



MELVIN BURGESS INTERVIEW: THE HIT

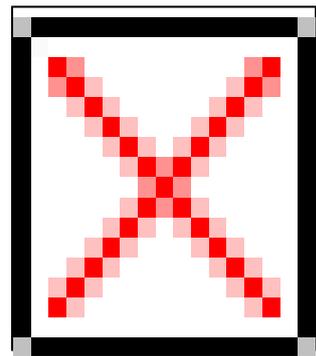
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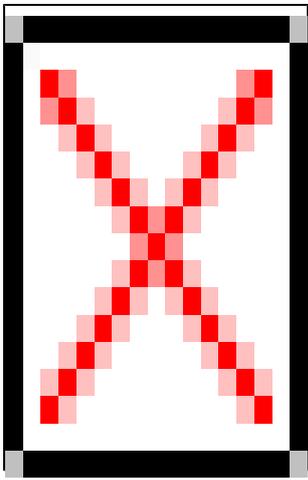
Take it. Live it. Do it. Die. Melvin Burgess talks about his new novel **The Hit**, a book that goes all out to deal with sex, drugs and death.



With a career now spanning 22 years, Melvin Burgess has surely earned the title 'the godfather of teen fiction' bestowed upon him by *The Independent*. As a writer, he seems to have not only a unique understanding of teenage sensitivities but the courage to describe them with complete honesty. His new novel **The Hit** is an irresistible celebration of teenage kicks. It describes a group of teenagers indulging their wildest desires, going all out to do the things they've always dreamed of, because, in a joyless, repressive, recession-hit society of the future, they've taken Death, a new drug that will kill you in exactly seven days, but make sure that those seven days are the best you could ever experience.

It's a brilliant idea, and you wonder if anyone but Burgess could have done it justice. His hero, Adam, draws up a bucket list that includes 'loads of sex with loads of girls' as well as 'do something so that humanity will remember me for ever'. There's a gleeful mischievousness to it all, but alongside the playfulness is still Burgess's serious concern for the human predicament.

The original idea was not Burgess's at all however, and **The Hit** is a uniquely collaborative project. The initial idea came from two A-Level philosophy teachers who approached Chicken House MD Barry Cunningham with a novel they had written that tackled big ideas. Cunningham, who liked the idea, but didn't think the novel worked, asked if he could take it to Burgess. 'When Barry came to me with the idea,' says Burgess, 'I was interested really. I've done a little bit of work for TV and am used to the collaborative approach, and I was keen to give it a try. I'm always interested in finding new ways of writing, new approaches.' He's quick to credit Barry, 'Barry picked out the idea, he spotted it', and the two obviously worked very closely on the book.



‘I read the original novel’ says Burgess, ‘and tried to keep as much of it as I could. Initially Barry and I approached it as if it was a treatment for a film or for TV, and I thought that version kind of worked. It was only when I came to write it that we realised neither of us are as experienced as we’d thought!’

It’s clear that the novel went through lots of different stages, but that Burgess and Cunningham had enormous fun working on it. ‘In the first draft, the comedy element was really to the fore, with lots more about Adam’s friend Jack. There was stuff about them falling around, being generally incompetent’, Melvin laughs at the memory, ‘Barry thought it was hilarious, but it didn’t fit in with the thriller theme, so it had to go.’

Once Adam has taken his dose of Death, the book does become a thriller, following different groups of people, all with different aims. Adam and his level-headed girlfriend Lizzie are desperate to find an antidote, though he is still set on working through his bucket list; Zealots, the underground opposition to the ruling regime, unleash their plan to bring down the government, using black market Death to provoke riots and mass disorder; while a ruthless criminal gang are after the people who’ve stolen their drugs. It’s fast-moving, full of violence and very funny indeed. Much of the most graphic – and gratuitous – violence is carried out by gangster Christian Ballantine and his minder Vince, an unusual, but horribly appealing comedy double-act. ‘It’s a thriller, a kind of gangster movie, and it’s about death’, explains Melvin, ‘but I always try and get some humour in there too. I wanted the gangsters to be a bit of a comedy turn and the idea of a gangster Wooster and his Jeeves-type sidekick really ticked me. The violence can’t be too real, or it would fall flat on its face, but I wanted the gangsters to have a proper feel to them too.’ The characters of Christian and Vince went through a number of different drafts too he adds, with Christian starting off much younger.

The Hit remains true to the vision of those two philosophy teachers, and underneath the comedy, serious points are being made. The book opens with a riot for example. ‘When the riots happened here’, says Melvin, ‘people found them hard to understand because they didn’t seem to be politically motivated. They made me think of Martin Luther King’s quote, ‘Riots are the voice of the unheard’. Adam takes Death because he has nothing left to lose. I put him in a situation where he’s got his back against the wall, everything has been taken away.’ He’s particularly pleased with the way the book covers so much ground, without appearing to do so. ‘I’ve always been a big fan of sci-fi, Philip K Dicks in particular. Somehow, in telling a story, he touches on bigger issues. It’s never apparent that he’s doing that, but somehow he pushes things in. I wanted to think about the sort of situation you’d have to be in to take a drug like Death, what would the social circumstances have to be like.’

Despite the high levels of violence, not to mention the sex and the drugs, Melvin is not expecting any backlash this time, or any of the moral outrage provoked by some of his earlier books. ‘I’m hoping people will respond very positively! I’ve never done anything controversial just for the sake of it, and I think people are more savvy these days about teenage fiction. I’m always surprised if these things become such debateable issues. I take the line that you shouldn’t ring-fence kids, but empower them. They can’t magically grow up without you telling them anything.’

The Hit is published by Chicken House, 978-1908435330, £6.99 pbk.

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