

ORPHIC RESONANCES OF LOVE AND LOSS IN DAVID ALMOND'S *A SONG FOR ELLA GREY*

David Almond's *A Song for Ella Grey*, first published in 2014, is a thoroughly modern young adult novel, which explores the loves (familial, romantic, friendly, and "complicated") and the losses of a group of ordinary-seeming seventeen-year-old school pupils in the north of England, by weaving the myth of a returned, young-again Orpheus into their lives. The eponymous Ella Grey is the Eurydice figure in the novel's Orpheus myth, and is the best friend of Claire, a girl in her class and our narrator. Almond is a critically acclaimed British author of children's and young adult fiction, best known for *Skellig*.¹ *A Song for Ella Grey* won the *Guardian* newspaper's Children's Book Prize in 2015. Almond's work, including this novel, has sometimes attracted controversy for its unflinching and realistic portrayal of "adult" themes for young adult readers, which has led some reviewers to question whether novels such as *A Song for Ella Grey* can really be classified as children's books.²

The novel is about a group of young adults – the protagonists are all seventeen – so that the label young adult rather than "children's" (or young adult

¹ David Almond, *Skellig*, London: Hodder, 1998, winner of the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year and the Carnegie Medal (for children's books); runner-up for the Michael L. Prinz Award (for young adult fiction). The main character, Michael (age 10), moves to a new house at the same time as his baby sister is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness; he discovers the strange eponymous creature – part owl, part angel – languishing in the garage; Michael helps to restore Skellig to health, and Skellig in turn will help restore life to Michael's sister.

² See children's author Lynne Reid Banks's letter to *The Guardian*: "David Almond's Fiction Prizewinner Is for Grownups of 17, Not Children", 30 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/30/david-almonds-fiction-prizewinner-is-for-grownups-of-17-not-children> (accessed 4 May 2020), for a rejection of that label; see also the responding article by fellow children's author, and one of the panel of judges that awarded the prize to Almond, Piers Torday, "A Song for Ella Grey Is a Children's Book – And a Great One", *The Guardian*, 1 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/01/a-song-for-ella-grey-david-almond-lynn-reid-banks-young-adult-children-fiction> (accessed 4 May 2020).

as a subset of children's literature) is clearly appropriate. One aspect that marks it out as distinct from most earlier children's and even young adult literature is its inclusion of issues and themes that had traditionally been excluded: the protagonists' sex and sexuality, including lesbian encounters, their drinking of alcohol, and their use of swear words³ – and not in a context that is either explicitly or implicitly didactic or condemnatory about their actions, but rather in one that simply portrays this as part of the reality of average late teens' lives. These aspects are precisely what has attracted controversy; but they are merely a realistic background to the fantastic or magical plot elements that see the figure of Orpheus brought to life as a contemporary youth who befriends the teenagers and seems to transform their everyday lives into something extraordinary. The use of these mature themes and the question of the categorization of the novel is not the focus of this chapter, except insofar as the former are relevant to the exploration of the novel's reception of the Orpheus myth. Piers Torday, writing in defence of his and other panellists' choice to award the novel the *Guardian* prize for children's fiction, says:

Almond's contemporary updating of this classic myth follows a group of young teenage friends on the north-east coast who discover the power of art and love for themselves for the first time. I would argue that is not only a fundamental human experience, but also a critical part of growing up. There is indeed "lesbian love, swearing and drinking" in the first few pages, and that's no bad thing. Young people today have to make sense of a complex, diverse world of intersecting, layered narratives, available to them on a permanent loop in just a few clicks. Good writing for children will help them navigate adult experience with awareness and understanding.⁴

³ There has now been a relatively long tradition of this kind of realism in young adult fiction, starting with the likes of Judy Blume in the 1970s, sometimes classified as the "new realism"; see further Owen Hodkinson, "'She's Not Deadly. She's Beautiful': Reclaiming Medusa for Millennial Tween and Teen Girls?", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 197–222, nn. 6, 29, with further references. The inclusion of homosexual relationships and physical expressions of homosexual desire in young adult fiction is a more recent phenomenon: in general, see the annotated bibliography by Laurel A. Clyde and Marjorie Lobban, *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom: Homosexuality in Books for Young People*, Port Melbourne: D.W. Thorpe, 2000; for classical reception examples, see Owen Hodkinson, "Interview with Michael Cadnum" and "Michael Cadnum's Metamorphoses of Ovid", both in Owen Hodkinson and Helen Lovatt, eds., *Classical Reception and Children's Literature: Greece, Rome and Childhood Transformation*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018, respectively, at 59–62 and nn. 4–5; and 64–86, 77–78, with further references.

⁴ Torday, "A Song for Ella Grey Is a Children's Book".

That is, *A Song for Ella Grey* is a coming-of-age novel or *Bildungsroman*,⁵ in which the teenage protagonists experience (first- or second-hand) and learn about several things for the first time, especially love and loss, and how to deal with them.

In this context, if the contemporary child or teen reader is to engage with the novel's mythical elements and identify with its protagonists, she will at first have to recognize and accept as plausible the realistic, everyday elements of the teenage characters' lives, which must therefore reflect the contemporary world more or less accurately. On this point, Almond, in *A Song for Ella Grey* as in his other novels, appears to be successful, since teen and younger readers report that they do recognize the characters as plausible and as like themselves. For example, fifteen-year-old Megan Foley writes: "I realised that I had finally found a book that put into words my thoughts, and in all honesty, it shocked me (in a good way)".⁶ A younger reader, twelve-year-old Lottie Longshanks, in an article entitled "If the Real World Isn't Censored – Why Should Fiction Be?", argues:

I will remember the book as a lovely haunting story because of the beautiful poetic language rather than any of the adult stuff, I'm not even a teenager till next July but there was nothing in the book that I don't know about already. You can't avoid knowing if you read the papers, watch a bit of TV or listen to people talking at school [...]. David Almond is brilliant at weaving all sorts of themes into stunningly written stories that you will always remember. It doesn't stop me from still enjoying books that I loved when I was very little, but how will I be able to deal with grown up things if I don't know about them till I am 17?⁷

⁵ For other examples of the *Bildungsroman* in children's and young adult fiction with classical themes, see, e.g., Andelys Wood, "Perspective Matters: Roman Britain in Children's Novels"; Helen Lovatt, "Harry Potter and the Metamorphoses of Classics"; Owen Hodkinson, "Michael Cadnum's Metamorphoses" – all three in Owen Hodkinson and Helen Lovatt, eds., *Classical Reception and Children's Literature: Greece, Rome and Childhood Transformation*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018, respectively, at 108–118; 21–24; and 68 and n. 11 with references; Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, index s.v. "coming of age"; see further n. 10 below.

⁶ Megan Foley, "A Song for Ella Grey by David Almond: Review", *The Guardian*, 19 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/nov/17/564b4472e4b0a51fe2018843> (accessed 4 May 2020).

⁷ Lottie Longshanks, "If the Real World Isn't Censored – Why Should Fiction Be?", *The Guardian*, 7 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/dec/07/david-almond-a-song-for-ella-grey-censorship-childrens-books> (accessed 4 May 2020).

This kind of anecdotal evidence suggests that Almond's novels, including *A Song for Ella Grey*, have been seen as ways of coping with difficult issues in the lives of their young readers of various ages, by giving expression to them and representing the characters' lives in a way they recognize as their own, albeit intertwined with the mythical. This fusion of the universal with realistic settings and episodes readily identifiable to young readers in Almond's part of Britain, as well as beyond it, is explored by way of further introduction to and contextualization of the novel in the first section.

The sometimes painful first experiences of love and friendships formed and dissolved, and the certainly painful first experiences of the loss of loved ones through death, are represented as they are perceived and negotiated by teenage characters in *A Song for Ella Grey*. If the novel succeeds in allowing teen and younger readers to identify with these characters, it might allow them to see hope beyond these painful experiences and ways of coping with them, as the narrator, Claire, does. These key themes of love and loss are explored in the central parts of this chapter. Finally, I will argue that the novel explores and portrays coping with loss through fiction in a metafictional manner, as we see Claire at the end overtly acknowledging lessons from literature and myth and play-acting the Orpheus myth offer in a struggle to accept the death of her best friend, Ella.

The Localization of the Universal

One of the ways in which Almond gives his characters a reality that his teen readers can recognize and identify with is through the identifiable and very local setting in the contemporary Tyneside and Northumberland area of northern England, where the author grew up; he is known for having his characters and narrators speak in the accent and dialect of the region, as well as for evoking its urban and rural scenery, and *A Song for Ella Grey* is no exception. In these linguistic and scene-specific ways, he localizes the universal aspects of the Orpheus myth and makes it particular not only to twenty-first-century teenagers, but specifically to its northern English setting. The naming of the Eurydice figure as "Ella" also renders her character part of a realist depiction of an English teenager. This all has the effect of ensuring that the setting is familiar and accessible to contemporary readers, but also of adding realism to the characters before the mythical element enters their lives via the figure of Orpheus – who alone, as Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer notes – marks the novel explicitly rather than

through reference and allusion as a retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth.⁸ At the same time, he retains and repeatedly emphasizes the universality and the applicability of the myth to “all times and places”.

Almond says himself in describing his novel and its inspiration (here and in the following quotations, underlining added; italics from the original):

A tale of youth and yearning, [the myth of Orpheus and Euridyce is] perfect for the young. We are all born into [...] a culture that is ancient. But for each new child, that universe and culture are brand new: all is dazzling, terrifying, potent with possibility. Each child’s first word is the first of all words... First love is the first of all loves, first recognition of death the first such recognition. [...]

Orpheus’s story fits all times and all places. In my version, it exists in the north east of England, where I grew up and where I live today. It’s a beautiful, energetic, scarred and troubled place. In parts it is a wilderness; a far-flung place of legend, ballad, folk song; a place of blocked-up pit shafts, abandoned mine workings, wide white beaches, ruined castles high on headlands, islands stepping off to the horizon.

When I was a teenager, I used to go with my friends to the beaches of Bamburgh and Beadnell. We’d camp in the dunes, have parties on the beach. We’d swim in the icy sea, watch seals, terns, oystercatchers. We’d sit by blazing fires as the beams of lighthouses swept across us and the astonishing stars glittered above. We’d talk of love, death, football, Tamla Motown, Allen Ginsberg, God, ghosts, grief. We’d talk of where we’d go, what we’d do, how we hoped we’d live. We went back to our ordinary lives on Tyneside: school, exams, families, council houses. Not so different, perhaps, from the lives of the young people in my book.⁹

This description captures the very realistic and grounded setting of the novel, in the school lives and out of school adventures of ordinary late teens in a specific area, as well as Almond’s understanding of the need to tell the universal story afresh for each new generation and culture, for each time and place.

⁸ Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, “Unerwartete Wendung und narrative Distanz. Unzuverlässiges Erzählen und antiken Mythen in der modernen Kinderliteratur”, in Markus Janka and Michael Stierstorfer, eds., *Verjüngte Antike. Griechisch-römische Mythologie und Historie in zeitgenössischen Kinder- und Jugendmedien*, “Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children’s and Young Adult Literature” 5, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017, 168.

⁹ David Almond, “Orpheus Helped Me Write *A Song for Ella Grey*”, *The Guardian*, 19 November 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/19/david-almond-song-for-ella-grey-guardian-childrens-prize-fiction-winner-2015> (accessed 4 May 2020).

The emphasized parts of the first paragraph explain why retellings of the myth that highlight the youth of the Orpheus and Eurydice figures, and other main characters as friends and onlookers, are particularly powerful in expressing love and loss, regardless of the age of the reader: this focus on their youth removes any cynical, jaded, or resigned attitudes in the face of major life experiences that may have been undergone multiple times already, by reminding us of how it was to go through them for the first time, seeing them through the eyes of the young adult characters.¹⁰ The novel is perhaps for this reason as powerful for an adult audience as for a young adult one, so that it succeeds as another version of that universal story, transcending the very local and the very contemporary setting.

Almond's description of the novel goes on to provide a synopsis that will be useful for readers who are unfamiliar with *A Song for Ella Grey*, up to the point where the traditional Orpheus story takes over:

They live by the Tyne. They are sixth formers in a comprehensive. They love music and each other. They yearn for joy and freedom. They travel north and have parties on the beach. They try to turn Northumberland into Greece. They try to think that the sun is warm and the sea is not icy. They sing and dance with abandon. Orpheus appears among them one morning as the sun rises over the sea, and he begins to sing them into a new understanding of themselves. Eurydice is Ella Grey, a girl who is not even there when he first appears. She hears his voice through the mobile phone of her best friend, Claire. It is enough: she knows she has always known him and he has always known her. The ancient love is recreated and so it all begins again. Claire is the narrator. She is also in love with Ella Grey. She watches, recounts, tries to share her friend's joy and calm her own fears. But she can do nothing to stem the trajectory of the ancient, lovely, terrible tale.¹¹

¹⁰ See Michael Cadnum, "Beyond the World: Gossip, Murder, and the Legend of Orpheus", in Owen Hodkinson and Helen Lovatt, eds., *Classical Reception and Children's Literature: Greece, Rome and Childhood Transformation*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018, 38–49; Hodkinson, "Interview with Michael Cadnum", 50–63; and Hodkinson, "Michael Cadnum's Metamorphoses", 64–86, on Cadnum's retelling of the Orpheus myth, *Nightsong* (2006), in which Orpheus is portrayed as very youthful, and on Cadnum's reasons for preferring writing characters with young voices (focalizing young characters) as well as his hinting at some of the more mature themes present in the myth. See further Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Orpheus and Eurydice: Reception of a Classical Myth in International Children's Literature", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, 291–306, on other children's and young adult versions of the Orpheus myth.

¹¹ Almond, "Orpheus Helped Me Write".

The novel is very unusual among modern retellings of the myth (especially those for younger readers) in including Orpheus' death, torn apart by women,¹² rather than stopping at the end of the Orpheus and Eurydice story. In this chapter, however, I focus on the central figure of Ella, Claire's love for her, and the novel's portrayal of Claire dealing with the loss of Ella. Orpheus' death (if indeed Claire does not entirely invent his alien intrusion into their world and subsequent death as part of her process of therapeutic myth-telling, as discussed below) does not affect her in the same way, as he interacts primarily with Ella; therefore, my analysis of Claire's love and loss does not explore the wider Orpheus myth as retold in the novel.

The following excerpts from the novel illustrate the mixing of local specificity with the universality of the story which is a recurring theme. Ella and Claire are paddling in the urban river Ouseburn at a locked gate where the water flows out from the city but rubbish catches up against it (Ella is speaking to Claire):

"This water's come from everywhere. From in the hills, The Cheviots, The Simonsides, The Pennines, from little springs high on the moors, [...] and it'll flow down the Tyne to mingle with the sea..."¹³

"Feel it?" she whispered.

Yes. I felt how the bars vibrated with the endless flowing of the water over them.

"And hear the music they make?"

...yes.

"This gate is like his [Orpheus'] lyre, Claire," she said.

[...]

"When I heard him [singing] on the phone, it was like I heard everything, Claire."

[...]

"The water and the music it makes. The music of everything. It is him, and we were with him for a little time."

[...]

"The music in everything is him." (SEG, 91–92)

The girls feel connected to all rivers and the sea, and thus to the whole world; and Ella makes the surprising comparison between this dirty, litter-catching gate, humming with the movement of the world's waters, and the lyre of Orpheus

¹² E.g., Ov., *Met.* 11.1–66.

¹³ David Almond, *A Song for Ella Grey*, London: Hodder, 2015 (ed. pr. 2014), 89. Henceforth SEG; all quotations and references are to this edition.

and its music. In the same passage, the repetition of “everything” along with “everywhere” and “endless” emphasizes the universality of Orpheus’ music, and its being identified with the world. His story of first love, and of love lost, is a universal story. This universality is not only one of place, but also of time:

[Ella speaking] “I’ve known him before, Claire. And he’s known me. He’s known all of us. You have to believe it.” (SEG, 93)

This utterance is one among many points in the novel that raise the idea that the Orpheus who appears in Northumberland and befriends the teenagers has somehow returned, and that his story has been repeated over the ages in different places, in a cyclical fashion. (The metaphysics of this are left vague in the novel: there is no explication through the medium of time travel or portals to alternative worlds, as found in a great many children’s novels. It is rather more in the mode of magic realism in its introduction of mythical elements into a realistic setting with no transition or explanation.) This vague idea of repetition, or a cyclical story, fits with the idea that the Orpheus myth represents *any* group of youths’ first experiences of love and loss: while the time and place have changed in this iteration, it is a universal experience that they are going through.

At the unofficial “wedding” between Orpheus and Ella on the beach at Bamburgh, the combination of the characters’ imaginations, activities, and accessories, along with Orpheus’ presence and his music, transforms and transfigures the very familiar local setting, for them, into the Greece of Orpheus, at the same time connecting it with the whole world, as the local and personal partake of the universal story again:

We threw away all thoughts of home, of the world we’d left behind. We entered Italy, Greece, our transformed selves, the transfigured North. (SEG, 156)

Orpheus sang and played. Northumberland was Greece... The music played Orpheus, played all of us and played the world. Sand drifted down from the dunes to hear him. The marram grass tilted to him... From their hiding-places in the dunes, the adders slithered out and slithered out... (SEG, 157)

Simple music from a simple lyre and a youthful voice on a Northern beach. Simple music that came from the furthest places of the universe, the depths of time, from the darkest unknown recesses of ourselves. It was the song of everything, all life, all love, all creation. It was his song for my friend Ella Grey. (SEG, 158)

Orpheus' love song for Ella Grey is the universal expression of love, and by partaking of this story, the very specific locale partakes of a universal setting and becomes anywhere and everywhere in the world.¹⁴

Besides love, death is the other universal of human experience that the Orpheus myth tells again in every place and time. When Orpheus (who at this point in the narrative is actually Claire playing the role of Orpheus in order to try to bring back her best friend: see further below on the narrative of this part of the novel) descends to the Underworld to plead for Ella's return, the personified Death's mocking reaction points out that death is the universal story-ending, and that Orpheus' stories and songs are ineffective against it:¹⁵

Then a stream of mocking voices.
 "Stupid bliddy crackpot singer."
 "There's nae such things as tales doon here."
 "There's just the ends of tales."
 [...]
 "And all the ends is just the same."
 [...]
 "And then she died and then she died and then!
 And then she died and then she died and then!
 [...]
 "The End! The E-E-E-E-E End!"
 "The end the end the end the end the end.
 The end the end the end the end the end.
 The end the end the end the end the end [...]." (SEG, 212-213)

Death itself is therefore the universal and the only story (and Orpheus' music, even though it charms and "plays" everything and everyone else, is ineffective against death); but this being the case, Orpheus as the supreme storyteller and musician recognizes that death is an integral part of the world, of this "music of everything" referred to earlier: the voices of Death "speak the harmony made by the deepest and the sweetest strings" (SEG, 217). Claire, through taking on the role of Orpheus, begins to recognize and accept these facts about her first experience of the loss of a friend through death, and the futility of her quest;

¹⁴ Cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Unerwartete Wendung", 168: "[T]he term 'Song' implicitly refers to Orpheus as the archetype of the singer" ([D]er Begriff 'Song' implizit auf Orpheus als den Archetyp des Sängers rekurriert"; my translation).

¹⁵ These pages, and the whole section in which Orpheus is in the Underworld, employ unusual typography, including being white print on black paper throughout.

only through accepting its reality rather than fighting against it (the “denial” stage of the influential model of “five stages of grief” as proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross)¹⁶ can she begin to process her grief and see hope for her life beyond the loss of her friend.

Representations of Love

The novel deals with a variety of kinds of love in the characters’ lives, besides the obvious one in the relationship between Orpheus and Ella, which, while being central to the Orpheus myth plot, is far from being the only important love for the novel as a whole. The following passages illustrate the strength of the mutual love of Orpheus and Ella, including the idea that it is a completely new experience, a first love, despite the eternal or cyclical nature of the story and its mythical protagonist:

[Ella speaking] “He says in all his travelling, he’s never met anybody else like me.”

“[...] he says the same as me – that he’s known me always.”

“[...] I feel like I exist more than I ever have before.” (*SEG*, 99–100)

“This is my love,” he [Orpheus] said. “The one I’ve loved from the very first moment, the one I loved before I even saw her. And she’s the one that has loved me.” (*SEG*, 143–144)

Another very important love is the platonic friendship between the close-knit group of young friends, which is described by the narrator as “love”, and is also central to their identity: “[T]he group was us. [...] We loved each other”. Within the group, they sometimes have relationships as couples, but the group dynamic is more important, and these passing pairings are not described as love:

We always said there was magic in the air down by the Ouseburn [...]. We scoffed at the kids who weren’t like us, [...] who already talked about careers, or bliddy mortgages and pensions. Kids wanting to be old before they

¹⁶ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, New York, NY: Macmillan, 1969. Of course, this model was intended to apply to a person learning that they have a terminal illness coming to accept it, not to the bereaved; but its widespread reception in non-specialist literature, media, etc., frequently bears hallmarks of its influence misapplied to the bereaved, of which this might well be an example.

were young. Kids wanting to be dead before they'd lived [...]. We plundered charity shops for vintage clothes. We bought battered Levis and gorgeous faded velvet stuff from Attica in High Bridge. We wore coloured boots, hemp scarves from Gaia. We read Baudelaire and Byron [...]. Sometimes we paired off, made couples that lasted for a little while, but the group was us. We hung together. We could say anything to each other. We loved each other. (SEG, 16)¹⁷

In fact the love of Claire for her best friend (and more), Ella, is arguably the central love of the narrative, rather than that between Orpheus and Ella, because of the status of Claire as the narrator and focalizer for most of the novel. This love is a first love, too, of sorts: they have known each other since they were small, and in recent years the relationship has been more than platonic, though there are no details about this aspect (this is the love that caused some to say the novel is not for young readers). Their love is thus a lifelong friendship, combined with an unrequited love that Claire feels for Ella. Therefore, when Ella's relationship with Orpheus is beginning, the portrayal of this love is bound up with Claire's loss of one kind of first love, while Ella is outgrowing this in some ways and experiencing her own first love, of a more consequential kind (because requited). We see their interactions in the first case when Ella is asking Claire to act as the father of the bride at the unofficial wedding and "give her away" to Orpheus:

"You've been everything to me," [Ella] whispered. "Ever since the day we met in primary school. Remember?" (SEG, 103)

Later, on the day of the "wedding", Ella demands, and receives, declarations and promises of love from Claire – but gives none in return, and monosyllabically accepts them with "Good":

"You're so beautiful, Ella," I told her.

I tried to tell her more, but the words I had were not enough. [...] I just held her close, closer. I ached to protect her from all darkness, all pain, and all death.

She shifted away when I asked if she'd like to sleep in my tent tonight. (SEG, 133–134)

¹⁷ Note in this passage also the hints at Hellenism in the names of shops and brands: the beginnings of the assimilation of the Northumbrian setting to a mythical Greece.

"And will you love me always, Claire? [...] Will you? Say yes, Claire!" [...]
"I will love you for ever, Ella Grey."
"And you will never abandon me."
"I will never abandon you. I am yours, Ella Grey, until the very end of time."
"Good," she said. (SEG, 151)

All the various qualities of love are finally brought together and compared by Ella's parents, after her inevitable death: the love of the foster parents who brought her up and "gave her *everything*", of Ella and her parents, who were like a second family to her, and of Orpheus:

"We're devastated," said Mum. "We loved her so very much."
"She was like another daughter," said Dad [...].
"[...] you loved her, she knew that," said Dad.
"Love?" said Mrs Grey. "It was more than love. We gave her *everything*."
[...]
[Claire's mother:] "We saw how much he loved her, Mrs Grey."
"Ah, that thing called love again! So you loved her like a best friend, and you loved her like a daughter, and you all saw how this wastrel loved her too, and you told us nothing, [...] and you let him lead her to her *death*?
[...] Is this what your idea of love is? That it involves secrets and lies and ends in death? What about the love that we had for her? what about the love that would have protected her and kept her safe?" (SEG, 168–169)

Claire's family met Orpheus with Ella, but did not inform Ella's stricter, more protective foster parents about it, and are thus blamed by them for not protecting her, and have their version of the meaning of love questioned.

Similarly, when Orpheus does not come to the funeral, Claire herself questions his love:

Orpheus? No one knew where he had gone. Hadn't been seen since he ran off that day at Bamburg.
It's grief, some said.
It's guilt. He's the one that charmed her. He's the one she followed into the dunes.
None of that. It's simply that he'd never bliddy cared at all. [...] He never loved her. How can he have loved her if he leaves her like this?
Not even at the funeral. Not even at the bliddy grave.
I lay awake at night and wept.

Ella. I wouldn't have left you. I wouldn't have made you follow me barefooted into the dunes. I would have kept you at my side. I would have loved you always. (SEG, 175)

In her grief, Claire reiterates her own, undying love for her lost friend, and compares her love, as one who would have protected her, with that of Orpheus, blaming him for not doing so.

Finally, those involved in and those who witness the modern Orpheus story begin to turn against the bereaved Orpheus, and start rumours of his loving exclusively boys thereafter – another part of the original myth that is not often retold,¹⁸ which leads to his dismemberment by rejected womankind:

[Sam:] "All he wants these days is lads, [...] that's what the story is."

[...] "It's hopeless, isn't it?" he said.

"You care nowt for me, do you?" he said.

[...] "What's wrong with me, then?"

No answer.

"Mebbe you should find another Ella," he said, "and not bother with bliddy lads at all." (SEG, 248–249)

In this passage, Claire is obsessively seeking out Orpheus with the help of one of the friendship group, Sam, who loves her with a strength of feeling she does not reciprocate. He reproaches her with her love for the dead Ella and suggests that she too should stick to her own gender.

Coping with Loss

The two central loves of the novel, both for Ella, give rise to its two central stories of loss. Claire loses Ella twice – first to Orpheus, then to death:

"Just think," she [Ella] said, "if you hadn't phoned, I wouldn't have heard a bliddy thing."

"No," I said.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Ov., *Met.* 10.83–85. On modern children's authors' approaches to such themes in Ovid, in addition to the works cited above, n. 10, see Deborah H. Roberts, "The Metamorphosis of Ovid in Retellings of Myth for Children", in Lisa Maurice, ed., *The Reception of Greece and Rome in Children's Literature: Heroes and Eagles*, "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 6, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2015, 233–256, esp. 244–256.

Thud, went my heart, then *thud* again.

"That's true," I said.

He won't turn up. He's duped us, charmed us, tricked us. He's just a traveller, a singing tramp. He's gone forevermore. Thank God for that. Good riddance to him. Go to Hell, Orpheus. And leave my lovely friend alone.
(SEG, 127)

Claire's heart is broken in a particularly cruel way, because she brings about this first loss herself. She phones Ella when all the other friends first meet Orpheus and makes her listen to him singing over the phone – Ella's parents were too strict to let her go on this particular group outing. Claire ends up saying to herself he will not turn up for the "wedding", and wanting rid of him, dismissing him as an unreliable charmer.¹⁹

Shortly after the "wedding", of course, both Claire and Orpheus lose Ella forever, taken away by death. Her death, like the appearance of Orpheus, is made by the English setting to seem an intrusion from the mythical world into the otherwise normal lives of the teenage characters, because there are no lethally poisonous snakes in Britain: she is bitten by Britain's only poisonous snake, the adder, but this in reality should not be enough to kill a fully grown human²⁰ – hence Claire's statement that "[t]hey're just adders. [...] They can't kill. She'll be safe", as well as the emphasis on the size of the lethal bite marks:²¹

¹⁹ The inevitability of this love and thus of Ella's loss is expressed in a way that further emphasizes the cyclical nature of the myth – the idea that Ella is simply the latest player of the Eurydice role: "I saw [...] how happy he was, as happy as she. They were teenagers, like me, like all of us. It could have been any of us lying there like them, transformed by love. But *could* it have been any of us? Did it *have* to be these two, Ella and Orpheus, Orpheus and Ella? Were their fates sealed long ago, long before they even heard each other, saw each other, [...] even knew the other existed?" (SEG, 150).

²⁰ "Statistically you have more chance of being killed by a wasp than dying at the teeth of Britain's only venomous snake", according to *The Independent*; see Daniel Butler, "Bitten by an Adder – 'The Doctors Were Worse'", *The Independent*, 23 October 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/bitten-by-an-adder-the-doctors-were-worse-1339277.html> (accessed 17 July 2019); the UK's National Health Service advises that "snake bites, particularly those that occur in the UK, usually aren't serious and are only very rarely deadly"; see "Snake Bites", NHS, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/snake-bites> (accessed 17 July 2019).

²¹ Cf. also SEG, 163: "[The policeman:] 'They can't have [killed her]. [...] Not the adders. Yes they'll bite, and yes they'll cause you pain and yes they'll cause you sickness for a little time. But kill? No, never... Or very very rarely,' he whispered". He, too, is incredulous, adding to the impression of the impossibility (the "magical" nature) of Ella's death in what had seemed a realistic setting. I do not think, with Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Unerwartete Wendung", 179, that the cause of Ella's death remains in the dark because of the very-rarely deadly nature of the adder's bite, nor that this therefore contributes to the case for Claire as an unreliable narrator. Since there is no

I touched the tiny tiny bite marks.

"They're just adders," I said. "They can't kill. She'll be safe. Ella! Oh, Ella!"

[...]

"Don't die!" I screamed into her ear. "Don't bliddy die, Ella Grey!" (SEG, 162)

Her distress is elevated by the shock at the seemingly impossible situation, which continues the novel's magical-realist tendencies; but her reaction then becomes a real, harrowing portrayal of a young person's first experience of death – shock, combined with an utter refusal to accept the reality of death (denial); commanding the departed not to die, to come back, and wanting to physically drag the dead back from the grave:

I wanted to leap down, smash the coffin open, haul her back...

[...] I hated it all. I cursed it all.

Death. Stupid Death.

Come back, Ella Grey! (SEG, 173)

Claire's desire to descend into the hole in the ground and pull Ella back, of course, literalizes the Orphic katabasis, and teaches the young reader familiar with the Orpheus myth as a kind of fairy tale, that it is very real and universal: Orpheus' desire and refusal of acceptance are simply the story of anyone's reaction to death, but perhaps especially the reaction of the young to the first ever death of someone close to them.

In contrast to Claire, Orpheus seems to be able to play by different rules – those of the mythical world whence he came. He, too, cannot accept losing her; he, too, will go into the earth to get her back; but only he is serious about it, and Claire dismisses him as insane when she realizes this:

"Why weren't you *here*?" I said.

"I've been searching." [...]

"Searching for *what*?"

[...]

alternative cause hinted at on any level in the novel, I prefer to see two possibilities put before the reader: either to accept this as one of the very rare cases in which the adder's poison kills, with no embellishment necessary on the part of Claire, or to assume (in the manner of a reader of a magic-realist novel) that, since the intrusion of Orpheus and elements of his myth began, the usual "rules" governing what had appeared a conventionally realist setting become gradually more flexible as the novel goes on.

"For *her*, of course."

[...]

Jesus. He meant it. He was mad, he'd always been mad. I'd led Ella to a madman.

"Ella's dead," I hissed. "She's in the earth."

[...]

"I'm going to go to Death and bring her back."

I groaned. But now I saw the depths of his pain. [...]

His madness was grief. It was the madness of anyone who's lost someone, who can't believe they've gone forever, who can't believe they won't come back.

And I shared the madness. I couldn't believe that my Ella was gone.

I couldn't believe that I'd never see her lovely face again, never feel her touch, never hear her voice. (SEG, 177)

But Claire ascribes his madness to grief, and says that she shares in the same madness: it is the universal truth of the myth. We see here the beginnings of the outworkings of the novel's clash of worlds, the real and the mythical: Claire "knows" that what Orpheus attempts is impossible, in her world, and that someone who believed they could undertake this quest would be labelled as "mad"; yet in the world of the novel, Orpheus' arrival seems to have brought things that do not belong in her real world; and she seems to accept that his ultimately doomed quest to retrieve Ella from the dead did really happen, despite what that would imply about her.

Next Orpheus, in his turn, also loses Ella for the second time – when he looks back. In this part of the novel, Claire takes on Orpheus' voice, puts on a mask representing him, and narrates in the first person: no longer as herself, but as Orpheus:

It's just

the

gentlest

of gentle

touches on my shoulder.

And how could anybody not turn at that?

[...]

Oh, bliddy stupid Orpheus.

Of course Ella Grey was bliddy there. (SEG, 231)

Here, Orpheus is narrating (but in Claire's dialect and voice). Or else Claire is narrating, ventriloquizing Orpheus. The status of the narrative and its claim to truth is unclear; when speaking as Orpheus here, Claire accepts that "[o]f course, Ella Grey was bliddy there" – that is, it really was possible for Orpheus to have brought her back, had he only kept eyes front; and she makes Orpheus, narrating through her, curse himself for being so stupid (or else she curses him). But in the rest of the novel, Claire narrating as herself is a reliable narrator in a largely realistic world – she later doubts the reality of some of the unlikely things she seems to have seen in the presence of Orpheus, an act of questioning that could serve as an authentication device for her unbelievable, strange-but-true narrative. That is, a narrator with the capacity and tendency to question what she has to tell because it seems, very reasonably, implausible to her could just as well function as a *Beglaubigungsapparat* in a fantasy novel, or in any kind of fiction, which we are to accept (within the suspension of disbelief that applies to the whole novel) as really having happened to her.

So is Orpheus' quest simply in Claire's imagination? Does it consist solely in her play-acting it out in the role of Orpheus? Kümmerling-Meibauer assumes that many of the events Claire relates did not really happen, arguing for Claire as an unreliable narrator.²² I would not rule out this reading, but the question is left open, especially because there is deliberate ambiguity about so much of what Claire claims took place: in a novel that provides almost no alternative view of its events to the first-person homodiegetic narrator's, there is no way to decide whether, for example, Ella and Claire met *anyone at all* matching (however loosely) the description Claire gives of Orpheus (did Claire lose her best friend Ella only to death and invent the whole episode of first losing her to a rival lover or boyfriend, of whatever description? If not, how many features of "Orpheus" are real and how many not?); or, for instance, how Ella really died.²³ Because there are so many possible elements and layers of the narration that might each separately be seen to be either wholly untrue, embellished, or magical/mythical-but-true within the bounds of the novel, to see Claire as an unreliable narrator leaves the reader with just as many unanswered questions as would reading the book as a kind of magic-realist narrative in which Orpheus' intrusion into the real world alters the reality of the setting and its accompanying rules.

²² Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Unerwartete Wendung", 178–180.

²³ On this question, see above, p. 658 with nn. 20, 21.

Metaliterary Features of *A Song for Ella Grey*

The backdrop for all of these mythical happenings is the real world they intrude upon – the world of seventeen-year-olds in their last year of high school, taking English lessons, writing their homework on literature, and revising for their final exams. This provides a context for exploring the importance of old, or timeless, stories to the lives of the youths, as Claire and the others question the relevance of such stories, and invite young readers to reflect on this issue too, not least of course with respect to the Orpheus myth that somehow – forcibly – becomes highly pertinent to their reality. Before Orpheus comes along, we see these tensions in the life of Claire and her mother, who worries that her daughter is missing out on real life through all this study of life through literature:

[Claire's mother:] "Essays! They work you far too hard. If I had my way there'd be no school from spring to autumn. What kinds of essays?"

"Love. [...] I've got to write about love."

She flung her hands up in despair. She burst out laughing.

"[...] What's the point in getting the young to write about love? They should be doing love!" (SEG, 79)

The sentiments of Claire's mother are closely echoed by her classmate Bianca, even *after* the events with Orpheus and Ella:

[Bianca:] "It is all so bliddy *boring*."

[...]

"It is all so bliddy *ancient*."

[...]

"*Paradise Lost!*" Bianca went on. "Let's all go abliddy Maying, and my ending is despair and blablablablablabla. We've got our lives to live. We're *young!*" (SEG, 253)

"It's all so bliddy *ancient!*" – and therefore, we infer, not relevant.

But Claire, of course, ends up using stories – telling them to herself, re-enacting them – as a means of dealing with the death of Ella: using myth to give hope in her moment of despair. And at another juncture, we see her, bereaved, composing poetry to celebrate her friend, thus using poetry also in that more conventional way of dealing with her grief:

I tried to write poems in celebration of my friend, tried to stop my words from swerving to gloom. I found myself stealing lines and images from Donne. I must not weep. I would not lose my friend...
Remember me, Ella, I wrote. I am the one who is true. (SEG, 128)

Here, she specifically takes on some of the poetry she has been learning in school, John Donne, and makes a conscious effort not to write a dirge, but something more positive, more hopeful.

These discussions of, and references to, ancient stories, to literature in general, and to their importance or “relevance” to the modern teenagers, are of course metaliterary features of a novel that brings its characters’ lives into close contact with a real-life ancient story. As a narrator, Claire problematizes the novel’s integration of ancient myths that “have no place” in the modern world, and that cannot be explained in its own terms. Her seeming reliability as a narrator is reinforced by her sometime scepticism about events which cannot be explained in that way, which is demonstrated by her use of the language of madness about them. Of the group’s first encounter with Orpheus, she says:

Maybe we were mad that day. Maybe some of the things that seemed to happen didn’t really happen at all. Maybe many of the things that seemed to happen in the days and weeks that followed didn’t really happen. Maybe it was all because we were young, and because being young is like being mad...

But maybe the best things that we do, and the best things that we are, come from madness. (SEG, 51)

She questions the reality of the events of the following weeks, and thus of the whole plot, and puts it down to the “madness” of youth. But this madness is also a positive thing – it is magic, and music, and being young enough to still be open to the charms of Orpheus.

Near the end of the novel, Claire again questions everything, in similar terms, associating madness with youth and first experiences:

I’ll take this earring as well. I found it yesterday. I went down to the Ouseburn to say farewell to the childhood monsters just beyond the gates. There it was... It’s a little white dolphin earring. The gift of Ella, sent from Death. Can that be true?
Yes. No. Maybe.

Maybe it's all been just coincidence, tale-telling, rumour, madness, the madness of being young, the madness of knowing love for the first time, the madness of being alive in this miraculous place. (SEG, 274–275)

This time, however, it is prompted by her finding an earring that belonged to Ella – or at least one identical to it – at the gates in the river Ouseburn, through which Orpheus entered the Underworld in his quest. It is therefore a “gift of Ella, sent from Death”. Claire does not question the reality of this find or its belonging to Ella; but she does question what it seems to imply to her – that Ella really might have been on her way back from death through that gate with Orpheus before he looked back, or that it was otherwise sent back from that other world to hers. This questioning by the narrator of the events she tells, in just a few places, raises similar doubts for the reader about what in her recollections is embellishment and imagination running free, and what is influenced by a cocktail of teenage hormones and alcohol. But as a character, she seems to dismiss such doubts and accept the reality of the events; the effect of this combined with her apparent reliability might be to further authenticate her narrative, rather than to undermine it, as discussed above.²⁴

The novel's most metaliterary moments come when Claire is preparing herself to take on the role of Orpheus in order to narrate the Underworld quest for Ella, and during this quest:

“I found Death,” he said. “And I found her, and I almost brought her back.”
He plucked the strings again and whispered, sang and told the tale.

[...]

It's the tale that I must tell as well.

But how to tell such a tale that fits with nothing in the world we know?
How to tell a tale that's nothing to do with modern young people like me,
like you?

Go back to the start, Claire. Find the entrance to this part of the tale.

Go back to being a child. Tell it as a child would, as we did as children all those years ago, when we put on masks and became other than ourselves, when we became deer, mice, babies, old men, goblins, aliens, so that we could tell our tales more easily.

²⁴ Alternatively, it marks her as an unreliable narrator, as suggested by Kümmerling-Meibauer, discussed above, n. 22. Either way, there would be the same role for myth and storytelling, and the same metaliterary comment on ancient myth, as a kind of therapy or coping strategy for Claire, who retells her story of Ella and her death with more or less (an impossible-to-determine proportion) truth and embellishment.

I'll make a mask.

I'll disappear.

I'll put on a mask, and let Orpheus breathe through me, speak through me.

I'll make the mask of Orpheus and let him sing his tale through me. (SEG, 189–190)

Here we see the returned Orpheus about to tell Claire the story of how he almost succeeded. But rather than give us the story by quoting his direct speech or by relaying it in indirect speech – the two most obvious narrative strategies here – Claire decides that there is only one way in which she can “tell such a tale that fits with nothing in the world we know [...], a tale that’s nothing to do with modern young people like me, like you”. She has to dress up in a costume and mask, in childlike fashion, as Orpheus, and give us a first-person narration speaking as Orpheus. This dressing up, for Claire the narrator, facilitates telling tales – and it removes responsibility for authenticating the narrative, distancing narrator-Claire further from the reader and from herself, her sometimes sceptical character-narrator, who, we are told, “disappears”. This narrative strategy gives us the extended first-person katabasis account of Orpheus but with Claire’s accent and dialect (some of this is quoted above). It is also set apart from the rest of the book by being printed in white text on black pages throughout, and by the play with different type settings and fonts.

Finally, here is another excerpt from Orpheus-Claire’s first-person narration of the katabasis:

[I]nfants dream of monsters, the young dream dreams of love, the old dream dreams of being young.

Do some of the young dream of snakes on dunes?

Do they dream of what’s happening now below, of Orpheus looking for Ella? Mebbe it’s Claire that dreams this dream, Orpheus wading through this darkness towards Death. (SEG, 201)

The blending of the narrators’ (Claire’s and Orpheus’) voices here collapses some of the distance that Claire had created by putting on Orpheus’ mask and persona. Claire, narrating as Orpheus, recalls some of the things that she had said earlier in the novel, when speaking as herself, about childhood dreams of monsters; her questions about what some young people might dream about include the very specific “snakes on sand dunes”, something that she of all

young people has had particular reason to dream about since Ella's death. Then Claire-Orpheus asks whether young people dream of "what's happening now below, of Orpheus looking for Ella". The narrator *almost* naturally uses Orpheus' name, even though she is supposed to be speaking as Orpheus, and so might rather ask "Do they dream of me?", because it focalizes the dreaming youngsters rather than Orpheus. But this, too, breaks down the distance between the two narrators' voices at this point, and further separates it by saying – markedly in Claire's accent – "Mebbe it's Claire that dreams this dream". So is Claire actually in costume and mask as Orpheus narrating what he has told her? Or is she only dreaming that she does this, and sliding between her person and his in a dream-state? And how far does the dream extend? Did Orpheus really come and tell her any story of a quest? Did he ever come to her group of friends at all? (Questions that Claire as narrator asks about the whole plot elsewhere, as we have seen.) Nothing is clearly answered: Claire, in the mask and voice of Orpheus, narrates Orpheus' story that he had narrated to her; but while narrating as him, she asks whether she merely dreams him doing what she says he is doing.

Conclusion

A Song for Ella Grey does not end with this passage, but includes it at the appropriate point in the Orpheus myth; and Claire does not question later events, like the dismembering of Orpheus by the women, except as implied in those isolated general doubts about what did and did not happen and the madness of youth. So Almond does not simply play the cheap trick of "it was all just a dream", and undermine the whole narrative, or even the katabasis part – at least not in a simplistic and therefore disappointing way. He leaves these distinctions blurry, like the boundaries between the mythical world of Orpheus and the "real" world of the protagonists in general, and like the metaphysics of the whole plot: if Claire is an unreliable narrator, how much and which parts of what occurs outside the katabasis episode really took place is impossible to determine; if we accept her account at least of (all, most, or some of) those surrounding parts of the narrative – that is, the majority of the novel, in which her voice is not blurred with that of Orpheus – the same questions pose themselves. These doubts about reality are central to Almond's portrayal of the young person's first experience of death, or anyone's experience of loss: the common reactions of shock and denial, of the event's not "seeming real" to the

bereaved before it (often over a long time) comes to be accepted as fact, are mirrored by the uncertainties for the reader surrounding all aspects of Claire's experience.

So much for the narrative strategy of Claire ventriloquizing Orpheus. As a *character*, however, Claire taking on Orpheus' identity is explicitly marked as a regression to childhood make-believe; it is a device that she expressly states will make it easier for her to tell the kind of stories and make sense of the kinds of things that do not fit into her reality, that do not make sense in her world, like the unreal-seeming, unacceptable losses of her best friend to another love and to death.

Playing the part of Orpheus, entering into a world in which she (as Orpheus) literally confronts death, and accepting at the end that she cannot bring Ella back, no matter how much she desires it or strives for it, is a part of her learning about and having the first experiences of love and loss. By this episode, Almond has the novel comment metafictionally about the power of stories and myths, in whatever form – Orpheus' story standing as universal symbol for all narratives.

Claire learns about death through ancient stories, realizing the relevance and utility of them along the way, in the wider context of a group of young people who are studying literature and questioning the value of these ancient stories. This is narrative as therapy.²⁵ What Claire does in narrating as Orpheus in the middle of the novel should be read as a *mise en abyme* of the whole novel, of which she also is the first-person narrator, and in which she cannot be entirely sure of the reality of the events she narrates. As a character, we see that she keeps notebooks and journals, writes literature herself,²⁶ and uses stories and words – much as dreams are supposed to function – as a way of gradually sifting over, remembering, and dealing with events after they have occurred.

The act of narration that constitutes the whole novel, then, can be read as one further such act of narrative as therapy: of using the Orpheus myth in her own piece of creative writing to help her deal with the loss of her love, Ella. Just as Orpheus wrote a "song for my friend Ella Grey" (*SEG*, 158, quoted above)

²⁵ For the use of ancient myths in therapeutic contexts, see this volume's chapters by Susan Deacy, "Hercules: Bearer of Hope for Autistic Children?", 251–274; Edoardo Pecchini, "Promoting Mental Health through the Classics: Hercules as Trainer in Today's Labours of Children and Young People", 275–325; and Krzysztof Rybak, "All Is (Not) Lost: Myth in the Shadow of the Holocaust in *Bezszenność Jutki* [Jutka's Insomnia] by Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala", 629–644.

²⁶ See, e.g., *SEG*, 29–30, 37, 66–67, 128.

as a kind of epithalamium, Claire has written the novel “a song for Ella Grey” as both an act of literary commemoration, and as a fictionalizing journal to help her come to terms with her loss; to give herself comfort and hope, however gradually, after the despair of her first experiences of loss.²⁷

²⁷ As Kümmerling-Meibauer, “Unerwartete Wendung”, 172, notes, “[t]he open ending [of *SEG*] means that there is no happy ending in the conventional sense” ([d]er offene Schluss [...] bewirkt, dass es kein Happy Ending im konventionellen Sinne gibt; my translation), referring to the enigmatic open ending of the novel’s last sentence: “[Orpheus] comes, singing his way to my mouth, and there, just behind him, is beautiful beloved Ella, coming out from Death” (*SEG*, 276). Rather than a “Wunschbild” or “Wahnvorstellung”, I take this, given the immediately prior context (*SEG*, 276: “I put [the mask of Orpheus] on now, the final act of telling this tale all night [...]. Sing through me, Orpheus, as I speak these last words... Lose yourself, Claire... And oh! He comes!”), to refer to Orpheus and Ella coming to Claire’s lips as she speaks their names and tells their story again. But the ending, and indeed the whole novel as we have seen, is certainly open to reading on many levels. This allows Almond to avoid playing down the difficulty of coming to terms with death and thereby creating an unbelievable portrayal of Claire’s response: room is left for hope, while at the same time acknowledging the awful reality of the experience for Claire and for teenagers like her who lose someone at this early stage of their lives.