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Unruly Girls and Unruly Language: Typography and Play in David Almond's *My Name is Mina*

Abstract: Over the last sixteen years Almond has experimented with ways of depicting an unruly wildernesses into which his protagonists adventure in search of space and time to come to terms with aspects of themselves and their world that they find difficult to control. This essay focuses on My Name is Mina (2010), the prequel to Almond's groundbreaking debut Skellig (1998), in which Mina, Michael's female accomplice in Skellig, is given a voice. The story takes the form of a journal supplemented by a first-person narrative in which Mina tries to understand and express the ways in which she finds herself unable to fit in. Her struggles with her unruly nature and where it might take her are evidenced in the variety of styles and formatting used throughout the novel to create striking double-page spreads. In these the semantic and iconic aspects of written language are used to invite an ambiguous and at times tense relationship between the reader and the female protagonist. This essay will draw on elements of multimodal analysis, feminine writing and the feminist künstlerroman to explore ways in which unruly girls and unruly language create paradoxes that encourage critical and creative engagements with the text and its protagonist.

Keywords: multimodal fiction, David Almond, feminine writing, feminist künstlerroman, hybrid novel, typography, unruliness

In his article for *The Lion and the Unicorn* (2011) David Almond speaks of our enduring need for a kind of wilderness that is not limited to wide expanses of untouched mountains or forest but, caught up in unruliness and unpredictability, can also be found in the unexplored scrublands and derelict wastelands of our neighbourhoods. In these neglected places, just beyond the reach of adult supervision, children have the freedom to engage in play that is rough and strange and scary. They have the opportunity to imagine and experiment with

roles and situations that lie outside the bounds of civilised behaviour and in doing so they learn to face and deal with things that exceed an ordered rationality.

Over the last sixteen years Almond has experimented with different ways of depicting this wilderness, allowing his protagonists to adventure into derelict garages, underground tunnels, chalk pits and ruined chapels in search of the space and time they need to come to terms with aspects of themselves and their world that they find difficult to control. However, although Almond is not scared of letting his protagonists face death and darkness, he sees it as his job to ensure that they always find their way back home. Indeed, most of his stories are told retrospectively using a first-person narrator, which lends a certain degree of security to them; “They thought we had disappeared, and they were wrong” Kit writes at the beginning of *Kit’s Wilderness* (1999), letting the reader know from the very first sentence that the teller has survived the tale (Almond 3).

In *My Name is Mina* (2010) no such certainty is provided. The book acts as a prequel to Almond’s groundbreaking debut *Skellig* (1998) but instead of allowing the reader to seamlessly extend their understanding of the original storyline, *My Name is Mina* offers an alternative perspective by giving Mina, Michael’s female accomplice in *Skellig*, a voice. The story takes the form of a journal supplemented by a first-person narrative in which Mina tries to understand and express the ways in which she continually finds herself unable to fit in at school with her teachers or her peers. In contrast to his earlier work, Almond does not allow himself the luxury of a retrospective narrator in *My Name is Mina*, preferring to depict Mina’s journey as it happens and providing the reader with a protagonist who is struggling and uncertain as to where her unruly nature will take her.

In this paper I shall begin by examining the ways in which *My Name is Mina* varies the font, size, weight and layout of the text to create striking and unusual double-page spreads. This will allow me to consider how typography enables Almond to create a complex, nuanced and challenging female protagonist. Once I have established how the semantic and iconic aspects of written language are used to invite an ambiguous and at times tense relationship between the reader and the protagonist, I shall be able to delve more deeply into whether Mina is characteristic of unruly heroines in the feminist *künstlerroman*. This in turn will lead me on to explore how Mina matures to a point where she can use her writing to deal with her own insecurities and act upon the world to write the beginnings of her friendship with Michael.

From the opening line *My Name is Mina* establishes itself as a story that is to be seen and heard; the rounded edges and irregular, handwritten feel of the main font match the conversational tone, so that an understanding of the protagonist is gained through both the iconic and the semantic characteristics of the text. Mina is an only child whose father died when she was young and whose mother writes articles and tutors her daughter. However, early on in the book we learn that Mina has not always been home-schooled and that she used to attend St. Bede's Primary School where both her classmates and her teacher were uncomfortable with the questions she asked and thoughts she came out with. *My Name is Mina* follows Mina through the months that precede the beginning of *Skellig*, tracking the thoughts and creative pieces she includes in her journal to give the reader an insight into how this young girl gathers strength and courage from the books she reads, the creatures she sees and the people she comes into contact with.

Unlike Almond's other fiction *My Name is Mina* is not a story with a central mystery or problem to solve, instead the narrative is disjointed and composed of a series of journal entries, short stories, poems and activities. It works hard to establish a sense of intimacy between Mina and the reader by using a stream of consciousness style of narration peppered with exclamations and reflections, which create an illusion of unmediated access to the protagonist's ongoing thoughts and actions.

The short sentences and erratic way in which the discussion shown in image 1 moves from William Blake to Mina's family, from "one big sad and horrible thing" (Almond 18) to sadness in general and from paradoxes to a reflection on the word "paradox", nicknames and then back to the "big sad and horrible thing" (*ibid.*) invites the reader to trace personal connections and allusions between seemingly incongruous subject matter. In taking up this invitation and trying to make sense of the discussion the reader aligns themselves with Mina's way of thinking and seeing the world. This move is supported through the use of lettering and layout, which not only provides contextual information but also allows the reader to see the text from Mina's point of view. For example, the gothic font used for the William Blake quote suggests age, stature and spirituality, while the brushstroke effect used for "paradox" and "paradoxical" is reminiscent of the script produced by a thick, felt-tip pen. Both examples show the text as Mina sees it on her wall and in her diary rather than describing it, literally giving the reader better access to Mina's perspective.

My motto's written on paper and pinned
above my bed:

**How can a bird that is born for joy
Sit in a cage and sing?**

It's by William Blake. Blake the Misfit, Blake the Outsider. Just like me. He was a painter and a poet and some people said he was mad - just like they say about me. Maybe he was out too much in the moon. Sometimes he wore no clothes. Sometimes he saw angels in his garden. He saw spirits all around him. I think he was very sane. So does my mum, so did my dad. I will write with William Blake in mind. I will write about the sad things, of course, because there is no way not to write about the sad things. And there are sad things in my life. Well, **ONE BIG SAD AND HORRIBLE THING.** Weirdly enough, the sad things in my life make the happy things seem more intense. I wonder if other people feel like that, if they feel that sadness, in a weird way, can help to make you more intensely

happy. That's what's known as a paradox, I suppose.

PARADOX!

What a word! It sounds good, looks good, and the meaning's good! And if something is a paradox, it is PARADOXICAL. Which is an even better word!

PARADOXICAL!

That's the kind of nickname I'd like to have. Not Typical McKee, but Paradoxical McKee!

Or Nonsensical McKee, of course.

Anyway, I'll try to make my words break out of the cages of sadness, and make them sing for joy.

Suddenly, thinking about the **ONE BIG SAD AND HORRIBLE THING**, I know that I'm writing all this for Dad. I imagine him watching me and reading my words as I write. He'll be everywhere in this journal, of course, in my mind and in my words and moving among the spaces between the words and behind the words. Sometimes

Image 1. Almond (2010) *My Name is Mina*. London: Hodder, pp.18–19.

The literary critic, Alison Gibbons calls this kind of narrative technique, in which the reader sees what the character sees, "lamination" (143) and identifies it as a way in which Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) works to encourage an empathetic relationship between the reader and Oskar, the nine year old protagonist. In her book *Multimodality, Cognition and Experimental Literature* (2012) Gibbons calls novels that make use of the visual and material affordances of the book to tell the story "multimodal literature" (1) and uses a combination of multimodal theory, cognitive criticism and empirical evidence to examine the ways in which these kinds of texts structure the reader's experience. However, other scholars (Fjellestad; Sadokierski; Walker; Wurth; Wurth, Epsi & van der Ven) have referred to these kinds of texts as 'hybrid novels' and there is still much debate as to whether, as the literary critic Katherine Hayles puts it, "this transformation represents the rebirth of the novel or the beginning of the novel's displacement by a hybrid discourse that as yet has no name" (781). However, what these literary critics agree on is that when analysing this kind of literature it is essential to take into account the ways in which both the visual and the verbal aspects of the text contribute to the story and frame the reader's experience.

to do what a dragonfly does and to look like a dragonfly looks."

"Or a good soul could turn out to be a bee."

"To be a bee," I said. "To be a beetle?"

"And a bad soul?"

"A cockroach."

"A bluebottle."

I pondered.

"I'd quite like to be a bird," I said.

"I can imagine you as a bird."

"A skylark, flying so high it can't be seen. Or a cat, as black as the night."

We were quiet for a time. We got on with our lunch. I tried to imagine what Dad might like to be, and I came up with a horse, a beast that's strong and fast and beautiful and proud. I didn't want to imagine him as another human being. The only human being I wanted him to be was my dad, even if he was just a memory of my dad.

"Another word for transmigration," said Mum, "is metempsychosis. It's a word from ancient Greece."

"Say it again."

"Met-em-sy-co-sis," she said, more slowly.

"Me-tem-sy-co-sis!" I said. "What a fantastic word! Metempsychosis! Metempsychosis! Met-em-sy-beautiful-co-sis!"

It is a great word! Look at it! Listen to it!

METEMPSYCHOSIS!
METEMPSY - BEAUTIFUL - CHOSIS

Then we looked at books about India and Sri Lanka, and read about Hinduism and Buddhism. We looked at photographs of the Himalayas, and I painted a picture of snow-capped mountains while Mum read to me about Tibet, the country beyond India high up in the clouds. In Tibet, people believe that the soul breaks free of the body at night, and has journeys that are remembered as dreams. This is known as astral travelling. Astral travelling! Imagine flying through the night with the bats and the owls, looking down at the house, the street, the city, the world!

They also believe that the whole of the universe hatched from a single egg. This makes total

Image 2. Almond (2010) *My Name is Mina*. London: Hodder, pp. 80–81.

In *My Name is Mina* a variety of different fonts and layouts are used not only to create a sense of intimacy and immediacy but also to distance the reader by drawing attention to the materiality and structure of written texts. There are moments in the novel when Mina pauses to think about and play with individual words. One such moment occurs when she considers the word paradox, while another happens later on when her mother introduces her to the word "metempsychosis". Unusually, instead of commenting on the meaning of the word or attempting to use it in a sentence Mina responds to the new word by savouring its visual and verbal textures.

By repeating the word "metempsychosis" and breaking it up into syllables Mina frees it of its referential function, isolating it and turning it into a string of phonemes to look at and listen to (image 2). As can be seen above, the capital letters and brush stroke effects remind the reader that Mina is writing this down in her journal and draw attention to the words' oral and graphic existence. "Look at it! Listen to it!" (Almond 81) she demands, inviting the reader to participate in physically sounding out the graphemes to relish the series of nasals, plosives and fricatives that make up the word. Finally Mina appropriates the word by interpolating her appreciation of it into its very

structure through the adjective “beautiful”. This tmesis privileges the aesthetic quality of the word over its meaning and creates a rupture in the discourse which calls attention to itself, highlighting the materiality of the spoken and written word rather than its meaning.

Both Maria Nikolajeva and Robyn McCallum have analysed the ways in which authors like Aidan Chambers and Robert Cormier use a range of different text types, including scripts, letters, cartoons and manuscripts, in their writing to foreground the “interplay of different voices” (Nikolajeva 113), distancing the reader and involving them “in active processes of inferring and constructing both story and meaning” (McCallum 207). Throughout *My Name is Mina* the different fonts and formats work to create both a sense of intimacy and of distance; allowing the reader to see what Mina sees and follow her line of thinking while at the same time requiring them to be aware of the text’s status as a work of fiction. Gibbons refers to this tension as “bi-stable oscillation” (208) and argues that for a text to be bi-stable, it must demand a reading strategy that toggles between looking *at* the surface of the page and *through* the words of the book. For example, about half way through her journal Mina tells the tale of SAT’s (Statutory Assessment Tasks) day and includes in her journal the story she wrote during the test. As can be seen in image 3, this story is rendered in a heavier and less spidery font with the title written in large, capitalised letters across the top.

However, the main difficulty with which the reader is presented is that some words are invented and others are spelt phonetically, making the story dauntingly illegible. At this point it is easy to skip over the text, glancing merely at its surface features and noting that some of the words included are faintly reminiscent of Lewis Carroll’s “The Jabberwocky”. On the other hand, for the reader who takes up the challenge of painstakingly sounding out each individual part, the narrative starts to make sense and reveals a parodic take on the kind of story that children are expected to write during their SATs test. By showing the reader Mina’s story rather than describing it Almond is able to keep two conflicting perspectives in balance because an examination of the page’s surface allows the reader to see the text as Mina’s teacher might have seen it, whilst a closer and more imaginative examination of the text reveals Mina’s subversive engagement with statutory testing. Depending on the perspective that the reader adopts Mina is either an incredibly annoying and belligerent little girl or an exciting and unruly misfit. However, it would be a mistake to settle permanently on one or the other because the text supports

forward. And there was a lovely pattern where the paint had flaked away at the edge of the window frame. Or maybe I could write a story about Mrs Scullery's night with the ghosts. I heard my name whispered. Mina McKee. I looked up. Mrs Scullery was glaring at me. Everybody was heads down getting their writing done. Mrs Scullery whispered my name again. I looked at her. I nodded at her and sighed. Poor Mrs Scullery. I read the first instruction on the paper. "Write a description of a busy place." Oh my God. I looked up again. THE HEAD TEACHER was looking in through the glass bit of the classroom door. He looked like he'd been with the ghosts as well. He looked like he was about to burst into tears. He caught my eye. He mouthed the words: WRITE. DON'T WORRY! PLEASE WRITE. The poor poor man. So I smiled at him, and nodded, and shrugged, and started to write, and this is what I wrote.

GLIBBERTYSNARK

In thi biginin glibbertysnark woz doon in the woositinimana. Golgy golgy golgy thang, wiss wandigle. Olotoshin under smiffer yes! Glibbering mornikles which was o so diggibunish. Hoy it! Hoy it! Then woz won so stidderuppickle. Aye aye woz the replifing clud. Yes! Clud is cludderish thats trew. Tickle und ticklin woz the rest ov that meet dun thar in the dokniss; An the erippy eralies erippin unda the path doon thar. Howzit! Woz the yel. Howzit! Sumwun nose a sekritish thang an wil holed it unda. Aye! Unda! So hoy it! Naa. It is two riddish a thang for hoyin. So giv it not a thowt. An wil be in the wel in the wel ay depe don in the wel. An on it goze an on an on an on an on an on an on an on til the middlishniss is nere. An the glibbertysnark wil raze oot the woositinimana an to the blewniss wi the burds an clowds an clowds this loke lyke clowns. An wil laff laff laff. An wil yel Hoy it! Hoy it! Til the lasst ov the daze wen we wil no a ansa. So pond the glibbertysnark an the olitoshin an kip way ov mornikles. Wel howzit an hoy it! Til the bels is ringerish.

Image 3. Almond (2010) *My Name is Mina*. London: Hodder, pp. 160–161

both and is continually using its visual and verbal affordances to create paradoxes and keep the reader thinking.

The use of typography in *My Name is Mina* to create intimacy and distance as well as providing multiple perspectives allows for a richer, more complex and contradictory character to be developed. Despite Mina being very keen to articulate a simpler and more unequivocal version of herself at the beginning of the novel as a child who is never afraid of upsetting conventions or challenging commonly held beliefs:

Then what shall I write? I can't just write that this happened then this happened then this happened to boring infinitum. I'll let my journal grow just like the mind does, just like a tree or a beast does, just like life does. Why should a book tell a tale in a dull straight line? (Almond 11)

The questions Mina poses at the beginning and end of this extract draw the reader's attention to the form and content of her writing by challenging the way in which stories and journals are usually writ-

ten, while the intervening sentences model two different styles of writing. The first sentence swiftly parodies and then dismisses linear narratives through its use of repetition and lack of punctuation that blends the successive events into non-significance. While the second sentence functions according to a logic of free-association, comparing Mina's writing to various, biological forms whose growth is fluid and spontaneous.

This aesthetic understanding that drives *My Name is Mina* from the beginning is sharply reminiscent of Hélène Cixous' definition of *l'écriture féminine*:

Life becomes text starting out from my body...I go where the 'fundamental' language is spoken, the body language into which all the tongues of things act, and beings translate themselves, in my own breast, the whole of reality worked upon by my flesh, intercepted by my nerves, by my senses, by the labour of all my cells projected, analysed, recomposed into a book ("Writing" 52-53).

In her writing Cixous seeks to create and sustain alternative forms of narrative and narratological relations by focusing on the embodiedness of both language and writing. Her insistence of feminine writing stems from a belief that the physical subjugation on women makes them more likely to be able to attain another perspective that undermines and reformulates the existing binary structures inherent in Western thought. On the other hand, Cixous does not believe that *l'écriture féminine* is an exclusively female writing position, allowing for male authors like Almond to engage in it and making it a productive way of thinking about the contradictions in *My Name is Mina*.

Throughout the novel Mina reflects on the ways in which we exist as embodied beings; in the same way as a birds pneumatized bones enable it to fly, our bodies enable us to walk and talk and write. In trying to grasp what happens to us when we die Mina continues to focus on our materiality, discussing how dust consists mainly of tiny fragments of human skin so "when we see dust dancing and whirling and sparkling in a shaft of sunlight the thing that is dancing and whirling and sparkling is dead human skin" (Almond 73). This understanding is later supported by Mina learning that sixty-five per cent of the human body is water "so that most of me is not me at all" (*ibid.* 124). Like Cixous, Mina adheres to a philosophy that is deeply rooted in the body as an evolving entity with permeable boundaries that connects us to the beings and objects that surround us.

Writing from this position Mina is able to feel "those creatures move inside me, almost like I'm a weird kind of creature myself, a

girl whose name is Mina but more than just a girl whose name in Mina" (Almond 10) and open herself up to the possibility of writing through the body and re-inscribing herself as a subject through her journal. However, at the beginning of the novel she has a long way to go before she can begin to act upon the world around her. This is evident when *My Name is Mina* is analysed using Roberta Selinger Trites definition of the feminist *künstlerroman* or maturation tale "which demonstrates the growth of a child whose identity is constantly formed by her desire to be a writer" (64).

Unlike the female heroines of nineteenth-century literature the heroine of a feminist *künstlerroman* is not required to sacrifice her writing for the sake of a romantic relationship but continues to use it as a means of changing her perception of her self and her world. Like the heroines Trites cites as prototypes for the feminist *künstlerroman*, such as Harriet in Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964) and Birdie in Mollie Hunter's *A Sound of Chariots* (1972), Mina's separation from other children is partly due to her independence of character and partly due to her life being disrupted by her father's death. At the beginning of the novel Mina defiantly accepts this separation and writes it into her identity as a creature of the night. And yet, the shakiness of the font in which she declares "My name is Mina and I love the night" (Almond 10) betrays a slight hesitation and uncertainty, alerting the reader to the fact that she still needs to "learn to use her voice not only as a matter of speaking but also as a matter of writing" (cf. Trites 63).

Like Harriet and Birdie, Mina finds it hard to acknowledge that she is scared or that she needs friends and initially it is only in her poems and autobiographical stories that she is able to begin dealing with her fears. In one of the first stories she includes in her journal she chooses to write in the third-person and finds this shift in perspective deeply liberating. "Mina is the Underworld' mixes references to Ancient Greek myths with Northumbrian folktales to tell about how Mina entered a mining tunnel on a quest to bring back her dead father from the underworld. After the easy confidence and gregarious overtones of the first-person narrative the opening description of Mina is startling:

She was just nine years old. She was skinny and very small and she had jet black hair and a pale face and shining eyes. Some folks said she was weird. Her mum said she was brave. Sometimes she seemed very old for her age and sometimes she seemed just like a little girl. All those things were true (Almond 43).

In the book the text is written in white ink on a black page under a title where “underworld” has been flipped upside down. These visual inversions prepare the reader for the third-person narrative, which allows Mina to “write her self” and “put her self into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movements” (cf. Cixous, *Medusa* 875). The simple and direct language used in the opening sets up a series of conflicting statements that are rounded off by the declaration, “All those things were true” (Almond 43). Each reported fact works to destabilise the traditional and simplistic figure of the male hero usually employed in mythic structures by framing Mina as a heroic figure and then pointing to the contradictions inherent in her personality.

However, although both the different types of texts and the use of typography produce instabilities and lend an open-ended structure to the narrative, the novel continues to display strong humanist qualities. Christine Wilkie Stibbs identifies these “tensions created between unity and disunity, interiority and exteriority, and between discursive structures and fictional words” (125) as being typical of the feminine postmodern in children’s literature, which is different from the classic postmodern novel, despite exhibiting many of the same techniques and literary devices, due to its “insistence on agency, and its refusal to dissolve the subject” (126).

Instead, Mina’s insistence on the natural world, the scientific method, reason and humanity can, at times, transform her into a mouth-piece for Almond’s own social and political beliefs; the series of ‘extraordinary activities’ in *My Name is Mina* may certainly be interpreted as an unwelcome incursion but this would be to read them out of context. When read as multimodal elements of the text they can be seen as another way in which the reader is invited to renegotiate his or her relationship to the text.

As can be seen in image 4, the bold font, use of capitalisation and the thick black line that runs around the text draw attention to the extraordinary activity and mark it out from the rest of the page. The boxed text and use of the imperative have a similar effect to what picturebook scholar David Lewis identifies as the demand function of pictures where “characters that look out of pictures at the viewer looking in seem to address the viewer directly and call for some kind of response” (156). Like those pictures, the extraordinary activities also address the reader directly and call for some kind of response. However, instead of them being an emotive and almost visceral response to the gaze of an individual, the extraordinary activities call for a reasoned and creative response. Completing the task enables the reader to try out the same

We walked slowly homeward through the sunlight. We stopped in the park on the way home. We ate ice cream and we sighed at its deliciousness. We sat on a bench by a bush with lovely bright red roses growing on it. We watched people dressed in white playing bowls on the beautiful green lawn. The brown bowls clicked and clunked as they struck each other. The people in white chatted and laughed. Somebody somewhere sang a lovely song. Close by, a little boy rolled down a hill, giggled, got up, ran to his mum and kissed her, then ran up the hill again and rolled down again. It was lovely and warm in the sunshine. The sky was heavenly blue. Bees buzzed. Butterflies flitted by. A dog chased a ball. A flight of honking geese flew over us. The tops of the trees were swaying in the gentle breeze.

"This is very diggibunish," said Mum.

"It is," I said. "And very pringersticks, as well."

When we got home, Mum pinned up GLIBBERTYS/ARK in the kitchen. We looked at it together. It was indeed one of the most important pieces of writing I had done all year. I was now

a Home-Schooled Girl, which made me Very Very Very Very Very Pleased. Very.

Mum put her arm around me, and we smiled, and we were filled with claminosity.

EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY

**Write a page of
UTTER NONSENSE.**

**This will produce some very fine
NEW WORDS.**

**It could also lead to some very
SENSIBLE RESULTS.**

Image 4. Almond (2010) *My Name is Mina*. London: Hodder, pp. 170–171.

activity that Mina has just completed but their open-ended and personal structure ensures that the results will remain dissimilar.

Mina includes the extraordinary activities in her journal as a repudiation of mainstream schooling methods. However, towards the end of the novel we learn that her initially dismissive attitude towards St. Bede's might not be completely justified and instead of her cage being composed of school railings it is made of her own fears. Her growing understanding of her own unruly nature and the ways in which she is able to express and direct it through language can be seen in the opening sentences of her final autobiographical story "Mina at the Corinthian Avenue Pupil Referral Unit" where she writes, "And so one day our heroine Mina, who thought she was so clever and strong, arrived at Corinthian Avenue" (Almond 221). The opening phrase, "And so one day our heroine" (*ibid.*) displays both an understanding of her femininity and a growing confidence in manipulating storytelling forms to suit her needs. Her use of the

submodifier “so” points to an irony that was entirely absent from “Mina in the Underworld”, which works to undercut and question the character’s heroic status. Likewise, instead of this being a tale in which Mina sets forth to vanquish the wild forces of death and bring back her father, this is a story in which Mina builds relationships with people that she once perceived as being radically different from herself. In this piece of writing Mina acknowledges that the other children at Corinthian Avenue are “troubled, damaged, shy, scared children, kids with pains and problems and yearnings” (Almond 239) just like her and she realises that she is interested in their stories and wants to share her own. By interacting with the pupils and teachers at Corinthian Avenue, Mina is made to realise that her silence and isolation is, to a certain extent, self-imposed by her habit of trying to show that she is “something special” (Almond 225).

Over the course of story the narrative follows Mina “wandering and wondering” (Almond 16) through the pages of the book as she meets different characters whose bravery and humanity remind her that she is not alone. Throughout the novel the reader’s attention is drawn to the visual and verbal characteristics of the narrative and as Mina writes the characters she meets into her journal she reflects on “the mysterious connection between words and the world” (Almond 186):

Is there someone who writes,
“There is a girl called Mina sitting in a tree.”

Is there someone who writes,
“Sometimes she hesitates and sometimes she wonders.”

And if there is, who is it?
Who writes Mina?
Who writes me? (Almond 187)

The musings in this poem demonstrate how Mina has learnt to shift her subject position and see things differently by writing through the body and exploring the ways in which she can “write her self” and “put her self into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movements” (cf. Cixous, *Medusa* 875). The poem appears in the capitalised font with a brush stroke effect that draws attention to its mode of inscription. However, unlike the other entries in Mina’s journal, it goes on to ask “Who writes Mina?” (Almond 187) and in so doing it reminds the reader that the character they recognise as Mina is just a collection of words on a page. This first question goes

unanswered and the following question, "Who writes me?" (*ibid.*) ends the poem, leaving the reader to ponder Mina's textuality and positioning in the language of the novel and by extension their own textuality and positioning in life.

In the last part of the novel we start to see how Mina begins to use her writing to act upon herself as well as the world around her. For example, the last extraordinary activity she includes in her journal, unlike the rest, is written not for the reader but for herself and pinned above her bed in the space that had been reserved for her Blakian motto. It reads, "EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY BE BRAVE!" (Almond 298) and the bold, capitalised font is blazoned across with the page without the familiar thick, black line boxing it out (image 5).

These final pages include short sections of text written in the third-person and using the same font Mina employed during her autobiographical stories that interrupt the first-person narration. These sections function as an embedded narrative with highly dramatic effects which portend future events and give Mina the courage to introduce herself to Michael and, in so doing, write herself into the

"Michael! Michael! Didn't we tell you..."
Michael. That's his name. But it's too late.
He's with his dad now, and his dad thumps
a wall and the garage shudders and I hear them
heading back towards the house.
Silly Minal! Lost your chance! Chicken!
I wait, but they've gone. And I trail back
home. And I write again.

Chicken! I'm frightened. Don't be frightened!

I try not to feel silly and forlorn. I write
an extraordinary activity for myself, the most
important of all extraordinary activities. I pin it up
above my bed.

**EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY
BE BRAVE!**

I read it and read it. I tell myself to be as brave
as a chick making its first flight, as brave as Steepy
with his tattoos, as brave as Sophie with her
operation, as brave as Mum living without Dad, as
brave as the baby leaping into the world. I write
the words to help me.

**Mina was brave and she tried again. She walked along
the street and into the back lane. She stepped up on to
the waste bin and then up on to the wall and she said,
"Hello. My name is Mina. What's yours?"**

And I do it, just like that, the very next day.
I see him go off to school in the morning.
I'm in the tree when he comes back in the afternoon.
I don't wait long. I take myself for a walk into
the back lane. I hear the boy and his dad talking
together. Then his dad goes away. And I wait.
And there's silence, just the creaking of a door, so
he must be in there again.
As soon as he comes out I tell myself.
I wait.
The creaking of the door.

Image 5. Almond (2010) *My Name is Mina*. London: Hodder, pp. 298–299.

beginning of *Skellig* using the same words with which she started her journal, "My name is Mina!" (Almond 300).

In conclusion, it is possible to see that *My Name is Mina* uses a range of typographical strategies to draw attention to the text's semantic and the iconic characteristics. At times these work to support the reader in their comprehension and to help them align themselves with the protagonist's perspective, while at others they distance the reader from the text by highlighting the materiality of spoken and written language. With these narrative techniques Almond is able to portray a complex and challenging protagonist whose unruliness results in different and often contradictory interpretative stances. These paradoxical perspectives are held in balance by the visual and verbal aspects of the text that support the development of an aesthetic that is in many ways similar to what Cixous calls *l'écriture féminine*. However, although the novel as a whole works within this kind of writing, its protagonist begins the story with a lack of understanding as to how writing can help her manage her unruly nature. As the story progresses Mina embarks on a journey into the wilderness through the pages of her journal and learns to recognise the ways in which her insecurities isolate her from the world. By learning how to use her writing to challenge, not only the reader's perspective, but also her own she discovers ways of more closely depicting her unruly nature and acting upon it.

The strategies that Almond employs in *My Name is Mina* are highly effective at creating a feminine voice that works subversively from an oppressed position to realise the visual, auditory and semantic potential of written discourse. By playing with words and experimenting with typography, Almond interrogates normative writing practices and undermines conservative or conformist power positions that promote univocal perspectives. These perspectives can be seen in schooling systems that insist on there being a "right" answer and in novels that work towards delimiting the subject positions available to the reader. Instead, *My Name is Mina* uses the text's iconic and semantic affordances to show how unruly girls, and unruly language, can work to produce a fictional space in which hierarchies may be turned on their heads and a crowd of different discourses can be given room to play with possibilities to create new opportunities.

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All images from *My Name is Mina* (2010) by David Almond, first published in the UK by Hodder Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Children's Books, 338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH. Permission granted by Hodder Children's Books.

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