

A Systematic Review of Studies on David Almond's Young Adult Novels

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Abstract

This systematic review examines existing research on David Almond's young adult novels, aiming to identify scholarly gaps in the field and guide future research. This review demonstrates that critical attention predominantly focused on the following aspects: magical realism, narrative complexity, radical space and landscape, religious and theological dimensions, the construction of age, and educational issues. Emerging interdisciplinary approaches offer promising avenues for future exploration. These include digital humanities methods, and the integration of age studies, life course studies, and literary studies to investigate the construction of age and intergenerational relationships in Almond's works, particularly evident in research published in 2024. The review concludes with specific gaps in Almond's scholarship that may guide future research.

Keywords: David Almond, young adult novels, systematic review

1. Introduction

David Almond (1951-), hailed as one of "the best writers for young adults" (Nilsen & Donelson, 2001, p. 5), made a remarkable debut in the young adult (YA) literature scene in 1998 with his inaugural YA novel *Skellig*. He has created over ten YA novels and has been honored with many prestigious awards, including the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the Michael L. Printz Award for Young Adult Books in the USA, and the Carnegie Medal in the UK. His works have been translated into over 30 languages and gained a wide readership and critical acclaim, establishing him as "one of the most critically and commercially successful contemporary British writers of fiction for children and young adults" (Dalrymple, 2010, p.1).

Given his significant impact on YA literature, critics have delved into his YA titles from diverse critical perspectives. This article undertakes a systematic review of existing research on his YA novels, aiming to answer two questions: 1. What are the principal critical perspectives on Almond's YA novels? 2. What are the research gaps in the scholarship of Almond's YA titles that merit further investigation?

According to Crowe (1998) and Bushman and Hass (2006), YA literature is literature written for, about, and marketed to young adults. Cart (1996) defined YA as young people aged 12 to 25. Based on these definitions, Almond's YA novels covered in this study include those novels targeted towards young readers and featuring young protagonists aged approximately between 10 to 25 years old (note 1)¹, including *Skellig* (1998), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *Heaven Eyes* (2000), *Secret Heart* (2001), *The Fire Eaters* (2003), *Clay* (2005), *Jackdaw Summer* (2008), *My Name is Mina* (2010), *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean: Telt by Hissself* (2011), *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014), *The Tighrope Walkers* (Penguin, 2014), *Island* (2017), *The Color of the Sun* (2018), and *Bone Music* (2021).

To locate relevant literature, this review searches the existing studies in Almond's YA novels in the database Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar, using respectively the search term "David Almond" and the 14 titles of the abovementioned YA novels. A total of 21 relevant journal articles and three books, including a monograph and two essay collections focusing on critical research of Almond's YA novels, are examined to address the research questions posed above. Additionally, insights from six Almond interviews and two book reviews are incorporated into the discussion.

The review is structured thematically, considering the chronology of these studies, the degree of focus on these themes, and their influence on subsequent research. It is essential to note that the themes outlined in the following sections are not mutually exclusive; studies included in one section may also pertain to themes reviewed in other sections. These categories are structured to systematically present key perspectives on Almond's YA novels and facilitate the intended commentary on these studies.

2. Studies on Magical Realism in Almond's YA Novels

For Almond, a significant role of literature is to reveal the magic in the ordinary. In an article written for *The Times*, Almond (2003) stated: "Ordinary kids live ordinary lives in ordinary places, and always ordinariness is just a front. If there are demons, this is the world in which they might pester us. If there are miracles, this is where they might take place." Through his work, Almond uncovered the extraordinary

within the mundane, inviting readers to see the potential for magic and miracles in everyday life. As a result, Magical realism has emerged as a dominant lens through which scholars interpret Almond's work, particularly in the early period of critical assessment.

Latham (2006a) pioneered the academic study of magical realism in Almond's YA titles. He initiated his study of magical realism in Almond's works by utilizing Wendy B. Faris' five characteristics of magical realism as a framework for a comparative analysis of *Skellig* (1998) and Gabriel Garc ía Márquez's short story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*. He maintained that *Skellig* (1998) can be read as an example of magical realism, explaining that Almond used this narrative style to critique adult society, highlighting the adolescent protagonist's discernment, discretion, and kindness when facing supernatural and inexplicable events. Latham (2007) subsequently expanded this theme, suggesting that magical realism is also integral to Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), where it serves as a means for adolescent characters to socialize by questioning conventional notions about reality and the social order in adult society. Across both studies, Latham highlighted the critical value of exploring the distinctive manifestation of magical realism in the literature for young people. He posited that by embracing magical realism—a mode known for its subversive nature—Almond highlighted the adolescent protagonists' special ability to see the extraordinary amid the ordinary, aiding their social integration within an adult-centric society.

Latham's (2006b) major accomplishment in exploring magic realism in Almond's YA works is epitomized in his seminal work *David Almond: Memory and Magic* (a volume of *Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature, No. 24*, 2006). In this work, Latham examined seven of Almond's YA novels to date, including *Skellig* (1998), *Counting Stars* (2000), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *Heaven Eyes* (2000), *Secret Heart* (2001), *the Fire-Eaters* (2003) and *Clay* (2005). He pointed out that though from *Skellig* (1998) to *The Fire-Eaters* (2003) to *Clay* (2005), there is a trajectory from overt magical realism to realism and a return to magical realism again, in all of these novels, “the connection between memory and magic: the transformative power of narrative helps to connect us to one another and to reveal the magic within the world and within ourselves” (p.130). Accordingly, a predominant theme in these works is young people's capacity to “recognize the presence of the magical amid the realities of everyday life” (p. 129). This theme is reflected in Almond's fascination with the fluidity and development of young people's identity, often situated within the borderlands between childhood and adulthood, the natural and supernatural, life and death, and past and present.

In this book, Latham (2006b) also explored the reasons behind Almond's fascination with magical realism, ultimately attributing the crux of this theme to Almond's ability to perceive magic in the ordinary world and to recognize and respond to the workings of the creative imagination. This keen perception informed Almond's adolescent characters, who often engaged in creative endeavors that help them maintain their magical sensibilities, make sense of their lives, and develop their identities as they come of age. Latham also noted that Almond's religious impulse imbued his adolescent characters with a profound spirituality closely linked to their creative impulses.

Latham's studies, supported by primary sources like emails, manuscripts, and personal interviews, not only shed light on the themes reinforced through magical realism but also paved the way for further theoretical explorations of this distinctive narrative mode in YA literature. Latham (2007) pointed out that “magical realism proves to be a quintessentially ‘adolescent’ mode” with a liberating potential that makes it particularly well suited for YA literature (p.60). Graham (2007) claimed that Latham's work *David Almond: Memory and Magic* “lays a useful foundation for subsequent critical explorations” of Almond's works and “prove invaluable to those interested in Almond's career” (p.251). By focusing on mystical, supernatural, and spiritual elements in Almond's works, he offered insightful observations on Almond's nuanced and complex style featured with magical realism. Yet, due to the date of writing, Almond's works published later are not covered in Latham's study.

Expanding upon Latham's foundational work, several scholars have enriched the discussion on magical realism within Almond's literary works. Bradley (2008) contended that though being a relative newcomer to YA literature, Almond “has firmly established himself as a master of magic realism” (p.109). Dalrymple (2010) traced the beginnings of Almond's magical realist sensibility to the shadows underlining his childhood life, including the early death of her baby sister and his father. Additionally, Dalrymple (2010) posited that Almond's engagement with the ritualistic language of his Catholic upbringing infuses his fiction with the colors of magical realism. Grace (2014) believed that Almond's half-fictional and half-autobiographical short story collection *Counting Stars* (2000) demonstrated his concerns with “magic in ordinary places” and his use of secular and religious imagery to convey the characters' potential for transcendent experience within an ordinary life. She contended that this thematic thread persists throughout Almond's subsequent works, underscoring his recurring fascination with the interplay between the magical and the ordinary in his narratives.

Recent research has introduced fresh ways to engage with the magical realism in Almond's work. As a patron of Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books, David Almond has donated his original writing notes and manuscripts to its archives. This donation has inspired research into the interaction between realistic spaces and magical settings in Almond's novels, facilitated by augmented reality (AR). Reynolds et al. (2020) explored how AR can create new spatial interactions within the context of Almond's YA works. They examined how AR technology enhances the magical experience in Almond's stories by providing immersive and interactive elements that bring the mystical and supernatural aspects of his writing to life. The study showed AR enhances readers' exploration of the geographies of Almond's texts, leading to a deeper understanding of Almond's metaphors, magical realism, and literary style.

In conclusion, the studies of magical realism in David Almond's YA novels have demonstrated Almond's distinctive capacity to integrate the ordinary with the extraordinary. This capacity is shaped by several factors, including his literary inspirations from magical realist writers like Gabriel Garc ía Márquez, his Catholic upbringing, and his perspective on the world. Scholars have established a robust framework for comprehending the role of magical realism in Almond's works, emphasizing its pivotal role in socializing young characters

and their perception of reality. As further research is conducted, especially in conjunction with the archives of Almond's YA works with augmented reality (AR), the potential for exploring the spatial interactions between spaces depicted in Almond's works and the readers' immersive experiences demonstrates the enchanting worlds Almond creates. This ongoing engagement with Almond's work ensures that his contributions to YA literature will remain a rich field for future exploration and appreciation.

Yet as Johnston (2014) stated in the introductory chapter of the book *David Almond*, "Much has been written about Almond and magic realism, and this is the generic description applied to Almond's work." (p. 8) She therefore asserted that as Almond's corpus has grown, there should be more enlightening ways to consider his writing. The reviews in the following demonstrate such studies dedicated to Almond's YA novels.

3. Studies on Narrative Strategy and Complexity in Almond's YA Novels

The multilevel narrative strategy, narrative depth, and narrative complexity in Almond's YA novels have sparked critical explorations, delving into the intricate layers of storytelling and thematic richness within Almond's works

First, Cosslett (2002) examined the relationship between time-slip narratives and the national identity of England in Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999). She claimed that the utilization of "the time-slip device" enables the characters to slip back in time, that is, characters from the past reappear in the present. This device opens the door to history and arrives at the "history from below." This approach is the history that Almond tries to reconstruct through memory, imagination, dreams, and archives related to ancient mine pits in *Kit's Wilderness* (1999). Cosslett maintained that the protagonists in the novel benefit from revisiting the past and consequently undergo a positive transformation (Cosslett, 2002). Her insightful analysis of time-slip narratives in *Kit's Wilderness* (1999) underscored the transformative power of revisiting the past, offering a hopeful and positive perspective on personal growth and historical understanding as portrayed through the eyes of the young characters in the novel. Cosslett's emphasis on the transformative power of the time-slip narrative resonates with Petković's (2008) examination of the function of storytelling in *Kit's Wilderness* (1999). Petković asserted that *Kit's Wilderness*, as a YA novel, performed the ultimate function of transforming and socializing by conveying a code of meaningful living here and now and helping readers come to terms with the idea of life and death.

Then, Latham's (2008) examination of intertextuality in Almond's *Skellig* (1998), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), and *Clay* (2005) centered on the narrative techniques of "allusion, adaptation, collage, and mise-en-abyme" (p. 213). He asserted that the intertextuality in these works not only invokes multiple layers of meaning inaccessible through any single work but also encourages young readers to draw connections between multiple texts, fostering engagement with others through shared reading experiences.

Latham's view of intertextuality among Almond's YA novels corresponds with Nodelman's studies of Almond's narrative patterns. In her article "David Almond's *Heaven Eyes* as a Complex Variation", Nodelman (2014a) believed this novel is "the most typical pattern of children's fiction, the home/away/home story of an escape into dangerous freedom and a return to restrictive safety" (p. 139). Nodelman (2014b) claimed that Almond's novels such as *Skellig* (1998), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *Heaven Eyes* (2000), *Secret Heart* (2001), *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), *Clay* (2005), *The Savage* (2008), and *Jackdaw Summer* (2008) all can be read as variations of the same story, which presents "the central home-away-home narrative pattern...the journey beyond the walls of a safe, ordinary home to a more dangerous and unsettling place... a place where wild things are" (p.46). These stories place the young characters at the boundary between home and wild places, civilization and savagery, and ultimately facilitate their transformation from darkness and death to light and life, from wildness to angelica. Nodelman's studies of Almond's home-away-home narrative pattern align with Bieber and Gooding's (2020) examination of the "downriver narrative" motif in Almond's *Heaven Eyes* (2000), in which the characters' journeying downriver is described as a process of refuge, reflection, and social interactions that foster their profound understanding about self, citizenship, and nationhood. Bieber and Gooding (2020) further argued that the downriver narrative forms a distinct genre in literature for youth.

Next, Hateley (2012) read into "a text-within-a-text narrative" (p. 176) and "'Northern' literacy narratives" (p. 170) in Almond's *The Savage* (2008). He believed that the utilization of the former breaks the boundaries between distinct levels of narration, namely the boundaries between the embedded tale within the work and the frame story of the work itself. Conversely, the utilization of the latter demonstrates that Almond is "influenced by currently dominant ideologies of gender and literacy" (p. 170). Hateley's (2012) analysis not only unveiled the intricate layers of storytelling but also highlighted Almond's engagement with contemporary ideologies of gender and literacy, showcasing how the interplay between different levels of narrative challenges traditional boundaries and offers a nuanced reflection on societal norms within the novel.

Additionally, Almond's multi-level narrative strategies draw the critical attention of Johnston (2014), who discussed the multiple and "metafictional layerings" of the narrative in *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean: Telt by Hissself* (2011, p.164). She maintained that in this novel, the monster Billy Dean's awkward words and frequent phonetic spellings in telling stories about himself makes the book about writing, about such paradoxes as what words can say and cannot say. This, she argued, exemplifies the paradoxes and problematic nature of truth prevalent in most of Almond's works (p. 173). Johnston (2014) posited that "Almond is a subtle and distinctive writer" with a particular gift that repeatedly leads readers into a world both profoundly terrible and profoundly beautiful (p. 181).

Similar to Johnston's analysis of Almond's metafictional layers of narrative, Hodkinson (2021) demonstrated the "metaliterary features" of Almond's *A Song for Ella Grey* (2014) by examining how the author incorporated discussions about literature and storytelling into the narrative itself (p. 662). In particular, he demonstrated that the teenage protagonists' engage with the novel itself, including the narrator Clair's self-awareness of the novel's use of the Orpheus myth to process her grief and loss and its impact on readers. This approach

contributed to the novel's exploration of the relationship between storytelling and real life. He concluded that Almond's strategy of using "narrative as therapy" enriches the depth of the work (p. 667), rendering it a compelling exploration of the story's power to help readers understand and cope with difficult experiences.

Generally, Johnston (2014) and Hodkinson (2021) delved into the metafictional narratives in Almond's YA novels. They accentuated Almond's ability to navigate the subtle line between story-telling and real life, capturing Almond's distinctive writing style that immerses readers in a world teeming with both suffering and beauty, myth and reality. They demonstrated how Almond used different narrative strategies to enhance his novels' depth and resonance, inspiring readers to reflect on the therapeutic role of storytelling in navigating young people's complex emotions.

While Tandoi (2014) focused on various typographical styles and formatting, like striking double-page spreads and using different fonts and layouts in *My Name is Mina* (2010). Tandoi argued through these techniques, Almond portrayed a rebellious protagonist whose unruly nature is mirrored in the unruly language, creating paradoxes that encourage critical and creative engagement with the protagonist and the text. The study concludes that Almond effectively created a subversive feminine voice through the visual, aural, and semantic potential of written discourse. Tandoi's (2014) investigation underscored the intricate interplay between typography, character development, and narrative subversion, showing how visual and textual elements can deepen the portrayal of complex protagonists and challenge traditional storytelling conventions.

At last, Trites (2014) and Silva (2022a, 2022b) interpreted Almond's narrative complexity from cognitive narratology perspectives. Trites (2014) combined the cognitive narratology theory with ontology, epistemology, and philosophical dimensions. She scrutinized the philosophical questioning in *Skellig* (1998) and *My Name is Mina* (2010) through cognitive narratological perspectives. By analyzing the interplay between the cognitive unconsciousness and philosophical contemplation of the young protagonists in the two novels, Trites concluded that Almond's works are profoundly philosophical, exploring the controversy and ambivalence inherent in the dichotomy of being a rational being and living in a socially constructed world.

Silva (2022a) dissected the interplay of "self-narrative, metanarrative, and graphic narrative" in Almond's *The Savage* (2008) (p.97), elaborating how these narrative forms, serving as "narrative medicine and cognitive narratology" (p.97). This approach enabled the adolescent protagonist Blue Baker to cope with and heal from his father's sudden death, bullying, and grief, and eventually shape the self while shaping the stories. Silva (2022b) also analyzed memorial fabulation in *My Name is Mina* (2010) through the 4E-based (embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive) cognitive approach. By illustrating the dynamic interconnectedness between the protagonist Mina's mind, body, and the "storyworld" (p.23), she outlined the negotiation between memory and imagination in the protagonist Mina. She emphasized shared practices of memorial fabulation across the lifespan and its intergenerational transposition, noting Almond's incorporation of his childhood memories and imaginative elements in his writing process.

Both of Silva's studies unveiled Almond's curiosity in investigating children and his own childhood experiences, which underlined Almond's constructions of his young characters and the basis of literature for young people. She emphasized Almond's adept storytelling abilities and illuminated the recurring themes of memory, imagination, and self-discovery that resonate across generations. Her studies uncovered the profound impact of narrative construction on shaping identities and enhancing the comprehension of human experiences within the context of YA literature.

In summary, the diverse perspectives presented in research on David Almond's narrative skills and complexity show the richness and depth of his literary works. Through the exploration of intricate narrative strategies like time-slip narrative, intertextuality, home-away-home narrative pattern, downriver narrative motif, text-within-a-text narrative, typographical and formatting style, as well as metafictional and metaliterary narrative features, these studies demonstrated that Almond's narratives offer readers a profound journey into the complexities of human experience and storytelling. These studies also highlighted the significance of Almond's narratives as tools for understanding and shaping identity, ultimately emphasizing the enduring power of stories to illuminate the human condition and provoke thought. Generally, Almond's YA titles serve as a testament to the skill and profundity of storytelling in YA literature, inviting readers to delve into the complexities of narrative self-shaping and creative significance.

4. Studies on Radical Space and Landscape in Almond's YA Novels

David Almond valued the importance of young people's access to wild places, as seen in his talk published in 2011 under the title *The Necessary Wilderness*. In it, Almond emphasized the importance of young people's access to wild places, both in their daily lives and in the stories they read. He contended that writing is a voyage of discovery into the inner and outer wilderness and that stories originate from delving into the unknown spaces within us. Consequently, his representation of wild spaces/landscapes became a major focus of scholarly scrutiny, reflecting his belief in the significance of the untamed spaces that function as liminal settings in his work.

Dalrymple (2014) noted that Almond's experiences were influenced by his growing up in Felling, a town on the edge of the urban and the rural landscape in north-eastern England. Almond's young characters are repeatedly placed in "an archetypal Almond space" (p. 105), typically a village or a town on the fringes of the industrial city, bordered by an area of wasteland adjacent to a place of wilderness beyond. Accordingly, the typical landscape in Almond's novels is featured in the radical combination of rural wildness and urban civilization. This kind of radical landscape can be seen in the wild yet civilized aspects of the garden in *Skellig* (1998) and *Clay* (2005), the deserted post-industrial coal pit and the wilderness in *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), The Black Middens like a protective womb and a deathlike tomb in *Heaven Eyes* (2000), the village Helmouth, a place at the city's edge in *Secret Heart* (2001), and the Burgess Woods

featured with the wilderness and urban landscape in *The Savage* (2008). The young protagonists in these novels discover their refuge in these radical spaces and experience the transformative nature of the northeastern landscape that is imbued with miraculous and spiritual qualities. Dalrymple's study highlighted the profound spiritual and miraculous essence woven into the northeastern landscape, inviting readers to go deeper into the symbolic significance of the radical spaces in Almond's writing.

Lower (2016) explored liminal settings "with real and metaphorical wild spaces and wildernesses that are central features of the narratives" in Almond's novels (p. 11), *Skellig* (1998), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *Heaven Eyes* (2002) and *The Savage* (2008). She observed that the young protagonists in these novels had access to various wild spaces functioning as liminal settings, providing them with opportunities to explore and imagine possibilities and cross thresholds to grow up. Lower (2016) argued that by mentally simulating the wildernesses depicted in Almond's stories or envisioning similar experiences, readers can not only share the protagonists' journeys through liminal spaces but also apply these experiences to their own lives. Lower's insights into the significance of wild spaces as liminal settings underscore the immersive nature of Almond's narratives, encouraging readers to envision themselves within these untamed landscapes.

In her 2021 article, Krynauf employed Henri Lefebvre's tripartite dialectic of space production as a guide to examine the creative production of space in Almond's *A Song for Ella Grey* (2015). She maintained that this novel fundamentally explores uncharted physical and mental spaces, where the characters employ storytelling to interact with and transform the spaces around them, contributing to the development of their spatially situated identities. Krynauf (2021) also suggested that as a local writer, Almond constructed literary spaces that challenge conventional representations of northeastern England and highlighted spatiotemporal narratives of both self and region. This exploration of space production in the novel illuminated the interconnection between physical and mental spaces, demonstrating Almond's capacity to challenge conventional representations and craft narratives that resonate with both the self and the region.

In summary, the study of radical space and landscape in David Almond's YA titles unveils a rich tapestry of wilderness and its profound impact on character development and narrative exploration. Almond's portrayal of the radical space and settings offers readers a gateway to imagination and growth, encouraging them to traverse thresholds and embrace transformation. Furthermore, Almond's YA novels exemplify the transformative power of wild spaces, encouraging readers to embark on a journey of self-discovery and exploration through the untamed wilderness of his narratives.

5. Studies on Religious and Theological Dimensions in Almond's YA Novels

The complexity of religious, theological, and spiritual dimensions demonstrated in Almond's work is revealed in different ways by critics like Stewart (2009), Coat (2014), and Coghlan (2014). Stewart (2009) explored the titular character Skellig, a frail, decrepit, mysterious, half-man, half-bird figure in *Skellig* (1998). She suggested that the strange image of Skellig can be interpreted as a response to the ongoing debate between science and religion in the United States, particularly represented by Darwin's theory of evolution and Christian views of creation. Skellig blurs distinctions between angels and man, between the sacred and secular world, and embodies a convergence of religious ideas associated with angels and scientific ideas related to evolution. Thus, the figure reflects the evolving relationship between science and religion, offering a fresh perspective on the debate by blending these seemingly opposed views through metaphor and symbolism and extending people's belief systems. Stewart's insightful analysis of *Skellig* (1998) offered a fresh perspective to understand the evolving relationship between science and religion in Almond's work, which blurred boundaries and blended diverse ideologies through metaphor and symbolism.

Similarly, Coghlan (2014) delved into the "religious resonances in the works of David Almond" (p. 85). She initiated her study by quoting William Wordsworth's notion of a sense sublime to understand the metaphysical qualities and lurking sense of the mysterious in Almond's work. The study discussed Almond's upbringing influenced by Catholic practice and belief, which informed his depiction of the boundary between faith and fiction, the trajectory from innocence to experience, and the interplay between ritual, growth, and redemption. These elements blur reality and magic, exemplified in magic spaces, as well as sacred and profane sacrifices demonstrated in Almond's work. Coghlan (2014) concluded that "Almond's writing is characterized by a generosity and openness to different manifestations of traditionally religious, pagan, mythical and humanist thinking" (p. 98). Coghlan's meticulous examination of the religious resonances in Almond's works sheds light on profound depths in Almond's spiritual and philosophical dimensions.

While Coat (2014) explored the "process-relational theology" (p. 67) in *Skellig* (1998), *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), *Heaven Eyes* (2000), *Clay* (2005), and *My Name is Mina* (2010), positing that a dominant theme in these novels is the redemption of individual brokenness through dynamic interrelatedness. This analysis demonstrated "the strain of modern ecumenical theology called process theology" (p. 68), which emphasized the dynamic interconnectedness of all things and holds that God gives humans the responsibility to recreate the world that has created human beings. Characters heal themselves through the process of connecting to others and healing others. In this process, they remake both themselves and their worlds. Coat's (2014) in-depth analysis of Almond's works delves into the profound theological theme of interconnectedness and personal redemption. The study also showcases the transformative power of human relationships within Almond's narratives and guides readers to explore the intricate spiritual meaning woven throughout his novels.

The analyses by Stewart (2009), Coat (2014), and Coghlan (2014) collectively presented the multifaceted exploration of religious and theological themes in David Almond's works. Stewart's examination of Skellig as a symbol of the evolving relationship between science and religion challenges traditional dichotomies; Coghlan's study of the religious resonances in Almond's writing underscores the author's openness to diverse spiritual and philosophical perspectives, while Coat's emphasis on process-relational theology reflected in Almond's novels highlighted the transformative power of interconnectedness and human agency. Together, these critics illuminated the scenario of

faith, spirit, and redemption depicted in Almond's works, unveiling the depth and richness of his religious, theological, and spiritual dynamics.

6. Studies on the Construction of Age in Almond's YA Novels

Undoubtedly, the essay collection *Age in David Almond's Oeuvre: A Multi-Method Approach to Studying Age and the Life Course in Children's Literature* (2024) signified a milestone of the studies on age in Almond's work. In the introductory chapter, Joosen (2024a) explained why Almond's work is suitable for a multi-perspective study of age in children's literature. She illustrated four reasons. First, Almond is a "crosswriter" who published books for readers of different ages (p. 2). Second, Almond's childhood memories have informed several of his stories. Third, some of his works often thematize age, growing up and aging, and intergenerational dynamics. Finally, his books construct age in nuanced and ambivalent ways and at different levels of the text. Given this construction, critics in this collection examined how age operates in Almond's works through characterization, themes, style, and media qualities. They also investigated how age is constructed in relation to the age of the author, the intended readership, and actual readers. The articles centered on Almond's YA novels are reviewed in the following.

Silva (2024) approached the construction of age in Almond's *Clay* (2005) and *Bone Music* (2021) through the exploration of the characters' coming-of-age journeys. By integrating age studies with cognitive narratology and material engagement theory, she unfolded the profound transformations and cognitive development of protagonists Davie and Sylvia as they navigate adolescence. She posited that the two characters' interactions with nature, art, and peers illuminate the significant influence of social and material elements on their growth. Meanwhile, their creation of artifacts from natural resources served as a metaphor for their evolving identities as they transition into adulthood. Overall, Silva contended that the characters' age-related encounters play a crucial role in their personal development, self-discovery, and the shaping of their identities amidst the challenges.

Almond's evolution from adult to YA author prompted scholars to consider the ideological differences in his works aimed at various age groups and potential stylistic adaptations. Geybels (2024) employed digital humanities methods to investigate age norms in writing styles and character development across 21 Almond works, including those for children, young adults, and adults. She explored writing styles through stylometric methods and explored age ideology and character age associations through topic modeling syntactic parsing. Through a comprehensive blend of digital analyses, Geybel delved into how age is portrayed in Almond's work concerning the target readers' age.

Greybel's (2024) study has highlights and limitations. By analyzing multiple titles simultaneously, Greybel's study exceeded those approaches that treated works individually, enabling "implicit age norms" (p. 83) in Almond's work by comparing writing styles, trend identification, and character analysis. However, her exclusion of titles with insufficient text or idiosyncratic language challenged the objectivity of digital analyses. Additionally, relying on common word lists may overlook significant topics expressed diversely. While studying various texts revealed thematic variations across age categories, close reading is essential to validate and enrich the findings obtained through this approach. Joosen's (2024b) close reading of *The Fire-Eaters* (2003) and the two short stories validated the findings of the reading method that Geybels employed in her study. Both Greybel (2024) and Joosen (2024b) contributed substantially to the existing research on David Almond as a crosswriter.

Duthoy (2024) conducted an empirical reader response study of Almond's *My Name Is Mina* (2010), demonstrating the interplay between the age of readers and that of the characters in the novel. Her study is based on the data from interviews with five participants aged between 12 and 68, who were tasked to read *My Name is Mina* (2010) and rewrite a section from the perspective of a different character in the novel. Duthoy (2024) focused on how the participant readers actively engaged in reading and rewriting, immersing themselves in their stories, and navigating their own age throughout the process. In a broader context, the study aimed to demonstrate the usefulness of the reader-response method in researching age in children's literature. Duthoy offered valuable insights into the relationship between age, space, shame, and the literary encounter, presenting a distinctive perspective on investigating readers' creative reactions to literary works.

Anjirbag and Pauwels (2024) comparatively and "transmedially" analyzed the construction of age in Almond's novel *Skellig* (1998) and its screenplay adaptation penned by himself (p. 123). They analytically compared the textual features of the novel with the visual aspects of the film, illustrating how age norms are presented, adjusted, or appropriated. They asserted that both the novel and its cinematic rendition normalize the idea of young individuals caring for the elderly, which underscored the reciprocal necessity for care across generations, and thus portrayed the exchange of care as empowering for all parties involved. Their study demonstrated that age is somewhat illusory, suggesting that our understanding of age can shift from rigid to adaptable.

In summary, these studies introduced a variety of frameworks to enhance the understanding of age in Almond's works, including life writing studies, cognitive narratology, digital humanities, reader-response theory, and transmedia methods. The critics have taken into account Almond's own life stage as he negotiated his childhood memories, the age of his characters, the age of his intended readership, and the age of his real readers. They illustrated how age constructions evolve through dialogue, plot development, character portrayal, objects, settings, and writing styles. Regardless of the analytical approaches taken, all studies highlighted the significance of intergenerational relationships in Almond's works.

Given the vast potential and complexity of age studies in literature, Joosen (2024c) proposed future research directions that merge age studies with the exploration of literature for young audiences. These directions include investigating the intersection of age with other identity markers (gender, race, class, and ability), historical representations of age, narratological considerations of age, the portrayal of age in illustrations and visual media for children, and different-aged readers' responses to the ages. Furthermore, the worldwide

translation and dissemination of Almond's works underscore the need to examine the shift in constructions of age in the international dissemination of literature for young people.

7. Studies on Educational Issues in Almond's YA Novels

Almond's YA novels often involve the theme of education, since the young characters in them are typically at the age of receiving schooling. Three studies have explored the educational issues in his YA novels. For example, Ferguson (2024) examined the representation of alternative education in *My Name is Mina* (2010). He argued that, in this novel, the "home-educated" or "unschooling" young protagonist Mina (p.178; p.184), who valued self-directed learning, nonsensical writing, the importance of doing nothing and embracing misfits, challenges the school-centric mainstream education that stifles children's creativity and individuality. Ferguson's (2024) analysis highlights the potential of alternative education to offer a more nuanced and enriching learning experience for children, even as it coexists with the traditional model.

Ferguson's exploration of mainstream education and alternative education in *My Name is Mina* (2010) resonated with Sahn's (2010) examination of formal and informal education in Almond's *Skellig* (1998). Sahn discussed the contrast between formal and informal education in *Skellig* (1998) by drawing on the contrary notions from William Blake's (1794) *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, which is frequently referenced by the young protagonists in *Skellig* (1998) and other Almond's YA novels. By bringing Blake's contraries in parallel with Almond's writing, Sahn revealed the contrasting yet enlightening interplay between science and imagination, medical and supernatural healing portrayed in this novel.

On a related note, Dunbar's (2014) discussion of "the depiction of the working class in David Almond's novels" (p. 124) also touched on the topic of education. Dunbar explored the social tensions evident in the education system, where a proportion of working-class children are educated alongside middle-class children. By unveiling the social tensions reflected in the education system, she demonstrated the working class's aspirations for class revolution, egalitarianism, and social realignment as depicted in Almond's *Kits Wilderness* (1999), *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), *The Savage* (2008), and *My Name is Mina* (2010). She argued that Almond's use of dialects, ballads, underground settings, and references to brown ale and Chinese takeaways mirror his rootedness in the working-class culture of northern England. When concluding her analysis, Dunbar noted that after spending time away from the working-class neighborhood where he was born, Almond returned with education, valuable memories, experiences, and maturity. These references allowed him to recreate his place and his people through his writing, resulting in a humane and affectionate homage to his class.

The three analyses exemplify the explorations of education-related themes in Almond's YA novels. They showcase Almond's concern with alternative and informal education as counterpoints to traditional formal education, along with educational challenges linked to social class. Despite these analyses, the review also showed that other education-related topics, such as school bullying and abuse, and the educational struggles faced by orphaned and refugee adolescents depicted in several of Almond YA novels, have received little attention and need further exploration.

8. Studies on the Other Aspects of Almond's YA Novels

In addition to the critical perspective on Almond's work discussed above, several studies delved into other aspects of his YA novels. Bullen and Parsons (2007) explored the enlightenment of "risk and resilience, knowledge and imagination" in *Skellig* (1998), by arguing that the novel is set in a "risk society" (p. 127), where scientific progress has created fear and uncertainty, necessitating children's resilience. Specifically, the young protagonist Michael faces the traumatic situation of his infant sister's possible death and the mysterious presence of Skellig, whose ambiguous nature as man, bird, angel, and a figment of the imagination challenges conventional knowledge systems. Michael is thus exposed to various epistemological tensions that require him to draw on scientific, psychological, folkloric, and spiritual knowledge to understand and fortify his resilience. They pointed out that the knowledge facilitating Michael's resilience is configured within the framework of magical realism, which disrupts binary logic, challenges traditional knowledge hierarchies, and ultimately contributes to the young protagonist's resilience.

The analysis by Bullen and Parsons illustrated the theme of resilience in Almond's *Skellig* (1998), which is regarded as "one main component in young adult literature" (Saelens & Larsen, 2006, p. 55). In an interview, Almond (2002) acknowledged the vulnerability and "astounding resilience" that real-life young people and his young character may show in the face of emotional and social adversities. Despite this evidence, resilience in Almond's work remains understudied. While Bullen and Parsons' (2007) exploration of resilience in *Skellig* (1998) illuminated this discourse, it also opened avenues for further research into Almond's works through the lens of evolving resilience theories.

Two studies in 2017 delved into other aspects of Almond's YA novels. Wegrodzka (2017) unfolded the intricate motifs of play, game, and performance demonstrated in playful activities in *Kit's Wilderness* (1999). These activities encompassed theatrical performances, the game of death, the dancing game, and the insect story written by the young protagonist Kit. Wegrodzka (2017) posited that these playful endeavors are intricately linked to Kit's artistic, ritual, and spiritual initiations and unveil the concealed facets of reality. In another study, Hor et al. (2017) analyzed the psychological crisis of puberty in the adolescent protagonists in *Jackdaw Summer* (2008) by using Carl Jung's notion of the individuation process. Through examining symbols like jackdaws, shadows, knives, and snakes that promote the young protagonists' cognitive balance and maturity, their analysis finally demonstrated how the young protagonists come to terms with their juvenile identities.

Together, these studies illustrate the diverse and multifaceted ways in which Almond's novels engage with themes of risk and resilience, the motifs of play and games, and the psychological challenges of puberty. These studies underscore how Almond's work can be read in the context of present-day societal concerns and as a celebration of the power of imagination and creativity that influence particularly young people's understanding of the world.

9. Conclusion

David Almond's remarkable achievements, particularly within the realm of YA literature, have garnered significant critical acclaim. This research review examined diverse critical perspectives on Almond's YA novels, including notably magical realism, narrative intricacies, spaces and settings, religious and theological undertones, the portrayal of age, and educational issues. The review highlighted the importance of Almond's narratives in tackling intricate themes such as finding the extraordinary within the ordinary, navigating human struggles through storytelling, embracing both inner and outer wilderness, harnessing the transformative essence of transitional spaces and artistic expression, exploring the interplay between faith and human experiences, depicting age dynamics within intergenerational relationships, and engaging in young people's education issues.

Furthermore, the review identified several aspects that have received less critical attention and warrant further investigation. The emerging approaches to Almond's works, especially those concerning advancing technologies and disciplines like augmented reality and digital humanities, provide fresh insights into Almond's writings and merit deeper exploration. Additionally, the burgeoning interest in Almond's portrayal of age and intergenerational relationships in 2024 signified a novel interdisciplinary approach that combines age studies, life course writing, and literary study. Considering Almond's role as a "crosswriter," who explores age from multiple perspectives, along with the diversity and richness of literary age studies, examining the portrayal of age in Almond's works within the context of YA literature remains a crucial focus in scholarship on his writing. Joosen (2024c) proposed that future research in this area could focus on the interplay between age and other identity markers, historical depictions of age, narratological strategies related to age, transmedia representations of age, reader responses to age portrayal, and the variations in age construction during the translation and global dissemination of Almond's works. Moreover, the educational issues, particularly school bullying and abuse, as well as the education of orphaned and refugee youngsters in Almond's YA titles are understudied and need further examination. Finally, the theme of resilience in Almond's YA titles is another crucial aspect that deserves more attention.

Almond (2004, 2014) acknowledged the profound influence of historical wars such as World War II, the Cold War, and the Iraq War on his creation of novels like *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), *Clay* (2005), and *The Tighrope Walkers* (2014). These works, along with other YA titles like *Jackdaw Summer* (2008) and *Island* (2017), explored the themes of the trauma of war, military conflicts, or terrorism to varying degrees, emphasizing the young characters' trauma associated with such experiences. Despite this thematic richness, the trauma of war/conflict/terrorism in Almond's works remains underexplored, presenting an opportunity for future research to delve deeper into this compelling aspect of his writing.

Moreover, in terms of analytical discourse, Almond's earlier YA titles, notably *Skellig* (1998) and *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), have been extensively studied. Conversely, his more recent works like *The Tighrope Walkers* (2014), *The Island* (2017), *The Color of the Sun* (Hodder, 2018), and *Bone Music* (2021) have received limited, even scarce, scholarly attention. Therefore, a focused examination of these newer titles may offer valuable insights into the trajectory of Almond's literary career.

As Johnston (2014) suggested, with the expansion of Almond's corpus of work, there should be more room for enlightening fresh perspectives on his writing. The worldwide dissemination of his works, the wide readership of different ages, the emerging literary theories, and the growing interdisciplinary studies of literary texts, all provide fertile ground to enrich the critical discourse of Almond's works.

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Authors' contributions

Phd Candidate Hou Bin was responsible for research design, data collection and drafted the manuscript. Dr. Suzana Hj Muhammad and Dr. Agnes WL Liau provided suggestions for improving the paper and revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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¹Note 1: It should be noted that since the definition of YA literature sometimes overlaps with that of children's literature, YA novels reviewed in this study may include works studied under the genre of children's literature.