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In the contemporary world, science often creates as many problems as it solves, and children as well as adults are aware of the impact of technological progress on the environment and our health. Many so-called “natural” disasters can be linked to climate change resulting from human interventions, and medical procedures often produce unintended side-effects. As a result, people are more skeptical, and more likely to be aware of competing knowledge systems and the fallibility of experts. In what Ulrich Beck calls “risk society,” and Anthony Giddens, a “runaway world,” a climate of fear and insecurity has been created by scientific progress, leading to a loss of confidence in the ability of experts to manage risk. Yet rational-scientific epistemology remains hegemonic in the West and we no longer explain the failures, misfortunes and accidents of life by attributing them to the hand of fate, magic, acts of God, or the forces of nature. Under such circumstances, what knowledge resources can children and young people draw upon to help them understand and cope with uncertainty, adversity and risk? How, for example, does a child remain resilient in the face of the uncertainty surrounding the premature birth and potential death of a sibling?

This is the scenario David Almond creates in his 1998 multi-award-winning novel, *Skellig*. The novel traces the experiences of 10-year-old Michael as he
negotiates the traumatic possibility of the death of his infant sister. His family has recently moved to a new home and in the dangerously decrepit back shed of the house he finds Skellig, a man with wings who is living—or dying—on a diet of insects and small rodents. With his neighbor, Mina, Michael tries to understand this creature. Is he a man, a bird, an angel, an evolutionary anomaly, or a figment of the characters’ imagination? Insofar as Skellig could be any or all of these things collapsed into one ambiguous being, there is no single knowledge system which can categorically define him.

This article addresses *Skellig* as a text which attends to the epistemological uncertainties in contemporary risk society and considers how children can become resilient in the face of risk. Resilience is at the forefront of psychology research informing child-rearing strategies (Luthar *et al*) and entails an approach to child welfare that focuses on fostering internal (psychological) and external (cultural) assets that develop a child’s ability to triumph over adversity in the form of individual, familial and cultural stresses. Resilient children are those who have the capacity to navigate difficult life circumstances and succeed in spite of them. To survive the uncertainties and accompanying anxieties produced by the destabilization of knowledge systems requires a particularly intellectual brand of resilience on the part of both child protagonists in, and child readers of, David Almond’s novel.

In this regard, our analysis explicitly engages with the social, cultural and intellectual conditions in which the narrative is embedded. We draw on contemporary sociology in the form of Beck’s risk society to frame our argument because his thesis describes the dynamics of the most recent phase of modernity. Risk society is demonstrably a function of postmodernity, a socio-cultural shift characterized by the questioning of master narratives, of which science has been one of the most masterful
and entrenched. At earlier junctures in the modern era, science was seen as holding
the answers to many of humanity’s problems, and progress was deemed to be a
worthy endeavour in and of itself. *Skellig’s* setting in present-day England locates the
narrative in the prosperous West where scientific approaches in education and
medical treatments are taken as a given for the majority of citizens. The narrative
thereby directly presents a realist depiction of the contemporary world.

However, *Skellig’s* realism merges with fantasy in ways that we will discuss under
the rubric of magical realism as a literary genre. In addition to considering the generic
status of the novel in respect to the research of Ian Rudge and, more recently, Don
Latham, our analysis attends to what Lois Parkinson Zamora considers to be “magical
realism’s most basic concern—the nature and the limits of the knowable” and its
“critique of modernity” (498).

Competing knowledge systems are not only a function of contemporary risk
society; they are also a feature of magical realism. The genre had its inception (and
remains most prevalent) in postcolonial texts. As Anne Hegerfeldt argues, in the
conventional texts of magical realism, the competing knowledge systems of colonized
and colonizing peoples are characterized by, and reflected in, the split between magic
and realism (63). Her contention illustrates the problems inherent in a deployment of
magical realism in a British novel populated only by characters of European ancestry.
The diversity of discourses employed in *Skellig* range from Blakean spirituality to
Darwinian science; however, as these approaches stem from Western intellectual
traditions, the differences between them must be wrought within a single culture in
ways that inflect our reading of *Skellig* within the magical realist genre.

In terms of resilient responses to this instability, the unknowable nature of Skellig
prompts child readers of the novel to engage in critical assessments of the knowledge
systems they would typically employ to conceptualize new or unknown phenomena. Teya Rosenberg argues that “the purpose of most magical realism is to encourage readers to rethink their perceptions of this world by presenting it as including rationalist, historical-factual elements but also including more than rationalism usually acknowledges” (18). As a winged man who may be a spiritual, animal or imaginary being, Skellig reflects this agenda and invites child readers to traverse divergent worldviews.

At one extreme of this epistemological continuum is empirical science, with its pursuit of certainty that offers a mechanistically causal conception of Skellig’s presence in the novel. At the other extreme is the realm of the imagination and spirituality that presents an alternative way of making sense of the world. The children in Almond’s narrative employ both modes concurrently. Their joint reading of Michael’s science homework towards the end of the novel demonstrates the strategy:

‘Tibia,’ we said. ‘Fibula, sternum, clavicle, radius, ulna, kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, brain.’

‘And spirit jumping in and jumping out but never seen,’ said Mina. (155)

These cognitive extremes are connected by a further set of discourses which occupy the narrative middle-ground of Almond’s novel. Among them, folklore and psychology produce something of the seamlessness between the polarized discourses that defines magical realist gestures. This is particularly the case for psychology as a discipline which has always occupied the interstices between untested supposition and legitimate scientific enquiry.

Skellig rejects the notion that a single epistemological system or tradition can provide the knowledge children need to cope with the anxieties that distinguish risk
society. Essentially, our contention is that, in dismantling knowledge hierarchies, the novel suggests that children need to be able to access a range of epistemological categories in order to adequately explain the world and to build the resilience required to deal positively with adversity. In order to pursue this reading, our argument will do three things. First, we will identify the epistemological tensions around the rational-scientific tradition underpinning risk society and requiring resilience. Second, we will marry these concerns to the novel’s idiosyncratic use of magical realism by examining the destabilization of oppositions between adults and children as well as reason/madness through the novel’s psychological dynamics. Finally, we will foreground the resilience resources that the novel promotes as responses to unstable conditions for knowing. These resources, we will argue, are both intellectual and creative in nature and specifically allow children to re-imagine their world in multi-faceted ways.

As such, our focus on knowledge and imagination produces an alternative reading to that proposed by Don Latham in his comparative discussion of *Skellig* and Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s tale for children, “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings.” Latham argues that the ultimate lesson learned by Michael and Mina is one of “compassion” and that this is founded on the children’s “special ability” for responsiveness that adults lack. Whereas Latham claims that the novel “calls into question adult institutions like medicine and formal education,” our reading scrutinizes this “critique of adult society” in order to foreground *Skellig*’s stance on the importance of providing children with a range of knowledge resources with which to successfully navigate risk society.
Epistemological Tensions

The very concept of risk is associated with the emergence of modernity and the Enlightenment and, thus, the historical trajectory that has produced risk society. Knowledge has played a key role in this evolutionary process because, according to Elliot, the prevention and management of risk and adversity was “bound up with the development of instrumental rational control” (295). However, in his risk society thesis, Beck argues that we have now entered a historical phase in which the risks of contemporary life not only exceed science’s ability to control them, but are often the unforeseen consequence of scientific intervention. As we have indicated, faith in the omnipotence of science is declining. But, so, too, is recourse to those forms of knowledge—progressively undermined by science since the Enlightenment—which formerly assisted individuals to cope with uncertainty and risk. This paradox in the status of science is conveyed in Skellig through Michael’s ambivalence about the capacity of science to control the vagaries of birth, illness, aging and death—and to define Skellig.

There is nothing in David Almond’s narrative to suggest that the premature birth of Michael’s sister is a consequence of those risks created by technological advances. Nor is there any suggestion that the boy is aware of any controversies that point to the fallibility of science. What is clear, however, is his apprehension about the capacity of doctors to save his sister, and we read this as symptomatic of the pervasiveness of uncertainty in risk society. It is equally clear that the doctors in the novel, all of them men, represent (masculinist) rational–scientific knowledge. The various characterizations of the general practitioner, Dr Dan, the paediatrician, Dr Bloom, and
the orthopaedic surgeon, Dr MacNabola, nuance the potentially reductive materialism
of this epistemological tradition.

Michael particularly dislikes the Dr Dan, whom he refers to as Dr Death. He visits
the family home to treat Michael’s baby sister, assesses her condition, and has her
admitted into the care of Dr Bloom in the hospital. Michael’s distrust of Dr Death is
intuitive rather than rational, but the images of the doctor’s grey pallor, his age-
spotted hands, and the fact that he smokes (7) all contradict his status as a healer. He
is patently unhealthy; indeed, he is engaged in risky behavior that contradicts, and
therefore undermines, the knowledge he personifies. Dr Bloom’s name implies a far
more positive judgement, but simultaneously evokes a horticulturalist managing the
environment of a hothouse seedling, in this case, the baby in her glass humidicrib.

The new baby is not the only character whose grip on life is tenuous. She and
Skellig form a definitive narrative pair in the novel, and their doubled presence is
powerfully representative of imminent death. Michael’s anxieties, in particular his
fears that medical science is powerless to prevent death, shift between these two
individuals, often blurring them in dreams and fantasies. Skellig is not only
malnourished, but incapacitated by arthritis and Michael seeks out medical advice on
his behalf in the orthopaedic ward of the hospital where his sister is being treated. Dr
MacNabola describes the treatment for arthritis: “‘Deep injections right into the joint
… Then the saw … Bits cut out and new bits put in … Stitch it up, good as new’”
(67). Although the surgeon is later redeemed, in this encounter he is surrounded by
sniggering medical students who evoke discourses about scientific arrogance. He
describes an intervention which clearly dehumanizes and objectifies the patient.

The increasing sophistication of medical science—and its reliance on
technology—places human life in the hands of doctors, and wrests agency or control
from the sufferer and their family. This is doubly the case for Michael as a child. The sense of powerlessness and uncertainty he feels in relation to his sister’s survival means that the active role he and Mina play in Skellig’s ultimate return to health is all the more significant. While Michael is helpless to intervene or assist with the procedures imposed by the doctors who are caring for his sister, he and Mina are actively able to help Skellig. They bring him food, ale and medication, and move him to a safer place. Despite Skellig’s resistance, both children are determined to impose their kindness on him. As Mina tells him, “‘you must let us help you’” (79). In this way Michael can act out his anxieties about the possible death of the baby through Skellig and, importantly, achieve a positive resolution with Mina’s help.

In this respect Skellig’s arthritis functions as more than a medical condition in the novel. In magical realist style—and in contrast to the dehumanizing effects of medical science, which reduces the patient to tissue and bone—arthritis is personified. When Michael asks Skellig about his identity, he replies, “‘I’m nearly nobody … Most of me is Arthur … Arthur Itis … Turns you to stone, then crumbles you away’” (31). Later, Mina describes this as “calcification,” but she goes beyond the material effects of arthritis:

‘It is linked to another process,’ she said, ‘by which the mind too, becomes inflexible. It stops thinking and imagining. It becomes as hard as bone. It is no longer a mind. It is a lump of stone wrapped in a wall of stone. This process is ossification.’ (77)

Skellig is not only physically immobilized by his pain, but also by a pessimism which translates into an inability to think or imagine. He thus lacks the very qualities of resilience that the children are in the process of forming throughout the narrative. If he is an angel, then he is an earthbound angel. He has given up; he no longer has the
will to fight his suffering and this is manifest in his flightlessness. By solidifying into
Arthur, he is caught between life and death, heaven and earth, flesh and spirit.

Trapped in an equally liminal existence is Michael’s infant sister. As we have
indicated, her relationship to Skellig is intricately rendered in Almond’s poetic
narrative. The novel draws a range of parallels between their physical states,
particularly the fragility of their bones. Skellig’s, described in their “extraordinary
lightness” (86), are disintegrating, while the baby’s are soft and not solid enough to
anchor her firmly to the material world. Symbolic of this disconnection is the fact that
she remains unnamed until the final pages of the narrative. When Michael’s mother
explains the folk belief that shoulder blades are where wings once were and would be
again after death, she goes on to say of the baby, “‘Oh, I’m sure that one had wings.
Just got to take one look at her. Sometimes I think she’s never quite left Heaven and
never quite made it all the way here to Earth’” (39). Such explanations are based on
religious faith or superstition, and require no empirical proof. However, Michael takes
the explanation seriously and investigates the bodies of Skellig and his baby sister in
tandem in the novel. After he has felt the lump beneath Skellig’s jacket he touches the
baby in similar ways, feeling for where her wings have been. These paired
descriptions of Skellig and the baby can be read as indicating Michael’s psychological
as well as intellectual needs, specifically his self-directed movement toward the
formation of a resilient self through understanding—both of himself and of external
physical phenomena.

The children also examine and draw skeletons as part of Mina’s home-school
education program and in Michael’s mainstream science classes at school. In these
repeated motifs, bones and wings serve as symbolic pivots and are made knowable to
readers in folkloric, artistic and scientific ways. In terms of the latter, the child
protagonists engage in the style of invasive, scientific approach used by Dr MacNabola when, in their desperation for empirical confirmation of Skellig’s nature, they palpate his back to check for wings and then forcibly disrobe him in order to expose them (94). Although Latham suggests that the lesson Michael and Mina learn in the novel is one of compassion, this moment calls this claim into question. The children’s insistence on physically and visually examining the wings shows a scientifically dispassionate disregard for Skellig’s autonomy. He weeps with pain and his pleading “no” is ignored by the children (94). Despite the traumatic nature of the incident, Michael and Mina’s dogged persistence serves to ensure that empirical science is not discounted in the novel.

The hospital is the site of further epistemological discussions in the novel. There, Michael meets a nurse and an elderly arthritis patient who also refers to Arthur, signalling that the personification of the disease is not unique to Skellig. However, unlike Skellig, the patient is not defeated. She concedes that “‘Arthur usually ends up winning in the end,’” but “‘In the meantime some folk swear by cod-liver oil and a positive mind. But for me it’s prayers to Our Lady, and Dr MacNabola’” (65–6). She is empowered by spiritual faith as much as her trust in medical science; others are empowered by their belief in folk remedies and a positive attitude.

The woman’s age is significant in this regard. She belongs to a generation for whom such faith is less likely to be questioned or considered incompatible with science. Her advice is given a positive representation in the novel by the way Dr MacNabola repeats it, but more significantly because Michael believes and then institutes it in his successful treatment of Skellig. This narrative outcome foregrounds multiple approaches as pertinent and contemporary, despite their being most prominently situated in an elderly character. This otherwise minor figure points to two
important themes in the novel. First, she exemplifies two key attributes of resilience: optimism and a sense of control, attributes that both Skellig and Michael lack at the start of the narrative but gain as the story proceeds. Second, she points to additional knowledge traditions—not the competing expert knowledge which pits scientist against scientist, researcher against researcher in risk society, but systems of knowledge operating alongside medical science. Religious faith, folk remedies and lay psychology represent those discourses which negotiate the middle ground between fact and fallacy since their efficacy can be neither proved nor disproved with any certainty. These discourses settle many of the uncertainties in the novel with reassuring solutions, and thereby offer comfortable answers to the question of arthritis. However, the undecideability of Skellig’s ontological status—and the question of what knowledge to draw upon to explain his wings—are the narrative elements through which this theme is most fully developed.

Skellig is not easily explained, either by the reader or the central characters. Mina and Michael speculate at length without ever reaching consensus and the context in which this winged man appears precludes any easy, unconsidered conclusion on the reader’s part. Instead, the novel offers readers the classic split of magical realist texts: “two systems of possibility, one that aligns with European rationality and another which [has become increasingly] incompatible with a conventional Western world view” in risk society. In so doing, the novel creates “a space where alternative realities and different perceptions of the world can be conceived” (Baker).

Skellig’s Configuration within Magical Realism
Having examined the epistemological texture of the narrative, we turn our attention now to the operation of a genre inherently compatible with the disruption of knowledge hierarchies. As its names suggests, magical realism collapses oppositions as part of an embedded narrative strategy. This approach is exploited in *Skellig* via the challenge the novel makes to binary logic. As we have argued, both Skellig and Michael’s sister are caught between life and death, but another two crucial oppositions underpin this logic in the narrative. Firstly Skellig is like both an adult and child. Secondly, he is represented as both a real entity and a “figment,” that is, as a symptom of psychological disturbance which is extended by the novel’s recurrent reference to dreams, hallucinations and mental illness. Skellig occupies the interstices between adult/child, real/fantasy, sanity/madness and our discussion now examines how these divisions, and the hesitations which beset them, further complicate Skellig’s ontological status.

Skellig’s age is particularly difficult to gauge because of his state of bodily decay, and it is not until nearly halfway into the narrative that the children see “for the first time he wasn’t old” (85). Nevertheless, although he is clearly a fully-grown adult, wearing a suit, and “as tall as Dad” (67), he describes himself as being “weak as a baby” (84). Indeed, he is treated as a fledgling by the owls that bring food to the nest he occupies on the top floor of the old house in which he has been ensconced by the concerned children. Indeed, the children themselves infantilize Skellig in their determined duty of care. Here again, the parallels between Skellig and the baby are drawn.

The same blurring of divisive gestures operates in relation to the oppositions between adult and child more broadly, whereby the majority of adults in the novel give credence to scientific discourse. Non-scientific modes like Blakean spirituality
are particularly privileged in the novel by Mina’s use of them and, in turn, by Michael’s admiration for Mina. However, in terms of adult approbation, Mina’s mother does not inflect these debates in particularly vocal ways, although her presence in the background of many conversations between the children adds unspoken adult support to non-scientific views. Her kindness to Michael, Mina’s positive relationship with her mother, not to mention Mina’s regular use of the pronoun “we” to describe views shared by mother and daughter, all go some way toward positioning her adult authority in this epistemological equation. Like Skellig, Mina’s mother thereby disrupts the division between adults and children that Latham proposes. In his acceptance of multiple conceptual modes, Michael’s maleness counteracts the gendered split between male doctors and female spiritualists (Mina, her mother and the elderly patient in the hospital) in ways that imply hope for future reconciliation of these somewhat stereotypical gender differences operating in the adult sphere of the novel.

In addition, a more focussed challenge to the adult/child split in the novel centres around the narrative construction of a consensus reality abutting the fantasy elements of the text. While this concatenation is typical in magical realism, it is here thrown into relief by the fact that children, but not adults, see Skellig and believe in his existence. In the disenchanted West, magic is often a stock feature of children’s literature where fantasy is set apart from the logical and rational order of the adult world. Almond’s separation of child perceptions from adult perceptions arguably means that Skellig remains discontinuous with consensus reality and therefore dogged by his own improbability. Whereas the old man with enormous wings in the García Márquez precursive tale is made a veritable public spectacle and exploited, Skellig is the child characters’ secret. When Michael asks if he can bring Mina to meet him,
Skellig sarcastically responds: “‘Bring the street … Bring the whole damn town’ ” (56). Michael refrains from this approach but Skellig also knows that one of the reasons Michael wishes to introduce him to Mina is a bid for knowledge as consensus because she is “‘someone to tell you I’m really here’ ” (55). In the adult domain, Michael’s mother has a vision of Skellig, but she describes this as a dream, therefore providing only an inconclusive corroboration of his reality. Again, when Michael asks if the previous elderly owner of the house had seen Skellig, it transpires that Ernie looked right through the winged man, and Skellig says, “‘Maybe thought I was a figment’ ” (54).

Given these indeterminate adult responses, Almond arguably reinforces the polarization between authoritative adult perception and unreliable child perception. The use of narrative limitation leaves open the possibility that Skellig is a product of the children’s imaginations and, in Michael’s case, a manifestation of his unconscious anxieties about his sister. Through this gesture, the novel metafictively replicates Michael’s and Mina’s uncertainty about Skellig. The lack of adult confirmation of Skellig’s presence means that he can be understood as an imaginative game these children are playing. By asking readers to navigate this uncertainty, the novel arguably has a pedagogical agenda. It invites child readers to engage in a combined imaginative and intellectual consideration of Michael’s and Mina’s version of events in tandem with the characters’ own assessment of Skellig.

These uncertainties are further complicated by the way Skellig explores the unconscious mind. Michael is dogged by a range of sleeping and waking dreams and consequent uncertainties about his mental state that also underpin the narrative’s import. He says to Mina, “‘I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s true or if it’s a dream.’ ” To this, she replies, “‘That’s alright. Truth and dreams have a way of getting
muddled’ ” (52). However, because the children both dream obsessively of each other and of Skellig, there is a further slippage here between waking and sleeping, which again undermines Skellig’s reality. This produces an additional tension between the novel and magical realism as its assigned genre, one that is particularly telling. According to Chanady, “magical realism should not be defined specifically as the juxtaposition of a realistic world and an unbelievable one that only exists in the dreams and hallucinations of strange characters,” (29) mainly, she argues, because the linking of the magic to dreams and hallucinations invites the suspension of judgement.

However, Skellig’s dreamlike quality also poetically illustrates the disintegration of binary logic in that it allows the children to disregard the cons boundaries between waking and sleeping reality. Michael and Mina reconsider the real world and the deaths it deals—and threatens to deal—because dreams can be a way out of the troubles of the rational world. They are the space in which a range of other modes of cognition are accepted, even expected to reign, and thus give the dreamer access to other truths. These dreams also have a more practical function in the novel. When they are caught out of their beds after visiting Skellig, Michael says to his father, “‘I didn’t know what I was doing. I was dreaming. I was sleepwalking’” (121).

Truths, lies and dreams collide here in ways that indicate that the uncertainty—if not incredulity—Michael feels about Skellig’s actual existence is consistent with the consensus reality of the text and of the reader. Children in the contemporary West are invited and even expected to believe in various brands of magic like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy (rather than seeing them as discontinuous with the rationality). They are also suspected of having a more tenuous intellectual grip on scientific modes of
cognition. Typical assumptions about growing up involve children learning according to scientifically driven epistemological models and therefore abandoning these fantasies in order to be socialized into the rational order of the adult life.

Psychological studies of Western cultures show that by the age of nine beliefs in magic are no longer entrenched, even for the children who held some magical beliefs at younger ages. They are thus easily shifted by exposure to rational alternatives (Subbotsky 148).

The shift is not simply a consequence of maturation, but of acculturation into scientific–rationalist modes of making sense of the world. Subbotsky claims that in the West “the very concept of magic has been rationalized” (149). He makes the point that “Insofar as many events that, in earlier centuries, were believed to be magical (transmitting auditory and visual messages remotely, flying in the air and space etc) became a scientific reality, this creates the possibility of interpreting anomalous causal events as scientific effects” (149). Even more interesting in Subbotsky’s analysis is the slippage between magic and science that encompasses lay notions of neuroscience. He goes on to address the psychological angle by underscoring “a strong tendency to reduce causal events that conform to the laws of magic causality (such as those that happen in the domains of dreams, feelings, symbolic communication, perceptual illusions) to physical events in the brain” (149). In Skellig this tendency explains the consistent references to mental illness (that is, physical events in the brain) as an explanation for human perceptions of the winged man. Medical explanations of such brain states are used to undercut the credibility of adults in the novel who may have seen Skellig.

The house’s previous occupant, Ernie, is a case in point. When Michael questions Dr Death about the old man’s knowledge of Skellig, the doctor admits that Ernie had
talked about seeing things. This is instantly given a medical gloss: “‘As the mind approaches death it changes. It becomes less … orderly.’” Dr Death goes on to confirm that Ernie “‘did speak of certain images that came to him. But so do many of my people’” (124). These responses imply that because he was dying, Ernie’s mind was disordered and irrational, essentially pathologizing phenomena which cannot be empirically proven or which conflicts with the rational–scientific consensus reality of the contemporary West. As a contemporary child, it is unsurprising that Michael should also attempt to rationalize Skellig in this way. Here, lay-psychology explanations of his experience come to the fore, anticipated early in the novel when, before taking Skellig food and Aspirin, Michael says to himself in the third person, “‘You must be going round the stupid bend’” (28). Dr Death reinforces this assessment when he concludes from Michael’s line of questioning that his mental health is at risk: “‘Too much inside the house.’ He tapped my head. ‘Too much thinking and wondering and worrying going on in there’” (124–25).

Regardless of the adult and scientific authority which underscores this diagnosis, the reader is not positioned to view either Ernie or Michael as mentally ill. Focalization through Michael and the negative characterization of Dr Death combine, positioning the reader to reject the possibility that the phenomena described in the novel merely constitute fantasy. If anything, in entertaining the possibility of madness, Michael confirms his sanity by clear-minded self-assessment. Moreover, the psychological subtext of madness adds a further dimension to the clash of belief systems and traditions which we have taken as pivotal in reading the novel’s deployment of genre. In order for Michael to succeed in this narrative he must accept that indefinable phenomena exist and are not indicative of his madness. He must likewise reshape or, in fact, expand his worldview so as to incorporate multiple
beliefs and to acknowledge that one way of thinking does not necessarily preclude or
discount another. This approach gives him the acumen, and therefore the resilience, to
contend with the stresses dealt by the narrative.

Knowledge for Resilience

At the novel’s conclusion, Michael’s baby sister has an operation on her heart. During
the critical recuperation period just after the procedure she is visited by Skellig, whose
powers of psychical melding have already been demonstrated to Michael and Mina in
an intense and emotive dance sequence where the children feel the uplifting power of
their own wings. Neither Michael nor the reader can be certain whether the baby’s
recovery can be attributed to medical intervention, Skellig, or the two events
combined. That Skellig exists at the limits of human knowledge and at the cusp of
magic and realism is part of his narrative construction as a metaphor for the unknown
boundary between life and death. When Michael asks Mina what Skellig is, she
replies:

‘We can’t know. Sometimes we just have to accept there are things we
can’t know. Why is your sister ill? Why did my father die?’ … ‘Sometimes we
think we should be able to know everything. But we can’t. We have to allow
ourselves to see what there is to see, and we have to imagine.’ (140)

Mina’s comments here are part of a larger narrative commentary on the role of art and
literature, children’s education and, thus, pedagogies for resilience.

The novel makes frequent allusions to imaginative and aesthetic knowledge, in
particular William Blake’s spiritual and artistic visions, as valid modes of
approaching real-world educational practices and larger epistemological agendas.
These allusions position the visionary and the imaginative as equal to science in the novel’s knowledge hierarchy. More importantly, the artistic renderings of such visions are in this way weighted as powerfully meaningful, despite being (traditionally) empirically suspect. This validation is heightened by the ways in which Blake’s beliefs are admired and promoted by significant characters in Almond’s novel. Not only do Mina and her mother live their lives by a kind of Blakean doctrine, Mina’s now deceased Father had been a party to this choice. Even Dr MacNabola quotes Blake to Michael and is impressed when the boy recognizes the literary reference (161).

The novel also draws on other pre-Enlightenment European traditions. The myth of Icarus, read out to Michael’s English class (14), has particular resonances with contemporary technological hubris in risk society. But whereas Icarus falls, Skellig ultimately succeeds in regaining the power of flight. Interestingly, these two figures are powerfully opposed, not only in terms of technological versus natural wings, but also in terms of optimism. While Skellig needs his optimism to regain strength enough to fly, Icarus’s excessive optimism (hubris) is his downfall. By encoding this lesson, the Icarus myth also has status in this novel as an ancient and artistic (even visionary) form of knowledge transmission. According to Foreman, “Magical realism, unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected” (370). Skellig reconnects its child readers with the pre-Enlightenment knowledge tradition, embodied here by Greek myths and Blake’s now canonized writings and etchings, thereby rehabilitating past knowledge, its modes of creation and transmission, and reconnecting it with the present.
The disconnection between historical and contemporary ways of knowing is also played out in the split of allegiances Michael feels between his school friends, Leakey and Coot, and his new friend, Mina. The boys are more interested in football than learning. They cannot fathom the evolutionary notion of humanity descending from monkeys, using the information only to ridicule Mina. Michael cannot divulge the presence of Skellig to them on the grounds that they wouldn’t believe him, betraying the anxiety that the winged man causes within a rationally defined universe. This narrative separation, however, equally demonstrates to the reader what boys with limited imaginations like Leakey and Coot miss out on in terms of adventures with supernatural creatures. Michael regards Mina as both intelligent and well-informed, but she is an anomaly in contemporary child culture. Through her, the novel mobilizes a critique of mainstream schooling. Whereas Michael attends a conventional British school, Mina is home-schooled. In contrast to the strictly defined learning areas of conventional education systems, there is no separation between her learning of art and science, fiction and fact, faith and empiricism.

Mina is regularly depicted as a budding natural scientist, spending many hours observing the behavior of less problematic winged creatures like owls and blackbirds. She talks authoritatively about Darwinian evolution, the anatomical adaptations which allow birds to fly, the birds’ ancestor the Archaeopteryx (61) and, thus, their connection to the dinosaurs. “‘There is no end to evolution,’ Mina says, ‘Maybe this is not how we are meant to be forever’ ” (99). Her statement suggests that the children can become “extraordinary,” a descriptor used at many and varied points in the novel not only to describe Skellig, but also the natural and thus phenomenal world. At the same time, Mina suggests a scientific explanation for Skellig’s wings which implies he is a relative of the bird and this is supported by the lightness of his bones (the
pneumatization which allows birds to fly). The balls of regurgitated bone and skin which the children find scattered around him in the shed resemble owl pellets and provide further supporting evidence. Later, the children witness the owls bringing Skellig prey, suggesting that the birds recognize kinship. After Skellig’s departure the owls bring the children similar carcass offerings. The children are thus shown to be both like Skellig and also like the birds themselves. As Michael says, the birds must think these children “‘are something like they are.’ Mina responds, ‘Perhaps we are’” (173).

The story narrates Michael’s intellectual journey to a new-found ability to understand difference through sameness. Mina, however, never sees a contradiction in accessing opposing modes of knowledge in order to interpret Skellig’s extraordinary nature. She is confident that both Darwin’s theory of evolution and the old wives’ tale that shoulder blades are where humans once had wings are “proven fact” (50, 52). The novel suggests that she is not only more knowledgeable than other children her age, but enjoys a sense of passion and wonder at the world which Michael and his schoolmates are losing in the process of socialization via institutionalized education. This process threatens their emotional survival when faced with social risks, as much as it limits their intellectual ability. To demonstrate this difference, Mina’s character is resilient in the face of the loss, not only of her father, but more recently her grandfather.

This characterization of Mina, and her impact on Michael as their relationship progresses in the novel, foregrounds the power of artistic imagination. Michael and Mina work through their understanding of Skellig not just scientifically but creatively, and their drawings and paintings of him are likened to and inspired by Blake’s visionary illustrations of angels. But Blake is also a writer. In terms of literary
production, Mina writes the story of Skellig in her private diary, while in another metafictive moment in the text, Michael writes a fictionalized narrative of finding Skellig, which is essentially the story of Almond’s novel (129). The story greatly moves Michael’s English teacher, suggesting the power of literature and, indeed, the power of Almond’s narrative, which also tries to make sense of the world and the knowledge we use to do so. Rosenberg agrees with Faris about this tendency in magical realism to highlight the magical power of fiction and to demonstrate that “writing is magical—it transforms experience” (20).

As we have been arguing, building intelligence by transforming categories of knowledge and ways of knowing are vital to the formation of Michael’s resilience. In this way, the role of art, particularly narrative production as a transformative response to the world, is paramount in *Skellig*. In clinical practice, resilience theory similarly relies on the curative affects of narrative (Levy and Wall 2000). Children are encouraged to rescript their biographical narratives in order to shift stories, and their tellers, towards positive conclusions. This curative approach to storytelling is mirrored by Beck’s concept of reflexive biography as a function of risk society. Beck sees contemporary social problems and solutions becoming progressively more individualized and that, in this socio-cultural landscape, individuals are required to monitor and take responsibility for their own life choices and pathways. Not only adults, but children must construct their own “reflexive biography”, that is, a narrative that is “self- rather than socially-produced” (Lupton 70).

*Skellig*, like narrative therapy and reflexive biography, suggests that today’s children must learn to devise positive life stories. In line with this ethos, fictions like *Skellig* can simultaneously speak a range of knowledge discourses without facing the charge of contradiction. Arguably, the narrative agendas that manifest in *Skellig* are
directly motivated by Almond’s beliefs. Valuing storytelling, whether written, pictorial and performed, is a pervasive theme in most of Almond’s novels and is most commonly a cure-all for psychological disturbance or trauma suffered by individuals and by cultures (by way of histories) in his narrative renderings.

In *Heaven Eyes*, Maureen, the director of the Whitegates orphanage, encourages her charges to invent narratives of their past in order to equip them with optimism in their present circumstances. While the book’s protagonist, Erin, staunchly refuses to participate in this act, part of her emotional emancipation in the novel comes from dictating her story. It is strangely transcribed by a virtually illiterate caretaker in his logbook of events which occur in the other-worldly black middens where the protagonists sojourn. Joe Maloney in *Secret Heart* stutters and for the majority of the novel is inarticulate, but he has access to another plane of existence which equips him to enact a primeval tiger narrative. With his face painted and draped in a real tiger-skin, he performs an ancient rite for a select audience in a dilapidated circus tent. The potency of his acting/channelling frees both the circus folk and himself from relentless performances of the same inadequate lives. In *Kit’s Wilderness*, Kit writes stories while the novel’s emotionally damaged child malefactor, Askew, provides the illustrations. The connection between these boys draws them into the death-filled histories of their mining ancestors, but equally empowers them in the face of the traumas of past and present circumstances.

In *Skellig*, the clay sculptures, the pictures, and the stories the children produce all capture Skellig’s presence and his spiritual significance without giving away the secret of his concrete realness. Art thus proposes its own self-guided truths. In this respect, Michael and Mina are constructed in line with Almond’s description of his autobiographical stories collected in *Counting Stars* (2000). Almond says in an
introductory passage that they are “stories are about my childhood …. Like all stories they merge memory and dream, the real and the imagined, truth and lies. And perhaps like all stories, they are an attempt to reassemble what is fragmented, to rediscover what has been lost.” Michael sense of certainty has been fragmented by the fear that his baby sister will die, but he finds that this same creative merging of opposites—a process so emblematic of the magical realist impulse—provides answers. These are, for Michael and Mina, both imaginative and intellectual, and their unification equips them with the resilience to move into an emotionally stable and somewhat more comprehensible future. The name Michael chooses for his sister, newly arrived home, is Persephone. As a girl who melds the dark underworld and the sunlit surface of the earth by her regular passage between the two, she is highly symbolic of this impulse. But the name is deemed a mouthful by his parents who settle on Joy, reiterating the survival strategy we have tracked across the story: that optimism is also the key to survival. A seamless and non-hierarchical understanding of all categories of knowledge—medico-scientific, psychological, folkloric, spiritual, magical, and creative—the narrative proclaims, produce an intellectual joy that will stand children in good stead in their bids to negotiate risk society.
Works Cited


