



David Almond

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Slide Shows

David Almond, interviewed in Calgary, Alberta on November 3, 2004.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your first young adult novel, *Skellig*, won the 1998 Carnegie Medal and Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award. Since then, you have written a string of distinguished and award-winning YA novels, including *Kit's Wilderness*, *Heaven Eyes* and *The Fire-Eaters*. All of them are similar in that they have a sort of spirituality woven throughout.

DAVID ALMOND: I think the spiritual elements in the books are elements that, in a sense, I'm not aware of; because what you write is just how you are. You know, you can't say, "I'm going to hammer in a bit of spirituality here, I'm going to hammer a bit of time travel in there." I write because of the things that drive me to write. So, if there are spiritual elements in it, the spiritual elements are about the world. They're about this world and how we are in this world; I don't think about a transcendent place. But, there are passages that we need to go through in order to become fully human.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What other similarities are there among your books?

DAVID ALMOND: A lot of the characters in my books begin by being quite alone. But, through forging relationships and forging a life for themselves and communing with other people, they move on to find that they become more themselves by being with other people.

In *Heaven Eyes*, for example, one sees essentially separate and lonely characters. But, together, they make a family. And that family of very lonely, fractured people seems to me to be a very powerful unit. They're a force; they're a society. Something about that sense of solitariness and society is important in all of the books. I think a lot of my work is, in a sense, saying, "We are nothing as individuals. The common unit of people working together seems to me to be the best way forward."

In *Secret Heart*, Joe and Corinna are lonely characters whose coming together in a sense creates a new character. In *Skellig*, Mina, despite her outspokenness, is in fact quite lonely. And Michael is, at the beginning of the book, really pretty lonely. And those two come together and become a unit. It's like Michael is half the character, and Mina is half the character.

In *The Fire-Eaters*, I think there are several examples of people coming together to produce something bigger than themselves; for example, Daniel and Bobby together produce something that's very powerful.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Whereas your books are not typical coming-of-age stories, there is a fair amount of growth that occurs for your characters.

DAVID ALMOND: I think what happens in a lot of cases in my books is that the kids perform courageous acts. A child or a couple of children go out into somewhere that's really dangerous and perform an act that is very difficult that could lead them into greater danger. But, through

working together and through working with a kind of spirit of hope and optimism, they come back again to the world. And they've changed in the process. And because they've changed, when they come back again, the world's changed.

Part of growing up is that you do these things: You challenge yourself to grow up and to move on and to become something different again. You become adult.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Skellig* features a character by the same name that is half-man, half-creature. How would you describe him?

DAVID ALMOND: People will often say, "Ah, here's the man who wrote the book. He has the answer. So then everybody's quiet and then often the teacher will say, "So, David, what is Skellig?" And really I don't have any answers except for the answers that are in the book. And at the end of the book the answer is kind of mysterious. It's an answer that I suppose has an absence to it. But I think like lots of life it can't be totally explained. And, I didn't feel when I was writing the book that I should come in at the end and say "Ah-ha, this is the solution to the mystery of Skellig." He is a creature that was discovered by Michael and Mina, but at the same time, he remains undiscovered.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did the name "Skellig" come to be?

DAVID ALMOND: When I began writing the book I didn't have a clue what the book was going to be about. I didn't have a clue what the creature in the garage was. During the first half of the book, Mina and Michael keep saying to Skellig, "What are you, who are you?" He keeps on saying, "I'm Mr. Bones, I'm Mr. Had Enough," and "I'm nothing, I'm nobody, go away." Then, when they've lifted Skellig out of the garage and put him into the room, Mina kind of points at him and says, "Who are you?" And I thought, "By this time, I should know." So, I literally looked up from the keyboard and in front of me was a book that I'd bought the previous year on a visit to Ireland and it was called *The Skellig Islands*. And I'd been the previous year to try and see the Skellig Islands.

Unconsciously, looking at the islands across the sea was a huge influence on the writing of the book. So in some way, in some strange symbolic way, the book is about the Skellig Islands. I looked up and I thought, "Oh, this guy's called Skellig. And then I thought about the Skellig Islands and I thought, "Dear me, one of the islands is called Skellig Michael. And Skellig Michael is named after the archangel Michael." This was like one of those wonderful serendipitous moments that you have as a writer when it's like the world's helping you to write the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Skellig is angel-like, complete with wings.

DAVID ALMOND: Skellig does have a kind of angelic aspect. He's part angel, part something else, part something else. And his angelic-ness comes from my Catholic past where it is taken for granted that there are angels that exist. And people did talk about seeing angels. And, part of this comes from when I was small, and my mother would put her hands under my shoulder blades and say, "Do you know what these are? This is where your wings were when you were an angel." So Skellig comes very directly from a physical sensation of feeling my mother's fingers under my shoulder blades. It also comes from the fact that I think right through time there've been stories about creatures that are like us but that have wings.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Before *Skellig*, you wrote for adults. How did you come to tell Skellig's story?

DAVID ALMOND: The story of Skellig just came out of the blue. It was like it had been waiting for its opportunity. And when I began to write, I was halfway down the first page and I thought, "Oh, this is a story for children," and I felt liberated and excited.

I knew it would start with a boy finding something on a Sunday afternoon in a garage. And I just had that one piece as I was walking along the street. I knew it was a good idea, because it came with a fizz and a buzz about it. It came with such energy, that I just dashed back to where I was staying, and started to write it down. And the book just wrote itself. The book happened to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You said you felt "liberated" when you began writing for children. Can you elaborate?

DAVID ALMOND: Since I became a children's writer, I know I'm writing better than I ever did before. It's something to do with the nature of the audience and the nature of the children's book world. People ask me, "Do you ever think you're going to go back and write an adult book?" And I say, "Well, maybe I'll come across an idea or I'll find myself writing a book that I think is deliberately for adults. But at the moment it's very difficult for me to see the distinction." I mean, I do write for kids, but I know that the books that I'm writing are the best books I can write at the moment. Stories can be read by anyone. I'm very free, and I'm very happy.

TEACHINGBOOKS: After *Skellig* came *Kit's Wilderness*, which is richly told through the language and landscape of Northern England.

DAVID ALMOND: Yes, I live in the north of England, and that fact is quite important. I have a different accent than you'd think of as stereotypically English, since physically I'm much closer to Scotland than I am to London. I think the influences on me are quite different from a lot of the influences that might be on a writer from the southeast of England. The North has a kind of rich industrial past and a rich past further back. I'm influenced by our own storytelling language, including one of our first great writers — Bede — who wrote an *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, which sounds so tedious, but actually was one of the first great books ever written down. So I feel as if I'm drawing on something that is actually really pretty powerful and hasn't quite been recognized by mainstream English culture. I feel as if I'm exploring and discovering a kind of new world.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The landscape in *Kit's Wilderness* is almost like a character.

DAVID ALMOND: Yes. I began *Kit's Wilderness* with a sense of where the story would be placed, and as the book developed, the landscape grew along with the story. It began in quite a small area of the northeast of England, but as the story developed the landscape had to get bigger as well, so I opened it up.

The landscape was such a rich thing to work with. Like, when Kit's grandfather is talking about his days as a coal miner, and he talks about dropping down through the landscape. I

remember the moment when I wrote his line that he was a time traveler, because when he went down to the coal mine he felt he was going down through time. The landscape wasn't just a fixed object, but it had hidden depths as well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have a multitude of characters in *Kit's Wilderness*.

DAVID ALMOND: *Kit's Wilderness* was a great challenge and a great joy to write. It was a great joy to have a character like Grandpa who, in a sense, holds the story together. He's the one that Kit keeps going back to or keeps looking for. When readers arrive at a point of contact with Grandpa, they think that everything's going to be okay; then, off they go again.

And it was great to write about a character like Askew, who appears so dark and dangerous. But the trajectory of the book is to find what Kit wants to find, which is the good insights and the child inside the growing boy of Askew.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Being from a mining community, what parts of your own past are included in *Kit's Wilderness*?

DAVID ALMOND: I wanted to write about a field with a coal mine underneath it; it was very much like the landscape that surrounded my first primary school. I also wanted to write a story about a mining disaster, because the town that I grew up in had a famous mining disaster when 97 men and boys were killed one afternoon. And, we used to go and play around the monument to that pit disaster. On the pit monument, there are just the names of all the people who had died that day. So, I was taking that.

I wanted to write about the past. I wanted to write about that mining disaster and the impact that it has today. I also wanted to write about men. I wanted to write about men who had worked in heavy industry, because in England they're often seen as just being rough, tough, bruising men. But, my experience was that those men — like Kit's grandfather — were actually very tender and had a kind of great facility with language. So, I wanted to put tender stories into the mind and imagination of a man who had lived in a very tough, rough industry. And, I wanted to show him passing something down.

Finally, I wanted to say something about storytelling, that storytelling is something that is about time and generations, about things getting passed down from here, til then, til right into the future. And they come right from the past, which was the link between the cave boy Lak, and the pit and the story and the future....

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about the experience of writing *Kit's Wilderness*.

DAVID ALMOND: I got a scholarship to go and live in a Scottish castle for a month to write. I wrote a lot of the first half of *Kit's Wilderness* when I was there. As I was writing it, many complexities began to develop. It was difficult, and it took a lot out of me.

I walked through the castle one day thinking, "I can't do this. It's too hard." But then I thought, "Well, yes, you can, of course you can." And I also had this feeling that maybe the story was a bit too dark and maybe it was a bit too difficult for young readers, and I just had to say, "Well, you can write it. You have to challenge yourself to write it, and you have to trust your readers, so get back to the desk and write it."

I remember the moment when Lak, the boy from the Ice Age, emerged into the story. That was another challenge to myself. And I took a deep breath and I thought, "I can do anything." It

was like I had to say that to myself. And I just took off and wham, I hit into the second half of the novel and it just roared along. After I finished, I was in bed for a week.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is it about your characters' voices that feels so lyrical?

DAVID ALMOND: I think of writing as being very similar to music. And a lot of the things that I write down, I'll write down because they sound good. I hope they have a meaning and they have help to carry the story forwards. But, I'm also interested in the sound and the voices. So, in *Secret Heart*, the voice of, say, Joe Maloney, his little stammering voice and Hackenschmidt's big booming, powerful voice, and Corinna flying across the tent all somehow blend to make a kind of music. And that's what I'm kind of hoping to achieve. I want you to see things, but also I want you to almost hear something going on.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books are filled with vivid imagery.

DAVID ALMOND: In my writing, I try to use the senses a lot. Kids will often write to me and say, "You do really well at describing the world because you use lots of adjectives." And I'll write back to them and say, "Well, actually I don't do that. What I want to do is to draw the reader in by giving them lots of things to touch and feel and to smell and to hear and to see. That's the way to draw a reader into a book."

My aim, as a writer, is to get the reader absorbed into the story. And the best letters I get from kids are the ones where they say, "I felt like I was in your book, you know, I was in there. I was with Kit." And that's the response I want as a writer. It's nice to have an objective, intellectual response, but the great response is when someone is absorbed in a book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Heaven Eyes* is perhaps the most surreal of your books.

DAVID ALMOND: *Heaven Eyes* is very weird, but it began with a very practical element. In all my books, the thing that has to predominate for me as the writer is the realism. But *Heaven Eyes* has these very peculiar elements that just grew and grew and grew. And *Heaven Eyes* herself — what a strange character. And, her grandpa! What an even stranger character. But, the people holding it together — Erin and January — seem to me to be very strong, courageous and contemporary kids.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you begin writing *Heaven Eyes*?

DAVID ALMOND: When I set off to begin the book, I wanted to send the kids downriver on a raft. I wanted to write about water and the river and to see what happened if you just floated some kids down it. So it really was like, "Off you go, let's see where we go." And then they end up on the Middens.

I remember writing the bit about where the raft flounders in the mud and I got them off of the raft about seven times. And each time they got off the raft something different happened. And each time I thought, "This isn't it, this isn't it, this isn't it." So, then I did it again. And then I wrote that they landed on the Black Middens, they got off the Middens, and then somebody taps Erin on the shoulder. And I thought, "Oh, here it is." And Erin turns around, and there is *Heaven Eyes* who begins speaking in this peculiar voice. I knew that's what I was looking for, though I

hadn't known previously that's what I wanted. But, this was the thing that had been waiting. Heaven Eyes came from some corner of my imagination and I think some corner of my past.

I also wanted to write a book about happiness when I was writing *Heaven Eyes*. All the characters in *Heaven Eyes* have lost everything, and then they find somebody who's lost even more than they have, but she's the happiest of them all. She's kind of heroically happy. I wanted to write about how people can lose everything and seem to be kind of smashed down to almost nothing but can say, "But I'm happy."

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Secret Heart* includes the exotic aspect of a traveling circus and the image of tigers roaming the woods at the edge of an industrial community. How did this story take its shape?

DAVID ALMOND: I was in Madison, Wisconsin, and I bought a book about shaman. It described the shaman as being the kind of character in many societies who goes out into the wilderness, does his dance and sings his song and then comes back with a message to the people and transforms them. I'd just begun to write *Secret Heart* then. And I was thinking, "Joe Maloney's like this; he lives in a kind of very run-down neighborhood, so why can't you have that kind of character and that kind of story happening in a place which is a modern, back end, industrial area of the northeast of England? Why can't this happen there? It doesn't have to happen in a very exotic place." The exoticness of the circus and the tiger kind of helped to drive it forward.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book of short stories, *Counting Stars*, is quite opposite of the exotic — it's about your family when you were growing up.

DAVID ALMOND: When I began to write the stories in *Counting Stars*, which was so important to me, I was writing about insignificant events happening to insignificant people at an insignificant time. It was just me and my brother and sisters and my family. But if you look at them in a particular way, then you become aware that any event can become just totally extraordinary and totally wrapped up in something much bigger. That's why I like the story "Counting the Stars" itself. It's about a father dying in a little house in a little family in a little place. But that's the core of human experience, isn't it?

TEACHINGBOOKS: Because *Counting Stars* was such a personal book for you, was it cathartic to write it?

DAVID ALMOND: When I was writing *Counting Stars*, I found a way of dealing with things that were very close to me, like the death of my sister, the death of my father. I'd tried to write about those things before, but it was just impossible to come at them full on. But framing them in this kind of almost playful storytelling manner, I had a way to deal with things that were very tragic.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your Catholicism is clearly revealed in *Counting Stars*.

DAVID ALMOND: Yeah, I was brought up as a Catholic in quite a big Catholic community in a small England town. For years, I'd deliberately kept out the Catholicism from my work, but then I turned 40, and I looked back into a place that from a distance looked really quite exotic and

strange, with wonderful imagery and characters. So, I said, “Okay, let’s allow that in — because it was obviously so important to me — let’s find a way to construct stories with it.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: Would you say that *Counting Stars* contains the genetic code for your novels?

DAVID ALMOND: *Counting Stars* transformed what I felt I could write about. It made me focus more on elements of my own experience and elements of the experience that I’d grown up with and allowed me a way to move forward to the books that I’m writing now.

For instance, *Skellig* grew out of it. The story in *Counting Stars* called, “Where Your Wings Were,” is very much the core of the *Skellig* story. “The Time Machine,” which is focused on a fair and characters in a fairground was the germination for *The Fire-Eaters*. And the same with *Secret Heart*. The circus in *Secret Heart* grew out of elements of the story in *Counting Stars* called, “Buffalo Camel Llama Zebra Ass.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Fire-Eaters* (which won the Whitbread, the Smarties Gold Award and was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal) is a story about a single child and his family, but it is also about historic, global events. What was the origin of this book?

DAVID ALMOND: Before I wrote *The Fire-Eaters*, I was writing another book called *The Apprentice*, which was this kind of vague, wandering, loose-limbed thing. And I was admiring all the beautiful passages. But, after a few months of doing this, I was forcing myself to admire it. Then, I woke up in the middle of one night and thought, “Well, it’s not very good, is it?” It was going nowhere, heading toward an empty, airy note. And in the end, I had to ditch it.

I wanted to do something much more realistic, so when I threw away *The Apprentice*, the character of McNulty the fire eater was there kind of just saying, “Write about me. Here I am.” And the character really was just fizzing about in the middle of my head. McNulty came from a character that I had seen as a boy on a quayside market. He was an escapologist who used to fascinate and terrify me.

I began to write *The Fire-Eaters* about the same time as the assault on Iraq was beginning. And people were throwing around words like “war” and “bomb” and “threat” and “fear.” And it brought me back to the only time that I’d ever really felt threatened, and that was in 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. So, I wanted to write something about what it felt like to have a sense of dread, to feel that tomorrow might be your last day. And once I started to write about that, I found myself back in 1962. The year 1962 was the time of lots of rebellions against nuclear weapons and sort of a general kind of rebelliousness, which is reflected in Bobby’s rebellion at school with Daniel and their undercutting of a very sadistic and nasty schoolteacher, Mr. Todd. Through the other teacher, Miss Butte, I was dealing with things about life and death.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is there significance to Bobby’s name in *The Fire-Eaters* — Bobby Burns?

DAVID ALMOND: I was writing and I thought, “I’ll just call him Bobby Burns.” And then I thought, “Oh, dear me, there’s Robert Burns, the poet.” And I thought, “Well, that’s quite a nice kind of reflection, so why not?” And then the fire-eaters, you know, and Bobby *Burns*, and I thought, “Oh.” So it’s a bit blatant, but I thought, “Why not? Just do it.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: Some of your characters are reminiscent of other, classic characters.

DAVID ALMOND: My books are filled with writers that I love, and I enjoy that. For example, when I was writing about Grandpa in *Heaven Eyes*, and he's writing in his book and he's making these strange noises, and his language is all fractured, I was thinking, where is this coming from? But I loved writing it. Then thought, "Oh, there's Sam Beckett in my book." And I didn't say, "I've got to take that out because it's too influenced by Beckett." I thought, "Oh, how wonderful to have Samuel Beckett inside my book." I believe you have to allow yourself to be influenced.

There's a lot of Blake, of course, especially in *Skellig*, and Blake comes up again in *Secret Heart*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have adapted several of your books for the stage.

DAVID ALMOND: One of the great things about writing in the children's field is you get a lot of freedom, and my books seem to transfer very well to stage. *Skellig* worked really well on stage, and *Heaven Eyes*. And I wrote an original play called *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*. It felt very in character to be writing a play; it felt a lot like writing one of my stories. I didn't feel as if I had to lurch across to some strange new genre.

This reflects something about the nature of writing for children, because children don't see deliberate divisions between different forms. To young kids, the story told to them or read to them or acted out — it's just a fluid thing. It's as if you tell a kid the story of Hansel and Gretel, and pretty soon they're going to be walking through woods and going up to the cottage. They naturally act out stories.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Another new genre for you is the picture book, debuting with *Kate, the Cat and the Moon*. How did you decide to write a picture book?

DAVID ALMOND: I was drawing up a new contract with Hodder, my English publishers, and they said, "So what do you want to do?" And I said, "Of course, I want to do some novels." And then I took a deep breath and said, "I want to write a picture book," because I thought if I'm going to be a children's writer, I really want to write a book that can't be claimed by adults, a book that is for children. Also, having read lots of picture books to my daughter, I realized there are so many masterpieces in this field. It's a real challenge; I was really scared by what I'd said because it's so hard to write a story in so few words. But I've done it, and it's come out and it makes me so happy when I look at it.

It's called *Kate, the Cat and the Moon*, and it's about a girl who goes out into the night and turns into a cat. While she's a cat, she encounters the dreams her family members are having back at the house.

Writing a picture book is very much like writing scenes for a play. You can see each time the page is turned that it's like a new scene appears.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like for you to work with an illustrator?

DAVID ALMOND: It was interesting to write the picture book and to take the very bare elements of the story and give a kind of hint to the illustrator about what I'm thinking about. But, also to have the sense that around the words that I'd written was this kind of empty space — like leaving

that part and my imagination to somebody else, to Steven Lambert in this case, to say, "I'll fill that in for you."

TEACHINGBOOKS: Describe your typical workday.

DAVID ALMOND: I'm pretty disciplined because I'm very busy; I travel away from home a lot. So, when I'm at home writing, I try to be at my desk at 9:00 and I take a lunch break, say from 12:00 until 1:00, and then I work through the afternoon. So that's my ideal workday, which I achieve quite a lot when I'm at home. One of the problems that happens is when you become kind of successful there are lots of other demands on your time, including emails and phone calls. But the essential day remains the same. I think it's important to see writing as a job and not to see it just as consisting of sort of inspirational moments.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your writing process.

DAVID ALMOND: I write and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite all the time. When I'm writing a novel, I always begin at the beginning and move through to the end. But, that process might consist of writing 30 pages and throwing them away, and going back to the beginning of the 30 pages. And then as I write, I change bits that I've written and move forward, then change bits that I've written and move forward. So, it's a kind of traveling forward but constantly changing things that I've already done.

Sometimes I put things into a narrative and I think, "Why am I putting that there?" But it seems important. And then 20 pages further on I realize, "Oh, that needs to be there because this is going to happen."

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

DAVID ALMOND: When I get stuck, there are lots of things I can do. I used to have a big sign in my office that said, "Sit with your story." And that was a kind of message to myself. "Oh, you just sit and you sit and you sit." The danger of that is that you just sit and as you sit, it becomes even more difficult.

So, another thing I do is I scribble a lot. And I just scribble and doodle and play and write rubbish. I think it's really important to write rubbish. I write lots and lots of rubbish on scraps of paper and in notebooks that I scribble in and then throw away. When I do that, it will often release something.

I also find that walking can release things. There's something about the physical movement. Or, I go the gym. Sometimes, some of the best ideas come when I'm on one of those step machines at the gym.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

DAVID ALMOND: When I go into schools, and when I talk to kids and teachers, I talk a lot about the writing process. Because, having been a teacher and now being a writer, I feel in a position where I can add something. I go into schools and I show my notebooks and I say, "Look, it's a mess, isn't it? It's doodles and I'm not quite sure where I'm going. And nobody's looking over my shoulder and saying, 'You need to change that son, now, you need to cross out that.'"

I tell students that they need to write lots of rubbish. They don't have to feel that because there are all these wonderful writers who have written wonderful books that everything they write has to be wonderful, because that just puts us off from writing. I also tell kids to read a lot, and not to feel they have to read particular things to please the teachers, but to read the things they really like.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You were a teacher, and your books include schools and teachers and, in some cases, theoretical assertions.

DAVID ALMOND: I was a teacher for a long time, and during that time, I got really interested in how teaching works. And it seems to me that a lot of educational theories are incredibly mechanistic and reductive now. In English education, there's always been this kind of alternative tradition of a skeptical approach to education, which is why it was so important in *Skellig* — Mina's theories about education and Michael's experience of school.

In *The Fire-Eaters*, Bobby and Daniel attack a certain kind of teaching, too. Heroically, Bobby puts himself on the line and all of Bobby's family's hopes are invested in Bobby. Bobby is going to lead them to a bright new future through education, which kind of reflected my experience as a kid. So, yes, education and how we learn has always been important to me.

Books by David Almond

- CLAY, Delacorte Books for Young Readers / Random House Children's Books, 2006
- KATE, THE CAT AND THE MOON (illustrated by Stephen Lambert), Hodder Children's Books, 2004
- FIRE-EATERS, THE, Delacorte Books for Young Readers / Random House Children's Books, 2004
- COUNTING STARS, Delacorte Books for Young Readers / Random House Children's Books, 2002
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- WHERE YOUR WINGS WERE, Hodder Children's Books, 2002
- WILD GIRL, WILD BOY: A PLAY, Hodder Children's Books, 2002
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- KIND OF HEAVEN, A, Iron Press, 1997
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