

Myth and David Almond's *My Name is Mina*

Mina is nine years old. She lives with her mother in Heston, UK; her father has died. Mina faces challenges. The very process of growing up presents difficulties, compounded by her grief for her father. She is also smart and unusual, which makes it hard for her to forge friendships at school and fall in line with the expectations and assessments of traditional education. After Mina has some run-ins with the school administration, Mina's mother decides to homeschool her, and Mina begins writing in a journal. *My Name is Mina* is that journal; the print edition of the book even uses handwriting fonts to make readers feel like they are holding something personal and private. And in her private book Mina relates memories, catalogs wonders, writes poems, records observations, and more. She thinks on its pages. As she processes her past and present through her writing, Mina invokes three mythological figures repeatedly: Orpheus, Persephone, and Icarus.

Orpheus arises first. Mina explains that she used to imagine that a tunnel in a local park was an entrance to the Underworld and that she could succeed where Orpheus had failed by bringing her father back from the dead. One day she enters the tunnel. A stream in the tunnel represents the River Styx. A growling dog becomes Cerberus, whom Mina tries to soothe with a song. When a man at the other end of the tunnel calls out for his dog, Mina retreats. Mina reflects on the episode: "Did I really believe that the tunnel would lead to the Underworld? Did I really think I could bring Dad home again? I'm the one who did it and even I don't know. I was a little girl. Awful things had happened and I was confused" (60). Mina's experience in the tunnel makes her realize that her father's death cannot be undone. Orpheus' failure may be a crystallization of a hard truth, but myth offers some solace. Mina is not unique in her sadness;

myth refracts her desire to retrieve her father from the dead so that it can be seen as a specific manifestation of a human impulse.

Persephone provides more comfort. Mina writes of the day that she, impatient for spring, knelt in her yard and struck the ground, calling “Come on, Persephone! Don’t give up!” (103) Mina connects her actions to ritual practices, recollecting that “in ancient Greece, they had music and singing to call [Persephone] back, to make sure that spring arrived again” (104). A mythical figure again allows Mina to put her feelings in a larger, transhistorical human context. When an old woman named Grace stops to talk with Mina, she joins Mina in calling on Persephone, and they even dance a little, despite Grace’s aches and pains. Mina’s conversation with Grace about Persephone connects Mina not only to the ancient past but to someone in her own present as well, and Grace offers Mina further consolation. She assures Mina that while sadness is “part of everything” (106), Persephone and spring will return. Grace also tells Mina of a dream she had in which both she and Mina were little birds, fledgling creatures of a fresh season. If the myth of Orpheus emphasizes the one-way road of human mortality, the myth of Persephone presents a cyclical experience of time through the seasons, fellowship across centuries and generations, and the possibility of symbolic rebirth and rejuvenation.

When David Almond has Mina mention Orpheus and Persephone, he makes sure that Mina explains enough about these mythological characters so that readers who may not be familiar with them can understand how they are functioning in the novel. Almond takes a somewhat different tack with the figure of Icarus. Mina refers to Icarus a number of times but does not give a full summary of his story—his escape from Crete on wings crafted by his father and his subsequent death when he falls from the sky after flying too close to the sun, whose heat loosens the wax holding Icarus’ wing-feathers together. Mina’s invocations of Icarus seem to

focus on him as a powerful image: a human in flight. Grace's dream of herself and Mina as birds is one instance of avian imagery in the novel, and it is by no means an isolated occurrence. For instance: Mina watches the birds who nest in a tree she loves to climb; she learns about prehistoric birds during homeschooling; she and her mother have an epiphany-like experience with owls in Mina's grandfather's old house; Mina notes the seasonal migration of goldfinches; she likens "people who trap the spirit, people who cage the soul" (180) to bird trappers; her mother jokes that a fallen feather must be from Mina's own wings; and Mina herself writes, "I sit in my tree / I sing like the birds / My beak is my pen / My songs are the poems" (181). The catalog of examples could go on and on. Part of this associative web, Icarus is a mythological manifestation of winged spirit.

Near the end of the novel, Mina and her mother pause on a walk to look at the star-filled sky: "We try to make out the beasts and weird winged beings that the Greeks described up there: bears and dogs and horses and crabs and Pegasus and Daedalus and Icarus" (280-281). That night Mina dreams "of centaurs, of Pegasus / of Daedalus and Icarus / falling from the sky" (289). The constellation creatures come to Mina's bedroom and urge her wake up. She does awaken—and not just physically. Mina has worked through her difficulties and sadness, spring has come, and she is ready to engage the world in new ways. Although Almond has not mentioned Icarus' fatal mythological fall in the course of the novel, he implicitly revises or supplements it. Icarus' (new) fall in Mina's dream is now an intentional descent from the heavens, an encouragement or exhortation rather than a cautionary tale. Almond's Icarus keeps his wings, and Mina gains her own.

Throughout *My Name is Mina* Mina writes about time, and especially the persistence of the past into the present: Heston's old mining tunnels lie beneath the contemporary city; Mina

and Grace's dancing echoes ancient rites for Persephone; dust motes are flakes of skin, sometimes from people now gone; Mina's father may be dead, but he's present in and among the words of her journal; the light from the stars is millions of years old by the time we set our eyes on it in our present. "We're time travelers!" Mina declares (281). When Mina says this, she is referring specifically to the time warp caused by starlight's journey across the cosmos, but her exclamation conveys something about *My Name is Mina* more generally. Almond shows us that, while we may not be able to reverse the arrow of human mortality, we can also have other experiences of and with time. Like the stars, myth can collapse or confuse temporal distinctions, and its ancient characters and narratives may continue to shed light on the present. *My Name is Mina* models myth as a source of resonant symbols that can help us make sense of our particular circumstances and find the heart to move forward.

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Bibliography

Almond, David. *My Name is Mina*. 2010. Yearling, 2012.