analyses of works that have received less attention, such as *Counting Stars*, *Clay* and *Bone Music*. Readers will also get a fuller understanding of Almond as a crosswriter of literature for children, adolescents and adults.

**Vanessa Joosen** is a full professor of English literature and children's literature at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.

**Michelle Anya Anjirbag** is an affiliated postdoctoral researcher at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.

**Leander Duthoy** is a PhD student at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.

**Lindsey Geybels** is a PhD student in children's literature and digital humanities at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.

**Frauke Pauwels** is a postdoctoral researcher, visiting lecturer and co-organiser of the Children's Literature Summer School at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.

**Emma-Louise Silva** is a postdoctoral researcher and visiting lecturer at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.

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# Contributors

All the authors of this book were involved in the ERC-funded research project “Constructing Age for Young Readers” (CAFYR) at the Department of Literature of the University of Antwerp, from February 2019 to January 2024.

**Michelle Anya Anjirbag** (University of Antwerp, Belgium) is an affiliated postdoctoral researcher at the University of Antwerp. Her research interests include adaptation; fairy tales and folklore; Disney; magical libraries; the intersection of literature, media and culture; representations of gender and age and cross-period approaches to narrative transmission across cultures and societies. Her work has appeared in journals including *Adaptation*, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, *Humanities*, *Marvels & Tales*, and *Social Sciences*.

**Leander Duthoy** (University of Antwerp, Belgium) is a PhD student. He conducts empirical reader-response research to explore how the age of readers affects their understanding of age in fiction for young readers. He has published articles in *Children’s Literature in Education* and *International Research in Children’s Literature*.

**Lindsey Geybels** (University of Antwerp, Belgium) is a PhD student in children’s literature and digital humanities. Her research focuses on the influence that the age of the intended reader has on the construction of age in children’s, young adult and adult fiction. She uses digital tools to examine the work of crosswriters and has published articles in *The Journal of Cultural Analytics, Language and Literature* and *Spiegel Der Letteren*.

**Vanessa Joosen** (University of Antwerp, Belgium) is a full professor of English literature and children’s literature. She is the Principal Investigator of the ERC-funded project “Constructing Age for Young Readers” and co-organiser of the Children’s Literature Summer School. Joosen has authored, amongst others, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy*

*Tales* (2011), *Adulthood in Children's Literature* (2018) and articles in *Children's Literature in Education* and *The Lion and the Unicorn*.

**Frauke Pauwels** (University of Antwerp, Belgium) is a postdoctoral researcher, visiting lecturer and co-organiser of the Children's Literature Summer School. Her research interests include adaptations of children's literature, age studies, cognitive narratology and Dutch children's literature. She defended her PhD on representations of scientists in children's literature in 2021. Her work has appeared in, amongst others, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* and *International Research in Children's Literature*.

**Emma-Louise Silva** (University of Antwerp, Belgium) is a postdoctoral researcher and visiting lecturer. Her research focuses on age studies, cognitive narratology, genetic criticism, and philosophy of mind. She defended her PhD on James Joyce and cognition in 2019. Her research for the CAFYR project has been published in *Age, Culture, Humanities* and in the *European Journal of Life Writing*.

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# Acronyms

CAFYR	Constructing Age for Young Readers
ERC	European Research Council



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# Introduction

*Vanessa Joosen*

In David Almond and Levi Pinfold's *The Dam* (2018), a father and daughter wake up early in the morning to descend to a deserted village in a valley. As the father explains, a dam has recently been built, which will cause the village to be flooded. All the houses and wildlife in the valley will disappear. As the daughter plays her violin as a way of saying goodbye to the village, she brings to life its former inhabitants, and she also becomes more closely connected to her father. Together they dance, mourn and heal. The story, which is based on folk musician Kathryn Tickell's childhood memories, underlines David Almond's belief in the empowerment that intergenerational alliances can achieve in the face of loss. Children's insights and capacities are often underestimated, he finds, and only through intergenerational dialogue can this impression be corrected: "More and more I think that adults and children should spend more time together, we should not separate them" (Joosen, "Interview"). In the narratives that Almond creates, life-changing encounters between characters in different stages in life often form the backbone of the story, from Michael's unexpected friendship with the mysterious man Skellig in the novel with the same title, and the inspiration that Kit draws from his grandfather's memories in *Kit's Wilderness* (1999) to Lizzie's efforts to support her father's attempts to fly in *My Dad's a Birdman* (2007) and the awkward friendship between Sylvia and 95-year-old Andreas in *Bone Music* (2021). When this intergenerational dialogue (temporarily) fails, as in Michael's alienation from his parents in *Skellig* (1998) or in Vincent McAlinden's rejection by his mother in *The Tightrope Walkers* (2014), the characters experience a profound sense of loss that is sometimes the trigger for dramatic events.

Reading literature can be a way for adults and children to "spend more time together." All children's books offer a form of intergenerational communication, since they are usually authored by adults, always mediated by adults (publishers, translators, librarians, teachers) and read by an audience that is diverse in age, including younger and older readers. Some children's books, however, thematise the meaning of age and intergenerational



relationships more than others. Almond's work is particularly suited for a multi-perspectival study of age in children's literature, which this book develops. First of all, Almond is what we in this book call a "crosswriter," that is an author who has published work for readers of different ages (Beckett, *Transcending Boundaries*). In David Galef's terminology, he is a "polygraphic" author: a writer who alternates between publishing books for young and adult readers (29). Almond published his first works, *Sleepless Nights* (1985) and *A Kind of Heaven* (1997), for adult readers; he switched to children's books when he first authored the biographical stories that would later be collected in *Counting Stars* (2000) and then published *Skellig* (1998), the book that won the Carnegie Medal and made him famous. Several of Almond's books function as crossover literature, which Sandra Beckett defines as "fiction that crosses from child to adult or adult to child audiences" (4). The potential interest of his children's books to adults is well demonstrated. For instance, according to "the chair of the 1998 Whitbread jury," *Skellig* was a book on the children's shortlist that "could have made the adult prize list" (Beckett 113), while critics argued that *Heaven Eyes* should have won the award in 2000 (Beckett 164). *The Tighrope Walkers* was marketed as both Young Adult and adult fiction. The oeuvres of crosswriters hold potential to gain insights into the relationship between children's literature, Young Adult literature and adult literature, inviting such questions as, do authors make a distinction in the topics they address, the characters they create or the styles they adopt? While various novels by Almond have been discussed as crossover literature, a fuller consideration of his oeuvre promises further insight into the construction of age in his works.

A second reason why Almond's works have particular relevance for the study of age is that childhood memories have informed several of his stories, as the paratexts to *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* (2007) make clear. Moreover, various quotations, scenes and characters from these explicitly autobiographical stories have crossed over into other texts. The names of the protagonists of *Clay* (2005) and *The Colour of the Sun* (2018), who are both called Davie, further invite readers to draw the link with the author's childhood. It is not unusual for adult authors of children's books to draw on their memories from youth, but this practice of life writing and the role that age plays in it is still underexplored in children's literature research.

Third, several of Almond's stories thematise age, processes of growing up and growing older, and the value and challenges of intergenerational relationships. Some, such as *Counting Stars*, *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean* (2011) and *The Tighrope Walkers*, follow the characters as they grow from childhood through adolescence and sometimes up to adulthood. Such stories offer possibilities to explore how age is constructed and what kinds of age norms inform the literary evocation of

various life stages. Many of Almond's books contain "metareflections" on age (Joosen, *Adulthood*): instances where a general statement about an age or life stage is made, and where age norms become explicit and debatable. *The Tigh trope Walkers*, for example, offers various explicit statements about adolescents, with a policeman arguing that teenage boys have "a talent for disguise, for misdirection" (170) and that "there's too much of this freedom thing" (299). Such statements invite reflection and debate on the features of adolescents; since the policeman in question is not a likeable character, the reader may not necessarily be prepared to accept them. A more sympathetic teacher in the same novel, Mister Joyce, pleads to "[b]e kind to all the lads. They're only lads" (106) and reassures his class of 13-year-old pupils that they are old enough to be exposed to the writings of Shakespeare, pulling them out of the "safe" literature that they studied as children. In this book, the authors study such metareflections, as well as other, sometimes more implicit, evocations of age norms, using a variety of methods and tools. Such analyses give insight into the age norms that Almond's novels offer to his readership, as well as the way he evokes inter-generational relationships and developments over the life course.

Finally, the aesthetic qualities and thematic richness of Almond's works have been recognised by literary juries, scholars and young and adult readers. His work has been studied from a variety of angles, in particular his use of magic realism (Latham; Johnston), the spiritual (Coats; Coghlan; Grace; Latham; Levy), the relationship between humanity and nature (Dalrymple) and constructions of boyhood (Nodelman). The literary complexity and richness of his oeuvre means that studying age in Almond's work is not a straightforward process. His books do not invite simple mimetic readings, but construct age in nuanced and sometimes ambivalent ways, and on various levels of the text. Through Almond's oeuvre, the authors in this book aim to get a better understanding of how age operates in children's literature through characterisation, themes, style and media qualities. They investigate how age is constructed on these levels in relation to the age of the author, the book's intended readership (young children, adolescents, adults) and the age of its real readers as they experience the story. To do so, the authors apply and assess various theoretical approaches and methods to studying age in children's literature: in addition to childhood and age studies, they draw on digital humanities, cognitive studies, life writing studies, empirical reader-response research and adaptation studies. By employing and combining these varied perspectives, the book wants to contribute to a fuller understanding of age in the works of Almond and reflect on ways that age can be studied in children's literature more broadly. Since age studies is central to all chapters, we will introduce this field and the terminology we adopt here first. The other theories and methods will be developed in the individual chapters.

### **Age studies and children's literature studies**

This book can build on a recent but growing body of scholarship that bridges children's literature studies and age studies (Benner and Ullmann 2019; Caldwell, Falcus and Sako 2021; Falcus and Waller 2021; Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Jaques 2021; Falcus and Sako 2019; Henneberg 2010; Joosen 2018; Malewski 2021). The connection between these two interdisciplinary fields makes sense for various reasons: the origins and continued need to publish books for children and adolescents specifically relies on a perceived age difference, the communication process around children's literature involves people in different phases in their lives, the narratives stage characters of various ages and they often focus on intergenerational relationships and the process of growing up. Of course, children's literature studies had already focused on age without necessarily drawing on age studies. In particular, the communicative situation of children's literature has received ample attention, in studies exploring images of childhood constructed by adult authors, intergenerational collaborations between authors, implied child readers and the double addressee. In addition, various scholars have investigated children as developing readers and their reception of children's books. With age studies, however, adulthood, old age and intergenerational relationships have come more into focus. So far, critics have paid most attention to characterisation and age norms that are part of children's books' ideological load. This book wants to build on this scholarship but also significantly extend it.

The analyses in this book rely on diverse concepts of age as they have been defined by, among others, Lorraine Green, Susan Pickard, Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss. When discussing age, people often refer to precise years and to age ranges (teenage years, your late 60s) and life stages. Green (5–9) distinguishes between the following phases: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood and old age. The boundaries, further refinement, and characteristics of these categories are subject to cultural differences, change and debate. Moreover, as Green (29) explains, chronological age (also called age by numbers), measured by the time that has elapsed since birth, is only one way of looking at age and the life course. Non-chronological age can take into account a person's abilities, health and social norms. Haynes and Murriss criticise the importance that Western society attributes to numerical age, for example, when it comes to organising education into grades. While the authors in this book subscribe to the idea that chronological age and strict age norms can obscure the diversity of lived age in unnecessarily limiting ways, they also acknowledge that Western culture, including the children's books produced in the West, strongly relies on chrononormativity. Although some initiatives try to limit the impact of numerical age and move to a "post-age" approach to,

for instance, education (Haynes and Murriss), chronological age is still used in various contexts to categorise people or to form expectations about them (Morrow 151). As Pickard argues, while there are good reasons for wanting to challenge a rigid age ideology, “an emphasis on the fluidity of age norms obscures the ongoing presence of classed and other structured hierarchies” related to age (67). This book tries to get a better understanding of the role that age plays in children’s literature as a discourse that is still implicated in these “structured hierarchies” and that imparts age norms to its readership, while also paying attention to the moments in Almond’s work where those norms and hierarchies are deconstructed.

In exploring age, scholars can take a biological-developmental or constructivist approach (a.o. López-Ropero): the question of nature and nurture is not just relevant to gender studies but also to age studies. Biological and developmentalist approaches will emphasise the patterns and norms in people’s physical and psychological development and relate them to numerical ages and life stages. Virginia Morrow criticises developmentalist thinkers such as Jean Piaget for putting too much emphasis on numerical age, which “leads to very powerful normative ideas about the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ age to do certain things” in childhood (151–152). In age studies, the idea that the ageing process inevitably equals physical and mental decline has been widely exposed and questioned. Pickard, for example, criticises the normalised association of older age with disease and shows how this might become a self-fulfilling prophecy: “previously kidneys with lower functionality, to give an example, were considered ageing and hence normal” (165), whereas they are now more frequently considered as “pathological and treatable.” With regard to developmentalist paradigms, Karen Coats has argued that presumptions about teenagers’ rebellious behaviour may provoke a treatment of the young that reinforces their rebellion (*Bloomsbury* 52).

Scholars in age studies emphasise that age is socially constructed. Cross-cultural and historical comparisons can help to bring out potential differences in the meanings attributed to age. Pickard offers evidence to argue that all life stages are “historically contingent” (80), using the concepts of teenagers (75) and retirement age (80) as specific examples. As part of this social construction, age is not isolated from other markers of identity, but influenced by gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, religion and so forth. Pickard’s handbook *Age Studies* is centred around the idea of the age patriarchy, where different forms of discrimination can mirror and reinforce each other: “Age, gender and class together underpin a cultural and material infantilization of those who have not acquired sufficient capital to be full adults” (17). Moreover, age as a social construct is also relational: we give meaning to life stages by contrasting them with each other, and

our own age may influence how we think about the life course and other people's age. In a Master's class on constructions of age in literature that I teach, it often strikes me how much the students' and my own readings of the characters in the same book can differ. For example, when we read Philippa Pearce's *The Battle of Bubble and Squeak* (1978), a novel about a conflict in a family, most of the students who are in their early 20s tend to sympathise exclusively with the children's point of view, and some even fail to remember the passages in which the mother appears as a more sympathetic figure. Those passages stand out more to me and to some of the students in their 30s and 40s who have also raised young children. In fact, one of the reasons why I assign the novel is because it provides such a multi-faceted image of the mother figure, who is often angry but also caring and tender. It is easy to miss the passages that offer this more nuanced reading of her character, and age seems to be a factor. Like gender, race and class, age is also an aspect of a reader's and a researcher's positionality that the authors have tried to be aware of when writing and giving feedback on the chapters for this book.

A social constructivist take on age helps to understand why it is important to consider age in children's literature. As a discourse that is included in children's education and that is given particular cultural weight in schools and some households, children's books communicate ideas about age to their readership. This process should not be reduced to simple influence: the ideology that books offer can also be debated and challenged, at least when that ideology is made explicit or recognised by the reader. Given the relative scarcity of debates on age ideologies (especially compared to norms and values related to gender and race), this book seeks to contribute to a greater awareness of age norms in children's literature.

### Overview of chapters

All the chapters in this book combine theories and perspectives from age studies and children's literature studies with other approaches, reflecting on their potential and limits for gaining insight into constructions of age in Almond's work, and by extension, in children's books and literature more broadly. The first chapter explores age in Almond's explicitly autobiographical collections, *Counting Stars* (2000) and *Half a Creature from the Sea* (2007). It fits into a recent trend of "a return to the author" (Berensmeyer et al. 3), but does so with an awareness of the potential limits that such an approach might set to readers' freedom of interpreting literary works (voiced so articulately in Roland Barthes' essay on the death of the author from 1970). The analysis takes an intertextual perspective on autobiographical elements to avoid having to make the tricky distinction between actual and imagined autobiographical events in making sense of

stories that are claimed to be inspired by the author's real life. The field of life writing studies offers useful theoretical perspectives and context here. Since *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* are informed by childhood memories in particular, this chapter combines life writing with memory studies. It works with the context and "toolkit" that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer in *Reading Autobiography* (2001), a set of relevant questions and methods to guide research on various aspects of life writing. In this chapter, I first put my focus on memory, both as a practice and theme in the short stories. I supplement Smith and Watson's life writing theory with Svetlana Boym's distinctions between different kinds of nostalgia to better understand how the stories thematise memory and autobiographical writing in a metareflective manner. Second, the chapter explores the shift from autonomy to community that David Parker has observed in recent life writing. *Counting Stars* fits well into this new trend, as analyses of the stories themselves and the paratextual elements (prefaces, introductions, afterwords) show. As Smith and Watson suggest in their toolkit, taking the audience into account is important, and audiences may change when books appear in different editions (166–167). Some of the stories in *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* were first published for adults, but then functioned as children's literature. The former can be considered an important step in Almond's creation of *Skellig* (1998), his breakthrough novel as a children's author.

In the second chapter, Emma-Louise Silva combines children's literature studies and age studies with cognitive narratology and material engagement theory. The chapter focuses on *Clay* (2005) and *Bone Music* (2021), two Young Adult novels whose protagonists seek meaningful experiences revolving around nature, art and their peers. Davie and Stephen in *Clay*, and Sylvia and Gabriel in *Bone Music* experience epiphanic forms of "mutual engagement" that involve "thinging"—or thinking "with, through and about things" (Malafouris, "Bringing Things to Mind" 764)—in their process of growing up. The characters' life courses are intensely shaped by creating cultural artefacts from natural resources. By examining these intricate social encounters and the meaningful "things," we can explore Almond's portrayal of "social" and "material" minds (Palmer; Boivin) via a cognitive lens. Almond evokes the minds of his protagonists by depicting their engagements with peers on the one hand, and their creations of artefacts made from raw material found in nature on the other. By intertwining cognitive narratology with children's literature studies, age studies and philosophy of mind, this chapter shows that Almond's evocations of social and material minds in *Clay* and *Bone Music* form striking examples of how influential that human relationships and material objects are in the coming-of-age process. Just as the ever-modifiable clay in *Clay* and the hollow bone in *Bone Music* with which Sylvia can create "ever-changing

tunes” (199), Almond’s protagonists resemble the natural resources they engage with in processes that demonstrate their ongoing metamorphoses.

The next chapter, written by Lindsey Geybels, relies on methods from digital humanities to study age norms in the construction of characters and style in a large selection of texts from Almond’s oeuvre. This approach moves away from close-reading strategies based on singular case studies to explore a large corpus at once. Almond, who started off as an author for adults, has stated that he never intended to start writing for a younger readership, but that he discovered “a new way of writing” when he did (Joosen, “Interview”). This raises the question of whether his books intended for different ages carry a different ideology in terms of age and whether he adapted his style accordingly. To explore these questions, the chapter considers most of Almond’s works, not just his children’s books and Young Adult novels. The 21 titles, which have all been manually annotated to identify speaking characters and disambiguate references to characters (such as pronouns), are subjected to different kinds of digital analyses. First, the stylometric method gives insight into the author’s use of style by grouping works that have similar word patterns into clusters. Then, age ideology on the level of the characters is explored with topic modelling and parsing. Topic modelling is applied to the speech of characters belonging to specific age groups, to examine the themes that are distinctive of, for example, children’s speech when compared to the speech of adults. Finally, a syntactic parser is used to extract the adjectives, verbs and possessions associated with different age groups. By combining the observations from these three types of digital analyses, this chapter constructs a comprehensive picture of age construction in Almond’s oeuvre with reference to the age of the intended reader.

Chapter 4 presents Leander Duthoy’s results of an empirical reader-response study of *My Name Is Mina* (2010) with readers of different ages. The novel emphasises its status as artefact by presenting itself as the main character Mina’s notebook or diary. One element of that presentation is the inclusion of “extraordinary activities” aimed at the reader, such as writing “a story about somebody else as if you’re writing about yourself” (Almond, *Mina* 50). Recent reader-response research by scholars such as Eva Fjällström, Lydia Kokkola and Eve Tandoi has demonstrated the potential of adding creative activities to more traditional question-based reader-response approaches. Duthoy’s chapter analyses how the age of readers is intertwined with the way they construct the ages of characters in *My Name Is Mina*, by focusing on readers’ creative and productive responses to the book. The chapter discusses data from interviews with five participants of different ages. They were asked to read the novel and conduct a number of its “extraordinary activities,” including rewriting a section from the perspective of a different character. Duthoy reflects on how the participants

engaged with these activities and on the content of their stories, as well as the negotiation with their own age as they completed them.

The fifth chapter starts with the observation that various media narratives contribute to age scripts both implicitly and explicitly. Building on adaptation studies, Michelle Anya Anjirbag and Frauke Pauwels show how transmedial elements and medium-specific techniques have the affordances to challenge age norms that creators and audience may have internalised. Close textual and visual analysis of Almond's novel *Skellig* (1998) and its mediation on screen offers the building blocks for a discussion of age norms and the way these are framed, adapted or appropriated. More specifically, the chapter uses the lens of care to explore how age-related expectations are marked or foregrounded. A comparative analysis of novel and film brings to the fore that the construction of age is entwined with medium-specific elements; apart from characterisation through a narrator's comments or the casting of different characters, media such as the novel or the movie adaptation may also entail other age-related scripts. As the constructions of age are performed and materialised differently in various media, the comparison of narratives and their adaptations reveals both the continuation and the disruption of age norms.

The sixth and concluding chapter further positions Almond as a cross-writer through a comparative analysis that relies on close reading. The chapter draws on the approaches from life writing studies, digital humanities, adaptation theory and cognitive narratology that have been introduced in the previous chapters to reflect on two short stories that Almond wrote for adults ("A Kind of Heaven" and "Fiesta") and on his children's book *The Fire-Eaters*. This final chapter closes with reflections on the different methods for studying constructions of age in children's literature that have been applied in this book and suggests some avenues for further research, with a focus on further merging age studies and children's literature studies.

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# 1 *Counting Stars*, discounting years? Life writing and memory studies

*Vanessa Joosen*

Before David Almond published his first children's book *Skellig* (1998), he wrote a collection of short stories that would later appear as *Counting Stars* (2000). In the preface, Almond makes clear that it is an autobiographical collection: "These stories are about my childhood. They're about the people I grew up with, our hopes and fears, our tragedies and joys." The stories were conceived and some first published for adults, but the collection also appeared as Almond's third book for young readers, after *Kit's Wilderness* (1999). *Counting Stars* can thus be considered the first children's book that David Almond ever wrote (see also Latham 15). By all means, it is an important collection for the rest of his career as a children's author. "Many of the themes, tropes and characters featured in Almond's children's novels are prefigured in *Counting Stars*," writes Valerie Coghlan (87). Indeed, various autobiographical elements that are most clearly expressed in this book are not limited to it: in particular, the death of a parent and the fear of losing a sibling feature in several of Almond's novels, as do the town of Felling with its Catholic community and the nature surrounding it. Almond further elaborated on several of these themes in *Half a Creature from the Sea* (2007), a collection of short stories that are all set in Felling, a town in North-East England, close to Newcastle. Each story in that book is preceded by an introduction in which Almond looks back on the autobiographical events that inspired it, such as his interest in football and fondness for horror stories. In these introductions, he also addresses some of the alterations that he made to reality. The paratexts to *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* explicitly encourage readers to put the fictional stories in connection to Almond's own childhood.

Literary scholars often feel discomfort in exploring autobiographical elements in fiction at length. This reluctance can be ascribed to the impact of New Criticism, which promoted the close reading of narratives as carrying all their meaning in themselves and discouraged critics from looking into biography or historical and social context (Cuddon 544). Equally influential was Roland Barthes' essay "Death of the Author" in *S/Z* (1970), where

speculations about the author's intentions were rejected in order to liberate readers to make their own interpretation of a literary text. Even for critics who are not so radical in their refusal of autobiographical or author-focused readings, there is always the danger that the relationship between life and narrative will be overrated, so that knowledge about an author's life is projected onto the story, limiting the multiplicity of meanings that the narrative can evoke. Vice versa, elements from the story risk being used to speculate about the author's life and psychology in a manner that is not only unscientific but also unethical. Nevertheless, various writers do draw on their own memories and lived experiences when creating fiction and when an oeuvre is so explicitly autobiographical as David Almond's, it seems limiting to ignore this dimension.

"A return to the author" can be witnessed in various literary studies in recent years (Berensmeyer et al. 3). In this chapter, I follow Alison Booth's suggestion to treat the autobiographical aspects of fictional texts as intertexts, considering "the inclusion of the author's biography and of historical context(s) as contributing, unfolding *texts*, in an alert intertextuality" (89). First, treating autobiographical elements in a story intertextually avoids the risk that such elements might get too much interpretive significance. As I show, they are just one thread in a text's intertextual web, just one lens through which to view the story and not one that overrules all other interpretations. In the specific case of Almond's *Counting Stars*, moreover, it is clear that its intertextual web stretches both into the past and the future. Rosemary Ross Johnston notes how many scholars in the volume on Almond that she edited refer to *Counting Stars* "as an intertext both to Almond's writing and his life" (24). In the epilogue to the e-book, Almond writes: "Of all my books, this is probably the one I feel closest to and I'll be writing stories that grow from this source for the rest of my life." Moreover, taking an intertextual perspective on autobiographical elements also helps literary scholars to avoid having to make the tricky distinction between actual and imagined autobiographical events in making sense of stories that are claimed to be inspired by an author's real life.

The field of life writing studies offers useful theoretical perspectives and context for work with autobiographical dimensions. Since *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* are informed by childhood memories in particular, this chapter combines life writing with memory studies. It works with the context and toolkit that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer in *Reading Autobiography* (2001). This book reflects on issues, terms and important questions and methods for scholars studying life writing. It helps to reflect on, amongst other issues, the status of autobiographical fiction as "truth" and the relationship between a narrator who reflects on the past and the younger self that is the subject of the story. In particular, I focus on two aspects of autobiographical writing in *Counting*

*Stars and Half a Creature from the Sea*. Given that Almond is an adult author looking back on youth, the first aspect I explore is memory, both as a practice and theme in the short stories. Here, I supplement Smith and Watson's toolkit with Svetlana Boym's distinctions between different kinds of nostalgia and investigate how the stories thematise memory and autobiographical writing in a metareflective manner. Second, I explore the shift from autonomy to community that David Parker has observed in recent life writing. As Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall observe, "Life writing typically entails telling the stories of others along with the self" ("Epilogue") and autobiographical texts that focus on childhood thematise the protagonists' relationship with their families and broader communities. Narratives that explore the development of an individual's subjectivity abound in children's literature and Young Adult literature. Especially in the latter, the emphasis often lies on young people's desire to emancipate themselves from the constraints imposed by their parents, teachers and even society at large. This focus aligns well with a pattern that Parker identifies in canonical life writing, which puts the emphasis on an individual's path to autonomy and self-understanding (often in the form of epiphanic insights). In recent life writing, Parker detects a shift to narratives that put community and significant others more central (Parker, "Ethicism" 9). In this shift, intergenerational relationships get new meaning. *Counting Stars* fits well into this new trend, as I argue with reference to the stories themselves and to the paratextual elements (prefaces, introductions, afterwords) of this children's book. As Smith and Watson suggest, taking the audience into account is important, and audiences may change when books appear in different editions (166–167). We must keep in mind that some of the stories in *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* were first published for adults but then functioned as children's literature. Writing the stories that were collected in *Counting Stars* can be considered an important step in Almond's development as a writer of children's books, a step that preceded the creation of *Skellig*, his breakthrough novel as a children's author.

### Life writing studies

Zachary Leader defines life writing as "writings about lives or parts of our lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed" (1). Mary Besemeres and Maureen Perkins describe it broadly as "all forms of analytical and reflective writing that take 'self' or 'selves' as their focus" (vii), and Smith and Watson add that "[s]uch writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer" (5). A broad range of genres falls under these umbrellas: "many varieties of personal narrative, including autobiography, biography,

memoir, diary, travel writing, autobiographical fiction, letters, collective biography, poetry, case history, personal testimony, illness narrative, obituary, essay, and reminiscence” (Sanders), and more recently blogs, vlogs and other social media accounts. The variety of forms that life writing can take are “testimony to its flexible and vibrant format, with an outward-facing as well as introspective purpose” (Sanders), but it also makes a delineation of the field under study quite challenging and even undesirable (de Haan 179). By all means, the kind of autobiographical fiction that Almond writes in *Counting Stars* and several of the stories in *Half a Creature from the Sea* fall firmly in the domain of life writing according to all the definitions that are offered here. Life writing studies consider both non-fictional and fictional texts (de Haan 180; Novak 6–9), and a reflection on the overlap between both concerns many critics in this field as they explore questions of memory and the narrative techniques that shape life writing (see a.o. Leader 4; Foulds 102; Lee 126; Smith and Watson; Strawson 286).

Life writing received increased scholarly attention in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (de Haan), with Besemeres and Perkins speaking of an “autobiographical turn” in the humanities. Scholars working in this field “are largely grounded in literary theory, Cultural Studies and research approaches that focus on identity, linguistics and memory” (de Haan 176). In contrast to biography studies, historiography is not the main purpose of life writing studies, which instead foregrounds “ethical, literary-theoretical and socio-emancipatory analyses” of the texts under study (de Haan 178) and relies more on personal memory as a “subjective form of evidence” (Smith and Watson 6). Given the focus of many texts in life writing on the development of lives over a longer period of time, age studies offer a relevant frame of reference to situate and interpret these texts. Childhood studies can further help to illuminate life writing that focuses on youth specifically, as do Almond’s texts. Although the focus in life writing lies on individual psychology and development rather than the broader social or historical context in which that life can be situated, childhood studies and age studies can help to see individual experiences in a broader perspective, and in turn, texts from life writing can offer insights into how life stages are experienced and constructed, and how individuals narrativise their own life course.

Moreover, given life writing’s interest in the self and its emancipation, childhood and adolescence are clearly life stages of distinct interest. Many autobiographical texts are devoted to youth specifically. In this light, it is not surprising that life writing abounds in children’s literature. Several classics, such as Judith Kerr’s *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (1971; Lathey) and Roald Dahl’s *Boy* (1984) are based on the author’s childhood memories, as are more recent award-winning books, such as Bart Moeyaert’s

*Broere* (Brothers, 2000), Guus Kuijer's *The Book of Everything* (2004), Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) and *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo (2018). Kate Douglas (2022) sees a rise of biographies for children in the twenty-first century that "follows the 'memoir boom' of the late 1990s and 2000s" ("Introduction"). Various children's books also take the form of diaries, whether they are based on real-life experiences, such as Anne Frank's and Zlata Filipović's war diaries, or invented accounts, such as Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾* (1982) or Jeff Kinney's bestselling series *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007). Almond too, has incorporated diaries in his work, in particular in *My Name Is Mina* (2010).

### Telling subjective truths

*Counting Stars* (2000) is a collection of 22 reminiscences and short stories that are all set in Felling, the small town near Newcastle where Almond was born in 1951, and where he grew up. The protagonists are David, his parents and his siblings (his older brother Colin, deceased sister Barbara and his younger sisters Catherine, Margaret and Mary). Some chapters describe the adult narrator contemplating childhood photographs and memories; other chapters are short stories describing events in young David and his family's lives. They span the years between his earliest memories at the age of two or three—"just me sitting in a pushchair staring up at Mam"—until a few years after his father's death, which occurs when David is 15. The events are not told in chronological order, a practice that is common in experimental life writing (Novak 16), but they are clearly connected. Recurrent themes are the loss and mourning over the death of Barbara and David's father, his practice of Catholicism and loss of faith, his sexual awakening and his love for nature and writing. Community is also central to the stories: both the small circle of David's core family as other inhabitants of Felling, which includes his friends and neighbours, Father O'Mahoney and intriguing strangers like Jack Law and Loosa Fine. Deborah Grace considers *Counting Stars* "the most conventionally realistic" of all of Almond's works (118). Nevertheless, while various stories focus on events that could have occurred in real life, at least one story is distinctly fantastical and various others fall under magical or mystical realism. "The Kitchen" offers an impossible gathering of family members who were never alive at the same time, as well as reflections of the deceased on the experience of being dead. Other stories introduce motifs that have been associated with Almond's magic realist works. In "Where your wings were," for example, David is visited by an angel.

*Half a Creature from the Sea* (2014) is a collection of eight short stories, some of which appeared as separate, illustrated children's books

(*Harry Miller's Run* and *Klaus Vogel and the Bad Lad*) and others that appeared in collections for children and adults. As explained above, each is preceded by an introduction in which Almond elaborates on elements from his own life that inspired the stories. While not all stories feature an alter ego of his younger self, the protagonists of "Slog's Dad," "When God came to Cathleen's garden" and "Joe Quinn's Poltergeist" are called Davie. As Almond explains in the introduction to "When God came to Cathleen's garden":

This story is filled with real people: my sisters Mary and Margaret; their friend Cathleen; Cathleen's mother; my mother; my mate Tex Flynn; the footballers David Hilley and Alan Suddick. And I suppose, as the narrator is called David, I'm in it too. Of course, as soon as you start to write about somebody, you start to fictionalize them. The person in real life isn't quite the same as the person in the tale. And the events in the tale, of course, never happened at all.

Smith and Watson note that distinguishing between the different narratological instances of life writing can be difficult—they list, among others, the historical I, the narrating I, the narrated I and the ideological I as relevant roles to consider. Given the process of fictionalisation that Almond has made explicit in his paratexts, I will refer in this chapter to Almond as the author and David or Davie as the protagonist of *Counting Stars* and selected stories from *Half a Creature from the Sea*, respectively. *Counting Stars* is told in the first person; Almond the author and David the protagonist are distinct from the narrator, who is presented as the adult David looking back on his childhood. In contrast to non-fictional autobiographies, where the author and narrator can be assumed to be the same person (Smith and Watson 8), *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* can be considered autobiographical fiction, or what Lynda Barry appropriately calls "autobifictionalography," an amalgam that reflects the mixture of autobiographical and fictional elements (Marshall).

As Smith and Watson note, "[m]any writers take the liberties of the novelistic mode in order to mine their own struggles with the past and with the complexities of identities forged in the present" (9–10). Almond is a case in point. As the quotes from the paratexts that I have already included in this chapter make explicit, both collections openly fictionalise memories of Almond's youth, offering a combination of autobiographical and imagined elements. In their toolkit for analysing life writing, Smith and Watson ask critics to reflect on the evidence that autobiographical writing offers to "have the 'truth' of the narrative validated" (175). Little such evidence is offered within the books themselves; unless one takes the paratexts as moments where the author's own voice is heard.



While some of the chapters refer to photographs, these are not actually provided. Specific places and people in Felling are named, and sometimes described in detail, but I have chosen not to verify them for this chapter. After all, as Smith and Watson also suggest, critics must rather ask themselves: “What’s at stake for the narrator in persuading you of the truth of his story?” (175). In the two books that I study here, the combination of facts and fiction is established from the start. Like autobiographies, “they offer subjective ‘truth’ rather than ‘fact’” (Smith and Watson 10). The subjective truth of these stories also includes imagined scenes that contribute to their emotional truth. I am more interested to see how the process of looking back on youth and constructing this “subjective truth” is thematised in the stories than in making the distinction between real and imagined events.

The focus on memories from youth in *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea*, as well as their status as children’s literature should be considered in this construction of subjective truth. Smith and Watson invite critics to reflect on the features of the narrating I in life writing, especially when the narrated I is a younger self. The tone can be ironic or romantic, the narrated I can appear as more naïve, but also as more successful than the older, narrating I (168). As I demonstrate in more detail below, *Counting Stars* can be read as a coming-of-age story and Künstlerroman, a “narrative of artistic growth” (Smith and Watson), while *Half a Creature from the Sea* combines ghost and adventure stories—all genres that are popular in children’s literature. Moreover, it is useful to contextualise these stories’ constructions of childhood in a broader literary context. As Adrienne Gavin explains, the engagement with childhood in literature is multifaceted and can serve various purposes:

Created from authors’ autobiographical or biographical imperatives, social intent, historical inspiration, or literary imaginations, the fictional child is an artefact that expresses memories or intuitive understanding of childhood or symbolically pictures the child as innocent, victim, blank slate, born sinner, infant tyrant, visionary, or signifier of nostalgia, hope, despair, or loss. (2)

In what follows, I develop the idea that child characters are used as figures of nostalgia and hope in *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea*, even if—or perhaps because—the stories also thematise profound feelings of loss and alienation. As Perry Nodelman notes as well, *Counting Stars* reveals Almond’s “strong interest in his own childhood experience, and an ability to be simultaneously nostalgic and clear-eyed and puzzled about it” (47). This same spirit is extended to the autobiographical sections and several short stories of *Half a Creature from the Sea*.

### Returning to a lost home that never was

Nostalgia is a complex sentiment that can take various forms. In her influential study *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii). It is “a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams [...] a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” (Boym xv). In *Counting Stars* and some stories in *Half a Creature from the Sea*, that idea of loss is present on two levels: the loss of a time passed (childhood) as well as the loss of loved ones who passed away. Boym deplors that nostalgia is often associated with kitsch and cheap illusions (xiv). To understand the complexities and potential implications of this sentiment, she argues that it is important to distinguish between restorative and reflective nostalgia:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* [the return home] and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of a lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (Boym xviii)

While Boym’s theory was first and foremost developed for collective rather than individual forms of remembrance, the distinction has been applied to singular cultural items (see a.o. Wesseling) and can help us understand how David Almond uses his childhood memories as the basis for his autobiographical fiction.

*Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* literally take the narrator back to a “lost home”: the houses where he grew up with his parents and siblings. As Almond explains in the preface to *Half a Creature from the Sea*: “I’ve found myself writing more and more about that little place. Many of my stories spring from it. They use its landscape, its language, its people, and turn it into fiction—half imaginary, half real.” While the stories do not idealise childhood as a whole or portray it as innocent and carefree, the relationships between the children and the parents and between the siblings are particularly loving and tender. A profound sense of longing permeates the endeavour of recounting and re-imagining scenes from his own past, and this sentiment is sometimes expressed explicitly. In “Dad’s Hat,”

a story that was added to the 2016 edition of *Counting Stars*, the narrator contemplates a picture of his father and writes: “Poor lovely man. There he is, gazing out at me through these more-than-fifty years. I touch the image of his face. I miss him so. Hello, Dad.” In “Where Your Wings Were,” a story from *Counting Stars*, young David is visited by an angel who grants him a reunion with his deceased little sister Barbara. His response shows how much this experience satisfies a deep longing in him:

‘There’s someone to see you.’

She [the angel] took my hands and stretched them out into the brightness. My fingertips encountered skin, hair, eyes, a tender cheek. I felt the lips part, felt breath breaking into laughter.

‘Barbara,’ I gasped. ‘Barbara.’

I reached down, I lifted her, and at her back I felt the quick fluttering of her own small wings. She put her arms around my neck and kissed me and spoke my name.

‘Oh, Barbara,’ I gasped. (70)

Such dreams give the illusion and satisfaction of a home that is lost and found again, temporarily undoing the workings of modern, chronological time. The same holds for the “The Kitchen,” in which the entire family—the living as well as the deceased—is reunited in the physical and emotional centre of their former house, where they recall memories, contemplate on the experience of being separated by death and engage in storytelling.

*Half a Creature from the Sea* contains a story that thematises the seduction of restorative nostalgia and the illusion of recapturing the past: “Slog’s Dad.”<sup>1</sup> The autobiographical introduction describes a person frozen in time: the hairdresser Ray Lough, who “would have no truck with modern styles” and treats all customers, also those “asking for a James Dean or a Beatles cut” to the same haircut: “short back and sides finished with lotion slapped on.” Almond approaches this figure, who stands for “a rebellion against the modern idea of time” (Boym xv; see above), with some irony, but he goes into full glorifying mood when describing the sausages of another Felling business that he frequented as a child, Myer’s pork shop: there you could buy “a taste of Heaven!” Likewise, in his description of the nature surrounding his hometown in childhood, Almond’s tone is distinctly elevating: “Sometimes, when the sun shone down and the sky was blue and the river glittered far below, the larks singing over the high fields, Heaven didn’t seem too far away.” In these descriptions, an indulgence in good memories of the past takes precedence over critical distance.

In the actual story of “Slog’s Dad,” the narrator’s friend, Slog Mickley, believes that his deceased father has returned from the dead. Davie recalls how the father had to undergo various amputations after black spots

appeared on his toe—the disease is reminiscent of gangrene, as it gradually maims and ultimately kills the man. At the end of his life, Mr Mickley promised his son that he would return in Spring, and when a man is sitting on a bench in the town square, Slog feels that he has kept his promise. Davie, by contrast, is not convinced: “He looked nothing like the Joe Mickley I used to know.” The reader is offered two opposing views on the identity of the man on the bench: Slog’s belief and delight that his father has come back from the dead to pay him a visit, and Davie’s scepticism. He suspects that the man is a tramp who is taking advantage of Slog and of Davie, whose pork sandwich (the “taste of heaven” from Myer’s) he eats.

Since Davie is the narrator and immediately discredits Slog’s point of view, readers might be tempted to follow his scepticism and stick to it. Further passages in the text support Davie’s reservations. The man on the bench refuses to see Slog’s mother despite the boy’s moving pleas—“There were tears in Slog’s eyes. ‘She misses you that much, Dad’”—an element that seems to affirm Davie’s impression that he is a fraud. At the same time, Slog’s longing is palpably and movingly real, and his delight is so sincere and beautiful that it is hard not to grant him this reunion with his father. The two are first observed from a distance, through David’s perspective: “He was leaning on the bloke and the bloke was leaning back on the bench, grinning at the sky. Slog made a fist and a face of joy when he saw me.” If we follow Slog’s point of view and take the man on the bench to be Mr Mickley, then he has returned to earth more complete than he was when he left it, with both legs and all physical abilities back in place. He is literally restored. Just as restorative nostalgia favours a “return to origins” narrative (Boym 46), Slog delights in this pure and complete version of his father as he was before the disease struck. Boym, however, is sceptical of restorative nostalgia’s tendency to recreate a polished version of the past and its conflation of purity and authenticity. She refers to the restoration of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, which was criticised for being too bright and perfect: “how can one remove the last wish of the artist who left his masterpiece open to the accidents of time? What is more authentic: original image [sic] of Michelangelo not preserved through time, or a historical image that aged through centuries?” (46). For Slog’s father, we could raise similar questions. Although he may not have wished for his disease to maim him, the transformation that it produced did become part of his life and influenced his character, showing first his resilience, and then his defeat. For Slog, however, the impossible restoration of his father is not a reason to discredit the man on the bench:

‘He looks a bit different,’ said Slog. ‘But that’s just cos he’s been...’  
‘Transfigured,’ said the bloke.  
‘Aye,’ said Slog. ‘Transfigured. Can I show him your legs, Dad?’

This transfiguration is an act of restorative nostalgia: “The past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot. Moreover, the past is not supposed to reveal any signs of decay; it has to be freshly painted in its ‘original image’ and remain eternally young” (Boym 49). Rather than an accurate revocation of the past, insofar that that is ever possible, this kind of restoration serves the needs of the present: in this case, to alleviate Slog’s grief and to give him the consolation that his dad kept his promise.

When David refuses to touch the restored legs, the man urges him: “Do it for Slogger, Davie”—a sentence that not only seems to refer to the legs, but also serves to coax Davie into believing that the man is Slog’s father or at least to hide his scepticism so that the moment is not ruined for Slog. Moreover, the man on the bench is able to answer some of Davie’s questions, which the boy asks to test him. He recalls his profession (a binman) and the name of Slog’s mother. Logical explanations are possible here for readers who are not willing to join in the feeling of restorative nostalgia—we don’t know what Slog and the man on the bench had already discussed before Davie arrived, the man could have known the real Mr Mickley and the name of Slug’s mum is such a common one (Mary) that it may also be a lucky shot. Yet, the comfort that the man on the bench brings to Slog, telling him that he loves him and that they will be reunited in heaven, seems to be the real reason that silences Davie’s sceptical questions.

When it comes to his own father, Almond never grants his own younger self such a straightforward belief in a reunion with the dead, even if stories like “The Time Machine” and “The Kitchen” come close. The lack of self-awareness that is typical of restorative nostalgia is not one that fits the writer David Almond or the fictionalised versions of his younger self. Instead, various stories in *Counting Stars*, as well as the collection as a whole, thematise what Boym terms reflective nostalgia:

Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols. At best, reflective nostalgia can present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias. (Boym xviii)

Already in the paratext to *Counting Stars*, Almond makes clear that his recollection of the past is not an attempt to recreate the past as it was, even if the starting point are people and events from his childhood:

These stories [...] explore a time that has disappeared and a place that has changed. They bring back those who have gone, and allow them to walk and speak again within the pages of a book. Like all stories, they

merge memory and dream, the real and the imagined, truth and lies. And, perhaps like all stories, they are an attempt to reassemble what is fragmented, to rediscover what has been lost.

Almond accepts that the time that he writes about is irrevocably lost. He also acknowledges change, while making clear that the stories do not reflect the past but evoke an image that is informed by his memories, dreams, longing and imagination of the present. The “attempt” that he describes in the final line might be reminiscent of the joy that Slog feels when he is reunited with his deceased father, but it is profoundly different, since several efforts to recreate the past in the book are also shown to fail. Moreover, the loss that Almond evokes in this preface not only refers to people and places but also to memories. As Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir points out, remembering and forgetting are in a close dialectic with each other: autobiography “answers to the call to remember, to preserve memories of the past” and “to rescue from the past what might otherwise be forgotten. The autobiographer must, however, also come to terms with the fact that much already has” (7). The process of remembering inevitably involves a confrontation with the limits of memory. Rather than trying to fill in the gaps and smoothing them out, Almond’s stories draw attention to the fictionality of recreating memories. He takes the liberty of using fragments of the past as the basis for new stories, some of which draw attention to the imaginative process of remembrance, others pointing out the inevitable failure of attempts to recapture the past as it was.

“The Time Machine” is a case in point. The events in this short story are situated when David is 14 years old, that is after the loss of Barbara and a year before the death of his father. The story opens with an image of David up in a tree, as he holds a bird’s egg in his mouth. The egg can be read as a symbol for clinging or returning to childhood, not only because of the association with an unborn bird but also because nesting and bringing home eggs is something the younger children in David’s family delight in. As David sees the trucks of a fair arrive, he slips and bites the egg: “I gag and spit. Salt and slime in my mouth.” The unpleasant taste of the broken egg is a premonition of the bitter experience to come, a warning that a return to childhood or the past can be frustrating and unpleasant. One of the attractions at the fair is a Time Machine, which proves to be the very same one that David’s father saw when he was a boy. That night, David dreams of being reunited with his sister Barbara, who comes out of a cracked egg as a feathered child: “It’s our dead sister, Barbara, the fourth of us. I watch her fluttering towards the blue sky and deserts of the Time Machine.” As he rushes to follow her, he wakes up. Even though, like the broken egg, the dream makes clear the impossibility to cling to the past (Barbara will not be captured), David is still attracted to

the Time Machine's promise of taking its visitors back in time or forward to the future. Encouraged by his father, he enters the machine, only to find that it does not take him to another time, but to a place devoid of magic. David does not travel anywhere, but is only made to listen to Corinna, the woman who operates the Time Machine and who tells him the lies about the future that she expects him to feed the audience, including the promise that death will be defeated. David is "disappointed by these bland and unsurprising visions." Rather than overcoming time or death, David is thrust forward in his development by the unexpected sexual dimension of the encounter, as Corinna kisses him, pulls him so close that he gets a long look at her thighs and feels her body, and promises him that he can visit her at night (another pledge that is not kept). The disillusion is underlined as David leaves the machine to face the audience again and gets a jar with dirt: "I lift the lid, rub the earth between my fingers, feel the dry grit, the fine dust, nothing growing there." The image recalls not only the religious idea of "dust to dust" that is associated with death but also an observation made by David's younger sister Catherine when they were contemplating the birds' eggs: "the majority of dust is human skin. Dead skin." The Time Machine proves to be a flawed way of bringing life to this dust or to the dead. It offers David no real consolation, nor does it foster his growth in any satisfactory way.

That being said, the Time Machine at the fair can also be argued to function as what Jean Baudrillard has termed a third-order simulation. Baudrillard uses Disneyland and the USA to explain this phenomenon:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (175)

In David Almond's story, exposing the Time Machine at the fair so explicitly as a fraud has the effect that the fictional reality in which it is embedded—the story in which father and son visit the fair—appears as more real, when in fact, they seemed to be informed by the same longing to restore the past and the same desire to bring the dead (in this case, the father) back to life. "The Time Machine" not only features such a machine but also operates as a time machine in its own right, and one that is more successful than the one at the fair. The story has the potential to evoke a deep

emotional satisfaction in the way that the loving relationship between father and son is described. When David enters the Time Machine, his father calls after him: “Remember me!” and while the machine itself is a fraud, remembering his Dad is exactly what the narrator does in this story. In a particularly moving scene, David sees his father tending to the roses in their garden, “tying the stems of roses against the fence. He squeezes a bud and we see the petals packed moist and dense inside. [...] He tells me there will be nothing I can’t do.” The scene offers a stark belief in what Clémentine Beauvais calls “might”: the rose buds, filled with life and promise, reflect the father’s trust in the potential of his son to thrive and his willingness to foster the boy’s self-confidence and growth. Just as the man is supporting the growing roses by stemming them, he is offering sustenance to his son. Next, the father takes David to the fair, just the two of them, before he will take the others. The moments with the father are steeped in celestial imagery, as they “step out into the streaming light,” and when they view the fair, “[b]rilliant light pours down” on them. Once more, the father assures his son: “You will be happy. You’ll have everything we’ve missed.” While sometimes the narrator stresses the family’s oblivion of the imminent loss—“We do not know that this is the year before my father dies”—other moments in the story hint at the knowledge that he brings in retrospect. At the same time, moreover, the remembrance of the scenes is steeped in that knowledge and the illusion of clear and soothing memories is left intact, except for one line. When David leaves the Time Machine at the fair, he says: “I start to dream of my father breaking into fragments, travelling to the future alongside me.” That line seems to hint at the process of remembering. It is an image that contrasts with the perfected body of Slog’s dad; one that acknowledges the process of fragmentation and reconstruction of recalling memories. Even if this awareness is briefly raised, writing stories proves to be a more powerful and convincing way of creating and sustaining the illusion of the ability to return to the past than the Time Machine at the fair.

In short, in several of the autobiographical stories in *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea*, we can witness a tension between the desire to create perfect memories and recapture the past and the awareness that this desire produces projections infused with the knowledge and needs of the present, not the truth. “Reflective nostalgia,” Boym writes, “can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection” (49–50). If the two collections are read as a whole, the narrators and characters regularly remind readers (and perhaps the author) that the kind of life writing that the stories provide relies on fantasy as much as on memory. In *Counting Stars*, “The Time Machine” is followed by “Barbara’s photographs,” in which



the narrator muses over a set of family snapshots and wonders if he is mixing up a picture of Barbara in her cradle with his other sister Mary.

And even as I write these words, I begin to wonder whether this second photograph is also misremembered, and that it is Margaret, the youngest of us all, and not Mary, who reaches out from the cradle. It was so long ago. We were all so young. Some of us were not even born. Memory, dream, desire, imagination have mingled through the years. How is it possible to bring this sister truly back to mind?

Both in the paratext and in various stories and reminiscences, the praxis of remembering, forgetting and imagining is made explicit. The stories also underline the purpose of doing so. David's teacher, Miss Lynch, sends her pupils out to explore their local town and its history: "When you travel through the place in which you were born, you travel through yourself," she says. Doing so retrospectively helps the narrator to make sense of who he was and who he has become.

In line with the mystical dimension of Almond's autobiographical writing, the acts of remembrance and storytelling also serve a supernatural cause. In "The Kitchen," where living and deceased family members are reunited, David's sister Barbara explains why it mattered to her that she was remembered:

'Thought you'd all forsaken me. Thought you'd all forget me. [...] I thought I'd be alone forever. Me so little and all of you so big. And so many of you, more of you even though I was gone. You'd have each other and the little memory of me would just get lost.'

'We never forgot,' says Dad. 'And if we didn't remember true, we just made bits up.'

Barbara laughs.

'Made bits up!'

'Yes. Truth and memories and dreams and bits made up.'

'Bits made up. But bits made up that kept me safe and real in all your hearts.'

The imagination brings comfort to both the dead and the living, and in this story, it serves to undo the passage of time. As David Latham notes, the family hears a group of children outside singing about the months of the year, "emphasizing the continual passage of time" (19). The kitchen offers a temporary escape from chronological time, which turns it into "liminal territory, both real and magical" (Latham 19). Similarly, when a woman from the village sees sister Barbara walking after her death, it is said that the mother finds comfort in her account and passes on the story to the rest

of the family. It is this kind of telling that Almond's autobiographical writing contributes to in its own right, providing comfort, even if the stories do not offer an accurate account of the past and are infused with an awareness of their own ambivalent status. While *Counting Stars* and *Half a Creature from the Sea* occasionally let the narrators and characters indulge in the satisfaction of having their longings fulfilled, this sentiment is paired with critical reflections on the mechanisms and conditions of that satisfaction. In "The Time Machine" and "Slog's Dad," an ironic perspective is combined with a more sentimental one; in other stories and in the paratexts of both books, the narrator and author draw attention to the process of fictionalisation and imagination that was needed to turn the fragmented memories into stories.

### *Counting Stars* as intergenerational narrative of relationality

As an autobiographical coming-of-age narrative, *Counting Stars* illustrates the teleological movement towards the protagonist's greater autonomy that David Parker observes in canonical life writing, for example, in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). There are quite a few similarities between this classic and Almond's autobiographical stories: both are so-called *Künstlerromane* that thematise how the protagonist becomes a writer, and Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and Almond's David share a movement away from Catholic faith and the Church (Coghlan 86). Their loss of faith also involves a separation from their parents. As I explained with regard to Boym's concepts of nostalgia, Almond's stories evoke a return to a lost home; but the reverse movement, the separation from home, is also thematised in *Counting Stars*, as in many stories that feature an adolescent protagonist. As David and his love interest Theresa walk away from Felling to engage in behaviour that the Church would consider sinful, it is said that they leave behind the "narrowness of their homes" in favour of the wider world (Almond, *Counting Stars*; see also Coghlan 93). In a similar vein, Nolan Dalrymple associates the eroticised visits of an angel to the "possibility of flight" and "the desire for escape from the constraints of childhood" (113), in this case, subverting David's catholic upbringing. As Boym notes with regard to reflective nostalgia, "[a] modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, both at once" (51). *Counting Stars* thematises David's coming of age and separation of his parents, while it is informed by the deep longing to be reunited with them, as I have described above.

Parker builds on the argument that Smith and Watson provide in *Reading Autobiography* that "canonical life narratives tend to privilege a certain teleological pattern of development in which there is some conclusive epiphany of self-understanding, seen in terms of individual autonomy and separateness" (8). In Parker's view, however, this pattern is "time-bound

and culturally relative,” as he observes in autobiographies “a relatively recent shift of moral feeling away from the attainment of autonomous authenticity as the highest achievement of the human spirit, towards a much more other-centred ethic in which self is understood in relation to the recognition of significant others” (Parker, “Ethicism” 8–9). In making sense of this trend, Parker finds inspiration in the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor’s reflection on the self: “One of Taylor’s crucial formulations is that we are selves only within what he calls ‘webs of interlocution’” (Parker, “Narratives” 138). This take on identity construction matches with a stance in literature about adolescents. Leander Duthoy has approached Young Adult literature in related terms when he studied the construction of the adolescent Jacob Todd’s identity in Aidan Chambers’ *Postcards From No Man’s Land* as “shaped by the intertexts in his socio-cultural environment” (326). In the examples that Parker puts forward, parents and people we meet early in life are privileged in establishing the conversations (or the intertexts) that build a sense of self. Such intergenerational alliances help to root “a self in moral space” (Parker, “Narratives” 139). Parker notes that when parents play this role in recent life writing, they often “tend to be obscure figures, brought to prominence only in and by the texts of their children or grandchildren, who are themselves typically much more highly educated and often even eminent in their own right” (“Narratives” 141). This also holds for David in *Counting Stars*, but as Parker highlights, such a difference in education does not discredit the (grand)parents’ influence:

the recent texts typically discover significant sources of self in the figures of parents and grandparents. If in the earlier texts the immediate familial past is stifling of the writer’s individuality, the more recent texts tend to find in their forebears qualities that merit attention and respect and that have come to shape the narrating self in important ways. (141)

Parker mentions Joyce’s *Portrait* as an example of the former, and Seamus Heaney’s “Digging” of the latter. Almond’s *Counting Stars* also exemplifies the trend that Parker describes, the shift from “the intergenerational narrative of autonomy” to “the intergenerational narrative of relationality” (141–142).

The opening scene, which echoes *Portrait*, already makes clear that the stories in *Counting Stars* are not just about an individual, let alone about the narrator’s younger self:

She started with The Universe. Then she wrote The Galaxy, The Solar System, The Earth, Europe, England, Felling, Our House, The Kitchen, The White Chair With A Hundred Holes Like Stars, then her name, Margaret, and she paused.

Not David is the focus of attention, but his younger sister Margaret, and she sees herself as situated in ever expanding circles of belonging. Mary wants to know where to find “the middle of the world,” which is also the title of this story. The children first speculate that there really is not one, but after they have visited their father’s grave and reunite in the kitchen, the narrator grants the possibility that it might exist after all and be situated right there: “We ate huge slices of the warm bread, sighed at the sweetness of raisins, caught the melting butter with our tongues, squeezed in tight at the middle of the world.” Not the individual space of the adolescent’s bedroom is what this collection puts forward as the centre, nor a special location where he experiences epiphanic insights, as some Young Adult novels do, but rather the communal space where the family gathers to share food as well as stories.

This focus on his close family was part of the earliest genesis of *Counting Stars*, as Almond explained in an interview:

I thought, I want to write some stories for the people that I love, so they are written for my sisters and my brother. They were a way of dealing with experiences in my own childhood and not confronting them directly but using them as a kind of basis for fiction to reimagine them. (Joosen)

Almond also dedicated *Counting Stars* to the entire family, and the first story he wrote, “The Fusilier,” was not one in which he himself is the centre of attention, but rather his sister Mary, who ran away to join a street band. In this story, David is an observer rather than the main character. The last story that he wrote was “The Kitchen,” which explicitly stresses the importance of community:

‘Death is separation,’ says Dad. ‘It’s when you’re torn away from those who have hardly known you, and who will have trouble in remembering you.’ He touches Mary on the cheek. ‘Like you and Margaret,’ he says. ‘You would always have difficulty in remembering me.’

The citation shows that the narrator is not just aware of his own process of remembering but also attuned to that of his sisters, who were younger than him when their father died and find it harder to recall him. As Almond explains:

the act of creation, the act of creativity was an act of healing for myself, for my sisters, for my family and also weirdly, it was a way of going back to me when I was a little boy and to my sisters when they were little girls and saying, ‘it will be okay, it will be alright.’ (Joosen, “Interview”)

This is what Parker calls the “other-centred ethic” in autobiographical writing, “in which self is understood in relation to the recognition of significant others” (see above). While some stories are focused on David’s individual growth and “The Fusilier” thematises his sister Mary’s desire to break free (Latham 25), the separation through death that he and his siblings experienced was so fierce that his need for autonomy is always matched with an equally important desire to feel connected with his family.

Moreover, what Parker terms “the intergenerational narrative of relationality” also operates in *Counting Stars* in the sense that David recognises himself in his parents, not just his father but also his mother. While the former’s death is a prominent theme, the actual relationship with the latter is more extensively developed. First, there is a strong physical resemblance between the narrator and his mother. In “My Mother’s Photographs,” he says that he and his siblings “are photographs ourselves. Her image is upon us.” In the street, he is stopped by strangers: “They saw the shape of her face in mine.” These moments of literal recognition are prompts for the people of Felling to recall stories about his mother, stories to which the narrator also contributes to himself. The relationship with the mother is not limited to the biological kinship that is highlighted by the children’s resemblance to her, but also illustrates the common ground between childhood and adulthood that Marah Gubar (2013) has theorised in her understanding of kinship: Gubar highlights that despite the differences between the phases of life, children and adults share their humanity and this allows for joint experiences. In Almond’s stories, the communal traits and experiences between the different generations in David’s family are present in overt and more subtle ways. In the relationship between David and his mother, kinship takes the shape of a capacity for empathy and a joint need for stories.

The mother is the moral centre of *Counting Stars*, an emblem of strength, goodness and love. As David’s father asks the children on his deathbed: “Do you understand you’re in the presence of one of God’s chosen angels?” More important than the physical resemblance is that David’s mother passes on to the children her values: love for the family, empathy and the power of the imagination. Just as the mother is shown looking after the children, the children care for her when arthritis makes her less mobile. They make sure to get home in time to avoid her growing worried. The mother is evoked as an open-minded person who does not judge: when David tells her about the gossip that he’s heard about the seamstress Miss Golightly, Mam tells him: “there wasn’t a harmful bone in the woman’s body.” David consequently befriends the seamstress and cares for her, resembling his mother in his efforts to support a woman so despised in the village.

Mam’s love for the family becomes not just evident in her care but also in the way she recalls and cherishes the moments that they spent together. In

“The Kitchen,” she remembers a day that the family was picnicking on the beach, similar to the reminiscences that the narrator collects in the stories. Like the narrator and his father, she is a storyteller, and she uses the imagination to deal with grief. Mam suffers two severe losses in the book, first of her daughter Barbara, and then of her husband. She shows David how grief can be faced without being completely torn down: through letting yourself be comforted, through remembrance and through the imagination. As mentioned above, when a villager sees Mam and Barbara walking together a week after the girl’s death, this idea brings comfort to the mother, who does not discredit it as nonsense. In fact, she instils in her son the belief in the supernatural. In “Where Your Wings Were,” one of Almond’s most reprinted stories (Latham 6), David’s mother says that he had wings in the space underneath his shoulder blades and that he’ll grow them again if he is a good person and goes to heaven. This story thematises both their resemblance, as their belief in the supernatural is a joint source of inspiration, and their strongest point of dissonance, as it testifies to her strong faith, and his deviation from it.

Only in his loss of faith does David disappoint his mother, similar to Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *Portrait*. But unlike that novel, it does not break up the family, even though it deeply hurts the mother. David’s father is more understanding. Paradoxically, it is through fostering his son’s individuality that their ties are strengthened, as he encourages David to follow his own path: “Just don’t leave us behind. You’ll need us waiting here with our love.” What is striking in all the appearances of the father in *Counting Stars*, is the explicitness with which he repeatedly expresses his faith in his son’s abilities and bright future. In doing so, he stresses their differences as well as the continuity between them: “Dad said that I was carrying the dreams of the past, that I was a pioneer” and “Dad said I had the world in the palm of my hand” (“The Baby”; see also “The Time Machine” and “The Subtle Body”). The father’s trust in his son’s capabilities is sustained when David loses his faith in adolescence, as is the mother’s love. Together, David’s parents equip him with the confidence and the skills he needs and uses as an adult narrator: self-confidence, hope, empathy, imagination and strong family ties. While David develops his individuality and learns to recognise his own talents and assert his voice, *Counting Stars* is also an intergenerational narrative of relationality. It suggests that it is the rootedness in a loving family that has fostered this character—a community to which he is happy to return and pay tribute.

## Conclusion

Life writing studies offers a rich theoretical framework and cultural context in which to situate and interpret texts that narrate the development of

life and the self, especially those that are explicitly (auto)biographical, like David Almond's. As Gilmore and Marshall explain, writing and studying autobiographical texts is always complex:

Although 'you lived it, you remember it, you write it' has a common-sense appeal, on the seeming simplicity of self-representation, theories and practitioners, if not all reviewers and readers agree: Even the aspects that seem the most straightforward are not. ("Epilogue")

Within the field of life writing studies, many critics rely on the methodology and principles that have been outlined by Smith and Watson in *Reading Autobiography*, as I have done here. They help to reflect on various aspects of the stories, of which I have developed in particular the relationship between paratext and text, narratological features (author, narrator, protagonist, other characters), the notion of truth, considerations of genre and the idea of intergenerational relationality. Combined with memory studies and author interviews, life writing studies has helped me interpret Almond's explicitly autobiographical work throughout this chapter, but perhaps even more importantly, to understand the status that his childhood memories can be given in literary analyses. In doing so, I have prioritised passages and stories in which the past, memory and the fictionalisation of recollections are thematised, while also considering aspects of the stories that are related to these themes, but express them less explicitly. Since theories of life writing are not limited to self-proclaimed autobiographical books, the tendencies that I have discussed here may also extend to Almond's other work. An interesting avenue for further research would be to see what instances of restorative and reflective nostalgia can be discerned in his novels, and on what levels they can be read as intergenerational narratives of relationality.

Close reading autobiographical fiction through the lens of life writing and memory studies also helps to understand the stories' importance in Almond's oeuvre and the influence that they had on him as a person. As explained above, Almond wrote *Counting Stars* before he started *Skellig*, and the stories can be considered his first children's stories, even if some of them were also published for adults. In an interview, he explains the impact of this kind of writing:

there is darkness in all of my work, but I have become less overtly dark and I have become less willing to indulge darkness as a way of controlling a story. Probably, maybe, as a person I have become more hopeful, more optimistic and maybe that is something to do with writing for young people. (Almond in Joosen, "Interview"; see also Latham 5)

This optimism is most evident in the relationship between David and his father—despite the cancer, the pain and the loss, their conversations are marked by hope and confidence in David’s abilities. Whether these dialogues are part of the factual or fictional layers of the book are beyond the scope of this analysis; more important is the place they hold in the development of his oeuvre. Finding a new, hopeful take on his memories was an important step in the direction that Almond took in becoming a children’s writer after authoring two collections of stories for adults. After all, various features that I have discussed in relation to intergenerational relationality in this chapter are common themes in children’s books more broadly, such as the idea of might (Beauvais), the centrality of family and family meals (Alston) and the tension between the desire for autonomy and the feeling of being connected to a community. The fact that the notion of intergenerational relationality as well as the idea of hope are so strongly expressed in *Counting Stars* may help to explain that it was published, if not initially conceived of, as a children’s book. Almond sees these stories as having “paved the way for the creation of *Skellig*” (Latham 4), which led to great critical acclaim and the recognition of a new kind of writer in himself: “I found a new way of writing, a new kind of power, a new kind of confidence and a new kind of rhythm which enabled me to write *Skellig* and then to find myself as a children’s author” (Almond in Joosen, “Interview”). While *Counting Stars* took David Almond back to his past to rediscover and re-imagine his childhood memories, it also brought into being a new stage in his life and authorship, the beginning of a new future.

## Note

- 1 In 2011, *Slog’s Dad* appeared as a graphic novel with illustrations by Dave McKean. For this chapter, I have studied the version without illustrations that appeared in *Half a Creature from the Sea*. An image from the graphic novel features on the cover of this book.

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## 2 Social and material minds through the lens of cognitive narratology in *Clay* and *Bone Music*

*Emma-Louise Silva*

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee  
From darkness to promote me?

(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1667)

In David Almond's *Clay* (2005) and *Bone Music* (2021), the protagonists seek meaningful experiences revolving around nature, art, and other people in their lives. In *Clay*, a 14-year-old altar boy named Davie sees his world become shaken up when troubled Stephen Rose arrives in the town of Felling with plans to create life from clay. *Bone Music*, meanwhile, sees 15-year-old Sylvia Carr's evolution from despising her stay in the Northern countryside to becoming one with nature and finding her voice to speak up about environmental issues. In both books, the protagonists have epiphanic experiences through their encounters with friends, family, and members of their communities, as well as with the artistic objects that they craft. The characters' development is thereby intensely shaped by creating cultural artefacts from natural resources together with peers. The raw material for these young artists' creations hails from the natural world. In sculpting a figure with clay from a pond by the quarry in Braddock's Garden, Davie and his friend Stephen become engrossed in their creature's possible connection to the death of the bully Mouldy in *Clay*. In *Bone Music*, Sylvia and Gabriel create a flute from the hollow bone of a dead buzzard found in the forest, which connects Sylvia with a "very ancient" girl (119).

Both Davie in *Clay* and Sylvia in *Bone Music* are depicted thinging by respective means of a clay figure and a hollow bone flute. Lambros Malafouris describes thinging as "thinking and feeling *with*, *through* and *about* things," an idea that has its roots in Martin Heidegger's essay "Das Ding" (Malafouris, "Bringing Things to Mind" 764; Malafouris, "Creative Thinging" 141, italics in original). Davie and Stephen in *Clay*, and Sylvia and Gabriel in *Bone Music* experience intense forms of "mutual engagement" that depict thinging happening "in-between humans and things"

(Malafouris, “Creative Thinging” 150). By examining these intricate social encounters and the meaningful “things” as evoked in *Clay and Bone Music*, we can explore Almond’s portrayal of “social” and “material” minds via a cognitive lens. Building on the work of cognitive narratologist Alan Palmer regarding “fictional minds” (“Construction of Fictional Minds”; *Fictional Minds*; “Universal Minds”), I probe how Almond evokes “social minds” (Palmer, *Social Minds*) and “material minds” (Boivin) in *Clay and Bone Music*, depicting his protagonists’ thoughts by means of their engagement with other people on the one hand, and their engagement with material artefacts created from nature on the other. As I suggest, Almond’s evocations of social and material minds underscore how influential human relationships and material objects are in the coming-of-age process.

### Cognitive narratology: Fictional minds and social minds

The field of children’s literature studies is no stranger to cognitive approaches. As early as 2001, Maria Nikolajeva explored the “depiction of consciousness in children’s fiction.” Since then, valuable research has been conducted in the field regarding cognitive studies.<sup>1</sup> Cognitive narratology, an approach that studies the “nexus of narrative and mind” (Herman, “Cognitive Narratology” 46), helps to map out which narrative elements mark the developing minds of Davie in *Clay* and of Sylvia in *Bone Music*. Cognitive narratology integrates hypotheses from philosophy of mind and various cognitive sciences in considerations of literary texts: works of fiction are explored by means of “real-mind” discourses. Marco Caracciolo has argued that research on real minds can lead to illuminating insights into “the psychological processes of fictional characters and the textual strategies for their presentation” (3). This forms an interesting backdrop when considering characters’ thoughts as presented in books, and the manners in which authors portray the minds of their characters. If real-mind discourses can generate interesting vantage points for the study of literature, David Herman suggests that narratology is in turn a worthy form of cognitive science (“Stories as a Tool”). The real-mind discourses I draw on in this chapter are, first, postcognitivist approaches to the mind, which can help in situating social relations and mind-body-world linkages (or the social minds depicted in Almond’s books), and second, material engagement theory, which can aid in assessing the importance of artefacts when it comes to characters’ evolving thoughts (or the material minds that are depicted).

As for the perspective of postcognitivism, I engage with so-called “second-generation” approaches to the cognitive study of literature (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 46; Herman and Vervaeck 199–203), basing my framework

on postcognitivist accounts of cognition as studied in philosophy of mind (Newen, de Bruin and Gallagher). Whereas “first-generation” or “cognitivist” approaches to the mind concentrate on analogies between the mind and computers, “second-generation” or “postcognitivist” vantage points shift the focus to mind, body, and world. Malafouris illustrates this paradigm shift as follows:

The study of the mind, like any other research field, is historically constrained by its grounding metaphors, and since the advent of cognitivism in the sixties, the metaphor of the mind as a computer has been a dominant one [...] it can no longer be justified or tolerated. The resurgence of interest in process philosophy, pragmatism and phenomenology, and on the other hand, the thriving nature of theories of embodied, extended, enacted and distributed cognition within the cognitive sciences, provide a variety of conceptual means for rethinking the notion of creativity.  
 (“Creative Thinging” 141)

Much like the shift that Malafouris describes in the field of philosophy of mind, the field of narratology has undergone a similar change from so-called “classical” takes on narratology to “postclassical” forms (Herman and Vervaeck 110–300). As Brian McHale points out in his revisiting of Dorrit Cohn’s “classical” *Transparent Minds* (1978), cognitive narratology “looks like a strong candidate, subsuming and completing Cohn’s project, but also superseding it” (123). McHale charts this shift from Cohn’s “classical” speech-category approaches to mind depiction (21–140) to “postclassical” perspectives such as Palmer’s framework of fictional minds (2004) and social minds (2010). McHale refers to Palmer’s argument that evocations of characters’ minds “can be detected in many places in a narrative text,” and “not just at those points where the various speech category modes of consciousness representation give us more or less direct access to the contents of their minds” (119). Palmer rightly points out that what he calls the “whole minds of fictional characters” are constituted by an array of states of mind, encompassing amalgams of processes involving “mood, desires, emotions, sensations,” “attention and memory,” “dispositions, beliefs, attitudes, judgements, skills, knowledge, imagination, intellect, volition, character traits, and habits of thought,” but also “intentions, purposes, motives, and reasons for action” (“Construction of Fictional Minds” 31). In other words, representations of characters’ minds must also be considered in “undifferentiated prose,” or prose that often escapes the nets of “classical” speech category approaches (McHale 119).

Such instances of prose in *Clay* and *Bone Music* involve both the cognitive and affective experiences of characters, and according to Uri Margolin, “it goes without saying that the totality of an individual’s mental life, be it actual or created by a literary text, also includes affects and desires or

volitions and that the cognitive component is intimately interrelated with both” (272). Take for example, the following instance of Davie’s thinking in *Clay*: “Time moves forward, so we’re told. Day leads to night leads to day leads to night. Past, present, future. Child, teenager, adult. Birth, life, death. But sometimes time gets stuck. We can’t move on” (271). This age-focused passage not only evokes Davie’s cognitive understanding of the phenomenon of passing time during the life course but it also suggests his emotional interpretation, which is hinted at by means of his suggestion that “time gets stuck” (271), and that troubling times can make it hard to carry on with one’s life. Here, the realms of the cognitive and the affective intermingle in Almond’s depiction of his protagonist’s mind. Or, as Palmer puts it, “cognitions cause emotions; emotions cause cognitions; cognitions tend to have some sort of emotional component; emotions contain cognitive elements” (“Universal Minds” 213). In other words, it is often impossible to untangle the cognitive from the affective, and vice versa.

Palmer delves into portrayals of cognitive and affective phenomena in literature in *Fictional Minds*, in which he discusses “the workings of characters’ minds” (1). He points out that in real life we do not have access to people’s minds at all times. In fact, we often try to work out what others are thinking on the basis of “speech, body language, behavior, and action” (“Construction of Fictional Minds” 29). In fiction, readers can, however, be presented with characters’ minds in a more direct manner. Like McHale, Palmer argues that it does not suffice to study only speech categories when it comes to portraying thoughts in fiction, because of the analogy it sets up between “fictional speech” and “fictional thought” (“Construction of Fictional Minds” 30). In other words, thoughts as depicted in fiction cannot be analysed with the same apparatus used to analyse characters’ speech acts. Palmer goes on to explain that typologies hailing from “classical” narratology encourage “an internalist perspective on fictional minds that stresses those aspects that are inner, introspective, solitary, private, and individual”; he argues that an externalist vantage point is also needed, which “stresses the outer, active, public, social, and behavioral aspects of the mind” (“Universal Minds” 219). Palmer concludes that approaches to mind depiction should show interest in “the mind beyond the skin” (“Universal Minds” 219). To foster such approaches, he has explored how social minds are evoked in fiction, focusing on “the whole of the social mind in action” (“Fictional Minds” 53). In *Social Minds in the Novel*, he explores group thinking as depicted in literary texts, based on what he deems “intermental thought,” or “joint, group, shared, or collective thought” (4). Palmer provides the following example to illustrate what is meant by such social minds:

[James] Wertsch tells the story of how his daughter lost her shoes and he helped her to remember where she had left them. Wertsch asks: Who

is doing the remembering here? He is not, because he had no prior knowledge of where they were, and she is not, because she had forgotten where they were and was only able to remember by means of her father's promptings. It was therefore the intermental unit formed by the two of them that remembered. (*Social Minds* 43)

Palmer's anecdote shows both how minds can be socially distributed (merging adult and child minds *nota bene*) and how other people can influence and steer our thoughts. In Almond's *Bone Music*, the following passage describing Sylvia Carr's first experience of the "music night" at a social club (44) shows how a group of people can think and act together. Sylvia is moved by the performance, which in turn has its effects on her thoughts:

Sylvia swigged her coke and tried to resist. She tried to tell herself that this was ancient stuff, stupid stuff. But the music kept touching her, moving into her. The garish lights were dimmed. She started to relax, to move past her shyness and her resistance, to give herself up to what was going on. An old man, old as Andreas, dressed in a dusty brown suit, played a set of pipes as if they were part of his own body, as if the music from them was the music of his own breath. The room was hushed as he played. When he stopped, it was as if they had been released from a spell. Other pipers, other accordion players. Sylvia's attention weaved in and out. At moments, she saw Gabriel looking across the room at her. At moments, she told herself how silly this all was. She couldn't be so moved by stuff like this. (50–51)

Further on in *Bone Music*, the effect that the music has on the characters is described as follows: "The music poured through the doors after them into the night, into their bodies and minds" (56–57). These passages show social minds at work in Almond's novel: Sylvia's mind is influenced by the social setting and the communal ambience that she inhabits. Here, the musical performance binds the musicians and the cross-age audience, including Sylvia. The pipers, the accordion players, and the people shushing the voices that surround Sylvia have repercussions on her thoughts and feelings. As Palmer notes, "the real communication is going on by means of looks, body language, and gestures" (*Social Minds* 2). The collective thinking evoked in this passage prompts a joint call for silence so that the audience's attention can fully concentrate on the music being played. Furthermore, the musician's instrument is depicted as "part of his own body" (Almond, *Bone Music* 51). To analyse this kind of fusion between the piper and his instrument, and building on the aforementioned instances

of fictional minds and social minds, another form of analysing minds is useful, namely an approach that studies material minds.

### Material engagement theory: Material minds

Nicole Boivin, the author of *Material Cultures, Material Minds: The Impact of Things on Human Thought, Society, and Evolution*, explains that “[h]uman thought has not only used the world as a prop for expressing itself, but has, in fact, often been enabled by that world” (47). In other words, just as humans make use of their surroundings in order to express themselves, their thoughts are in turn inextricably prompted by their environment. In *Clay and Bone Music*, the protagonists’ thoughts are often described by means of their interactions with their material surroundings, incorporating “objects, landscapes, environments, and bodies” (Boivin 25). Material engagement theory forms part of the shift towards a heightened awareness of the intense materiality that is part and parcel of human experience across the lifespan.

This material turn has been discussed in the field of children’s literature studies: Nikolajeva, for example, points out that the turn “reflects the complexity, plurality and ambiguity of our understanding of childhood and its representation in fiction produced and marketed for young audiences” (“Recent Trends” 133). In *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children’s and Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Seelinger Trites explains that “children’s literature may be a largely discursive phenomenon, but it is still heavily invested in exposing children to innumerable aspects of materiality, such as human embodiment, toys and other physical objects, physical spaces and geographies, and the environment” (xviii). Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Macarena García-González, then, have stressed the importance of “new materialism” for the field of children’s literature studies (2020). This chapter aims to add to that body of research by looking at both material and social minds and the ways in which these minds are depicted in children’s literature.

As for the angle of material engagement theory, this focus on materiality has become prominent in theories that stress the importance of human beings’ engagements with the material world encompassing them. Malafouris works with the example of clay to elucidate how “creative material engagement” takes shape, quite literally (“Bringing Things to Mind” 675):

the vase has used the potter’s muscles and skills to bring about its final form as much as the potter has used the material affordances of the clay to create the form of the vase [...]. The feeling *of* and *for* clay designates, on the one hand, the experience of absorption in and submission to the material, and, on the other, the parallel active exploration of and



ongoing improvisation with the material. (“Bringing Things to Mind” 765–766, italics in original)

Parallels can of course be made with the clay figuration in *Clay*, and with Sylvia’s sculpting of the hollow bone into a flute in *Bone Music*. These artefacts teach Davie and Sylvia more about artistry than do the art classes at school.

When it comes to the art of creating stories, Almond commented that “it’s almost like you are this *thing* that the story, that the music, that the words come through” (“An Evening with David Almond,” emphasis added). He even aligned the story depicted in *Bone Music* with his writing process, mentioning that “actually, the hollow bone is a bit like a pen,” exclaiming:

Maybe it’s crackers but, I’d begin to think, well, maybe a pen is a hollow bone, maybe all instruments of art are like hollow bones, because here’s something, it’s a narrow tube, through which my words come through, but through these *things* come all kinds of experiences, they appear on notebook pages, and then they appear in published books, and they look very kind of organised, and very civilised, but I think any book that is worthwhile, has something of the wilderness in it. (“An Evening with David Almond,” emphasis added)

Almond’s description of things aiding in the production of works of art shows how important the practical parts of the creative process are. Danielle Boutet points to forms of material agency that are essential for “thinking through practice” (30). This “generative process” (Boutet 38) involves material tools and instruments which enable thoughts to arise. In order to explain how this “thinking and feeling *with, through* and *about* things” (Malafouris, “Bringing Things to Mind” 764, italics in original) is evoked in *Clay* and *Bone Music*, an analysis of the young artists at work must now be put forward regarding the evolving craftsmanship of Sylvia and Davie.

In *Clay*, the first time Davie and his friend Geordie see Stephen Rose is when they spot him at the church graveyard with a “slab of yellowy clay under his arm” that he had been given by gravediggers (15). Stephen has moved in with his aunt (known by the locals of Felling as “Crazy Mary”): his father died of a stroke and his mother “went mad” and resides at a mental health unit (7). As Davie and Geordie approach Stephen at the graveyard, he “quickly pressed three holes and a slit” into the slab of clay he is holding, and adds “two eyes, a nose, a mouth,” and then, “he made it talk in a squeaky voice,” while asking Davie to say hello to it (16). Stephen responds to Davie’s “hello” by answering for the clay figure: “‘Hello, Davie,’ squeaked the clay. ‘Thank you for believing in me’” (17).

This marks the moment when Stephen realises that Davie will be perfect material to include in his plans to create life from clay. After all, Stephen sees that Davie believes in the clay figure.

Davie becomes fascinated by the clay figures Stephen makes, and, after a visit to Crazy Mary's house, he agrees to help Stephen find good clay in the pond at Braddock's Garden (34). This symbolises the beginning of Stephen helping Davie to defend himself against the bullies Skinner, Poke and Mouldy, and of Davie helping Stephen with the "purpose" that Stephen envisions for him (119). He wants Davie to steal the "body and blood of Christ" during his duties as an altar boy at church services, and to help him create "[a] bliddy monster. A thing that'll terrify Mouldy and brutes like Mouldy. A thing that'll even kill him for us, if that's what we tell it to do" (131).<sup>2</sup> Once Davie has assembled the crumbs of "Communion wafer" and the "wine-stained cloth" as Stephen asked of him (140; 143), he joins Stephen in the cave at Braddock's Garden, where he has laid out "a heap of clay" that resembles a body (173). Then, Stephen and Davie create their monster, "Clay":

We kneel and turn the sticky sloppy clay into the shape of a man. And we become engrossed in it, and sometimes I forget myself and where I am, and I forget how crazy this would seem if someone else from Felling stumbled into the quarry tonight. [...]

We smooth out the flaws, we touch in details, we smile and sigh at the beauty of our work. Before we finish the man's chest Stephen presses a wizened rose hip there to make a heart. We close the chest and rake the shapes of ribs with our fingertips. We put a conker inside the skull for a brain. We form the features of his face. Sycamore seeds make eyes, ash keys make the ears, dried-out hawthorn berries make nostrils, twigs and grass stems make his hair. (Almond, *Clay* 175–176)

The creative process takes the form of thinging, as Davie and Stephen become more and more engrossed in their engagement with the materials they are working with:

And we ourselves become somehow not ourselves, but we turn subtler, weirder, less attached to our bodies, less attached to our names. And often I look across the body lying on the floor to Stephen and expect to see him gone, or to see him turned to a shadow or a spirit without any substance to him. And he shimmers and sways, and he does seem to move in and out of sight. (Almond, *Clay* 179)

While the two anticipate the awakening of their monster, Stephen tells Davie about his childhood troubles, and then he leans towards "Clay,"

whose “limbs twitch” (189). The clay monster then “turns his head and looks straight into Stephen Rose’s eyes” (189). During this “generative process” (Boutet 38), Davie is described as merging with the act of creating the clay figure, forgetting himself and his surroundings and becoming wholly concentrated on the shaping of the clay, thereby providing an example of a material mind at work (Boivin), thinging “with, through and about the clay” (Malafouris, “Creative Thinging” 142). The artistic object Davie creates has a profound effect on his sense of self in that he becomes immersed in the clay sculpting process.

In a similar way, Sylvia is depicted thinging in *Bone Music*. Her new-found friend in Blackwood, Gabriel, introduces her to the tradition of hollow bones used as flutes, explaining that “they were used in initiation rites” and that they “helped children to go through the transformations that would turn them into adults” (61). Hollow bones will also play a crucial part in the epiphanies that Sylvia experiences while she is in Blackwood. The first time Sylvia plays a hollow bone flute marks a profound experience for her:

She closed her eyes. She rested a finger on one of the finger holes. She breathed, and yes, she began to hear and feel how her breath could be turned to music. She covered another fingerhole. She breathed harder. She found the note again and held it for a second, another second, another second.

It made her dizzy, dreamy.

She breathed the notes. Her lips and tongue tingled with the vibrations.

She lowered the hollow bone, opened her eyes. [...]

She breathed again, found the note more easily this time. Found the way to play a little louder. Found out how to change the note by using the fingerholes. Began to find out how to take control. She felt the notes inside herself as well as hearing them outside herself. Closed her eyes, relaxed into the music. (Almond, *Bone Music* 81–82)

Here, as was the case with Davie’s experience of creating the monster “Clay,” Sylvia learns by practising with the hollow bone flute: quite simply, “she learned how to play it by playing it” (121), without any specific instructions involved. The importance of a focused and intense engagement with the material world is highlighted both in *Clay* and in *Bone Music*. As Malafouris puts it: “we create things that very often alter the ecology of our minds, as well as shape the boundaries of our thinking and the ways we understand and encounter the world” (“Creative Thinging” 140). This point of view does not only ring loud for the presumably adult potters’ experiences with clay that Malafouris discusses but it also holds

for adolescents' experiences of coming of age via material objects as evoked in *Clay* and *Bone Music*. Just as Malafouris describes the "agentive and animate quality of clay" and the "participatory interaction between the potter and the clay" in his work on material engagement theory ("Creative Thinging" 150), children's literature scholars often resort to metaphors of "sculpting" and "shaping" to convey coming-of-age processes in fiction targeted at young audiences. Trites, for example, writes that "adolescent growth has thus been defined with the following metaphors, all of which involve mapping embodied concepts onto psychological growth: journeying, sculpting, forming, painting" ("Growth" 66–67). These metaphors often have a material connotation: sculpting, forming, and painting are acts of artistry that cannot take place without the materials they rely on.

In what follows, I apply the method of "comparative close reading," a reading strategy used in literary criticism, which is explored in depth in Chapter 6. I engage in comparative close readings of *Clay* and *Bone Music* informed by an interdisciplinary framework based on cognitive narratology, material engagement theory, age studies, and children's literature studies. The close readings will show that Almond's depictions of adolescent protagonists in the two novels are striking examples of social minds and material minds at work. Furthermore, the analyses will demonstrate how these particular depictions of minds can help to better understand the coming of age of characters by means of their epiphanic experiences that emerge from social and material encounters.

### **Social minds in *Clay* and *Bone Music*: "Our life outside of school is bigger than life inside"**

When it comes to the portrayal of social minds in *Clay* and *Bone Music*, Almond depicts his characters within frameworks that include their families, their friends, their communities, and their schools. As Rosemary Ross Johnston explains, many books in Almond's oeuvre can be characterised by "a family setting" and "the ready sense of the beginning of an episode of events that will clearly be significant" (3). Both Davie and Sylvia are evoked as very much embedded within such societal structures. However, this does not mean that Davie and Sylvia have high opinions of the social concentric circles around them. In fact, many of these social relations involve intergenerational conflict. Cognitive narratology forms a useful framework with which to uncover and analyse mechanisms of social influence and conflict. Trites writes that

the study of children's and adolescent literature shares with cognitive narratology a focus on the intersection between physical embodiment and cultural construction. That is, childhood and adolescence are

biologically-influenced stages of life that are nonetheless also structured by cultural constructions. (“Growth” 64)

By applying Palmer’s approach concerning “intermental thought” in literary texts to passages in *Clay* and *Bone Music*, one can examine how these collective thoughts are evoked “between the lines,” or, analyse parts of the texts in which the characters are not speaking to each other but in which they are thinking via “outer, active, public, social, and behavioral aspects of the mind” (Palmer, “Universal Minds” 219). By doing so, one can also consider how Davie and Sylvia’s coming of age is very much intertwined with the shared experiences they go through with peers and schoolteachers specifically. Take for example Davie’s account in *Clay* of the art teacher at school, Mr Peter Patrick “Prat” Parker (156). Perry Nodelman has pointed out that teachers in Almond’s oeuvre are often “given unflattering nicknames by their students” and “Prat” is a case in point (Almond, *Clay* 37). Davie seems to think that Prat is the best of the bunch, although he does mock his art teacher’s pedagogic strategies:

Prat was all right, but he really was a prat. He used to fling his arms about and blather on about creativity and how art was a mix of crazy wildness and tough discipline. Then he’d give out sheets of paper and put flowers and pots and animal skulls and stuff in front of us and tell us, ‘Draw what you see...’ then he’d hold his finger up and his eyes would get wide like he was saying something dead profound, ‘... but do your seeing with the eyes of the imagination. Off you go, my artists!’ (Almond, *Clay* 48)

Davie recounts how he and his friend Geordie would usually mess about and splash paint on the paper and name their artworks “The Message,” for example, purely to ridicule Prat’s assignments (48–49). These artworks would then be enthusiastically received by Prat and hung on the wall. Here, Davie’s criticism towards his art teacher and his mockery of the assigned task is not something that is portrayed openly in speech acts, yet readers may detect this intergenerational tension by piecing together Davie’s thoughts, which are provided via first-person narration, with Prat’s (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) actions of hanging the “artworks” on the wall, and by contrasting them with the much more engaged experience that Davie has when he is making clay figures with Stephen.

Prat’s response to Stephen’s clay figures shows age norms at work:

‘Had I been told that they were the work of a 31-old professional, I would not have been surprised.’ He looked into our eyes. ‘But for them to be the work of a boy, a boy who by all accounts—and I cannot

expand—is in a condition of distress. Well, it is humbling. These are living things. Clay. Stone. Things of the earth. But alive!’ (50)

Here, Almond is setting the stage for the theme of epiphanic coming of age in *Clay* by depicting Prat’s impression of clay figures as both “astonishing” and yet “so ordinary” (49). This reflection echoes Richard Ellmann’s remark in his biography of James Joyce that the author’s literary evocations of epiphanies (in *Dubliners* [1914] 2012 and *A Portrait of the Artist of a Young Man* [1916] 1993) mark a profound sense of revelation in which “the ordinary is the extraordinary” (Ellmann 5).

Stephen’s clay figures are “so ordinary” yet “astonishing” at the same time, they are “lifelike” yet “beautifully formed” (Almond, *Clay* 49). Prompted by Stephen’s creations, Prat brings clay to the classroom so that his pupils can try to mould figures themselves: “He held up a little sphere of it between his fingers. ‘The basest thing of all,’ he said. ‘A lump of muck. Soft, oozy, slimy, slithery, formless stuff. Could it be that we are drawn to it because it reminds us of ourselves—of our own human formlessness and muckiness?’” (154). Prat reflects on the fact that clay can remind us of ourselves when young, and of our supposed need to still be “formed” by institutions such as the school system. While he can admire the results of Stephens’ creation, unlike Davie, Prat never becomes as engaged in the creative process itself. In contrast, the boys’ social and material minds as they bring their clay figure to life is a much more intense joint experience that takes the form of an epiphany contributing to their coming of age.

Davie is more profoundly shaped by his experience of creating the clay “monster” with Stephen than by the clay-moulding he does in class. Whereas he produces “stupid clumsy hopeless things” at school, he creates “a lovely creature” with Stephen from clay that they find in the pond at Braddock’s Garden (95; 179). These instances of clay that are thread throughout the novel bring the social implications of creativity into focus: whereas clay is brought into the classroom by the teacher in order to instruct the pupils on how to mould figures, it is scooped up from a pond by Davie and Stephen in their free time and their interaction with the clay is their own affair. These two experiences with clay have completely different outcomes. Davie resists “thought control” by means of the education system, whereas he embraces the epiphanic experience he has with clay outside of the school walls. The lyrics of Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” come to mind: “We don’t need no education, we don’t need no thought control” (Waters), seeing as the clay that is brought to the classroom results in meaningless “hopeless things” (95), while the clay that is sculpted by Davie and Stephen has the power to exert “thought control” over their intense social and material experience.

Likewise, in *Bone Music*, school is sometimes cast aside as a negative factor of growing up, or at least, as a place where no “real” experiences will be gained. Sylvia’s toiling at a hollow bone in Gabriel’s shed in order to make a flute has much more of an influence on her than does her time at school: she feels that she has gained in confidence after she has made the hollow bone flute and learnt how to play it. As for Gabriel, who is highly intelligent, he strongly criticises the school system. Gabriel’s “amazing brain” (83) has been the subject of the school system’s will to push him towards the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) early, and to make him go to sixth form prematurely, something that he refuses to do. Instead, Gabriel expresses his wish to do “more than think”: he wants to be a “thing that can play the hollow bone” (84). During the creative process of transforming the hollow bone into a flute, however, Sylvia does reflect in a more nuanced way about the benefits of school, recognising knowledge she has picked up in a biology lesson:

‘The wing is an arm,’ said Gabriel. ‘It’s just like ours. It has an upper arm like ours, and the bone like ours is called the humerus. It has a lower arm and...’

She gasped. Second year biology with Mr Atkinson! She reached down to touch. (111)

Sylvia realises that she has, in fact, already learnt about the different parts of the buzzard wing that she is dissecting with Gabriel during a biology class at school. It is as if she finally discovers that by doing “more than thinking” to use Gabriel’s words (84)—or by *thinging*—she is garnering valuable insights, and putting what she has learnt at school to good use. In “Ontology, Epistemology and Values: Philosophy and Cognitive Science in David Almond’s *Skellig* and *My Name Is Mina*,” Trites spotlights the same mechanism, describing how “the text makes clear that that he [Michael in *Skellig*] knows what he knows by emphasising knowledge as he gains it through his five senses” (“Ontology” 52). Trites relates this to a refusal of the Cartesian split between mind and body: “none of them can *know* without embodied experiences that affect their rationality and *being*” (“Ontology” 55, italics in original). The same holds for Sylvia in *Bone Music*, where thoughts and bodily experiences are closely intertwined. These examples that are threaded throughout Almond’s oeuvre show that it is important to reflect on mind-body-world linkages, and the ways in which Almond depicts his characters’ thought processes as very much intertwined with their physical, social, cultural, and material experiences.

Towards the end of *Bone Music*, Sylvia invites Gabriel to join her at school, explaining: “I know there’s lots that’s wrong, but we’re all together there. Me, Maxine, Francesa, Mickey, all the rest. We haven’t been too

damaged by it all. And our life outside of school is bigger than life inside” (184).<sup>3</sup> Deszcz-Tryhubczak highlights the importance of such exchanges between characters by pointing out that

characters who know each other well form intermental pairs [...] as such, they are more than just the sum of diverse ideas, and yet they do not make decisions on their own: they only provide a background or a set of principles that shape decisions made by individual minds. (148)

Despite Sylvia’s positive experience regarding school knowledge, Gabriel continues to confront Sylvia with the school system’s faults: “What do we do with kids today? Stuff them into schools, trap them between four walls, cram them and test them. Where are the rites of passage now? GCSEs? A Levels?” (Almond, *Bone Music* 62). Here, as was the case with the example of Prat in *Clay*, Almond is setting the scene for the epiphanic experience of coming of age, or the rite of passage, that Sylvia experiences in the forest. In both novels, the meaningful coming-of-age experiences take place under influence of intermental couplings: between Davie and Stephen in *Clay*, and between Sylvia and Gabriel in *Bone Music*. As Malafouris points out, “this is exactly the kind of mutual engagement that we observe in the case of creative thinging, albeit not between two humans but in-between humans and things” (“Creative Thinging” 150). It is these “things” that will form the main focus of the following section, which approaches the epiphanic coming-of-age experiences in *Clay* and *Bone Music* through the lens of material minds (Boivin).

### Material minds in *Clay and Bone Music*: “Like I was his clay”

Both *Clay* and *Bone Music* feature *Bildungsroman* patterns to a certain extent, and interestingly enough, Trites points to Jerome Buckley’s definition of such patterns as follows: “Insofar as the word *Bildung* itself is related to *Bild* and *Bildnis*, it may connote ‘picture’ or ‘portrait’ as well as ‘shaping’ or ‘formation’” (Buckley qtd. in Trites, “Growth” 13–14). Readers are provided with a “portrait” of Davie in *Clay* and of Sylvia in *Bone Music*, and both novels depict the protagonists’ “formation”: they “shape” different materials in order to create cultural artefacts, and these artefacts, in turn, shape Davie and Sylvia. Trites links such narratives to “psychological growth employing another set of embodied domains, including sculpting and art” (“Growth” 13–14). The reciprocity between the shapers and the artefacts they shape can be linked to processes of thinging or thinking “with, through and about things” (Malafouris, “Creative Thinging” 142). Davie and Sylvia’s experiences of formation include coming of age via acts of creative material engagement. Davie comes of age



by means of insights gained after being manipulated by Stephen during and after their creation of the clay monster. Sylvia comes of age through crafting her flute and learning how to play it, thereby finding her voice and gaining the confidence to use her voice and her musical skills in front of large groups of people.

As for Davie's process of coming of age, his friendship with Stephen marks a disturbing yet inspiring escapade. Stephen is an outsider with a troubled past; his father has died and his mother is residing at a mental health unit. *Clay* opens with a depiction of Stephen being taken to his aunt's, known as "Crazy Mary." After having met Stephen via Father O'Mahoney, Davie and his friend Geordie visit Stephen one day and are taken to his shed, where he is busily creating his clay figures. When the three visit the wilderness of Braddock's Garden, characterised by Nolan Dalrymple as a "wild setting" that becomes a "place of refuge" (107), they are confronted by bullies, Skinner and Poke, also known as "massive Mouldy's" sidekicks (60; 64). To their surprise, Stephen defends Davie and Geordie by "stabbing," or what he refers to as "scratch[ing]" the bullies (61; 63). Stephen and Davie then create a clay "monster" that is depicted as coming to life. During their shared creational process, Davie has to find ways to deal with the manipulative Stephen, and in his nightmares, he feels "Stephen's fingers on [him], like he was forming [him], like [he] was his clay" (76). Although Davie is attracted to Stephen's luring and controlling demands at first, the "thought control" that comes with the experience ultimately leads to disempowerment. It turns out that Stephen was fully aware of how malleable Davie would be upon the moment he met him:

'Hello,' he squeaks, 'Hello, Davie.' And he laughs. 'Remember, Davie?' he says. 'Remember how you said hello back to it. Oh, what a moment that was. This lad's been sent to me, I thought. Dead ordinary, dead innocent, dead big imagination. This is just the lad I need.' (230)

The theme of shaping and moulding, with regard to both social and material trains of thought, is obviously prevalent here too: Stephen understood from the start that Davie would be pliable and go along with his plans. Nodelman has linked this manipulative side of Stephen to the clay monster in that "the giant seems to represent the force of evil that Stephen brings out of Davie—or perhaps even creates in him" (33). Harkening back to the focus on material minds here, the sheer power that the act of moulding the figure "Clay" has on Davie and on his capacities to imagine awful events is quite striking. Davie's mind becomes completely engrossed in the material he shapes, and he ultimately "feel[s] like Clay—stiff, heavy, dull" (268). This intense form of creative material engagement leads Davie to believe that "Clay" is a living thing capable of murder. As Karen Coats

points out, “over and over again in Almond’s books, we meet characters who create the truths in which they believe” (“The Possibilities of Becoming” 73). Readers have to decide whether it’s Davie’s “big imagination” that sees him showing “Clay” around Felling, pointing to the school, the hospital, the post office, the shops, and the church (245–249), and then asking the creature to lie down and die (254), all while concealing these experiences from his worried parents.

At the end of the book, Davie is astounded when he sees remnants of “Clay” in his garden: his father has salvaged the creature from his “resting place” in Braddock’s Garden. The quarry is to be filled in to create space for a new estate (112; 287). Davie’s father explains that “a bit of clay will come in useful in them sandy borders” (288). Davie describes this addition to their garden as follows: “Where he’d lain on the earth, he’d started to merge with it, turning back to the stuff called clay and not the creature Clay” (288). Here, this “extraordinary” clay creature, a powerful figment of Davie’s imagination, becomes “ordinary” again, and merges with the earth, echoing the idea that “the ordinary is the extraordinary” (Ellmann 5).

This merging with the earth strongly resembles Sylvia’s epiphanic experience in the forest in *Bone Music*, an experience that answers her question: “How could she say her mind was a forest?” (101). Part of Sylvia’s coming-of-age experience in Blackwood involves an imaginative encounter with a prehistoric girl. Sylvia feels drawn to the forest and senses “a hand” that “tugged her gently” (144). As she progresses deeper into the forest, the girl materialises as Sylvia opens up to this strange experience:

She breathed. She widened her mind and widened her eyes.

She did not resist.

She opened herself to what was happening to her.

She faced the girl, and the girl became more real as Sylvia looked at her, as the moon shone down at her. The girl allowed herself to be looked upon. She opened herself to what was happening to her. She was as tall as Sylvia. She was as old as Sylvia. (146)

As this passage demonstrates, the two girls are intensely mirrored in terms of height and age and, together, the girls carve entwining spirals into a rock with flints and hammer stones. As was the case with Davie in *Clay*, Sylvia becomes totally immersed in the materials she uses during this act of creative engagement in the forest; she “lost herself in the task,” and she was “just her hand, the stone, the movement, the mark” (149). Boivin stresses that such acts show how “human involvement with the world reflects a unity of mind and matter, and of culture and nature,” underlining that nature and culture have equally determining roles to play when it comes to material minds (25). By using natural resources, such as stones, Sylvia

and the prehistoric girl create a work of art on the rock, intertwining nature and culture. Once the engraving is complete, the girl plays the hollow bone, and Sylvia “became the music” (Almond, *Bone Music* 151). Sylvia, entranced, enters a dream during which she merges with the earth: “She began to turn to earth. Her flesh and her bones decayed. Spiders and beetles crawled over her. Worms slid through her. Maggots fed on her. Moisture seeped up from the ground. Dew seeped down from the air. The earth took her to itself” (152). This passage takes an understanding of material minds to its extreme: Sylvia dissolves into the forest floor, her mind and body disintegrate and become one with the environment. Sylvia’s dream ends with a buzzard falling to its death, a signal that the story of her hollow bone has come full circle. Sylvia awakens to the sound of singing coming from “hollow-boned bodies” that produce a song of “air and earth and time,” which “journeyed through her narrow ear, called through her growing body, poured into her wondrous mind” (Almond, *Bone Music* 154–155). Here, Sylvia’s mind coalesces with the forest, and her epiphanic experience with the prehistoric girl forms an example of people using “the world and its material richness to think with, not just to re-create thoughts they already have” (Boivin 50). This pivotal moment makes Sylvia feel like a “new version of herself” (Almond, *Bone Music* 157). She has evolved through thinging.<sup>4</sup> The new version of Sylvia does not shy away from taking up her place in the world, and the next “music night,” she takes to the stage:

And Sylvia felt herself changing yet again, as she had kept changing ever since she’d come to this place. She stood there, a frail fifteen-year-old girl on this small stage with a frail instrument at her lips and felt that she might rise from the floor here, like a buzzard, a skylark, an angel, while all the world and all of time sang through her, through the hollow bone named Sylvia Carr. (182–183)

In this passage, Sylvia senses that she is “changing yet again,” and realises that she has “kept changing” ever since she arrived in the Northern countryside (182–183). Such processes can be considered as a string of multiple social and material “metamorphoses” (Pickard 238, italics in original) in line with age studies scholar Susan Pickard’s take on such, who explains that we experience an array of metamorphoses throughout the life course, which show “a movement in which like the development of the adult from the child, traces remain within a very different being” (104). Although traces of her former self are still there, Sylvia has evolved into a different being, into someone who embraces nature instead of disdaining it, thereby finding confidence to speak out thanks to her experience with the hollow bone flute.

In both *Clay* and *Bone Music*, the protagonists become absorbed with creating material artefacts from natural resources. These objects evolve from being negative to positive features of Davie and Sylvia's processes of coming of age. Sylvia's flute, which she carves from the wing of a dead buzzard (feeling slightly guilty about the death of the bird), evolves into a means of communication for Sylvia and a way to find confidence. Davie's clay monster, a figment of his imagination that Stephen links to Mouldy's murder, finds peace in Davie's garden. Such complexities of mind evocation in children's literature can be illustrated by means of analyses of the characters' creative experiences "with, through and about" nature, art, and other people (Malafouris, "Creative Thinging" 142). As Nodelman points out with regard to Almond's oeuvre, "artistic creativity is always a borderland activity, necessarily engaging wildness but necessarily also engaging it enough to be as potentially dangerous as it is potentially healthy" (43). The negative aspects of thinging in *Clay* and *Bone Music* metamorphose into positive aspects of the characters' development, their experiences marking a coming-of-age process that consists of metamorphoses as "an ongoing experience of ageing through the life course" (Pickard 238). Just like the ever-modifiable, ever-metamorphosing clay in *Clay* and the hollow bone flute in *Bone Music* with which Sylvia can create "ever-changing tunes" (199), Almond's protagonists resemble the natural resources they engage with when it comes to their evolving minds and bodies.

## Conclusion

As Palmer explains,

[t]o talk of a cognitive approach to literature can be rather misleading if it gives the impression that it is simply one alternative among a range of others: historical and cultural, Marxist, feminist, rhetorical and ethical criticism, and so on [...] the cognitive approach is the basis of all the others. It does not stand alongside them; it sits underneath them. (*Social Minds* 7)

The lens of cognitive narratology, which contemplates the "nexus" of narrative and mind (Herman, "Cognitive Narratology" 46), helps us better understand the coming of age of characters in David Almond's *Clay* and *Bone Music* by providing insights into different aspects of adolescent minds as depicted in fiction, and by framing epiphanic experiences. In this chapter, I have gauged the effects of social and material factors on the coming of age of Davie in *Clay* and Sylvia in *Bone Music*, by means of close readings that are based on cognitive narratology integrated with real-mind

discourses. Firstly, postcognitivist approaches to the mind, which consider the mind as inextricably embedded in social contexts, have been valuable when exploring how protagonists' thoughts are intensely entangled with other characters in Almond's books. Secondly, the tenets of material engagement theory have helped in assessing the roles that objects play when examining characters' experiences in fiction.

I have focused in particular on social minds (Palmer, *Social Minds*), such as relational experiences with peers and the school system, and, material minds (Boivin), covering aspects such as thinging (Malafouris, "Creative Thing-ing"; "Bringing Things to Mind"). As for examples of social minds at work in the two novels, relationships with peers are depicted as more important than experiences at school, but also symbolise manipulative social interactions. The evocations of material minds involve artefacts such as the clay figure that Davie creates with Stephen in *Clay*, and the hollow bone flute that Sylvia crafts with Gabriel in *Bone Music*. These experiences provoke cognitive and affective growth, and coming of age via epiphanic manifestations that resemble strings of social and material "metamorphoses" (Pickard 238, italics in original). Both *Clay* and *Bone Music* are examples of what Vanessa Joosen and Katrien Vloeberghs discuss as shifting forms of the traditional *Bildungsroman*: instead of result-driven narratives that concentrate on the integration of young people as productive members of society, *Clay* and *Bone Music* symbolise coming of age as a process that involves sudden and intense moments of initiation, highlighting the importance of place, time, and materials as important motives during these processes (136–137).

By intertwining such findings with impulses from children's literature studies and age studies, I have shown how the social and material experiences that the protagonists go through lead to a deep feeling of interrelatedness with nature. Furthermore, it can be established that both stories end with themes of social and material connections taking the foreground after coming-of-age experiences. The close readings of Almond's *Clay* and *Bone Music* form more examples of Joosen's argument that "insights from age studies can contribute to interpreting and contextualizing these fictional constructs" (128). By analysing the thoughts and experiences of Davie and Sylvia on the basis of their social and material encounters during processes of coming of age, it was surprising how their epiphanic experiences were so anchored by the people and objects around them, often characterised by a "transactional relational achievement that emerges out of an effort to create and align understandings of people and things" (Malafouris, "Creative Thing-ing" 150–151). Davie and Sylvia's creative acts, involving people and things—or the social and the material—generate more nuanced understandings of their adolescent selves as they navigate the ecologies of their evolving minds, bodies, and worlds.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Nikolajeva's "Reading Other People's Minds" and Coats' "The Meaning of Children's Poetry" on cognitive poetics; Nikolajeva's *Reading for Learning* and "Recent Trends", and Kokkola and Van den Bossche's "Cognitive Approaches" on cognitive criticism; Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer's "Towards a Cognitive Theory" on cognitive development; Nikolajeva's "What is it Like to be a Child" on neuroscience; Zunshine's "What Mary Poppins Knew" on theory of mind; Trites' "Ontology" and Tandoi's "Not Just Writing" on embodied experience; and Trites' "Growth" and "Cognitive Narratology," Nikolajeva's "Haven't you ever felt," Alkestrand and Owen's "A Cognitive Analysis," Pauwels' "Reading as a Scientist," and Deszcz-Tryhubczak's "Reading about solidarity" on cognitive narratology.
- 2 Linkages to the legend of Golem are apparent here, and the David Almond archive held at Seven Stories (The National Centre for Children's Books at Newcastle City Library) testifies to this intertextual allusion, given that the preparatory writing materials for *Clay* feature several printed sources about the legend, which have been annotated by Almond.
- 3 Sylvia reflects on a similar experience that juxtaposes school knowledge and life knowledge when she says a prayer of thanks for the dead buzzard: "When she was little, they made her say prayers at school, to a god that she never believed in, even then. The words were always meaningless to her. But the words of thanks and praise she murmured now to a creature of the earth and sky did feel like a true prayer" (97).
- 4 Sylvia's epiphanic experience underlines what Boivin points out in relation to rites: such rites "do something rather than just say something" (50).

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### 3 “Weird, but lovely”

## A digital exploration of age in David Almond’s oeuvre

*Lindsey Geybels*

Infants dream of monsters,  
the young dream dreams of love,  
the old dream dreams of being young.

(Almond, *A Song for Ella Grey* 201)

Such is the uncomplicated view of adolescent character Orpheus on differences between people of various ages in *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014), David Almond’s young adult novel based on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In truth, age, both in real life and in fiction, is a much more complex concept. Do infants truly have the imagination to dream up monsters, are old people actually that nostalgic, and where are the younger adults in this line? Do they not dream at all? These contrasting views on characters of different ages, as well as Almond’s status as a crosswriter, raise the question to what extent his books published for readers of different ages vary, both in their writing style and in the age norms they convey.

In this chapter, I demonstrate the potential benefit of an intersection between the field of digital humanities and the study of children’s literature by exploring various facets of the representation of age in Almond’s work through three different digital tools: stylometry, topic modelling and syntactic parsing. The stylometric analysis lays bare possible distinctions in the writing style of texts intended for readers of different ages. Topic modelling and syntactic parsing are conducted to explore how ideology pertaining to age is represented in Almond’s works in both explicit and implicit ways, through the content of character speech and characterisation as it is established through verbs, adjectives and possessions associated with characters of different ages. To get a comprehensive image of the different facets of the representation of age in Almond’s oeuvre, the analyses in this chapter are performed on a large portion of his works, namely, 21 titles. By studying such a large number of texts at once, the following discussion supplements research on Almond that has emerged in recent decades by moving away from close-reading strategies (Chapter

6) and towards studying an extensive corpus by using tools from the field of digital humanities. While this kind of research has long been limited to adult fiction, various researchers in children's literature studies have recently started using a distant reading approach (van Lierop-Debrauwer; Hurkmans; Karsdorp; Cross et al.; Haverals, Geybels and Joosen; Haverals and Joosen; Giddens; Fitzsimmons and Alteri).

As established in the previous chapters, Almond is a "polygraphic" author who publishes books for readers of different ages and so breaks through the dichotomy implied by traditional views on crosswriting as moving from an adult to a child readership or vice versa. Moreover, the analyses take into account that children's literature itself is further segmented into different age categories, from picturebooks to young adult literature. Almond's books have been published for children of various ages. The analyses in this chapter classify his work into three categories: children's literature for ages 7–11, young adult literature, ranging from 12 to 17, and adult literature. In reality, these age categories are situated on a continuum rather than being opposites, but since digital analyses rely on countable categories, I grouped them together according to the most common segmentation as it is also found in library catalogues and bookstores. The combined observations from the analyses paint a comprehensive picture of the representation of age in the oeuvre of David Almond and reveal stylistic and ideological differences according to the age of the intended reader.

In *Introducing Electronic Text Analysis* (2006), Svenja Adolphs lists the main advantages of using digital tools to study language and literature (7–8). First, digital analyses allow researchers to study a large number of texts simultaneously, and reveal trends that operate across a large corpus; smaller-scale studies run the risk of giving more weight to atypical observations that such digital analyses can avoid. A second advantage is more objective processing of the texts by reducing the possible subjectivity of the researcher. However, it must be noted that in analyses like those included in this chapter, the influence of the researcher still exists in the annotation of the texts and the interpretation of the resulting analyses. Third, the use of tools for digital text analysis makes the research process reproducible, meaning that it can be repeated and verified by other scholars. While I cannot share the annotated texts for reasons of copyright, I have included some of the results of my digital analyses in their entirety in the text of this chapter and in the appendices. That way, readers can add their own interpretation of the data that my digital analyses yielded. Before those analyses are presented, I will give a brief overview of the study of writing style and of characterisation as it is studied in children's literature and digital humanities. After that, I will explain the digital methodologies employed in this chapter.

### **Studying writing style through digital analyses**

The differences and overlaps between children's and adult literature have received ample attention in children's literature studies but have rarely been studied using quantitative analyses. Comparisons of writing style have so far been limited to investigations into the complexity of texts, with children's literature being defined in rather vague terms like clarity, directness, simplicity and an overall childlike style (see Ghesquière; Wall; Beckett, *Transcending Boundaries* and *Crossover Fiction*). Ruth Bottigheimer (1998) observed a link between the literary style of a text and the reader that text is addressed to: "If a text was intended for children rather than for adults [...] then both content and style should betray the presence, and identity, of those readers" (197). The stylometric analyses included in this chapter test this claim, using Almond as a case study.

During the past few decades, computational methods to determine the complexity of texts have appeared; for example, readability formulas that are mainly applied to children's literature in a pedagogical context. Stylometry provides additional digital tools to study the writing style of a text, but it has yet to be applied to children's literature on a large scale.<sup>1</sup> Together with Wouter Haverals and Vanessa Joosen, I investigated the applicability of stylometric methods for stylistic clustering according to the age of the author and the age of the intended reader with promising results for the latter. We found that cluster analyses based on a small set of most frequent words, which in effect consists of function words, reveal that texts often cross the boundaries of authorship to group together according to the age of the intended reader. This means that books published for the same age range are stylistically more similar than texts published by the same author. In this chapter, I will apply a similar method to the works of David Almond.

### **Studying characterisation through digital analyses**

Traditionally, characterisation is studied mainly using close reading strategies (Chapter 6), but in recent years, many studies have employed digital tools to look into various aspects of fictional characters, including their social networks (see Oelke et al.; Rochat and Kaplan; Kim and Klinger; Thomas), minds (Mahlberg et al.), emotions (Nalisnick and Baird; Jacobs) and proper names (van Dalen-Oskam and van Zundert; Rowe et al.). Fictional characters, which are such an important aspect of most narrative forms, have long been neglected by children's literature studies (Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* vii) but have received much more attention since the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> Maria Nikolajeva's *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature* (2002) has become a cornerstone to study characters in

fiction for young readers. In this narratological study, Nikolajeva situates different ways of characterisation on a scale from direct to indirect methods, rather than contrasting these two categories. At the far end of the scale, description and narration are the most direct methods of characterisation. The scale then moves through action and events, speech and internal representation to implicit characterisation, such as proper names and settings (157–158). To study the construction of age through characters in Almond's novels, two out of the three analyses in this chapter are designed to represent this scale and thus include methods from both ends as well as the middle. For explicit characterisation, I study description and action through adjectives and verbs attributed to characters, respectively. To study implicit characterisation, I look at the possessions of characters. Possessions are here understood in a grammatical sense: that is as attributes linked to characters through possessive forms (genitives, possessive pronouns). Although Nikolajeva only considers permanent attributes as a method of characterisation, the analysis below broadens this category to include all objects that belong to a character, from their clothes to their dreams. Another analysis looks at speech, which Nikolajeva places in the middle of the scale. Whereas she considers it in essence to be a more direct method, in practice she finds that in children's literature, speech is mainly used to drive the plot rather than to develop characters.<sup>3</sup>

### Data collection

The analyses that follow incorporate the majority of Almond's oeuvre, as the results of digital analyses become more meaningful the more extensive the studied material is. However, this entails a trade-off concerning the qualitative aspect of the analysis; it will lack the in-depth nature and nuances presented by the other chapters in this book and focuses more on general trends and attitudes in how age is represented in Almond's work. Although working with digital tools creates the opportunity to study a large body of texts, this way of conducting research requires a critical approach to which types of text are included as primary data. To avoid that the results of the analyses are influenced by differences on a textual level, short story collections, picture books, primers, graphic novels, plays and the novel *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean* (2011) are not included in the corpus.<sup>4</sup> This book is Almond's first full-length novel, published simultaneously for a young adult and adult audience and written entirely in an idiosyncratic language. The story is told in the voice of the protagonist Billy Dean, who has grown up in a highly secluded environment and has received minimal education. His story is written down in phonetic language, for example: "He grew in isolayshon wile the enjins of destrucshon flew and smoke rose over the sitys and wile wilderness

and waste crept all across the world" (1). Due to the different spelling in this book compared with the rest of the corpus, *The True Tale* would be anomalous in an analysis of writing style and characters' speech and contribute little when looking at the descriptions, actions and possessions of characters.

Table 3.1 provides an overview of the 21 titles that are included in the analyses in this chapter, along with the age of the intended reader for each work. While many texts are written, published or marketed with the age of a readership in mind, the age of the intended reader can be conceptualised in specific or broad terms. This information is not always communicated publicly, especially for books published in the UK. This is partly because of writers' opposition against 'book banding', a strategy of children's literature publishers to increase sales by adding age recommendations to the covers to assist adult buyers in their search for suitable reading material for their children. In 2008, many authors, led by best-selling Philip Pullman, argued that such banding would have the opposite effect of restricting readers in their choice of books (The Page Turner; see also Pullman). None of David Almond's works that I examine include such an age marker on the book itself. However, information about the age of the intended readership can still be found in the catalogues of certain publishers or on the websites of authors who are in favour of this method to classify children's literature. To categorise the books below, I first looked for information on the age of the intended reader on the websites of publishers and Almond's own website. When no minimum age or age range was given there, I consulted websites of booksellers and the Dutch database for children's books, which also includes entries for many English children's books. For the analyses in the next sections of this chapter, the novels are placed into three broader categories: adult novels (18 and up), young adult fiction (12–15) and children's literature (7–9).

To conduct digital analyses on the 21 texts, each work was digitised, either through obtaining an e-book version or scanning the physical book and running it through optical character recognition software. All texts were pre-processed to remove metadata, including the front and back matter, page numbers and chapter headings. For the second set of analyses in this chapter, those pertaining to the age of fictional characters, information is added during a process called 'text annotation', which means that words and (parts of) sentences of interest are identified and tagged. For this purpose, extensive mark-up language is used in accordance with guidelines set up by the Text Encoding Initiative, which provides researchers with a "standard for the representation of texts in digital form" (TEI Consortium) using a hierarchical system of so-called tags. These tags can be used to categorise parts of a text, such as chapter headings or copyright information,

*Table 3.1* List of novels by David Almond included in the corpus of this chapter and the corresponding age of the intended reader

<i>Title</i>	<i>Age of the intended reader</i>
Harry Miller's Run (2015)	7
My Dad's a Birdman (2007)	8
The Boy Who Climbed into the Moon (2010)	8
The Boy Who Swam with Piranhas (2012)	8
Brand New Boy (2020)	8
The Tale of Angelino Brown (2017)	9
War Is Over (2018)	9
Skellig (1998)	12
Kit's Wilderness (1999)	12
Counting Stars (2000)	12
Heaven Eyes (2000)	12
Secret Heart (2001)	12
The Fire-Eaters (2003)	12
Klaus Vogel and the Bad Lads (2009)	12
My Name Is Mina (2010)	12
A Song for Ella Grey (2014)	12
The Colour of the Sun (2018)	12
Bone Music (2021)	12
Clay (2005)	15
Jackdaw Summer (2008)	15
The Tightrope Walkers (2014)	18

or to add information, such as a character's name to a pronoun referring to that character.

The annotations add information about fictional characters in several ways. First, each text is divided into narration (indirect speech) and character speech (direct speech).<sup>5</sup> In case of direct speech, the tag includes an attribute to identify the speaking character. The following fragment shows an annotated version of the opening lines of *My Dad's a Birdman*:

```
<said direct="false">An ordinary spring morning in 12 Lark Lane. The
birds were tweeting and whistling outside. The city traffic rumbled and
roared. Lizzie's alarm went ringa-ding-ding.</said> [...]
  <said direct="true" who="lizzie">"Dad!"</said>
  <said direct="false">she shouted.</said>
  <said direct="true" who="lizzie">"Daddy!"</said>
  <said direct="false">No answer.</said>
```

In the case of third-person narration, <said direct="false"> is used to mark the beginning of parts of the text told by the narrator, while <said direct="true" who="lizzie"> marks the beginning of direct speech by a character, in this case, Lizzie. </said> is a so-called 'closing tag', marked

by the slash after the first angle bracket. It is used to indicate where a section of direct or indirect speech ends. In the tag that marks direct speech, 'lizzie' is a so-called 'character ID'. The character IDs used in the annotated document are saved in a separate data frame, together with additional features, including the full name, species, gender and age of each character. We call this data frame the 'character list'. Below, I elaborate on this part of the annotation process.

In addition to direct and indirect speech, all references to characters are tagged: names, nouns and pronouns.<sup>6</sup> The above fragment then looks like this:

```
<said direct="false">An ordinary spring morning in 12 Lark Lane. The birds were tweeting and whistling outside. The city traffic rumbled and roared. <rs ref="lizzie">Lizzie's</rs> alarm went ringa-ding-ding.</said> [...]  
  <said direct="true" who="lizzie">"<rs ref="dad">Dad</rs>!"</said>  
  <said direct="false"><rs ref="lizzie">she</rs> shouted.</said>  
  <said direct="true" who="lizzie">"<rs ref="dad">Daddy</rs>!"</said>  
  <said direct="false">No answer.</said>
```

<rs ref="lizzie"> labels the words referring to characters with the right character ID. Again, this tag comes with a closing tag to mark the end of the reference: </rs>.

As explained above, the annotators make a separate data frame (e.g., an excel table) that we call the 'character list', where they match the character ID with the character's name, species, ethnicity, gender and age (see Table 3.2 for a simplified example). The latter is recorded either in a numerical format or as a life stage, following a scheme (Table 3.3) based on research by life course scholars Lorraine Green (2010) and Thomas Armstrong (2007). Age is a dynamic concept in a story: a character may age during narratives that span several years (e.g. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series), and many stories contain flashbacks in which the characters are younger than in the main part of the story. For this reason, a singular character may have several character IDs, each reflecting a different age. Similar to determining the age of the intended reader for Almond's work, identifying the age of his fictional characters is not without its difficulties or ambiguities. When assigning an age to human characters, the annotator either relies on explicit age markers or context; parents of minors are labelled adults in the broad sense, grandparents are categorised as old adults and those attending secondary school are considered to be adolescents. While this method of assigning age does not correctly reflect the true diversity of age, where people under 20 years of age can be parents or have a profession, performing digital analyses on a large amount of



data sometimes requires such oversimplifications. The downside of this approach is that the age norms that are to be studied are in part also being used to create the annotated material, risking the creation of biased data.

A further obstacle when assigning age to Almond's characters is the fantastical element in his work. Many characters are realistic portrayals resembling real people, but his stories also regularly feature ambiguous or supernatural creatures, a characteristic of the magic realist style which is often attributed to Almond's work (Latham). In Chapter 5 of this book, Michelle Anya Anjirbag and Frauke Pauwels note that the movie adaptation of *Skellig* hints at the age of its title character by portraying him as 'someone older.' However, in the novel the only clue to Skellig's age is that he is referred to as a 'man' on several occasions, suggesting that he is an adult. What complicates the attribution of age to Skellig is that he is revealed to be a supernatural creature that unites aspects of a human being and an angel. This raises the question whether life stages catered to human development are applicable to non-human creatures. A similar dilemma occurred for the

Table 3.2 Simplified example of a character list from the annotation of *A Song for Ella Grey*

<i>Character ID</i>	<i>Full name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Relation to protagonist</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Life stage</i>
carlo	Carlo Brooks	Male	Friend		Adolescent
claire	Claire Wilkinson	Female	Friend		Adolescent
claire17	Claire Wilkinson	Female	Friend	17	
claire5	Claire Wilkinson	Female	Friend	5	
ella	Ella Grey	Female	Protagonist		Adolescent
fatherella	Grey	Male	Parent		Adult

Table 3.3 Age scheme including the life stages and their corresponding numerical age as used in the annotations of David Almond's oeuvre

<i>Life stage</i>	<i>Corresponding numerical age</i>
Infant	0–2
Child	3–11
Earlychild	3–5
Middlechild	6–8
Latechild	9–11
Adolescent	12–19
Adult	20–...
Earlyadult	20–39
Middleadult	40–59
Oldadult	60–79
Deepoldadult	80–...

supernatural creation in *Clay* that Emma-Louise Silva discusses in Chapter 2. For this reason, supernatural creatures and animated objects are not included in the analyses on the representation of age in the following section.

### **Style and the age of the intended reader**

The analyses in this section use digital methods to investigate if David Almond's writing style differs in texts published for different ages. A small set of most frequent words, which are in effect function words, are used to perform the analyses in this chapter. The use of function words as discriminators for an author's writing style has been widely researched and confirmed (see Burrows; Diederich et al.; Grieve; Hoover; Koppel et al.; Martindale and McKenzie; Uzunur and Katz; Yu). The raw digital text material of the 21 books in the corpus was subjected to a second round of pre-processing, after the removal of metadata. Appendix A lists the 100 most frequent words extracted from the samples created from Almond's works that we use for stylometric analysis. After the list of most frequent words is manually edited to remove, amongst others, verbs that might be influenced by the narrative point of view or tense, we can start measuring how closely related the different texts are.<sup>7</sup> The stylistic analysis is presented in two forms: a hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA) and a principal component analysis (PCA).<sup>8</sup> The HCA (Figure 3.1) clusters stylistically similar documents together in a tree-shaped diagram. The larger the distance between two documents, or clusters of documents, the smaller their similarity. The PCA (Figure 3.2) is a scatterplot, where each dot represents one sample of Almond's texts. Here too, stylistically similar samples are positioned together, and the larger the distance between two dots, the smaller their similarity. To highlight the feature of the age of the intended reader in the HCA and PCA graphs, the labels in both visualisations are colour-coded. The samples of texts aimed at children range from orange for seven year olds, to yellow for readers aged eight years old, green for nine year olds, to blue and purple for young adult titles (12 and 15 years old, respectively), while red titles signify adult novels.

Almond believes that his writing changed between his short stories for adults and working on *Skellig* (Joosen, "Interview"), which suggests a potential stylometric difference between texts intended for readers of different ages. The HCA tree diagram in Figure 3.1 displays evidence of this, as various texts for similar ages cluster together. However, this grouping is not perfect, and his writing style does not seem to be solely influenced by the intended reader. Moreover, the two analyses show a slightly different pattern. In the HCA tree diagram (Figure 3.1), *Skellig* clusters closest together with *The Fire-Eaters* and *Heaven Eyes*, two other novels intended for 12 year olds, but can also be considered to be quite similar to his adult novel *The Tigh trope Walkers*, as they are connected in the hierarchical tree

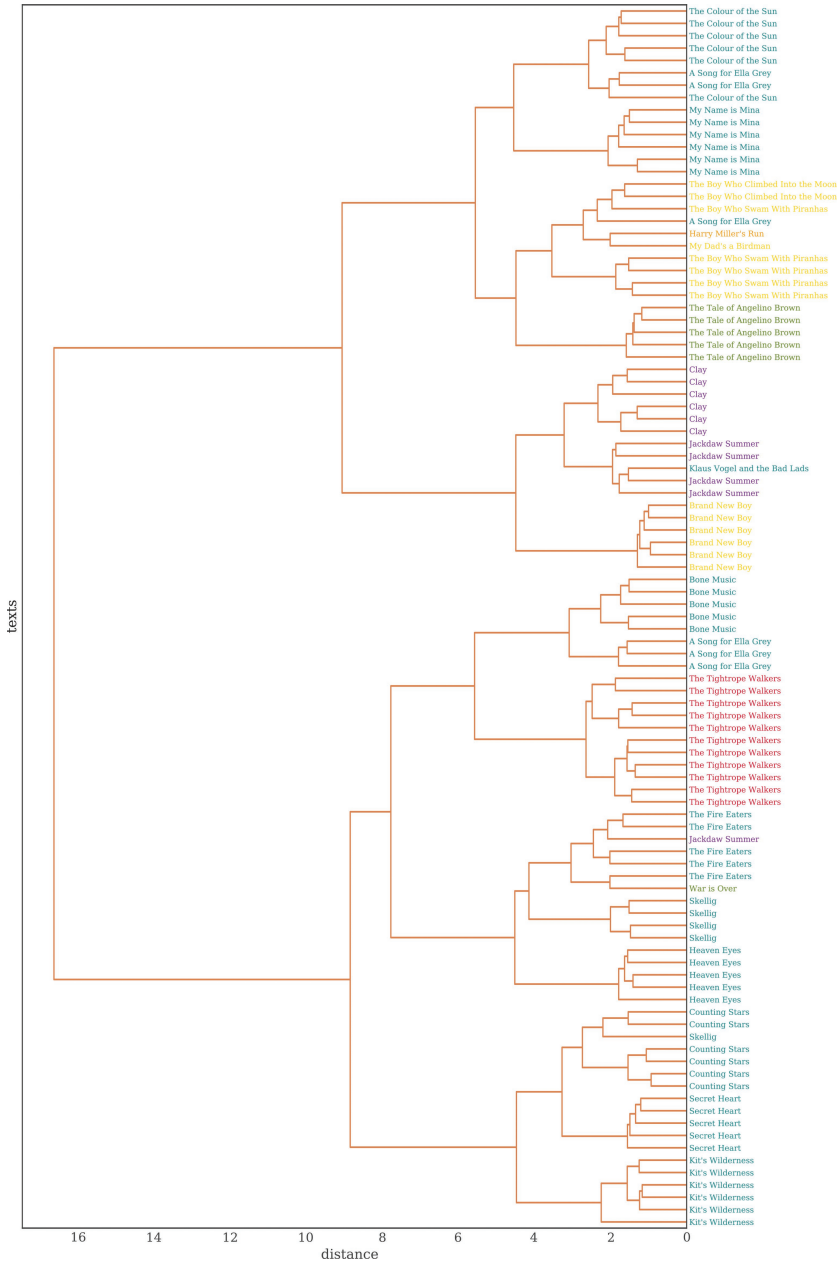


Figure 3.1 Hierarchical cluster tree analysis for David Almond's novels, colour-coded according to the age of the intended reader.

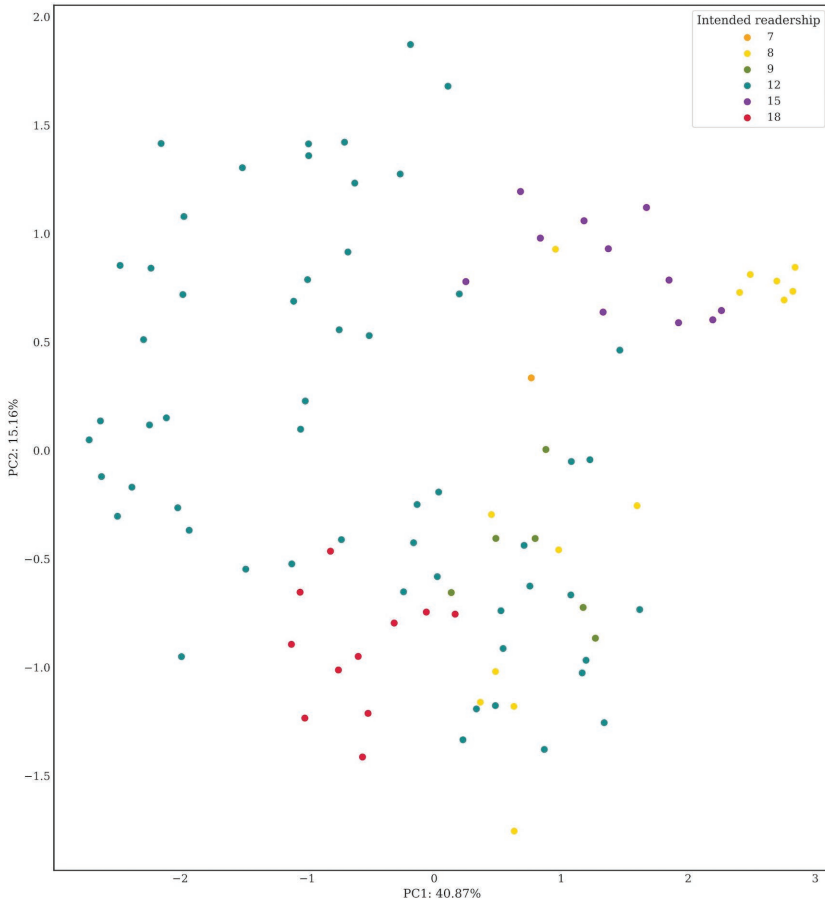


Figure 3.2 Principal component analysis for David Almond's novels, colour-coded according to the age of the intended reader.

only one level higher (at distance 8). However, in the PCA (Figure 3.2), both titles are located on opposite sides of the vertical axis, suggesting stylometric distinction; the samples that make up *Skellig* are found at the top of the plot while the red dots that represent *The Tightrope Walkers* are at the bottom. The PCA scatterplot (Figure 3.2) shows a larger cluster of novels for 12 year olds than the HCA tree diagram. Located in the upper left quadrant, represented by blue dots, this cluster is made up of six titles, which are all novels for 12 year olds written before 2014: *Skellig*, *The Fire-Eaters*, *Heaven Eyes*, *Kit's Wilderness*, *Secret Heart* and *Counting Stars*. Almond's writing style in these books is very similar, which is evident from the distinct cluster they form. This similarity can be

due to the intended readership, but can also be explained by the period in which they were published. After all, Almond published these titles one after the other, without bringing out any other books that are included in the corpus of this chapter between *Skellig* in 1998 and *The Fire-Eaters* in 2003.

The next period is interesting to consider in this light, because from 2009 onwards, Almond alternated books intended for readers of different ages that are all included in the corpus studied for this chapter. With only one exception, his novels for 12 year olds published between 2009 and 2020 are also stylistically distinct from the books for other ages, as both the HCA and PCA suggest. *Klaus Vogel and the Bad Lads* is the only novel for 12 year olds that does not fit into any of the previously discussed clusters; in both the HCA and PCA, this title is located more closely to the distinct cluster formed by *Clay* and *Jackdaw Summer*, Almond's novels for 15 year olds, suggesting that the writing style of this novel is different from the other novels intended for the same age. While it is explicitly marketed for 12 year olds, as is apparent from Almond's own website, it is written for "struggling, reluctant and dyslexic readers" ("Klaus Vogel") and published at Barrington Stoke, which focuses on readable books. The guidelines set by publishers with such objectives might provide an explanation for the deviating writing style, although one might expect that books for struggling teenage readers might be written in a style that resembles books for younger readers rather than for older readers (see also Haverals and Geybels).

I will now consider Almond's books for younger readers. Of his novels for children aged seven to nine, four titles are shown to be stylistically similar in both plots: *Harry Miller's Run*, *The Boy Who Climbed into the Moon*, *The Boy Who Swam with Piranhas* and *The Tale of Angelino Brown*. *Angelino Brown* and *War Is Over* are the only two titles written for nine-year-old children and the PCA situates them close together. In Figure 3.1, however, *War Is Over* is located in a cluster of books for 12 year olds and *The Tale of Angelino Brown* is deemed to be stylistically more similar to books for eight year olds. This suggests that Almond has no distinct writing style when addressing nine year olds and that these books, more than those for other ages, function as transitional texts between books written for younger and older readers, in this case between children and young adults. Another striking observation that emerges from the plots is the location of *Brand New Boy*, one of Almond's most recent novels, published for eight-year-old readers. The six samples that were extracted from this text are clustered together with books for 15 year olds, showing little stylistic similarity with other books written for the same age. In short, the stylometric analyses reveal a consistency in style for 12-year-old readers that were published in the period 1998-2003, and stylistic similarity in some books for younger readers. However, various

seemingly more random clusters show that Almond does not typically adapt his style for a young audience.

## Speech

After this reflection on style and the age of the intended reader, I now turn to the construction of age on the level of Almond's fictional characters, first by looking at direct speech.<sup>9</sup> This analysis focuses on vocabulary to gain insight into the similarities and differences between the word choice and topics of interest of speakers who are at various stages in the life course. Characterisation through speech is situated at the midpoint of Nikolajeva's scale from direct to indirect characterisation (*Rhetoric* 157–158). The starting point of the analysis is the question of whether there is lexical variation across age groups and if so, whether we can see a link between this variation and the age of the intended reader.

To answer these questions, I first extracted all instances of direct speech from the annotated texts and divided them into four files, one for each age group: children, adolescents, adults (ages 20–59) and old adults (ages 60 and up). Stop words, names and words that are only used by one character were removed from these files, as I am particularly interested in words that express topics and that are used by various characters. Next, I used the open-source tool *Scattertext*, developed by Jason Kessler, to visualise how texts belonging to two different age categories (or two different files) differ from each other, based on word frequency.<sup>10</sup> *Scattertext* is an interactive tool, which creates an HTML file that allows the user to look for specific words in a scatterplot (see Figure 3.3 and Appendix B1), where each word is represented by a dot. If the user clicks on this dot, the programme gives more information on the words' relative frequency and shows their use in context. We use this tool to find out what words and topics are distinctive for specific age categories. Identifying these topics relies on the researcher's interpretation. This leaves some room for confusion as one word often has different meanings; for example, the term 'book' can refer to the noun as well as the verb, and the words 'young' and 'old', which are so obviously significant for analysing age, can refer to people but also objects.

### *The Tigh trope Walkers*

I begin with the character speech in Almond's adult literature. As this concerns only one novel, *The Tigh trope Walkers*, the scatterplots are scarcely populated and no old adult characters are included, as none speaks in the novel. Figure 3.3 (see also Appendix B1) shows a comparison of child and adolescent speech (on the vertical axis) to speech of adult characters (on the horizontal axis) in *The Tigh trope Walkers*. It immediately reveals Almond's distinct use of colloquial language in his writing. Almond draws

inspiration from how real people talk in the North of England, where he grew up and where most of his stories are based (“David Almond Interview”). His northern voice is evident in the characters’ speech of all ages in *The Tighrope Walkers*. The top left corner of the scatterplot, where terms distinct for children and adolescents are located, features terms including ‘bugger’, ‘tek’, ‘dunno’, ‘bliddy’, ‘nowt’ and ‘ok’, while adults, whose high-frequency words are found in the bottom right area, use ‘lads’, ‘bonny’, ‘nae’ and ‘oot’. The scatterplot also reflects the story’s main theme of the conflict between freedom and love on the one hand and recklessness and cruelty on the other, which is embodied by the protagonist Dominic. Both young and adult characters talk of darker themes. In the top left corner, which features words distinctive of the younger characters, there are words like ‘kill’, ‘die’, ‘knife’ and ‘hell’. If we break these age categories further down we see that ‘kill’ and ‘die’ are present almost exclusively in adolescent speech. The speech of adult characters features distinct words related to dark themes, such as ‘dead’ and ‘death’, but also its counterpart ‘life’ together with the term ‘love’, which has a relative count almost three times higher than in younger characters’ speech.

Also found in opposite areas of Figure 3.3 (Appendix B1) are age-related forms of address, suggesting the presence of intergenerational relationships in the novel. In the speech of child and adolescent characters, there is a higher frequency of the words ‘mam’, ‘dad’, ‘miss’ and ‘mr’, pointing towards parental and student/teacher relationships. These words are more distinct to child speech (Appendix B2), which can imply that there are more interactions between children and adults than between adolescents and the latter. The frequency of words relating to childhood in adult speech (‘children’, ‘son’, ‘boys’, ‘boy’, ‘lads’ and ‘kids’) shows the centrality of youth in this novel, even though it is published for adult readers. Other terms with a high frequency in adult speech are ‘need’, ‘care’, ‘doctor’, ‘work’ and ‘war’, which match traditional expectations of adult life. As observed by Leander Duthoy in the next chapter of this book, adults in Western culture are expected to have more responsibilities than younger people. This is confirmed in a study by Thomson et al. (2004); when 100 young people from the UK were asked what, to them, constitutes adulthood, two of the most prominent aspects that were named were responsibilities and entering full-time work. In the speech of adult characters in *The Tighrope Walkers*, there are references to responsibilities concerning care, providing for their families by maintaining a job and protecting what is dear to them (although we can argue that waging war is not the best way to do this). Even the term ‘school’, which can be seen as the counterpart of ‘work’ as it is one of the few obligations for young people, shows up more often in adult speech, while ‘play’, associated more with freedom rather than responsibility, is mentioned more by child and adolescent characters.





*Young adult fiction*

Many of the same topics from Almond's adult novel return in the scatterplot generated from the speech in his young adult fiction. The 13 novels in question feature a wide variety of characters, including speech from old adult age (Figure 3.4 and Appendix B3). Here too, characters of all ages use colloquial and regional language, but these words are less distinct for the speech of children (with 'nit' and 'bloody' as exceptions) and old adults (with only 'ah' and 'lass') than for adolescents and adults, which both feature a long list of colloquial terms (Appendices B4 and B5). The conflict between death and love in *The Tigh trope Walkers* also appears in the scatterplot of Almond's young adult novels (Figure 3.4 and Appendix B3). Contrasting words including 'knife', 'murder', 'killed', 'dead', 'war' and 'hate' are distinct to the speech of child and adolescent characters, while 'peace' and 'love' are more characteristic of adult and old adult speech. Upon closer inspection, almost all terms belonging to the darker theme feature most in speech by adolescent characters, except for 'murder' (Appendix B4). This term shows up relatively more often in child speech but is used by only two characters from the same novel (*Heaven Eyes*), while the adolescents who talk about murder feature in more than one novel.

The distribution of words referencing other fictional characters in Almonds' YA fiction resembles that in *The Tigh trope Walkers* (Figure 3.4 and Appendix B3): 'grandpa', 'mum', 'dad' and 'sir' are more distinct to speech of young characters, and adults and old adults use 'son', 'child', 'boys' and 'lad' more often. However, in the young adult novels, the young characters also use 'brother' and 'sister', and the adults 'men', 'woman' and 'madam'. This suggests that while intergenerational relationships are still very important in young adult fiction, talking about, or to, peers is more common than in the previous analysis. This is consistent with one of the most common patterns in young adult literature: conflict with parental authority (Trites 54) and "the desire to belong to the tribe of [...] peers" (Cockrell 21; see also Ghesquière et al. 382). If we further break down forms of address by age category (Appendix B4), we see that child characters use 'miss', 'mrs' and 'mr' more frequently, while only 'sir' is slightly more distinct to the speech of adolescents. As with Almond's adult novel, this might point towards a higher degree of interaction between children and (old) adults. A similar image emerges when comparing speech of the two adult age groups (Appendix B5); adults talk about or address more people of different ages ('son', 'child', 'lad', 'woman', 'madam' and 'baby') than older adults, suggesting that the older characters in Almond's young adult novels are more isolated from intergenerational social networks than other adults.



When revisiting the theme of adult responsibilities, the dichotomy of work versus play as identified in *The Tigh trope Walkers* reappears in Almonds' YA fiction (Figure 3.4 and Appendix B3). The more detailed graphs present a gradual evolution in responsibilities throughout the life course: 'freedom' is distinct for child speech when compared with adolescent speech, where 'play' and 'playing' show up more. The terms including 'pay', 'work' and 'school' are more used by adults, but not by older adults. This observation is reminiscent of the rather ageist disengagement theory by Elaine Cumming and William Henry (1961), which states that adults give up their responsibilities and withdraw from society when they reach old age. However, when conducting a close reading of Almond's works, various older figures, including Andreas in *Bone Music* and Kit's grandfather in *Kit's Wilderness*, still contribute to their social networks, albeit not professionally.

In addition to the themes identified in *The Tigh trope Walkers*, other topics are prominent in the speech of characters in Almond's novels for young adults (Figure 3.4 and Appendix B3), including the autobiographical elements of writing, religion and nature that Vanessa Joosen and Emma-Louise Silva highlight in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively. The words 'book', 'books', 'writing' and 'tale' are more distinct for the speech of adult and old adult characters (Figure 3.4 and Appendix B3), but feature in the speech of characters of all ages (Appendices B4 and B5).<sup>11</sup> Less prominent in the speech of younger characters is the theme of religion, which is a clear topic for adults and, more specifically, old adults ('pray', 'god', 'blessed', 'souls' and 'sin' are distinct for their speech). Adolescents do utter the words 'jesus', 'lord', 'hell' and 'heaven' quite often, but the first three are used almost exclusively as exclamations rather than in the context of a conversation about religion. The theme of nature is distinct in the speech of old adult characters when compared to adults, with words like 'water', 'sea', 'trees', 'fields', 'sky' and 'earth' (Appendix B5). This is in line with various classics in children's literature in which an older character shares with a younger character a love for nature (Joosen, "Second Childhoods")—a trope that Almond also addresses in young adult novels such as *Kit's Wilderness* and *Bone Music*.

### *Books for child readers*

Where children's literature traditionally focuses on child characters to facilitate identification and empathy for its intended readership (Nikolajeva "Aesthetics"), it is striking that in the seven novels for children that are included in the corpus, more than half of the character speech is spoken by adult characters. Less surprising is the small share of adolescents in this category, with only 90 words in total attributed to characters in that age range.



Given that limited word count, I will not go into any differences between child and adolescent characters in Almond's children's books. To a large extent, the same themes that were discussed above surface in Almond's children's books (Figure 3.5 and Appendix B6). Once again, colloquial language is used by characters of all ages, with words including 'dunno', 'nowt' and 'mebbe' being distinct to speech of young people and 'ah', 'ye' and 'aha' to that of (old) adult characters. The use of accents and non-standard English is unusual in children's literature, as it may provide a hurdle for young readers and books are also used to teach children standard language. Almond explains that he had difficulty finding agents and publishers due to the combination of his target audience and his northern voice, but that he finds it important to "write about [his] landscape in [his] language" ("January Interview"), also when addressing children.

The terms associated with intergenerational relationships and (adult) responsibilities also show similar trends to those identified in the young adult and adult novels, while terms referring to stories, religion and nature surface less in the direct speech. Children and adolescents address or talk about parents and other adults ('sir', 'ms' and 'mr'), but also their peers ('mate', 'pal' and 'friend'). The same is true for adult and old adult characters, whose distinct terms include 'brother', 'sister', 'child', 'son' and 'boy'. Different from previous observations is that adults, when compared to old adult characters (Appendix B8), use nouns referring to parents ('mam', 'dad') as well as children. This may have several explanations, including adults in children's fiction speaking to children who are not their own (for example, "Does your mam know you're here?") or adults speaking about their own parents. Terms associated with (adult) responsibilities centre mostly around work and school and, like in the young adult novels, all of them are distinct for the speech of adult characters. Work and school may be more prominent in books for children as more words show up in the plot that are associated with them, including 'boss', 'teacher' and 'professor'. In the scatterplot for the children's books' direct speech (Figure 3.5), darker themes surface again, but the more graphic 'murder', 'killed' and 'blood' are rarely found. The theme is also mitigated by the terms 'live' and 'born' that show up in children and adolescent's speech. Death is considered a more typical theme of fiction for adolescents than for younger children (a.o. Talley 232), which is confirmed here.

Taken together, the analyses above reveal recurring topics as well as some remarkable variation between texts written for different intended ages. Almond's colloquialism shines through in the speech of all his characters. However, in his books for young adults, it is more distinct to adolescent and adult characters. The main topics that are found across the three analyses are intergenerational relationships as well as love and cruelty. In Almond's books for younger readers, peers are commonly referred to,

both by young and adult characters, while in his young adult novels, older adults are less often explicitly mentioned or addressed. Violence is most prominent in Almond's young adult novels, where terms associated with cruelty are uttered mostly by adolescents and the topic of love is present in the speech of adult and old adult characters. In *The Tigh trope Walkers*, the only adult novel included in the corpus, the darker themes are more manifest, mainly in the speech of adolescents and adults. While still present, cruelty is less graphically evoked in character speech in Almond's books for children. There it is mainly present in the speech of young characters and balanced with terms associated with life.

### **Action, possession and description**

In this final part of my analysis of age in Almond's oeuvre, I discuss explicit character building by looking at the verbs, possessions and adjectives associated with different characters to study their description and actions. According to Svenja Adolphs, these are the two fundamental methods of characterisation: "The way in which a character is depicted in a story is often expressed in the verbs and adverbs that illustrate his or her actions and in the adjectives that are used to describe the person" (67). To study verbs, adjectives and possessions in the annotated files of Almond's work, we developed a so-called 'parser' that is able to recognise the grammatical relationships in a sentence and match verbs, possessions and adjectives with the characters they refer to.<sup>12</sup> Combining the resulting data with the corresponding character lists (see above) allows the parser to extract relevant information of characters in different age groups.<sup>13</sup> To keep the discussion concise and relevant to a study of age, my analysis is based on the 40 most frequently used terms for each category (see Appendix C).<sup>14</sup> The discussion focuses on general trends rather than listing all terms extracted from the text.

#### *Actions*

First, the focus of the characters' actions lies on verbal and non-verbal expression, movement and leisurely activities. Across Almond's oeuvre, child characters verbally express themselves mainly by whispering, giggling, yelling and laughing. While their inquisitive nature is reflected in the novels for children and young adults, where 'ask' is a high-frequency verb, the adult novel *The Tigh trope Walkers* paints a more stereotypical picture; it is the only text to include 'cry' in the 40 most common verbs for children. Overall, adolescent characters express themselves similar to characters from other age groups, but it is noteworthy that they are the only ones to frequently 'mutter' and 'gasp'. It is striking how often

adolescents ‘shrug’ across the corpus (adults do so too, but far less often). Not surprisingly, as they make up the largest portion of the characters featured in *The Tighrope Walkers*, adult characters show a diverse array of ways to express themselves verbally and non-verbally in this adult novel: adults ‘laugh’, ‘tell’, ‘ask’, ‘whisper’, ‘smile’, ‘sigh’, ‘yell’, ‘speak’, ‘grin’, ‘call’, ‘cough’ and ‘murmur’. Contrastingly, in books for young adults and children, there is less variety in the ways that adult characters communicate; there, they primarily ‘laugh’ and ‘smile’ in the books for the youngest readers. Featured mainly in books for young adults and children, some of the verbs indicating how older characters express themselves, such as ‘murmur’ and ‘sigh’, tend towards a stereotypical image of unhappy older people, but the opposite is also shown with ‘laugh’ and ‘smile’.

A second trend in the 40 most common verbs associated with characters of all ages pertains to leisure activities and creativity. The novels for adults and young adults portray children as creative beings who ‘draw’, ‘dream’, ‘read’, ‘write’, ‘imagine’ and ‘remember’. Adolescents engage in similar activities throughout Almond’s oeuvre. Apart from the substitution of ‘paint’ for ‘draw’, the most common leisure activities of children and adolescents are identical. By contrast, the material interaction of adults is rather abstract, as suggested by the verbs ‘touch’ (in adult and young adult literature), ‘open’ (in novels for young adults and children) and ‘unfold’ (in children’s books). In Almond’s novel for adults, the image of childhood is complicated by the verb ‘kill’. As discussed in the previous analysis, this is most likely due to the theme of cruelty present in the novel. Parallel to younger characters, old adults are more associated with leisure activities; they ‘write’, ‘remember’ and ‘dig’ in young adult fiction and ‘drink’ and ‘drive’ in children’s books, although hopefully not simultaneously.

Notable differences between characters of various ages are also found in terms of movement; children and adolescents ‘run’ (or ‘outrun’) significantly more than adult and old characters. This activity occurs more frequently in novels for children and adults than in young adult fiction. Contrastingly, adults (in adult and young adult novels) as well as old adult characters (in young adult and children’s literature) often ‘lean’. Other verbs pertaining to movement associated with old adults, who do not feature in the adult novel, are largely stationary in nature; rather than running and walking, they ‘stand’, ‘sit’ and ‘turn’.

### *Possessions*

As explained above, ‘possessions’ are here understood in a grammatical sense. The parser recognises genitive forms and possessive pronouns and can thus link attributes to the corresponding characters. Because there are few adolescent characters in Almond’s books for children, the list of the

40 most frequently occurring possessions of this age group contains only *hapax legomena*, or terms which occur only once, and will therefore not be discussed. Most of the extracted possessions for other age groups relate to the body, community versus home, and work. The largest category in the 40 most common possessions of characters of all ages pertains to the human body. Most body parts are found in all age groups, but some are characteristic of a particular group. Child characters in books for children and adolescents frequently possess a 'voice', but not those in the adult novel. This is in line with the observation in the analysis of character speech that children hardly speak in *The Tighrope Walkers*. In that novel, 'blood' and 'brain' are distinctive of the adolescent body. The former may hint at the aggressive nature of adolescent characters, an interpretation reinforced by the high occurrence of 'knife' in both the young adult and adult books and 'mask' in the latter.

More overlap can be found between the analysis of direct speech presented above and characters' possessions; many terms bear evidence of intergenerational relationships or, more appropriately here, the communities surrounding characters. Various analyses in this book expand on the element of community in Almond's books; my large-scale analysis makes clear that family and friends play an important role throughout his oeuvre. The members of the community of child characters most frequently referred to across all of the author's works are parents and friends. In young adult fiction, 'siblings' are also frequently mentioned, while 'uncle' and the more general 'family' feature in the 40 most common possessions of child characters in children's books. Keeping the observations from the previous section in mind, it is worth noting that any references to grandparents are missing. However, this does not necessarily contradict the intergenerational bond between children and their grandparents but suggests that grandparents are mostly talked about within the family, without the possessive pronoun (e.g., 'granddad' instead of 'my granddad'). In the adult novel *The Tighrope Walkers*, adolescents are also represented as being parents themselves, as they have a 'baby'. References to children also show up amongst adult possessions, in all categories of intended readers, and are predominantly male: 'son', 'boy' and 'baby'. The community of adult characters is considerably less extensive and comprises almost exclusively family; the only references to adults' friends through possessive forms are made in the adult novel. The community of older adult characters referred to with possessive forms consists exclusively of family.

Complementing the theme of community are terms associated with private space. In books for adults and adolescents, there are frequent references to the 'bed' of a child character and in young adult and children's literature there is talk about their own 'room'. In the YA novels, 'room' is featured in the list of common possessions of adolescents and their 'house'



is frequently referred to in adult literature. For adult characters, the terms 'room', 'house' and 'apartment' point towards interactions with private spaces. Those of old adults are not limited to indoor spaces; together with 'apartment' and 'caravan', 'garden' shows up in the 40 most common possessions of old adults in books for children. In young adult literature, the space is again more restricted and older characters only have a 'window' through which they can look at the outdoors from their 'bed' and 'room'.

More prominent for (old) adult characters, at least in books for adults and children, are material possessions, mainly pertaining to outward appearance ('jacket', 'bag', 'collar', 'glasses' and 'cigarette'), and objects associated with professions ('desk', 'office', 'uniform', 'work' and 'colleague'). 'Work' is also included in the 40 most common possessions of child and adolescent characters in Almond's novel for adults but might refer to tasks assigned to younger people at school rather than to a professional job. While present in the lists of characters of all ages, the theme of responsibilities discussed above is more prominent in the list for adults. The allusion to disengagement theory in the discussion of speech of old adults, where the topics of adult responsibility and social networks were less present, is nuanced in the study of their belongings. The theme of responsibilities, especially centred around work life, remains present; in young adult fiction, these characters have a 'desk' and in children's literature the older generation is frequently attributed 'ambition', a 'job' and a 'report'. Similar to adults, terms associated with physical appearance are also featured in the most common possessions of old adults in young adult fiction; they are the only characters to frequently have a 'beard' as well as wear a 'helmet', 'jacket' and 'suit'.

### *Adjectives*

Finally, the discussion of adjectives in Almond's works focuses on characters' physical size, character traits and physical appearance. I will start with adjectives describing the characters' bodies. Many of the most common adjectives in Almond's work validate the stereotypical image of the small and vulnerable child. However, there is a surprising difference in connotation between terms found in books for different intended readers. A central theme in YA fiction is the transition from childhood to adulthood, and one might expect that adolescent characters might be eager to distance themselves from the younger age group. In Almond's YA novels, however, a more caring stance emerges, with child characters being described as 'delicate' and 'precious'. These endearing words stand in stark contrast to how child characters are portrayed in narratives for children as 'ickly' and 'scrawny'. Adolescents in *The Tightrope Walkers* are repeatedly called 'little', 'sweet' and 'silly'. The young adult books paint a diverse

picture. In terms of physical size, adolescent characters are both 'little' and 'big' but are more often than not 'slender.'<sup>15</sup> The physical appearance of adult characters, for its part, is described in varied ways in children's books and thus seems to be an important aspect of their characterisation. Besides the highly frequent 'big' and 'little', their stature is referred to as 'slender', 'burly' and 'chubby'.

A predictable image of child characters emerges from adjectives related to character traits. In young adult fiction, the recurrent adjectives to describe children suggest balanced traits: 'ignorant' and 'scared' as well as 'strong' and 'lucky'. In children's books, child characters are mainly described in a positive light with an emphasis on their intellect and all-around good nature, with terms including 'clever', 'bright', 'gifted', 'perfect', 'fantastic' and 'brave'. The adolescent characters in young adult fiction are regularly described as 'dreamy', 'clever', 'brilliant', 'lucky', 'sweet' and 'brave', but they are also frequently 'troubled', 'shy', 'bad', 'daft' and 'silly'. The theme of societal alienation that is often present in young adult fiction and adolescent characters is also apparent from the most common adjectives in this category. More than any other age group, adolescents are described as 'strange', 'weird' and 'different'. In terms of character traits, the representation of adult characters in young adult novels is also balanced. Adults are deemed 'extraordinary', 'nice' and 'great', but also 'crazy', 'useless', 'awful', 'boring' and 'reckless'. The latter is contradicted in Almond's books for children, where adults are predominantly described in positive terms as being 'sensible', 'great', 'nice' and 'clever'. Their only flaws are rather lovably described as 'silly', 'barmy' and 'daft'. Adjectives describing old adult characters that are not shared with other age groups are too limited to identify trends with any certainty. Very superficially, a more positive image emerges from the terms 'sweet' and 'nice' in children's literature than from 'filthy' in young adult fiction, but all of these words occur only twice.

## **Conclusion**

Digital tools can reveal implicit age norms that stay under the radar and that can, according to Stephens (*Language* 10), be all the more effective in influencing readers because they are not explicitly addressed and put up for scrutiny. The stylometric analysis of Almond's work shows that overall, there is a stylistic similarity between novels intended for readers of the same age. However, there are exceptions; some titles (e.g., *Klaus Vogel and the Bad Lads* and *War Is Over*) are not included in the cluster of texts for the age of their intended readership, but are grouped together with others. Books for 12 year olds and 15 year olds seem to be stylistically most distinct from others, even if some samples from these novels are still clustered

with books from other age ranges. Almond's writing style is not distinct for each age range and does not show a gradual change from the youngest to the oldest readership, a trend that can be identified in some authors' oeuvres but that is overall rare (see Haverals, Geybels and Joosen).

Turning to the age of fictional characters, the analyses of speech and possessions show that child characters in Almond's children's books typically have an extensive community around them consisting of friends, family and other adults. In young adult fiction, this group further includes siblings and grandparents. Thus, although intergenerational relationships feature in all books, they are particularly extensive in books for younger readers. This age norm emerges both from the close reading of his work (see also Chapters 1, 2 and 5) and the computational analyses. The characters in Almond's work who lack this community, usually adolescent boys, often display strange and aggressive behaviour that is also captured in the vocabulary related to them. In books for all ages, but in his adult novel in particular, Almond's adolescent characters are associated with the theme of death. In his young adult and adult books, the adjectives evoke the image of adolescents who are rebellious and alienated from society. These similarities between adult and young adult literature are acknowledged by the author himself: "even when I write for adults, there is usually some kind of sense of youth, or a young protagonist" (*Living North*). Although the theme of alienation is strongly present, there is a community surrounding (some) adolescent characters in all books. Their size and character traits are evoked as balanced, with positive and negative aspects. The descriptions reveal that Almond's adolescent characters are often evoked as skinny, lean figures. From the analyses of speech and actions, adolescents, parallel to child characters, are associated with creativity and, consequently, with the leisure time needed to express this creativity.

Almond's books present a diverse picture when it comes to childhood. In books for children, the negatively connotated description of their size is contrasted with positive attributes, specifically their intellect. Conversely, in his YA novels, children's small size is described in endearing terms, while their personality comes across as more balanced. Based on the character's vocabulary and actions, the freedom and creativity traditionally associated with children are most evident in Almond's adult literature and young adult fiction.

For adult characters, creativity and leisure make way for responsibilities. In books for readers of all ages, there is an association between adulthood and professional life in the analyses of speech and possessions. In the books for children and adults, there is also the responsibility of care, which goes hand in hand with the community surrounding them, which consists mainly of children and is particularly evident in the analysis of speech in all the books. In children's novels, some adults have more varied relationships, including siblings and possibly their own parents. There, the digital

analyses suggest that only in the adult books do friends of adults appear frequently. There they also express themselves in varied ways, whereas the analysis of actions shows that in children's books they mainly 'laugh' and 'smile'. In children's books, adults' personalities are largely described in a positive way (even if these books also feature some adult villains), while a more balanced picture emerges from the books for young adults. This might be explained by the demands associated with young people; while children are more dependent on parental figures for basic needs such as care, adolescents are more independent and defiant towards them.

Older adult characters are less common in Almond's books, and absent from his adult book. From the digital analyses of his books for children and young adults a similar image emerges. The speech and possessions of both categories suggest that the community around old people is considerably smaller. The stereotypical image of the disengaging older adult is reinforced by a greater emphasis on private spaces. Then again, the responsibility of work is mentioned for these characters, albeit much less prominently than for adults. In both children's books and young adult books, the decline narrative is evoked when old people are described with terms that express helplessness, fragility and static movement. In young adult novels, this concept is brought to the next level as the verb 'die' emerges in the analysis of actions.

The analyses in this chapter form an important contribution to the existing body of research on David Almond as a crosswriter. Using computational methods allowed me to discuss more titles than any previous studies and study the works together instead of treating them separately. This made it possible to compare the writing style of texts, discover trends in specific aspects (e.g., attributes of fictional characters of specific ages) and compare their speech. A limitation that this method has, however, is that some titles had to be excluded from the corpus because they did not contain enough text or were written in an idiosyncratic language. This complicates the argument that digital analyses can provide an objective and data-consistent analysis. Additionally, relying on lists of most common words to identify predominant themes in Almond's works overlooks potentially significant topics that are expressed with more diverse vocabulary, where each term is used only sparingly.

The benefit of studying many texts at once is that I could identify some variety in texts intended for different ages; while the theme of death, inter-generational relationships and the child's need for protection recur in all categories, they are addressed differently depending on the age of the reader. Violence and death are presented more graphically in books for young adults and adults. Adults are placed in a more positive light in books for children than in those for young adults. Child characters are described as vulnerable in all books, but this characteristic is compensated by more agentic features in children's books. Many of the trends identified in this chapter can serve as hypotheses to be tested with close reading, which

remains a valuable tool to study the representation of age in fiction and might enrich or nuance findings that come out of a more distant approach as employed in this chapter.

## Notes

- 1 The most influential early study making use of stylometric analyses was a case in disputed authorship, undertaken by Mosteller and Wallace in 1964, who moved from the analysis of low-frequency features to high-frequency features in a study of style. Another noteworthy precursor of current methods is Celia Catlett Anderson's doctoral dissertation from 1984. She went beyond the research of reading specialists, who examined vocabulary as well as the structure and length of sentences for prescriptive purposes, and moved towards a general analysis of the characteristics of children's literature (39).
- 2 See Cadden's "Narrative Theory and Children's Literature" for a brief overview of studies of character in children's literature.
- 3 Furthermore, the image that a reader creates of characters through their speech is often affected by dialogue tags which express the agency of the narrator (Nikolajeva, "Aesthetics" 446). In this chapter, direct speech is separated from narration, removing all context from the discussion and thus moving speech more towards the side of direct characterisation. The speech tags are taken into account as part of the digital analysis of verbs that are linked to the characters.
- 4 An exception is made for the short-story collection *Counting Stars*, because the same characters appear throughout the publication, which can be read as a single narrative. Primers and picture books are mainly directed to first readers and thus use short sentences and a limited vocabulary when compared to other children's books. Pertaining to the second set of analyses, those on the construction of the age of fictional characters, an important part of character building in picture books happens visually, through the illustrations included in the work. Because the digital analyses included in this chapter are exclusively text-based, a lot of information on the representation of characters and more specifically their age, would be lost. This is also the case with graphic novels and plays.
- 5 To facilitate the task of the human annotator, a self-developed Python script is used to automatically insert tags as the texts go through a pre-annotation process.
- 6 The field of digital humanities provides a tool to classify named entities in a text, including person names, called named entity recognition (NER). However, NER was not used in the annotation process of Almond's works for two reasons. First, none of the existing NER models classify pronouns, which means that many character references would not be identified. Second, automated character recognition does not consider the element of age which is central to the question of characterisation in this chapter. Even if there were a model that could correctly classify pronouns, it would be an insurmountable task to automatically trace changes in a character's age throughout a text. To that effect, tags are added to all pronouns during the pre-annotation process, while proper names and nouns referring to characters are manually tagged by the human annotator, who also attributes the relevant character ID to each tag.
- 7 The Python script used for the stylometric analysis in this section was written in large part by Wouter Haverals for the article "A Style for Every Age: A Stylometric Inquiry into Crosswriters for Children, Adolescents and Adults,"

co-authored by Vanessa Joosen and myself, to which I refer for technical details. I made the following updates to the script: First, rather than a full manual pronoun culling, I make use of the syntactic parser software spaCy to automatically remove unwanted words. Second, following Maciej Eder's advice, the remaining words are randomised before sampling the texts to avoid clustering due to the disparity in the distribution of vocabulary between narrative and dialogue.

- 8 The HCA (Figure 3.1) is generated using scipy's cluster.hierarchy.dendrogram() function. The following settings were used to generate the HCA and PCA: features n=54, chunk size=5,000, n-gram size range=(1,1), min\_df=0.1, max\_df=1.0, vectorizer=TF-IDF, distance metric=cosine similarity.
- 9 The discussion in this section builds on preliminary research carried out by intern Jo Debruyne who worked on the CAFYR research project in 2021–2022. The author is indebted to her for the insights she brought to this analysis.
- 10 See Joosen, "Research in Action" and Haverals and Joosen for the implementation of this tool to the oeuvre of Bart Moeyaert and Guus Kuijer, respectively.
- 11 For children and old adults, terms associated with stories are much more related to specific characters (the only child character who uses 'writing' is Mina and only two old adult characters use the word 'book'), while they pop up more widely in the speech of adolescents and adults.
- 12 The Python script was developed in collaboration with TEXTUA, the Text Mining Centre of the University of Antwerp and is available in open access via the following link: <http://textua.uantwerpen.be/app/cafyf>. It uses the open-source software spaCy (Honnibal and Montani) to parse the syntactic dependencies in sentences.
- 13 A prototype of this parser was used by Joosen in "Research in Action: Constructing Age For Young Readers," published in *International Research in Children's Literature* to study adjectives in Philip Pullman's *La Belle Sauvage*. See this article for a brief introduction to previous studies conducting analysis with other implementations of automatic syntactic dependency parsers.
- 14 In the discussion, we omit words that appear in all or almost all lists as they do not contribute to a comparison of the representation of different age groups. Likewise, terms that only occur once for any given age range are also excluded, as these may be heavily dependent on specific characters. Adjectives that are discarded include 'good', 'lovely', 'poor' and indications of age, as characters of all ages are described as being both 'old' and 'young', the only exception being old adult characters in young adult fiction, who are exclusively described as 'old' and 'ancient'.
- 15 Similar to the possessions of adolescents in Almond's children's books, there are no adjectives that are used to describe characters in this age group more than once and they are thus discarded from the discussion.

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## 4 An exploration of reader-response research through *My Name Is Mina*

*Leander Duthoy*

### **Introduction: actual readers or constructed readers?**

The goal of this chapter is to highlight the value of empirical reader-response research for expanding our insights into readers' relationship with children's literature and age. I start with a theoretical framework that explores the basics of reader-response criticism. Next, I discuss the methodology and set-up for the empirical research I conducted on David Almond's *My Name Is Mina* with readers of different ages, and then shift into exploring my results. At its core, reader-response criticism asks "how it is that literary works have the meaning they do for readers" (Culler 52). This kind of research "displaces the notion of an autonomous text to be examined in and on its own terms" in favour of "the reader's recreation of that text" (Benton 88). Methods for gaining insights into readers' meaning-making process can be diverse. Louise Rosenblatt, who has theorised the individual reader's experience, and Stanley Fish, who focuses on the dynamics in "interpretative communit[ies]" (14), are still regularly cited in research that deals with readers (a.o. Pope and Round 265; Tandoi, "Negotiating" 80; Waller 29). However, the readers they envision are usually more hypothetical than real. Fish admits that the reader he writes about "is a construct, an ideal or idealized reader" (48). Other researchers engage deeply with empirical reader-response data, sometimes to test particular "aesthetic experience" models or more specific hypotheses. Among children's literature scholars, the work of Maureen and Hugh Crago (1983) is known for its extensive focus on one actual reader, their daughter Anna, and her early engagement with picturebooks.

The diverse approaches we can find in more recent reader-response projects mirror the vast complexity of how the human condition shapes and defines the experience of literature. To gather data, scholars have used a mix of tools, including surveys (Stening and Stening 292), observations (Goldstein and Russ 109), writing journals (Tandoi, "Negotiating" 80), group

discussions (Pope and Round 364; Tandoi, “Negotiating” 80), individual discussions (Crago and Crago xxiv–xxv; Waller 199) and creative performances of the text (Tandoi, “Negotiating” 82). Many of these projects isolate one particular variable that they explore. Stening and Stening wanted to know how “culture” contributes to the perception of characters (292), while Goldstein and Russ hypothesised that children “who demonstrated better fantasy skills should be better able to understand the fantasy lesson in the story” (108). In the next section, I explore another variable in more detail: the reader’s age.

### Readers, age and children’s literature

The age of the reader has been a point of interest for reader-response critics from the start. Back in 1960, Rosenblatt argued that “the *Antony and Cleopatra* read at fifteen is not the same work we evoke at thirty” (“Reader” 305). Of course, “age” is a complex factor. Being a specific biological age does not dictate a specific reading of a particular book. When age is invoked as a parameter in reader-response research, there is generally some recognition that “[a]ge’s measurability does not carry with it universality of meaning” (Looser 28). In Waller’s introduction to her empirical study, in which she had volunteers re-read children’s books from youth, she remarks that “[a]s a reader ages, his or her life is populated by a wide range of reading matter, as well as literary and non-literary events that inflect reading response” (25). The “meaning” of a reader’s age for their response to literature is thus not the direct equivalent of their chronological age, but rather the amalgam of their particular experiences, events and beliefs, which accompanied their “becoming” a particular age. As Anna Sparrman writes: “the same numerical age can have different values depending on when, where, by whom and to what it is related” (244; see also Waller 25).

Doing empirical reader-response research with children’s literature presents an opportunity to explore age from two different angles. On the one hand, there is the readers’ age in and of itself: do readers of different ages reflect differently on the same story and if so, how? On the other hand, children’s literature offers constructions of age, and empirical research on age and children’s literature can thematise this aspect (Duthoy). For example, researchers can inquire how readers feel that their own age is represented in a given book, or whether they agree or disagree with the explicit age norms that a book voices (what we in this book call “metareflections”). Before I discuss the findings of my age-focused reader-response research on *My Name is Mina*, I will briefly highlight some of the methodological considerations that this kind of research entails.

### The practical side of empirical data collection

Empirical reader-response research usually falls under “qualitative” research, which “marshals an emphasis on meaning” and “focuses attention on the perspectives and interpretations that people develop about experiences and events” (Hermanowicz 491). From the initial research design to participant recruitment and data processing, qualitative empirical reader-response research requires a significant amount of time investment before any analysis can be done. Two common kinds of qualitative research are semi-structured interviews and focus group conversations. The distinctive feature of semi-structured interviews is that “topics and open-ended questions are written but the exact sequence and wording does not have to be followed with each respondent” (Cohen et al. 278). In focus group conversations, a group of participants is encouraged by a researcher to discuss a particular topic. This “interactive discussion [...] leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews” (Hennink 2-3). In a focus group, the researcher fades into the background as much as possible, and “participants talk amongst themselves rather than interacting only with the researcher, or ‘moderator’” (Barbour 2).

For interviews and focus group conversations, researchers first need to create an interview guide (Hennink 48). This involves translating abstract research questions into relevant interview or focus group questions. This “translation” needs to be done with care, because it is vital that qualitative questions “elicit full, rich, and personalized stories from participants” (Magnusson and Marecek 52). In that endeavour, research questions tend to be poor interview questions if they are not adapted. Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek offer the example of a student who wanted to ask ten-year-old participants: “How does your body image affect your identity?” (52). In contrast, interview questions need to be phrased in “an easy-going, colloquial form to generate spontaneous and rich descriptions” (Kvale 58). In creating the interview guide, a researcher also has to account for “the objectives of the interview; the nature of the subject matter; whether the interviewer is dealing in facts, opinions or attitudes; whether specificity or depth is sought [and] the respondent’s level of education” (Cohen et al. 274). These initial choices are not a matter of right or wrong, as much as they are about considering what is the best approach in a particular research project.

A second decision involves the set of participants to conduct research with. In some cases, research questions may demand a particular kind of participant. For example, if you want to know how adolescent readers reflect on YA fiction, that research question obviously limits the age of your readers. However, even with such a specific focus, questions of gender, ethnicity and other markers of identity remain. When conducting group discussions, some scholars suggest that homogeneity is

important, and that it is “advisable to avoid a group composition with participants from vastly different socioeconomic groups, life stages, or levels of authority” (Hennink 39) to limit potential interpersonal friction. However, others report how an “unruly focus group who ignored and ridiculed the young researcher” ended up offering fantastic data (Bloor et al. 48). Whether or not you want to engender consensus or discord between participants can be an additional matter to decide on before recruiting participants, though a significant part of the group dynamic will always be outside of the researcher’s control. On the practical side of things, finding participants may be difficult, especially if you have a narrow range of participants in mind.<sup>1</sup> Recruiting young participants adds further complications, as you need children who want to participate, but also their parents’ or guardians’ consent (Seidman 42).<sup>2</sup>

Transcription work is likely to be part of qualitative research in which participants are interviewed, or in which focus group conversations are conducted. Before data have been gathered, critical reflection is needed to ensure “a transcribed text is loyal to the interviewee’s oral statements” (Kvale 24). Transcribing in general is described as a “time-consuming” (Cohen et al. 281; Darlington and Scott 143; Seidman 115) and “arduous” (Magnusson and Marecek 73) process. For the broader PhD research project in which this chapter fits, I conducted interviews with 50 participants in total, which produced close to 60 hours of recorded audio and resulted in half a million words in transcript data.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Weiss remarks that when doing interview-based work, analysing the data is challenging because of the size and the difficulty to “extract the essential message” (48). Several software packages exist that support annotating and analysing qualitative research data. Nevertheless, finding meaning and significant dynamics in qualitative data still requires careful reading, re-reading and note-taking. Some researchers let colleagues look at (parts of) their data to make sure they have not missed anything or check whether they are not biased. In short, doing empirical research is challenging and time-consuming. This partly explains why projects that include reader-response research tend to be small-scale studies. In the second half of this chapter, I will return to some of the aspects of conducting qualitative research I have just outlined by reflecting on a series of interviews with readers that I conducted based on David Almond’s *My Name Is Mina*.

### **David Almond’s *My Name Is Mina*: Extraordinary activities and readers**

*My Name Is Mina* was published in 2010 as a prequel to *Skellig* (1998). It expands the backstory of Mina McKee, the girl living across the street from

*Skellig*'s protagonist Michael. The novel is presented as Mina's journal and details the period leading up to her meeting with Michael. In her journal, Mina plays with various forms of fiction and storytelling as she shares her thoughts on life, education, her relationship with her mother and more. She experiments with both form and content, writing in the first and third person, using various typefaces, including several pages of white text on a black background, adding a selection of poems and so on. One particularly notable aspect of the book's presentation as Mina's notebook is the inclusion of the "extraordinary activities" that she offers to her reader. For example: "Stare at the stars. Travel through space and time. Hold your head and know that you are extraordinary. Remind yourself that you are dust. Remind yourself that you are a star. Stand beneath a streetlamp. Dance and glitter in a shaft of light."

Eve Tandoi considers *My Name Is Mina* to be a hybrid novel. Hybrid novels "draw attention to themselves as artefacts in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" and make "use of the book's potential to engage readers visually and kinaesthetically as a means of contesting the supremacy of written language" ("Hybrid" 330). The hybridity found in *My Name Is Mina* is a product of its presentation as the actual notebook written by the main character. In her empirical research with the novel, Tandoi found that young readers "made use of the text's different typefaces and layouts to identify moments within the book that they wished to share and reflect on" ("Hybrid" 330). Young readers also engaged with the poems in *My Name Is Mina* by performing them in various playful ways (Tandoi, "Negotiating" 82). Tandoi points out that these readers "made use of their unique social and physical location—outside the classroom and in dialogue with a researcher—to revise aspects of the text they had been asked to read by performing it" ("Negotiating" 82).

Tandoi observes that "authors are increasingly making use of a range of modes [...] that invite readers to engage actively with texts, continuously remaking them" ("Hybrid" 333). Mina's extraordinary activities are a case in point, as readers are invited to perform creative acts and produce items which are—to push the term a bit—also hybrid in nature, as a meeting point between a particular "real" reader and their own creative drives and impulses, and a fictional character's intradiegetic reasons for proposing those same activities. The final product carries something of both the reader and the fictional character. Moreover, other researchers have also touched upon interesting dynamics by foregrounding readers' creative responses to a text. Using a short story, Eva Fjällström and Lydia Kokkola explored "how adolescent readers actually respond to fictional characters, and the extent to which they may be swayed into adopting the

narrative's world view" (395). They asked a group of 35 sixteen-year-old students to "rewrite the narrative from the perspective of one of the non-focalised characters" (396). By having readers actively produce a new text in response to a story, certain aspects of their reading experience can be considered from a different angle. For instance, while you can simply ask a 16-year-old reader to reflect on their perspective on an adult character, you can also explore how they write a story from that adult character's perspective and this may produce a richer image. As Fjällström and Kokkola note, based on their participants' written stories, "the fact that many struggled to comprehend the adult mind, but few had difficulties with sibling rivalry, suggests that they are drawing on personal experience, which signals that dismissing immersive identification out of hand is overly simplistic" (408).

Most of Mina's extraordinary activities involve acts of creative expression such as "Stare at Dust that Dances in the Light." One activity overlaps somewhat with what Fjällström and Kokkola asked their participants to do: "Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else" and "Write a story about somebody else as if you're writing about yourself" (Almond, *Mina*). For the purposes of this chapter, it is important that these activities are a part of the story's presentation as Mina's notebook rather than my own prompts. These are activities that the main character proposes her reader do.

### *Methodology*

For the research that I present in this chapter, I asked five readers of varying ages to read *My Name Is Mina* and complete as many of the book's extraordinary activities as they felt comfortable with. The goal was to explore if and how the age of the reader affects the way they engage with these activities. For instance, do younger readers find it easier to perform activities proposed by a main character closer to them in age? Do readers explicitly invoke their age as shaping their response to these activities? If so, in what way? In contrast with Fjällström and Kokkola's approach, where participation was part of the "mandatory" schoolwork of a group of teenage students, my participants were repeatedly told that any reason not to complete an activity was valid, although they would be asked to explain why. I chose this approach partially because of the practical reality that it is not possible (nor perhaps advisable) to make an assignment "mandatory" with volunteer readers, but also because I was interested in the reasoning behind readers' choices not to engage with certain activities. I felt that some activities seemed likely to trigger a sense of silliness that some readers would struggle with, such as "Go to the loo. Flush your pee away. Consider where it will go to and what it will become" (Almond, *Mina*).



My analysis is based on five one-hour semi-structured interviews with readers between the ages of 12 and 68. My participants were all Dutch-speaking inhabitants of Belgium and most lived in or near Antwerp. Readers were recruited through a variety of approaches. The majority responded to a call for participants spread on Twitter. Additionally, one reader contacted me after reading about my project in the digital newsletter of a local non-profit organisation, De Dagen, which promoted reading and book-centred events. Table 4.1 summarises the basic information of my participants: their chosen pseudonym, age and sex.

The adult readers were all women, which is a broader trend across my whole research project, with only 20% of all participants being men. Some of the reader-response research projects I cited in prior sections struggled with the same issue. Bruce and Rowena Stening's participants consisted of 78% women (294), while Alison Waller's participants were around 75% women (199–202).

The version of *My Name Is Mina* that I worked with, is its Dutch translation, *Mijn naam is Nina*. The translation does not change the book in ways that would obviously lead to divergent interpretations, but there are nevertheless some differences. For instance, some of the characters' names are changed into more Dutch-sounding equivalents: Mina becomes Nina, and her teacher Mrs. Scullery becomes Juf Suf (Mrs. Dull). For the sake of clarity in this discussion, I have translated these names back to their English equivalents. The Dutch translation is unfortunately out of print, which is why readers received a printed scan of the book. In addition, to be able to engage with one particular extraordinary activity, readers were given a scanned copy of the Dutch translation of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Finally, they received a free copy of an unrelated children's book as a reward for their participation.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted online, on the University of Antwerp's Blackboard Collaborate platform. The interviews were transcribed in full, with the combined transcripts amounting to just under 30,000 words of data. These transcripts were then analysed using NVivo, a software package aimed at supporting qualitative research by allowing the researcher to organise and manage data through

Table 4.1 List of participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sex</i>
Michiel	12	M
Leen	30	F
Marie	46	F
Griet	58	F
Astrid	68	F

the use of tags and folders. I translated the quotes from participants I use in my discussion myself from Dutch to English.<sup>4</sup> This study was approved by an independent ethics board.<sup>5</sup>

### Extraordinary activities

I started the interviews with a handful of general questions which were intended to ease participants into the conversation and ask them about their general experience of reading *My Name Is Mina*.<sup>6</sup> This part of the interview included questions such as “What did you think about engaging with these activities?” and “Was any activity more memorable for you than the others?” After these introductory questions, the interviews shifted to discussing each extraordinary activity one by one. For each activity, I had prepared a set of questions to discuss readers’ responses. For example, one extraordinary activity centres on the poetry of William Blake:

#### EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Read the Poems of William Blake.  
(Especially if you are Ms. Palaver.) (Almond, *Mina*)

For this extraordinary activity, some of my questions were:

What poems did you read?  
Why did you choose to read those ones?  
Do you understand why Mina might be a fan of William Blake?

The intent was not to gather answers from every participant about every single question. Rather, I allowed participants to dwell on activities they had stronger opinions about and asked follow-up questions if interesting lines of thought emerged. In general, I attempted to find a balance between gathering enough responses about all activities to make broad comparisons, while capturing some of the deeper idiosyncrasies of particular readers’ responses.

One element of those individual idiosyncrasies I wished to explore was readers’ reasons for *not* conducting certain activities. Therefore, I started the interviews by explicitly reaffirming that I was also interested in hearing about the activities they did not do and their reasons why. Every reader skipped at least one extraordinary activity for one reason or another. For instance, only one reader completed the activity: “Stand beneath a street-lamp. Dance and glitter in a shaft of light.” In contrast, there were also a handful of activities which tended to evoke more extensive and deeply personal reflections among readers—especially the writing exercises, where

participants created short stories or little bits of poetry. Readers of all ages generally seemed to enjoy talking about these activities the most, and these, therefore, generated more data than others.

Through discussing their encounter with *My Name Is Mina* and its extraordinary activities, readers offered rich reflections on their ideas about age, their own lives, reading histories and their thoughts on children's literature in general. In the next sections, I engage with these data through a handful of different angles. My intent is to highlight how readers of different ages confront these activities, with an emphasis on how their age plays an explicit and implicit role. To support my analyses, I build on several theoretical concepts from fields like age studies and children's literature criticism, such as Marah Gubar's kinship model to understand the relationship between childhood and adulthood, and the notions of "being" vs. "becoming," (Uprichard 303) and highlight how readers' responses fit or clash with these ideas. Two of the more prominent concepts put forth by readers, "shame" and "space," will serve as guiding principles for the first of my analyses. Next, I turn to the stories written by the oldest readers Griet (58) and Astrid (68) in response to the extraordinary activities. While all readers engaged with this specific set of activities, they were the only ones who were willing to share their texts with me. Moreover, in these texts, both thematise age and ageing. In my reading and analyses of these stories in the final part of this chapter, I draw comparisons with Mina's own intradiegetic, third-person story.

### **Age, space and embarrassment**

At the start of my interview with Leen (30), I asked her if she believed there were any likely differences between younger and older readers in completing Mina's activities. She replied that among readers of all ages, many would prefer not to do the activities, but "the motivation might be different. I think that children will tend to skip them because they are not in the mood or don't know where to start, while adults will tend to skip them because they don't have time or because they think the activities are a bit silly."<sup>7</sup> Though she did not immediately connect this observation to herself, it resembles how she talks about her own experience. For example, she discussed the struggle of finding time to read due to her adult responsibilities, and reflected how: "back in the day when I was younger I could read a whole Sunday afternoon, while being more focused without being distracted so easily."<sup>8</sup> In contrast, she now mainly found the time to read on her commute to work by train: "that's two 45-minute trips for me to read, which is a nice bit of time and ensures I can still read quite a bit."<sup>9</sup> Leen's reading experience is thus entwined with that particular location, and is more or less driven by her work schedule.

In that context, she suggested that deeply engaging with literature as a working adult is more difficult because “finding the time is a problem [...] as adults we all have many responsibilities.”<sup>10</sup> Talking about what it means to read almost exclusively on trains, Leen added: “You can’t lose yourself in the book because you have to make sure that you don’t miss your stop. There’s also always people around you. [...] It creates a unique reading experience.”<sup>11</sup>

It was that implicit social context, being surrounded by strangers on a train, that Leen (30) identified as stopping her from completing some of the extraordinary activities: “I did feel a tad self-conscious at times. I think that if I’d read the book at home that I would have completed more of the activities.”<sup>12</sup> I asked her whether she felt that that sense of shame was age-related. She added that while she always was a “very self-conscious child [...] I feel like children are a bit less prone to that.”<sup>13</sup> These thoughts on her own age and reflections on her physical surroundings returned in her execution of the extraordinary activities. When I asked about the story-writing activities, Leen opted to paraphrase the story she had written instead of reading it out loud, and summarised it as “being about nothing, just about the train, that it is delayed sometimes, but that it also brings peace. That I’m always happy when we arrive at our destination.”<sup>14</sup> When prompted to explain how she felt about engaging with this activity, Leen’s insights further expanded on her prior reflections of what adulthood and childhood mean(t) to her:

It was [pauses] difficult. It was fun to do in a way, but it was also hard. I had very little inspiration and I see that my story is about the train, so I clearly had very little inspiration [laughs]. I also found it a little bit confronting as well. I think that I would have been better at this in the past. Making up stories and stuff.<sup>15</sup>

Leen’s choice not to complete several of the extraordinary activities is contingent on several age-based discourses which intersect and feed back into each other: her busy adult life with little time to read, reading on the train, and the social awkwardness about doing specific tasks in a public setting. Moreover, for the activities she did complete, she reflected with a twinge of sadness about how her progression into adulthood seems to have negatively affected her inspiration or ability to write long stories.

Several of these themes also returned implicitly and explicitly in other readers’ approaches to the activities. Marie (46), for instance, shared almost the exact same sentiment about children being more comfortable with completing some of the activities because they have a less developed sense of shame. This emerged strongly in our discussion of the following extraordinary activities:

### EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

#### *(DAYTIME VERSION)*

Touch the tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb, making a ring. Look through the ring into the sky.\* See the great emptiness there. Contemplate this emptiness. Wait Don't move. Perhaps there is a tiny dot in the emptiness, which is a skylark singing so high up that it's almost out of sight. Perhaps not. Perhaps there really is just emptiness. Sooner or later a bird will appear for a second in your view and will fly away. Something appears in nothing, and then disappears. Keep looking. Sooner or later another bird will appear to take its place. Keep looking. It may be that several birds appear together. Keep looking. Keep looking. Allow the extraordinary sky into your mind. Consider the fact that your head is large enough to contain the sky. That is all, and it is hardly anything at all. No need to write anything down unless you would like to. Just remember. And wonder. And do the activity again when you have a moment. Do not worry about staring into space. It is an excellent thing to do.

### EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

#### *(NIGHTTIME VERSION)*

Touch the tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb, making a ring. Look through the ring into the sky.\* See the great abundance there. Contemplate this abundance: the stars and galaxies, the planets, the great great darkness, the stars so far away in time and space they look like scatterings of silver dust. Consider the unimaginable amount of space and time that is circled by the ring you have made. Consider that this unimaginable amount is just a tiny fragment of the universe, of eternity. Keep looking. Keep looking. Things will move across your vision: a flickering bat, a swooping owl; the high-up light of an airplane, the slow slow flashing of a satellite. Keep looking. Keep looking. Allow the abundant night into your mind. Consider the fact that your head is large enough to contain the night. That is all, and it is hardly anything at all. No need to write anything down unless you would like to. Just remember. And wonder. And do the activity again when you have a moment. Do not worry about staring into the dark. It is an excellent thing to do.

### EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Go to the loo. Flush your pee away.

Marie (46) found it particularly difficult to engage with these activities because she “did think like: ‘look at me doing this stuff’.”<sup>16</sup> She added that it “requires you to leave your comfort zone. I would normally never do something like this.”<sup>17</sup> As with Leen, I asked Marie if she connected her own age to this sentiment. She readily replied: “yeah I can imagine that children will think less about how silly or crazy doing this makes you look. That they spend less time thinking ‘look at how I’m making a fool of myself.’”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, even though Marie read the book at home, and thus did not suffer the same level of social scrutiny as Leen felt on the train, Marie nevertheless remarked how she

thinks so much about ‘what will others think of me’ when I do things. And even though I am home alone, that thought sticks with me. I can imagine that as you grow older, that those thoughts dissipate a bit. That you are more like ‘screw it I’m doing my own thing’, and care less about how crazy you look.<sup>19</sup>

I explored Marie’s struggle with these thoughts in more detail and was struck by her own insight into where these feelings came from. She shared that she had distinct memories of being increasingly criticised for behaviour that did not comply with norms for proper adult behaviour as she progressed into adulthood, and that younger children have not yet received that negative feedback, so they will not have such a sense of shame. In her words: “it’s very clear in my case that I just heard so often: ‘you don’t do that as an adult’ and ‘come on, act like an adult’ and yeah as a child you obviously haven’t heard that as much yet.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the shame tied to the spatial and social context of the activities, the idea of “self-consciousness” operates in the background of this whole discussion: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines self-consciousness fairly generally as “Consciousness of one’s own existence, identity, sensations, etc.; self-awareness.” In the case of Marie’s struggles, there is an underlying tension of feeling aware of a particularly *adult* identity, as she reflects on how she was told how to “act like an adult,” an internalised age norm which she felt unable to separate herself from as she attempted to engage with Mina’s extraordinary activities, even in the privacy of her own home. Shame, self-consciousness and age have a long history of entanglement. The oldest source the OED cites for “self-consciousness” is a 1646 text that suggests “shame hath its source [sic] within.” This entanglement has also been invoked in constructions of childhood and adulthood. In Romantic idealisations of childhood, the “original state” is admired for its innocence and consequent lack of shame. Children represented “a point of imaginative escape from

the regularizing effects of (proto-) capitalist rationality, encapsulating innocence, simplicity, wonder, and a connection to sensation and emotion that is thought to be lost to adulthood” (Faulkner 131). On a similar note, James Kincaid argued that “the good child’s innocence is figured as shamelessness: like Adam and Eve in the garden, naked and proud of it” (223). This shamelessness is tied to a lack of self-awareness or self-consciousness, which Kincaid also finds in constructions of childhood in some children’s classics. Writing about Peter Pan, he suggests that his “identity is whole, focused, absolutely assured: ‘There never was a cockier boy’ [...]. He holds his body cocked and ready, struts, asserts his being unself-consciously, happily exposed” (282).

As a counterpart to this image of childhood as innocent, adulthood tends to be envisioned as a rational and self-conscious state that has also been idealised in its own right. Neil Postman remarks how some educators and philosophers have historically ascribed to children “the status of ‘barbarian,’ [...] unformed adults who need to be civilized” (50). That civilization process entailed “inducing a sense of shame in the young, without which they could not gain entry into adulthood” (50). Allison James and Alan Prout write how “self-conscious subjects” are not simply the result of biological processes, but are “produce[d]” specifically through “institutionalized practices” (22). Shame and embarrassment can function as social mechanisms that make people conform to age norms. Cheryl Laz, for example, argues that “we situate ourselves vis-a-vis these images [of age] and as a consequence feel guilty or proud, ashamed or delighted, at our ability to ‘measure up’” (104). While shame can be part of a personal reflection (i.e. you can be ashamed of your own actions), it can also be a tool for social conformity. We try to avoid being shamed by living up to accepted images of age, or shame others for failing to do so.

Marie (46) and Leen (30) touch upon topics that age scholars have also explored in cultural constructions of age and the role of shame and self-consciousness in that construction. More specifically, both share an embarrassment rooted in an imagined reaction of (hypothetical) others, motivated by an internalised awareness of how they *should* act as “normal” adults. Shame is both used as a tool for policing conformity to age norms, while simultaneously being an age norm in and of itself. Marie (46) and Leen (30) express some regret for having internalised these concepts. Marie, in particular, points out the negative impact of being taught shame and how, even as an adult in her own home, she still cannot shake off that feeling. Her expectation that this personal sense of shame dissipates as one becomes older, has also been expressed in age studies, but it has similarly complex implications. It is a mindset that is attested in some empirical research. Nick Hubble and Philip Tew explored older adult readers’ reflections on their own age and the way older adulthood is presented

in literature for adult readers. They quote extensively from the diary of N1592, an unnamed 75-year-old woman, who reflects on her age:

When I am old I shall wear purple—as Jenny Joseph famously enunciated—I no longer care what people think of my appearance, actions, what I say. I'm no longer afraid to address a meeting, sing a solo, recite, crack a joke in a dismal silence—my privilege. (91)

This feeling overlaps with Marie's (46) expectation of being old and going "screw it I'm doing my own thing." Indeed, N1592 describes this as a firmly positive quality of ageing. However, she contextualises it as a direct consequence of a different, negative aspect of ageing, the fact that she feels invisible as an older woman: "who cares! I'm invisible anyway" (92).

As I will explore later in this chapter, (in)visibility and the broader theme of shame return as topics throughout Astrid's (68) and Griet's (58) responses. However, before discussing the oldest readers, I briefly want to turn to Michiel (12), the youngest reader who engaged with Mina's extraordinary activities. Michiel did not complete several of them. Shame and embarrassment were completely absent from his explanation, but there was significant overlap with Leen in the emphasis he placed on the impact of his reading environment. Where Leen's reading time was constrained by her job, Michiel (12) found himself unable to do all the activities the way he wished because he used some of his spare time at school to read. For example, I asked him whether he completed the following extraordinary activities:

#### EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Write a sentence which fills a whole page.

#### EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

Write a single word at the center of a page.

Michiel replied that he "didn't do that, no. I was in the study hall at that time and we had to work with a system of 20 minutes of studying followed by a five-minute break. And I thought: 'If I only have five minutes, this activity is not that easy to complete.'"<sup>21</sup> In addition, this particular time and space also shaped *how* he executed some of the extraordinary activities. Mina proposes that the reader "Take a line for a walk. Find out what you're drawing when you've drawn it." Michiel completed this activity in the study hall, and remarked that he made his drawing "on the beat of the sound you hear around you and how bright the light is. Making waves,



going straight, that sort of stuff.”<sup>22</sup> In that regard, there is some overlap between Michiel’s and Leen’s dependency on their environment for completing these activities in a way that is tied to age.

Just as Leen (30) has adult responsibilities, Michiel (12) has to attend school. This overlap fits within what Gubar has called a “kinship model” of age, in which we acknowledge that “children and adults are fundamentally akin to one another, even if certain differences or deficiencies routinely attend certain parts of the aging process” (299). Through framing Michiel and Leen in a context of kinship, I want to stress that—despite existing in evidently different stages of the life course—it is also important to acknowledge what they share (see also Joosen 83). For example, one key aspect of age to which Gubar applies this kinship model is the notion of agency. She emphasises that “[r]ather than assume that adults are full-fledged autonomous agents and then attempt to discern how children fail to live up to that standard” we should acknowledge “that all human beings begin life in a compromised position, a state of dependency in which key decisions about who we are and how we live our lives are being made for us” (300). With Leen and Michiel, the question of agency floats to the surface in how they engaged with Mina’s activities. Both experience their own age in a broader context of responsibility and obligation, tied to the locations and social contexts in which they function. Their observations also demonstrate how reader-response research can reveal much more than only *how* readers experience a narrative. By zooming out and locating literary experience in a broader socio-cultural context, literature becomes a prism that reveals both our shared humanities as well as our disparate individuality.

### **The need for fantasy**

Indeed, there are also ways in which participants’ responses were unique. Compared to my interviews with Marie and Leen, my conversation with Michiel about the stories he wrote in response to Mina’s activities was quite long. Michiel admitted that his story was heavily inspired by the Percy Jackson books. It was set in a “school where it is normal to be magical. And then you have the one person that isn’t magical—me, in this case—and he is very good at other stuff.”<sup>23</sup> When we compare Michiel’s story to those of other readers, a few things stand out. He was the only reader writing a third-person story about themselves that entailed a fully fictionalised narrative. By that, I mean that every other reader chose to describe their current situation and corresponding thoughts in a more or less biographical manner. Leen (30) wrote about her sitting on the train and the peace it brings her, Marie (46) created: “an everyday story about the things I did that day,”<sup>24</sup> while Astrid (68) and Griet (58) both reflected on becoming old, with references to their children or grandchildren.

In my interview with Leen (30), she had shared her frustrations about feeling unable to go beyond this kind of autobiographical description in her story:

I feel that when I was younger, my fantasy was much more unbound. It was much easier to tell and make up stories compared to now. Now I get stuck on mundane facts and I wouldn't have had that so much in the past. [...] Ten years ago I don't think my story would have been just half a page long.<sup>25</sup>

In that context, the contrast between Michiel's (12) fully fictionalised reimagining of the Percy Jackson books featuring himself, and the mostly autobiographical stories of the older readers becomes particularly striking. Furthermore, Leen's comment about having "unbound fantasy" when she was younger, but struggling to make up stories from scratch as an adult, is interesting to contextualise in the broader discourse of readers' relationship with fantasy and imagination.

Joseph Appleyard's seminal *Becoming a Reader* (1994) explores how a reader's approach to literature changes over their lifetime. Children, Appleyard writes, "are marvelous fantasists in ways that to adults seem imaginative and creative" (32). Appleyard describes a significant change around adolescence. Among teenagers, "[a] story is praised because it is 'true,' 'normal,' 'like how people really act,' 'valid,' 'something that's not like a fantasy'" (107). Other reader-response scholars acknowledge the commonly held belief that as readers age, they "become mainly concerned with the 'real' and reject 'the worlds of the imaginative and the fantastic'" (Rosenblatt, "Transaction" 273). In addition, there is a broader discussion in life course studies about imagination and fantasy in the ageing process. Lorraine Green points out that there are "gains [...] as well as losses" related to ageing, and she identifies fantasy as being one of the things one tends to lose as we "become more cognitively expert" (178–179). The cognitive element is also affirmed by Maria Nikolajeva:

even in the best of circumstances, a significant part of [fantasy] will be sacrificed during adolescence in favour of other cognitive activities, such as prediction and decision-making, which are often recognised as tokens of maturity. ("Neuroscience" 27)

The position of children's literature in all of this is complex. Discussions about the value of imagination and fantasy in these texts date back centuries. Some eighteenth-century educators saw children's literature specifically as a tool to repress fantastical impulses in children, as "progress away from the imagination was progress towards reason and science"

(Wilkie-Stibbs 355). In 1796, educator and writer Maria Edgeworth prefaced her stories for children with a brief note to parents that:

[t]o prevent precepts of morality from tiring the ear and the mind, it was necessary to make the stories in which they are introduced in some measure dramatic [...]. At the same time care has been taken to avoid inflaming the imagination, or exciting a restless spirit of adventure. (Edgeworth xii)

Romantic thinkers, such as the Brothers Grimm, lauded children's capacity for the imagination. In more recent texts, positive intergenerational interaction has been portrayed as stimulating imagination and fantasy, in particular through bonds between older adults and children. As Vanessa Joosen writes: "[i]n late twentieth-century children's books [...] the close relationship with an older person is usually constructed as being in the child's best interest, fostering his or her agency, emotional strength, and imagination" (188; see also Lindgren and Sjöberg).

In the participants' discussion of their engagement with *My Name Is Mina* and its extraordinary activities, various facets of this discourse returned. Leen was not the only adult reader, for instance, who made comments about "losing" fantasy. Astrid (68), the oldest participant, reflected on the amount of mental labour that completing the activities required of her, and contrasted herself with the fictional Mina:

there are activities I'd like to have a second go at. I'd really have to sit down and focus. And really think. Meanwhile, [Mina] just writes what pops into her mind. Whatever pops into her mind, she writes down. Yeah, that's a part of the imagination you lose as an adult.<sup>26</sup>

My goal here is not to imply that the data empirically prove that fantasy's decline is related to age. I do want to highlight that adult readers use constructs of adulthood and childhood as times of, respectively, lost fantasy and spontaneous, effortless imagination to make sense of their engagement with the extraordinary activities. Leen and Astrid struggled with the activities and blamed this on a lost connection to childhood fantasy, which they characterised as a consequence of adulthood, rather than thinking that they might have just had a bad day. Both believed that, instead of some biological process, this change is a product of society's demands of adulthood. When I asked whether she believed that her ability to use fantasy was lost for good, Leen replied: "it would come back if I were to invest in it. I think it would just be a problem of time. [...] As adults we all have lots of responsibilities and I imagine it would be very difficult at first to not have those take over."<sup>27</sup> Astrid made roughly the same point, suggesting

that she had lost fantasy in adulthood “because you are just busy doing so many things. I’ve been retired for barely two years and finally have more time for that sort of stuff.”<sup>28</sup>

At the start of my discussion, I pointed out that qualitative research does not aim for generalizability, but instead wishes to explore personal meaning-making, which is engendered by approaches like interviews and group discussions. While a quantitative survey might tell us what percentage of adults feel like they have lost their capacity for unbound imagination, qualitative research (in this case a combination of creative activities and personal interviews) allows for an exploration of the deeper dynamics that underline those experiences, which can then be put into dialogue with existing theoretical frameworks, as I have tried to in this framework.

### **Older readers and their third-person stories**

At the end of each interview, I asked participants whether they would be comfortable with sending me a scan of the extraordinary activities that required them to produce written texts or drawn images. Interestingly, the only readers who wanted to do so were the oldest two participants, Griet (58) and Astrid (68). In contrast, Michiel (12), Leen (30) and Marie (46) all felt that their creations were personal and did not wish to share the originals, although they did describe them to me. In this final section, I will turn my attention to the written stories produced by the oldest readers, and explore how some of the themes and topics I discussed earlier returned here.

Griet (58) and Astrid (68) independently chose to emphasise age in their stories, jumping at the opportunity to address their concerns and uncertainties, and did not mind sharing them with a researcher who openly disclosed the possibility that their stories would be disseminated in research publications. This is interesting in the context of shame that emerged in my interviews with Leen (30) and Marie (46) and the quote from Hubble and Tew’s participant N1592, who remarked that her sense of shame dissipated over time because she feels invisible as an older woman (92). My oldest participants were the only readers who felt comfortable sharing their creative products and both opted to make age visible in their stories. Of course, all participants were told in advance that my research project centred on age, so the choice of age as a topic for Griet and Astrid’s stories was perhaps somewhat prompted. However, none of the younger readers’ stories addressed age as a topic to the same extent.

In addition, it is relevant to consider that Mina’s two prompts for these extraordinary activities are placed right after she has written a third-person story about herself exploring an underground coal mine. Aspects from Mina’s own story seem to return in some participants’ stories.<sup>29</sup> Mina relays how she ran out of school after being bullied and ended up in the

old coal mine below the park. There, she encountered someone patrolling the mines, which scared her and she ran back out. Mina starts her story by describing herself: “She was just nine years old. She was very skinny and very small and she had jet-black hair and a pale face and shining eyes. Some folks said she was weird. Her mum said she was brave.” During her underground adventure, she also muses about Greek mythology, such as the minotaur and Orpheus. Mina’s reverence for Greek mythology may have inspired Michiel’s narrative about a school “where you learn how to fight mythological characters and stuff.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast, Griet (58) and Astrid (68) seem to build more on the parts where Mina reflects on her own identity and fears. Astrid opted for writing about herself in the third person. Her story was relatively short, so I include it in full below:

She is 68, alone, happy in a nice house with a garden, birds, chickens, frogs and salamanders. Time is slowly running out. Many memories but also what is still possible? What with the coming generations, and then concretely what will her grandchildren have to deal with?<sup>31</sup>

Astrid (68), like Mina, opens by stating her age, but where Mina shifts focus to other matters, age and time remain the core topics of Astrid’s story. Her comment about being alone is instantly followed by the reassurance that she is happy. The up-beat first sentence is balanced with a set of questions and remarks about the inevitability of death, uncertainty about how much more she can accomplish and concern about the coming generations. Rachel Siegel remarks that “[f]ailing strength, isolation, and the fear of death, all of which are associated with ageing, though formidable, do not inevitably cause depression” (qtd. in Gullette 53). Astrid’s third-person story is that of a woman who—although she worries—finds happiness and comfort in old age.

Meanwhile, Griet (58) was the only reader who opted to write both a full story about herself in the third person *and* a story about someone else in the first person. Due to the length of her stories, I have selected specific segments to discuss here, while the full stories are included in Appendix E. Griet’s stories cover various topics, ranging from her struggles with living up to her own expectations of adulthood to the pain older people experience in a society that sometimes refuses to acknowledge the fact that people age. While writing about herself, Griet first reflects on a childhood that is marked by a sense of certainty, which partially disappears when she grows older:

She grew up.  
She became an adult.  
She heard about awful things in the news.

She knew that she couldn't be a coward, nor did she want to be. She didn't always know how.

Deep in her heart she knows that she still isn't fully adult. She has kids of her own now. She thinks that she will be very brave if they are ever in danger. She still doesn't know how brave she will be in actual danger, because she doesn't have a dangerous life.<sup>32</sup>

Griet's story seems to express a disconnect between her own conceptualisation of adulthood and how she actually feels, centred on the idea of bravery. Although her story touches upon some of the anxieties Griet has about what being an adult means, the tale ends on a mostly content reflection about how her small acts of bravery are enough for now.

Like Michiel and Astrid, Griet seems inspired by aspects from Mina's story. Bravery matters to Mina as well, as she repeatedly whispers the mantra "*My name is Mina. I am very brave*" (italics in original) throughout her trip in the coal mine. Like Mina, Griet tells her story through flashbacks, but whereas Mina only goes back a short time, Griet reflects on her whole life. Interestingly, while in Mina's story her belief in her own bravery pushes her beyond her initial limits (e.g., "she told herself she'd dare to go through that entrance"), Griet's story is much more about accepting that she will never be as brave as she would like to be, and contextualising that in her personal view on adulthood. In other words, Mina tells a story of pride in personal growth and further potential achievement, whereas Griet is more centred on being content with what you have and are.

### **A note on beings and becomings**

The tension between growth and stasis that emerges through this comparison between Mina and Griet's story is one that operates in the background of several of the previous analyses. Specifically, readers' comments about their imagination, their engagement with the third-person stories, and to some extent shame and self-consciousness illustrate various aspects of what is called the "beings" and "becomings" conflict in childhood studies and age studies. The idea is most debated in childhood studies, in the question of whether a child should be seen as a "being," that is "a social actor in his or her own right, who is actively constructing his or her own 'childhood'," or as a becoming, that is "an 'adult in the making', who is lacking universal skills and features of the 'adult' that they will become" (Uprichard 304). As Colin Heywood points out, these discussions go back centuries, with "leading figures in the Enlightenment confidently assert[ing] that children are important in their own right, rather than being merely imperfect adults." Since the 1970s, there has been a slow shift towards

envisioning children as “beings,” or as both “beings” and “becomings” at the same time (Fitzpatrick 44; Uprichard 305). More recently, there has been a push for rethinking adulthood through the same lens, by changing the conceptualisation of older adults in the opposite direction, “with a new emphasis on older adults as not only *beings* but also *becomings*” (Fitzpatrick 45; italics in original). One of the intended goals of this shift is to reaffirm older adults’ “right to ongoing access” to personal, intellectual and social growth through formal and informal education (45). Put simply, these changing perspectives on childhood and adulthood aim to draw the two life stages closer together. For children, it means meeting them on their own ground, as people with their own current desires, problems and contexts which have merit beyond their impact on children’s development into future adults. For adults, it means recognising that they too still change, that adulthood does not mean finality and that as long as we live, we can envision a new future for ourselves.

In Griet and Astrid’s third-person stories, there is a struggle between hope for “becoming,” and acceptance of “being.” Astrid recognises that she has limited time left but still contemplates personal goals, constructing old age as a time when change may still be possible. Griet’s story emphasises her own happiness despite recognising that progress is more difficult because of her age, but also leaves the possibility that she may become brave if her children are ever in danger. By contrast, Michiel’s story fundamentally revolves around change and positive growth, being a school story where the main character learns various new skills.

The state of children and adults as either “finished” or “in progress” also informs readers’ perspectives on shame, self-consciousness and imagination, and it does so in a way where adult superiority is also sometimes questioned. Envisioning children as “unformed adults who need to be civilized [by] inducing a sense of shame” (Postman 50) firmly constructs them as existing in a state of “becoming” with conventional adulthood as the desired result. Emma Uprichard has pointed out that when the cultural discourse around age envisions children purely as “becomings,” and adults strictly as “beings,” we end up with children “who seemingly cannot be competent at anything, [and] adults who are seemingly competent at everything!” (305). The adult participants indeed questioned whether adulthood was the most desired or competent life stage. Marie (46) expressed regret at being conditioned into self-consciousness at the expense of freedom and spontaneity, while Leen (30) and Astrid (68) similarly reflected on a lost sense of fantasy because of social conditioning. Leen and Astrid’s views on the “finished” status of adulthood are complicated. Both believe that certain aspects of childhood can be reclaimed in adulthood with enough time and effort. In that sense, they uphold a narrative of a potential adult “becoming.” At the same time, however, they recognise adulthood as a state of partial atrophy.

### Griet's first-person story

For her first-person story about someone else, Griet wrote from the perspective of Pierre Brice, the actor who played Winnetou in the 1960s West-German films. Griet composed a short story detailing Brice's reflections about growing old and his struggles with continuing to perform as Winnetou for various events:

I feel it in my back. I have to hold the table to be able to stand up without too much pain. There isn't much glamour in getting old. [...] It's just that the real Winnetou never got old. Well, the real fictional Winnetou. I do it for the kids. Just a bit longer on the exercise bike so that I can climb the stairs to the stage without help.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to her story about herself, her story about Brice puts more emphasis on the negative aspects of ageing. It is presented as the private reflection of an older man whose ageing body aches, but who feels pressured by his environment to keep performing a role he is no longer able to enact without significant physical discomfort. While Astrid's narrative relayed the potential for happiness despite social isolation and the distinct awareness of death, Griet's story portrays an older person who is deeply miserable despite being surrounded by people and being literally put on a pedestal (or stage). The term "performance" is significant here. As Cheryl Laz writes: "Age is an act, a performance in the sense of something requiring activity and labor" (86, italics in original). Griet's Pierre is literally putting up a youthful performance that is so discordant with the reality of his body that he needs to work and suffer for it. There is also an undertone of guilt, shame and exploitation. Pierre does not want to disappoint the young fans and knows that his performance raises money. That is not to say that all performances of age are necessarily motivated by shame or guilt; Kathleen Woodward has explored several empowering examples (287–288). But whereas Woodward writes about people who perform old adulthood for their own benefit, Pierre's performance is presented as a kind of charity and he becomes subject to other people's purposes. He is paraded as an attraction to raise money and entertain others.

Moreover, while thinking about age as a performance is mostly metaphorical, here it literally involves an older man dressing up as a character he played in his early thirties and consequently attempting to re-embody a younger self that is inconsistent with his changed body. In her book *Age Studies*, Susan Pickard includes a section where she explores our response to "the model Heidi Klum attending a Hallowe'en party in fancy dress as a 'wrinkled old lady'" (194):

Just like the Rabelaisian carnival celebration of the grotesque, the poor and the ugly, Klum can only indulge in her spectacle of age because in



the world of Order she is known for a youthful beauty that has earned her a fortune. The performance draws attention to the disjunction between the ‘real’ Heidi and this Hag; it does not so much suggest the arbitrary quality of the rules of age and beauty as remind us why they are (rightly) there. (195)

Klum’s performance as an old woman serves as an interesting opposite to Pierre. In Griet’s story, we are faced with an older man whose performance of youth is motivated not by the audience’s knowledge that he is much older, but by their refusal to let him age: “the real Winnetou never got old,” so Pierre cannot be old either. He is told that the fundraiser will be most successful if “the ‘real Winnetou’ hits the stage.” His own age thus needs to become invisible for the audience to be amused.

Griet (58) and Astrid (68) both make use of Mina’s fairly general prompts to foreground some of the upsides and downsides of ageing. In their stories, they incorporate significant nuance, and to some extent genuine tenderness at what being older may mean for different people. Being alone in old age does not equal unhappiness, and being uncertain about whether or not you are successful at “being” a brave adult does not prohibit you from being brave “enough for now.” Moreover, unlike the younger participants, Griet (58) and Astrid (68) voluntarily shared their entire written stories without mentioning embarrassment. The stories highlight both the joys and challenges that accompany ageing. In doing so, they offer an open, insightful look into their age group—an intriguing contrast with the more explicit shame highlighted by some younger readers.

## Conclusion

Readers’ completion of the extraordinary activities from *My Name is Mina* offered a unique perspective on the entanglement of age, spatiality, shame and the experience of literature. In Tandoi’s discussion of her empirical research on *My Name Is Mina*, she notes how her young participants read the story out loud in “performances that [...] often disregarded [...] linguistic meaning, but the children derived great pleasure from experimenting with the physical challenge of articulating words and creating a multi-sensory reading experience” (“Negotiating” 81). Similarly, the participants I interviewed engaged with the extraordinary activities in ways that disregarded direct connections to the book, but simultaneously created a multi-sensory experience; both in the literal meaning of the sounds and sights that were incorporated into the completed activities, but also through more figurative senses, such as a sense of shame, space, time and age.

Novels that ask their readers for active engagement may have significant potential for unlocking further insight into readers’ meaning-making.

Reader-response research traditionally asks “how it is that literary works have the meaning they do for readers” (Culler 52). Hybrid books like *My Name Is Mina* allow us to take that question one step further, by asking how readers *make* meaning in wholly new ways in response to a literary work. While some of the products of readers’ engagement with *Mina*’s extraordinary activities depart from the book, there is distinct value in that as well. Benton suggests that “reader-response methods can help to illuminate the values and attitudes that readers sometimes hide, even from themselves” (Benton 96). In doing research with readers’ creative responses to a literary work, we are given the opportunity to delve into what that book “did” to the reader in ways that their more direct responses might not otherwise facilitate.

For instance, in this chapter, I explored how all five readers responded to *Mina*’s extraordinary activities in ways that foregrounded aspects of their ages. While the actual content of their completed activities is of course interesting, the entanglement with age already presented itself on a higher level, in *how* readers chose to engage with these activities, ranging from those they opted to skip, to how their reading environment folded back into the completed activity. For instance, in Michiel’s (12) and Leen’s (30) cases, the places where they read the book and completed activities were tied to their age. Age scholars have remarked how “we are increasingly segregated by our structures and institutions on the basis of age” (Titterington et al. 121), and as a working adult and a school-going child, both of the youngest readers found themselves reading the book in environments tied to the institutions they are entangled in. In turn, these environments constrained and shaped their responses to the extraordinary activities, ranging from the sounds these environments provided to the pressure of social conformity that readers struggled to supersede. As part of that social dynamic, “shame” played a complex role in readers’ handling of the activities. In general, the engagement with the activities emphasised all the more how the experience of literature is a social process that is inextricably intertwined with readers’ environments.

Children’s literature’s range of characters of different ages lends itself to portraying various intergenerational interactions in which children and adults adopt diverse roles, therefore, playing with the “relationality of age” – age “is defined against what it is not; young is not old; [...] each derives their meaning from contrast with the other” (Pickard 176; see also Chapter 3). In engaging with these stories, readers of all ages are drawn into this social entanglement. Their reading experience and perspective on a character will be partially predicated on the constructs of age they are familiar with through personal experiences and broader cultural socialisation. In being challenged by the extraordinary activities, readers are drawn into this social aspect even more explicitly—having to navigate their constructs

of childhood and adulthood in how they approach these activities and the environments they find themselves in as they are completing them.

As I have detailed above, reader-response methodologies present challenges, but also offer unique opportunities. In reflecting on the early days of reader-response research, Patricia Harkin includes an anecdote: “At a 1981 conference [...] several participants objected that [...] reader-response theory would require us to listen as a sophomore opined that ‘A Rose for Emily’ reminded her of her grandmother” (416). As an age scholar, I disagree with the idea that memories of grandmothers are not interesting, but as a reader-response scholar, I also understand the broader sentiment that exploring readers’ reactions may seem so idiosyncratic and diverse that finding significant patterns feels exhausting. An interview guide that engenders relevant and to-the-point responses can help to answer your research question, but should also help to avoid being so leading that readers simply tell you what you obviously want to hear. Moreover, reader-response research always depends on participants, who may struggle to put their thoughts into words or might offer mostly generic or short yes/no answers. While the broader aim of this chapter was to demonstrate the usefulness of reader-response methodology for doing research on age in children’s literature, I also want to highlight the value of going beyond classic qualitative methods such as interviews and group discussions by including creative, artistic responses to the book as both prompts for discussions and objects of study. David Almond’s *My Name Is Mina* is a perfect book to explore this angle, as it has activities as an intradiegetic part of the story. However, other books can also be approached through such a lens, and research has highlighted the benefits of doing so. Evelyn Arizpe et al. point out that some readers may “struggle to express themselves through words,” and that by granting them access to a “form of expression that sidesteps language barriers,” we enable readers from diverse backgrounds to engage with literature in ways that empower them to express their responses in forms that they may be more literate in (306). In the planning stages of my research, I had some concerns about the unpredictable aspect of the extraordinary activities. In practice, however, my fear at the data’s diversity eventually turned into excitement, as readers’ engagement with the extraordinary activities offered such multi-faceted insight into their views on age and identity that it made it worth taking the risk.

## Notes

- 1 Handbooks of qualitative research often dedicate whole chapters to advising the burgeoning researcher on how to recruit participants (e.g., Magnusson and Marecek 37; Seidman 40).
- 2 Recruiting participants can take on several different forms. Magnusson and Marecek mention advertising, chain referrals and targeted nominations as three

- common options (38–39). Advertising is more likely to be done in cases where a reward is offered for participation. Targeted nominations are about asking people who are not participants themselves to “name one potential participant who fits a particular set of characteristics” (38) while chain referrals entail asking participants whether they know anyone else who may be interested in participating, which is also called “snowball sampling” (38).
- 3 I was fortunate enough to have the help of several MA students and interns for the transcription process—but doing research of this scale completely alone may be impossible for shorter-term projects, or those with smaller teams.
  - 4 Wherever possible, literal translations were used. In the case of idioms, these were substituted by the closest English equivalent.
  - 5 This board is the University of Antwerp’s “Ethische Adviescommissie Sociale en Humane Wetenschappen” (EA SHW). They assessed, among others, the methodology, forms of consent and GDPR compliance of this research project.
  - 6 The full interview guide is provided in Appendix D.
  - 7 Original text: “Ik denk dat de motivatie ervoor misschien anders zou zijn. Ik denk dat kinderen ze misschien meer niet zouden doen omdat ze er geen zin in hebben of omdat ze misschien niet weten hoe dat eraan te beginnen of zo, terwijl dat volwassenen ze misschien meer niet zouden doen omdat ze er geen tijd voor hebben of omdat ze ze een beetje onnozel vinden.”
  - 8 Original text: “Vroeger toen dat ik jonger was kon ik bijvoorbeeld een hele zondagnamiddag lezen en dat geconcentreerder met minder afleiding.”
  - 9 Original text: “Dat is twee keer drie kwartier, dus dat zijn wel mooie tijden en dat zorgt ervoor dat ik wel redelijk wat kan lezen.”
  - 10 Original text: “Ik denk dat het gewoon een probleem van tijd zou zijn om dat te doen want ik denk dat dat niet zou terugkomen op een namiddag ofzo en allé als volwassen mensen hebben we allemaal veel verantwoordelijkheden.”
  - 11 Original text: “Je kan je gelijk minder volledig verliezen in het boek omdat je toch terug moet zorgen dat je je halte niet mist, je hebt ook nog altijd mensen rond jou. [...] Het maakt inderdaad wel voor een uniekere, enfin, unieke ervaring.”
  - 12 Original text: “Ik voelde mij zo wel wat selfconscious soms. Ik denk dat als ik het thuis had gelezen, dat ik er meer van had gedaan.”
  - 13 Original text: “ik was zelf een zeer selfconscious kind [...] mijn gevoel is dan dat ik zou zeggen dat kinderen daar net iets minder last van hebben.”
  - 14 Original text: “Het gaat eigenlijk over helemaal niets, het gaat gewoon over de trein en dat de trein soms vertraging heeft en dat de trein ook wel rust brengt, dat ze, dus ik, altijd blij ben als we op de bestemming zijn, dus het gaat eigenlijk echt wel gewoon over niets.”
  - 15 Original text: “Dat was [pauze] lastig, allé, dat was ergens leuk om te doen maar ik vond dat ook moeilijk, ik had gelijk weinig inspiratie en ik zie dus dat het over de trein gaat, dus ik had duidelijk zeer weinig inspiratie [lacht]. Ja ik denk dat, ik vond dat een beetje confronterend, ik denk dat dat vroeger makkelijker zou gegaan zijn. Zoiets verzinnen ofzo.”
  - 16 Original text: “ik wel zoiets van ‘zie mij hier nu staan.’”
  - 17 Original text: “Ja omdat het u echt wel helemaal iets doet doen dat helemaal uit uw comfortzone zit. Iets dat je normaal echt nooit doet.”
  - 18 Original text: “Ja ik kan mij dat wel voorstellen dat je als kind daar minder bij stilstaat van hoe idioot of gek dat je daar staat. Dat je daar minder mee bezig bent van ‘hoe sta ik hier nu enzo’.”
  - 19 Original text: “Ik denk nogal heel veel na over ‘wat gaan anderen van mij denken’ als ik dit of dat doe. En ook al ben ik dan alleen thuis, blijft die gedachte

- daar dan steken. En ik kan mij wel voorstellen dat die naarmate dat je ouder wordt dat dat wel wat vermindert zo. Dat je dan wel meer zoiets hebt van ‘foert ik doe mijn eigen ding.’ En dat je daar minder bij stilstaat van hoe gek je daar staat.”
- 20 Original text: “Bij mij is het heel duidelijk dat ik heel vaak gehoord heb ‘dat doe je niet als volwassene’. En ‘gedraag u nu eens volwassen.’ En ja als kind heb je dat sowieso nog minder gehoord.”
- 21 Original text: “Die heb ik niet gedaan, nee. Toen zat ik in de studie en dan was ik met het systeemje van 20 minuutjes leren, 5 minuutjes pauze nemen. En dan denk ik, ‘als je 5 minuten hebt, gaat dat niet zo makkelijk.’”
- 22 Original text: “Zo op de maat van geluid dat je om u heen hoort of zo en hoe fel en hoe licht dat dat is, dan golvend en recht, die dingen.”
- 23 Original text: “Het is een soort normale school waar dat het normaal is om magisch te zijn. En dan heb je zo de enige persoon die niet magisch is. Ik dan, in dat geval. En die is dan heel goed met andere dingen.”
- 24 Original text: “Het was eigenlijk meer een alledaags verhaal van wat ik die dag had gedaan.”
- 25 Original text: “Ik heb het gevoel dat toen dat ik jonger was, dat mijn fantasie veel vrijer de loop ging, dat het veel makkelijker was om verhalen te vertellen of te verzinnen dan nu, nu blijf ik gelijk wat vasthangen op gewoon droge feiten en vroeger zou ik dat denk ik minder gehad hebben, vroeger denk ik, [...] toch tien jaar geleden dat mijn verhaal niet maar een half paginatje zou geweest zijn.”
- 26 Original text: “Er zijn opdrachten die ik terug wil oppakken — ik zou me moeten echt gaan zetten en concentreren. En echt zoeken. Maar zij schrijft gewoon wat in haar hoofd komt. Wat in haar hoofd opkomt, dat schrijft zij allemaal op. Ja, een deel fantasie die ge kwijt zijn als volwassene.”
- 27 Original text: “Ik geloof wel dat dat terug zou komen als ik daar de investering in zou doen. Ik denk dat het gewoon een probleem van tijd zou zijn om dat te doen [...] allé als volwassen mensen hebben we allemaal veel verantwoordelijkheden en ik vermoed dat het zeker in het begin zeer lastig zou zijn om die dan niet te laten overnemen als ik dat zou doen.”
- 28 Original text: “Omdat je met veel andere dingen in het leven bezig bent, voor een groot stuk. Ik ben nu nog maar twee jaar gepensioneerd en er komt meer tijd voor dat soort dingen.”
- 29 For context, Mina chooses to write hers down to be able to relay it to her mother, though she is unable to put into words why precisely the story needed to be in the third person: “I thought I’d write the story of the Underworld in the first person, [but] somehow it’s better to write this in the third person.” Mina’s story covers several different topics and is significantly longer than the ones the participants wrote, at a total of just over 2,500 words.
- 30 Original text: “waar dat je zo leert te vechten tegen allemaal mythologische figuren en zo.”
- 31 Original text: “Ze is 68, alleen, gelukkig in een fijn ‘woon’ huis met tuin, vogels, kippen, kikkers en salamanders. De tijd raakt stilaan op. Veel herinneringen maar ook wat kan nog? Wat met volgende generaties, en dan concreet wat zullen haar kleinkinderen waarmee moeten afrekenen?”
- 32 Original text:  
 “Ze groeide op.  
 Ze werd volwassen.  
 Ze hoorde over enge zaken in het nieuws.  
 Ze wist dat ze geen lafaard mocht zijn, wilde zijn.

Ze wist niet altijd hoe

Diep in haar hart weet ze dat ze nog altijd niet helemaal volwassen is. Ze heeft nu zelf kinderen. Ze denkt dat ze heel dapper zal zijn als die in gevaar zouden zijn. Ze weet nog altijd niet hoe dapper ze zal zijn in echt gevaar, want ze heeft geen gevaarlijk leven.”

- 33 Original text: “Ik voel het in mijn rug. Ik moet me aan de tafel vasthouden om zonder al te veel pijn recht te komen. Er is niet veel glans aan ouder worden. [...] Alleen is de echte Winnetou nooit oud geworden. Nu ja, de echte fictieve Winnetou. Ik doe het voor de kinderen. Nog even op de hometrainer, dat ik het trapje van het podium zonder hulp op kan.”

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## 5 Constructing age transmedially

### Framing age in text and on screen in *Skellig*

*Michelle Anya Anjirbag and Frauke Pauwels*

In David Almond's 1998 novel *Skellig*, protagonist Michael is coping with his life being upturned. His family has moved into a fixer-upper in anticipation of the arrival of his baby sister, but when she is born quite ill, the family's dreams for the next stage in their lives are upended. On top of this, Michael is left on his own to deal with the strange being he finds in the garage. An example of the magical realism so manifest in his oeuvre, Almond's first young adult novel has been the subject of several literary analyses. *Skellig* has been read as an illustration of differences between adults and children, and the latter's "capacity for compassion and kindness" (Latham, "Magical Realism"). Rather than reinforcing this age binary, however, *Skellig* can also be understood as questioning clear boundaries, since it "renders [its] fictive world fluid, liminal, ambiguous and multi-layered" (McCallum 203). Not only does it challenge strict age categories but the novel also questions various elements included in the construction of age, such as knowledge. *Skellig* demonstrates how child characters and readers alike can develop resilience in combining diverse ways of knowing, thus challenging the "rational-scientific epistemology" that "remains hegemonic in the West" where "we no longer explain the failures, misfortunes, and the accidents of life by attributing them to the hand of Fate, magic, acts of God, or the forces of nature" (Bullen and Parsons 127). This process of meaning-making is typically connected to maturation. In conversation with these readings, we explore in this chapter how the story hinges on the idea of age and care: how is age perceived, who cares for whom, and which visual and textual affordances can impact readers' or viewers' understanding of age norms and expectations? As Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss note in their exploration of a "post-age pedagogy" that aims for a reconfiguration of intragenerational relations and ways of being and becoming, "we all know of 'age defying' yet everyday actions by children." They mention "the responsibility of care for adults or siblings" as one of the examples where many children defy age norms in their daily lives. We agree with Haynes and Murriss that "[o]ur surprise

or noting of these examples suggests we should question our assumptions about how things are, at a particular age” (976).

Our exploration of these questions goes beyond Almond’s novel. Published in 1988 and honoured with the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread children’s book of the Year Award, *Skellig* was adapted for theatre, with Almond himself penning the screenplay first performed in London in 2003. It was also turned into a TV movie by British television production company Sky in 2009, which has been awarded “best film” at the European Children’s Film Festival Flanders in 2011 and an honourable mention at the “Cinekid” Festival 2009 in Amsterdam. The adaptation process adds an interesting layer to the age dynamics at play in the narrative, as the visual mediums solidify and refine age-related expectations around certain characters’ framing and depictions. In this chapter, we will explore medium-specific techniques that impact the reception of age norms by examining these various iterations of the *Skellig* narrative.

Part of the joy and fascination of reading *Skellig* as a novel rests on multiple layers of ambiguity around its namesake character through Michael’s focalised perspective: who he is, what he is, how old he might be, and why and how he came to be in the garage. The imaginary potential of this story invigorates this narrative of childhood, intergenerational exchange, and coming of age, as Michael navigates the changes in his family’s life, sees the world in new ways with the help of new neighbour Mina, and finds a sense of purpose in caring for *Skellig*. That imaginary potential becomes transformed in the screen and stage adaptations of the narrative. It moves from the potential envisioning of an individual reader to settings where viewers are led by an intermediary’s interpretation and re-visioning of the narrative. As such, the adaptation of *Skellig* brings to bear an interesting critical conversation on age, ageing, and age norms. As Linda Hutcheon explains in her attempt to outline a cohesive working theory of adaptation as a critical form, adaptation is “a creative *and* interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging” (8). Hutcheon’s idea of adaptation as interpretation guides our examination of *Skellig* across different media, particularly, the novel and the film. Vanessa Joosen notes that “given the role that children’s books play in the socialisation of the young, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the ideas that they convey with regards to age and to gain a better understanding of how these age norms are constructed and received” (“Research in Action” 253). While we exclude real readers and spectators from our analysis, we aim to demonstrate how adaptation as a process creates an extra layer in the construction, framing, and interpretation of age, both in the storyworld itself and in relation to the intended audience. Thus, we will explore how a comparative analysis of a work against its adaptation can lay bare assumed age norms, social constructs, and which age norms circulate in a given society based on who the visual medium is framed for.

In her detailed and insightful analysis of the film adaptation in comparison to the novel, Robyn McCallum convincingly explores how *Skellig* both as novel and film “constructs childhood as a space of hope and fulfilment,” continuing “the Romantic legacy for its celebratory vision of childhood and nostalgic belief in the redemptive power of love and the imagination” (204). Where McCallum’s work on *Skellig* focuses on liminality and childhood, we would like to open that frame and to consider intergenerational dialogues and how these are portrayed across various media. To this, we want to add the perspective of age studies that has been developed by Anita Wohlmann, among others. In her analysis of age in contemporary film interpretations of “Snow White,” Wohlmann focuses “on the moments in which the movies use hyperbole and read[s] these instances as potential counter-narratives or subtexts of parody and resistance” (228). In the variations between film and fairy tale, she looks for evidence of an intentional reversal of age and gender norms that helps to break cultural constructions. While she explicitly excludes adaptation theory from her analysis (Wohlmann 249n3), her rigorous reading of the cinematographic choices closely aligns with what adaptation studies as a framework can help to attain. In this chapter, we will study the construction of age in the *Skellig* narratives in a similar way, less in relation to genre features as to age norms shared via diverse cultural channels. To do so, we will be building on age studies, adaptation studies, and children’s literature studies.

In this chapter, we first discuss how adaptation has been approached in children’s media, and the benefits and limitations of adaptation-centred approaches. We then examine the constructions and portrayals of, respectively, Michael and Skellig as characters. Next, we interrogate the age dynamics of care as they operate within hegemonic Western discourses and how these can be reflected and interrogated in children’s media through exposing the interlinking structures of who cares for whom and how those care structures are depicted with regard to age. In essence, we further extend McCallum’s observation that the

conceptualisation of preadolescence and adolescence as ‘liminal’ states [...] is problematic insofar as it implies a binary between childhood and adulthood, and potentially conceives of both states as stable self-contained states of being, despite the realities of how those states of being may be experienced, which is, arguably, as always in a state of becoming. (McCallum 173–174)

Whereas other studies have mainly focused on genre and intertextuality (Bullen and Parsons; Latham; McCallum) to analyse age binaries in *Skellig*, we will study the construction of age in the novel and its movie

adaptation through the lens of agency and care. Given the central position of the child-adult relationship in children's literature and the entanglement of age categories with care needs and labour, paying attention to "care" can open up age norms and expectations. In its depiction of a severely ill baby, a teenager on the verge of adolescence and a suffering creature that escapes age categories, *Skellig* is a case in point of the "[c]ultural narratives of ageing, illness and care—whether in the form of film, popular music or theatre—[that] complicate the dominant discourses" (Sako and Falcus 3).

### **Adapting age: In search for child-centred adaptation studies**

While adaptation studies on children's media are often considered as a domain that is still crystallising (e.g., Kunze, "Filming"), singular publications on adaptations of children's literature are simultaneously so widespread that it is difficult to grasp the field. This has as much to do with adaptations themselves as with the range of disciplines that can bear on their study. Ranging from theatre, television, and film to apps, fanfiction, merchandising, games, and Lego sets, adaptations display particular modes of representation, each speaking to their own literacies and web of references. Main themes in the field of study are audiences and more specifically the way children and/or adults are addressed, fidelity towards the source text, intertextuality, seriality, translation and transcultural adaptation, multimodality, and modes of engagement (a.o. Kertzer; Kérchy and Sundmark; Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Never-ending Sequels?"; Linkis; Mackey). Challenges for the field include the growing importance of transmedial storyworlds and the shift from textually oriented research to approaches that embrace the network in which adaptations are always embedded. Several monographs have recently appeared on the topic of adaptations into children's film, searching for patterns and a common ground, as did McCallum with *Screen Adaptations and the Politics of Childhood: Transforming Children's Literature into Film* (2018). Noteworthy titles here are, among others, Casie E. Hermansson with *Filming the Children's Book: Adapting Metafiction* (2019) and Meghann Meeusen with *Children's Books on the Big Screen* (2020). In theorising screen adaptation of children's media specifically, Meeusen uses the idea of various binaries to analyse how adaptations reconstruct and reinterpret narratives when moving from the medium of the written word to film. She notes, in particular, that the transformative process of adaptation can exacerbate binaries and that "key power dynamics and textual messages change when concepts like adult and child or good and evil are positioned in starker contrast from one another" (5). By looking at *Skellig* across media, we can better see how the embedded child/adult or old/young binaries are complicated or deconstructed. As a matter of fact, the construction of such

binaries as a central format of theorisation becomes problematic especially with regard to age, as neither childhood, adulthood, nor the concept of being old or young, are discrete, isolated categories (Pickard). Conceiving of age dynamics in binary risks preferencing an aetnonormative perspective, where the power of the adult is always implicit and superior to the power of the child, and the adult is set as the norm (Nikolajeva, *Power*). Various children's literature scholars have addressed this power imbalance and proposed alternative power structures: Clémentine Beauvais (*The Mighty Child*) points to the might of children stemming from their larger futures; Marah Gubar pleads for a kinship model that stresses commonalities instead of essentialist differences.

In a study of age in adaptations, we encountered some challenges in combining adaptation methodologies with age studies approaches. Though a deep methodological exploration lies beyond the scope of this chapter, it is necessary to briefly discuss how an age-centred adaptation study might work, together with its limitations and the unique opportunities for observation and analysis that it generates. Adaptation studies operate in the spaces between intention and reception: in analysing staging, scene composition, dialogue, setting, casting, medium choice, and other aspects that inform the process of adaptation, we encounter over and over again how our own subjectivities also inform how these choices are perceived. As a matter of fact, we came across several points where we as the co-authors of this chapter made sense of the narrative in different ways, building on our different backgrounds in terms of nation, ethnicity, class, age, and so forth. As reader (or viewer) response research is not the focus of this chapter, we try to avoid statements of how certain episodes impact on the audience. However, by comparing novel and film adaptation we pinpoint how characterisation, the selection of episodes, and the use of narrative techniques bear on the construction of age. Adapting a children's novel inadvertently asks interpreters to think about childhood and what it means to be a child, both in relation to characters and audience, as "the film is also, consciously or unconsciously, a critical reflection on the images of the child in the book" (van Lierop-Debrauwer, "Nostalgia" 48). The same goes for the audience, invited to respond to the various age norms and expectations at play.

Adaptation studies since the 1980s has grappled with the idea of fidelity, or, how accurately a film reproduces its source materials, in various ways (Hermansson and Zepernick). Of course, even when fidelity is not held as the metric by which an adaptation is measured, as a central concept of the field it is still a useful illustration of the subjective nature of the study of adaptations. Meeusen notes that "the inherent nostalgia associated with children's literature makes a departure from the 'essence' of these texts feel troubling, thus encouraging viewers to judge a film against its

source” (7). To some extent, a focus on constructions of age allows us to free ourselves from such comparisons, instead compelling us to investigate how the film and the book each communicate their narratives for their respective audiences. As Hutcheon states, “[i]n the process of dramatization there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters and plot” (40). Looking at these different modes of representation and different means of expression brings to the fore alternative interpretations and representations of age-related characteristics. Think, for example, of differences in characterisation: “Characters may be described once and in significantly selected detail in a novel, but are seen over and over in a movie, so significant particularities of their appearances are lost with repetition and naturalization” (Hutcheon 62).

A very practical limiting factor is, of course, access to the material. While this chapter focuses predominantly on the novel and the film, we are aware of the screenplay and would have liked to include the dimension of theatrical adaptation in this discussion. However, to fully appreciate the medium-specific considerations of representing these characters on stage as embodied live by actors, it would have been necessary to see the play, something we did not have access to at the time of writing—indeed, plays “rather exist only in the moments in which they are performed” (Myers 39). The choice of medium creates opportunities, but also sets boundaries to how the narrative is communicated across the novel, the theatrical screenplay, and the film. Age studies and adaptation studies can be brought into dialogue in considering how life scripts and age norms become visualised and shaped in different media. Comparing a single narrative across media with an eye to age studies becomes less about the idea of “fidelity” to the source narrative, but rather about reflecting on how each medium shapes the perception of the age of the characters and their relationships. It is in the spaces between these media that tell the same story that we find a fruitful area for analysis. In the next section, we first explore how the visualisation of Michael and Skellig as central characters reflects social constructions of age and associated biases.

### **“You didn’t tell me”: How Michael negotiates (not) knowing**

From the novel’s opening, Michael is shown as slightly separated from his family. When he finds Skellig—then still a mysterious “him,” “filthy and pale and dried out”—in the very first paragraphs of the novel, Michael is on his own: “Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby” (1). In hindsight, this short description can be regarded as the novel’s skeleton, centred around an experienced imbalance in care and attention, and Michael struggling to find his place within his family. A similar image arises from the movie,

where shots frequently show the intimacy of Michael's parents and the baby (to be born), filmed through door openings or over Michael's shoulders, hinting at the alienation between him and his family. More than the novel, the movie bears on social age norms to establish this separation. Played by the then 13/14-year-old actor Bill Millner, Michael is visually portrayed as a wimp—especially in contrast with his sportive and taller friend Leakey. Michael's pale skin, bent shoulders and the frown on his face make him look like a moody, troubled teenager. In the novel, the strong focus on sensory and particularly tactile experiences suggests that Michael is a sensitive boy. This aspect of his character seems to be lost in the movie, or it may have contributed to the portrayal of Michael as a wimp, as this sensitivity is at odds with hegemonic social norms of boyhood and emergent masculinity (Stephens). Instead, the setting is filmed in such a way that it may trigger similar sensory experiences through the numerous close-ups of dust, insects, snails, and swamps. The film thus transposes the sensitive tactility of Michael to the viewer. Several scenes play into this visualisation and Michael's characterisation as a sensitive, sluggish teenager, such as the sports class where Michael is insulted by his teacher. In addition to the visual aspect of this characterisation, the dialogues contribute to the construction of Michael's age. His father alludes to age-related expectations when the rooms in the new house are allocated. Michael is expected to be happy with the attic that would offer him "privacy," while it further separates him from his family. When Michael offers to help, his father responds: "You're feeling alright?" This remark hints at teenagers' presumed self-centredness.

Indeed, in *Skellig*, David Almond builds the (de)construction of age norms at least partly around care. Following Western views on parenthood (Pickard 215–220), readers might expect more guidance and protection for a young teenager who just got a baby sister while also moving to a house that needs renovation and being separated from his friends. Such expectations are even part of literary scripts, in which regularly "a substitute parent is provided for the young character" when "the real parent is [...] insufficient in offering the support and guidance necessary for the child's growth" (Nikolajeva, *Character*, 118). In their distress over the sick baby, Michael's parents fail to give him the attention he needs. On top of this lack of care, which forces Michael into liminal experiences, comes a lack of knowledge. Since Michael is denied detailed information over his baby sister's medical condition and since he is kept away from her, he is also deprived from giving her care, which he consequently gives to Skellig. Here as well, small differences between novel and film appear. In the former, Skellig himself calls for aspirin and "27 and 53," numbers that refer to a food menu (17–18). By contrast, Michael initiates the nurturing in the movie. Starting with food and drinks, he then proposes to get



medical help and brings aspirin and cod liver oil. The selection of scenes further contributes to the intersection of care and knowing. The parents' emotions are hidden from Michael, who only accidentally gets a glimpse of them; this is visually translated via so-called "spatial" and "perceptual point-of-view sequences," which communicate a character's consciousness (Thon 73), in this case Michael's alienation. At the same time, these shots give child viewers access to experiences from which they may be restrained in their own family, and which are more generally caught up in the so-called "blind space" of adulthood. This is a term that Joosen borrows from film studies to refer to the conceptual space in children's literature where aspects of adulthood are referred to without being fully addressed (*Adulthood*), and that may operate in other media and in real life as well. In the movie adaptation, Michael catches glimpses of both his mother and father when they feel upset, frustrated, and scared with regard to both the housing situation and the health of his baby sister. Even though both parents are trying to obscure the seriousness of the situation, or otherwise hide their own emotions, they can be observed more directly than in the novel, where Michael's focalisation always mediates their feelings, for example, when Almond writes "I heard the sighing, the fear in his voice" (*Skellig* 129).

If people are deprived of knowledge they cannot act upon it. Since children are regularly withheld information, their chances to give care can thus be limited. Indeed, sharing and withholding of knowledge, and acknowledging or downplaying other types of knowledge have been used in moulding children as dependent and powerless (Pickard 71–73). Not being seen as someone who is able to give care reduces people's potential agency. In the movie, Michael has an emotional outburst when Skellig also refuses help. "What am I supposed to do?" Michael cries, "You're all sad, my dad's sad, my mom's sad..." The denial of knowledge and of his potential to care makes him feel powerless. Later in the movie, Michael orients his anger towards his father, claiming that he is denied information, or stronger, "the truth." Once he understands that adults often do not have the certainties they pretend to have, he refuses to obey his father. As it turns out, "[f]or your best" lacks any ground. Gradually, Michael claims and takes up agency. In this process, he is encouraged by the experiences of people like Grace, an older woman he meets at the hospital. In the novel, Grace is a minor and unnamed character that is only mentioned twice, but she plays a much more prominent role in the film. Suffering from arthritis, Grace still tries to keep moving and in the film she shares her motto with Michael: "Them as can walk, should walk, them as can dance, should dance, them as can fly, should... Well, you know the rest, don't you." As a novel and even more as a film adaptation, *Skellig* thus exemplifies Joosen's statement that "the connection that is set up between old and

young in children's literature is not just based on disempowerment, but also on characteristics that are positively valued [...] and the characters are shown to gain agency through this friendship" ("Childism" 7).

Since Michael is the narrator and focaliser of the novel, the image that readers can discern is rather diffuse; there is no third-person narrator to guide them. Michael's age is never directly referenced in the text, and the ambiguity about his age may inflect how a reader interprets aspects of his life, such as his behaviour towards his friends or him taking the bus through the city and leaving the house at night. Since the number of side characters is reduced in the movie and "substitute parents" like Michael's English teacher and Mina's mother are cut, the abnormality of Michael's situation is less stressed. In the novel, these characters compensate for the parental care that Michael is lacking due to his baby sister's illness. In the movie, Michael's bus rides to school are changed for rides in his father's taxi; in Almond's screenplay the bus ride forms the background for Michael's reflection that "you could never know, by looking at [people], what was happening in their lives" (Almond, *Skellig: The Play* 11), mirroring his own worries. Even though the elimination of the bus rides may seem like a minor adaptation, it illustrates that Michael's independence is downplayed in the film adaptation, and his frailty is stressed. Of course, the car rides create the opportunity to visually portray father and son next to each other: the repetition of similar yet slightly differing medium shots marks the changes in their relationship and makes the alienation between them tangible. On their way back from the hospital, both look in another direction, tears running down Michael's father's face; much later, after the baby is healed, the taxi forms the setting for their shared pleasure in music. As such, the car rides are one element of how the father-child relationship in the film is brought to the fore, metonymically representing how "age patriarchy" determines that adults dominate over children's lives and that "children's space, time, and bodies" are controlled by adults (Pickard 71–72). Simultaneously, the evolution of their relationship opens up the space for an alternative understanding of age norms.

The strongest visual trope used to communicate Michael's growth is his leap from a tower, with which the movie opens. Soon after, Michael is shown suffering from vertigo on a diving tower—a clear reference to the opening shot, foreshadowing Michael's evolution into a self-conscious person who takes up agency in responding to the situation. Throughout the movie, several scenes mirror the shot of Michael standing on top of the tower and recall his fear, for example, when the camera moves upwards to Michael balancing on the garden wall, arms spread, or when he performs the long jump during sports class. Significantly, the class and the teacher have already turned away and started a new activity, ignorant of Michael's success and visible satisfaction. Again, Michael is portrayed as

standing apart, left to himself on the brink of adolescence, a position that is much less explicit in the novel. Moreover, Michael's jump is alternated with Skellig waking up startled, suggesting a relation between the former's leap and the latter's magical abilities. While it is up to the audience to judge whether Skellig magically helped Michael or Michael just feels encouraged by the belief that Skellig has such magical abilities, the alternating shots clearly reinforce the intergenerational connection between Michael and Skellig and its value for Michael's growing agency.

While Michael's growth from a child into an adolescent is hinted at by recurring scenes that show him diving, jumping and caring for Skellig, adulthood is no longer portrayed as a life stage where emotional balance and a full understanding of life are reached. As mentioned, Michael's father is also shown to experience powerlessness, facing obstacles he cannot easily overcome. Thus, the movie questions the construction of adulthood as "the benchmark against which all other life stages are measured" (Pickard 78) and shows to an audience of both children and adults that "adulthood is no longer the time of stable certainties it used to be but partakes in the risk and fluctuations of all other phases of life" (79). Adults are presented as vulnerable: the more Michael grows into a self-confident adolescent, the more his father is shown as losing faith and acting impulsively. In one climatic scene, the father burns down the shed. Caring roles are reversed, with Michael looking after his father, leading him to the couch, covering him with a blanket and caressing his forehead in a way that mirrors a typical parental gesture.

### **Meeting the un-knowable: Visualising Skellig**

Part of Skellig's appeal is that this character is not easily defined or understood: he is wrapped in ambiguity. The novel and the film interpretation use medium-specific techniques to communicate this ambiguity to the reader, and his age is part of that uncertainty. In the novel, Michael, Mina, or both children always act as interpreter or mediator for Skellig's presence, which is slightly different in the film, as it frequently cuts between shots of Michael and Skellig when they are separate from each other. Nevertheless, the reader or viewer mainly encounters Skellig through the children's visual, aural, and tactile experiences. Their perception of age, or assumption of his advanced age, colours Michael and Mina's responses and actions in relation to Skellig.

In the novel, Skellig is properly introduced after Michael goes into the garage despite multiple warnings to stay away from it by his parents. Before he actually enters, he stands outside the garage, which looks "like the whole thing was sick of itself and would collapse in a heap and have to get bulldozed away" (Almond, *Skellig* 4). He then shares with

the reader that he “heard something scratching in one of the corners, and something scuttling about” (4). In the film too, Skellig is connected to the crumbling outbuilding and the aurality of the kind of creature that would “scratch” or “scuttle” in dark and decrepit spaces. The sparse lighting, camera angles, emphasis on insects, mould, and general sense of things being abandoned and forgotten in this place exemplifies how setting can be used to co-construct a sense of age. The surroundings encourage viewers to make inferences about who or what might inhabit such a place. This visual portrayal heightens and exacerbates the textual descriptions used to frame and describe Michael and Skellig’s first meeting. When Michael enters the garage, actually seeing Skellig is prefaced by seeing “something little and black [scuttle] across the floor” (6). There is dust everywhere, and he hears the scratching again, before feeling spider webs across his forehead (6). He then sees woodlice “scattering” across the “broken and crumbly” floor (6), “bones of some little animal,” “dead bluebottles” (6), and “ancient newspapers and magazines [...] from nearly fifty years ago” (7). Afraid that the shed will collapse and with dust in his throat and nose, Michael is describing a claustrophobic experience, almost like an entombment. Then he finally sees Skellig:

I thought he was dead. He was sitting with his legs stretched out, and his head tipped back against the wall. He was covered in dust and webs like everything else and his face was thin and pale. Dead bluebottles were scattered on his hair and shoulders. I shone the torch on his white face and his black suit. (Almond, *Skellig* 7)

After the sense of entombment, the first sight of Skellig is akin to a corpse prepared for burial, with the “white face” and “black suit” (7), which then haunts Michael’s dreams that night, asking him: “what do you want?” (7). This first impression makes Michael question whether the experience was real or if he imagined it. The meeting is replicated in the film. Skellig’s first words ask a key question. “What do you want?” is what Michael is not asking himself at the beginning of the narrative. Does he want to be in this new house, new neighbourhood? What does he want from his parents that he is not getting? Does he want care, or the agency to care for his family? This important question becomes a recurrent theme to keep considering throughout the narrative. It is also the question that Skellig is asking himself. Anonymous, forgotten, corpse-like, semi-buried in a garage on the verge of collapse, unrecognisable as a creature—what does he want?

This is not the only question that Skellig evokes. “Who *are* you?,” both Michael and Mina ask several times, trying to understand this being whose name they do not learn until about halfway through the narrative. When Michael asks him what he should be called, he answers “Nobody.

Mr Nobody. Mr Bones and Mr Had Enough and Mr Arthur Itis” (54), defining himself in the language of despair, pain, disease, and discardability. As such, Skellig adopts a decline narrative. Margaret Morganroth Gullette defines decline as “the entire system that worsens the experience of aging-past-youth” (*Age-wise* 5), a social construct where ageism inflects a negative perception of quality of life in middle and old age. Skellig’s response also reflects what Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer describes as “age-related despair as a result of the internalization of society’s negative evaluations of older people and their position in the margins of society” (“Right to Self-Determination” 87). While the novel leaves open whether Skellig is a figment of the children’s imaginations or not, the movie does not make a visual distinction between him and the other characters. Focalised through Michael’s perspective, as Michael accepts him as real, Skellig appears real to viewers as well. The actor playing him is Tim Roth, who was in his late 40s during the film’s production. Roth’s performance and various production choices emphasise the idea of decay, especially at the beginning of the film. In addition to the items and sounds described above, the ideas of decay, decline, and the grotesque become visually linked by the emphasis on shots of spiders, mushrooms, mildew, and other insects in the garage where Michael first encounters Skellig. The effect is to evoke a literal and visceral repulsion in the viewer and link that emotion to the mysterious being in the garage. This effect also creates a degree of narrative tension, in line with genre conventions from gothic horror, which the film adaptation leans into in its depiction of the magical. The evocation of the grotesque through both the spectre of decay and the evocation of illness that is typical of the gothic add to the portrayal of Skellig as an old man and ageing as undesired. Indeed, the gothic genre has a specific relationship to old age—associating age with “an oppressive past” (Horner and Zlosnik 185). For example, Bella Swan, protagonist of the *Twilight* Series, prefers becoming a vampire not only to live with her vampire boyfriend, but also out of “a terrible fear of ageing” (Horner and Zlosnik 188).

Michael keeps visiting Skellig in the garage, trying to take care of him by feeding him and bringing him aspirin, cod liver oil, and brown ale to drink. In the film, Skellig is resistant to Michael’s care, but not entirely dismissive of it, acquiescing to the child’s demands that he move, and taking the medicine he is given. This is in contrast to the novel, where Skellig himself repeatedly asks for aspirin. Throughout this, in both novel and film, there is no indication of Skellig’s internal monologue or feeling. As such, giving and receiving care is mediated entirely through Michael’s perspective. At most, film viewers are given moments where Skellig is resigned in the face of Michael’s persistence. Death, ageing, and invisibility become an interesting trifecta in how audiences perceive Skellig through Michael. As mentioned, Michael’s first encounter with Skellig evokes a corpse in

a burial chamber, and it is through this in part that advanced age becomes inferred. Liz Lloyd notes that “the status of those who are dying is liminal, placing them in an ambiguous position as members of society” (239). This certainly fits Skellig, who is not only ambiguous in terms of who and what he is, but if he is real or not. Moreover, he does not seek help for either his physical needs or his loneliness, which is apparent in the novel when Mina visits him while Michael is in school and Skellig feels abandoned by Michael (Almond 124). This also reflects the social conditions of old age as a liminal position in British society which Lloyd outlines. But liminality can also become invisibility, as those who exist more solidly within systems may find it difficult to perceive, understand, and empathise with those who reside on the edges and in in-between spaces. Michael as a child becomes the mediator for the viewer and reader: through him they are able to perceive that which does not fit normal order, that which is othered in the world.

There are several moments that make Skellig’s otherness particularly visible, though these are handled differently in the novel than in the film. In an early scene in the novel, Michael steadies Skellig as he coughs after eating the Chinese food and aspirin. The boy observes that he “felt something held in by his jacket [...] I reached across his back and felt something beneath his other shoulder as well. Like thin arms, folded up. Springy and flexible” (29). This is visualised in the film adaptation, where cuts between zoomed-in shots of Michael’s face, Skellig’s face, and Michael’s hand feeling Skellig’s back emphasise the idea that Michael has noticed something that he cannot quite understand. While the text explicates what Michael is feeling, the film necessarily leaves this up to interpretation. At this point in the film, viewers might interpret the man in the garage as someone older, in pain, perhaps even waiting for death. They are left to wonder if Michael is feeling some type of deformity or injury under the jacket (he asks if Skellig is a hunchback after touching his back in the film), or if perhaps it is just the frailty of advanced age that Michael finds difficult to touch. When Mina is first introduced to Skellig in the shed, in a scene which is mirrored in both film and novel (73–74; about 49 minutes into the film), she comments on the rigidity of Skellig’s wrists, identifying the hardening as “calcification [...] the process by which the body turns to stone” and goes on to link that to ossification, “another process [...] by which the mind becomes inflexible” (74). The focus on mental inflexibility here again reflects Gullette’s observation of the culturally constructed ageism (*Aged by Culture* 11). Such scenes emphasise the children’s perception that Skellig is extremely aged, while they also think flexibly about who and what he is, and how to help him.

Julie Sanders writes that “adaptations and appropriations [...] highlight often perplexing gaps, absences and silences within the original” (126).

While this observation was made with the idea of responding to source texts via changes in their adaptations, in *Skellig* the gaps and changes serve a slightly different purpose. Rather than questioning the social, cultural, or political positioning of the original, the medium-specific changes highlight the emotional conditions of the characters. The film alters the novel's pace and externalises motivations that are otherwise internalised within Michael's focalised narration. Moreover, the film adds several scenes to the narrative that complicate viewers' understanding of Skellig as a magical being, an angel, or a figment of Michael's and Mina's imagination. First, about an hour into the film, Michael's father sets the decrepit garage on fire, which forces Michael to run into the burning building to get Skellig out of harm's way. Michael is burned in the process and goes to Mina for help. She bandages his hand and helps him to move Skellig to an abandoned tower in the woods. After they move him, they learn that he is "ancient as the earth," and that his name is Skellig. It is after this point that Michael first removes Skellig's coat and his wings are revealed to both the children and the audience.<sup>1</sup> The fire creates a heightened sense of urgency for the narrative, but it does remove a different moment from the book, where Michael and Mina move Skellig together as a calculated decision. There they gain a deeper tactile understanding of him:

His joints creaked as he struggled to rise from the floor. He whimpered in pain. He leaned against us. He tottered and wobbled as he rose. He was taller than us, tall as Dad. We felt how thin he was, how extraordinarily light he was. We had our arms around him. Our fingers touched behind his back. We explored the growths upon his shoulder blades. We felt them folded up like arms. We felt their soft coverings. We stared into each other's eyes and didn't dare to tell each other what we thought we felt.

'Extraordinary, extraordinary being,' whispered Mina. (Almond, *Skellig* 80)

While the fire adds a sense of urgency in the film, this scene in the novel emphasises the magical realism of the story. In carrying Skellig, his physicality becomes more real to the children, both its otherness and its agedness, which are intertwined. Bodily awareness becomes a process of recognition of his lightness, his frailty, and his need for support. This was translated to the screen through the child Michael's ability to physically move Skellig out of the burning building on his own.

As Skellig becomes stronger, being fed by owls in the respective abandoned buildings, another scene is added to the film: Mina and Michael take care of Skellig's hygiene, bringing him mouthwash and bathing him in a nearby stream, with Mina using products to specifically make his feathers

“silky and smooth” (about an hour and 13 minutes into the movie). He is now more mobile and stronger than before, and at this point in the narrative, the children have already observed in the novel’s text that “he wasn’t old” (81). Nevertheless, this scene once again emphasises Skellig’s lack of worldly cares, while also providing a reversal of age-related expectations around care. Both this scene and the different depictions of Skellig being removed from the shed make visible what Pickard discusses as the “invisibility of care and normative assumptions about who cares and why, within families and age groups” (218). She continues, “where children and young people ‘transgress’ social roles by providing care for their parents, this often results in a lack of recognition and support from social and healthcare organizations in their care-giving role” (218). Michael certainly can be read as fitting this descriptor of “transgressing” normative social roles around age and care, both in his attentions to Skellig and his desires to be involved in the care of his baby sister. Only to the viewer and to Mina does his care for Skellig become visible.

A final and quite abrupt addition to the novel’s narrative occurs in the film while Michael’s sister is undergoing heart surgery. Michael runs out to the tower to demand that Skellig heal her the way he healed Michael’s burn after the fire. In order to push Skellig to action, Michael leaps off the tower towards the water below, forcing Skellig to reveal more of his true nature and fly. Skellig saves Michael and takes him soaring over the trees and roofs of his hometown, before going to the hospital. If Skellig is indeed a figment of a distressed child’s imagination, this action is dark and speaks to Michael’s helplessness and desperation. However, the scene can again be read as a medium-specific decision. Whereas the novel is able to voice Michael’s internal anxieties about his sister’s surgery, film as a medium does not give viewers such access to internal dialogue, unless it employs techniques such as voiceover narration, which is not the case here. Instead, Michael’s anxiety needs to be externalised through his actions. After he has felt so powerless throughout the novel, his leap from the tower becomes a moment when he pushes back against that powerlessness through an action that, though very ill-advised, epitomises a desperate logic in the face of unknowable and uncontrollable events. It parallels his father’s powerlessness when he burns the shed. The scene also validates Michael’s commitment to Skellig and his belief in the mysterious man’s abilities. In terms of reflecting age dynamics, it is in this moment that a reversal occurs between Michael and Skellig: Michael is fully the child in need of care, love, and support, and Skellig is mobilised out of his prior calcification, in part thanks to Michael’s care. Skellig now fulfils the role of an adult lifting up a child in need—both physically and emotionally, by validating Michael’s interpretation of him as a magical being. At the same time, this reversal could only occur in response to Michael’s act, demonstrating to



what extent “agency is enactment” and springs from “mutual relationality” (Haynes and Murriss 974).

### **Age dynamics and care: Where Skellig and Michael meet**

Almond’s novel features different forms of caregiving and receiving care both within and outside of family structures. Skellig and Michael’s relationship and the network around Michael become interesting places to examine both intergenerational relationships and role reversals of age-based hierarchies of care. We have already mentioned the circumstances of Michael’s nuclear family, which are somewhat neglectful of his needs. Both the novel and film show distinct places where Michael experiences care from other people than his family. A large part of this care comes from intergenerational communication and non-traditional family structures. Michael’s time in Mina’s home with her mother, and participating in her home-schooling act as a narrative counterbalance to instances where exploring or questioning in his own home is met with resistance. Similarly, intergenerational dialogues with both Skellig and Grace in the film become empowering discourses for Michael, who is so disempowered within the age-based hierarchies of his own family.

Most obviously, the dynamics of the adult/child binary are reversed in the beginning of the novel. Michael and Mina “infantilize Skellig in their determined duty of care” (Bullen and Parsons 135), actually mirroring how older people are often treated in contemporary societies (Joosen, “Connecting”; Sako and Falcus). When the children move Skellig, and even through the earlier steps of feeding and administering medicine to him, they are assessing his needs and risks, and making decisions for someone less capable—acts which are culturally determined as adult.<sup>2</sup> This care also comes with frustrations when Skellig is not taking his medicine, not trying to get better, and just wasting away in the dangerous shed, but these moments become an outlet for anger that Michael cannot air within the confines of his family. Even though Michael is not sure whether Skellig is real, it is a relationship where he can exert control. Skellig has minimal choice in the matter. In both the novel and movie, there is little sign that Skellig himself feels a desperation to leave the building when he is moved. Likewise, when Mina and Michael bring Skellig mouthwash in the film, and then bathe him in the stream, this has more to do with the children’s responses to his breath and physical odour, than Skellig’s own choice. It reverses the dynamic of how parents might bathe a malodorous child, and viewers are left uncertain of how Skellig actually feels about these intrusions—a continuation of the way older people are positioned as needing help and support from younger people (Sako and Falcus). But it is also important to note that in all of these interactions, as reluctant as

Skellig comes off, he still accepts Michael's help and care in a way that Michael's parents do not. That underscores the different kind of familial relationship that Michael builds with Skellig to supplement what he is not receiving at home.

In taking care of Skellig with Mina, Michael constructs his own network of care, one under his own sense of control in a meta-construction of family dynamics. Especially in the case of the film, which adds the bathing scene discussed earlier, the informed care and inclusion that Michael is not receiving at home becomes something that he is constructing for himself instead. Jessica D. Zurcher et al. explore two distinct characteristics of the portrayal of families in children's media, where "family structure refers to the formation of the family" and "family function examines family member interactions and the family relationship climate" (4). Though Michael is part of a traditional nuclear family, in building his own family structure around Skellig, he and Mina become the "parents" and Skellig fills the roles of both "child" and "aged adult," two figures who typically are treated as needing care (Joosen "Connecting"). Though this is a non-traditional representation of family, it is still a positive portrayal of care that might have an impact on viewers, since "cultivation analysis and social learning theory posit that children may learn from and imitate interactions they view in media" (Zurcher et al. 13). Also, the fact that actual children take on the role of caregiver complicates and challenges normative discourses on the relation between age and care. Another example of the bridging between age categories in the film adaptation is the visual suggestion of the connection between Skellig and Michael's baby sister, emphasising the observation of Bullen and Parsons that, "she and Skellig form a definitive narrative pair in the novel, and their doubled presence is powerfully representative of imminent death" (131). Alternating shots with a mirrored composition show them to be two sides of the same coin, a binary, and yet a whole. Being very young and seemingly very old, both characters can be seen as the ultimate sides of a continuum. Skellig's breath is visually projected onto the baby's breath, and his mouth actions while chewing or being fed by the owls is likewise projected onto the baby's mouth, stressing their relatedness—but also creating a space for Michael to believe that caring for Skellig can be transferred onto care for his baby sister.

As mentioned before, another important character for challenging expectations surrounding age, care, and agency is built out of the older woman with arthritis who answers his questions about the disease honestly and kindly (63). Later, she remembers Michael and asks about his friend with arthritis (91–92). Though nameless in the novel, this woman's role is expanded in the film in lieu of conversations with the doctors and nurse, who do not take Michael seriously.<sup>3</sup> With Grace, Michael is able to speak openly and frankly to an adult about what he is currently experiencing.

He tells her about his sister's illness and indirectly he also talks about Skellig. Grace in turn can speak to someone younger, relating that her own children do not visit. In constantly sharing grapes with Michael, she is mirroring the act of care by feeding that Michael directs towards Skellig. Michael makes a promise to Grace to visit her, but quite tragically, she dies before he can fulfil that promise. Grace brings the spectre of impending death back to the forefront as an inevitability. Unlike Skellig, she was not resigned to her condition or her decline; unlike the baby, she had the cognisance to know what she faced and fought it by insisting on a sense of joy despite her illness. Grace becomes an opposite foil against Skellig as a model for ageing: kind, willing to listen, still noticing the world around her, and unwilling to give up. But more broadly, these moments of intergenerational exchange (with Skellig, but especially with Grace) stand in sharp contrast with Michael's relationship with his parents. When considering these relationship in both the medium of film and novel, we should keep in mind Clémentine Beauvais' observation that

it is difficult to accommodate intergenerational solidarity within narratives occurring over a brief timespan, because that exchange of favors is most often solely understood in specific contexts intensified by narrative necessity, rather than envisaged as existential, continuing, and evolving through time, subject to constant reconsideration, and tinged with memories of previous encounters. (Beauvais 7)

In fact, the ephemerality of the presence of adults such as Grace serves in the end to highlight the adult/child binary, and the strains that this binary places on Michael's being—although different readers and viewers may recollect different scenes or give more weight to them in their interpretation of the intergenerational dynamics in the narrative. Nevertheless, kindness and listening from adults are fleeting while the neglect and dismissal are constant and normal within Michael's family space. Change only happens when Michael steps out of the binary and challenges adult authority by defying his parents' order to stay out of the shed and by aiding Skellig against his stated wishes.

## Conclusion

In her discussion of retellings of "Snow White," Wohlmann states that "the dwarfs challenge stereotypical notions associated with youthfulness and adulthood by revealing the artificial nature of age stages" (228). It is tempting to state that Skellig functions in a similar way, given his ambiguity as a creature and the children's difficulties in guessing how old he is.

However, it is only in the relationship with Michael and his baby sister that Skellig comes to his full potential as challenging constructions of age. Initially, Skellig is associated with decline, as is particularly strongly visualised in the film: he lives in the shabby shed, eats insects and snails, and is dusty and dirty. Through the relationship with Michael and Mina, he gains energy and becomes interconnected with Michael's baby sister, so that the life course appears as a cycle rather than a one-way path. As becomes clear from our analysis and research conducted by other scholars (Bullen and Parsons; McCallum; Wohlmann), the comparison between adaptations and their source texts does not need to entail a hierarchy (Meeusen 8). It rather proves to be a fruitful starting point to consider shared and differing interpretations of features that have been naturalised in misleading ways, such as age. First, as McCallum notes, genres appear to operate slightly differently in novels and films, which thus may lead to different expectations regarding constructions of childhood. In *Skellig*, for example, the novel's dream sequences that blend seemingly unrelated persons and situations are absent from the movie. However, through the use of medium-specific elements like music and a rapid succession of shots, this holistic atmosphere is present in the movie as well. The Skellig film weaves a network of diverse characters and scenes that shows how all people and other living species are connected and formed through intergenerational relations rather than determined by age-specific characteristics.

While we aimed to show how the comparison of narratives and their adaptations lays bare the continuation of age norms at the same time as their disruption, some elements remain unstudied in this chapter. For example, the influence of paratexts as an element that steers interpretation should not be underestimated, as paratexts contribute to the web of media and information that influence the interpretation of both an adaptation and its source text (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2012). Intermedial and transmedial shifts often entail shifts in paratexts. Even when characters and plot remain largely the same, these shifts affect reading and viewing experiences. For example, the typography on the film poster and DVD case of *Skellig* is very similar to that of Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* film poster: a "gothic" letter with a playful touch that triggers expectations towards the genre of the horror movie. Also, we chose to analyse the construction of age through close analysis, which means we have left out "the economic and social circumstances in which [the adaptations] are produced," as well as the use in education, all elements for which John Daniel Stahl demanded attention already in 1982 (8). Teaching instructions can guide viewers towards a particular understanding. In Belgium and the Netherlands, the Skellig movie circulated within an educational program, pointing to, among other things, fantasy and magic realism as a genre, the wish to fly, and the performance of the actress who plays Grace in relation to her age (she was

born in 1921). Peter Kunze (“Revise”) stresses the commercial aspects of children’s media. In his regard, textual exegesis alone will not suffice: production, distribution, marketing, and reception are all important factors. While we do not deny the impact of these elements, we believe that close analysis still has its merits, especially when used as a gauge against which social norms and expectations can be set.

Our focus in this chapter was the construction of age through characterisation. Much could be said about the expected audience and how this affects the construction of adaptations. Meghann Meeusen, for example, maintains that adaptations are more oriented towards an audience of children *and* adults than children’s novels. Questions regarding the intended audience are also addressed by Noel Brown and Bruce Babington (2015) in their discussion of the differences between children’s films and family films and by Lindsey Geybels (Chapter 3), who studied differences in Almond’s writing style depending on the intended age of the readers. In line with the work done by Leander Duthoy (Chapter 4), it would be interesting to analyse how a family audience responds to so-called children’s movies and to see whether such films can contribute to intergenerational understanding.

Rather than being a case of age bending, where expected age roles are consciously transgressed, *Skellig* presents us with a realistic portrayal of intergenerational relationships, and as such is oppositional to a standardised use of child and adult characters as binaries. Care, which is so central to the narrative, appears in an intergenerational network which runs counter to hegemonic discourses: those supposedly in need of care, as children and older people are often treated (Joosen, “Connecting”; Haynes and Murriss), can at the same time give care. Indeed, the need for protection and care, which Michael clearly has, does not have to imply a lack of agency. Through the relationships with Skellig and Mina, who challenges him to think and act for himself, Michael gradually develops an alternative understanding of the ways that care, age and agency are entwined. Since care operates “as a space and time where discourses surrounding human subjectivity are brought into sharp relief” (Falcus and Sako 18), it proved to be an interesting lens for questioning constructions of age. Following the ethics of care, caring relations within family structures can inform ethical choices on a societal level (Noddings). Starting from this perspective, it might be argued that *Skellig* normalises young people taking care of older people, but we believe that it rather highlights that children need care, even—or perhaps especially—if their parents are preoccupied with serious matters, and that an exchange of care can be empowering for all generations. Constructions of age are thus entwined with family models and care: no characterisation of Michael as a child growing into adolescence is possible without also portraying other age categories, like Michael’s father as

an adult, Skellig as a fluid creature experienced as an old man, and Grace as an older woman. Even though the film adaptation seems to continue a rather stereotypical portrayal of older people, it also shows how they develop agency within the confines of their need for care. As Joosen also recognises, it will depend on the viewers if they accept “the responsibility to recognise prejudices, complex situations, and conflicting emotions, to reflect on them and to take a position” (“Connecting”). The Skellig novel and film have the affordances, however, to show that age has “a partially illusory character” (Haynes and Murriss 976), just as Skellig does: it is a bit of everything, and our understanding of it can move from being calcified into flexible and responsive.

## Notes

- 1 In the novel, Mina removes the jacket to make him more comfortable (Almond, *Skellig* 89).
- 2 There is a simultaneous reversal of the adult/child binary, and also, the dynamics of care for those in advanced age which can sometimes parallel childhoods, as “continued control, or rather, the presentation of an apparently controlled and controllable body, becomes harder to display in advanced age” (Pickard 10). But regardless of whether we consider this a reversal of the dynamic or Michael being thrust into a role that an adult would take with, perhaps, an aged parent, what remains is that Michael is not fulfilling the role of the “child in need of care” in his interactions with Skellig.
- 3 When Michael approaches the doctors at the hospital for information about what to do about arthritis, he is treated with a certain amount of ridicule. A nurse counteracts the doctor’s information about saws and needles with more kindly dispensed information about staying mobile and “trying to smile” (64–65).

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## 6 Eating fire

### Close reading David Almond as a crosswriter

*Vanessa Joosen*

David Almond's work for adults has so far stayed under the radar of researchers, with mainly just short mentions in the margins of analyses of his works for young readers (e.g., Latham 5–6; 101).<sup>1</sup> For a study of age in his works, his early short-story collections *Sleepness Nights* (1985) and *A Kind of Heaven* (1997), both published for adult readers, are particularly interesting. Not only do these books have a different implied readership than his children's books and Young Adult works, but Almond's early adult work already features several characters growing up, some child or adolescent narrators and focalisers, and some stories that thematise youth and intergenerational relationships. The short story "Where your wings were" in *A Kind of Heaven* is also included in *Counting Stars* and the phrase reappears in *Skellig*, where Michael's mother expresses the idea that his shoulder blades are a remnant of his wings and that one day, they will grow there again. An interesting similarity can be observed between the first two stories in *A Kind of Heaven*, the eponymous story and "Fiesta," and Almond's novel *The Fire-Eaters* (2003). Such narratives, which recycle material and are published both for children and for adults, can form the basis for a deeper reflection on the distinction between the implied readership of children's literature and adult literature that can supplement the digital analysis that was presented in Chapter 3. In the final chapter of this monograph, which offers comparative close reading, I draw on various insights from the previous approaches to age in David Almond's works, so that this chapter also functions as the book's conclusion.

#### Close reading and comparative literary analysis

This chapter supplements Chapter 3 in its focus on David Almond as a "polygraphic" author or crosswriter, that is an author who writes for children, adolescents and adults. Instead of distant reading, the method used in Chapter 3, I work here with comparative analyses and close reading. The latter is a common method in literary analysis that is often left undefined.<sup>2</sup>

In current literary scholarship, close reading is no longer reduced to the de-contextualised interpretative practice that it was when it was developed in New Criticism, where a text was interpreted separately from its author, context and the reader's response (Brewer; Wohlmann 15-18). As the meanings of close reading have diversified, it is often left implicit what is meant by it—in fact, in various chapters of this book, it was also mentioned and used, but not defined. Even Louis Hébert's *Introduction to Literary Analysis*, which calls itself *A Complete Methodology*, does not define close reading, and only mentions it as a common method for literary analysis in contrast with world literature and Franco Moretti's concept of distant reading (Hébert 142; see also Chapter 3 of this book).

What does close reading for constructions of age entail then? Perhaps not surprisingly, the clearest definitions of close reading can be found in pedagogical publications that teach students how to perform literary analyses. Theresa Tinkle et al. (2013) describe it as “a very detailed analysis of a text that includes commentary on such formal features as meter, theme, imagery, figurative language, rhetorical strategies, tone, and diction” (507). Close reading then requires a combination of skills: “first, the ability to identify textual details that have significant interpretive implications, and then the marshaling of disciplinary terminology and an understanding of genre to develop an original argument about how, what, and why a text means” (Tinkle et al. 507).

In his attempt to define close reading, David Greenham goes back to I. A. Richards' basic idea from the 1920s that “meaning is not inherent in individual words but is rather derived from the relationships *between* words” (Preface). Greenham puts pleasure central to literary analysis and sees close reading as “enjoying the way the words on the page create beauty in complexity” (Introduction), contemplating how the use of language in literature involves various dimensions, including sounds, allusions, expectations and surprises and so forth. Greenham proposes a close reading method that starts at the level of the individual word to gradually zoom out to syntax, themes, textual patterns, genres and the historical, political and theoretical context. Since our understanding of the potential meanings at every level also shifts once the larger picture comes into view, close reading involves returning to individual words, sentences and themes with fresh eyes when re-reading the text. This is also called “the hermeneutic circle,” which in practice takes the form of going back and forth between different aspects and levels of the text (and its context) to gain a fuller understanding of its potential meanings. When it comes to analysing the construction of age in literature through close reading, this means paying attention to words and sentences that contribute to larger patterns of characterisation and themes, which can be contextualised in reflections on genre, implied readership, age ideology and related sociological and literary debates.

In the analysis presented in this chapter, I engage in comparative literary analysis through close reading. Comparative literary analysis is a

study that compares texts and textual forms [...] that in principle arise from different cultures (and possibly from different languages), in order to bring out their identities, similarities, oppositions, and alterities, and to establish the causes, modalities of presence, and effects of these different comparative relations. (Hébert 81)

Comparative literary research is mostly associated with translation and adaptation studies. In Chapter 5, we have seen how this approach to the novel and film versions of *Skellig* teased out new insights about the construction of age and intergenerational dialogue that might have been less easy to observe if the two had been studied in isolation. Frauke Pauwels and Michelle Anya Anjirbag focused on the media properties of novel and film to frame the similarities and differences that they saw; I will take into account the genre and the implied readership of “A Kind of Heaven,” “Fiesta” and *The Fire-Eaters*. Considering the quote from Hébert, one could argue that children’s and adult literature do not really stem from “different cultures” but are rather expressions of the same culture for a different addressee. However, as Hébert explains, “the concept of different cultures is a relative one” (81) and a culture can also display “internal diversity” (81). Hébert sees merit in the potential of comparative literature for counteracting the compartmentalisation of the literary field (82). If we relate this idea to age, we can question not just how children’s literature differs from adult literature but also remind ourselves to stay attuned to what the two discourses share and how they can complement each other. In this debate it is important to keep in mind that children’s literature is not just addressed to young readers, but always has a double addressee: it includes the adult reader. Both can address concerns of different life stages, with some stories for adults thematising childhood, and children’s books also reflecting on adult life. What distinguishes children’s literature from adult literature here is that the young reader is included in the former, whereas this effort for inclusion is not consciously present in the latter.

The methodological steps of close reading described above can inform a comparative analysis of a text for children and for adults, starting at the level of words and sentences and putting them in dialogue with patterns established on higher levels of the literary text. Close reading and comparative literary analyses were widely practised in the twentieth century, also in children’s literature studies. In *Poetics of Children’s Literature* (1986), one of the foundational critical texts in the field, Zohar Shavit includes an analysis of Roald Dahl’s children’s book *Danny, Champion of the World* (1975), which was based on a short story for adults from *Kiss Kiss* (1959).

Shavit argues that “the structure of the specific addressee [of children’s literature] is best revealed when compared to that of the adult as implied reader” (43). One method to do so is to investigate the adaptation strategies when a text that was first published for adults is then adapted for a young audience, as has happened with, among others, *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* (Shavit 43). But since such a procedure usually involves a translator or adaptor who is not the author, Shavit argues that “the best possible example for illustrating the point is a text that is written by the same writer for children and then for adults” (42–43), as she does for Dahl. While this practice is relatively rare, it helps “to reveal the writer’s constraints (regarding the child as an implied reader)” (43). While Shavit’s point of departure is the marginalised position of children’s literature in the literary polysystem,<sup>3</sup> I adopt aspects from her method for my analysis of Almond’s stories, but work with a slightly different starting point. I want to use the comparison not so much to reveal the limits that the implied child reader sets, but rather what the construction of age of this new implied reader enables in Almond’s imagination, characterisation and in his use of themes and style. In this setup, children’s literature is not necessarily seen as something less than adult literature. As I have established in Chapter 1, Almond found a new voice when writing children’s books, a way of approaching darkness without a story being governed by it (Almond in Joosen, “Interview”). My comparative analysis of the three stories will make clear how this process has worked in practice and supplements Lindsey Geybels’s observations about darkness and violence in Almond’s works in Chapter 3.

It is not a coincidence that Shavit explores a relatively small corpus to perform her comparative close readings of Dahl’s works, and then contextualises her findings in the larger trends that she observes in the literary polysystem. The methodology of close reading that I have outlined above is a particularly slow process that involves various rounds of re-reading, as well as carefully choosing which patterns to focus on. The method that I have used for the analysis in this chapter differs a bit from the bottom-up approach that Greenham outlined above. Rather than starting from observations on the word and sentence level, I have approached the texts that are the subject of this chapter with pre-established research questions that are informed by the contexts of age studies and children’s literature studies: what are the similarities and differences between David Almond’s *The Fire-Eaters*, a novel published for children, and his short stories “A Kind of Heaven” and “Fiesta,” which were published for adults? On which level of the text are the similarities and differences situated? Can the differences be explained by the difference in genre (novel versus short story) and by the implied reader (children versus adult)? What can we learn from them about Almond’s poetics of children’s literature and the features of children’s

literature more broadly? These questions can be explored on various levels of the text. In practice, I started by re-reading *The Fire-Eaters* after having spotted similarities with “A Kind of Heaven” and “Fiesta.” For tracking differences and similarities, I drew up a table in which I noted both general trends (e.g., narratological features, setting, overall themes) and examples of similarities and shifts on a smaller level (e.g., details about clothing, names, quotes). While I did not use a digital method that was as sophisticated as the one described in Chapter 3, I did rely on digital tools to facilitate my close reading method; in particular, I used an e-book version of *The Fire-Eaters* to help retrieve specific passages and sentences that I had identified in the two short stories.

### Three narratives

A short description of the three narratives will already make clear that they are closely related. “A Kind of Heaven” (1997) is one of the two short stories for adults. It opens the collection with the same title. The story first follows a boy, Tom, and his mother as they visit Newcastle and watch a performance by a short, bruised man called Harris, who lifts a heavy cartwheel and balances it on his brow. The mother explains that Tom’s father and Harris met in Egypt. Tom and his mother then walk on a bridge where she leans over the parapet and tells him to hold her back. They see Harris again and then race to the other side of the bridge, looking at the stars together. As Tom and his father later visit the beach, the father tells him about Harris’s fascination with Egyptian artists who had conquered pain. At home, Tom starts experimenting with a needle to spot places where you do not feel pain. When he visits Newcastle again with his father, Harris is there—while he will not engage with the father’s memories, he does recall Tom’s mother. Tom and his father go home, discussing the threat of another war, and are welcomed by his mother. The story ends with Tom listening to his parents, pushing the needle into his arm, saying he feels nothing.

“Fiesta” follows immediately after “A Kind of Heaven” as the second story in the collection. “Fiesta” revolves around a boy whose mother leads him away from home while his father is asleep. She takes her son to Bilbao, where she leaves him alone at a hostel as she goes out with a man called Luciano. The boy goes down to ask for water but the mother gives him wine and sends him out into the streets. There he sees some street performers, with one breathing fire. The next day the boy and his mother go on a walk in the mountains and see pilgrims on their way to Santiago. They talk about purgatory. Back in town, the fiesta starts and the boy sees the fire eater again, while his mother is with Luciano. The fire eater wants to teach the boy his trick and puts some kerosene into his mouth. He gags and

retches, while the men are asking after his sexy mother. As the boy feels his mouth burning, he realises he will never go back home to his father and tells the men that his mother is with Luciano.

*The Fire-Eaters* (2003) is David Almond's fifth children's book and winner of a Nestlé Smarties Book Prize and Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award in 2003.<sup>4</sup> The novel is set in 1962 and opens with the protagonist, 11-year-old Bobby (Robert) Burns, visiting Newcastle with his mother and seeing McNulty, a street artist.<sup>5</sup> He makes Bobby his assistant and lets him choose the device that will cause him the most pain. Bobby chooses a skewer, which McNulty then uses to pierce his cheeks. In the story that unfolds after this opening scene, various narrative threads unfold. Three relationships with Bobby's peers are important: his old friendship with Joseph, an older and more violent boy attending a different school, his new friendship with Daniel, a more intellectual and pacifist boy who has just moved to town and joins Bobby's class, and Bobby's concern about Ailsa, a friend who has dropped out of school to take care of her family. She has found a fawn that was presumed dead and that she is now raising. After taking his 11-plus exams and receiving a scholarship, Bobby is starting school in a prestigious and strict Catholic grammar school. McNulty regularly turns up in the novel. Bobby and his father see him perform in Newcastle, where the father reminds him of their time as soldiers in Burma, which McNulty doesn't seem to recall. Throughout the novel the threat of the Cold War looms, but there is also a more immediate danger that Bobby faces at school, as he joins Daniel's revolt in opposing their abusive teacher Mr Todd. Moreover, Bobby's father may be seriously ill and they fear for his life. At home, Bobby experiments with a needle to see where he feels pain. The novel ends with Daniel and Bobby letting themselves get caught and Bobby taking a severe physical punishment. His father returns from the hospital in good health. As the main characters gather on the beach with the fear of the war erupting, that danger is avoided too, but McNulty breathes in his fire and dies. The story ends with Bobby looking back on this part of his life and the fawn that Ailsa raised being reunited with its family.

As these summaries make clear, the three narratives are all about a boy protagonist and his encounter with a street performer who engages in a dangerous and potentially painful act. The relationship between the boy and his parents is also central to the story, and none of the stories mentions siblings. *The Fire-Eaters* combines elements from the two short stories: the visits to Newcastle with first the mother and then the father, the fear of the Cold War and the scenes with the needle from "A Kind of Heaven." From "Fiesta" it takes on some of the religious fascination with doing penitence to reduce your time in purgatory and the boy's involvement in the act of the street performer, who is—like McNulty—a fire eater.

### Opening the story

Following the method of close reading that Greenham described above, I first turn to the smaller building blocks of the three texts to explore the similarities and differences between them in more detail. A prime place to do so is the opening sentences. This is true for any narrative, but especially for short stories, as Andrew Kahn explains: “the openings of short stories are already the first act and swiftly move to present subject, event, and motivation, using techniques of speech, viewpoint, description, situation, and timing. Their impact is more pointed on the whole than novelistic openings” (15). We see this in the openings of the three narratives by Almond. As the two short stories start more *in medias res* than the children’s book, some key themes and differences already become clear from the first sentences:

Why had he been so scared? She seemed well, that morning they left the house above the beach, headed to the city, the day he encountered Harris for the first time. (Almond, “Heaven” 7)

The boy can’t sleep. The memory of the row, of yet another row, of the father’s face aflame, his yelling, ‘Woman, go to Hell! Go to bloody Hell!’ (Almond, “Fiesta” 25)

It all starts on the day I met McNulty. I was with my Mam. We left Dad at home beside the sea. We took the bus to Newcastle. (Almond, *Fire-Eaters* 1)

In all three passages, the focus lies on the boy protagonist, although in “A Kind of Heaven” it is not made clear from the start that “he” is a boy. In fact, when I first read the story, I assumed “he” was an adult and only established on the second page that the protagonist was a boy and that “she” referred to his mother and not his partner. This lack of a referent is best understood in light of the genre of the short story (rather than the implied adult readership). Based on a study of 600 short stories, Helmut Bonheim found with regard to the opening sentences that the “use of pronouns without referents occur[s] more frequently in the short story than in the novel” (Friedman 18). Of course, this is not an absolute rule. In “Fiesta” it is explained in the second word that he is boy, while in *The Fire-Eaters*, the young age of the narrator can be derived from the references to “my Mam” and “Dad” in the second and third sentences.

From an age-aware close reading, taking into account the differences in implied readership, the opening sentences also make clear that the two short stories are more about adulthood than about childhood. They use a child focaliser to reflect on the mother’s fear (“Heaven”) and share information on the parents’ marriage problems (“Fiesta”); by contrast, the focus



of the children's book seems to lie more fully on the child's experience, who also narrates the story himself. The present tense in *The Fire-Eaters* creates a sense of immediacy, while the first line also establishes that the story is told in retrospect, with the narrator possessing the hind knowledge of what happened after he met McNulty. The first lines mainly seem to serve the purpose of drawing the reader into the story by creating narrative tension, although the separation between the mother and son from the father anticipates on a threat that will surface later in the story, when they fear he is fatally ill.

Some striking differences can also be noticed in the emotions that are evoked in the first lines. In the adult short stories, the themes of conflict and fear are immediately introduced, whereas the first sentences of the children's book are more action-driven. Both "A Kind of Heaven" and *The Fire-Eaters* raise questions though: the former does this most explicitly by making "Why" its first word, but *The Fire-Eaters* also creates suspense in not making clear what exactly starts on the day that the narrator meets McNulty, leaving the reader to wonder what is "It"? In short, the first sentences endorse some of the features that one would associate with the intended readership: more action and immediacy in the children's book, and a focus on adult problems in the short stories for adults. Moreover, the openings create certain expectations, some of which are endorsed when you read the rest of the narratives, while others are not. The mother's pain will remain a central theme in "A Kind of Heaven", and the conflict between the parents will not be resolved at the end of "Fiesta," with the child being presented as a victim of adult conflict. However, it is not because these themes are more foregrounded in the adult short stories that they are absent from the children's book.

### Adulthood through children's eyes

In what follows, I focus on two aspects that the three narratives share: the evocation of adulthood and the central theme of pain. For its construction of adulthood, I analyse the relationship between the boy and his mother in particular, since these characters feature prominently in all three books. The obvious starting point is the scene where Tom and Bobby visit Newcastle with their mothers, in "A Kind of Heaven" and *The Fire-Eaters*, respectively. As the first sentence of the short story already made clear, what the mother feels is a central concern to "A Kind of Heaven." It stands out especially in the scene after she and Tom have seen Harris perform, and they take the lift to the bridge. In both stories, the mother is laughing, but the sentiment is completely different:

She pulled Tom on. She was laughing. 'Don't look back,' she said. 'Or he [Harris] will never let you get away.' The river ran a dozen feet below

them. There were gulls screaming, riding the gentle breezes at the river's centre. (Almond, "Heaven" 10)

Although she is laughing, the warning not to look back and the ominous screaming of the gulls hint at the inner distress that she is trying to hide from her son and the dozen feet signal a dangerous height. In *The Fire-Eaters*, these elements are also present, but they are rearranged in a way that also allows for a more cheerful interpretation. The scene has already started off with a different emotional load. A happy memory that Almond mentioned in the paratext from *Half a Creature from the Sea* (Chapter 1) surfaces here too, as Bobby and his Mam "ate hot beef sandwiches, smeared them with sauce and mustard, licked the juices that ran down our chins and across our fingers" (9). They are more relaxed when they see the river:

Then we moved away from the stalls and walked right by the water's edge. It flowed ten feet below us. Seagulls hovered over the water and swooped for the scraps thrown by a bunch of children. The tide was turning and the centre was all eddies and swirls and agitation. Mam kept laughing, holding her face up to the sun.

'I told your dad the day would brighten,' she said. 'He's an old misery! All that autumn and winter nonsense!'

And she took my hand and hurried me forward. (Almond, *Fire-Eaters* 11)

The distance between the characters and the river is reduced from 12 to 10 feet. This seems almost symbolic for the way that the children's book slightly tunes down the threat of the situation. Even though *The Fire-Eaters* also brings up external turmoil (the agitated water), elements are added to also allow for a lighter reading of this passage. The mother's optimistic stance seems genuine. The way they walk is also notably different. In "A Kind of Heaven," the mother comes across as restless from the start, as "[s]he pulled Tom on." When Bobby and his Mam walk by the river, they are more calm. She also takes his hand and drags him along, but this act seems to be done in a spirit of adventure rather than distress. Word choice matters here. The phrasing in *The Fire-Eaters*—"she took my hand and hurried me forward" (10)—brings up connotations of care and growth, while "[s]he pulled Tom on" suggests a more forced moment of growth that is led by her state of mind rather than his interests. In "Fiesta," that forcefulness is even more pronounced, as the mother "urges him onward, grips his hand, drags him, runs through their city, leaving it all behind" (25). As the analyses in Chapters 3 and 4 have made clear, responsibility and care are age norms that strongly govern ideals of adulthood. In *The Fire-Eaters*, Bobby's parents live up to these norms, while "A Kind of

Heaven” shows how adults’ own distress may get in the way of that care and “Fiesta” offers a rather judgmental picture of a mother who drags her son into an unwanted and irresponsible adventure. These larger thematic differences become clear in smaller details in the text, such as the ways the boy protagonists and their mothers hold hands.

Further differences arise in the scene that develops next in “A Kind of Heaven” and *The Fire-Eaters*. To step onto the bridge that crosses the river, mother and son pass a man operating the lift and pay him a coin. In the adult short story, the mother is sexualised through Tom observing the man’s gaze: “Tom saw how the man watched her, couldn’t take his eyes off her” (11). This line is absent from *The Fire-Eaters*, which instead thematises the process of remembering. The man by the lift explains that he keeps track of all his customers: “Just for memory’s sake” (10). His notebook supports the remembrance, and as Bobby enters the lift, he sees the man writing. Although it is not known whether this passage stems from Almond’s memories, other parts (the meat and mustard sandwich) do, and it is significant that the children’s book thematises the act of remembrance, especially since the story is set at a time when the author was similar in age to Bobby.<sup>6</sup> The man’s position is later mirrored in Daniel’s dad, who takes photographs to capture the world “before it changes” (57). Is *The Fire-Eaters* written in a similar vein? The random figure by the bridge seems to suggest it without letting this potential autobiographical dimension determine the story (see Chapter 1). At the same time, the man by the bridge is also a memory himself, stemming from the older story, “A Kind of Heaven.” A shift occurs when this figure is transported to the children’s book that de-sexualises his gaze. He does write down a flattering description of Bobby’s mother (“Beautiful bright lady [...] All dressed in red,” 11) but this is much more respectful than the glaring that Tom observes. Moreover, whereas the man seems oblivious to Tom, Bobby is seen too in *The Fire-Eaters*, as the man adds “[h]er quiet boy” and the hopeful note “[s]unshine after rain” (11). The adaptation of the passage underscores again the idea that the children’s book puts the child more central, whereas the adult story uses the child to express the state of mind of the grownup characters.

The most striking difference between the two narratives occurs when mother and son are on the bridge. In “A Kind of Heaven,” the mother’s leaning over the parapet gets a particularly dangerous ring, especially in the light of her unhappiness and need to escape, which have become clear from earlier parts of the story:

She leaned over the parapet, he peered through its rails, saw her face filling the sky, hair streaming in the wind. She leaned further, further, till her head was inverted, almost level with his own, and she laughed,

‘Hold me, Tom! Keep me back!’ And in terror he swivelled and clutched her, both arms around the knees.

‘Silly thing,’ she said. ‘Silly thing. I couldn’t fall.’ (Almond, “Heaven” 11)

She tipped her head forward so that her hair fell down in front of me. She leaned further and her upside-down face came into view. She smiled at me from the dizzying space outside the bridge. Then she laughed and started running. (Almond, *Fire-Eaters* 11)

Although the novel is much longer overall, this scene stretches out to three times the same length in the short story. The citation above is followed by the mother expressing her need to escape and the ominous gulls appearing again: “Her voice mingled with that of the screaming of the gulls” (Almond, “Heaven” 11). Such repetitions are significant and underline the mother’s mental distress, with the threat of suicide oppressing Tom so much that he can think of nothing else—signalled by “her face filling the sky” (11).

A crucial difference between “A Kind of Heaven” and *The Fire-Eaters* is the agency assigned to Tom/Bobby. Although the passage above might suggest that Tom gets more agency than Bobby in the scene on the bridge, it may actually be the other way around. Tom’s thoughts are completely occupied by his mother, and his chances for empowerment are dependent on her impulses: on the one hand, she asks him to hold her back, suggesting that preventing her fall might be in his power; on the other hand, she calls him “[s]illy thing” and suggests that she has only fooled him. Tom seems to sense actual danger in her need to escape, and his terror is real—he does not dare to take the risk of letting her go and so she controls his behaviour. Moreover, when the mother says that she “couldn’t fall,” it is also implied that his efforts to hold her back did not matter and that he would not be able to stop her if she did want to fall. By contrast, if Bobby feels any distress on the bridge, it is not mentioned. The game with his Mam seems playful throughout, with her smile added for reassurance. Bobby is not asked for help, nor is he mocked afterwards. This could be said to reduce his agency, as he seems barely present in the scene, except as an observer. Scenes like this one, however, contribute to the evocation of happy memories with his mother. They strengthen his agency in the face of the other challenges he faces in the book: the threat of a nuclear war, his father’s illness and the abuse he suffers at school. While hints about the mother’s depression are absent, there is no shortage of dark themes in *The Fire-Eaters*. Don Latham gives his chapter on the novel the title “At the Gates of Hell” (97), quoting Bobby’s father as he refers to the Cuban Missile Crisis (190), but also alluding to Bobby’s preoccupation with pain and penance in the light of his Catholic faith. Chapter 5 has shown

extensively how Michael in *Skellig* can gain agency despite his family's worries. Latham argues that this novel and *The Fire-Eaters* "empower their young readers by portraying the potential of young people to effect positive change in their own lives and in the world" (100). This is not true for Tom in "A Kind of Heaven," and even less so for the unnamed boy in "Fiesta," but it is for Bobby in *The Fire-Eaters*. The implied child readership, as well as the expectations of adult readers about children's literature, help to understand why the agency of the protagonist is more pronounced in the latter book.

That does not mean, however, that hints of more complex feelings in the mother are completely absent from *The Fire-Eaters*. For example, the first paragraph of the novel ends as follows: "The water splashed her ankles but she didn't seem to feel it. I tugged her hand and wanted to move away, but she didn't seem to feel it" (1). Paying attention to the word level is once again important here: the repetition draws extra attention. Thinking of the broader context of the novel and its publication history, it gets a four-layered meaning: the fact that the mother does not feel the water and the tugs (1) indicates her fascination with McNulty, (2) contributes to the larger theme of (not) feeling, (3) is an echo from "Fiesta" in which the unnamed boy protagonist feels ignored by his mother and (4) is a relic from "A Kind of Heaven," in which the mother's depression is a more prominent theme. Whatever the explanation, this idea is not developed in the rest of the novel, where the mother appears as a sensitive person who is attuned to Bobby's needs while also showing sadness, anger and fear, in particular, because she is worried about the father's health. However, in contrast to "A Kind of Heaven," her mental state does not produce terror for Bobby, but they rather support each other through the ordeal. In the children's book, the theme of suicide is shifted from the mother to McNulty. On the one hand, the novel goes further than the short story by showing the actual moment that McNulty dies by inhaling his fire; on the other hand, it is also less disturbing because of the greater distance between Bobby and McNulty. While his death upsets Bobby, the mental distress of McNulty does not enter his own home and family.

Engaging in this careful balancing act between addressing dark themes and offering coping strategies to face that darkness, *The Fire-Eaters* also raises the question of what is appropriate to show to children. When Bobby and his mother stand in the circle around McNulty, another adult in the audience voices an explicit age norm to the mother: "Some of the tricks is [sic] just disgusting. Not for bairns to see. It shouldn't be allowed" (2) The mother ignores this comment and keeps watching, first holding Bobby close and then urging him to assist McNulty, "helping [him] forward" (3). Her position mimics that of the narrative: confronting young readers with difficult and even "disgusting" subjects, but doing so in a manner that also

protects them and helps them grow. Such a position does not emerge from an inferior position of children's literature or an underestimation of child readers' capacities, but rather from an emotional sensitivity towards readers growing up in a complex world. In this light, it is interesting to note that child readers approved of Almond's choice by giving *The Fire-Eaters* the Nestlé Smarties Book Prize, which led to the newspaper heading in *The Times*: "Scary story wins children's award." The article mentions that some critics found the story too frightening to qualify as children's literature. Of course, it originally wasn't, but the children's appreciation for it shows that Almond got the balance right when he addressed it to a young audience.

Both "A Kind of Heaven" and *The Fire-Eaters* make use of blind space to evoke adulthood from a child's perspective. Blind space is a term that I have borrowed from Alice Curry to describe the construction of adulthood in children's books: this is always a selective evocation that leaves out aspects from adult life. Some narratives even draw attention to their own framing of adulthood and hint at what they leave unsaid (Joosen, *Adulthood* 1–5). As Curry argues, "[b]lind space thus pertains to the physical spaces outside of such a frame, as well as to the conceptual spaces outside of its cognitive or ideological demarcations" (62). In drawing attention to the limits of what is shown, blind space "encourages frame-breaking: the desire to venture beyond physical comfort zones, and to see beyond enculturated frames of reference" (Curry 63). Blind space related to adulthood is also present in adult literature with a child narrator or focaliser, such as Emma Donoghue's *Room*, for example, or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, where readers have to fill in the gaps that the child narrators leave to understand the experiences of the adult characters. In "A Kind of Heaven," I see blind space being signalled in the way that Tom observes his mother hanging over the parapet: "he peered through its rails" (11). Just as part of his view is obscured, the mother's full psychological condition remains partly out of sight from him and, consequently, the reader. This fragmented view gives him stress. Later in the story, when Tom presses his father to tell him what is wrong with his mother, the only answer he gets is: "Nothing, Tom. Nothing" (22), again an indication that something is kept hidden from him. Finally, significant parts of the parents' life take place in spaces where Tom is not allowed, while he does hear sounds that he tries to interpret. At the end of the book, he hears a cry from their room, but cannot make sense of it: "they gasped and sighed. Was that her cry of pain?" (24). On the cover of my book *Adulthood in Children's Literature*, I use an image from a picturebook by Marita De Sterck and An Candaale in which the parents' presumed love-making is hidden from their children's view—it is an image that marks blind space. In "A Kind of Heaven" that blind space is also signalled by Tom's

confusion when he overhears his parents. Is the mother feeling pleasure or pain? Because he is aware of her distress but never really informed, he is left on his own and his imagination may even make things worse. At the same time, the parents' lovemaking may also signal a (temporary) relief from anxiety. If it is a moment of intimate connection between them, Tom does not find out, as he is left to his own devices in his own room. In this reading, his naivety is marked once again and may elicit pity in the reader. In the end, he wants to feel nothing, as I will develop below.

In her comparison of Dahl's "Champion of the World" narratives, Shavit argues that "a text for adults is much more complicated than one for children" (43), and based on the analysis above, one might come to the same conclusion for Almond's crosswriting. However, it would be too simple to state that "A Kind of Heaven" is more complex in its evocation of adulthood than *The Fire-Eaters*. Rather, the signalling of blind space is more pronounced in the former, so that readers are more compelled to reflect on the adult characters' psychology. In the children's book, these complications are signalled less overtly but still operate as a potential subtext of the story. Latham comes to a similar conclusion with regards to the fire-eating street artist who appears in "Fiesta" and in *The Fire-Eaters*. In the children's book, Latham argues, "the connotations are more complex," as McNulty "represents not evil itself, but rather the destructive effects of evil" (101). As his analysis further demonstrates, *The Fire-Eaters* does not shy away from adult pain: "McNulty has been mentally and psychologically damaged by his experiences, and because of that, he is an outcast, inspiring horror and loathing among some, sympathy and fascination among others" (Latham 102). Bobby belongs in that second category and is affected by McNulty's suicide, without being overwhelmed by it. In contrast to Tom, Bobby seems to be supported by a more reliable network of child and adult characters with whom he can share his concerns and feelings of distress.

Adult characters are part of the age ideology of children's literature, and they can serve as role models that children may want to grow into or that adult readers may want to imitate, or they can also present negative examples of adult behaviour that is undesirable. *The Fire-Eaters* contrasts various teachers to make clear what kind of educational methods are preferable, with the kind and open-minded Miss Bute gaining Bobby's sympathy and the cruel Mr Todd being the most-hated character in the book—Perry Nodelman points out that his name is reminiscent of the German word for death (37). Adult stories of course can be informed by such an age ideology too. In "A Kind of Heaven," the parents' rearing methods cause distress in Tom, but that feeling is amplified even more in "Fiesta," where the mother's behaviour—abducting her son, letting him get sunburn, giving him alcohol instead of water—leave the boy in a state of utter disempowerment and

despair. As he “prepares to sip again” (Almond, “Fiesta” 33) the kerosene that made him retch, McNulty’s tragic fate comes to mind. The mother’s disregard for her son’s well-being is put forward as the cause for his distress. The title “Fiesta” only refers to the mother’s experience of their escape—the last image of her is calling “Luciano, olé” (32). For the boy, the trip to Spain is no *fiesta*, but rather recalls the father’s curse in the first lines, when he told the mother to “go to Hell! Go to bloody Hell.” As the boy is abandoned, burnt, hurting and breathing fire, his experience comes close to having arrived in hell—a curse his father wished to land upon his wife, but ended up inflicting on his son. “Fiesta” invites readers to distance themselves from that adult viewpoint and sympathise with the child. With regard to that invitation, the short stories and the children’s book are in fact quite similar, even if the former take a more ironic stance to childhood than the latter. *The Fire-Eaters* raises various complex questions for its child protagonist and readers alike, but also offers them tools and a sense of agency that is needed to confront those questions. As I explore in the next section, some of those tools also complicate notions of agency, in particular the idea of pain and sacrifice.

### **Pain for relief and sacrifice**

One coping mechanism that both Tom and Bobby try out in the face of their mother’s distress and father’s illness, respectively, is experimenting with pain. This is inspired by Harris’s and McNulty’s acts and for Bobby, the role of suffering in his catholic upbringing is added as a subtext. “Christ hung in agony on his cross” (92) in the room where he first starts experimenting with a needle, highlighting the potential salvatory qualities of suffering. Both boys engage in stabbing themselves with a needle; it starts at school in a class where they take turns touching each other’s hands with a needle and map the areas where they feel pain. As in many passages in the book, *The Fire-Eaters* extends the scene with details from children’s daily lives. In “A Kind of Heaven,” it ends with the teacher asking the questions that inform the major themes of the story after the children have mapped “the points of pain and the points of nothingness”: “Why are some parts of us more sensitive than other parts?” (16). The question echoes the opening lines which raise questions about the mother’s anxieties (“Why had she been so scared?”). In *The Fire-Eaters*, the teacher’s question is not made explicit because the class breaks out in giggles and screams, and Miss Bute tells them to “[a]ct your age, children” (93). That leaves readers with a more implicit question: what does it mean to act your age? And what role does pain play in that? Mr Todd comes in, annoyed by the noise. As he refers to “the ancient theory of sacrifice” (94), he takes out two pupils to be whipped, as Miss Bute continues the class with “tears in her eyes” (95).



Pain, the ability to feel, the desire not to feel as well the danger of not feeling are central themes to both “A Kind of Heaven” and *The Fire-Eaters*. Both Tom and Bobby take the needle home and continue stabbing themselves with it. In the former, the story ends with Tom wondering if his mother’s pain is similar to his and how she deals with it, while pressing the needle to his skin, echoing his father’s words: “I feel nothing [...] I’m fine... It’s nothing, nothing...” (24). This is a more disturbing form of the process of “thinging” that Emma-Louise Silva describes in Chapter 2, or “thinking and feeling *with*, *through* and *about* things” (Malafouris, “Bringing Things to Mind” 764). The needle becomes a tool that merges with Tom’s body and helps him to canalise his thoughts and manage his feelings, but unlike the clay or the musical instruments that Silva discusses for *Clay* and *Bone Music*, there is no creative output. Tom is only left with pain, and then numbness. The ending is reminiscent of James Joyce’s “Araby” from his short-story collection *Dubliners*, which also ends on a disturbing note, leaving a boy in disappointment and distress. The short story’s scope is well-suited to convey this kind of “emotional intensity,” argues Andrew Kahn (xxv), who finds that “[t]he power of many of the finest short stories comes from the provisionality of conclusions that refuse to tie up loose ends” (107). Note that this observation also applies to the conclusion of “Fiesta” that I discussed above, which also ends on a disturbing open ending, leaving a child utterly disempowered.

Children’s literature, by contrast, has a tradition of offering either happy endings or at least some form of hope—books that carry through a nihilistic tone until the very end, such as Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* and Anne Fine’s *The Road of Bones*, are often met with resistance (Reynolds 81). This is informed by the fear that child readers might be too heavily affected by gloomy feelings. As Kimberley Reynolds observes: “The nihilism of novels such as Cormier’s can make it hard for readers to think why they should struggle for change when the consequence is unwelcome attention and recognition of impotence” (82). At the end of “A Kind of Heaven,” Tom has found a way of dealing with his mother’s anxiety, but his method may come across as disturbing, as he engages in self-harm in an effort to quell his own feelings.

Although self-harm in response to “hopelessness” is still a fairly rare and recent topic in children’s literature (Reynolds 88), it is no longer a taboo subject. Almond’s Bobby engages in it too. He resorts to self-harm as a way of coping with hopelessness in the face of the Cold War, the abuse at school and his father’s illness. Whereas Tom stays stuck in that feeling of impotence, Bobby moves beyond it, albeit also in a problematic way. The children’s book thus ties some of the loose ends that the short story leaves hanging. When the children first see Harris/McNulty, he reminds

the audience that “[y]ou’ll see nowt till you pay!” (*Fire-Eaters* 2; see also “Heaven” 9). Both Tom and Bobby pay by suffering pain, but only Bobby is rewarded with change. *The Fire-Eaters* includes more graphic details about the children’s physical pain, both when Bobby harms himself and when the pupils at school get whipped. Bobby is described as he draws blood with the needle, and “push[ing] it all the way through” the “hard skin at the edge of [his] thumb” (106). Later he pierces the skin between his thumb and forefinger, which is particularly painful. Bobby feels that his suffering serves a double purpose. After a rebellious act with Daniel to expose Mr Todd’s cruelty, Bobby takes a severe whipping at school, believing that “punishment will only make me stronger” (174). In addition, his motivation to let himself be hurt and also hurt himself becomes endowed with religious significance. As he sits by a Lourdes lamp by his bedside, he says: “Let me take the pain. [...] Not him.” He then hurts himself with the needle while his father is groaning (149). As he is hurting and praying, his self-harm feels as a way of empowering himself and sacrificing himself to save his father. After his father’s recovery, the threat of war still looms large. Following the logic that his suffering helped to cure his father, Bobby expresses his willingness to sacrifice himself to save the world, but in the end, it is McNulty who actually takes his own life. Although the novel refrains from establishing a direct causal link between Bobby’s self-harm and his father’s recovery, or between McNulty’s suicide and the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, these events do coincide and may be interpreted as being connected. Nodelman does so: “it is McNulty who breathes in the fire and sacrifices himself,” he writes, “and who, the novel implies, may have then saved the world from the fiery holocaust of nuclear war. Or at least protested, even if it was hopeless” (38–39). Similarly, John Stephens argues that in his prayer to take him to save the Earth, Bobby has drawn up a convincing social ecology that makes it plausible that he has made a difference: “While he offers to die if everything else could be saved—an overt religious reference to vicarious atonement—he exemplifies the wholeness, humanness and relationship of self to place” (152). This is an important shift if we compare *The Fire-Eaters* to “A Kind of Heaven” and “Fiesta”: whereas the stories for adults are devoid of magic and end in defeat, the children’s novel leaves open the possibility of a miraculous connection between events, even if critics have differed in their reading of the book as magic realism or simply realism (Latham 99; Prain et al. 9–13; Reynolds 22). As Vaughan Prain, David Beagley and Sarah Mayor Cox point out in their reading of *The Fire-Eaters*, “[t]he author has a vocabulary of language and symbols, as does the reader, but the two vocabularies are not necessarily identical” (13). Indeed, readers may interpret the connection between events as driven by a Catholic logic of sacrifice, as enabled through magic, or they

may perceive them as simply coinciding without any causality. In contrast to the adult stories, however, the children's book at least opens up these three avenues, while the adult stories end in pain and disillusion.

The ending of *The Fire-Eaters* then is quite different from that of the two short stories. Whereas many short stories show characters in crisis and focus on a moment of insight rather than tracing growth (Reid 56), children's books often do focus on a young character's development. While not shying away from disturbing events and including more direct depictions of pain than "A Kind of Heaven," Almond's novel ends on a particularly hopeful note, both with regard to Bobby's personal growth and to the external circumstances in which he is living. Rosemary Ross Johnston sees the story as complying with what she calls "an ethics of hope": "a sense of the potential for the future (especially for young people); a sense of the capacity of the human spirit to choose its own interior response no matter what the external circumstance; a sense of beauty as creation" ("Writing" 178). The story offers a positive outcome on various levels. Bobby has a sense of agency and stays connected to the people he loves most. The father's recovery marks a change that David Almond did not experience in his own life, as he lost his father at age 15 in 1966, and can be considered a restorative act of nostalgia when it comes to his own past (see Chapter 1). This nostalgia does not necessarily need to be attributed to the author but can also be assigned to the narrator who is telling the story retrospectively, as the opening passages suggest, and may be looking back on youth. Like for Bobby's father, death has also been averted for Ailsa's fawn, which has miraculously recovered and is reunited with its parents. Ailsa says, "look how strong it's got" (217). This reflects Bobby's situation, whose family is also restored and who has grown stronger after the disturbing events he has faced. This process of growth then takes him to the next step, as the book closes with him looking into Ailsa's eyes, affirming that "the world's just so amazing" (217). The passage underlines the age norm of adolescence as a time of *Sturm und Drang*, which his mother also made explicit in a metareflection on age earlier in the novel: "Not to worry. It's a stage. The laughing lad'll soon come back again" (13). At the end of the novel, Bobby appears as strong, happy and in love—a stark difference from the despair that Tom and the unnamed protagonist of "Fiesta" are left with.

## Conclusion

The "short story form is particularly good for uncomfortable or edgy subjects," argues Helen Simpson (cited in Kahn xxv). But as this analysis has shown, so are contemporary children's books. When Almond received the Hans Christian Andersen medal in 2010, the jury lauded him

for “captur[ing] his young readers’ imagination and motivat[ing] them to read, think and be critical” (cited in Flood). His stories offer readers challenging subjects, both on a personal level (loss, self-harm, child abuse) and on a larger, social one (war, social conflict). Almond addresses such provocative themes regardless of the age of his implied readership, although as my analysis has shown, a comparison between his short stories and novel does lay bare some differences that cannot only be attributed to the genre and length of the text (short story versus novel). These shifts include a focus on the child’s experience, the potential of agency for the child and a hopeful resolution. Such shifts can be interpreted in the light of Almond’s poetics as a children’s author and his consideration for the child reader, and studying them can, in turn, contribute to a fuller understanding of his views on children and children’s literature.

In discussing Almond as a crosswriter, it is important to consider not just the differences, though, but also to acknowledge the connecting elements between the three stories. When taking elements from “A Kind of Heaven” and “Fiesta,” Almond did not find it necessary to remove the stories’ preoccupation with pain, for example, or to delete the larger threat of a nuclear war. *The Fire-Eaters* thus testifies to a view that children and adults live in the same world, and that children cannot be safeguarded from personal and political issues but should rather be given the tools to deal with them. As a result, there are some striking differences between “A Kind of Heaven” and “Fiesta” on the one hand, and *The Fire-Eaters* on the other. In an interview that I conducted with Almond in the fall of 2020, I asked him to reflect on the differences between the friendships in *Kit’s Wilderness* (a Young Adult novel) and *The Tighrope Walkers* (first published for adults in the UK and then as a YA novel in the US). The relationship between Kit and John from the former reminded me of that between Dominic and Vincent in the latter, but in *The Tighrope Walkers*, the friendship between the two boys gets a more sexual dimension and the tensions between them culminate in a cruel rape scene at the end of the novel. When I wondered if there were some themes that Almond felt more comfortable putting in the adult book, he responded: “yes, I could explore things that probably would have been very difficult to explore in a children’s book without doing it very subtly, without hiding them” (Joosen, “Interview”). Similarly, my analysis has shown that several of the controversial aspects of “A Kind of Heaven” and “Fiesta” are not absent from *The Fire-Eaters*, but have been relegated more to the blind space of adulthood in the children’s novel, which is not always marked a such—this is true for the unmistakable allusions to sex in the adult stories, but also for the anxieties that the mother experiences.

In her analysis of Dahl as a crosswriter, Shavit concludes that Dahl’s adult text “The Champion of the World” is “more complicated” than the

related children's book *Danny, the Champion of the World*, on various levels: the events are not told in chronological order in the adult story, and the adult text is more ironic (45). Children's literature has evolved since Shavit published her study in 1986, and some of her statements seem to homogenise the field of children's literature of the 1970s and 1980s in problematic ways, laudable as her plea to open up views on children and children's books may be. Whereas she still finds it a daring move that Dahl thematises poaching in a children's book, such a topic, as well as the adult characters' moral ambiguity, seems less controversial in the twenty-first century. As Åse Marie Ommundsen observes, controversial topics are bound to evolving cultural norms and are rapidly shifting in contemporary children's literature (178). Moreover, Shavit interprets the differences between Dahl's text for adults and that for children as an undesired assimilation on his part:

If he still wished to ensure the acceptance of the text by the children's system, however, he had to offer compensation for violating the rules by adapting both subject and characters to the children's code. Therefore, a certain change in direction was not a matter of free will but was imposed on the text due to its transfer to the children's system. (Shavit 42)

While I cannot judge how reluctant Dahl was to adapt his story for children, Almond voices his process of taking a young readership into account in more positive terms. He does not see writing for children as catering to the needs of readers who are radically different from adults, but who are rather "akin" (Gubar) to them with some differences. Almond stresses how writing children's books does not limit, but rather enriches him as an author and as a person:

If you try to define yourself as a writer too closely, you limit your opportunities. When I began, I saw myself as a writer for adults. If I had just hung on to that and said, 'I just write for adults,' I would never have written *My Dad's Birdman*, I would never have written *Skellig* [...]. One of the reasons that I work in so many different forms these days is because I am aware that maybe all of my books in a sense are the same book. Similar things are happening in all of them, but what is offered to writers is the opportunity to write in different forms. (Joosen, "Interview")

Rather than seeing himself as being restrained by conventions of children's literature, Almond as a crosswriter likes to experiment with the different forms that operate in various literary systems and feels that together they

enrich the *ur*-story that he wants to tell. The darker aspects of that story are also present in books where this is not immediately obvious:

I have just written a new picturebook [...], and it is very light and airy, up up up, but I know inside that at the heart there is a darkness there, too. It is not obvious to someone who is reading a picturebook, but I know that the themes that are written in *The Tighrope Walkers* are in some of my lighter work too. (Joosen, "Interview")

Almond's success as a writer for young readers seems to lie in the balance that he is able to achieve between controversial and challenging subject matter on the one hand, and agency, support and hope on the other hand. His use of magic realism creates room for ambiguity if readers try to assess how much agency actually the characters possess. Moreover, his books do feature the moral complexities in adults that Shavit finds lacking in Dahl's story for children. However, her comment about Dahl's ending is also applicable to Almond as a crosswriter:

The constraints of the implied reader in the children's version are particularly evident as opposed to the open endings of the adult version. In the former, the narrator pulls together all the threads; poetic justice is done, no issue remains open. In the adult version, however, the story opens and ends 'in medias res.' (Shavit 57)

Open endings are becoming ever more common in children's literature (Ommundsen 180), and it could be argued that *The Fire-Eaters* offers its characters only temporary relief from the threats of the Cold War, the father's health problems and the *Sturm und Drang* of adolescence. That being said, several of the tensions are resolved at the end of this novel, and the successful outcomes on so many different levels (the father's healing, the fawn's resurrection, the averted nuclear threat, the happy gathering on the beach) can come across as a kind of wish-fulfilling fantasy that impacts the narrative's credibility.

Rather than approaching the happy ending as the result of the constraints of children's literature, however, I want to focus on what it enables. As explained in Chapter 1, as a children's author, Almond no longer wants to "indulge darkness as a way of controlling a story" (Joosen, "Interview"). That shift is obvious from my comparison of the first and last sentences of the stories: the adult stories open with conflict and anxiety and end in pain and disillusionment, whereas the children's novel begins by raising curiosity and ends with growth and hope. The discovery of that voice did not only lead to a change in his writing career but also in himself as a person: perhaps through writing more optimistic stories, Almond

says that he also became more hopeful himself (see Chapter 1; Joosen, “Interview”). In short, the happiness and optimism that his stories offer are a conscious choice that is not driven by perceived limits on what he can write for children. In fact, when Almond started writing *Skellig*, he was a childless 47-year-old man who felt unfamiliar with the new literary field he was entering: “I knew nothing about the children’s book market and here I was writing a children’s book. But I knew inside myself that it was good, I knew that this is what I should be doing. So it felt like coming home, coming home to how I should be” (Joosen, “Interview”). For that he could draw on his previous work for adults, but with a new impulse: he experienced what Peter Hollindale has called a sense of “childness” that can be retained in adulthood thanks to the common ground between the life phases that Gubar’s kinship model emphasises, as well as memories of being a child. As Almond describes this feeling of childness in adulthood: “I began to experience a kind of childhood—the intellectual and emotional and physical sense of being a child again—and to write through that experience” (Almond in Joosen, “Interview”). The happiness and hopefulness in *The Fire-Starters* seem, therefore, less driven by constraints on children’s literature than by what Almond wants to achieve as a writer and as a person. One could even argue that this spirit has also entered his adult work, despite the more extreme violence and palpable darkness. In that light, it is interesting to note that *The Tighrope Walkers* (2014), which was first published for adults, features scenes of disturbing cruelty and rape, but also offers hope, at least for the protagonist Dominic. Similarly, *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean* (2011) offers readers gruesome scenes of child abuse and murder, but grants the troubled protagonist a happier outcome in the end than most of the protagonists in *Sleepless Nights* and *A Kind of Heaven*.

For my analysis of Almond as a crosswriter, I have relied on a close reading method that has alternated between various levels of the text: word, sentence, scene, thematic strands and the broader contexts of genre and age norms. This method can supplement the digital analysis that was presented in Chapter 2. The kind of distant reading that Lindsey Geybels performs there has the advantage that it can reveal trends in a large corpus or focus on an array of small elements in texts that might escape the attention of one human researcher. Close reading, by contrast, is driven by the idea that various levels of a text are related and together constitute meaning; while its scope is inevitably smaller, this method is currently better suited to contextualise observations on the level of a singular narrative and its context. My reading of “A Kind of Heaven,” “Fiesta” and *The Fire-Eaters* confirms Geybels’s conclusion that violence and death are described graphically in Almond’s Young Adult and adult works.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, a close reading of the passages in which Tom and Bobby

self-harm themselves with a needle shows that *The Fire-Eaters* offers more gruesome details than “A Kind of Heaven.” It can be argued, however, that the latter story is more disturbing because it ends in a scene of self-harm and does not balance out the pain with a more hopeful resolution or a sense of agency in the young protagonist. *What* a story describes matters if we assess its representation of violence, but *where* it does so also has an impact. With reference to a larger number of books by Almond than the small corpus that I have studied, Geybels concludes “[c]hild characters are described as vulnerable in all books, but this characteristic is compensated by more agentic features in children’s books” (Chapter 3). To this observation, I would add that *The Fire-Eaters*, which is characterised as a book for readers aged 12 and up, also falls within this trend, even if Bobby’s logic and tools for gaining strength can be considered flawed and problematic. In that context and in contrast to Geybels’s more general conclusions based on a larger portion of Almond’s oeuvre, *The Fire-Eaters* shows that the Catholic faith is an important frame of reference for the 11-year-old protagonist, and is not just expressed in exclamations but also through Bobby’s acts and reasoning and in more subtle juxtapositions of events. In short, my close reading of two short stories for adults and a children’s book confirms but also nuances the results of the distant reading method that Geybels employed in Chapter 3.

In this book, we have presented different frameworks and tools to gain a broader and deeper understanding of how age operates on various levels in Almond’s works. The authors have taken into account Almond’s own life stage as he negotiated his childhood memories (Chapter 1), the age of his characters and age as a theme in his work (all chapters), as well as the age of his intended readership (Chapters 3 and 6) and the age of his real readers (Chapter 4). Age in literature is constructed as a combination of those aspects from the production process to the reader’s reception. No single theory or method can fully captivate that process. The analyses have shown that age as a lens can be combined with diverse paradigms, from adaptation studies and cognitive studies to digital humanities, life writing studies and reader-response theory, each bringing different aspects of age to the fore. We have explored how constructions of age are shaped through dialogue, characterisation, plot and writing style, but also how objects and settings can be imbued with significance when it comes to discovering age norms or seeing how a story challenges received assumptions about the life course. What has become obvious from every chapter, whether they apply close reading or digital analyses, is that intergenerational relationships take a prime place in Almond’s works. Moreover, all of his books that have been discussed here thematise a moment of crisis in which young characters can appear as particularly vulnerable. Sometimes this crisis is produced by troubled intergenerational relationships (an abusive teacher



like Mr Todd in *The Fire-Eaters*, absent parents in *Skellig* and *Heaven Eyes*); sometimes other causes, in particular (the threat of) death and loss are the main reasons why the protagonists struggle. Regardless of the cause of the crisis, however, intergenerational support is always needed to solve it. The most prominent intergenerational relationships in Almond's works are those between children or adolescents and their parents and teachers. While older figures are relatively rare in his books, when they do appear, they can have a big impact on the protagonists' growth—from Kit's grandfather in *Kit's Wilderness* to Andreas in *Bone Music* and Grace in the film adaptation of *Skellig*. Moreover, Almond's use of magic realism allows his characters to form intergenerational connections across time.

Given the potential diversity and richness of literary age studies and the complexity of constructions of age, there is more work to do in combining age studies and children's literature studies than what the authors of this book have been able to accomplish. In particular, the intersection of age with other markers of identity (gender, race, class, ability) deserves further attention, as do historical constructions of age in children's literature. The narratological aspects of age, in particular the use of child narrators and focalisers, and older narrators looking back on childhood, could be further theorised and explored in children's literature and adult literature to supplement important work that has already been done in this area (a.o. Cadden, Douglas, Gilmore and Marshall, Nikolajeva). In addition, the construction of age in illustrations and visual media for children is still understudied. The field of digital humanities is rapidly developing new methods to assist research in this area,<sup>8</sup> but a close reading of age in illustrations is also rarely done, while images so obviously contribute to characterisation and notions of age. Michelle Anya Anjirbag and Frauke Pauwels have pointed out the scarcity of empirical research on viewers' responses to children's media, and the impact of their age in that process is understudied when it comes to making sense of film as narrative and as an aesthetic product. While the research that Duthoy presents on *My Name Is Mina* is part of a larger project, more research on how readers of various ages respond to children's literature could offer further insights. As challenging as participatory research with children may be, they deserve more active roles in setting the research agenda and exploring questions of age in the media that they are offered (Deszcz-Tryhubczak). Finally, Almond's work has been widely translated and distributed. This book has hinted at some shifts, for example, in the Dutch translation of *My Name Is Mina* (Chapter 4) and the re-branding of *The Tighrope Walkers* as a Young Adult novel in the United States. The shift in constructions of age in the international dissemination of children's literature is another aspect deserving of more attention. While far from exhaustive, we hope that the insights offered in this book will inspire other researchers to engage in further research on age in children's literature, and

that our methodological reflections will help them choose the frameworks and tools that fit their work best.

## Notes

- 1 The index of Rosemary Ross Johnston's *David Almond*, for example, lists neither collection of stories.
- 2 Anita Wohlmann's *Metaphor in Illness Writing* is a rare exception and offers an interesting reflection on the practice of close reading (15–18).
- 3 Shavit defines the polysystem as “member of a stratified system in which the position of each member is determined by socioliterary constraints” (x).
- 4 It was published after *Skellig* (1998), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *Heaven Eyes* (2000) and *Counting Stars* (2000).
- 5 Bobby is starting secondary school after taking the 11-plus exam. His specific age is not mentioned, but Almond has said he is 11 (Latham 113n14).
- 6 David Almond was born in 1951 and the novel is set in 1962. Bobby, the protagonist, is then 11 years old, as Almond has explained himself (see previous endnote).
- 7 Note that the two short stories were not included in Geybels's corpus, which only contains full novels and short-story collections that display narrative continuity. The collections of individual short stories, *A Kind of Heaven* and *Sleepless Nights*, were not part of the corpus.
- 8 At the University of Antwerp, Thomas Smits and Paavo Van der Eecken are experimenting with digital tools, such as CLIP, and an annotation method for the detection of bias in illustrations to Dutch historical children's books. They include age norms in this analysis, as well as gender, class and race.

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# Appendix A

List of 100 most frequent words  
(words preceded by '#' were manually  
culled, leaving a list of 54 words)

about, across, again, all, an, and, #are, around, as, at, away, aye, back, #be, #been, but, by, #came, #can, #come, #could, #day, #did, #do, down, each, #eyes, #face, for, from, #get, #go, good, #got, #had, #hand, #have, #head, here, how, if, in, into, #is, just, #know, #like, little, #ll, #look, #looked, #man, more, no, not, now, of, off, on, one, or, other, out, over, #put, #re, right, #said, #saw, #say, #says, #see, so, some, still, #tell, that, the, then, there, #things, #think, this, through, #time, to, up, #ve, #was, #way, #went, #were, when, where, #whispered, #will, with, #world, #would, yes

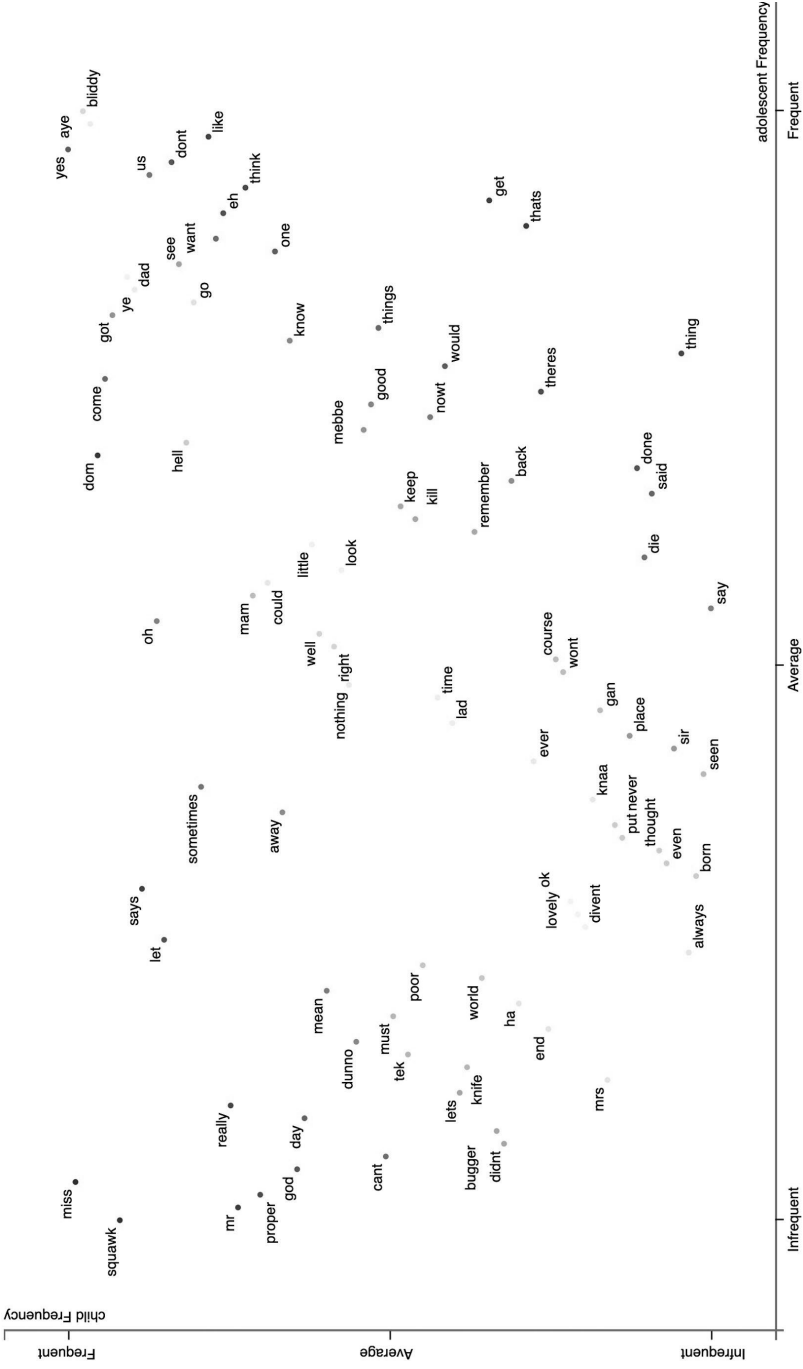
## Appendix B

### Scatterplots of character speech in the oeuvre of David Almond, categorised according to the age of the intended reader

- 1 Scatterplot comparing speech of child and adolescent characters to speech of adult characters in David Almond's novel for adults, after removal of stop words and character names.
- 2 Scatterplot comparing speech of child characters to speech of adolescent characters in David Almond's novel for adults, after removal of stop words and character names.
- 3 Scatterplot comparing speech of child and adolescent characters to speech of adult and old adult characters in David Almond's novels for young adults (aged 12–15), after removal of stop words and character names.
- 4 Scatterplot comparing speech of child characters to speech of adolescent characters in David Almond's novels for young adults (aged 12–15), after removal of stop words and character names.
- 5 Scatterplot comparing speech of adult characters to speech of old adult characters in David Almond's novels for young adults (aged 12–15), after removal of stop words and character names.
- 6 Scatterplot comparing speech of child and adolescent characters to speech of adult and old adult characters in David Almond's novels for children (aged seven to nine), after removal of stop words and character names.
- 7 Scatterplot comparing speech of child characters to speech of adolescent characters in David Almond's novels for children (aged seven to nine), after removal of stop words and character names.
- 8 Scatterplot comparing speech of adult characters to speech of old adult characters in David Almond's novels for children (aged seven to nine), after removal of stop words and character names.







*Figure B2* Scatterplot comparing speech of child characters to speech of adolescent characters in David Almond's novel for adults, after removal of stop words and character names.



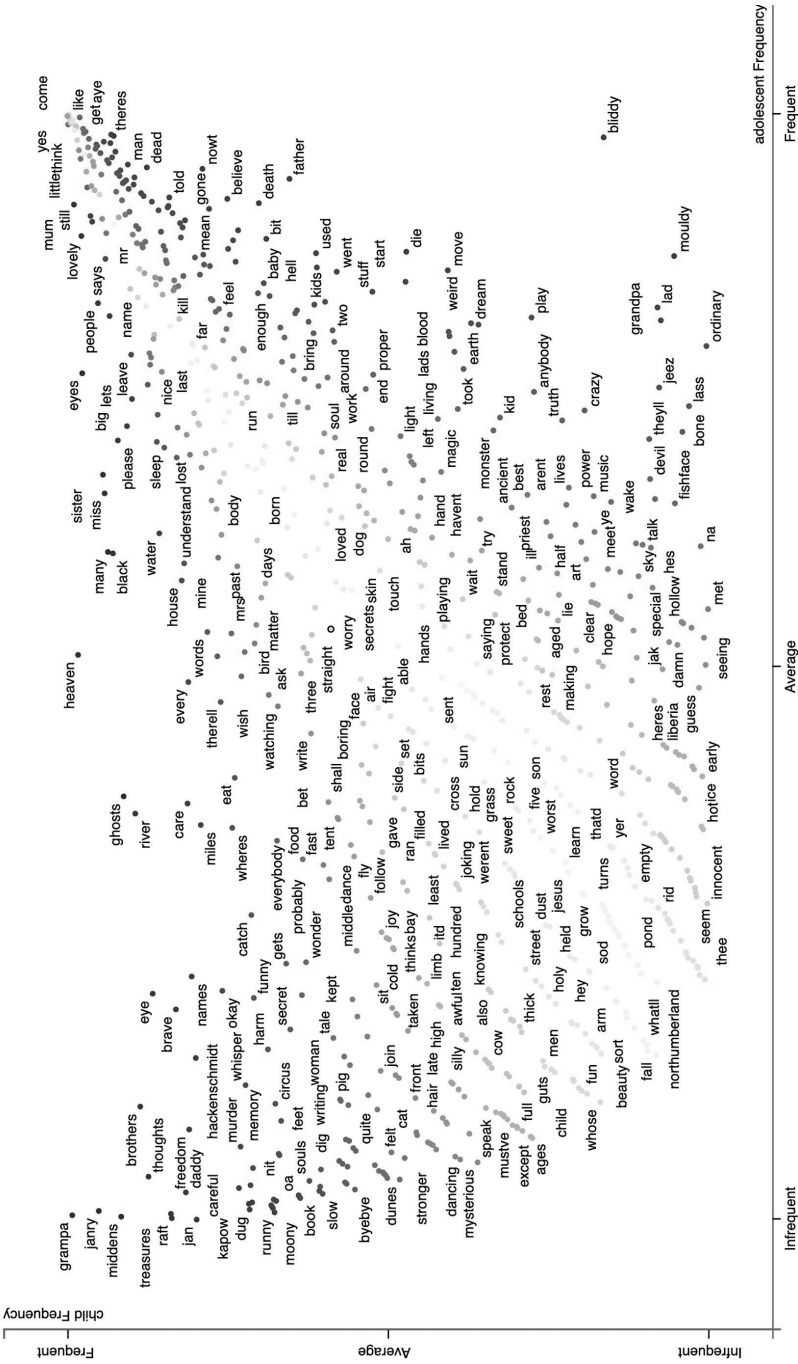


Figure B4 Scatterplot comparing speech of child characters to speech of adolescent characters in David Almond's novels for young adults (aged 12–15), after removal of stop words and character names.

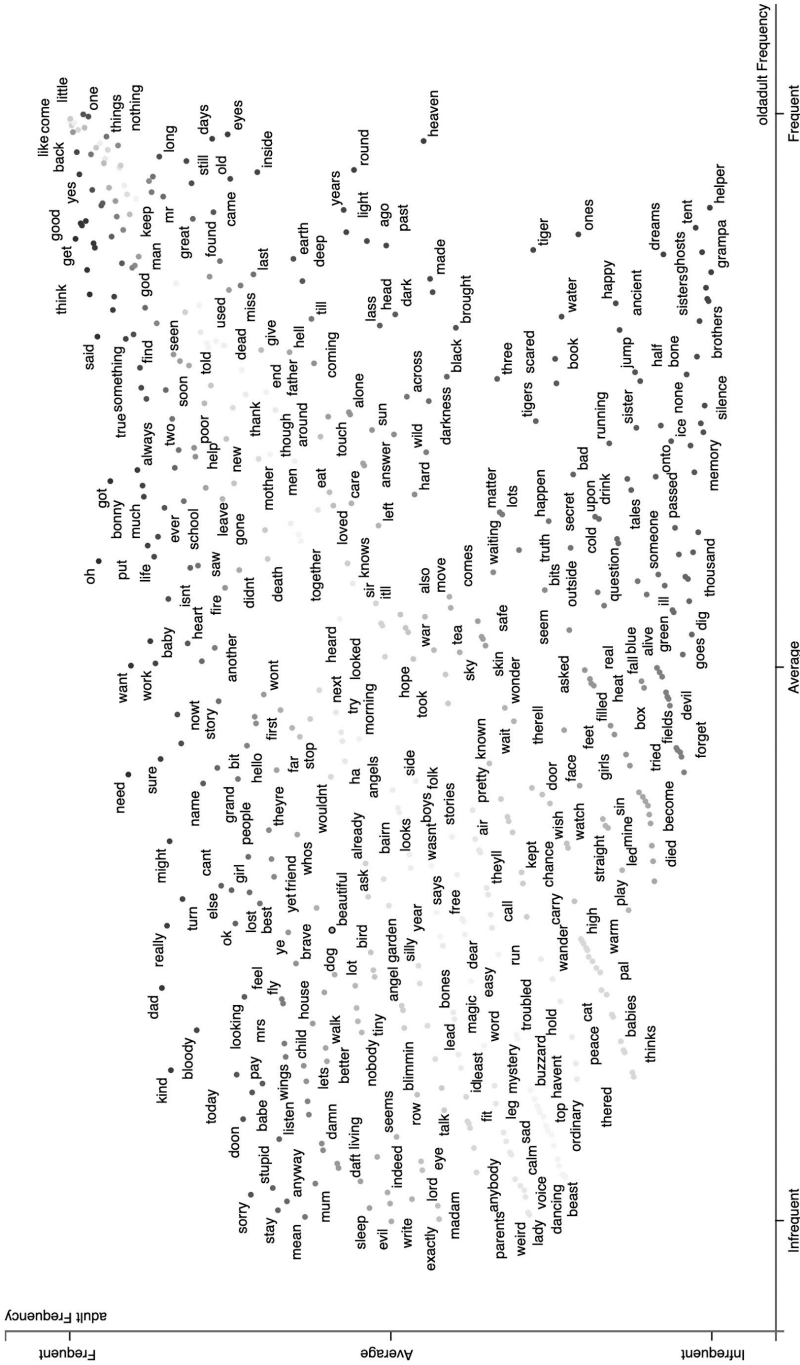


Figure B5 Scatterplot comparing speech of adult characters to speech of old adult characters in David Almond's novels for young adults (aged 12–15), after removal of stop words and character names.

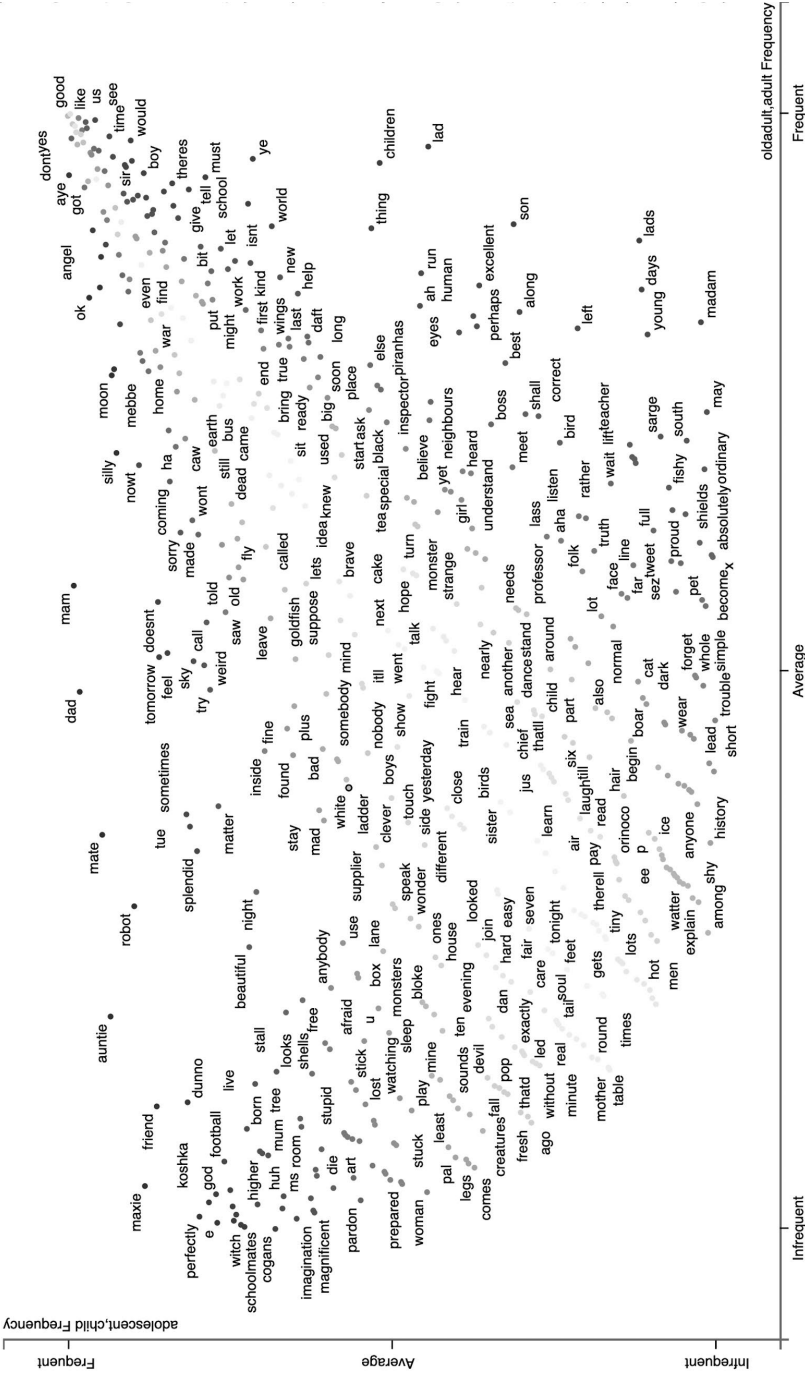


Figure B6 Scatterplot comparing speech of child and adolescent characters to speech of adult and old adult characters in David Almond's novels for children (aged seven to nine), after removal of stop words and character names.

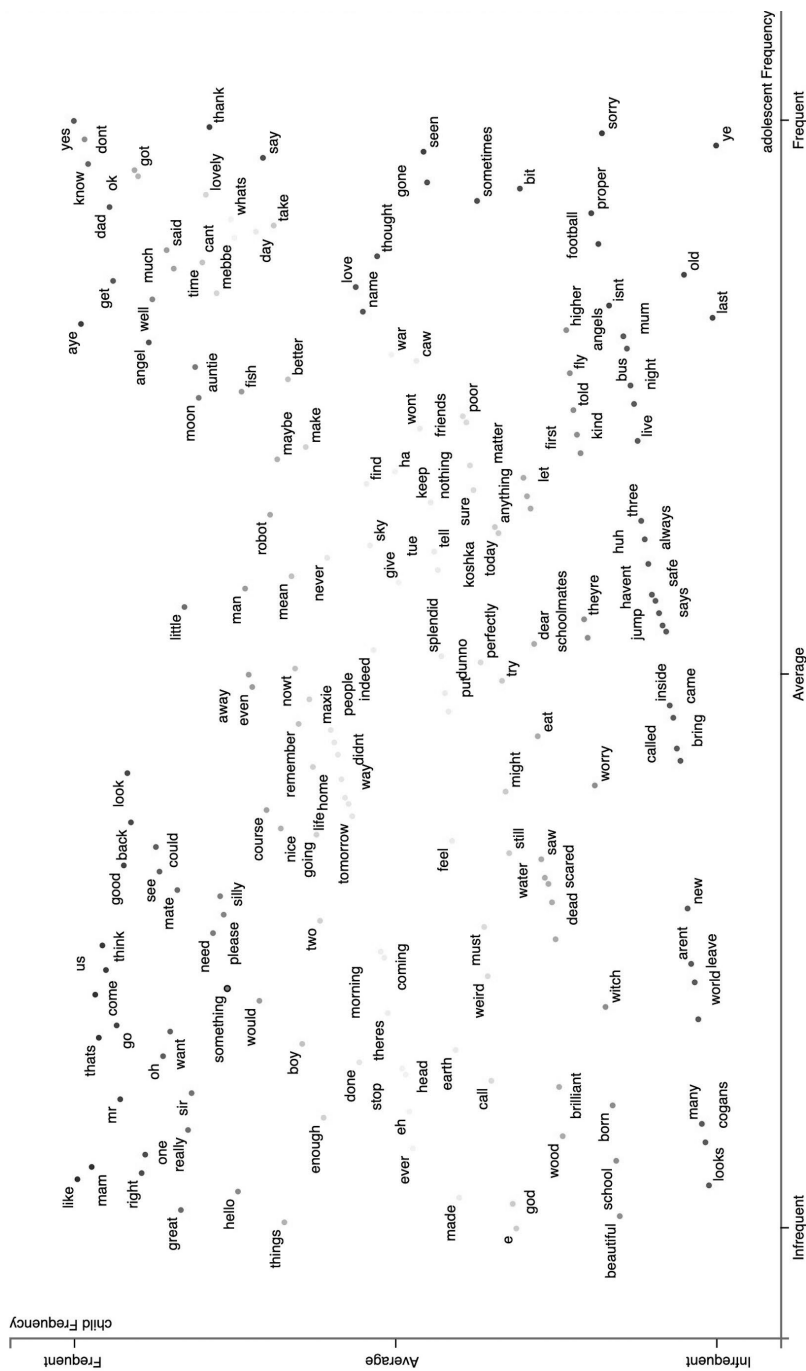


Figure B7 Scatterplot comparing speech of child characters to speech of adolescent characters in David Almond's novels for children (aged seven to nine), after removal of stop words and character names.

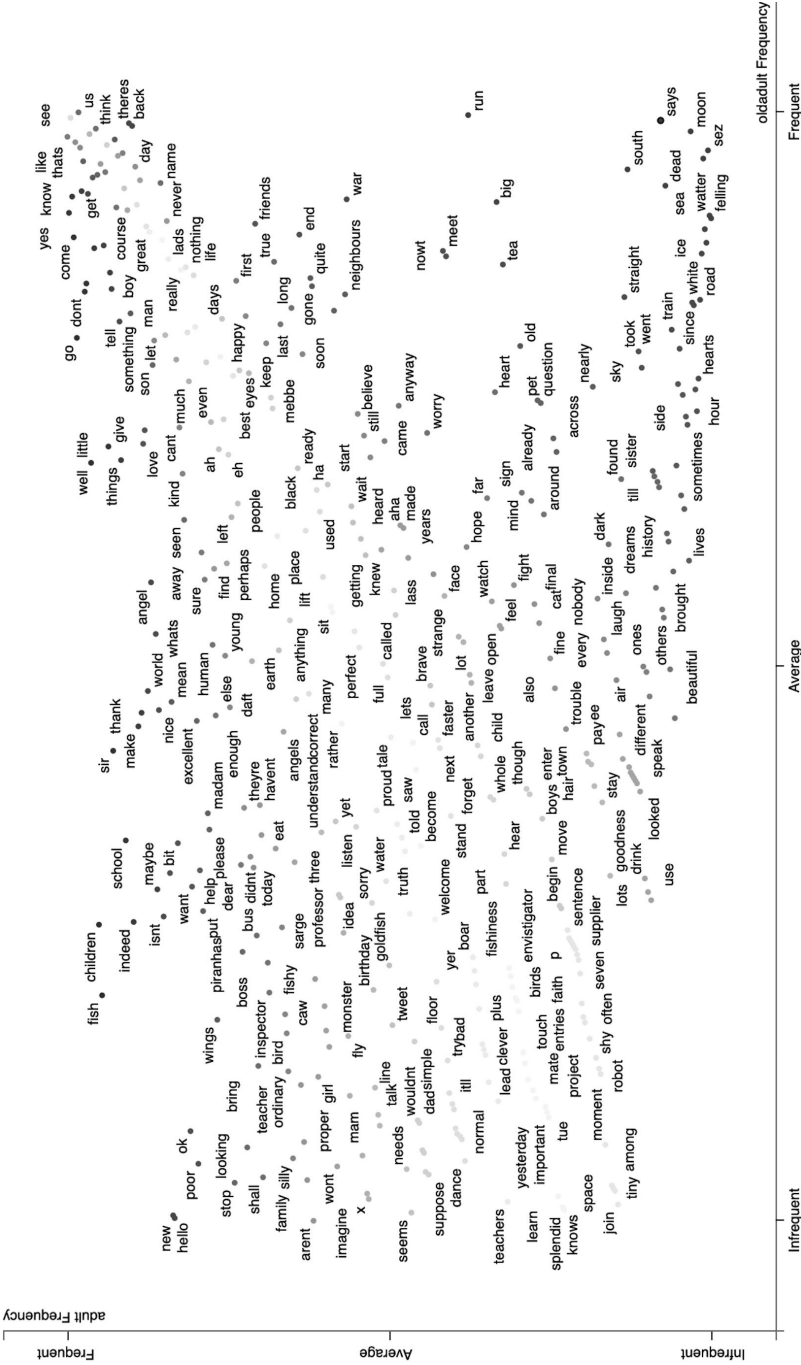


Figure B8 Scatterplot comparing speech of adult characters to speech of old adult characters in David Almond's novels for children (aged seven to nine), after removal of stop words and character names.

# Appendix C

Lists of 40 most common verbs, possessions, and adjectives associated with child, adolescent, adult, and old adult characters for David Almond's oeuvre, grouped by the age of the intended reader

## Verbs

<i>Intended readership</i>	<i>Characters' age</i>	<i>Terms</i>
Adult (18+)	Child	say (77), see (24), think (22), do (22), come (19), go (19), have (18), draw (17), turn (14), want (13), get (13), look (12), know (12), yell (10), ' (10), take (10), hear (10), tell (10), whisper (9), make (9), walk (9), love (8), stand (8), 're (8), like (7), try (7), 'm (6), watch (6), laugh (6), hold (6), dream (6), begin (5), cry (5), mean (5), sit (5), read (5), use (5), giggle (5), keep (5), give (5)
Adult (18+)	Adolescent	say (376), do (71), think (60), have (55), get (54), see (54), know (54), laugh (43), go (43), take (38), whisper (35), want (33), look (29), hear (27), put (26), tell (26), hold (23), turn (22), come (21), try (20), remember (20), feel (19), 're (19), 'm (19), shrug (18), ' (17), answer (17), stand (16), watch (16), yell (15), breathe (15), run (14), keep (13), start (13), read (13), dream (12), ask (11), kill (11), write (11), point (10)
Adult (18+)	Adult	say (507), come (59), laugh (44), do (42), take (32), tell (32), have (31), ' (28), know (28), look (26), go (25), put (25), get (25), think (23), ask (23), 'm (23), whisper (23), turn (22), see (22), stand (19), smile (19), sigh (19), hold (18), yell (18), raise (14), keep (14), walk (14), move (13), give (13), speak (13), lift (12), lean (12), grin (12), call (12), cough (12), touch (11), murmur (10), light (10), shrug (10), want (10)
Adult (18+)	Old adult	die (1), sit (1)

(Continued)



<i>Intended readership</i>	<i>Characters' age</i>	<i>Terms</i>
Young adult (12–15)	Child	say (1386), see (246), know (234), look (202), whisper (201), think (194), go (175), have (148), tell (145), come (143), do (138), want (113), feel (111), hold (96), take (94), hear (91), turn (84), laugh (79), keep (74), get (72), sit (71), put (70), stand (66), smile (63), find (60), ' (60), try (58), write (57), watch (57), stare (56), 'm (53), giggle (52), ask (51), imagine (51), walk (49), touch (49), remember (48), start (48), call (46), 're (45)
Young adult (12–15)	Adolescent	say (3394), see (599), know (573), look (481), think (453), go (441), whisper (420), do (417), want (321), tell (318), come (291), feel (282), have (261), hear (260), laugh (234), get (225), take (209), 'm (206), 're (198), turn (188), hold (174), ' (167), stand (165), try (154), put (150), watch (133), keep (130), walk (123), find (121), shrug (119), stare (119), shake (114), ask (114), make (114), imagine (110), move (108), start (106), smile (105), sit (104), play (95)
Young adult (12–15)	Adult	say (2067), come (227), look (172), tell (140), have (140), smile (139), hold (133), whisper (131), see (128), know (124), go (118), do (117), take (117), laugh (113), think (104), put (99), stand (92), ask (88), get (87), call (79), ' (78), turn (76), 'm (72), want (71), reach (67), use (57), sigh (57), shake (56), yell (54), watch (54), make (49), keep (46), sit (46), give (45), lean (44), touch (42), open (42), stare (41), lift (41), raise (40)
Young adult (12–15)	Old adult	say (241), whisper (51), smile (38), tell (30), hold (28), turn (24), stare (22), look (22), come (22), take (21), have (20), put (17), laugh (16), write (16), sit (15), see (15), go (15), ask (15), do (14), know (14), stand (14), lift (13), sigh (13), touch (11), raise (11), use (11), hear (11), dig (11), call (10), remember (10), murmur (10), lean (10), ' (9), reach (8), close (8), get (8), die (8), find (8), press (7), think (7)
Children (7–9)	Child	say (1140), look (208), know (182), do (174), see (162), ' (154), get (152), think (143), have (140), go (122), whisper (95), want (95), tell (81), come (78), take (75), 'm (74), stand (73), 're (64), turn (62), hear (61), stare (59), put (56), ask (54), feel (53), laugh (50), sit (48), try (47), like (42), need (40), run (38), start (37), call (37), walk (36), smile (34), move (33), keep (33), yell (33), hold (32), shake (31), reach (30)

*(Continued)*

<i>Intended readership</i>	<i>Characters' age</i>	<i>Terms</i>
Children (7–9)	Adolescent	say (15), paint (9), 'm (5), see (5), do (4), think (4), become (3), have (3), know (3), disappear (2), outrun (2), grow (2), mutter (2), whisper (2), admit (2), gasp (2), 're (2), make (1), tell (1), 's (1), ' (1), throw (1), attend (1), hide (1), re (1), nick (1), feel (1), want (1), pretend (1), shrug (1), hesitate (1), trot (1), watch (1), linger (1), seem (1), play (1), hear (1), gain (1), stare (1), lay (1)
Children (7–9)	Adult	say (42), laugh (4), smile (4), lift (4), tell (3), come (2), take (2), unfold (2), hold (2), make (2), ' (2), sit (2), open (2), photograph (2), think (2), visit (1), find (1), let (1), bend (1), push (1), help (1), shrug (1), hear (1), link (1), rest (1), read (1), send (1), hammer (1), sez (1), go (1), toot (1), call (1), tug (1), grin (1), taste (1), watch (1), ponder (1), snap (1), trot (1), bring (1)
Children (7–9)	Old adult	say (140), see (22), look (15), turn (13), have (11), take (11), know (11), reach (9), think (9), do (9), tell (9), sigh (8), go (8), stand (6), open (6), come (6), ' (5), keep (5), point (5), smile (5), put (5), drive (5), ask (5), need (4), 'm (4), drink (4), shake (4), hold (4), whisper (4), tick (4), yell (3), laugh (3), sit (3), stare (3), close (3), drop (3), lean (3), grin (3), murmur (3), mean (3)

### Possessions

<i>Intended readership</i>	<i>Characters' age</i>	<i>Terms</i>
Adult (18+)	Child	hand (30), eye (14), arm (11), dad (8), side (7), mother (6), name (6), finger (6), head (6), mam (5), shoulder (5), foot (5), face (4), brow (4), lip (4), book (4), story (4), fingertip (3), turn (3), hair (3), own (3), word (3), friend (3), ear (3), knee (3), father (3), mind (3), breath (3), bed (2), cheek (2), palm (2), skin (2), blood (2), year (2), work (2), neck (2), faith (2), dog (2), throat (2), mouth (2)

(Continued)

<i>Intended readership</i>	<i>Characters' age</i>	<i>Terms</i>
Adult (18+)	Adolescent	hand (46), eye (26), mother (25), head (21), knife (19), face (18), dad (16), shoulder (16), side (15), foot (13), father (13), arm (12), finger (12), throat (10), hair (9), body (9), lip (8), back (8), word (8), mask (7), breath (6), cheek (6), ear (6), pocket (6), friend (5), house (5), door (5), work (5), brain (5), skin (5), mam (4), heart (4), mind (4), voice (4), blood (4), life (4), wrist (4), parent (4), baby (4), wasteland (3)
Adult (18+)	Adult	hand (44), eye (34), face (23), head (22), mouth (17), lip (17), finger (13), arm (13), breath (12), son (12), back (10), clothe (7), desk (7), tongue (6), fist (6), voice (5), hair (5), cigarette (5), brow (5), mate (5), cheek (5), dog (5), jacket (5), bag (5), pocket (5), own (4), knee (4), chest (4), shoulder (4), room (4), collar (4), foot (4), word (4), glass (4), palm (3), handkerchief (3), fingertip (3), smoke (3), footstep (3), office (3)
Adult (18+)	Old adult	home (1), dog (1)
Young adult (12–15)	Child	eye (224), hand (213), head (136), face (96), arm (90), dad (79), name (76), finger (73), mum (64), heart (48), friend (47), sister (44), lip (43), mouth (42), brother (42), cheek (41), shoulder (41), foot (40), mother (38), hair (37), mind (33), side (33), voice (33), breath (32), skin (31), life (27), fist (26), father (26), tongue (22), pocket (22), body (19), way (18), parent (16), palm (16), room (16), knife (16), thought (16), back (15), bed (15), tree (15)
Young adult (12–15)	Adolescent	eye (492), hand (398), head (292), face (175), arm (161), mother (160), mum (131), finger (119), lip (116), heart (101), friend (88), dad (84), side (84), voice (77), shoulder (77), name (75), foot (74), cheek (74), skin (70), mouth (63), breath (62), tongue (59), mind (58), hair (54), back (54), father (50), fist (48), chest (47), body (46), ear (45), palm (45), throat (37), sister (37), mam (35), room (32), dream (32), parent (31), life (30), pocket (28), knife (28)
Young adult (12–15)	Adult	eye (231), hand (221), head (136), arm (111), face (110), voice (74), finger (66), lip (65), mouth (40), breath (38), son (36), house (33), shoulder (30), side (29), hair (28), back (25), tongue (24), leg (23), cheek (22), foot (21), fist (20), pocket (19), way (19), skin (17), throat (17), chest (16), tooth (16), boy (16), body (16), knee (14), name (14), life (14), heart (13), door (13), baby (12), word (11), book (11), dog (11), palm (10), fire (10)

*(Continued)*

<i>Intended readership</i>	<i>Characters' age</i>	<i>Terms</i>
Young adult (12–15)	Old adult	eye (91), hand (47), head (31), finger (25), face (20), arm (18), book (16), lip (13), voice (13), shoulder (11), bed (11), body (10), cheek (10), door (7), tale (7), one (7), throat (6), helmet (6), tea (6), foot (6), pocket (5), mouth (5), hair (5), breath (5), song (5), desk (5), helper (5), son (4), room (4), palm (4), window (4), back (4), jacket (4), Corinna (4), pencil (4), beard (4), Helper (4), suit (3), tongue (3), soldier (3)
Children (7–9)	Child	eye (119), hand (110), head (98), dad (75), mum (57), name (43), wing (42), face (41), mouth (40), arm (40), side (36), friend (35), shoulder (31), ear (31), voice (26), foot (25), hair (22), heart (21), lip (21), book (19), finger (18), mind (17), back (17), mam (16), chest (16), leg (16), tongue (13), table (13), pocket (12), life (12), uncle (11), lap (11), box (11), Mam (11), skin (10), time (10), family (10), way (10), room (10), cheek (9)
Children (7–9)	Adolescent	lass (1), lad (1), teacher (1), pal (1), behalf (1), backside (1), mouth (1), mummy (1), hand (1), eye (1), trembling (1), dad (1), family (1), workplace (1), paper (1)
Children (7–9)	Adult	hand (41), head (29), eye (24), arm (19), voice (16), face (15), finger (9), name (9), shoulder (8), brother (7), notebook (7), hair (6), way (5), foot (5), smile (5), salon (5), bag (5), van (5), fist (4), uniform (4), cheek (4), nephew (4), sister (4), apartment (4), son (3), leg (3), word (3), knee (3), work (3), mouth (3), lip (3), ambition (3), side (3), office (3), whistle (3), lap (3), colleague (3), house (2), footstep (2), laughter (2)
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## Adjectives

<i>Intended readership</i>	<i>Characters' age</i>	<i>Terms</i>
Adult (18+)	Child	good (7), little (7), lovely (4), old (3), other (3), small (3), new (2), brave (2), many (2), poor (2), young (2), invisible (1), slow (1), awful (1), bonny (1), bliddy (1), inner (1), scorched (1), wild (1), chesty (1), sacrificial (1), normal (1), endless (1), gorgeous (1), beautiful (1)
Adult (18+)	Adolescent	good (14), other (5), poor (4), new (4), young (3), little (3), lovely (3), bonny (3), sweet (2), silly (2), clever (1), many (1), old (1), tall (1), only (1), brainy (1), brutal (1), open (1), troubling (1), different (1), graceful (1), dozy (1), filthy (1), tawdry (1), stupid (1), own (1), true (1), lazy (1), temporary (1), canny (1), proper (1), prim (1)
Adult (18+)	Adult	poor (4), other (4), lovely (3), own (3), stupid (3), cold (2), dark (2), english (2), good (2), kind (1), true (1), strict (1), fat (1), fine (1), hatted (1), fuckin (1), clumsy (1), weird (1), normal (1), squat (1), muscular (1), little (1), shocked (1), visible (1), bloody (1), miserable (1), bonny (1), famous (1), desperate (1), wizened (1), gentle (1), young (1), aged (1), handsome (1), right (1), canny (1), sane (1), fellow (1), old (1)
Adult (18+) Young adult (12–15)	Old adult Child	old (2) little (113), young (23), new (18), good (15), bonny (15), poor (14), lovely (14), skinny (12), stupid (7), bloody (6), other (5), silly (4), bad (4), tiny (4), best (4), whole (3), haired (3), mine (3), ancient (3), ordinary (3), fifth (3), delicate (2), old (2), ignorant (2), scared (2), strong (2), own (2), lucky (2), blond (2), precious (2), ill (1), funny (1), great (1), invalid (1), right (1), runaway (1), legged (1), small (1), thin (1), hyena (1)
Young adult (12–15)	Adolescent	good (42), old (16), little (15), dead (13), aged (11), lovely (10), poor (10), stupid (9), bad (9), young (7), big (7), black (7), skinny (6), other (6), bonny (5), brave (5), strange (5), lucky (4), ordinary (4), troubled (4), weird (4), sweet (3), great (3), daft (3), bloody (3), clever (3), silly (3), ancient (3), white (3), hipster (2), beautiful (2), dreamy (2), single (2), own (2), bliddy (2), true (2), brilliant (2), different (2), shy (2), scrawny (2)

*(Continued)*

<i>Intended readership</i>	<i>Characters' age</i>	<i>Terms</i>
Young adult (12–15)	Adult	poor (19), old (19), lovely (14), young (11), stupid (8), little (7), tall (5), other (5), boring (5), daft (5), extraordinary (4), big (4), haired (4), nice (3), first (3), beautiful (3), crazy (3), foster (2), white (2), tasty (2), good (2), deep (2), silly (2), great (2), useless (2), top (2), straight (2), awful (2), reckless (2), drunken (2), dead (2), impatient (1), low (1), precious (1), troubled (1), favourite (1), stinking (1), strange (1), rotten (1), thin (1)
Young adult (12–15)	Old adult	old (22), ancient (2), filthy (2), own (2), lovely (2), pale (1), frail (1), kind (1), trembling (1), strange (1), paradoxical (1), irish (1), quick (1), gentle (1), same (1), poor (1), bad (1), good (1), little (1), angry (1), tall (1)
Children (7–9)	Child	little (70), young (18), good (17), lovely (17), poor (12), other (9), german (8), new (8), silly (6), dear (5), ordinary (4), lonely (3), same (3), different (3), great (3), lost (3), clever (3), few (3), small (3), bright (2), stupid (2), natural (2), ickle (2), skinny (2), old (2), scrawny (2), brave (2), perfect (2), nice (2), fantastic (2), weird (2), cheeky (2), bloomin (2), gifted (2), excited (2), several (2), wingy (2), reet (2), headed (1), tiny (1)
Children (7–9)	Adolescent	few (1), other (1), certain (1), criminal (1)
Children (7–9)	Adult	great (10), lovely (9), young (9), new (7), burly (7), other (6), big (6), little (6), good (5), poor (5), next (4), haired (4), dark (4), weird (3), same (3), nice (3), identical (3), twin (3), silly (3), chubby (3), huge (3), barmy (2), slender (2), winged (2), sensible (2), clever (2), daft (2), old (2), homeless (2), wise (1), square (1), full (1), wobbly (1), close (1), ordinary (1), many (1), terrible (1), correct (1), sorry (1), absent (1)
Children (7–9)	Old adult	old (12), young (6), identical (3), twin (3), sweet (2), nice (2), little (2), winged (2), daft (1), smelly (1), silly (1), boomy (1), stepped (1)

# Appendix D

## The interview guide for *My Name Is Mina* (translated from Dutch by Leander Duthoy)

### Introduction

- What were your thoughts on the book?
  - Would you recommend it to other readers?
  - Of what ages?
- What did you think about engaging with these activities?
- Do you remember what went through your mind as you were working on the activities?
- Would you say it was generally easy or generally hard to complete the activities?
  - Why do you think that is?
- Was any activity more memorable for you than the others?
  - Is there an extraordinary activity that you found more difficult than the others?
  - What extraordinary activity would you call the most important for you personally?
- I am very interested in hearing about extraordinary activities you did not want to complete. Do not feel bad about being honest in letting me know that a particular assignment wasn't enjoyable for you and you did not finish it.

### Extraordinary activity

*(THIRD-PERSON VERSION): Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else.*

*(FIRST-PERSON VERSION): Write a story about somebody else as if you're writing about yourself.*

- What did you think about this activity?
- How did you go about doing this?
- Why do you think Mina suggests her reader do this?
- Would you mind giving me a summary of your written stories?
  - Why did you choose this particular topic to write a story about?
  - Is this fully fictional or is it based on reality?
- Why did you choose [character/person] to write about?
- Which of these two assignments did you struggle more with?
  - Why?
- Do you tend to make up a lot of stories?
  - If not, is it something you used to do?
    - Did you struggle to do it for this activity? Why do you think that is?
- Do you think that your own age affected what you wrote?

### Extraordinary activity

*Write a poem that repeats a word and repeats a word and repeats a word and repeats a word until it almost loses its meaning. (It can be useful to choose a word that you don't like, or that scares or disturbs you.)*

- What word did you choose?
- How often did you repeat the word, give or take?
- Is there a particular reason why you chose this word?
- What does this word mean to you?
- Did this word become important to you recently, or have you been thinking about it for a while?

### Extraordinary activity (Sky activities)

- What did you think about this activity?
- Would you say this was fairly easy or fairly difficult for you to do?
- Did you feel any sense of connection to the things Mina writes about? (e.g., the birds, stars, darkness, ...)
- Do you understand why Mina proposes you do this, and maybe why she does it herself?
- Would you have done anything like this spontaneously on your own?
- Is this something you would consider doing more in the future?



- Do you think you would have handled this assignment differently if you had been younger or older?
  - What do you think of the way you handled the activity now? Are you happy with it, do you have any regrets, or do you perhaps not care?

### Extraordinary activity

*Read the Poems of William Blake. (Especially if you are Ms. Palaver)*

- What poems did you read?
  - Why did you choose to read those ones?
- Do you understand why Mina might be a fan of William Blake?
- Would you like to read more poetry by Blake after reading *My Name Is Mina*?

### Extraordinary activity

*Write a sentence which fills a whole page.*

*Write a single word at the centre of a page.*

- Did you struggle with this activity?
- How did you approach this?
- What did your sentence end up being about?
- Were you surprised by what you ended up writing?

### Extraordinary activity

*Take a line for a walk. Find out what you're drawing when you've drawn it. Take some words for a walk. Find out what you're writing when you've written it. Take yourself for a walk. Find out where you're going when you get there.*

*Stare at the stars. Travel through space and time. Hold your head and know that you are extraordinary. Remind yourself that you are dust. Remind yourself that you are a star. Stand beneath a streetlamp. Dance and glitter in a shaft of light*

*Listen for the frail and powerful thing at your heart*

- Did you complete all of these activities?
  - If not, why did you not do some of them?
  - Do you think you would have done more/fewer of them if you had been younger or older?
  - How did you experience these activities? How did you go about completing them?

- What did you draw?
  - Why did you draw this?
- What did you write?
  - Why do you think that you wrote this?
- Are any of the things Mina suggests things that you think about in your daily life?
  - What went through your mind whilst completing these activities?
  - Are there any particular feelings/emotions that you experienced while doing these activities?
- Did you succeed at knowing that you are extraordinary?

### Concluding the interview

- I did not ask questions about every single activity in the book. Are there any activities that you would like to talk about? For any reason whatsoever?
- On a scale of one to ten, how connected would you say you felt to Mina?
  - Do you think that number would have been higher or lower if you hadn't completed the activities?
- The activities in this book are conceived of by the main character Mina. Has engaging with these activities changed your view on Mina?
  - Mina is considered "not normal" by some of the children and adults in the story. Do you agree with that assessment?
  - Do you think that you have more compassion for Mina by completing the activities?
- Do you think that there is added value for readers of the book to complete the activities?
  - Do you think that value is the same for readers of all ages?
  - Do you believe there is a difference between younger and older readers in how they approach these activities? Did you notice any of that in your own experiences?
- Do you think your own age affected your way of engaging with these activities?
  - Would you have approached these activities in a different way if you were younger?

- Do you think that in 10 or 20 years you would approach these activities differently?
  - If so, where do you think this change would come from?
- Did completing these activities affect your view on the larger story at all?
- Would you have reflected differently on the book if you hadn't been doing all the activities as you were reading?

## Appendix E

### Griet's and Astrid's stories (translated from Dutch by Leander Duthoy)

**Griet (58): Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else.**

Winnetou

She read Winnetou.

She WAS Winnetou.

Brave, not a muscle twitching in your face at a sign of danger.

She read in the long summers, looking for something to read in her grandparents' house. Jommeke (bound with brown wrapping paper), cut from the newspapers by Jeanne, her great-aunt. She read "the holy Maria Goretti," who gave her life for her purity.

She read "the holy Victorinus, martyr in China," who—even in the worst of pains—did not betray his faith.

Brave, brave, no cowards. But she was afraid of pain. She'd never be brave in real life. But she was in her mind. In her mind she had long hair, she rode a horse, conquered everyone, was a brave Indian, always knew what to do. She thought it really sufficed to lead an exciting life strictly in books and in her daydreams. She thought things quickly became (too) scary. When she was watching Huckleberry Finn on tv, she was always frightened by Indian Joe (she disliked that an Indian was the bad guy.) With her sisters, she played between the sheets that hung to dry on the clothesline while imagining they were fleeing in the dark hallways of the cave. Each of the sisters wanted to be Becky, the only girl in the story, with braids in her hair that swung around when she quickly moved her head from left to right to see if there was danger.

She grew up.

She became an adult.

She heard about awful things in the news.

She knew that she couldn't be a coward, nor did she want to be.

She didn't always know how.

Deep in her heart, she knew that she still wasn't fully adult. She has kids of her own now. She thinks that she would be very brave if they are ever in danger.

She still doesn't know how brave she will be in actual danger, because she has no dangerous life.

And she is happy about that. She is still scared by tense scenes in movies. Even in *Paddington the Bear*. She is a moviemaker's ideal audience.

~~No, she isn't brave. At best, she tries to respond to bullies and racists. (Unless there are too many of them and there is no point.)~~

When her children are stressed about an exam or something else that requires courage, she calls them *Winnetou* or brave hamster (the one that says: I want it, I can do it, I do it).

Maybe that is (enough) bravery for now.

**Griet (58): Write a story about somebody else as if you're writing about yourself (= Pierre Brice, the actor who played *Winnetou* in the 1960s)**

*Winnetou*

I feel it in my back. I have to hold the table to be able to stand without too much pain. There isn't much polish to getting old.

And definitely not if you've been in the spotlight for years.

I am dreading having to wear those fake suede pants and tunic at next month's fundraiser. I'll probably have to eat less for several days in advance so my gut is not noticeably poking out. And my hair. Thin and grey is not really believable for an Apache.

They asked me to once more sing "*Winnetou, du warst mein Freund*"

I do it for the organization. For me, it takes ten minutes of pushing through the disgust of the actor that doesn't know that you need to quit when you are at your peak.

Hella convinced me. She said that it will raise much money the profit of the fundraiser will multiply if the "real *Winnetou*" hits the stage.

It's just that the real *Winnetou* never got old. Well, the real fictional *Winnetou*. I do it for the kids. Just a bit longer in the home gym so that I can get up the stage stairs without help.

**Astrid (68): Write a story about yourself as if you're writing about somebody else.**

She is 68, alone, happy in a nice house with a garden, birds, chickens, frogs, and salamanders. Time is slowly running out. Many memories but what is still possible? What with the coming generations? And what will with her grandchildren have to deal with?

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