

## Episode 1: Sing The North

**Introduction** *New Narratives for the North East, brought to you by New Writing North. Telling fresh stories, exploring the historical legacies, and looking to the future of the North East.*

*Episode One: Seeing the North, featuring original work by David Almond.*

**David Almond** I write this in exile during lockdown days. Three hundred miles from Bamburgh Beach, where I wanted to start. I tried to set off writing as if we're free to wander as we were before. But we aren't free. And without mention of pandemic, there's no truth. All's illusion. The words are locked. Now I must write myself there. Must write to the edge of the world, to the edge of myself. Let me see my north.

Is it sound and song that will take me north? Birds sing and bees buzz and the leaves shift in the breeze. And high above this garden a skylark sings and sings, exultant as ever despite all troubles down below, and I'm lifted from this garden by its song. And hover high above the land, and there it is below, the North.

**Andrew Hankinson** There's the Midlands, and then there's the kind of North – but the North East is north, you know, that's *really* north. A place with its own personality.

**David Almond** Moorland and forest, rivers and streams, reservoirs and lakes.

**Richard T Kelly** The North East does think itself apart, and its sons and daughters feel a bit that way all through their lives.

**David Almond** Cheviots and Pennines, the Simonside Hills.

**Melissa Tutesigensi** Often the North East is just seen as like, 'oh, it's on the edge, in an awkward part of the country to get to'. Whereas if you're starting from the North East, then it is the centre of your world.

**David Almond** The North Tyne, the South Tyne, the Coquet.

**Carmen Marcus** It's got so many characters. You're travelling from North Yorkshire, all the way up to Northumberland, to the borders of Scotland.

**David Almond** The battlefields and pilgrim ways.

**Carmen Marcus** If you want to encounter spiritual reawakening then you have to go to Holy Island.

**David Almond** Glowing heather, shining gorse.

**Carmen Marcus** See those huge moors and the bruised northern skies, and get a totally different mood.

**David Almond** The long line of the seashore, the broad pale beaches.

**Carmen Marcus** And every beach has its own personality and its own text.

**David Almond** The archipelago of the Farnes. The space, the great expanse of it, the wilderness.

**Richard T Kelly** You can see the wildness of the North East all around you...

**David Almond** The Durham hills, the city...

**Richard T Kelly** ...when you see Durham Cathedral...

**David Almond** ... Newcastle and Gateshead, clustered on the Tyne's banks.

**Richard T Kelly** ...when you see the River Tyne: powerful elemental things.

**Lisette Auton** It's rugged. It's vibrant. It's industrial.

**David Almond** The tender damaged beauty of it all.

**Lisette Auton** The whole of the North East is this juxtaposition between the beauty and the harshness.

**David Almond** They tell us that we live on a tiny crowded island.

**Lauren Davies** I was standing on top of the hill the other day and I looked around 360 degrees. I literally couldn't see anybody.

**David Almond** They try to tell us that we are tiny within ourselves.

**Richard Benson** I have the sense in the North East, you know, it's happy to be on its own. It doesn't want to be assimilated; it doesn't want to be in competition. It knows what it is.

**David Almond** Tell them to come up here with the skylark, to forget what they think they know, and to look down upon the vastness of the North.

**Lauren Davies** You know, it feels that you can breathe and I've really felt how lucky we are to have this fresh air and space and tranquillity.

**Juliana Mensah** I grew up in London, and when you're in a city it feels very much as though humanity has control of the environment. But spend a night out in Northumberland and you will realise that that's not the case.

**David Almond** Tell them that this is where they might come, if they wish to be rewilded.

**Juliana Mensah** It doesn't even need to be extreme weather. You're just more connected with your surroundings and with the environment.

**David Almond** And now the skylark falls, still singing, and leaves me here on the Wall.

**Bronwen Riley** We're just about to go on to Hadrian's Wall.

**David Almond** This is it, the edge, the frontier, my desk and chair, the place that I sit and write with the South behind, the North in front.

**Bronwen Riley** We are on the south side, so we're in Britannia.

**David Almond** Hard stone crag beneath me, a dizzying drop, then a dark lough, then boggy rushy fields, stone walls, a couple of farmhouses, spinneys, land mounting towards distant moors.

**Andrew Hankinson** We're this link between Scotland and England. I think that's really important. People in the south, they kind of see us as being on the frontiers, you know. And then people in Scotland see us as England, but not really the proper England.

**David Almond** We stay and write for the freedom of being on this edge.

**Andrew Hankinson** It's that whole thing of those frontier folk up on the wall. And I think that has carved our personality somewhat.

**David Almond** This stepping place between the civilised and the wild, the real and the imagined, the body and the soul.

**Bronwen Riley** When you cross a threshold – either a physical threshold, or from one country to another, or a threshold in terms of age, childhood, puberty – there's a sense of absolute unease always, because there's uncertainty and all these changes of state.

**David Almond** This edge, where words can echo in the emptiness and call into eternity.

**Bronwen Riley** In classical belief, there's this idea that you have to do something when you cross a boundary, you need to propitiate the gods.

**David Almond** What mystical nonsense! Perhaps, but isn't it something to be in a place where such nonsense can be thought, and thought to make sense?

**Bronwen Riley** It's interesting now, in these times of COVID, that I think people are now beginning to be a little bit more aware of that: what it means to be in an uncertain world.

**David Almond** Yell your words into the air. Let them mingle and flow with the sounds of the ages-long music of this place.

**Alex Niven** I think, for me, perhaps the most important thing about the North East is, it has a kind of cultural identity and heritage that is separate from familiar clichés of England and Englishness.

**David Almond** Call them out through your open gob like Cuthbert called his prayer to God, like Cædmon unleashed his spontaneous praise of all Creation.

**Carmen Marcus** Aiden and Cuthbert established the north as the spiritual and cultural centre of pretty much the Christian universe.

**David Almond** And, yes, with those eternal skylarks, singing then and now and ever more. And try to make them soar like the buzzard above, that now spirals down and picks me up and

carries me away, eastwards, across the land of deer, red squirrel, adder and badger and fox, towards the beach.

**Lauren Davies** The sea, the North Sea, is both powerful, in its way, and peaceful.

**David Almond** And oh and ouch the delight of the sea, so bitter bliddy cold.

**Lauren Davies** The coldness is where you get what we call an ice cream headache. When you first go under the cold water.

**Carmen Marcus** This shock, the shockwave that goes right through the body and it hits behind the back of your eyes as the cold hits you.

**David Almond** I'm in it in my bare feet. It's turning gently over me splish splash splish splash.

**Carmen Marcus** As you wade in, as it gets up over your calves, up to your knees, then you start to feel the muscle of the water.

**David Almond** And over all is the deep and eternal roar of it.

**Lauren Davies** The sounds are very different. The waves and seagulls.

**David Almond** Just look at that horizon, so sharp and so distinct.

**Lauren Davies** The coastline is so beautiful – the sunrises have amazing colours.

**David Almond** There's Cuthbert's island not far off, black rock with the shining drips of birdshite on it. Bamburgh Beach, the great pale stretch of it, black outcrops of the Whin Sill, the tender dunes behind, the astonishing castle against the sky. And the grey concrete tank traps, put here for the invasion that never came, each year a little deeper in the sand.

**Lauren Davies** The surfers, North East surfers, sit in the sea, and you look back at the North East and you look back at the land and it really gives you a fresh perspective. I always think that.

**Carmen Marcus** When you look back at the land from the sea, it's entirely different. That's the way you need to look at the North. Take a new perspective.

**David Almond** Terns dance and dive over the waves. Sanderlings skitter on the shore and take quick wing. The curlew leaves, calling as it flies away.

**Lauren Davies** When you take off on a wave, you know, you feel a certain energy under your arms. I think it's almost like you're flying down the way. I watch birds fly by, and I kind of I feel part of their freedom – that they're sort of flying along the tops of the water.

**David Almond** A boy runs with his dog yelling, "Howay, Jackie. Howay, howay!" Walkers keep their distance from each other. One passes by a few short yards away. He lifts his homemade face mask aside. He's my age, perhaps a little older. "Grand day," he says. "Aye." "Aa'd offer ye a liquorice allsort, lad," he says. "But Aa'm not allowed te even diy that."

**Juliana Mensah** The thing that connects the North East, the wider North East, I suppose is the warmth. There's a cultural kind of warmth and openness.

**David Almond** He laughs as he puts one into his mouth. "Strange days," I say.

**Juliana Mensah** People say what they mean. They're more direct. And I like that a lot.

**David Almond** "As ever they were. These too will pass."

**Richard Benson** In the North East as a region. I think they have a very secure sense of a history and a culture that in many respects, feels older and more venerable than London's does.

**David Almond** He seems about to go, but then he says, "Aa niver understood why there was hardly ever anybody here. Like they didn't knaa it was here, or like they didn't want to knaa."

**Lisette Auton** From my doorstep, I can get to the moors, I can get to the coast, I can get to mountains. It's just brilliant.

**David Almond** I smile. It's true. It mystifies. "They'll knaa now, won't they?" he says. "And every bugger'll want to come."

**Lisette Auton** We've got to keep this quite quiet, because otherwise everyone'll move here.

**David Almond** "Aye, once we're free. Once aal this is done. Who wouldn't want to be in such a place?" He slips on his mask again. "And welcome to them, I suppose," he says.

**India Hunter** When you actually, like, live here, and you talk to these people, they're all so lovely. And they all care. It's a specific, sort of, 'we look after each other' kind of kindness. Yeah.

**David Almond** He wanders on, close by the yelling boy. "Howay howay howaaaay!" The lovely voice, the lovely words, the lovely language of the North.

**India Hunter** Looking at the history of the English language, it's not concrete. In the 1800s, some random Southern London people decided these rules for grammar specifically so the poor people couldn't access them. So there was this correct way to think and speak. So I kind of decided, like, sod it. We can speak however we want to speak. And I think there is a beauty to that, like, it's much less stiff, our way of speaking.



**Carmen Marcus** We need new stories of the North to root us. To reclaim. To remember. And those stories need to work in the same way that the sea does. So the sea, it unearths and delivers what was hidden, but it also reinvents, changes and transforms what exists.

**David Almond** We think the sea is blue, but look again.

**Carmen Marcus** You read the sea the way that you would read body language.

**David Almond** See how in the gentle coming-in of the water all colours shift and change.

**Carmen Marcus** You're looking for the rises.

**David Almond** Pale violets, greens, pale pinks.

**Carmen Marcus** You're looking for dips, you're looking for those white caps.

**David Almond** See flashes of rainbow above the splashing white.

**Carmen Marcus** You can read the sea, but it never tells the same story twice. That's where the North East is right now. If you're going to attempt to read the North, read it fresh.

**David Almond** And yes, we know that all of this is beautiful. Such beauty could be anywhere, but could it be? Look down. There they are, a thousand thousand jet black fragments, like seeds scattered on pale sand around pale feet. They shift and shift beneath the shallow shifting sea.

**Lauren Davies** I would meet an old miner, now and again, who walked his dog up here and he would tell me stories about him being out working, you know, under the seabed

in the mines in the North Sea. And he would tell me, 'Oh yeah, there's a mine that structures right out there, you know, that we use to work in.'

**David Almond** Coal, the stuff that's come up from the North's dark heart. Coal, the stuff that fired a revolution, that was dug up from here and carried away, and that blazed across the world. Coal dust in this gorgeous place. I reach down and pick it and let it lie there on my palm.

**India Hunter** Our identity, in Teesside at least, is steel, and like the mining and Durham and everything. And we've had that taken away from us.

**David Almond** It takes us deeper, deeper back through time.

**India Hunter** We've tried rioting, we've tried protesting.

**David Almond** And down to the tunnels beneath much of this land.

**India Hunter** The steel works still shut down.

**David Almond** Tunnels with bones in them.

**India Hunter** The mines still shut down.

**David Almond** With the sun's locked brightness in them, with death in them.

**India Hunter** There's definitely this kind of idea that if you don't leave for university, or you don't leave when you're young, then you're stuck here.

**David Almond** To the tunnels within us all who know the North.

**Juliana Mensah** Working in Ashington, there weren't opportunities for work. The mines had been closed, yet the stories and the history was so rooted in this one particular

narrative – but the world had moved on and the place hadn't. And I think that's something that I connect with the North East in a real way. As somebody who grew up in London as a second-generation immigrant, this idea that industry, culture, the UK has moved to a different place and has forgotten about you a little bit, and having to reinvent, having to come up with new narratives; having to improvise.

**David Almond** Yes, this is the North – aching bright beauty with swirling drifts of darkness in it. Joy with pain in it. Love with loss.

**Andrew Hankinson** People are really proud of that industrial history of the region. And I mean, I am as well like, you know, I look at some of these people, and what they achieved and I think it's amazing. And I think it's interesting and I think we need to know it. But I think we lack people who are coming up with stories about the future.

**David Almond** I scatter the dust back to the sea. Time passes and light fades and here it comes, the deep dark Northern night. And now the stars and now the galaxies. See them stretch across the universe in whorls and spirals, again like scattered seed. Open your eyes and gaze in wonder. Open your mind and dare to listen for the music of the spheres. Up there is the blazing negative image of what lies at your feet. Each fragment of coal is partnered with a distant star. Each dot of darkness entangled with each bright. And at the heart of it is you, standing in this place, on what they tell us is a little crowded island, on this deserted beach, in this far-flung North, in touch with the depths of the earth and with the furthest galaxy, with the true glittering possibility of yourself.

**Richard T Kelly** I remember feeling really glad the first time I had the chance to write and publish something about the North East. So we just have to try and write and think our way out of the box.

**Mim Skinner** Around arts and writing and social enterprise, the North East is absolutely amazing. And we should be investing in finding it a home.

**Richard Benson** When you think about it as a region and how distinct it is and what is being done there already, it's not only grounds for optimism, it's grounds for celebration *now*. They don't tell the outside world about that they don't really celebrate themselves in the way that some other places might do.

**David Almond** The sun rises, red ball of fire over Inner Farne. The white kittiwakes come, a little flight of them with their kittiwake cries wheeling over the waves.

**Carmen Marcus** There's no home like it, and being in the darkness with the sounds and the sound of the wave... And the sea is just a sound presence that blends with the sound of the birds, and you're never more alive than in that moment.

**David Almond** Now southward, over the great beaches of Northumberland. Beadnell, Embleton, Craster, Alnmouth. Dunstanburgh Castle in ruins on its rock.

**Carmen Marcus** We are never alone. There is always this constant sound of the sea, this voice which is hushing us or waking us or calling to us.

**David Almond** The old mining towns just inland. Ellington, Ashington, Cambois.

**Bronwen Riley** If you look around here, you notice all those trees are absolutely bent by the wind. You really realise what an impact it can have on the landscape and on your mood.

**David Almond** Wind turbines massive in the sea.

**Richard Benson** I'm not sure that even people in the region understand that either the area is a world leader, not a national leader, is a world leader in renewable energy in wind turbines.

**David Almond** The twin piers at the mouth of the Tyne, like welcoming arms.

**Lisette Auton** The power of the river to change, and sometimes it's a trickle, and sometimes it's blocked. But it always erodes and gouges out and finds another way, and then eventually, it gets to the sea.

**David Almond** Follow the Tyne against its flow. Jarrow, Hebburn, Felling on Tyne.

**India Hunter** Everything is its own. Everything has its own personality.

**David Almond** Write the North.

**India Hunter** There's a romance in the urban-ness and the beautiful kind of wildness of it.

**David Almond** Write it again.

**Carmen Marcus** There's this real tension between those who tell the story of the North...

**David Almond** Write it better.

**Carmen Marcus** ...and those in the north who want to tell the story of themselves.

**David Almond** Write it new.

**India Hunter** It's very important that we have our opportunity to speak.

**David Almond** Write the North. Write it again. Write it better. Write it new.

**Juliana Mensah** It feels like a bit of a paradox, because we're saying this place has an identity and this huge landmass with all of these people in it have a shared identity. But also there are differences. I think it should be plural: the *cultures* of the North East.

**David Almond** Fly over it all with the kittiwakes. They too are heading home, to their nesting sites on the Tyne Bridge and the Baltic. They leave me here on the Millennium Bridge. It's hung like a lyre between Newcastle and Gateshead, the north and south banks.

**India Hunter** Me and my friends sat on the bridge to eat lunch, and we did, like, the *Titanic* thing over the edge. It does take a lot to make me think something new and urban is beautiful, but that is definitely beautiful. It's like a symbol of who we are.

**David Almond** Beautiful city, bright early morning. Solid steel and stone. Walls and quays and passageways. The cities rising on either side. Bridges curve against the sky.

**India Hunter** The Tyne and the Tyne tunnel, and the bridges across it as well, are a big sign of industry. They are like a big sign of what we're capable of.

**David Almond** Even in lockdown, the endless gentle hum of it all. Flowing water and clear air and kittiwakes calling. The sudden image of the city as it was not so long ago: packed streets, voices, people, traffic.

**Alex Niven** Newcastle is a much bigger city than it should be on paper. It has the kind of cultural feel of being a huge and quite diverse city.

**David Almond** When will it return?

**Lyndsey Ayre** Just seeing all of these things closed, like the Theatre Royal and the Tyneside Cinema, and all of Northumberland Street just being silent – I found it really unsettling.

**David Almond** When I was a boy the river below me was filth. Fall in and they'd need to pump your stomach in the RVI.

**Lyndsey Ayre** This kind of a sense of like a little bit of optimism, as well, in terms of, like, this is almost like a blank slate. Can we do things better?

**David Almond** Now seals swim in it. Cormorants dive. Salmon leap, in their journey back up to Northumberland. Swallows sweep over and under me.

**Alex Niven** I'm not sure there's anywhere that quite has that same balance between this kind of metropolitan urban area and this quite beautiful, quite dramatic, rural area as well.

**David Almond** All this wildness, come back into the city's heart.

**Lyndsey Ayre** At school, they always told us that it was called the 'rural urban fringe', which I've not actually heard it described in that way by anyone else, ever. And we always had to colour it in brown on the map as well. Like, they'd give us brown pencils to colour in the area that we lived in.

**David Almond** I lean back and feel the bridge tremble in the breeze. Yes, the bridge is a lyre. There's music as it moves, as its walkways tremble and its cables vibrate.

**Lyndsey Ayre** It's like an eye. Like an eye that blinks. The walkway comes up when there's boats and stuff passing. It's quite a sight when you see it open.

**David Almond** It hums, it sings. And we are lyres, each one of us, played by the breezes of space and time. Close your eyes and feel your own vibrations. Be a lyre, be a bridge. Unreal city, dream-like city, city like no other, city that I love.

**Andrew Hankinson** I tell my friends, 'Come and stay here, we'll show you around,' and I take great pride in walking around Newcastle with them, showing them different buildings. I'm really proud of it.

**David Almond** You will open again, rise again.

**Lyndsey Ayre** I mean, you've got all of the kind of light-stoned Grainger Town and all of that area, and then you've got Grey Street and then you've got down the Quayside which is just so beautiful on a night time as well, when the Sage is lit up, and all the bridges.

**David Almond** Time and again we've been told you're finished, you're done, and like Orpheus you rise and sing, time and again. Sing on, Newcastle, young and ancient, civilised and wild.

**Andrew Hankinson** One of the things that makes it feel really different around Newcastle is the Town Moor, because there's just this huge moorland, and there's all these cows all over it. I go to the library every day to write, and I just cycle over this moorland with these cows around you, and that's right in the city centre. And I wish we made more of that, and I wish more people saw that, and went to it, and spent time there.

**David Almond** Now, more than ever, might be your time. The cables vibrate. A swallow swoops through them to take me away.

Here in the garden where it all began, sun still shines and water runs and skylark sings. Lie among the wildflowers with notebook and pen. Make marks on the page, create the North. Make marks like birdsong, flowing water, shifting coal dust, swirling stars. Use knife and boulder, Eadfrith's ink. Catch Cuthbert's prayer and Cædmon's song, the wild noise of the hollow bone and vibrations of a bridge. Be brave, don't doubt. Don't turn to the metropolis and wonder what it might want from you. Instead, wonder what it needs from you. Write this place, your place. Make this the middle of your world and not the fringe. Sing some necessary wildness, some mystical nonsense, into our tired, disjointed, corrupt civilisation. Sing the North



into the South and make it beautiful. And let a boy keep running always through the marks. Let him run with his dog on a Northern beach, yelling out to each of us, “Howay! Howay! Howaaaaay!”

## **Acknowledgements**

*New Narratives for the North East is a New Writing North commission for the North East Cultural Partnership, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and featured original work by David Almond. The series is produced for Durham Book Festival, a Durham County Council festival, supported by Durham University and Arts Council England. It was made in York by Sonderbug Productions, with music specially composed and recorded in Newcastle by Jayne Dent. Find out more about the project, and read the written essays and stories on Durham Festival website.*