

David Almond's Introduction to *Kit's Wilderness*

My first school was St John's, a little stone-built place by the banks of the River Tyne. It was built on old coalmining ground. Just outside the school were the remains of an old pit-heap. We called it the Red Hill. Some of the older boys used to jump over the school walls at lunchtime and dig dens and tunnels and caves in it. They would go right into the Red Hill, and disappear. I never followed them: too young and much too scared. There were lots of rumours and tales about the games they played in there, especially about a mysterious fainting game. It was said that boys half-strangled each other, that they made each other lose consciousness. It was said that boys were often left to wake up alone in the Red Hill. The stories terrified me. Then one bright sunny morning I was walking into school and I saw a couple of boys playing in the long grass between the Red Hill and the school. One boy was crouching, the other was kneeling at his side. The kneeling boy was whispering into the other's ear. The other was letting his head hang low and was breathing deeply. Then the kneeling boy touched the throat of the other, who suddenly slumped, and crumpled to the earth, as if he'd died. I realised that they were playing the fainting game, not hidden deep inside the Red Hill, but out here, in ordinary daylight. It fascinated me, and scared me stiff.

Many years later, I was at my desk trying to begin a new novel and the memory of that morning, and of the Red Hill, and of the disused coalmines, kept coming back and back, and I knew that a fainting game, and a coalmining landscape, would have to be central to the book. Once I realised that, and began to explore the possibilities, more memories came to me.

Felling-on-Tyne, the place where I grew up, was an ordinary town, but like all ordinary towns it was filled with extraordinary places. One of the places I used to play with my friends (once I'd grown a little older and braver) was the town graveyard. It was an ancient place. We all had ancestors and relatives and neighbours buried in there. There was an old stone church at the centre, tall trees around the church, ancient stone graves, newer graves, brand-new graves, then a high stone wall around it all. Sometimes, at dusk, as the darkness fell and the shadows deepened and bats and owls began to fly, we'd gather at the steel graveyard gate and challenge each other to go in there. 'I dare you,' we'd say. 'I double-dare you!' Soon enough, somebody would crack and run in, and then we'd all follow. We'd run along the paths and dance around the graves and run out again, laughing and gasping, filled with excitement and fear. One of the graves we used to dance around was a monument, a tall stone pillar filled with names. They were the names of ninety-seven men and boys who had gone down into Felling Pit one sunny morning and who had lost their lives in an explosion underground. It had happened long ago, and to my friends and I, excited by our games and our lives, it was just another grave, nothing special. But when I began to write *Kit's Wilderness*, I realised that if I'd been born a hundred years before I was, I could well have been a boy who'd gone into a coalmine one day never to come out again. And so the monument became a crucial image in the novel, and a crucial moment in the book, of course, is when Kit Watson finds his own name, and John Askew's, written there.

As I put together the first part of the book, all of these elements began to come together. When I set off writing, I don't work to a definite plan. I don't know exactly what will happen. I allow the story to grow, like a living thing. It began to do this. At first, the book

was called 'Quiet Michael and the Wilderness' because I had a character called Quiet Michael, who seemed to be pretty important. He was a spooky character who walked back and forward along the riverbank with a dog. Spooky, but really fairly innocuous – just a kind of vague, shadowy person with no reality to him. So I ditched him. At the time, I had no real central character. I needed to have someone who would be deeply involved in the story, someone who could tell the story from his point of view. I scratched and scribbled and experimented, then I came up with a boy called Kit, who had moved to an old coalmining town called Stoneygate, a name that I took from a part of Felling-on-Tyne. When I started to write Kit's story from Kit's point of view, the book began to take its proper shape. And the other characters, especially John Askew, Kit's grandfather, and Allie Keenan, seemed to appear automatically.

Like all books, *Kit's Wilderness* is a mixture of reality and imagination, truth and lies. It contains things that I think I know about (like the fainting game and the monument) alongside things that seem to be totally invented (like the story of Lak). None of the characters is based on an actual person, but I suppose they all contain elements of people I've known. I never knew anyone exactly like Kit's grandfather, for instance, but he does have elements of many men I knew as I was growing up. These were men who'd worked in very tough occupations, like shipbuilding or coalmining, but who had much tenderness in them. He's also like many older people I knew who weren't particularly 'clever' or 'literary' but who had a wonderful ability to tell stories.

Lak's story seemed to come from nowhere. In the novel, the teacher Burning Bush gives her class the first line of the story: 'His name was Lak'. I remember writing that down and thinking, 'No! Now I've got to find a way to write this story as well!' I thought I couldn't do it, but I double-dared myself, just as I used to at the graveyard gates, and found that I could, or rather that I had a character, Kit Watson, who could.

It took me about a year to write *Kit's Wilderness*. It was a fascinating journey. I felt really deeply involved with the characters and events. When the game was being played in Askew's den, I almost felt as if I was in the game myself. And when Askew and Kit are underground together towards the end of the book, I felt stifled and scared. Often, writing was like writing in a dream. It's important for me to feel involved like that when I'm writing, but a writer also needs to keep some distance from the work, so that he or she can keep control, and as always I took great care with the language I used. I read everything out loud to hear how it sounded and to test the rhythms. I did a great deal of rewriting (although some sections of the book are exactly as I wrote them first, so rewriting is not *always* necessary). The overall structure of the book (the simple three-part Autumn, Winter, Spring) helps to hold the whole thing together.

Writing a story is a journey of exploration. When you set off, you don't know exactly where you're going or who you'll meet along the way. Lots of the things you write are deliberate and planned, but many things (often the best things of all) are unexpected and spontaneous. The more I wrote *Kit's Wilderness*, the more I found about the characters and their lives, and the more the story deepened. I put a great deal of effort, time and creativity into it, and I have to say that I'm really pretty proud of it.

David Almond