



SKELLIG by David Almond

SCHEME OF WORK-National Curriculum refs

Reading: during key stages 3 and 4 pupils read a wide range of texts independently, both for pleasure and for study. They become enthusiastic, discriminating and responsive readers, understanding **layers of meaning** and appreciating what they read on a critical level.

En2 Reading

Knowledge, skills and understanding

Understanding texts

1 to develop understanding and appreciation of text pupils should be taught:

Reading for meaning

- a. to extract meaning beyond the literal, explaining how the choice of language and style affects implied and explicit meanings
- b. to analyse and discuss alternative interpretations, ambiguity and allusion
- c. how ideas, values and emotions are explored and portrayed
- d. to identify the perspectives offered on individuals, community and society
- e. to consider how meanings are changed when texts are adapted to different media
- f. to read and appreciate the scope and richness of complete novels, plays and poems

Understanding the author's craft

1. how language is used in imaginative, original and diverse ways
2. to reflect on the writer's presentation of ideas and issues, the motivation and behaviour of characters, the development of plot and the overall impact of a text
3. to distinguish between the attitudes and assumptions of characters and those of the author
4. how techniques, structure, forms and styles vary
5. to compare texts, looking at style, theme and language, and identifying connections and contrasts.

NC page 34



SKELLIG

'We can't know. Sometimes there are things that we have to accept there are things we can't know...we have to allow ourselves to see what there is to see, and we have to imagine. Mina pg. 131.

Possible approach: Do not reveal what novel you are about to study.

preparation

- a. Begin with the De Bono thinking game 'Recognizing and linking'. Categorizing and finding similarities –see end of module for sheet-. After completing short selection of Blake poems. (See separate sheet).
- b. Research module using ICT.
- c. In groups of 4 leading to 2 min presentations. Findings to be e-mailed to designated 'leader groups' who can assemble class notes.
- d. Subjects (differentiated) for groups as follows:
 1. What was Archaeopteryx-59/93 why is it important?
 2. What is evolution who is, famously, associated with it?
 3. Who was Persephone why did she eat pomegranates?
 4. What does the poet William Blake have to say about school? 57
 5. What are angels?
 6. What is arthritis/what are owl pellets?
 7. Why can't humans fly? Who was Icarus?
 8. Editorial group-assembling information-looking for connections. (most able).
- e. When the sheets are assembled and copied for each student then the search is on to make links e.g. -flying/bones/the spiritual world /myths/science/creativity/birth and death.



Themes:

Dreams. Pages

- 16 told myself I had been dreaming
- 25 baby in blackbird's nest
- 30 bed a nest
- 49 Truth and dreams always getting muddled
- 59 dream I walk in my sleep
- 60 I dreamed about you last night
- 78 Doctor Death/baby about to fly-written as magic realism?
- 79 We're not dreaming this? X3
- 81 I told myself that anything was possible in a dream

- 94 It was like we were looking into the place where each other's dreams came from
- 104 Skellig and baby
- 112 sleepwalking/dreaming?
- 123 dream song
- 132 dreams of chicks
- 149 mum's dream of Skellig's visit (name Angela)

Blake (see poetry sheet)

- 48 'How can a bird that is born for joy/sit in a cage and sing'
- 57 'To go to school in a summer's morn
O! it drives all joy away'
- 84 Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
- 122 WB said we were surrounded by angels and spirits
- 124 'I dreamt a dream! What can it mean?'
- 142 WB used to faint sometimes/too much joy
- 152 'Love is the child that breathes our breath/Love is the child that scatters death' Dr. MacNabola pg152
- 162 We read WB
- 170 'Joy'

Skeleton/bones

- 15 fossil-pigeon
- 29 arthritis 'turns you to stone then crumbles you away'
- 37 'I drew a skeleton with wings rising from the shoulder blades'
- 58 Bird bone structure- 'pneumatisation'
- 74 'calcification' 'ossification' –'of the mind'
- 114 wings would never rise at his back
- 143 'My body was heavy and awkward, like I was arthritic, like I was turning to stone'
- 146 'Tibia,Fibula,srenum,clavicle,radius,ulna...and spirit jumping in and out but never seen'



Greek Myths

- 12 Icarus -flying
- 137/138 /144 Persephone –and rebirth
- 33 Ulysses/Polyphemus
- 27/157/51 ‘nectar, food of the gods’-27+53

Ageing

- 2 /115 Ernie Myers
- 33 Old man on bus
- 92/63 Old lady in hospital

Other themes to explore

1. Science/medicine v spirit
2. Education/Teachers-not appreciated! Mina –free spirit-home educated
3. Friends/relationships/pressures-peer and parental.
4. Imagination and artistic creation-painting/clay/poetry
5. Characteronyms-Dr.Death/Mr.stone/Mina (‘strong protector’) Michael (‘who is God –like) Skellig (Celtic? Area in Ireland) Skeleton?
6. Birds: Owls/chaffinches tits/sparrows/pigeons/blackbirds/fledglings/goldfinch
Fledglings (baby referred to as chick pg. 21)
7. Wings –169/89 /158/114/111/Skellig’s feathers baby’s pillow.
8. ‘The owls and the Angels’

Skellig is gradually revealed to the reader.

1. 158 something like a bird/angel/beast/you
2. 36 Shoulder blades
3. 76 congealed skin and bone
4. 73 dark furry balls
5. 81/74 back
6. lightness
7. 10/30Trapeze nearly fly/baby’s bones/wings

Analyse description

- Narrowed ^{pre}veiny eye- face pale plaster dry post modification
- Skin cracked crazed –original meaning of crazy as in ‘paving’
- Hair a tangle of knots metaphor



Blake Poetry featured in SKELLIG

Infant Joy

1 "I have no name:
2 I am but two days old."
3 What shall I call thee?
4 "I happy am,
5 Joy is my name."
6 Sweet joy befall thee!

7 Pretty joy!
8 Sweet joy but two days old,
9 Sweet joy I call thee:
10 Thou dost smile,
11 I sing the while,
12 Sweet joy befall thee!

Infant sorrow

My mother groand! my father wept.
| Into the dangerous world I leapt:
| Helpless, naked, piping loud;
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my fathers hands:
Striving against my swadling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
| To sulk upon my mothers breast.

Tyger Tyger

1 Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
2 In the forests of the night,
3 What immortal hand or eye
4 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

5 In what distant deeps or skies
6 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
7 On what wings dare he aspire?
8 What the hand dare seize the fire?

9 And what shoulder, and what art,
10 Could twist the sinews of thy heart,
11 And when thy heart began to beat,
12 What dread hand? and what dread feet?



- 13 What the hammer? what the chain?
14 In what furnace was thy brain?
15 What the anvil? what dread grasp
16 Dare its deadly terrors clasp?
- 17 When the stars threw down their spears,
18 And water'd heaven with their tears,
19 Did he smile his work to see?
20 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?
- 21 Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
22 In the forests of the night,
23 What immortal hand or eye,
24 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The Lamb

- 1 Little Lamb, who made thee?
2 Dost thou know who made thee?
3 Gave thee life, and bid thee feed
4 By the stream and o'er the mead;
5 Gave thee clothing of delight,
6 Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
7 Gave thee such a tender voice,
8 Making all the vales rejoice?
9 Little Lamb, who made thee?
10 Dost thou know who made thee?
- 11 Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
12 Little Lamb, I'll tell thee:
13 He is called by thy name,
14 For he calls himself a Lamb.
15 He is meek, and he is mild;
16 He became a little child.
17 I a child, and thou a lamb.
18 We are called by his name.
19 Little Lamb, God bless thee!
20 Little Lamb, God bless thee!



Poetry by Blake that features in SKELLIG 2

The Angel

I Dreamt a Dream!

what can it mean?

And that I was a maiden Queen:

Guarded by an Angel mild:

Witless woe, was ne'er beguil'd!

And I wept both night and day

And he wip'd my tears away

And I wept both day and night

And hid from him my hearts delight

So he took his wings and fled:

Then the morn blush'd rosy red:

I dried my tears & armed my fears,

With ten thousand shields and spears,

Soon my Angel came again;

I was arm'd, he came in vain:

For the time of youth was fled 162

And grey hairs were on my head.

The Schoolboy

I love to rise in a summer morn,

When the birds sing on every tree;

The distant huntsman winds his horn,

And the sky-lark sings with me.

O! what sweet company.

But to go to school in a summer morn,

O! it drives all joy away;

Under a cruel eye outworn,

The little ones spend the day,

In sighing and dismay.

Ah! then at times I drooping sit,

And spend many an anxious hour.

Nor in my book can I take delight,

Nor sit in learning's bower,

Worn thro' with the dreary shower.



How can the bird that is born for joy,
Sit in a cage and sing.
How can a child when fears annoy,
But droop his tender wing,
And forget his youthful spring.

O! father & mother, if buds are nip'd,
And blossoms blown away,
And if the tender plants are strip'd
Of their joy in the springing day,
By sorrow and cares dismay,

How shall the summer arise in joy.
Or the summer fruits appear,
Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy
Or bless the mellowing year,
When the blasts of winter appear.

Night

The sun descending in the west.
The evening star does shine.
The birds are silent in their nest,
And I must seek for mine,
The moon like a flower,
In heavens high bower;
With silent delight,
Sits and smiles on the night.
Farewell green fields and happy groves,
Where flocks have took delight;
Where lambs have nibbled silent moves
The feet of angels bright;
Unseen they pour blessing,
and joy without ceasing,

On each bud and blossom,
And each sleeping bosom.

They look in every thoughtless nest,
Where birds are coverd warm;
They visit caves of every beast,
To keep them all from harm;
If they see any weeping,
That should have been sleeping
They pour sleep on their head
And sit down by their bed.



The simple Sentence of Almond's style

James Bond from *Dr.No* by Ian Fleming.

The centipede had reached his knee. It was starting up his thigh. Whatever happened he mustn't move, mustn't even tremble. Bond's whole consciousness had drained down to the two rows of softly creeping feet. Now they had reached his flank. God, it was turning down towards his groin! Bond set his teeth. Supposing it liked the warmth there! Supposing it tried to crawl into the crevices! Could he stand it? Supposing it chose that place to bite? Bond could feel it questing among the first hairs. It tickled. The skin on Bond's belly fluttered. There was nothing he could do to control it. But now the thing was turning up and along his stomach. Its feet were gripping tighter to prevent it falling. Now it was at his heart. If it bit there, surely it would kill him. The centipede trampled steadily on through the thin hairs on Bond's right breast up to his collar bone. It stopped. What was it doing? Bond could feel the blunt head questing slowly to and fro. What was it looking for? Was there room between his skin and the sheet for it to get through? Dare he lift the sheet an inch to help it? No. Never! The animal was at the base of his jugular. Perhaps it was intrigued by the heavy pumping of his blood. Damn you! Bond tried to communicate with the centipede. It's nothing. It's not dangerous, that pulse. It means you no harm. Get on out into the fresh air!

As if the beast had heard, it moved on up the column of the neck and into the stubble on Bond's chin. Now it was at the corner of his mouth tickling madly. On it went, up along the nose. Now he could feel its whole weight and length.

Softly Bond closed his eyes. Two by two the pairs of feet, moving alternately, tramped across his right eyelid. When it got off his eye, should he take a chance and shake it off –rely on its feet slipping in his sweat? No, for God's sake! The grip of the feet was endless. He might shake one lot off, but not the rest.

With incredible deliberation the huge insect rambled across forehead. It stopped below the hair. What the hell was it doing now?

Bond could feel it nuzzling at his skin. It was drinking! Drinking the beads of salt sweat. Bond was sure of it. For minutes it hardly moved. Bond felt weak with the tension. He could feel the sweat pouring off the rest of his body on to the sheet.

In a second his limbs would start to tremble. He could feel it coming on.

He would start to shake with an ague of fear. Could he control it, could he? Bond lay and waited breath coming softly through his open, snarling mouth ...

The centipede stirred. Slowly it walked out of his hair on to the pillow.

Bond waited a second. Now he could hear the rows of feet picking softly at the cotton. It was a tiny scraping noise like soft fingernails.

With a crash that shook the room Bond's body jack-knifed out of bed and on to the floor.

At once Bond was on his feet and at the door. He turned on the light. He found he was shaking uncontrollably. He staggered to the bed.

There it was crawling out of sight over the edge of the pillow.



Bond's first instinct was to twitch the pillow on the floor. He controlled himself, waiting for his nerves to quieten. Then softly, deliberately, picked up the pillow by one corner and walked into the middle of the room and dropped it. The centipede came out from under the pillow. It started to snake quickly away across the matting. Now Bond was uninterested. He looked round for something to kill it with. Slowly he went and picked up a shoe and came back. The danger was past. His mind was wondering now how the centipede had got into his bed. He lifted the shoe and slowly, almost carelessly, smashed it down. He heard the crack of the hard carapace.

Bond lifted the shoe.

The centipede was whipping from side to side in its agony – five inches of grey-brown, shiny death. Bond hit it again. It burst open, yellowly.

Bond dropped the shoe and ran for the bathroom and was violently sick.

SKELLIG Chapter 1

I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we'd be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the new baby.

He was lying there in the darkness behind the tea chests, in the dust and dirt. It was as if he'd been there forever. He was filthy and pale and dried out and I thought he was dead. I couldn't have been more wrong. I'd soon begin to see the truth about him that there'd never been another creature like him in the world.

We called it the garage because that's what the estate agent, Mr. Stone, called it. It was more like a demolition site or a rubbish dump or like one of those ancient warehouses they keep pulling down at the quay. Stone led us down the garden, tugged the door open and shone his little torch into the gloom. We shoved our heads in at the doorway with him.

'You have to see it with your mind's eye,' he said.

'See it cleaned, with new doors and the roof repaired. See it as a wonderful two-car garage.'

He looked at me with a stupid grin on his face.

'Or something for you, lad - a hideaway for you and your two mates. What about that, eh?'

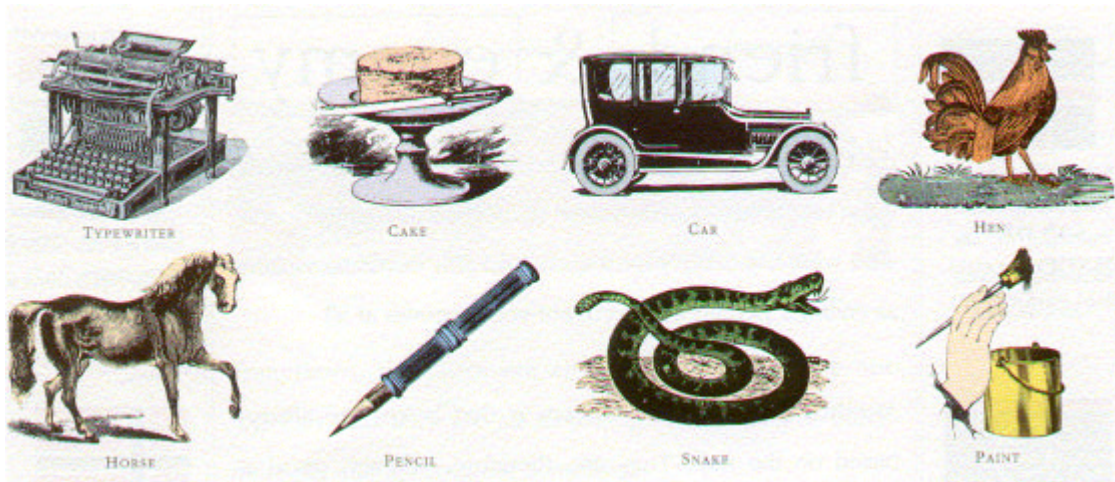
I looked away. I didn't want anything to do with him. All the way round the house it had been the same. Just see it in your mind's eye. Just imagine what could be done. All the way round I kept thinking of the old



man, Ernie Myers he had lived here on his own for years. He'd been dead nearly a week before they found him under the table in the kitchen. That's what I saw when Stone told us about seeing with the mind's eye. He even said it when we got to the dining room and there was an old cracked toilet sitting there in the corner of the floor behind a plywood screen. I just wanted him to shut up, but he whispered that towards the end Ernie couldn't manage the stairs. His bed was brought in here and a toilet was put in so that everything was easy for him. Stone looked at me like he didn't think I should know about such things. I wanted to get out, to get back to our old house again, but Mum and Dad took it all in. they went on like it was going to be some great adventure. They bought the house. They started cleaning it and scrubbing it and painting it. Then the baby came too early. And here we were.

I nearly got into the garage that Sunday morning. I took my own torch and shone it in. The outside doors to the back lane must have fallen off years ago and there were dozens of massive planks nailed across the entrance. The timbers holding the roof were rotten and the roof was sagging in. The bits of the floor you could see between the rubbish were full of cracks and holes. The people that took the rubbish out of the house were supposed to take it out of the garage as well, but they took one look at the place and said they wouldn't go in it even for danger money. There were old chests of drawers and broken wash-basins and bags of cement, ancient doors leaning against the walls, deck chairs with the cloth seats rotted away. Great rolls of rope and cable hung from nails. Heaps of water pipes and great boxes of rusty nails were scattered on the floor. Everything was covered in dust and spiders' webs. There was mortar that had fallen from the walls. There was a little window in one of the walls but it was filthy and there were rolls of cracked lino standing in front of it. The place stank of rot and dust. Even the bricks were crumbling like they couldn't bear the weight any more. I was like the whole thing was sick of itself and would collapse in a heap and have to get bulldozed away.

I heard something scratching in one of the corners, and something scuttling about, and it was all just dead quiet in there.



Can you arrange the 8 items shown above into 4 pairs and give reasons for your choices?

For example you might say that the typewriter and pencil go together because they are both writing devices.

REVIEWS AND NOTES

The man who came to stay **David Almond**

David Almond endured 33 rejection letters before he was saved by a grubby old tramp with stinky breath. The award-winning children's novelist talks to Claire Armitstead

Thursday July 15, 1999

Suddenly, children's books are hip. Their sales are counted in tens, or even hundreds of thousands, and overseas publishers are gobbling them up just as fast as the new crop of writers can churn them out. While JK Rowling - author of the Harry Potter books - is the biggest new star, another recent arrival, David Almond, has been quietly vacuuming up awards with a sombre story of a boy and an angel.

Earlier this year, his *Skellig* snatched the Whitbread Children's book award from under Harry Potter's nose, and yesterday he made off with the prestigious Carnegie medal.

For the 47-year-old Geordie, it is all rather bemusing. Until recently, he was a part-time teacher at a special school who wrote in his spare time - mostly short stories for anthologies and magazines. He thought he might strike lucky when he finished his first full-length novel for adults - but after touting it around 33 publishers, he finally consigned it to his bottom drawer and, trouper that he was, sat down to writing the next book.

It was then that he was visited by a grubby old man with stinky breath, who eats bluebottles and excretes owl-like boluses of fur and bone. An old man crippled by "Arthur-itis", with knobby shoulder-blades. "Skellig," says Almond, "just sort of came."

Though Almond hadn't set out to write for children, he immediately realised that this would be a children's book. The "hero" is Michael, a forlorn little boy whose baby sister is dying and whose family have just moved to a run-down house in what he calls the wilderness. He discovers Skellig slumped in a derelict garage. "When I was writing the book, I knew Michael had discovered something but I wasn't sure what it was," says Almond. "When he reached out his hand and felt the bones of the shoulders I thought, 'Oh-oh, it's an angel.'" He wasn't very pleased. "There's so much sentimental claptrap about angels."

Nor was Skellig the last of his problems: as he was developing the plot, he could see no way of saving Michael's baby sister - and it wouldn't do to end this most solemn of novels with a complete downer. Again it was Skellig, the arthritic angel, who came to the rescue.



David Almond looks on his creation with a sort of awed detachment. Like Michael, he had a sister who died in infancy. When he describes his family, he talks of his five siblings, even though one has been dead for some 40 years.

He was brought up in Felling on Tyne, a town on the edge of Newcastle, as part of a large and close-knit Catholic family. His father had arrived back from the war to his office job full of optimism, particularly about the new possibilities of education. Though he died when David was 15, four of his children went on to get degrees, and a fifth went back to college as a mature student. "Dad would have been immensely proud, because we achieved what he wanted."

Family life, and the stories that bind generations together are central to Almond's work. But just as important is his Catholicism: it saturates his world not through any overt religiosity, but through a preoccupation with mystery, with what could almost be called the occult. When he was growing up, he says, he was into astral travelling. The novel that was rejected was about seances. His latest children's book, *Kit's Wilderness*, deals with the reality-altering results of children's fainting games. "It's sort of pagan stuff, but it comes from Catholicism, because there's this other stuff that's all around you: angels on your shoulder and little trinkets all over the place. Things you dip your finger in and things that you smell."

All this might sound fey and unfeasibly old-fashioned, but there is a spareness, a toughness to Almond's writing that holds his stories in sharp focus. This spareness has provoked criticism in some quarters that his books are not as linguistically challenging for children as, say, the Harry Potter books or Philip Pullman's outstanding *Northern Lights*.

Almond is having no truck with that: "My vocabulary in *Skellig* is probably very restricted, but if you look at Carver or Hemingway, the writers I most admire, the same criticism could apply to them. I like simplicity in art. I remember discovering the music of Monteverdi in my twenties and loving the eloquent use of restricted resources."

And it is true that, while he may not use difficult words, he takes his readers into strange new areas of the imagination that are not - like so much children's fiction - fileable under "childhood issues". In *Kit's Wilderness*, Kit's fainting games sensitise him to the precious stories of his senile grandfather, while *Skellig*, with his quite scary personal habits, is an odd kind of angel who seems to have escaped from some East European allegory rather than from a nursery frieze. In order to understand him, you have to accept that he will never be wholly comprehensible - which is a pretty sophisticated literary concept.

Almond knew *Skellig* was the best thing he had ever written, even before his agent told him so. But he is also smart enough to realise that it came at the right time: under the Labour government children's reading, and with it the books they read, have become a hot political issue, a subject of intense and anguished public debate. Almond takes some of it with a pinch of salt. After all, the people who push

literacy are the same people who criticise his books for having a too-easy vocabulary.

"Education is a little bit tired in this country. There isn't the same optimism and confidence in the future that my dad had," he says. "And because we're tired, we're turning reading into this mechanistic thing, and testing it in inappropriate ways."

Yet this new feeding frenzy means Almond has earned enough with two books to pack up teaching and devote himself to writing and looking after his baby daughter. *Skellig* has been translated into 15 languages; *Kit's Wilderness* into seven. His next book has already been sold abroad. And, he says, with a grin 33 rejections wide, he hasn't even finished writing it yet.

The Carnegie shortlist

Skellig by David Almond (Hodder). 9-plus.

Heroes by Robert Cormier (Hamish Hamilton). A young, disfigured war veteran deals with his past and his thirst for revenge. 14-plus.

The Kin by Peter Dickinson (Macmillan). The dawn of humanity seen by children in Africa 2,000,000 years ago. 10-plus .

Fly, Cherokee, Fly by Chris d'Lacey (Corgi). School bullies and a racing pigeon with a broken wing. 8-plus.

The Sterkarm Handshake by Susan Price (Scholastic). Time travel novel which veers between a 16th century borders clan and the 21st century. 14-plus.



David Almond's three novels, *Skellig*, *Kit's Wilderness* and *Heaven Eyes* have quickly established him as one of the finest living children's authors. His numerous awards include The Carnegie Medal and The Whitbread Prize. His books have been translated into over twenty languages, and are being adapted for film, stage and radio. He also writes short stories, and his latest collection will be published during 2000. He lives in Newcastle upon Tyne and is a highly experienced writing tutor.

The Kerry **Skellig** Region makes up the Western half of the famous Ring of Kerry. It offer, breathtaking scenery, comfortable accommodation and wonderfull walks.

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The Kerry Skellig Region is easily accessible from Shannon Airport (120 miles/180 km) and Cork Airport (94 miles/140 km), and is only half an hour drive from our own Kerry International Airport.

[Celtic Klezmer Concert](#) - tape featuring Celtic and Klezmer performers in the Washington, D.C. area, including: Bonnie Rideout, **Skellig**, Bill McComiskey, Fabrangen Fiddlers.

