

READERS GUIDE

MY NAME
is
MINA



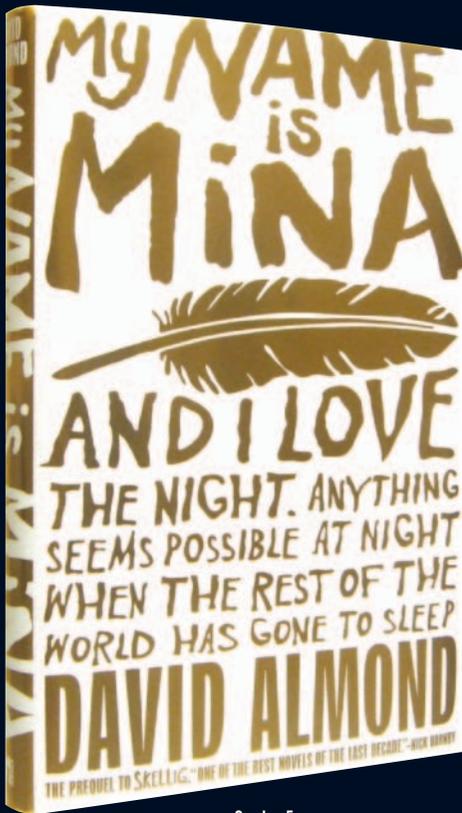
AND I LOVE
THE NIGHT. ANYTHING
SEEMS POSSIBLE AT NIGHT
WHEN THE REST OF THE
WORLD HAS GONE TO SLEEP
DAVID ALMOND

THE PREQUEL TO SKELLIG, "ONE OF THE BEST NOVELS OF THE LAST DECADE."—NICK HORNBY



★ “THIS NOVEL
WILL INSPIRE CHILDREN
TO LET THEIR IMAGINATIONS SOAR.”
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED

ABOUT THE BOOK



Readers of the beloved *Skellig*, by David Almond, will remember Mina as the deeply thinking, deeply feeling adolescent girl with “hair as black as coal and the kind of eyes that can see right through you.” In *My Name Is Mina*, Almond takes readers into Mina’s world as she ponders life’s metaphysical and philosophical questions, while grappling with the pain of growing up in a society that values conformity over creativity. From her perch in a tree, Mina observes the world with the curiosity and skepticism of a scientist, and the wonder and awe of an artist. Her intelligence, independent spirit, and way of questioning what society views as “normal” sets her at odds with her peers, who see her as a weird outsider. Through journaling, Mina begins to answer some of the difficult questions that confront her and to truly understand the unique and sensitive person that she is and how she is interconnected to the larger world.

Grades 5 up
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QUESTIONS

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Begin with a discussion regarding the major themes in the story, such as conformity and nonconformity, death and grief, and growing up and change. Challenge young readers to describe and discuss passages from the book that present these themes and how Mina's character is expressed through them.
- Mina loves the night, saying, "Anything seems possible at night when the rest of the world has gone to sleep." (p. 9) How does the night and darkness represent what's unique about Mina? Nocturnal animals fascinate Mina, such as owls and bats. She likens herself to one of these animals: "It's like those creatures are moving inside me, almost like I'm a kind of weird creature myself, a girl whose name is Mina but more that just a girl whose name is Mina." (p. 10) Discuss what you think Mina means by this description of herself.
- Mina identifies with the writer-artist William Blake, referring to him as a misfit and an outsider. Why does Mina consider herself an outsider? How do the constructs of her school and community contribute to her identification as a misfit? Why is being "different," especially as an adolescent, viewed with scorn?
- Discuss Mina's "extraordinary facts" and "extraordinary activities." Do these observations and ideas help you think about the world and your life from a different perspective? How? What does it mean to be extraordinary? On page 298, Mina writes down what she calls her "most important of all extraordinary activities" and pins the paper above her bed: "Be Brave!" To Mina, what does it mean to be brave and why is being brave, especially in adolescence, an act of courage?
- When Mina writes a nonsensical story on her school test, her teacher screams that her work is "Utter. Idiotic. Nonsense!" (p. 165) Do you think Mina's decision to write nonsense verse is an act of defiance or artistic freedom, or both? How does her ability to write nonsense verse demonstrate her keen intelligence?
- Mina rails against the conformity of public school, and finds her teacher, Mrs. Scullery, stupid and lacking in imagination. How does Mina's school environment undermine her natural talents and intelligence? Why do you think that it is so important for many educators to "follow the plan"? On page 15, Mina writes, "Trying to be a good girl sometimes made me very sad." To Mina, what does it mean to be a "good girl," and how does this notion conflict with her true self?

- Throughout the text, Mina refers to her dead father, and refers to her loss as a “big sad horrible thing.” (p. 18) When she begins her journal, she realizes that the memory and spirit of her father will color everything she writes. How does writing in her journal help Mina cope with her grief? She realizes that “the sad things in my life make the happy things more intense.” (p. 18) Discuss what Mina means by this observation. Reread pages 126–127. Discuss this notion of Mina “half-remembering” aspects of her father and the experiences she had with him. Why do you think this happens, and why does it make Mina feel “very small indeed”?
- Reread pages 30–31, in which Mina’s keen powers of observation and appreciation of the natural world are made evident. How do these gifts she has give her both joy and sorrow? Mina feels that perfection is boring, empty nothingness. What do you think she means by this? Do you agree with her that perfection would be “very dull”? (p. 30)
- In both *Skellig* and *My Name Is Mina*, birds are both concrete and symbolic elements. Discuss how the author uses birds to represent larger thematic elements such as evolution, growth, life, and death. How does the story of St. Kevin and the Blackbird (*Mina*, p. 25) parallel the events in *Skellig*? Throughout *My Name Is Mina*, there are moments that foreshadow the arrival of Skellig, such as Mina’s poem “A Wish & A Prayer” on page 83. Challenge students to identify other examples of foreshadowing and discuss the sense of hope this adds to the work.

THE MIND
IS A PLACE OF
WONDER. (p. 12)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Journaling with Teens

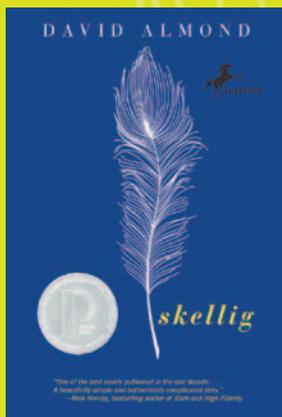
extension.missouri.edu/p/GH6150

The William Blake Archive

www.blakearchive.org/blake

SKELLIG

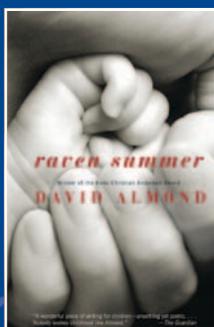
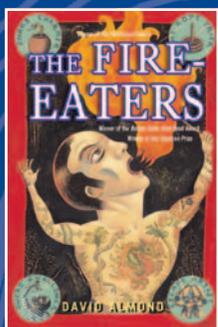
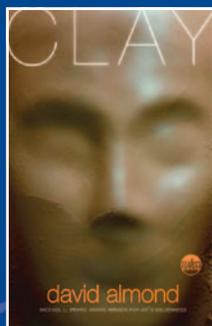
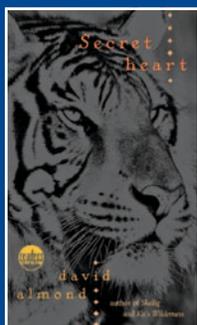
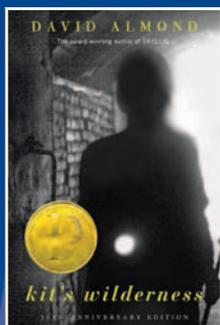
QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION



Yearling PB:
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- Michael is very unhappy at the beginning of the novel. Discuss how Michael's life changes after he discovers Skellig and meets Mina. Think about ways that you deal with fear and loneliness. How can you help a friend who appears unhappy?
- Almond never gives the reader a specific description of Skellig. Based on the glimpses of Skellig found throughout the novel, what is your impression of Skellig? How might Michael describe Skellig at the end of the novel?
- Michael brushes his hands against Skellig's back and detects what appear to be wings. When he asks his mother about shoulder blades, she answers, "They say that shoulder blades are where your wings were when you were an angel . . . where your wings will grow again one day." What does this statement reveal about Skellig?
- When Michael questions why Skellig eats living things and makes pellets like an owl, Mina answers, "We can't know. Sometimes we just have to accept that there are things we can't know." Why is this an important moment in the novel?
- When Michael's soccer teammates discover his friendship with Mina, they begin teasing him. How does this affect Michael's relationship with them? Why do you think they make fun of Mina? How does she handle the teasing? How would you handle the situation if your classmates made fun of a special friend?
- Discuss Michael's relationship with his mother and father. How does the baby's illness put a strain on these relationships? How is Michael's relationship with his parents different from Mina's relationship with her mother?
- At the same time that his sister is undergoing heart surgery, Michael discovers that Skellig is gone. Mina calms Michael by quoting William Blake: "[Blake] said the soul was able to leap out of the body for a while and then leap back again. He said it could be caused by great fear or enormous pain. Sometimes it was because of too much joy. It was possible to be overwhelmed by the presence of so much beauty in the world." Why do you think Mina quoted this passage to Michael? How are fear and pain related? How are joy and beauty related? How does Skellig represent all these qualities?
- What does the nurse mean when she describes Michael's baby sister as having a "heart of fire"? Why does Michael want to name the baby Persephone? Why is Joy an appropriate name for her? What other names might symbolize her journey and her place in the world?
- Skellig returns for one last visit with Michael and Mina. What do you think is Skellig's purpose for entering Michael's life? How does he touch other lives? Do you think he'll ever return?

ALSO BY DAVID ALMOND:



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo credits: © Sara Jane Palmer

DAVID ALMOND grew up in and around Newcastle, England. One of six children in a large Catholic family, he learned to love print at an early age; his mother used to take him on outings to an uncle's printing press, where he delighted in watching the pages roll off the machine. Almond has written many books for children, including *Skellig*, a Michael L. Printz Honor Book, and *Kit's Wilderness*, a Printz Award winner. He lives in Northumberland with his family, "just beyond the Roman Wall, which for centuries marked the place where civilization ended and the wastelands began."

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