



The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

David Almond's first published novel for adults is both familiar and extraordinary. Familiar in that, once more, he creates a visionary world through which terror and beauty travel hand in hand. Extraordinary in that, although previous books have introduced shaman-like figures whose suffering has connected them to an elemental power, both spiritual and creative or destructive, he hasn't examined such a personality from within. This is Billy Dean, locked away by his parents in his childhood as a shameful secret, who emerges to be spirit guide and healer in a near future of war and ruin, and who tells his own story in an idiosyncratic spelling that suggests the intonation of the Northeast. It's an ambitious book which, available also in this edition marketed to young people, will tax even keener younger readers, less perhaps for the spelling, which becomes accessible surprisingly quickly, than in the intensity of the writing. Billy's voice is the most immediately striking aspect of the novel. His speech follows rules derived from his community; a community where organised society seems to have broken down but a fundamental sense of belonging and care persists, personified by Billy's mum, the home hairdresser. Here faith, and perhaps civilisation itself, are being reinvented. Certainly this is how it begins, with Billy, in his solitary confinement, playing both God and man with his toys and the few live creatures, mice and a pigeon, which enter his small kingdom. Everything is seen through Billy's eyes, a personal vision which is, perhaps, more successful in the first half of the book before Billy is released from his homely prison. The ordinary, everyday world which balances the visionary in most of Almond's children's books has been blown away and Almond's depiction of what remains is imprecise; only Missus Malone, the medium, and Mr McCaufrey, the butcher, standing out in the rubble and desolation. While Billy becomes the channel for his broken community's pain, the conflict and eventual violence in his life remain intensely personal. Here there are passages of mantra-like repetition of sentiments which will be familiar to Almond readers but which don't move the story forward; even Elizabeth, Billy's soul-mate is slightly out of focus, put together from characters we have seen before. That said, there are unforgettable episodes here too (as when the birds feed from Billy's sugar stiffened hair) that are Almond at his heart stopping and inimitable best. It's another remarkable book from a remarkable writer.

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