



# Authorgraph No.118: Melvin Burgess

Article Author:

[George Hunt](#) [1]

[118](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

**Melvin Burgess** interviewed by **George Hunt**.

## Melvin Burgess interviewed by George Hunt

<!--break-->

We're sitting in the kitchen of the cosy south Manchester house that Melvin Burgess shares with his partner and their children, and he is talking about what for him was the most powerful episode in his early reading:

?I was so completely mesmerised by the Piper at the Gates of Dawn chapter in **The Wind in the Willows** that I read it over and over again when I was a kid. I became so fascinated by it that my parents got me a painting of Pan, and I read voraciously everything I could find about him. He shows up in **The Little Grey Men** by BB but he's simply not godlike enough in that story. Nothing comes anywhere near the chapter in Kenneth Grahame.?

Melvin Burgess is best known for **Junk**, a novel about teenage heroine addiction that won the 1997 Carnegie Prize. **The Baby and Fly Pie**, a nightmarish vision of life in an ultra-Thatcherite Britain where street children are hounded to death by Latin American style extermination squads, was shortlisted for the award in 1993. Other powerful novels have focused on the persecution of witches in 17th-century Lancashire ( **Burning Issy**), the sexual harassment of a deaf girl in a hypocritical village community (**Loving April**), and the plight of a mentally disturbed bag lady who haunts a troubled schoolboy (**An Angel for May**, another Carnegie nomination).

Given the uncompromisingly controversial nature of such themes, it might come as a surprise that Burgess's most formative reading experience is an episode from one of the best loved classics of children's literature: the poignantly wistful account of Ratty and Mole's moonlit boat ride along the river bank in search of a lost baby otter, a quest which culminates in a theophanous encounter with the great god Pan on an Eden-like islet just before dawn.

However, much of Burgess's fiction is imbued with the nature mysticism which underlies **The Wind in the Willows**, and the quest theme of that most mysterious of its chapters is one which features in many of his novels. The difference is one of scope and context: Burgess's appreciation of nature refuses to evade the redness of tooth and claw, and the Wild Woods he explores are often urban ones.

Burgess grew up in the home counties in the late '50s and early '60s. Apart from Kenneth Grahame, his favourite reading consisted of the animal books of Gerald Durrell, later augmented by a love of Mervyn Peake's 'Gormenghast' saga. He was fascinated by nature, and enjoyed birds'-nesting until it dawned on him that 'if you leave the tap turned on, everything's going to dry up'. His first piece of fiction to be recognised, a school story about a cruelly treated circus horse, reflected his concern for animals.

In spite of an obvious talent for storytelling, he left school with few qualifications, and after a brief and unsuccessful brush with journalism, he tried to support his writing through various casual jobs before going to squat with friends in a disused Bristol youth club. This was a life of druggy, anarchistic, skip-raiding Bohemianism, lived amongst characters

who are later incorporated into the multiple narrators of **Junk**. Burgess was unemployed for much of this time, though he did manage to qualify as a bricklayer after taking a Training Opportunities course. He was also honing his writing, exploring experimental poetry and the possibilities of radio drama, but he was in his early thirties before he made any serious effort to sell his work.

His first novel, **The Cry of the Wolf**, was published in 1990. Based on the idea that a community of British wolves have secretly survived in Surrey, it tells the harrowing tale of an psychopathic hunter's relentless campaign to extirpate the entire pack. 'I wanted to reverse that stereotype of the wolf as a force for evil, and to turn around the dragon slaying myth,' Burgess says. 'In the book it's the human being who is the nameless, murdering brute.' **The Cry of the Wolf** is a celebration of lupine majesty and beauty, informed by a keen sense of landscape as the survivor wolf treks from southern England to the Scottish Highlands. The climax, presenting a chilling showdown between the two protagonists, makes no concessions to a happy ending. 'I was writing a novel about extinction, so you can hardly have a neat optimistic conclusion, can you? I also have a bit of resentment against the idea that stories should end with the redemption of villains. Life's not often like that, and sometimes redemption can ruin a character. Look what happened to Mr Toad - he was much more interesting as his old self.' **The Cry of the Wolf** was shortlisted for the Carnegie, and Burgess's career as a successful children's writer had begun.

Burgess had moved to Lancashire by now, and several of his subsequent novels have featured the landscape and people of the county. He was living in a village near Pendle Hill when he wrote **Burning Issy**, a novel based again on persecution and pursuit. The story incorporates the actual sites and some of the miserably oppressed victims of the 17th-century witchcraft trials, but Burgess also includes tantalising glimpses of the chthonic rhapsodies that the old religion might have been grounded in. A witch's declaration that the world will die when the horned man is forgotten seems to echo his own ecological concerns.

**An Angel for May** was inspired by the ruins of a burned Lancashire hill farm, and the troubling memory of a destitute bag-lady standing barefoot and wretched in the London rain. 'I asked myself what this woman's story could be, how could she have ended up like that?' In the novel, the bag lady is presented as the survivor of a series of childhood catastrophes who seeks to amend the past by summoning another lost child back through time to the farm where she was briefly happy. This is a very strange and moving story, its spiritually powerful but terribly vulnerable central character typical of the charismatic victims who haunt his books. **Loving April** features another such heroine, a deaf girl living a semi secluded life in a narrow rural community, who takes her pleasure from befriending wild animals as she rows amongst the reed beds and willowy islands of the local estuary. Meanwhile, as a middle class incomer begins to fall in love with her, the village churls plot her rape. 'April kind of follows May; I wanted to look again at how somebody excluded by society might end up being screwed up by everybody. I also wanted to write a love story that would appeal to boys and girls.' Gazing wryly at the incongruous Mills and Boon cover of this sometimes brutally frank book, he mischievously suggests, 'perhaps it would've gone down better with the lads if I'd called it *Screwing April*.' He is particularly proud of a scene in this story where April outrages the congregation at the local church by turning up at a service dressed in her mum's slinkiest clothes, and leading a wild swan in a dog-collar up the aisle, a magnificent pagan image rich with subversive suggestions.

**The Baby and Fly Pie**, written between the April and May books, shifts to a dystopian urban environment in which street children have become commodities, scavenging on garbage heaps as bonded labourers for exploitative 'mothers', and being hunted down as vermin if they try to break out. 'All my novels are about underdogs and outsiders and people craving for a decent life, and this was my response to the homelessness and begging issue which was getting worse just about then.' The central character in this book is Jane, a sensitive street kid who has just been sold as a prostitute when her brother discovers a millionaire's kidnapped baby on a rubbish tip. In attempting to deal with the situation ethically, the futility of civilised behaviour in the urban wildwood is revealed to her. Her lament, towards the end of the book, 'We just wanted a life, didn't we, Davy?' could serve as an epitaph for many of Burgess's characters. In spite of the bleakness of this book, he insists that Jane represents an optimistic acknowledgement of the resilience of the human spirit. 'No matter how bad things get, no matter how horribly everybody else is behaving in a situation, somehow you'll always find someone like Jane, someone who just refuses to sacrifice their own integrity.'

Characters like this appear amongst the eleven voices who narrate **Junk**, a picaresque but subtly organised tale of drug taking, shoplifting, partying, sex, pregnancy and self delusion, set in Bristol in the early punk era. The award of the Carnegie Medal to a book in which a breastfeeding teenager injects herself with heroin perturbed some people, including the gentlefolk of the Campaign for Real Education, but Burgess was robust in his response to them. 'We all know who these people are,' he said in his acceptance speech. 'The fundamentalists. The ones who rise up from the front row demanding that things are done THEIR way... These people are, quite simply, bullies. They are educational vandals. They talk in terms of standards but their real aim is ignorance. If you came across a child behaving like this in a classroom, you'd tell them to shut up and respect other people's opinions.'

Burgess stands by this opinion now. 'It really is an odd, eccentric, extremist view to think that a 13 or 14 year old reading **Junk** would be automatically corrupted; if you've got a kid that age you know damn well how difficult it is to keep them from worse material. Yet these fundamentalists get so much pandering to, given the weird adversarial media set up we've got. It's a bizarre and hypocritical world. **Junk** couldn't be made into a film because it would have to be an 18 so the people it was written for wouldn't be able to see it, so they made it into a TV programme instead.' Burgess defended **Junk** as educative at the time, but he's more cautious now about didacticism in fiction. 'A book can be informative, but it's up to the reader to take from it what they want, and kids of the age I write for can be trusted to do that and put it in context. I think if you try to teach through fiction you're in for a caning.'

Burgess's latest novel is **Bloodtide**, a retelling of the violent and passionate Nordic Volsunga saga transposed to an urban gangland. It has taken four years to write, and its treatment of themes including murder, vengeance, incest and genetic manipulation promises to reinforce his position at the cutting edge of fiction for teenagers. He enjoys the scope for experimentation and for mischief that this position affords him, and he's not shy about courting controversy. He cheerfully admits to enjoying the challenge of writing about violence: one of the killings in **Tiger, Tiger** (written at the same time as **Junk**, and depicting the trail of death left by a magical, avenging tigress who escapes the massacre of her pack by Triad gangs in search of raw materials for traditional medicines) is modelled on the shower episode from **Psycho**. He also likes to tease the reader: a scene in **Junk** where an alcoholic teacher falls asleep at a staff meeting and wets himself was put in 'partly to amuse the high school kids' it's quite a gas for them to imagine a teacher doing that.'

This combination of playfulness and serious concern for human predicaments is evident in his current ambition to write for and about 15 to 25 year olds, focusing on their experiences of sex, particularly from a male point of view. 'It'll have to be laddish and rude, of course, but also subtle enough to appeal to female readers, who are so much more advanced than boys in things like emotions and relationships. It'll be interesting to see what I can get away with and what I can't.'

It will indeed.

## The Books

**An Angel for May**, Heinemann Education 'New Windmill', 0 435 12444 7, £5.75 hbk, Puffin, 0 14 036981 3, £3.99 pbk

**The Baby and Fly Pie**, Andersen, 0 86264 461 5, £9.99 hbk, Puffin, 0 14 036982 1, £4.99 pbk

**Bloodtide**, Andersen, 0 86264 833 5, £14.99 hbk (October 1999)

**Burning Issy**, Andersen, 0 86264 381 3 hbk (o/s), Hodder Signature, 0 340 59024 6, £4.99 pbk

**The Copper Treasure**, A & C Black 'Flashbacks', 0 7136 4938 0, £7.99 hbk, 0 7136 4939 9, £4.99 pbk

**The Cry of the Wolf**, Andersen, 0 86264 308 2 hbk (o/s), Puffin, 0 14 037318 7, £4.99 pbk

**The Earth Giant**, Andersen, 0 86264 574 3, £9.99 hbk, Puffin, 0 14 037444 2, £4.99 pbk

**Junk**, Andersen, 0 86264 632 4, £12.99 hbk, Methuen Drama, 0 413 73840 X, £6.99 hbk, Puffin, 0 14 038019 1, £4.99

pbk

**Kite**, Andersen, 0 86264 737 1, £9.99 hbk, Puffin, 0 14 130041 8, £4.99 pbk

**Loving April**, Andersen, 0 86264 527 1, £9.99 hbk, Puffin, 0 14 036983 X, £4.99 pbk

**Tiger, Tiger**, Puffin, 0 14 038339 5, £4.99 pbk

**George Hunt** is a lecturer in Language in Education at the University of Reading.



[Melvin Burgess Bench\\_0.JPG](#) [3]



[Melvin Burgess Bench\\_0.JPG](#) [4]

Page Number:

12

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20):** <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/118/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no118-melvin-burgess>

**Links:**

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/george-hunt>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/118>

[3] [http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Melvin Burgess Bench\\_0\\_0.JPG](http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Melvin%20Burgess%20Bench_0_0.JPG)

[4] [http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Melvin Burgess Bench\\_0\\_1.JPG](http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Melvin%20Burgess%20Bench_0_1.JPG)