Emily Booth, "Entry on: A Song for Ella Grey by David Almond ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/601. Entry version as of October 31, 2026.

David Almond

A Song for Ella Grey

United Kingdom (2014)

TAGS: Eurydice Maenads Orpheus Snakes Underworld



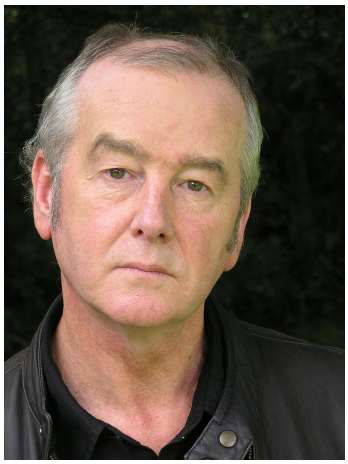


We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	A Song for Ella Grey
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2014
First Edition Details	David Almond, *A Song For Ella Grey*. United Kingdom: Hodder Children's Books/Hachette Children's Group, 2014, 276 pp.
ISBN	9781444919547
Awards	Guardian Children's Fiction Prize (2015), YA Book Prize Nominee (2015)
Genre	Fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults
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Creators



Retrieved from Wikipedia, public domain (accessed: December 21, 2021).

David Almond , b. 1951
(Author)

David Almond was born at Felling on Tyne, near Newcastle, where he now lives. He is the author of over 30 works, including young adult fiction, children's fiction, picture books, and short story collections. His debut novel, *Skellig*, won the Carnegie Medal in 1998, kick-starting his career as an author. His work has since been adapted for the screen and stage, as well as translated into over 40 languages. He is currently a Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University,. In the past, he worked as a teacher and an editor for the literary fiction journal *Panurge*.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 6, 2018)

Profile at goodreads.com (accessed: July 6, 2018)

Twitter (accessed: January 1, 2019)

Bio prepared by Emily Booth, University of Technology, Sydney, Emily.Booth@student.uts.edu.au

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Additional information

Summary

A Song For Ella Grey is a non-linear retelling of Orpheus and Eurydice set in contemporary Newcastle, from the point of view of Claire, Ella's best friend and lover. Claire disapproves of Ella's relationship with Orpheus, and is gradually left behind by Ella to witness their love and subsequent deaths. Claire and Ella are seventeen, and Orpheus is described as looking in his early twenties, though it is hinted that he may be much older.

Part 1 – Present Day

Claire is in love with her best friend of 12 years, Ella, who doesn't love her in return despite their sexual relationship. Ella says she is in love with Orpheus because of his music. Ella is adopted.

Part 2 – Flashback

Claire, Ella, and their friends have always hung out by the Ouseburn, a stream that runs under their city, then out through a gate where it joins a larger river. One spring evening, Ella says she can hear music. They search for the source, but only find an old beggar playing a mandolin and singing. They give him some coins, and he says 'the Gods will reward ye.' (p. 21) Carlos asks what reward they would get if they gave him more, and the beggar says, 'Give me your everything […] and you will see.' (p. 21) Claire learns Ella continued to hear the beautiful music in her head after she went home. Ella's adoptive parents forbid her from going on the week-long Easter holiday the friends had planned because of her bad school grades. Claire and her other friends set up camp on the beach in Northumberland, and over the next few days, they sing a song called "The Magpie" about defying the devil and see a pair of adders sunbathing. At night, one of the boys identifies different constellations, and as the Harp is identified, they think they can hear its music. The next morning, they find Orpheus in their camp, playing the lyre and singing a song so beautiful that it brings them to tears. Claire rings Ella and tells her to listen.

Orpheus came to the beach because of their festivities, and all the teenagers (as well as the dolphins, birds, ocean, and sand) except Carlos are drawn to him. Claire rings Ella again, and Orpheus sings directly down the phone to Ella. The next morning, Claire is worried about Ella for reasons she can't explain and immediately travels back to the city, to Ella's house. Ella is studying and dismisses Claire's

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concerns, but confesses she's obsessed with the music. Ella says she knows Orpheus will come and find her. The friends return from the beach, saying Orpheus didn't come back. Ella has permission to attend the next beach holiday, and shares that she's had dreams about her biological parents, which meld into dreams about Orpheus. In them, she calls his name to bring him to her. The night before school resumes, Ella leads Claire into the water of the Ouseburn where she rambles about water, the gate, and their bodies being Orpheus' instruments. Claire is concerned, but Ella says it is to do with her dreams – and that Orpheus is coming for her.

Part 3 – Present Day

Ella and Orpheus plan to marry at the beach during the next school holiday. Though Claire opposes, she agrees to Ella's request to "give her away" at the ceremony in place of Ella's father. Ella brings Orpheus to meet Claire's parents, and when they ask about Orpheus' parents, he says they are in heaven, and they offer their condolences. Orpheus plays at the Ouseburn, and two girls named Crystal and Bianca from Claire's school want Orpheus for themselves. The first night of their holiday, Ella rejects Claire's sexual advances, telling Claire that she doesn't understand how much Ella loves Orpheus. The next morning, Claire checks on Ella in her tent, and discovers her sleeping "still as death" (p. 136), and barely breathing. More teenagers arrive at the beach, including Bianca, Crystal, and Carlos who kill two adders. Moments later, Orpheus arrives.

Claire brings tea to Orpheus and Ella's tent, where she is confronted by a bright light radiating from their skin. Ella asks Claire to promise to have a happy day and love Ella forever. Claire promises, and Orpheus kisses Claire in thanks. Claire marries the pair, and the natural world goes silent as they say their vows. Later, Orpheus wanders away from the celebration, and when he doesn't return, Ella goes looking. Moments later, Ella screams, and Claire finds Ella unmoving and covered in snake bites; the sand around her marked by snake-tracks. Locals insist that adders don't have enough poison to kill a human. Orpheus returns as Ella is loaded into an ambulance, having not responded to CPR or defibrillation. As Claire climbs in beside Ella to go to the hospital, she sees Orpheus running towards the beach.

Ella's parents blame Claire and her parents for Ella's death, and Orpheus does not attend the funeral. He is not seen for months after Ella's death, until he unexpectedly turns up at Claire's house. Orpheus

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tells Claire that he intends to retrieve Ella from Death, and asks Claire for help. They go to the gate at the Ouseburn stream, which Orpheus identifies as the entrance to Death, and insists Claire leave if she wants him to get Ella.

Part Four – The Journey

Claire has strange dreams about Ella at different ages. When she wakes, she returns to the Ouseburn and finds Orpheus in the water, distraught. He says he almost had Ella, and then he lost her. Orpheus recounts his journey, using Claire as a medium to speak through. His journey is printed in the book with white ink on black pages, paraphrased here thus:

Orpheus sings at the Ouseburn gate, demanding entrance until it is granted. He sings his way through the dark, calling for Ella, despite whispered warnings for him to turn back. The water gets deeper, and he is confronted by a beast with paws and claws that threatens to shred him. He sings until it calms enough for him to pass. Orpheus meets a crowd of voices that mock Ella's death. He sings until they fall silent. Finally, Orpheus meets a woman and a man who jointly identify themselves as Death. He sings his love for Ella Grey and though they are reluctant, they promise he can have her forever as long as he does not see her in death. Orpheus hears Ella's voice, and Death warns him not to look back. The two of them talk of their future, and when they reach the light, Orpheus sings the locks of the Ouseburn gate open. Ella touches his shoulder, and Orpheus suddenly fears he has been deceived, wondering if Ella is truly there. He looks back before stepping through the gate, and Ella is taken away.

When Orpheus ceases to use Claire as a medium to speak through, Claire is disappointed and invites Orpheus to her place, implying that they could build a relationship on a mutual love for Ella, but he rejects her.

Part Five – Present Day

Various extreme rumours about where Orpheus is circle at Claire's. Claire studies throughout the winter, and in Spring, Claire's friend James says he saw Orpheus in a place similar to the beach they had vacationed at. James says Orpheus was surrounded by men, and pretended not to know him. Claire asks Sam to drive her there. Sam agrees, but they don't find Orpheus. Bianca and Crystal grow angry

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with Orpheus, stating that Ella would still be alive without him – that he is a killer who should "pay". They disappear from school, and two weeks later, Bianca turns up at Claire's house. Bianca is drunk and dishevelled, and reveals that she and Crystal spent the last two weeks hitch-hiking to find Orpheus. They found him, but he rejected them; and before they could leave, he was attacked by a group of angry women who accused him of 'turning from women'. Bianca believes the women had been hunting him for a long time. The women told Bianca and Crystal that they killed and dismembered Orpheus for Ella. Bianca and Crystal watched pieces of Orpheus be eaten by birds, then Bianca visited Claire. Bianca confesses that she feels happy.

Part Six – Present Day

Claire finishes her final exams and prepares to travel around Greece in the next year, and as she packs, she finds one of Ella's earrings. Claire says she can still hear Orpheus' music, and that she will allow him to speak through her always. The novel closes with music and lyrics to the song "The Magpie"; the song the teenagers had sang that brought Orpheus to them.

Analysis

A Song For Ella Grey is a retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the genre of fabulism. It is set in the present day, in Northumberland in North East England, with characters travelling north several times to 'make our own damned Greece!' (p. 27) at a beach during their school holidays. They hate the cold in England, and would rather live in Greece where they think it would be warmer. While the retelling of the myth is straightforward, Almond uses staples from the Young Adult category to adapt it for a contemporary readership, including a love triangle between Claire, Ella, and Orpheus; themes of alcohol, drugs, and sexual fluidity; and teenage rebellion against parents.

Orpheus' characterisation is similar to the original myth: he is a wandering singer who performs ethereal music with his lyre. Claire estimates that he can't be much older than them; however, he frequently makes statements that suggest he is, such as recalling how Northumberland used to look in the past. He answers that his parents are "in heaven" when Claire's parents ask; and while Claire's parents interpret this as his parents being dead, it could also refer to his godly parentage. Music is a recurring theme in the novel, acting as Orpheus'

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greatest allure, emphasised by the lyrical prose of the novel. Additionally, the final pages of the novel are the music and lyrics to the song "The Magpie" that the teenagers sing during their first beach holiday, suggesting the entire novel could be a song of its own. In contrast, the character of Eurydice is modernised in the form of Ella, a teenage girl with a habit of daydreaming. Her orphan status allows her own origin to be mysterious, having been left on the steps of a hospital in a basket where she was found by the people who would become her adoptive parents. Her parents often wonder whether they 'got themselves a fairy child' (p. 85), because of her eccentric behaviour.

The original myth plays out between Orpheus and Ella: they fall desperately in love, Ella is killed by snakes, Orpheus ventures through the underworld to rescue her – taming Cerberus (depicted as an unknown beast with paws) and meeting Persephone and Hades (a woman and a man who introduce themselves as Death) along the way – and just as Orpheus and Ella are about to return to the surface, Orpheus looks back, banishing her soul forever. Orpheus is later torn to pieces by maenads, who in this version, are women who are furious that Orpheus' sexual preference has changed from women to men (see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XI). Orpheus meets his death with resignation, and it is suggested that he expected it, as the women had been hunting him for a long time. The women justify their murder as justice for Ella, and other young girls and women.

The character of Claire is the greatest departure from the original myth, who is in an established sexual relationship with Ella at the start of the novel. In this way, Claire acts as a secondary Orpheus figure, though there is no indication that Ella reciprocates Claire's romantic feelings. Ella states that her love for Orpheus is 'different', and somehow superior to the love she feels for Claire, but together they do emulate the myth to an extent. On the day of Ella and Orpheus' wedding, Ella begs Claire to swear to stay with her forever, even wishing Claire a 'happy wedding day', in an imitation of marriage vows. When Ella is bitten by the adders, Claire accompanies her in the ambulance to the hospital as she dies. Later, Claire allows Orpheus to speak through her when he recounts his journey to the underworld, suggesting that both of them made the journey for Ella's soul. However, where Orpheus meets his traditional fate, Claire is spared – perhaps because of her female status, as the maenads who kill Orpheus indicate that it is done as a gesture to protect women.

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A minor deviation from the myth is that Ella's murder by the snakes is framed as a provoked attack. Bianca, Crystal, and Carlos kill two adders after crashing the holiday wedding, and Ella is the first person in that area after the snakes are killed. It is strongly implied that they are the same two snakes Claire saw on her first holiday, which are repeatedly described as not dangerous enough to kill a human. In this way, Ella's death was not predetermined by fate, but rather an act of revenge by the snakes.

The formatting of the novel changes during Orpheus/Claire's journey to the Underworld. In Part Four, the standard black text on a white page is inverted to white text on a black page, potentially reflecting the descent into the underworld, or Orpheus' perspective in contrast to Claire's. Additionally, the text font and size changes depending on who speaks during the chapter, with larger, more stylised text being used when Underworld creatures speak, emphasising their "otherness" compared to Orpheus/Claire.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Eurydice Maenads Orpheus Snakes Underworld
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Coming of age Death Friendship Love
Further Reading	Hodkinson, Owen, "Orphic Resonances of Love and Loss in David Almond's *A Song for Ella Grey*", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Hope. The Ancient Myths as Medicine for the Hardships of Life in Children's and Young Adult's Culture*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021, 645–668.

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Addenda

E-book, Australian publisher's website: penguinrandomhouse.com (accessed: July 6, 2018).

Edition used for entry: David Almond, *A Song For Ella Grey,* London: Hodder Children's Books, 2015, 276 pp.

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