

Adversity and Resilience in David Almond's *The Fire-Eaters*

Hou Bin

School of Foreign Languages, Tianshui Normal University, Tianshui, China;
School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Suzana Hj Muhammad

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Agnes WL Liau

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Abstract—David Almond has mentioned the astounding resilience that young people in reality and his young characters can show in the face of difficulties. Despite this, scholarly attention to the theme of resilience in Almond's young adult fiction remains notably scarce. This paper analyses the resilience of the adolescent protagonist, Bobby Burns, in Almond's young adult fiction *The Fire-Eaters* (2003). Bobby confronts multiple adversities that cause a variety of cognitive and emotional challenges. Yet, with the support of his family, friends, and local community, Bobby demonstrates extraordinary resilience. His cognitive and emotional disturbances are ameliorated or mediated and his negative self-concept is transformed into a sense of stronger self, characterized by self-worth and self-efficacy. He embraces a reconstructed worldview and a revised understanding of education. In essence, Bobby's resilience is primarily featured in the developmental milestones of adolescence, including self-identity exploration, interpersonal relationship building, and a deeper appreciation of life. Bobby's resilience reveals the dual nature of adversity: posing threats and offering developmental connections simultaneously to young individuals.

Index Terms—*The Fire-Eaters*, adversity, adaptation, resilience, development

I. INTRODUCTION

David Almond is “widely praised as a new and distinctive voice in the field of children's and young adult fiction” (Dalrymple, 2010, pp. 1-2). His young adult fiction features young protagonists who strive to thrive in the face of multiple social and emotional problems. Almond indicated this implicitly. When discussing the portrayal of the main characters in his young adult fiction *Heaven Eyes* (2000), Almond (2000) acknowledged that his childhood and working experiences helped him understand the vulnerability and resilience of young people, noting that “they're very vulnerable... they can have huge emotional and social problems, but they often show astounding resilience” (p. 10). In another interview entitled “David Almond on Writing for Young People” (Almond, 2020), he underscores his young characters' striving to transcend difficulties and achieve happiness.

Despite Almond's emphasis on the resilience that young people—both in reality and in his fictional characters—the theme of resilience in his works has received very little scholarly attention. A review of existing criticism of Almond's works shows that there is only one article that approaches “risk and resilience, knowledge and imagination” in Almond's *Skellig* (1998) by focusing on epistemological tensions and the workings of magical realism (Bullen & Parsons, 2007, p. 127). In light of this gap, this paper examines the resilience of the young protagonist Bobby Burns in Almond's young adult fiction *The Fire-Eaters* (2003).

Resilience simply means “the overcoming of a stress or adversity or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences” (Rutter, 2012, p. 335). It is also conceptualized as “positive adaptation or development in the context of significant adversity exposure” (Masten, 2015, p. 308). According to Masten (2015), identifying resilience in an individual requires two judgments: judgments about adversity exposure and judgments about how well an individual is doing during or after facing adversity. These two judgments are later identified as “challenge criteria” and “adaptation criteria” for measuring resilience (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016, pp. 6, 8), or alternatively, as “two essential components” in the study of resilience (Masten et al., 2021, p. 525). This framework provides a lens through which to analyze the adversities and positive adaptation of Bobby Burns. Drawing from that, this paper first discusses adversities faced by Bobby and then examines his positive adaptation and development in the midst/aftermath of such adversities.

II. MULTIPLE ADVERSITIES FACED BY BOBBY

The fiction follows the story of the protagonist Bobby Burns, a 12-year-old boy who faces multiple adversities, including the intrusion of the fire-eater McNulty in his life, the looming threat of nuclear war, his father's illness, and the

abusive teachers at his new school. The intersection of these adversities poses significant challenges and threats to both his mental well-being and developmental trajectory.

A. *The Adversity of War*

In *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), Bobby Burns's experience of war begins with the unsettling intrusion of the fire-eater McNulty into his life. The story begins in the later summer of 1962 when Bobby and his mother encounter the fire-eater, the escapologist McNulty's performance in an outdoor market in Newcastle. During the performance, McNulty asks Bobby to take out "something awful" that "should make the most pain" to him from his toolbox (Almond, 2003, p. 5). Trembling with fear, Bobby takes out a long skewer, with which McNulty pierces through his own cheeks from side to side. McNulty also asks Bobby to collect money from the crowd. The self-mutilating performance of McNulty with blood falling from his cheeks and lip makes Bobby shudder breathlessly with fear. He wants to escape, but he is packed by the crowd watching McNulty's performance.

Upon returning to their coastal coal village, Keely Bay, Bobby's mother describes to her husband what they witnessed of McNulty: "a devil, a demon, a rascal" who made his helper Bobby "quivering" (Almond, 2003, p. 14). Bobby knows from his father that McNulty has ever served alongside his father in the Burma battle during WWII and they returned to England together in 1945. McNulty's mind was severely damaged by the war, leaving him with no memory of his past except for the intense fire and heat of battle. With the skewer-penetrated bloody face, chain-tortured body, and roaring fire engulfing everything, McNulty's image intrudes recurrently into Bobby's dreams, which turns his sleep into "a great writhing and struggling to break free" (Almond, 2003, p. 31). The intrusive image of McNulty also disrupts Bobby's daily routines, intruding into his mind when he is with his friends, having class, or doing his homework.

As a result, the intrusive presence of McNulty in Bobby's life gives rise to what Rachman (1981) identified as "unwanted intrusive thoughts" (p. 89), which refer to repetitive, unwanted, and/or unacceptable thoughts, images, or impulses that disrupt ongoing activities and are difficult to control. Unwanted intrusive thoughts are closely associated with subjective discomfort and distress (Riffle et al., 2020). The unwanted intrusive image of McNulty becomes a source of heightened tension and fear for Bobby. Captured in this inner turmoil caused by the fire-eater beyond his understanding, Bobby records in his diary the occurrence of McNulty and introspectively questions, "What am I so scared of?" (Almond, 2003, p. 31). The unwanted intrusion of McNulty also poses a threat to Bobby's sense of self. Bobby experiences repeatedly nightmares about McNulty, which make him feel that he is "so useless" (Almond, 2003, p. 91). He even imagines himself "being McNulty" and wants to "stop being (me) himself", to "be nothing, unconscious" (Almond, 2003, pp. 107-108). These negative mental effects, encompassing tension, fear, and a diminished sense of self, directly stem from the persistent intrusion of McNulty into Bobby's life.

In *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), Almond intertwines three distinct but interconnected forms of war: the trauma of World War II as experienced by McNulty, the imminent threat of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and the violent war games played by the children. Together, these elements magnify the psychological threat to Bobby. McNulty's war-induced mental damage and Bobby's father's stories about their experiences in Burma transport Bobby to the heart of WWII's traumatic past. These stories, combined with the looming threat of nuclear annihilation, amplify Bobby's sense of fear. The danger of nuclear war pervades the story, as media broadcasts expose the public to images of atomic bomb clouds and nuclear missiles, making the threat seem inescapable. Meanwhile, the war games played by the children expose them to the brutal realities of both past and present wars. During these games, they simulate violent acts, such as being "tortured, hanged, drawn and quartered" (Almond, 2003, p. 37). These brutal games help Bobby understand the real dangers of nuclear war and intensify his palpable fear of a Third World War and the devastating power of atomic bombs.

Throughout the novel, the pervasive sense that "the world is on the abyss of destruction" (Almond, 2003, p. 161) and that humanity is "standing at the gates of hell" (Almond, 2003, p. 190) is conveyed through media and public discourse. This apocalyptic view of the world, teetering on the brink of collapse, sharply contrasts with Bobby and his father's shared dream of a peaceful world—a world free from the horrors of war, filled with quiet beauty and harmony. The constant threat of war, whether personal, historical, or global, challenges their aspirations for a serene life and deepens Bobby's sense of helplessness and fear.

B. *The Adversity of His Father's Illness*

Bobby is currently facing the possible death of his father due to a mysterious illness that causes severe and constant coughing. It is important to note that parental illness can be a significant adversity for a family, particularly in terms of the quality of parenting (Masten, 2015). Parental illness can cause worry and concern for young people, leading to discomfort and distress in their caregiving role and resulting in difficulties with children's adaptation (Ireland & Pakenham, 2010).

In the case of *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), when Bobby's family decides to build a fallout shelter to safeguard against the possible nuclear bomb holocaust, his father worries whether he, "an old wheezer", and Bobby, "a scrawny brat", can count as two men to build it (Almond, 2003, p. 112). His father's words reflect his father's deep concern about his illness which affects the family's safety in the war-threatened time. In another case, when Bobby attempts to talk about McNulty with his family one evening, he is met with his father's audible groans in bed and the sight of tears in his mother's eyes, signaling that it is not an appropriate time for such a conversation. The weight of his father's ailment is palpable in these moments, complicating Bobby's attempts to seek solace or understanding from his family.

Similarly, after being expelled from school, Bobby returns home trembling, only to find the house empty—his parents have gone to the hospital. This absence deprives him of the immediate comfort and reassurance he desperately seeks.

In short, his father's illness compounds Bobby's anxiety, making it even more challenging for him to adapt to the adverse conditions. Bobby articulates the heightened anxiety stemming from his father's illness when confiding in Alisa: "My father was ill. The world might be coming to an end" (Almond, 2003, p. 119). These words encapsulate his emotional turmoil and underscore the profound impact of his father's illness on his perception of the world, further intensifying the challenges he faces in adapting to these adverse conditions.

C. *The Adversity of Abuse Committed by His Teachers*

In addition to these challenging circumstances, Bobby's new school, the Sacred Heart, is plagued by student bullying and abusive teachers. On the very first day of school, Bobby overhears his schoolmates talking about bullying they'd experienced or witnessed: being turned upside down, being forced to eat dirt or drink one's own piss, sticking needles in the bullied, hurting the bullied nearly to death...The prevalence and severity of these bullying actions make going to school like "ganning to the bliddy slaughterhouse" (Almond, 2003, p. 79). Though there is no description of bullying towards Bobby from his schoolmates, the prevalence of bullying among students exacerbates Bobby's nervousness and anxiety as a new student to the school.

The teachers' abusive behavior towards Bobby and his classmates worsens the situation and directly leads to Bobby's disruption of schooling. On the first day of meeting his students, Mr. Todd disparages them, labeling them as having no "character or moral fiber", calling them "half-civilized", and "wild things" who "must be taught to conform" (Almond, 2003, p. 80), simply because they've made clumsy lines. Bobby is punished into tears by Mr. Todd with a strap forcefully lashing across his palms, for he attempts to find his friend while waiting in line. Bobby is subjected to further abuse when photographs reflecting Mr. Todd's abusive behaviors are found throughout the school. The photos are marked with the words "EVIL, WICKED, CRUELTY, SIN (capitals original)" and are featured with Mr. Todd's cold and contemptuous face and the victim's flinching and fearful eyes (Almond, 2003, p. 143). They were taken secretly by Daniel and distributed throughout the school with the assistance of Bobby. This enrages the headmaster Mr. Grace, who is determined to find out and punish the perpetrators, the sinners. Bobby and Daniel acknowledge to Mr. Grace what they'd done. As a result, they are subjected to verbal and physical abuse from Mr. Grace, calling them "scum" and the "true serpent", sneering at Bobby's background of "the lower orders" (Almond, 2003, p. 171), criticizing him as being poisoned by the venom of "a nest of vipers" (Almond, 2003, p. 172). When Bobby refuses to apologize for his actions, he is punished with the strap again and dismissed from the school for his disobedience.

While the physical abuse leaves dark marks on Bobby's palms and hurts him physically, the psychological abuse committed in the form of sarcastic and insulting words conveys to Bobby the overtones that he is immoral, half-civilized, degenerated, flawed, and unwanted. This abuse has such a profound impact on Bobby that when he meets Mr. Todd again, he "trembles with frustration and pain" (Almond, 2003, p. 176). Bobby's belief in school and teachers is also shattered due to the prevalent bullying and abuse he experienced. The school becomes a "bliddy slaughterhouse" (Almond, 2003, p. 79), and the teacher in particular Mr. Todd is regarded as wicked and cruel. His expulsion also disrupts his aspiration to attend university—a goal his family and friends believe is within reach, given his admission to Sacred Heart, a prestigious grammar school.

In *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), Bobby's life is marked by a convergence of adversities: McNulty's intrusion, the looming threat of nuclear war, the trauma of WWII transmitted through McNulty, his father's illness, and the abuse at school. These chronic and accumulating challenges threaten his psychological well-being and personal development. Amid these formidable challenges, Bobby experiences a profound emotional struggle, as reflected in his sentiments of feeling "so bloody hard" (Almond, 2003, p. 117), the persistent "aching in his heart that threatened to overwhelm him" (Almond, 2003, p. 122), and an overwhelming "feeling of helplessness and uselessness" (Almond, 2003, p. 182).

Generally, the tension, fear, and anxiety stemming from these adversities contribute to a pervasive feeling of helplessness, uselessness, and a loss of selfhood. Moreover, the adversities also violate his view of the world and his goal for schooling. Then, the crucial question emerges: how does Bobby adapt successfully to such overwhelming challenges? And what areas of development does Bobby whereby achieve?

III. ADAPTATION AND DEVELOPMENT AMID THE ADVERSITIES

A. *Adaptation*

Despite the numerous challenges mentioned above, Bobby adapts to his new life and achieves personal growth through the exercise of agency, supported by his friends, family, and community. Given that these adversities are interconnected, his process of adaptation cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Therefore, his journey of overcoming these challenges is discussed holistically.

Although Bobby experiences fear and anxiety resulting from the intrusive, recurring thoughts about McNulty, these thoughts also drive him to learn more about McNulty and adjust his cognitive and emotional responses. Intrusive, recurrent thoughts reflect an individual's efforts to process new information about a stressful event, facilitating cognitive reconstruction (McIntosh et al., 1993; Park, 2010). The intrusive and recurrent image of McNulty compels Bobby to seek additional information, drawing him closer to McNulty to offer help. This proactive engagement helps Bobby recognize

the strength of care and love, initiates his sense of self-worth, moderates his cognitive and emotional tensions regarding both McNulty and the war, and ultimately facilitates Bobby's resilience.

During their second encounter, Bobby gains a deeper insight into the traumatic effects of war on McNulty and his yearning for help, which motivates Bobby to offer his assistance. Bobby and his father find McNulty in Newcastle. Despite McNulty's inability to recollect Bobby's father and their shared past, he immediately recognizes Bobby as his helper. McNulty implores Bobby to lend an ear to "yelling and rampaging deep inside his (my) skull" (Almond, 2003, p. 70). Bobby recognizes that the tumultuous thoughts in McNulty's mind are nothing but a mixture of echoes of the Burma battle and his apprehension about the impending nuclear war. As indicated by McNulty: "There was days of fiery heat and now there's days of icy cold" (Almond, 2003, p. 70). McNulty's words are also indicative of the threatening situation that Bobby is facing: the mixture of the trauma of WWII inflicted on him through McNulty and his father and the threat of nuclear annihilation felt by everybody. McNulty's poignant admission that he is "too much alone" and "he needs a lad like (you) Bobby to be beside him" (Almond, 2003, p. 70) suggests a deep-seated loneliness, which he trusts Bobby to alleviate. McNulty's willingness to open up to Bobby reveals a unique connection between them, a connection that transcends their limited interactions. It becomes apparent that McNulty has already identified Bobby as his helper, seeing in him a reflection of his pre-war self—a "little bairn" (Almond, 2003, p. 71). This encounter enriches Bobby's understanding of McNulty, evokes his compassion for him, and reveals McNulty's solitude and his yearning for companionship, especially from someone like Bobby who embodies the innocence McNulty feels he lost in the ravages of war. This motivates Bobby to provide much-needed help for McNulty.

However, Bobby is unable to see McNulty for a period. During this time, Bobby takes every opportunity to talk about McNulty with his friends and tell them that McNulty is harmless. According to Park (2010), "Thinking and talking about a stressful situation allows people to integrate a stressor into their lives, so that its negative impact decreases" (p. 263). Bobby's proactive efforts to talk about McNulty with his friends signify his awareness to integrate McNulty as a less stressful presence in his life. Such efforts become more evident when he finds McNulty's presence among the dunes near their home respectively with his friends Alisa and Joseph. Although in both cases, Bobby gets no chance to talk with McNulty or have McNulty recognize him, he reassures his friends, who are scared of McNulty's proximity to their home, that McNulty is harmless. Bobby's attempts to convince his friends of McNulty's harmlessness demonstrate his revised perception of McNulty, which starkly contrasts with his mother's characterization of McNulty as a malevolent figure—a devil, demon, and rascal who made her son quiver. This progression marks Bobby's gradual cognitive and emotional adjustment to McNulty's intrusion into his life and his resilience whereby built through the adaptation process.

Bobby's adaptation and resilience are further promoted as he gets closer to McNulty and extends assistance to him. Resilience, as ascertained by Jordan (2023), involves the courage to move into stressful situations when an individual feels fear or hesitation. Bobby approaches McNulty and helps him despite the apprehension triggered by McNulty's unexpected intrusion into his life. His courage to bring food and drink to McNulty's shack not only fosters a reciprocal sense of care but also serves as a catalyst for enhancing his self-efficacy. This, in turn, contributes significantly to the fostering of Bobby's resilience.

Upon discovering McNulty's solitary existence in a deserted shack amid the dunes near their home, Bobby and Alisa respond empathetically by providing him with food and drink and urging him to be careful. In return, McNulty not only reassures them of his harmlessness but also expresses his keenness to protect the two young guys from "the world afire" (Almond, 2003, p. 161) and his genuine gratitude, praising them as "lovely bonny bairns" (Almond, 2003, p. 159). The help and care that Bobby and Alisa give to McNulty are reciprocated with gratitude and a desire to protect and care for them against the threat of war. The implied mutual exchange of care and protection underscores the sense of self-worth Bobby and Alisa find in their benevolent actions. Prompted by this sense, they resolve to take more to McNulty the next day and depart his shack, laughing "at the fear and excitement" they've felt (Almond, 2003, p. 161). This is the first time Bobby feels excited about his connection to McNulty. It signals a positive emotional transformation in Bobby's connection with McNulty.

Primarily, Bobby's assistance to McNulty enables him to develop growth-fostering connections to the latter. Growth-fostering connections are characterized by mutual empathy and empowerment and have the potential to generate a profound sense of worth, enthusiasm, clarity, and a desire for increased connection (Miller, 2015). Bobby's growing sense of worth and excitement in helping McNulty, his enhanced understanding of McNulty, and his desire to help McNulty more eventually contribute to Bobby's next visit to McNulty's shack on an evening before Guy Fawkes Night. On that night, fearing that the impending nuclear war would leave them with no opportunity to celebrate the upcoming event, the neighbors gathered on the beach for a bonfire party. Bobby's mother suggests to invite McNulty to join them. Bobby and Alisa undertake the task of inviting McNulty. They come to McNulty's shack and tell him that the villagers are waiting for his presence with food and drink. Moved by their invitation, McNulty responds:

*"People! His eyes were shining. "People! Get them underground, bonny, Cover them up."
I crouched beside him.*

*"There's no point to it," I said. "There's nowhere safe, nowhere to hide." I put my hand on his skinny elbow.
"Please come with us."*

.....

"These people will care for you," I whispered.

"Care?" he said.

"Will love you," I said. (Almond, 2003, p. 203)

McNulty's words reveal how his traumatic experiences of war intertwine with his desire to protect others from external dangers. Bobby's response demonstrates his insight into McNulty's mind and his efforts to draw McNulty out of the terror and trauma inflicted by the war. It also highlights Bobby's awareness of confronting the war collectively with local people and his accommodation with the threat it presents. As there is no safe place to hide, the best course of action is to confront the situation directly and show care and love for each other. At this moment, in Bobby's perception, caring and loving become a source of strength capable of healing the terror and trauma endured by McNulty. They also become the collective strength of the villagers to resist the menacing circumstances of war confronting the entire community.

This strength is eventually felt by McNulty who reciprocates Bobby with tenderness and love, as evidenced in their communications followed. That night, after McNulty performs chain escaping, Bobby crouches beside him. McNulty, catching Bobby's hand and looking at him tenderly with softened eyes, says to Bobby: "Don't be troubled, I love you, bonny" (Almond, 2003, p. 211). These are McNulty's last words to Bobby, to this world. Bobby offers help and care to McNulty, who reciprocates by trying to comfort him and expressing his own affection. The care and love McNulty receives from Bobby and his neighbors alleviate his mental anguish and even, seemingly, heal his madness: Bobby perceives "all the madness seemed gone" from McNulty (Almond, 2003, p. 211). On that night, Bobby and his friends watched McNulty's last performance, "saw how marvelous McNulty was...And perhaps he saw us, too, and recognized the children who had discovered him and drawn him here and who had tried to care for him and love him" (Almond, 2003, p. 212). Bobby is eventually assured that McNulty recognizes him, and sees his efforts to draw him out of the trauma of war with care and love.

Drawing from Afifi's (2018) insights, giving and receiving care and affection can help individuals resist impending threats, moderate stress, improve their mental health, and facilitate their adaptation. Bobby's care and love seem to have a moderating effect on McNulty's madness, guiding him toward a final inner stillness. As Bobby observed McNulty for the last time that night, seeing his lifeless body in the cold sand, he reflects on the transformative journey: "I imagined opening him up, to see the inside of his body, the stillness and silence of it, the mysterious disappearance of life" (Almond, 2003, p. 215). Instead of being a devil and a demon, McNulty eventually becomes "marvelous" and comes to his inner stillness, leading Bobby to the perceived sense of the mysteriousness of life. This inner stillness in McNulty is symbolic not only of his personal peace but also of the resolution of Bobby's own cognitive and emotional disturbances stemming from McNulty's intrusion into his life and the haunting trauma of WW II intensified by the clouds of nuclear war in the air. The fiery chaos that defined McNulty's existence has given way to a profound serenity, marking the culmination of their shared journey toward healing and understanding.

Bobby's adaptation to the challenges posed by McNulty's intrusion is crucial to his overall adjustment to the looming threat of nuclear war. As discussed earlier, these two aspects are interconnected, highlighting Bobby's resilience in navigating the adversities presented by both McNulty's presence and the nuclear war. The analysis in the following reveals further how Bobby comes to terms with the threats of nuclear war with the support of his friends, family, and religious practices.

In a conversation with his friend Joseph, Bobby asks the latter if he is afraid of a potential Third World War and the use of atom bombs that could potentially end everything. Joseph, drawing on his father's wisdom, consoles Bobby with the assurance that "We've grown out of all that stuff" (Almond, 2003, p. 39). This perspective implies that war may not be as inherently destructive as Bobby perceived, as successive generations have outgrown its dire threats. Such insight aids Bobby in accepting war as an inevitable reality with reduced stress. Furthermore, Bobby's family plays a pivotal role in alleviating Bobby's anxiety about the impending war. When Bobby empathizes with the destructive nature of WW II and the profound trauma experienced by McNulty, his father sensitively discerns Bobby's thoughts. Offering words of comfort and encouragement, Bobby's father assures him that he will "be different"; he "can do anything" and "go anywhere" for the world is his and he "is privileged and free" (Almond, 2003, p. 54). These reassuring words serve to dissolve Bobby's tension in the face of the looming threat of war and instill hope and confidence in his future. Through the wisdom of Joseph and the comforting guidance of Bobby's father, Bobby gains a renewed perspective on the evolving nature of the war and the potential for positive change.

Following their conversation, Bobby and his father then pray for a world without war. Praying, as noted by Kirkpatrick (2005), reflects an individual's efforts "to seek comfort and security in the face of stress or perceived danger" (p. 109). Bobby and his father's praying reflect their efforts to seek comfort and to adjust themselves to the perceived danger of nuclear war. In *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), Bobby repeatedly turns to prayer to find solace amidst adversities. An illustrative moment occurs when he tells Alisa about his father's illness; they both make wishes and pray for his recovery. This act makes Bobby feel "happier" (Almond, 2003, p. 119). While the emotional transformation Bobby experiences here through prayer seems miraculous, Spilka (2005) argues that praying as an "adaptive" and "coping mechanism" predicts the outcome of releasing tensions, bolstering courage, and lifting spirits to face challenging experiences (p. 371). Bobby's desire to alleviate his father's suffering motivates him to "take the pain" of his father (Almond, 2003, p. 149). This act boosts his courage and spirit to "always be good" and "always fight evil" (Almond, 2003, p. 150). With such courage and spirit, Bobby and Daniel stand up against the tyranny of Mr. Todd the next morning by exposing his abusive actions through photographs.

Bobby's family serves as a source of inspiration and empowerment for his son, encouraging him to fight against wrongdoings directly. When they get the news that Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament protesters struggling with the police in London are arrested, Bobby's father teaches his son that people should yell out against what they know is wrong, because "everything that's been won for folks like us has been won by fighters" who "wouldn't kowtow and cringe but looked the oppressors in the eye and said that things had to change" (Almond, 2003, pp. 166-167). These words validate Bobby's actions regarding Mr. Todd's photographs, making him filled with "all recklessness" to stand up against the abuse they've suffered at school "boldly and bravely" (Almond, 2003, p. 168).

Consequently, despite being aware that it will be their last day at school, Bobby and Daniel confess their involvement in distributing incriminating photos of Mr. Todd the next morning. As anticipated, they face punishment, but Bobby embraces it with a fighter's mindset. When the headmaster's strap whips down on him, he feels he is "a fighter" who "could take any pain" and the headmaster's punishment "would only make him (me) stronger" (Almond, 2003, p. 175). This mindset exemplifies Bobby's psychological adjustment within the adverse context of abuse. Bobby's courage and spirit in acting against his abusive teachers reflect a perceived sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy simply means "perceived self-effectiveness" (Cardwell & Flanagan, 2003, p. 146). It is part of the self-evaluative cognitive process and predicts an individual's psychological adjustment within traumatic contexts (Benight & Cieslak, 2011). Bobby feels the effectiveness in acting against his sadistic teachers: he evaluates himself as being "stronger" to take any pain. It is a psychological fulfillment of his commitment to take his father's suffering from illness and "always fight evil" (Almond, 2003, p. 150). It suggests Bobby's improved psychological adjustment and an improved sense of self.

Subsequently, Bobby tells his parents what he has experienced at school. They respond with comforting words: "Good lad. We didn't fight a war so that berks like your Mr. Todd could hold sway" (Almond, 2003, p. 190). His father praises Bobby's bravery and justifies his action to fight against his tyrannical teachers. He also reassures his son that the disruption of schooling is inconsequential, stating that "There's more to education than reading books and scribbling in books" (p. 190). In the face of adversity, "direct problem solving and seeking of social support along with acceptance and reappraisal had the most resilient trajectories of recovery" (Wadsworth et al., 2009; as cited from Park, 2016, p. 1240). Bobby's actions of dealing directly with problems at his school coupled with his parents' supportive attitude toward his actions, aids him in adapting to the challenges he faces in his education. Moreover, his parents' adaptive and revised understanding of the meaning of education has contributed to this positive outcome.

The adaptive outcome Bobby thus achieved motivates further his "own reflection" on the difficult circumstances he faces (Almond, 2003, p. 192). He learns to adjust himself and accept them with a positive outlook, acknowledging that "whatever happens the stars will go on shining and the sun will go on shining and the world will go on spinning through the darkness" (Almond, 2003, pp. 192-193). Bobby's previous fear that "the world might be coming to an end" (Almond, 2003, p. 119) amid multiple adversities transforms into the belief that whatever happens, the world will go through the darkness. It means Bobby has accepted the adversities as less challenging and come to terms with them. He embraces what happened to him as "part of history" that is "all recorded" and that might happen to others (Almond, 2003, p. 216). This shift in perspective reflects Bobby's adaptation and resilience in the face of multiple adversities.

B. Growth and Development

At its core, Bobby's journey of adaptation and resilience is a dynamic process characterized by his growth and development. This transformative trajectory is evident in Bobby's exploration of self-identity, the formation of close friendships and romantic relationships, as well as a deepened appreciation for the intricacies of life.

(a). Affirmation of Self-Identity

Exploring self-identity, forming friendships and romantic relationships are identified as age-salient developmental tasks in adolescence (Masten, 2015). In navigating through adversities, Bobby has experienced all three developmental milestones. He evolves a self-identity integrated with the experiences of going through difficulties and shedding the negative self-perception that plagued him previously. A poignant moment illustrating this shift occurs when Joshep encourages Bobby to assert, "I'm me! I'm Bobby Burns" who has gone through a time when "the worst comes to the worst" (Almond, 2003, p. 183). This signifies Bobby's successful reconstruction of self, characterized by resilience and a fortified self-identity. The former sentiments of "helplessness and uselessness" (Almond, 2003, p. 182) dissipate, replaced by a newfound sense of self-worth and self-efficacy notably demonstrated in his efforts to help McNulty and react against school abuse.

(b). Formation of Closer Friendship and Romantic Bond

Bobby also develops a closer friendship with Daniel and Joseph. During their collective resistance against school abuse, the bond between Bobby and Daniel strengthened, dispelling skepticism and prejudices between their families of different social and cultural backgrounds. The families recognize the shared values and upbringing that bind them when Bobby and Daniel are acknowledged as "a pair of fighters" (Almond, 2003, p. 200) acting together against school abuse. The two families begin to converse and share drinks until the misunderstanding and prejudice between them are dispelled. Initially, Bobby's parents suspected that Daniel's family moved to their village from the City of Kent with the sole intention of "using" them for photographs required for Daniel's father's books (Almond, 2003, p. 210). Conversely, Daniel's family perceived Bobby's family and the villagers as "backward and even violent" (Latham, 2006, p. 98). However, Daniel's

father now assures Bobby's family that they are "very pleased" to settle in the village as they find "it is very beautiful" (Almond, 2003, p. 210). This transformation from initial skepticism and prejudice to shared appreciation and unity between the two families, initiated by the evolving friendship of the two kids, symbolizes not only the personal growth of Bobby and Daniel but also mirrors the collective growth of the local community.

The deepened friendship between Bobby and Joseph becomes evident as Bobby confides in Joseph, sharing his fears, tensions, and sufferings. Joseph reassures Bobby that his actions against school abuse are justified and comforts him over his father's illness. Joseph's response confirms to Bobby that Joseph is the same person he has known since birth, "the greatest friend he'd (I'd) had, who'd always been something like a brother" (Almond, 2003, p. 182). Currently, we witness a fraternal friendship that significantly empowers Bobby and gives him a strong sense of belonging to the local community. This friendship was once disrupted by the arrival of Daniel, as Joseph feared that Daniel might replace him as Bobby's friend. It has now been solidified and improved as Bobby turns to Joseph for emotional support during difficult times.

Additionally, Bobby forges a romantic bond with Alisa Spink, "an earth mother figure" (Latham, 2006, p. 102) who seems to be able to "read (my) Bobby's mind" (Almond, 2003, p. 153) and be at his side when he needs her help. Their romantic relationship is marked by shared affection. During a vulnerable moment when Bobby confides in Alisa about his father's illness and his fear of losing him, Alisa responds with empathy by sharing her own experience of losing her mother. She expresses her love for Bobby directly, hugs him, and kisses him. Bobby reciprocates in the same heartfelt manner, solidifying the emotional connection between them. In essence, Alisa is the one who accompanies Bobby to "get through the winter" (Almond, 2003, p. 218), much like she cares for an injured fawn until it is strong enough to reunite with its parents at the witness of Bobby and Alisa. The culmination of their romantic journey unfolds in the fiction's final lines, where Bobby gazes into Alisa's eyes and confirms her words that "the world's just so amazing" (Almond, 2003, p. 218). This moment marks the restoration of Bobby's belief in the world, signifying the positive transformation and the final resilience of Bobby in the face of multiple adversities.

(c). *Deepened Appreciation of Life*

Bobby's growth is also epitomized in his deepened appreciation of life, a facet considered crucial for evaluating stress-related growth (Park, 2010). His father's illness and McNulty's suffering and eventual death allow Bobby to feel and accept pain and death as an indispensable part of life. Miss Bute's biology class on frog dissection guides Bobby to the beauty, sacredness, and mystery of all sorts of life, which he feels eventually in the marvelousness and mysteriousness of the fire-eater's life. His wish to shoulder his father's pain and to save lives important and trivial in the world that might be taken by the nuclear holocaust illustrates that, through coping with these stressful events, Bobby has obtained a transformed meaning of life bearing with a broader sense of responsibility.

IV. CONCLUSION

In *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), the adolescent protagonist Bobby grapples with a multitude of adversities that challenge his growth and mental well-being, and concurrently catalyze a resilient process marked by significant development. These challenges encompass the intrusive presence of the fire-eater McNulty, the looming threat of war, his father's illness, and the abusive teachers at school. The convergence of these challenges not only causes profound cognitive and emotional turmoil in Bobby, leaving him overwhelmed by feelings of fear and anxiety and ensnared in a negative self-concept of helplessness, uselessness, and loss of self, but also shatters his view of the world and disrupts the life goal of education.

However, with the social support from his family, friends, and local community, Bobby adapts positively to these adversities. He ultimately develops resilience marked by age-salient development. The cognitive and emotional disturbances he initially experiences are mediated, transforming his sense of helplessness, uselessness, and loss of identity into a burgeoning sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. This transformation is evident in his proactive efforts to assist McNulty and confront abusive teachers. Meanwhile, his worldview is reconstructed, reinstating his belief in the inherent amazement of the world. Bobby's perception of education expands beyond the confines of traditional schooling, embracing a more holistic understanding of education that transcends the mere act of reading and writing at school.

Fundamentally, Bobby's resilient process amid adversities is characterized by stress-related growth. Through enduring hardships, he forges a self-identity integrated with experiences of becoming a "fighter" and a "stronger" self. This newfound resilience extends into Bobby's interpersonal relationships, leading to the establishment of closer friendships and romantic connections. With a deepened appreciation for life, Bobby comes to understand and accept pain, death, and uncertainty as integral parts of the human experience.

Bobby's resilience serves as a testament to the dual nature of adversities, which simultaneously pose threats and foster opportunities for personal growth in young individuals. His journey underscores the significance of navigating difficulties, embracing uncertainties, discovering inner strength, and maintaining a belief that "the world is just so amazing" despite facing various challenges. In essence, Bobby's story highlights the transformative power embedded in the resilience of a young individual confronted by adversity.

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Hou Bin is a doctoral student who is studying in School of Humanities in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), whose area of study is English literature. Contact: houbin5@student.usm.my

Suzana Mj Muhammad is working as a senior lecturer in School of Humanities in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), who got a doctoral degree in Indiana university of Pennsylvania (America) on literature. Contact: szna@usm.my

Agnes WL Liau is working as a senior lecturer in School of Humanities in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), who got a doctoral degree in Cambridge University on Literature. Contact: agnes@usm.my