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Jackdaw Summer
By David Almond (Hodder Children’s Books 2009)
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*Jackdaw Summer* was my first introduction to David Almond. His debut novel, *Skellig*, which won the Whitbread Children’s Award and the Carnegie Medal, had been sitting on my shelf for some time, but I frequently passed it by in favour of other, seemingly more appealing, choices. When I finished Almond’s latest contribution to the world of young adult literature, I immediately pulled out his first novel and was soon happily immersed in yet another marvellous world.

Like *Skellig*, *Jackdaw Summer* involves a mystery. Liam and Max are enjoying their summer exploring the wilds of Northumberland in England when a jackdaw leads them to an ancient farm house. They find a baby wrapped in a blanket, with a note pinned to her blanket: ‘PLEASE LOOK AFTER HER RITE. THIS IS A CHILDE OF GOD.’ The baby is a bright spark of hope in a world consumed with war and violence. The war in Iraq, in particular, is an ever present reality, with military jets flying regularly overhead. The boys play war games with sticks and knives, and shout out to the jets to ‘Bomb them back to the Stone Age!’ War is both timeless and eternal as the Roman ruins remind us of past conquests.

Fourteen-year-old Liam spends his summer sleeping in a tent in the backyard, coming to terms with the changing nature of the relationships around him. Max and Liam have less and less in common, as Max finds a girlfriend and talks of becoming an agricultural engineer. He seems, as Liam describes, ‘so boring these days, like he can’t wait to grow up, like he won’t do anything reckless anymore.’ Meanwhile, Liam is revelling in his youth, ditching school, and planning a rendez-vous with two runaway foster kids.

Along with baby Alison, the foster children Crystal and Oliver provoke action and anxiety in small-town Northumberland. These two scarred young people are foreigners in the countryside. They are so noticeable that their progress towards Liam’s house can be, and is, tracked. They bring with them the spectre of broken homes, disrupted families, and war. The attractive Crystal self-harms and Oliver, a child soldier from Liberia, seeks asylum. The revelation of Oliver’s true story is part of the gripping climax of the novel where the spectre of war embeds itself in this tiny corner of the countryside, which ‘can stand for the whole world, no matter how peaceful and how isolated it might seem to be. It is gorgeous and strange and terrible and filled with throbbing life and awful death all at once.’

This coming of age story is all the more interesting because Liam is uncertain about his role in the world. He understands that adolescence offers seemingly infinite possibilities, yet he also yearns for the comfort and security of boyhood. As he says, ‘I want to be every single thing it’s possible to be. I’m growing and I don’t know how to grow. I’m living but I haven’t started living yet.’ At the same time as he encourages his mother to adopt the foundling baby, he is also engaged in a battle of wits and nerves with another boy from his childhood, Gordon Nattrass, who makes art by filming mock beheadings. The relationship between the two boys is complex, and while we might wish to see Nattrass as slightly insane, he represents the reality of violence in this seemingly pastoral environment. Moreover, Liam is fascinated by
Nattrass and we are left to wonder why. Is Liam a monster like Nattrass? Is there violence in him? In everyone? At times, Liam’s decisions and reactions are unclear, echoing the incomprehensibility of adolescence. Nonetheless, I enjoyed following him on his journey to maturity. He felt like a real person, solidly located with his family and his friends during a summer of change.

The role of fiction and art in the telling of truth is a central theme in the novel. Liam’s mother is a visual artist; she takes close-up photos of all the scratches and bruises on Liam’s skin and places them alongside the beauty of the baby’s skin, choosing to see the beauty of the human body. Her belief in faith and in the importance of art provides an example of hope in a chaotic, violent world. ‘We have to help the angel in us overcome the beast,’ she says and she mourns a world where the spectacle of violence is more important than the beauty of art.

Liam’s father Patrick, a self-absorbed yet famous writer, is a looming presence in the Lynch home. Most of his time is spent in his office on the second story, from whence come the whir of the printer and shouts when his story is not coalescing. He resents intrusions on his time and often seems to dislike his parental role, yet it is he who sympathises most with Liam’s desire to be a boy and go on adventures. Initially not keen on fostering Alison, he ultimately uses the story of the abandoned baby in his latest novel, developing a narrative that includes the imprinting of the jackdaw, an itinerant war veteran wanderer, and a lonely young woman who can’t look after her baby.

This lovely novel is both provocative and evocative. I wasn’t always certain what Almond was telling me, but I enjoyed the ride. There is a strange truth in this novel that serves to underscore the role of storytelling in the construction of history. ‘Truth and fiction merge into each other’ because the world is ‘miraculous’ and ‘filled with the most amazing possibilities.’ Although Patrick groans at this interview from his younger self, he transforms Liam’s real-life experience into a fiction and develops a story that satisfies both the facts and the need for a coherent narrative. Likewise, in David Almond’s beautiful, spare prose, stories are fiction but they are also truth.
David Almond. Every summer Liam and Max roam the wild countryside of Northumberland - but this year things are different. One hot summer's day a jackdaw leads the two boys into an ancient farm house where they find a baby, wrapped in a blanket, with a scribbled note pinned to it: PLESE LOOK AFTER HER RITE. THIS IS A CHILDE OF GOD. And so begins Jackdaw Summer. A summer when friendships are tested. A summer when lines between good and bad are blurred. A summer that Liam will never forget. A stunning novel from the author of the modern children's classic Skellig - winner of the Carnegie.