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# A Song for Ella Grey

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Reading this latest novel for young people from David Almond, I was reminded of a film I had not thought about for a very long time. Pier Pasolini's **Oedipus Rex** (1967) is mostly, as you might expect, set in a magnificently recreated Ancient Greece. However, in the opening sequences, before his abandonment in the desert, Oedipus is born to a young officer in 1930s Italy; and, in the closing sequences, the banished and blinded king walks the streets of 1960s Bologna, Pasolini's university town. Now, forty years later, reading **Ella Grey** recalls Pasolini's dream-like telescoping of time, place, historical reality and ancient myth. In many of Almond's previous novels, his young protagonists have been beguiled, challenged or comforted by the visions, miracles and holy mysteries that they have met in the familiar streets of the Northeast. And, for the most part, these visions have remained enigmatic. **Ella Grey** is different, and perhaps more ambitious, for it transposes the Orpheus and Eurydice myth into modern adolescent Tyneside: a time of artistic aspiration, weekend beach parties and first love and sex. Almond not only puts the myth into modern dress but also retains those aspects of it that might be most difficult for a contemporary reader to credit: particularly the descent into the Underworld and Orpheus's gruesome death at the hands of a posse of enraged women. Unlike Pasolini's film, where a more or less straightforward retelling of the myth is bracketed by the historical and modern sequences, Almond melds the myth and contemporary reality so completely that, if, as one character says, these young people aim to turn a Northumberland beach into Greece, then, as surely, does Ancient Greece itself become one with Tyneside. The central tale of a young woman enthralled by a wandering charismatic musician is, of course, as fit for now as it was for then. It is told through the eyes of Claire, Ella Grey/Eurydice's best friend who is somewhat displaced in Ella's affections by Orpheus. Paradoxically, this gives the narrative a viewpoint that is physically apart but deeply emotionally engaged with the story, which somehow helps to hold myth and reality together. It is Claire who imagines Orpheus's daring and doomed journey to retrieve his dead love, impelled as much by her own need as his, and Claire who hears from another of Orpheus's admirers of his appalling and almost unbelievable fate. After what I felt was a rather slow start, with some uncharacteristically thin depiction of supporting characters, and a sense of awkwardness, at least in this reader, about what was being attempted, this becomes another spell-binding triumph from one of our most gifted and daring writers for young people or adults. I should mention, too, Karen Radford's illustration which adds so much to the atmosphere of the tale.

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