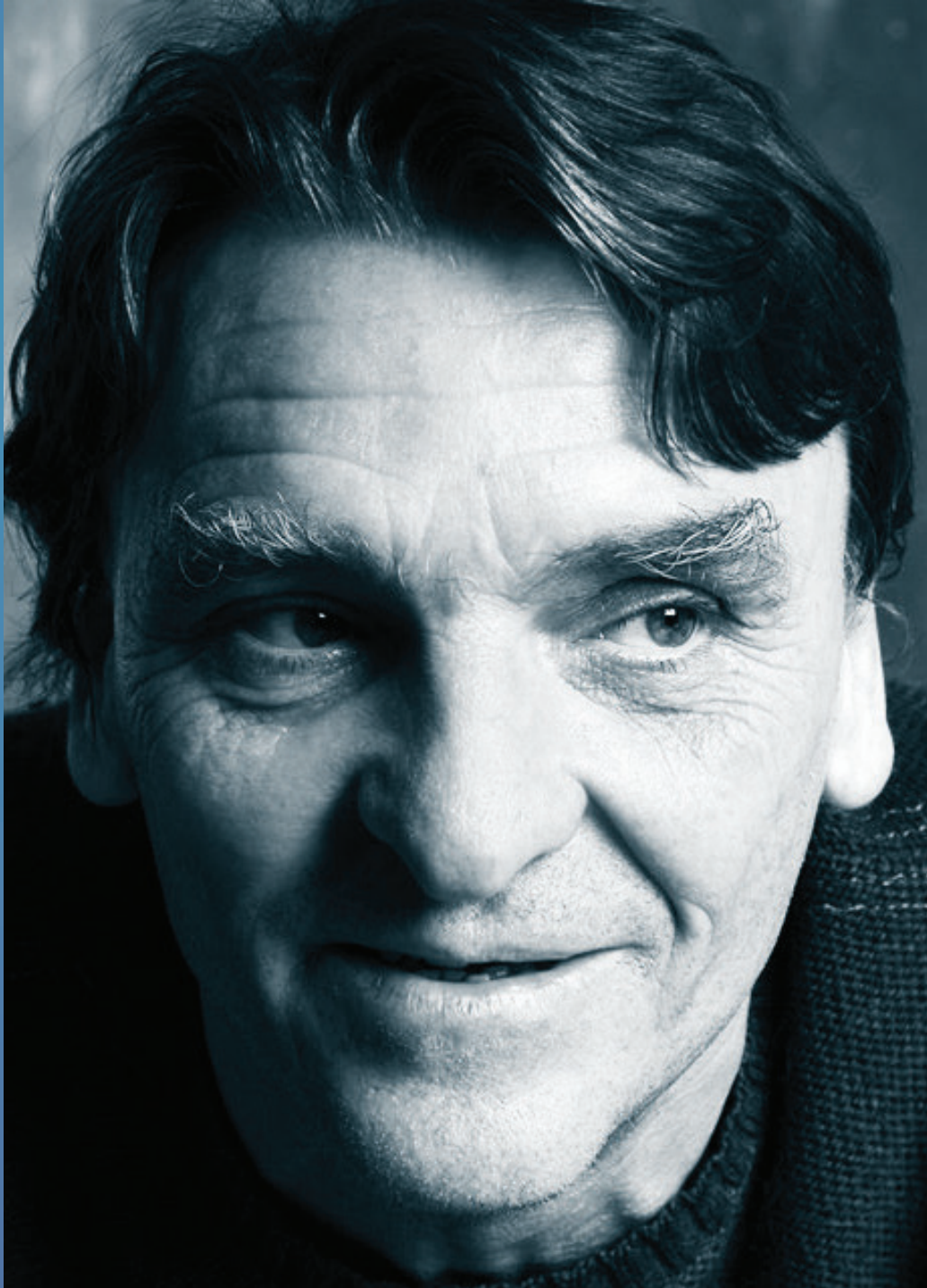


Melvin Burgess

Hans Christian Andersen Awards 2018

UK Author Nomination



Although they are made up of words, I think stories can reveal things to us in a pre-verbal form

– a thought or feeling before we find the words to frame it. When I think of the novels that had a big effect on me in the past, I think I could describe what it is that fascinated and influenced me, but the concepts would be far removed from anything on the school curriculum.

## Melvin Burgess Biography



Melvin Burgess was born in Twickenham, Middlesex, grew up in Crawley in Surrey and spent most of his teenage years in Reading. He wanted to become a writer from the age of 13 and, after leaving school, he trained as a journalist, and worked for a short time for *The Reading Evening Post*. Abandoning journalism, he moved to Bristol, where, sometimes unemployed, and sometimes in casual work, he began writing fiction. "Inner-city Bristol was a great place to live, with a big racial and cultural mix. I learned a lot there and got my feeling for life." He has described this time as "becoming someone who writes books" but it wasn't until fifteen years later, and living in London, that he decided to take his ambition seriously: "I thought I better find out if I can really do this." Within the year, he had a radio play broadcast by the BBC, a short story published in *The London Magazine* and his first children's book, *The Cry of the Wolf*, accepted for publication and subsequently shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal. Five more books followed and were equally well received, but it was with the publication of *Junk* in 1996 that Melvin really made his mark.

*Junk* is about a group of young people in Bristol in the 1980s, and was based on Melvin's own experience. It won both the Carnegie and The Guardian Fiction Awards, and Melvin joined a select band of writers who had won both awards with the same book. *Junk's* portrayal of its character's sex lives and drug use was immediately controversial, perhaps as much for its refusal to draw explicit moral lessons as for its treatment of these subjects in a book for young people. Melvin described the book as the book he would have liked to read at the age of 16. Then, as now, he asserted the right and the need for young people to read stories about serious issues which interest and affect them, and which do not patronise or preach. In retrospect, the publication of *Junk* is seen as a landmark in UK publishing, kick-starting the "Young Adult" market for older teenage fiction. Its status was acknowledged in 2016 with the Booksellers' Association YA Book Prize special achievement award marking the twentieth anniversary of the book's publication.

In those twenty years, Melvin has continued to explore the boundaries of what can be shared with young people in fiction, sometimes causing extreme critical reaction. Sandra, the protagonist of *Lady: My Life as a Bitch (2001)*, is a seventeen year old who is transformed into a dog; a transformation that enables her to continue a very active, if largely loveless, sex life, but also poses understandable problems for her. *Doing It (2004)*, deals with the sexual longings, conversation and affairs of teenage boys, including a relationship with a teacher. It provoked a critical assault from the then UK Children's Laureate, Anne Fine. She dismissed it as a "grubby book, which demeans both young women and young men." In reply, Melvin asked, "What is it about young male sexuality that is so unacceptable that no one writes about it?... Are young men really so disgusting that they have to lead large parts of their lives in secret, or are we being cowardly about the whole thing?"

If Melvin's deliberately taboo breaking teenage novels have caused the most uproar, there has always been more to his writing. He has written historical novels and fantasy and for a range of abilities and ages. He wrote a novelisation of the screenplay for the film *Billy Elliot* (2001). In *Bloodtide* (1999) and *Bloodsong* (2005) he created a richly imagined dystopian version of the Volsunga saga. *Sara's Face* (2006) and *Kill All Enemies* (2011) highlight the vein of social and political criticism in his novels. *Kill All Enemies* is particularly close to his heart. It developed out of a Channel 4 TV project in which Melvin worked with teenagers who were excluded from mainstream schools. "*Kill All Enemies*," he writes, "Is a celebration of the lives of young people who have other things to worry about than just school – and who are penalised for it." In 2011 Melvin also worked with the Save the Children charity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, visiting street children in centres in Kinshasa, collecting stories from them, some traditional and some of their own lives, and writing a blog about his experience, particularly around the issue of child witches.

Melvin's novels have been dramatised for the theatre and television. He adapted *Junk* for the stage in 1998, and it was made into a TV film in 1999. *Bloodtide* was staged by Pilot Theatre in 2004. *Doing It* was adapted into a US television series, *Life as We Know It*, which starred Kelly Osbourne and was screened in 2004-5. Melvin received an honorary doctorate from the University of Bolton in 2006 for his contribution to the arts and was honorary research fellow at the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature at Roehampton University from 2012-2015. He is a regular writing tutor with the Arvon Foundation and other organisations, is a Patron of Writers in Prisons and works with the Prisons Education Trust.



## Melvin Burgess A Critical Appreciation

Melvin Burgess is best known for his ground-breaking multi-narrator novel *Junk* (1996), a story about growing up and falling in love with heroin in 1980s Bristol, which is now firmly established as a classic of young adult literature. The YA Book Prize organisation recently marked its 20th anniversary by presenting Burgess with a special achievement award, recognising his role in 'kick-starting' British YA and acknowledging *Junk's* influence on generations of readers and future writers.<sup>1</sup> Burgess himself thinks he might be let into heaven 'just for that one'. He has developed a lively reputation for courting controversy by writing about sex, drugs, and violence in *Junk* and other YA novels such as *Bloodtide* (1999), *Lady: my Life as a Bitch* (2001), *Doing It* (2003), and *Nicholas Dane* (2009). However, his literary output over more than 25 years is remarkably diverse and builds a broader picture of an author of significant literary ability with a taste for innovation and generic experimentation. Moreover, Burgess's drive to highlight the experiences of the disadvantaged reveals a serious social and political aspect to his writing for young people that is also reflected in the outreach and youth work he has undertaken.

Burgess's first book for children was *The Cry of the Wolf* (1990), a dramatic, partly mythical animal story that pits a male cub and a young boy against an obsessive individual called 'The Hunter' who wants to kill all of England's remaining wild wolves. It is an impressive debut, revealing Burgess's skill in controlling plot and creating taut, tension-filled scenes, and his talent for portraying non-human characters with precision and sympathy. Klaus Flugge, who accepted *The Cry of the Wolf* for publication at Andersen Press, claimed he could not put the novel down, and it marked the beginning of a successful career and a fruitful publishing relationship.

Much of Burgess's early fiction published by Andersen Press reflects his concern with the natural world, an interest nurtured in his youth

when he collected butterflies and enjoyed reading stories about animals and autobiographical tales by naturalist Gerald Durrell. Set in 1960s England, *Kite* (1997) develops the theme of threat to uncommon species, following the fate of a hatchling red kite as two boys thwart a local gamekeeper's attempts to eradicate this once endangered bird of prey. *Tiger, Tiger* (1997) also features a rare beautiful creature under attack, this time a Siberian 'spirit' tiger with mysterious powers hunted for her healing properties by a Chinese poacher and rescued by a boy on the cusp of adolescence. Another novel from this period that blends the supernatural and natural is *The Earth Giant* (1995), in which Burgess creates a compelling alien character displaying elements of innocent wonder and feminine wildness. Giant must be protected from human forces that would destroy her and, again, it is a child protagonist who acts to save the non-human being. In each of these well-told narratives, Burgess is alert to the complexity of the untamed world and the potential for young people to respond sensitively to dangers posed to it by adult civilisation.

As well as being an adept nature writer, Burgess has a talent for crafting historical narratives that draw his readers in through strong characterisation and the evocation of a vivid, often very contemporary, atmosphere. *Burning Issy* (1992) tackles the seventeenth-century Pendle witch trials but invites young readers to make connections with their own everyday experiences of growing up and challenging authority. Issy herself seems to have inherited her long-lost aunt's special powers as a wise woman and is therefore in danger of persecution, but just as important as the threads of witchcraft running through the story are the themes of Issy's burgeoning self-confidence and prowess as a clever trader. *Loving April* (1995), set in the 1920s, presents its audience with a morally ambiguous scenario, as the lively but vulnerable deaf-mute heroine is mocked, abused, and finally raped. As critic Pat Pinsent has pointed

out, Burgess's treatment of this difficult topic was noteworthy for its portrayal of disability as a social, rather than individual or medical, problem<sup>2</sup>: the novel is an early example – his 2000 *The Ghost Behind the Wall*, in which he writes honestly about dementia is another – of his writerly urge to reveal and critique inequalities and limitations inherent in society and ask young readers to question the world they live in.

Later novels aimed primarily at a young adult audience continue to explore the experiences of what Burgess describes as the 'underdogs' of society. In some respects he can be thought of as a modern Charles Dickens for young people: he certainly shares Dickens' belief that literature has utility in encouraging social activism. To form the plot of *Nicholas Dane*, Burgess drew on his own interviews with victims of abuse who had been housed at children's homes between the 1960s and 1980s, and he is vocal in support of these survivors who have now brought successful cases to court. In a similar style, he researched *Kill All Enemies* by speaking to young men and women excluded from schools and sent to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). The resulting 'found fiction' is an affectionate portrayal of disadvantaged teenagers that gently incites responsible rebellion against institutionalisation. He is keen to pin his political views about disadvantaged young people to the mast, and following the publication of *Kill All Enemies* he wrote a piece for *The Times* arguing that youth violence (specifically surrounding the 2011 London riots) was ultimately a result of the general greed and sense of entitlement that adolescents observed in adults around them.<sup>3</sup> Alongside his radical writing, he has also invested time and energy in global youth rights, taking part in the British Council's India Lit Sutra programme in 2010 and visiting the Democratic Republic of Congo with Save the Children in 2011 to tell and gather stories about atrocities performed against child 'witches' in Kinshasa.

Burgess is, of course, best known for his unique contribution to young adult literature: a sequence of publications that showcase his innovative storytelling talents and willingness to push the boundaries of what his young readers (or at least the gatekeepers of their fiction) might be ready to explore. From his chilling futuristic dystopia *The Baby and Fly Pie* (1992) to *The Hit* (2013), a more recent thought experiment circulating round a fictional euthanasia drug, he regularly probes big questions about humanity and where it is heading. His hugely inventive Volson-saga books, *Bloodtide and Bloodsong* (2005), retell Icelandic mythology in an imagined gangland London, where humans and animals are genetically modified and issues of love, power and blood ties are violently played out. These novels are dynamic and exciting, but also pose many ethical problems for their readers to consider. Indeed, Burgess often demands something of a philosophical stance from his young audience, constantly stretching and challenging them.

Burgess also identifies crucial intimate issues about being a teenager that he feels need to be explored, and in doing so has made his fiction essential reading for generations of young people. In an article called *Sympathy for the Devil*, he argued that before Junk, very little had been written for the YA market about taking risks.<sup>4</sup> Taking on this task himself, he has written about sex, drugs and rock n' roll with relish, particularly in *Lady: my Life as a Bitch* and *Doing It*. He has been attacked by fellow author Anne Fine for the latter, which she famously described as '[f]ilth, whichever way you look at it'.<sup>5</sup> It is an accusation Burgess is happy to embrace, however, since he believes his books help readers understand and celebrate the realities of puberty rather than feel ashamed or restricted by them. It is also important to note that Burgess's YA novels are not mere tokens of controversy, but often work to advance or even break down literary conventions, presenting fans with the opportunity to experience new aesthetic forms. For instance, Junk's multiple narrators help young readers engage with the

difficult content via plural perspectives, providing balance and nuance to what might otherwise have been a 'black and white' moral tale, and this narrative structure is now an established device amongst other contemporary YA writers. In *Lady*, Burgess experimented with comic allegory, offering a satirical take on adolescent sexuality through the story of a girl magically transformed into a dog. In *Sara's Face* (2006), he created a postmodern and metafictional fable about a girl who willingly undergoes a horrific face transplant in the pursuit of fame, which forces readers to ask what is real and what is made up. Burgess is ultimately interested in what he calls 'surprising truths', and in hunting these out through imagination, he creates incredibly affecting and effective stories for young readers.

Burgess is known as 'godfather' of young adult fiction, but his achievements extend well beyond this field. His extensive oeuvre includes novels for younger readers and reluctant readers, short stories, radio and stage plays, a cross-media game narrative, a novelisation (of the screenplay *Billy Elliot*), a picturebook, and '*Twittertales*'. He has also written pieces for children's literature journals and mainstream press. Melvin Burgess is a passionate advocate for his young readers, as well as an impressively versatile author, and a socially-engaged one. IBBY UK is honoured and delighted to nominate him for the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

**Alison Waller, 2016**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://yabookprize.tumblr.com/post/143164654677/20th-anniversary-of-melvin-burgess-junk>

<sup>2</sup> Pat Pinsent, "'You Know What I Mean': The Development of Relationships between Socially Isolated Characters in An Angel for May, Loving April, and The Ghost Behind the Wall' in Alison Waller (ed.), *Melvin Burgess: a New Casebook*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 154-169.

<sup>3</sup> Melvin Burgess, "'The Rioters Did What We've Been Doing for Years; When the Chance Came to Get Something for Free They Grabbed it'", *The Times*, 7 September 2011, T2 Review, 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Melvin Burgess, 'Sympathy for the Devil', *Children's Literature in Education*, 35:4 (December 2004), 289-300.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Fine, 'Filth, Whichever Way You Look at It', *The Guardian*, 29 March 2003, Saturday Review, 33.

## Melvin Burgess Interviews and Opinion

Melvin is an outspoken advocate of fiction for young people, so there many interviews and articles available, many of them on the Web. The two that we have chosen are relatively recent and cover, first, his views on censorship and, second, in conversation with Alison Waller, an overview of his career.

His views on teenagers and education and on censorship respectively can also be sampled in two YouTube interviews:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1U1LEzOu8w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1U1LEzOu8w)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBlayKr\\_V9I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBlayKr_V9I)

### Melvin Burgess on Censorship and the Author

Written in anticipation of Banned Books Weeks (25th September – 1st October 2016) and a panel discussion on Censorship and the Author at the British Library on 22nd September, at which writers Melvin Burgess and Matt Carr discussed censorship with Jo Glanville.

Censorship in books for teenagers takes a number of forms, but before looking at them, it's worth looking at the provision of fiction for teenagers in general, and the peculiar and privileged position books do hold among them.

Written matter is, in fact, the only media in which any serious issues can be seriously explored in a fictional way for people under the age of eighteen. Film, for instance, is strictly censored according to age – we're all familiar with the age rating for films in the cinema. At first sight, this might appear not to matter, since anyone can actually get to see anything via the internet; but if you look at provision rather than access, you get a very different picture. When my book *Junk* first came out, a number of production companies wanted to make a movie based on the book, but they very quickly realised they couldn't because "the audience for whom it's intended won't be allowed

in the cinema." Funding was impossible, and the project was dropped. *Junk* later appeared in a castrated version on BBC Education.

That remains the case to this day. TV is the same. Access, although technically very limited, is in fact almost unlimited. Provision on the other hand is almost non-existent.

Censorship of provision is well and away the most successful way of going about the job of restricting what people get to see or hear but it does have some other unfortunate side effects. In the case of film anyone over the age of about twelve, can get to see things, many of them highly inappropriate, that they technically shouldn't. Meanwhile, the kinds of material they actually should be getting, but which some adults would still feel uncomfortable with, simply doesn't exist at all.

This isn't particular to the UK, either. It is in fact, global. In every continent in which visual material for film or TV is made, serious content for teenagers is effectively stifled at birth by the censorship of age. It appears at first glance to be a matter of simple negligence, censorship by accident, almost; but something that happens with such uniformity on such a global scale is obviously nothing of the kind. That doesn't mean it's done on purpose of course, but it does say a great deal about our attitudes to teenagers that the provision of visual imaginative material for them is restricted to the anodyne on such a universal level.

Books and other written material such as graphic novels and comics are uncensored for age. The importance of written fictional material for teenagers can be measured exactly by the degree of absence of fictions for them in other media. It is of the very first degree of importance.

Censorship of books does occur, however, at a much more local level. I remember very well the librarian who kept my books in a locked cupboard at the back of the library, so that no innocent

youngster could inadvertently come across them, and suffer god only knows what forms of psychic shock or corruption. That's an extreme example, but that librarian was acting in the manner in which censorship against books does occur; by the system of gatekeepers. I'm referring to those people who are in a position to control or regulate books to young people; librarians, teachers, bookseller managers, parents – in other words, the very people whose job it is to encourage reading are the ones who also take it upon themselves to limit it.

It goes without saying, but even so I feel I have to say it, that this is not a role all of them relish.

A great deal of this actually happens in the school library, where the kind of material that older teenagers in particular like to read, is by no means always considered suitable for them. When I began writing, schools were still the main source of sales for children's books and to this day, publishers are concerned not to put anything out there that might fall foul of the kind of "standards" that schools require. All too often, such standards, purporting to be some kind of moral stewardship, actually revolve more around the the kind of stories the local press might summon up if they found people under the age of fourteen had access to books with such horrors as drugs, breasts or sexual activity of any kind. There is in every class at least one unfortunate child with a mad parent, and if the school's senior management is more concerned with public image than developing young minds, that one person can completely define what kind of reading matter every child in the school has access to. In such schools, many readers will tend to ignore the library almost as much as non-readers. It's a vicious circle.

*Junk* of course, and *Doing It*, were often kept by thoughtful librarians in brown paper wrappers under the desk, to be handed to chosen, suitably mature students, who weren't always the ones who would benefit from them the most. But I can also think of many examples not by any means

connected with my more controversial books. One teacher told me how, when reading a passage from my very first book, *The Cry of the Wolf*, to a group of parents, one mother rose quaking with horror that something so violent (the wolves got shot in a suitably bloody fashion) was available in an institution of education. As a result, not just that one, but all my books were taken off the school shelves.

Violence, however, is one of the rarer targets for the banning of books. The usual one is sex – very handy when everyone over the age of thirteen is fascinated by it – and second is religion. I don't tend to write religious books, but back in the day I did write a book called *Burning Issy*, which showed witches persecuted by the Church in the 17th C. This book caused me to be dis-invited to a very posh school, on the grounds of "we do not feel the parents of our students would want them to be introduced to this sort of thing." I was puzzled by what "this sort of thing" might be, but my enquiries yielded no further answers. My guess, though, is that someone somewhere out there, actually believed I was acting as a propagandist for Mr Satan.

Other gatekeepers can include book sellers. Those who remember the book shop Borders from a few years ago, may be surprised to hear that at least one store didn't stock my books, after receiving one solitary complaint.

Of course all this occurs alongside a great deal of support, and stems from an issue which begins life as something quite reasonable. Content, of course, is an issue that all parents will be concerned about. The real issue here isn't about whether we want to allow unrestricted access to children of any age whatsoever; we have allowed them that already (so long as we're not in the room at the time.) It's more about the disconnect between the kinds of material young people want to engage in, (and that we passively allow them to engage with), and the kind of material that we as adults want to present them with. It's a bit like teaching someone to swim



in the bath, and then turning your back while they rush out and splash in around in a fast flowing river.

What are we scared of, I wonder? Finding out what they really think? It's all very hypocritical on the face of it, but presumably such a universal system serves some kind of purpose. Perhaps it's something to do with permission. All over the world, adults passively encourage teenagers to breach the rules that we ourselves have put into place. I wonder if we rather like the idea that they transgress – that it is in fact a necessary rite of passage. In that case, the rules are more like the governor on a lorry, rather than the actual brakes. Even so, it's a pretty abyssal way of doing it, that leaves people at a time in their lives when they are changing so much, risk taking so actively, and trying to get to terms with an ever more complex and rapidly changing world, without the imaginative structures that might help them negotiate it.

The most moving and enthusiastic, as well as the most common emails and letters I've had from teenagers speak of the sheer relief and joy they've had at finding something that seems to actually reflect what's going on in their own heads in an honest and authentic fashion.

YA is barely twenty years old, and it remains the only form in which the contradictions I've spoken about are ever reconciled. Already it's become fashionable to knock it and to dismiss its existence as a form, even among the people who actually write the stuff – driven, perhaps, by the urge to widen their readership among adults. Every publisher and every writer wants their work to be crossover, rather than pure YA as such. It would be a tragedy if it ever got genuinely taken over by middle aged wannabe youths, looking for nostalgia. At its best it is for teenagers, about being a teenager, and its disheartening to see grown-ups trying to hijack it for themselves. If they succeed, we'd be talking about banned genres, rather than just books and that old biblical saying – To those that have not, even that which they have shall be taken from them – will yet again have proven its worth.

**British Library Blog, 21 September 2016,**

<http://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2016/09/melvin-burgess-censorship-and-the-author.html>

**Accessed January 5th 2017**

## Found Fiction An Interview with Melvin Burgess

Alison Waller and Melvin Burgess

In *Melvin Burgess*, ed. Alison Waller, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 191-202

**A:** Let's start with your two most recent novels for teenagers, *Nicholas Dane* and *Kill All Enemies*: stories that both deal with young people who are on the margins but that are told in very different ways. What draws you to telling those kinds of stories, and which narrative form did you find more satisfying?

**M:** Well I think those two books are linked. And as very often happens, you write one book and then you're off on something and you think 'oh, I'm going to do another one like that'. The link between them is real people's real stories, this 'found fiction' idea, that you talk to people, and there's this whole world, this whole set of fantastic stories. It's to do with drawing from life. I feel that authors don't draw from life that much. People include their aunt, or some friend of theirs, but really thinking about it, including groups of characters in relationships, and interviewing them, doesn't happen that often, which is a bit weird really.

The guys I talked to and interviewed for *Nick Dane* – you would have never otherwise have known the experiences they've had. Of course, at the time no one would have believed them if they had told their stories. So *Kill All Enemies* was linked in that sense in it was about the fact that people could be something completely unexpected. The kids in *Kill All Enemies* are actually dreadful in school but they're heroes in another part of their life. So that's how the books grew out of one other: they were about people on the margins of society and how people who you would think are bad lots actually have really significant heroic lives in a different way.

As far as the form's concerned, I do love telling stories in multiple first-person; it's such a fantastic way to tell a story. I'm very much someone who becomes involved in voices, so I love the shifting viewpoint and the three-dimensional quality that

it can give you and the fact you can move the story on very quickly because it's constantly changing.

*Kill All Enemies* is slightly different structurally, because the voices are quite loosely tied together. Around about the time I was thinking of the idea, I was approached by a TV company who wanted to do something for Channel Four involving teenagers, so I said 'you can come in on my next project if you like'. And it was great, because it meant that they hired a researcher for *Kill all Enemies*, so I had all that at my disposal. But it means the novel's based on a soap structure, where you have the A story, the B story and the C story. And the A story's coming up and the B story's coming down, and the C story's a bit of comedy or something. So in that sense, Billie's the A story and Chris is the C story and Rob's the B story. It's not a soap, because it's not rolling on, but you do have these three strands which are quite loosely connected together. The first third or so was written originally as a TV script, but Channel Four decided they didn't want to use it so I turned it into a book. So it's got those two elements: the first person voice and the TV structure of episodes.

I suppose I prefer the multiple voice thing really. I feel very at home in it these days. It was nice doing third person for *Nicholas Dane*, and it was also a little tribute to Dickens, but it had its problems. By and large I prefer doing the first person. I don't know whether I'd want to stick with one form or the other forever: I've enjoyed doing them all. They really give you a different effect for each story. I must admit, there was a time when I was trying to get away from those multiple first person voices, because it's hard, really hard, to get it right: you know? It's time-consuming. But I find myself being drawn back to it.

**A:** I want to return to that idea of writing an homage to Dickens with *Nicholas Dane*. Do you consider yourself as a social writer in the way that Dickens was, writing about social issues and making a difference through that writing?

**M:** I do like writing about social stuff and I feel that teenagers don't have much of a voice, so it's probably quite an important thing to do. It's hard though, because it's not a popular thing to do at the moment. When *Junk* was out, everyone was on the back of writing about social issues, but they're not now. So the publishers aren't terribly interested – there's this response that 'oh, it's an issue book'. So I do, but it's hard to do social issues now. It's not necessarily supported by schools and libraries anymore. Schools have become a lot more anxious about their image, with all the testing that's being done. Everything's much less about exploring themes for the sake of it or for social reasons, and much more about passing, marks, and producing a measurable product. So it's not a good time for social writing, certainly not for young people.

**A:** It's interesting to think about the trends that you have perhaps initiated or followed, and the periods in which you have written or which you have written about. *Nicholas Dane* and *Junk* are both set in the eighties. Do you think there has been some comment you've been trying to make there about Thatcher's Britain, about the way things were for young people and for society in general?

**M:** Probably not. *Nicholas Dane* was set at a time when it had become apparent that dodgy things and difficult abuse were happening in children's homes. And the form of children's homes in which it was happening had been set up in the sixties; so it's at the end of a period really. Whereas *Junk* simply happened because that is when it happened. It's based on real people and real events, by and large. It takes a little bit of time before you realise what actually defines a period. But I think eighties things that have happened there are chance.

Trying to write really totally contemporary stuff is tricky for all sorts of reasons. If you try and do it completely bang up to date then by the time you've finished it it's out of date anyway. It's like when people ask 'how do you get a young person's voice right?' and the answer is you don't do it too

exactly, otherwise it's dated by the time it's done. It's a novel you're writing, not a magazine, so it has to last. You can't be too fashionable. There are lots of cultural references in *Kill All Enemies* and I think you can get away with it if you're writing about a specific period and a specific place. But even with *Kill All Enemies*, the people I was talking to were older, in their early twenties or late teens, talking about when they were fifteen and sixteen.

**A:** I hear what you're saying about the growing conservatism in schools and libraries, but I'm hoping there's also a contemporary movement for young people to feel activated in some way. It seems there has been a recent shift towards young people being engaged in politics, with protest songs and that sort of aesthetic back 'in'.

**M:** It would be nice to think that sort of thing's coming back in. It would be dreadful to think that it took a Tory government to make it happen. I was reading an article the other day saying 'they're bloody dismantling the NHS, how can they do that'. It's because they can, because Thatcher dismantled the Trade Union movement, which for all its flaws was a bulwark against this sort of thing, and Labour didn't put it back.

**A:** Do you feel as strongly about your historical characters as you do about the contemporary youth you write about, because they're still neglected or damaged by uncaring communities even if they are from a different period?

**M:** All my books are about underdogs really; they're about people who are afflicted or put down or haven't had proper opportunities, and I naturally gravitate towards that kind of storytelling; it's how my mind works. But I'm particularly fond of the kids in *Kill All Enemies*. I have a particular place in my heart for them, so that one is different. It was an interesting thing because it was very much based on real people I went out and talked to, so I wanted that to be very positive and show them sorting it out for themselves. I was being consciously socially minded with that one, as I was with *Nick Dane*.

**A:** I know you've recently been gathering tales not only from young people from this country who have had experiences of being in care or institutions, but also tales from young people in the Congo. Can you tell me a little more about that project?

**M:** I was approached by Save the Children who wanted to do some stuff with children's authors to try and promote their work. They said 'do you want to go somewhere?', so I said 'yeah, fantastic!' Then they gave me a list of all these dreadful places where all these awful things were happening. It was originally going to be Angola, but it turned out to be too expensive to stay there, so they picked the Congo instead. And I was sent to meet child witches and kids being accused of witchcraft, very often by their own parents, who were being hounded out of their families. That really fascinated me because it's got a lot of things I'm interested in – the touch of magic, plus the dreadful social issue – and it also seemed so incomprehensible why you would accuse a child of witchcraft. It did my head in, really.

I went out to Kinshasa and spent a week talking to the kids. They were very often from broken families and were basically just distressed, so they were coming up with odd behaviour and being accused of witchcraft. Everyone there believes in witches, so if they don't have any other explanation that's the answer. There are all these billions of little churches which are a really revolting combination of Christianity and the fetish churches, and some of them were just exploiting the situation. It's a relatively recent situation, because it's a product of the society being under huge stress, and the children showing signs of that stress. It was absolutely fascinating and kind of heartbreaking as well.

I spoke to the children, I spoke to the church leaders, I spoke to various people running various centres, and I think the idea was that Save the Children would make some stuff about it when we got back, but nothing ever happened. It was ridiculous really. I felt really bad about it, and I want to do something.

It's supposed to be saving children, not sending authors off watching the children.

But I have got all this material. While I was there I collected folk stories. I would tell the kids The Three Little Pigs or Red Riding Hood and I would get them to tell me stories. So I've got a great collection of stuff. I'm still writing it up and I will do something with it at some point. I was thinking maybe some of them might make good picturebook stories, but most of them are quite bloodthirsty so I don't know about that. Of course the Grimms' fairytale tradition is also very bloody, but by the time those get to picturebooks they've all been a bit toned down. And some of these Congo stories are really very bloodthirsty.

**A:** How did you feel about your role as 'white ethnographer'?

**M:** There's a bit of me that thinks I might like to do a novel on the child witch material, but the problem is I was only there for a week and I don't want to make a fool of myself by trying to write about events in a culture that's really very alien to me. It did get a bit bizarre on occasions. After I'd done the stuff in Kinshasa 'I thought I've got to go and see somewhere else'. I did a package where I flew to Mbandaka on the Equator and they drove me to this little village. The trip consisted of being paddled up river in these dug-out canoes, stopping off to visit various villages. But it was five guys paddling: one guide, one cook; some guys helping to put up the tent, and me. One white man sat in a canoe with all these beautiful young black guys paddling away, chanting and singing songs. I thought 'what am I doing, I'm like Livingstone or something. This is ludicrous, I feel like a fool!' But I was a tourist and that's how you have to be a tourist.

**A:** Can you say a little more about the other recent work you've been doing with black writers in Manchester?

**M:** Diversity, or identity, is the keyword these days, and it doesn't just mean black writers it means writers of different ethnicity, which will



be Asian and black writers mainly. There's a great organisation in Manchester called Common Word which is set up to develop new writing. I just attended a conference that was set up by Puffin: all the publishers are gagging to have more diversity amongst their writers, because the percentage in children's fiction is risible, it's miserable. There's Malorie, there's Bali, there's [you mention someone else here I cannot quite distinguish]. I'm very conscious that although we live in a society that is very diverse ethnically and culturally, everyone does keep to their little groups, by and large.

You go down Manchester city centre to Piccadilly Gardens and you get all these different groups and you think it's fabulous; but they're all separate, they don't mix together. Consequently, if I wanted to put, say, a black or Asian character into my book, I'd be a bit at sea. So I thought I'd do some work with some of these authors and interview them: so I would have a collection, because I do collect people. That's not really working out, but I am running a course every Wednesday with African, Jamaican heritage, Asian, Chinese, Iranian Turkish writers.

**A:** Somebody asked me the other day if there is a black character in *Kill All Enemies* and I did have to think for a while. I said no initially, but I'm actually not sure there are any indicators either way.

**M:** There could be. As it happens, I was basing it on real people and I came across very few black kids in those PRUs [Pupil Referral Units] oddly. I saw practically no black kids. Now it might be that in the PRUS a lot of the problems were just disenfranchised white kids.

**A:** Can you tell me something about your relationship with publishers over the years?

**M:** My first publisher was Andersen Press who mainly worked with picturebooks, so I was a bit of sport for them, probably because Klaus' son liked the book. Klaus Flugge was a remarkable publisher. He is great: he's a proper old-fashioned publisher so he's like your uncle and looks after you, and says

[in German accent] 'we're the Andersen family and all in it together'. At the same time he's a very sharp business man. He says if you have a good publisher you don't need an agent. Well you want an agent because sometimes Klaus's deals are five percent down... so in the end I decided to get an agent and Klaus was really annoyed with me and that was a deterioration in our relationship.

Then I was doing this memoir, *From Thirteen to Nineteen* (not published). I noticed that autobiographies tend to skirt around that bit very often just because it's such a weird period: they stop just before puberty and they come back in about fifteen or sixteen. But Klaus hated the memoir and was terrified he was going to get sued because the European Human Rights Act had brought in some really challenging issues. So I departed from Andersen, which is a shame really, because I like Klaus.

Puffin were very good to me for a long time, very supportive. I think that like most children's publishers now they're really overworked. I don't think the editors have enough time to focus; they're really concentrating on their really big sellers. Literary fiction is also not very popular at the moment: children's literary fiction, that is. I mean it's swings and roundabouts – they will be interested again I hope – but at the moment they're not so bothered. It's like the stuff I'm doing with black and Asian writers in Manchester who always complain that they hear 'well we've already got a black writer'. It's the same with literary stuff; they say 'well we've got a literary figure, why would we need another one?'

I'm here, there, everywhere at the moment. I'm doing a horror thing for Hammer, which is an adult imprint; I'm doing something for Chicken House. So I haven't really got a home, although it's with Puffin if it's with anyone. You've got to have a good editor. I really want a strong editorial voice. But I'm lucky because my partner is an editor for TV with some very strong ideas, and I force her to do my books.

She finds it very stressful. If she thinks it's rubbish, she absolutely hates doing it – you can see her writhing around, she puts it off. But she's really good. Most people don't have someone who's that tough with them. Particularly as you get a bit older and your reputation goes up, they don't edit you so much. Editing is a really peculiar profession, because although you do get some very very experienced and very good editors, practically anyone can become an editor if they're in the right place at the right time. You get some really rubbish editors.

**A:** You have worked with all kinds of people, from screenwriters and TV producers to philosophers. Do you enjoy working collaboratively?

**M:** I really enjoy it. It's increasingly important to me to do collaborations, yeah. I mean I've done over twenty odd novels now and it's an isolating business, so it's a real relief to work with other people on projects.

I worked with Ruth Brown on a picturebook called *The Birdman*. I knew her from Anderson Press and at the time she was doing picturebooks with a number of novelists. She did one with Anne Fine, I remember. And I wanted to do a picturebook. Sometime ago I'd separated from my German wife, and she went off to Germany with my kids so I wasn't seeing them but I sent them stories. I sent Ruth a collection of these and one of them was *The Birdman*. When I was first trying to work with her I would try and think about the design of the page and this sort of thing but she said 'er that's my job': she was very clear. So I had no idea actually what she was going to do. She wasn't interested in working close with me at all.

I'm interested now in finding ways of making novels more collaborative, but you can only go so far down that road.

**A:** You've been involved in multi-media, multi-platform types of narratives...

**M:** Well there isn't really a narrative, and that's problem. It becomes a conversation and as soon as the reader can start answering back, you're

stuffed. Where's the script? Where's the story? It's a different thing, that's all it is.

**A:** You have said elsewhere that you want young people to feel there are stories and narratives that belong to them. Is there something you have read as an adult that you feel really belongs to you?

**M:** I was an enormous fan of Peake's *Gormenghast*. I still am really. I think it's quite a unique little masterpiece. Those gothic characters which aren't human, practically, but work as characters. It is character-driven fantasy, which is a rarity. When I do fantasy I always want it to be character-driven rather than the adventure fantasy, which is what Tolkien does – none of the characters change in Tolkien. I enjoy fantasy very much. You can explore anything via fantasy, it's a very interesting genre.

My dad worked very briefly for Oxford University Press who did a whole series of myths and legends. *Folk tales from Moor and Mountain*, *Folk Tales from Czechoslovakia*, from here there and everywhere. I had the whole collection, but the one that particularly did it for me was *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes* by Barbara Leonie Picard, and that's where *Bloodtide and Bloodsong* came from, because her version of the *Volsunga Saga* really blew me away. I still have a real possession of those Norse myths; they really did it for me, in a profound way.

**A:** So, maybe you have something in common with Tolkien after all...

**M:** But it was folktale that he did, it wasn't myth. A folktale's a nice little adventure, but mythic stuff is much more meaningful and deep. I mean there are mythic elements in Tolkien, I suppose, but the figures of the gods Odin and Loki have a much more deep and profound meaning, and the hobbits and all that are much more folktales aren't they? Little adventures.

People do turn to the Norse myths quite often: they're very powerful. One thing nobody has done is to deal with the god cycle properly yet. So I'm kind of interested in that but I can't work out how

to do it. Because the whole Ragnarøk thing is all about Loki leading them astray and then saving them, but taking away from their integrity all the time until eventually it's all gone. By the time they turn on him it's too late: it's a great story.

**A:** Many of your novels are difficult and quite sad at times, but they still have humanity at their core and still on the whole have a certain amount of optimism and hope and love. The text that stands out for me as different is *The Baby and Fly Pie*.

**M:** *The Baby and Fly Pie*. The idea for that novel came about after listening to a radio programme about street kids in Bogota they used to shoot. When it came out there was a lot of a debate about it, and I remember having a public debate with one guy who said *The Baby and Fly Pie* is a great book right up to the last page', because he really thought that every book has to end on a note of hope. Of course Jane, who is the hopeful, optimistic, striving character, she gets shot. And there were two reasons for that: the main reason was that I felt that sometimes it's just really unreasonable to say that things are going to be alright. If you were writing about life in the trenches in the First World War – or death in the trenches – you wouldn't want to say 'oh it worked out alright in the end' because it didn't – it was grim, miserable and completely fucked and that was all there is to it. So I do think that would be an immoral and an unreasonable, unfair, lying thing to do and I'm interested always in trying to write with some kind of truth and some sort of verity. And the other thing is that Jane is such an optimistic character and so idealistic and so hopeful, and if there had been a way through she would have found it. One day a 'Jane' will find it.

And sometimes the hope is in the reader. So when you come across something that is so unfair and so unjust, and you as a reader are outraged, then the hope lies in you. It doesn't have to lie in the book. I would hope after reading *Fly Pie* that your sense of justice and tragedy would be stirred enough for you to be more stirred: then it's worked out alright. It's not

up to me to put hope in the book, but it might be up to me to leave some hope in the reader. Just the fact that everyone was saying 'that was so dark' meant that what they were really saying was 'that was so unfair' – well life is unfair and maybe it shouldn't be.

**A:** The hope you give readers quite often resides in the affection you have for your characters. Perhaps in *Fly Pie* that affection is less apparent, although Fly himself is quite endearing.

**M:** He just wants to be ordinary. And both Jane and Sham are completely leading him up the garden path. But Jane is wrong. Did you not like Jane?

**A:** I loved Sham, particularly his moment of vulnerability in taking on the baby to begin with, and when Jane comes along and adopts a motherly role I'm slightly sad that Sham isn't allowed to develop that attachment and show a different and more nurturing side.

**M:** Jane's a bit like Joan of Arc, isn't she? She's a complete pain in the neck but you can't help but admire her.

**A:** Most of your characters, however bad they might seem – however annoying young men can be, however violent young women can be – have something good in them at the core, it's just a case of understanding them. Do you believe in love?

**M:** Oh yeah! Sure I do! The redeeming power of love, is that what you're talking about? Well it's a funny word isn't it, really? And fictional love is a bit like biblical love. It's 'oh everyone loves in the end' and it makes everything alright, and I'm not sure that's entirely true. I do think that people want to be good and get on together, I do really, in my heart. There's a whole cultural thing, so it's quite easy to raise people to be violent and obnoxious and horrible, but I do feel that we are essentially communal creatures as well.

I don't know if that's love, necessarily. I mean love's great isn't it? We all want to be in love. You don't necessarily mean sexual love?

**A:** I've just noticed in a number of your books, particularly those featuring young lads, that what you seem to want to get across are their huge hearts. They might have all this other stuff going on but they've got something redeeming, which might be love towards their friends or towards their mothers in some cases.

**M:** Yeah ok, yeah I do. I think that people relate to one another. We all are creatures of relationships. It's what people do. It's the first thing you do as a baby at your mum's breast; you're relating, loving if you want to put it like that. I do think that everyone really has to have those relationships and closeness with one another, and that's the redeeming thing: that we all actually want to be in one another's hearts – not in everyone's heart – but somewhere, somehow.

**A:** Which leads me to challenge you on *Nicholas Dane's Tony Creal*. While you give an explanation outside of the novel for why he might be the way he is, inside the novel there's no explanation provided. He's not given the back-story that characters like Jonesy or even Sunshine get. We don't get that redeeming background with Creal.

**M:** No you don't, with Creal. I certainly didn't think why I did that at the time. I suppose there's already this sense of time going on when Jones comes in, and you suddenly realise it's gone way back, and who knows what's happened to him through Tony Creal. If you can do that with Jones, I would think, yes, there would be something there for Creal, if I'd gone into it, but I'd already gone into that with Jones. It's a good point actually. It's a funny book that one for me. I actually think it's not finished really. I don't know what I would have done if I'd carried on with it and started engaging with it again. In a sense it's a broken novel, because the first half is different from the second half.

Are there any other characters that don't have redeeming back-stories? Well there's the Chinaman in *Tiger, Tiger*, there's The Hunter in *The Cry of the Wolf* – basically he was the wolf out of Aesop's Fables, reversed. Sometimes you need a baddie.

You can't explain everything. There's no real baddies in *Junk*, but as soon as you start having the multiple voice thing it's almost impossible to make someone one-dimensional. Even in *Doing It*, Miss Young had her mum there, the bigger monster, who terrified the pants off of her. I think I did want an absolute baddie in *Nicholas Dane*. I was kind of aware of it, but going back in time with Jones was perhaps enough.

**A:** That's a good defence.

**M:** A good defence, but I need a defence!

**A:** So if *Nicholas Dane* has problems for you in its completed form, what is the novel you're most proud of?

**M:** It is a very difficult question. I'm very very fond of *The Cry of the Wolf*, but how much because it was my very first one, I don't know. But I kind of feel it's just perfect, just alright. I'm very fond of *Junk*, and that one has obviously had a profound effect on a lot of people. I'm proud of it as well in the sense that when I go to heaven, they might let me in just for that one. Because it's really helped a lot of people. I get so many letters from people saying it's helped them with addiction for themselves or people in their lives, or it got them into reading, or 'it saved my life when I was thirteen'. I am very proud of that. *Doing It* I'm quite proud of because I took a lot of stick for that one, and it did damage me in some ways. I still get people saying 'oh you wrote that book and I thought you were a pile of shite but I read it and it's interesting'. And I really wanted to say it's alright to be filthy and it doesn't mean you're being sexist or horrible or any of those things. And I am very proud of *Kill All Enemies*. In some ways the one I like the best is actually probably *Bloodtide*: I was really pleased with that one.



## Melvin Burgess Awards, Honours and Adaptations

### Book Awards

1990	<i>The Cry of the Wolf</i>	Highly Commended, the Carnegie Medal
1992	<i>An Angel for May</i>	Highly Commended, the Carnegie Medal
1993	<i>The Baby and Fly Pie</i>	Highly Commended, the Carnegie Medal
1996	<i>Junk</i>	the Carnegie Medal
1997	<i>Junk</i>	the Guardian Fiction Prize
1997	<i>Junk</i>	the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Shortlist
2000	<i>The Ghost Behind the Wall</i>	the Carnegie Medal Shortlist
2001	<i>Bloodtide</i>	the Lancashire Children's Book of the Year Award
2004	<i>Doing It</i>	the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Young Adult Literature
2007	<i>Junk</i>	Carnegie of Carnegies Shortlist (one of ten books selected from all 70 years of the Carnegie Medal)
2016		Young Adult Book Prize Special Achievement Award marking the 20th anniversary of the publication of <i>Junk</i>

### Other Honours

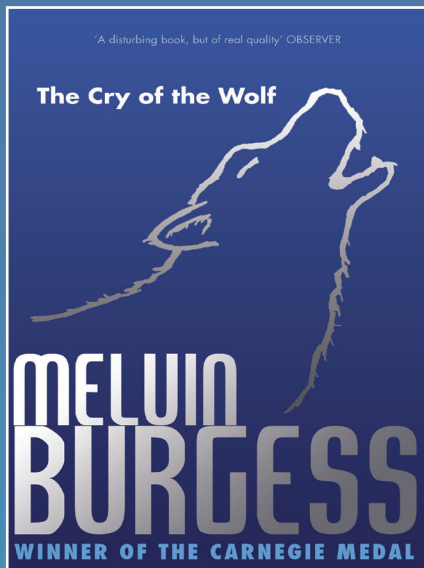
2004	Honorary D.Litt University of Bolton for contribution to the arts
2012-2015	Honorary Research Fellow at the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature, Roehampton University, Surrey, U.K.

### Adaptations of Melvin's Work for Screen and Theatre

1998	<i>Junk</i>	adapted for the stage by John Retallack, commissioned and produced by Oxford Stage Company, premiered at The Castle, Wellingborough, and went on to tour throughout the UK in 1998 and 1999.
1999	<i>Junk</i>	BBC TV Film
2004	<i>Bloodtide</i>	adapted for the stage by Marcus Romer for Pilot Theatre, York.
2004-2005	<i>Doing It</i>	adapted as ABC TV series (USA), <i>Life as We Know It</i>

## Books for consideration by the Jury





### Awards

Highly Commended for the Carnegie Medal  
1990

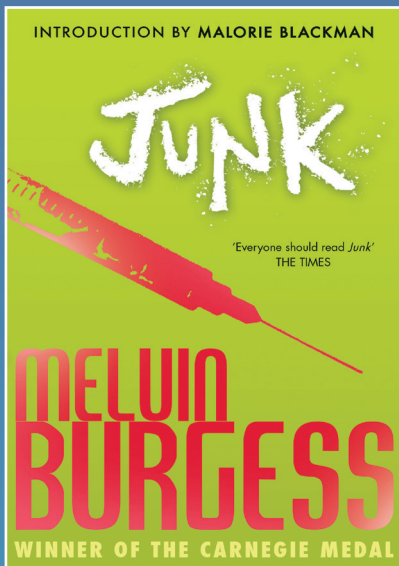
## The Cry of the Wolf

What if there were still wolves in England and only a few people knew it? What if one of those people was an obsessive, half-mad, extremely able hunter who was determined to have the honor of killing the last wolf in England? We are with the last wolf pups as they are born short minutes before the slaughter begins. The female survives, wounded by The Hunter, only long enough to teach her sole surviving pup a few skills before she too is killed by the man. The pup, Greycub, is reared by Ben and his family and, being a social animal, waits in vain for the sound or scent of a remaining wolf. This is not to be for he is the last wolf in England. Regretfully leaving his human friends, he roams for years searching for sign of his species. In a bizarre but very fitting climax to the story, Greycub becomes the hunter and The Hunter knows, too late, the feeling of the prey.

This is a raw and brutal book and, to be sure, a cautionary tale about extinction. However, the focus is on obsession verging on madness. Ben, the boy who rears Greycub, becomes an innocent betrayer of the wolves for it is he who first alerts The Hunter to the presence of the wolf pack. The book reads like non-fiction with an almost detached manner but the brutality is so compelling that detachment on the part of the reader is nearly impossible.

In fact, the feelings of the reader would make for a fascinating discussion. At which point did they become engaged? Did they ever feel any sympathy for The Hunter? How did the author do that? Also, there is some anthropomorphism present. Could Burgess have done the book without it?

Carol Hurst review on Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site, <http://www.carolhurst.com/titles/cryofwolf.html>



### Awards

Carnegie Medal 1996

Guardian Fiction Award 1997

Shortlisted for the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year 1997

Shortlisted for the Carnegie of Carnegies 2007

## Junk

In a Carnegie Medal winning novel (under the UK title, *Junk*) that cuts to the bone, Burgess puts a group of teenage runaways through four nightmarish years of heroin addiction. At 14, sweet-natured Tar leaves his small seaside town for Bristol to get away from his alcoholic, abusive parents. Gemma follows him to escape an infuriatingly repressive (to her, at least) home situation.

Revelling in their newfound freedom, the two find shelter with a welcoming set of “anarchists” (punks) squatting in an abandoned building, then move on to live with Lily and Rob, a glamorous couple a year or so older who willingly share not just their squat, but their heroin too. Using multiple narrators, and only rarely resorting to violence or graphic details, Burgess (*The Earth Giant*, 1997, etc.) chronicles drug addiction’s slow, irresistible initial stages, capturing with devastating precision each teenager’s combination of innocence, self-deceit, and bravado; the subsequent loss of personality and self-respect; the increasingly unsuccessful efforts to maintain a semblance of control. Although the language is strong, Burgess never judges his characters’ behavior, nor pontificates; more profoundly persuasive than a lecture is the turn to prostitution to finance their habits, Tar’s casual comment, “If you don’t mind not reaching twenty there’s no argument against heroin, is

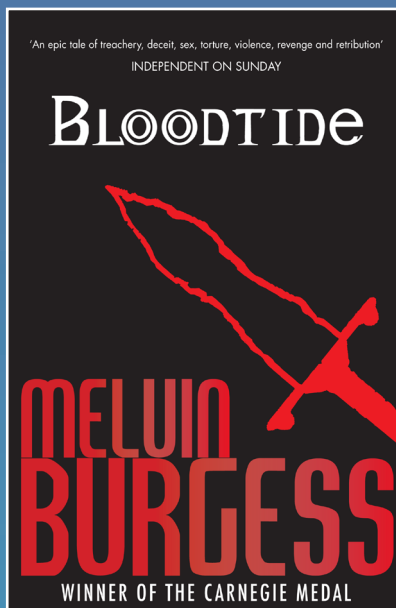
there?” or a scene during which Lily nurses her baby while also probing her own chest for a vein to insert a needle. Based on actual people and incidents, this harrowing tale is as compellingly real as it is tragic.

**Review of *Smack* (US title)  
in *Kirkus Reviews* May 1 1998**

There have been other novels about young people and addiction, but this was the first to show why hard drugs can seem so attractive. Tar and Gemma begin by finding heroin a totally pleasant experience, enabling them to forget their worries and just float away. They think they can give it up at any time, but when they finally try, it is not so easy. To make matters worse, everyone in the squat is quarrelling – the drug makes them mean as well as needy. They are all deteriorating physically, too, feeling permanently sick and forever searching for new veins to inject. Told from the point of view of several different characters, this story is hard-hitting but completely gripping. The author writes in his preface that “This book isn’t fact... it’s all true, every word.” It deserves to be read by as many young people as possible.

**From Nicholas Tucker and Julia Eccleshare,  
*The Rough Guide to Books for Teenagers* (2003),  
Rough Guides, 2003, pp.100-101.**





Lancashire County Library Children's Book of the Year Award 2001

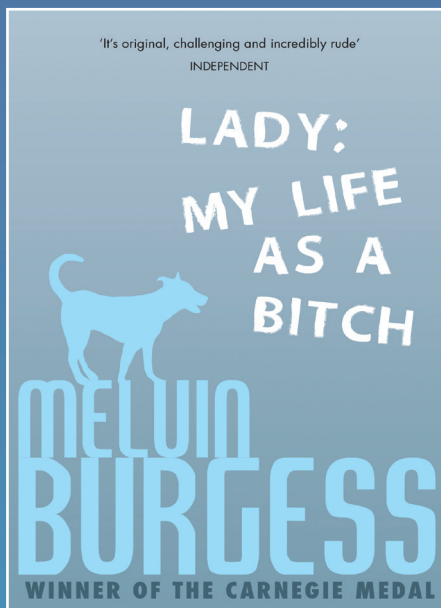
## Bloodtide

Straddling a dystopian future and a myth-ridden past, *Bloodtide* is a savage story of betrayal, passion, hatred and the corrupting nature of power. Melvin Burgess is shocking, and deliberately so, in his descriptions of stomach-turning cruelty, but his carefully constructed retelling of the Nordic Volsunga saga is rich enough in other ways to carry it. Rival warlords Val Volson and King Conor control the ruined remains of London. Both rule with an unhealthy mixture of primitive vengeance and sophisticated torture. King Val misjudges Conor's commitment to peace and sacrifices his only daughter Signy to him in marriage. Conor's tenderness to his new bride, who is only 14, soon gives way to violence as Conor is a psychopath capable of boundless destruction. Having hamstrung Signy – literally, in a scene that compares with the putting out of Gloucester's eye in *King Lear* and can only barely be borne he delivers her three brothers to be eaten by genetically modified, half-pig monsters. Revenge is inevitably extracted and the power of the gods holds sway over the corrupt world of humans. Moments of tenderness offset the brutality and Burgess's use of the multi-voiced storytelling that worked so well in *Junk* is equally effective here in giving different pictures of the whole.

*Review of Bloodtide by Julia Eccleshare in The Guardian 30 November 1999*

Given such a gory framework, Burgess's development of sympathetic characters is as surprising as it is convincing. Rapidly shifting perspectives and deft dialogue expose minds as frighteningly real as growly gangsta rap and as unexpectedly compassionate as unconditional animal love, pivoting on Old Norse gods – or are they constructs of genetic breeding tanks? – who watch but cannot change the weaving of human fate. Alfather Odin and the trickster god Loki give both twins gifts, but in this tortured world, one gladly embraces fatal madness, while the other learns from the humblest of creatures how to become truly human. Burgess leaves in sorrowful question who suffers the more.

*From a review of Bloodtide in Publishers Weekly 24 September 2001*



## Lady: My Life As a Bitch

A constant theme in Burgess's oeuvre is the reckless lengths that people will go to in the avoidance of pain. In *Junk*, his Carnegie Medal winning novel about drug taking, the world is blotted out by needles. In *Bloodtide*, it is safer to kill before you are yourself consumed. In *Lady*, we discover that Sandra's father left when she was nine and now has a new family. She tells us: 'if my rage had the ability to turn people into animals, half of Manchester would be on four legs by now.' For her then, sexuality is not a path to intimacy but a protection against real contact.

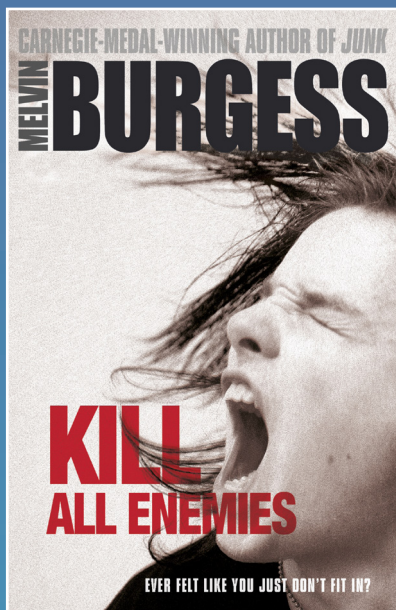
Some commentators have found the depiction of sex in this novel shocking. In a society where so much is sexualised, this can seem a kneejerk reaction to a novel which appears to be a tongue in cheek metaphor for existential choice – and Lady does not conclude that the sole pursuit of biological drives leads to human growth and happiness. This is an edgy, original and challenging novel of ideas that is also unexpectedly poignant – not least when Sandra/Lady finally chooses to continue 'life as a bitch'. When pain and confusion cannot find a bearable and constructive path, it is an unsurprising outcome.

**From a review by Rosemary Stones, Editorial, Books for Keeps November 2001**

In *Junk*, Burgess used multiple narrators to create layers of perspective. Lady is ostensibly told in one voice, but Sandra's new existence provides her with a range of new insights into her previous life; she also shifts disconcertingly between a human and a doggy consciousness, one minute regretting her past, the next defending it, another, simply not caring, because some new distraction has offered itself. In this way, Burgess builds up a sympathetic but measured picture of Sandra, and a rounded argument (without seeming to make an argument at all), leaving his readers to make the judgments.

Undoubtedly, to some extent, Burgess is setting out to shock the grown-ups. But in the end, this seems unimportant. *Lady* may not be as riveting as some of Burgess's other books but it has his unpredictability, darkness and ability to confront the dispiriting. The sex has to be there for authenticity, but, actually, this is a novel about what matters and what doesn't.

**From a review by Geraldine Bedell in The Observer 12 August 2001**



## Kill All Enemies

We are in familiar Burgess territory here, in a violent and painful teenage world depicted by an uncompromising writer who takes no prisoners. Burgess is interested in outsiders. All three of his protagonists are literally excluded: excluded from school. Their paths cross (not for the first time) in a Pupil Referral Unit, which in *Kill All Enemies* is the one adult institution that works – unlike school, the family, or the police. Each of the characters tells his or her own story as the narrative swaps from one voice to another. Billie, a feisty girl addicted to fighting, has fought once too often. Rob is accused by his school of bullying when he is in fact bullied. Chris, a highly intelligent grammar-school boy, has undiagnosed dyslexia but also a mutinous, disaffected entrepreneurial personality and a ruthless way with adult humbug. This is a compelling story of their individual lives, and how they intersect, collide, converge, and finally come satisfyingly together. Though the world that Burgess makes for them is harsh and bleak, it is far from hopeless, and their story even has a kind of black comedy which is highly effective. Above all, the three of them are masterfully characterised and totally believable. Burgess is an uneven writer. In *Kill All Enemies* he excels himself. Even *Junk* was not as good as this.

From a review by Peter Hollindale  
in *School Librarian* Winter 2011, p 239

For all the sound and fury surrounding Burgess's work, at its heart is a very simple moral message – to understand all is to forgive, if not all, then a great deal. Billie's poignant backstory reveals her to be a child robbed of her childhood, forced to look after a feckless parent and care for younger siblings, and most crucially, starved of any love. She does have one caring adult on her side, harassed social worker Hannah, who gives Burgess the opportunity to show that it's not all as simple as it might seem, even from a liberal perspective. Billie's violence is clearly the expression of her inner turmoil and need for love, but it does real harm, and sometimes adult failings are the unfortunate result of good intentions. Difficult, highly nuanced moral questions are posed on almost every page in the book. *Kill All Enemies* is a novel that will have enormous appeal for teenagers and should probably be compulsory reading for policy makers too. In his efforts to give a voice to the voiceless, Burgess is the kind of gadfly we need at times like this. Indeed, if a children's author like Burgess didn't exist, we would most definitely have to invent him.

From a review by Tony Bradman  
in *The Guardian* September 3 2011

## Melvin Burgess List of Titles

### *Cry of the Wolf*

London: Andersen Press, 1990.

Overseas editions: Chinese Simplified, Danish, Dutch, English (US), French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Russian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish

### *An Angel for May*

London: Andersen Press, 1992.

Overseas editions: English (US) French, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lithuanian, Russian

### *Burning Issy*

London: Andersen Press, 1992.

Overseas editions: Czech, English (US), French, German, Italian, Lithuanian, Russian

### *The Baby and Fly Pie*

1993.

Overseas editions: Danish, English (US), French, German, Italian, Japanese

### *The Earth Giant*

London: Andersen Press, 1995.

Overseas editions: English (US), French, Italian, Russian

### *Loving April*

London: Andersen Press, 1995.

Overseas editions: Danish, French, Italian, Japanese, Lithuanian, Russian, Slovenian, Spanish

### *Tiger Tiger*

London: Andersen Press, 1996.

Overseas editions: French, German, Italian, Russian

### *Junk*

London: Andersen Press, 1996.

Overseas editions: Arabic (Egypt), Bulgarian, Chinese Complex, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English (US), Estonian, Finnish, French, Galician, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese (Brazil & Portugal), Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Thai, Turkish

### *Kite*

London: Andersen Press, 1997.

Overseas editions: English (US), French, Italian, Russian, Slovenian

### *Bloodtide*

London: Andersen Press, 1999.

Overseas editions: Danish, Dutch, English (US), French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese (Brazil & Portugal), Russian

### *The Birdman, (illus. Ruth Brown)*

London: Andersen Press, 2000.

### *The Ghost Behind The Wall*

London: Andersen Press, 2000.

Overseas editions: Croatian, Danish, Dutch, English (US), French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Korean, Lithuanian, Spanish

### *Billy Elliot*

London: Chicken House, 2001.

Overseas Editions: Australia and New Zealand (Scholastic Australia), Brazil (Martin Fontes), Canada (Scholastic Canada), Catalan (Editorial Cruilla), Denmark (Forlag Mallings Beck), Estonia (Tänapäev), France (Gallimard), Germany (Ravensburger), Greece (Patakis), Hungary (Cartaphilus), Italy (RCS Libri Spa), Japan (Allkusha), Korea (Prometheus Publishing), Latin America (Editorial Norma), Netherlands (Memphis Belle), Portugal (Salamandra), Spain (Editiones SM)), Turkey (Atemis), USA (Scholastic Inc.)



***The Copper Treasure***

London: A & C Black, 1999.

***Old Bag***

London: Barrington Stoke, 1999.

***Lady, My Life as a Bitch***

London: Andersen Press, 2001.

Overseas editions: Czech, Danish, Dutch, English (US), Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese (Brazil & Portugal), Russian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish

***Robbers on the Road***

London: A & C Black, 2002.

***Doing It***

London: Andersen Press, 2003.

Overseas editions: Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English (US), French, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese (Brazil & Portugal), Russian, Slovenian, Spanish

***The Hit***

London: Chicken House, 2003.

Overseas editions: Australia and New Zealand (Scholastic Australia), Brazil (L&PM Editores), Canada (Scholastic Canada), Film (Parallel), France (Gallimard), Germany (Chicken House Deutschland), Latvia (Zvaigzne ABC), Lithuania (Alma Littera), Netherlands (Chicken House Nederland), Romania (Rao), Spain & Catalan (La Galera), USA (Scholastic USA)

***Bloodsong***

London: Andersen Press, 2005.

Overseas editions: Danish, English (US), Lithuanian, Portuguese (Brazil & Portugal), Slovenian

***Sara's Face***

London: Andersen Press, 2006

Overseas editions: English (US), French, German, Greek, Lithuanian, Polish, Spanish, Turkish

***Bloodsong***

London: Penguin, 2007.

***Nicholas Dane***

London: Andersen Press, 2009.

Overseas editions: English (US), French, German, Lithuanian, Polish, Slovenian

***Nicholas Dane***

London: Penguin, 2010

***Kill All Enemies***

London: Penguin, 2011.

Overseas editions: French, German, Italian and Portuguese.

***Krispy Whispers***

Vol. 1, Melvin Burgess e-book 2013

***Krispy Whispers***

Vol. 2, Melvin Burgess e-book n.d.

***Hunger***

London: Hammer, 2014

***Persist***

Edinburgh: Barrington Stoke, 2015.

Overseas edition: Swedish (to be published in 2017)





## Acknowledgements and Thanks

This dossier was compiled by Clive Barnes on behalf of IBBY UK. We would like to thank the following for their help: Melvin Burgess and his publishers, particularly Andersen and Penguin; Alison Waller for her critical appreciation of Melvin's work and permission to reprint her interview with Melvin; Suzanne Curley for her compilation of Melvin's bibliography and foreign editions; Rebecca Butler and Ferelith Hordon for their invaluable research; and John Dunne for liaison with publishers.

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