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Introduction

Alison Waller

Burgess the ‘controversialist’

Variations on the word ‘controversial’ are most often used by critics and commentators to describe Melvin Burgess’s fiction. ‘[U]ncompromising’, claims The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature;1 ‘edgy, honest, provocative’ is how The Continuum Encyclopedia of Young Adult Literature puts it.2 Burgess himself is widely known as the ‘godfather’ of young adult fiction and ‘a reluctant, if consistent, controversialist’.3 This high-profile reputation stems from the publication of what was in fact his eighth novel for young people, Junk (1996), a multiple first-person narrative which details the adventures of two teenagers encountering street life and drugs culture in 1980s Bristol. The popular British newspaper The Daily Mail reported on Junk’s success in winning the 1996 Carnegie Medal in sensationalist style: ‘Heroin addiction, brutality and prostitution […]. Teachers outraged by librarians’ choice.’4 However, Burgess himself claims that much of the controversy surrounding the novel was a ‘paper tiger’.5 Indeed, the scandalized tone of The Daily Mail was relatively isolated, and many more educationalists, librarians and reviewers have preferred to take a liberal stance towards Junk and Burgess’s other contentious titles. The Times’ response to his Carnegie success (‘It’s not books that corrupt’6) was perhaps more representative of the attitudes of such adult gatekeepers towards what young people might be exposed to and digest.

A significant exception is the infamous ‘hatchet-job’ carried out on Doing It (2003) by author Anne Fine, who was British Children’s Laureate at the time.7 She created a media, publishing and critical storm by reviewing the novel for British broadsheet newspaper, The Guardian, and describing it as ‘[f]ilth, whichever way you look at it’.8 She also created her own controversy by suggesting that Burgess’s portrayal of adolescent boys and their crude discussion of girls and sex was as damaging as representing the views of ‘deluded’ racists or anti-Semites might be. A number of other reviewers raced to the novel’s defence, notably the children’s literature scholar and child psychologist, Nicholas Tucker, who gently rebutted Fine’s attack in The Independent.9
Introduction

The ‘debate’ rumbles on in academic discussion of Burgess’s young adult fiction, with Clare Walsh and, most recently, Kimberley Reynolds, attempting to lift *Doing It* clear of Fine’s assault by focusing on its sympathetic characterization of the male protagonists, its comic plotting and wordplay, and its shift from ‘guilt and unease to *jouissance*’ in writing about sex for teenagers. 10 Elsewhere in this Casebook, Chris Richards and Michele Gill continue the critical dialogue.

Not surprisingly then, scholarly work on Burgess has tended to cluster around his YA (young adult) novels rather than his fiction for younger readers, often focusing on the most controversial ingredients of drugs (*Junk*), sex (*Doing It; Lady: My Life as a Bitch, 2001*) and violence (*Bloodtide, 1999; Bloodsong, 2005; Nicholas Dane, 2009*). This tendency has helped foreground his status as part of a tradition of pioneering or challenging writers for teenagers. For example, useful comparisons have been made with Robert Cormier and Judy Blume from the United States, and Aidan Chambers and Robert Swindells from the UK, with Burgess acknowledging his debt to Cormier and Chambers in particular.11 However, the focus on social issues and taboos has also resulted in a slight shortage of analysis drawing attention to the literary qualities of his work, as well as his innovative style. As a highly vocal commentator on his own work, Burgess both feeds and contests this trend. His default persona in the public arenas of the blogosphere, online interviews, literary festivals and book signings matches a general perception of his fiction: ‘edgy, honest, provocative’. Note, for example, his stance in an article called ‘Sympathy for the Devil’, written for the academic journal *Children’s Literature in Education*:

> There’s so much written about doing the right thing for young people, and really very little about taking risks [...] Teenagers are in a better position than most people to say yes to some of the more risky things life has to offer. That might be a bit scary, but it is life they’re saying yes to, and when some blobhead turns up and tries to force them to say no instead—well, it makes me want to write a book for them.12

The impression given is of an author driven by social forces to write for and on behalf of a disadvantaged readership about specific social issues, but Burgess admits in the same article, ‘although I am best known for my two attempts at social realism, *Junk* and *Doing It*, they are not typical of my work’.13 Indeed, since his literary debut in 1990, Burgess has produced more than twenty novel-length works for young readers and his oeuvre includes fantastic tales of time-travel, metamorphosis
and spectral projection, as well as animal stories, historical tales, horror, stories for reluctant readers, myth, fable, picturebook, short stories, Twittertales, radio and stage plays, cross-media game, fictionalization and metafiction.

This volume of new essays on Burgess firstly acknowledges the central position held by those controversial novels for teenagers within his own writing, and the significance they have for the development of young adult literature more generally: it presents critical debates about what defines YA, what is suitable fare for an adolescent readership, and what ideological messages are being offered to teenagers through novels such as *Junk*, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*, *Doing It*, and *Kill All Enemies* (2011). It also encourages examination of Burgess’s less obviously controversial work in order to familiarize the reader with what is a full and diverse career of writing for a youthful audience in a variety of modes and genres. To this end, it has been important to give space to his picturebook and some of his novels for younger readers alongside his YA fiction. In addition, the essays included in this collection introduce readers to aspects of style and theme in Burgess’s work, as well as offering critical and theoretical approaches—such as masculinity studies, postfeminism, ethical criticism and ecocriticism—that can help illuminate some of these texts by decoding their complex meanings and systems of representation. The Casebook thus offers an initial reassessment of Burgess’s literary output as valuable and interesting for more than just its controversial qualities. The rest of this introduction offers some commentary on key points of Burgess’s career and themes in his work, and pays particular attention to some texts that have not yet been subject to scholarly analysis, before outlining the shape of the collection and presenting the critical chapters.

**Animal adventures**

Burgess’s initial entry into the world of children’s literature was relatively low key: his first novel, *The Cry of the Wolf*, was published in 1990 by Klaus Flugge at Andersen Press who, according to Burgess, claimed he could not put the book down. It is a ‘neo-fable’ about the mythical last wolves of England, who are pursued to the death by a man identified only as ‘The Hunter’. Just one male cub escapes with the help of young Ben. The novel was shortlisted for the prestigious British Carnegie Medal in 1990 and was highly commended. It is somewhat ironic that it missed out on the award to Gillian Cross’s *Wolf*, since both are ambiguous texts sympathetic to the complexities
of wild animals and the violence of humanity, and both refigure the wolf as more than mere symbol of fear and threat.

When *The Cry of the Wolf* was published in the United States in 1993, a reviewer declared that ‘[a] kids’ novel about animals is a tough road to travel if you want to get me to like it’ and although Aisling Foster in the British newspaper *The Independent* called it a ‘rippling yarn’, American education and publishing industry magazines were more circumspect. Susan Oliver in *The School Library Journal* described it as ‘an ecological thriller’ which ‘may be too violent for some children’, while the writer for *Kirkus Reviews* suggested ‘[t]here’s more food for confusion than for thought in this savage hunt and its ambiguous outcome’. The difficulties cited by these reviewers might relate to issues of audience, especially since Burgess had been told by Andersen Press that he was unwittingly writing for teenagers in this first novel. *The Cry of the Wolf* clearly falls within a convention of fiction for young people that pits children and animals against a cruel adult world—think of E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952), or Michael Morpurgo’s *War Horse* (1982)—but it also has much in common with older animal writing that might appeal to young readers and adults, and which might be identified as ‘crossover’ fiction in more recent critical terminology.

Alongside *The Cry of the Wolf*, much of Burgess’s earlier fiction demonstrates a general concern with the contrasts and conflicts between human and natural worlds, an interest nurtured in his youth when he collected butterflies and enjoyed the autobiographical tales of naturalist Gerald Durrell. His other animal narratives include *Tiger, Tiger* (1996), *Kite* (1997), *The Birdman* (2000), *Lady*, and arguably *Bloodsong*, although these later works turn away from nature writing and serious debates about animal rights towards fairy-tale horror, allegory and posthuman dystopia. In the interview included in this Casebook, Burgess states that he has nothing now left to say about animals; but he names *The Cry of the Wolf* as one of the novels of which he is most proud. This pride is evident in correspondence he had with established author Robert Westall soon after the Carnegie Prize was announced, in which he wrote ‘I’ve had a lot of praise for that book but it means something more coming from you […]. Thanks especially for your appreciation of my style—that was the thing I’ve worked hardest for.’
Indeed, the key strength of this narrative is its control of character and fictional space, as well as its pacy plotting. Unlike some later novels where multiple voices and complex social worlds produce a satisfying muddle for the reader to navigate, *The Cry of the Wolf* pursues its theme—and young Ben’s growing understanding of the needs of the last wolf—with admirable single-mindedness.

As Peter Hollindale and Karen Williams both stress in their chapters in this collection, Burgess often questions the concept of human exceptionalism in what he sees as a biodiverse world, but a tension can also be identified between his strongly non-anthropocentric animal fiction and novels where people are not only central but also celebrated in all their flawed variety. Where his animal world is most often represented as ‘completely devoid of sentimentality but far from heartless’, Burgess’s humans are usually redeemed by the power of love and are sometimes rather romanticized. Taking a cue from literary criticism on eighteenth-century sentimental fiction, it is possible to argue that his work has its emphasis ‘not on the subtleties of a particular emotional state but on the communication of common feeling from sufferer or watcher to reader or audience’. The author himself explains, ‘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’.

**Human heart**

Two of Burgess’s children’s books, *An Angel for May* (1992) and *The Ghost behind the Wall* (2000), nicely illustrate this portrayal of redemption through human feeling (and are explored in more detail in Pat Pinsent’s chapter in this collection). Both short novels are focalized through boy protagonists who are initially unsympathetic. In *Angel*, Tam’s sullen attitude towards his mother can be explained by the fact that he is trying to cope with the difficult circumstances of his parents’ divorce. In the time-travel adventure that forms the core of this narrative, Tam meets another awkward child, May, and through wanting to help her overcome her own traumas he learns the value of all human beings, even the strange old woman, Rosey Rubbish, who turns out to be a grown-up May and who Tam is therefore willing to love. In *Ghost*, David also comes to understand and appreciate an older character. His reluctant friendship with his elderly neighbour, Mr Alveston, develops through a series of violent episodes in which the young boy is haunted by the old man’s childhood self. David has to recognize that even someone suffering from dementia as Mr Alveston does has
a history worth hearing about, and the two characters work together to exorcize the past through memory and storytelling.

While these two novels lead readers to recognize the importance of human relationships through plot development, a number of Burgess’s YA novels—*Junk*, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*, *Doing It* and *Kill All Enemies*—take a different literary tack in approaching the broad concept of love and redemption. In these works, Burgess uses multiple narrators to provide alternative perspectives, a strategy that can simultaneously distance readers from individual characters and help to show these characters in a new light that might highlight their more human qualities. For example, in discussing *Junk*, John Stephens has pointed out that multiple first-person narrators can have the effect of creating a ‘relativist perspective and moral indeterminism’, a point also made by David Rudd and Maria Lassen-Segar, and which Robyn McCallum and Stephens pick up later in this volume in exploring the ethical possibilities of Burgess’s Volson sagas, *Bloodtide* and *Bloodsong*. But giving voice to characters who seem initially unattractive or immoral ultimately also humanizes them, makes them seem vulnerable, and therefore provokes sympathy, as Michele Gill points out in her analysis of *Doing It* and *Kill All Enemies* in the first part of this collection.

This critical reputation for heart may at first seem incongruous, but in some cases there is a clear affinity between Burgess’s social realism and a certain measure of sentiment. In an early article on *Junk* for the academic journal *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Stephen Thomson explores the character of Tar, teenage runaway and sidekick to the more vibrant heroine, Gemma. Thomson notes that, unlike the majority of characters in YA novels, Tar seems most authentic when he is being described by other people, rather than when he is allowed his own voice:

So, for instance, we see him sitting crying in the rain next to an extinguished bonfire, being watched through the window by Rob and Lily. ‘Isn’t he lovely?’ she said. I put my arm around her. ‘Isn’t he lovely?’ she said again’ ([Rob] 121). Tar’s performance here is for no one; it is spontaneous, unmediated even by speech, taken unawares. In this lies the guarantee of its utter truthfulness. Tar must be characterized not by a desire to be truthful but by an absolute inability to dissemble. His reasons for leaving home are ‘painted on his face .... His upper lip swelled over his teeth like a fat plum. His left eye was black, blue, yellow and red’ (2). So, again, when another character asks why he left: ‘He just glanced up and touched the side of his face. I hadn’t noticed the bruises. He didn’t have to say any more’ ([Skolly] 26).
Thomson identifies a moment, not just of spontaneity, but of sensibility. Tar is literally sensitive to the blows his father has dealt him, but the implication is also that he feels emotions more strongly than the average young man or woman: there is also an invitation for the reader to experience vicariously his sensations of physical and psychological pain or pleasure.

Burgess returns to a sentimental vein in his more recent novel, Nicholas Dane, which tells the traumatic story of a young boy passing through a heartless social welfare system. The author’s own ideas about the importance of love in this context are voiced by the third-person narrator, who comments on Nick’s eventual self-belief and successful romantic relationship as a form of salvation: ‘Love comes to us all, if only we can recognise it and hold on to it’. The novel also features a character called Oliver who, in an image reminiscent of Tar’s pet name ‘Dandelion’, is ‘more like a dandelion seed than a boy’ (90) and who suffers rape as an infant at the hand of his mother’s boyfriend and repeated abuse throughout his young life. Burgess employs a classic realist narrative voice, directly addressing the reader with the intention of reflecting Oliver’s reality in the mirror of fiction: ‘By the time Nick came to make friends with him he had turned into the broken little blond rag we know, with nothing to get him through other than the ability to acquiesce to anything that was asked of him’ (172). There is, of course, something Dickensian in this portrayal of an attractive but sensitive young boy trapped in the workhouse-like institutions of 1980s social care, and Burgess admits he wanted to create a homage to Dickens in Nicholas Dane. The connections to the plot of Oliver Twist are obvious. There are also stylistic debts (not always successful), from comic set-pieces—like the disastrous dinner party Nick’s well-meaning neighbour Jenny throws to convince the social worker Mrs Batts that she can look after him after he is orphaned—to grotesque characters such as Michael Moberley, the pie-factory owner, and Tony Creal, the dastardly deputy head of Meadow Hill Children’s Home. Ironically, Mrs Batts argues, in her broad Yorkshire accent, that ‘some of the Children’s Homes are very good these days. Times have changed a lot since Oliver Twist’ (21). Burgess’s point is, of course, that in many ways times have not changed much at all. Critic Grahame Smith’s commentary on Dickens’ social realism as ‘an indictment of a society as a whole that is parentless’ can be applied as easily to Nicholas Dane: and if disadvantaged orphans in 1980s England could still face mistreatment as foul (if not fouler) than those Dickens wrote about in the nineteenth century, then readers might be encouraged to question the world they live in today.
It is also notable that Burgess has a general interest in the experiences of what he describes as the ‘underdogs’ of society that extends beyond his fiction, sharing Dickens’ belief that literature has utility in 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 in Manchester between the 1960s and late 1980s and who had finally brought successful cases to court; and for his most recent novel at the time of writing, *Kill All Enemies*, he spoke to young men and women excluded from schools and sent to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) around the North West and asked them for stories. Although he does not necessarily match Dickens in actively campaigning for the rights of the poor, Burgess is nonetheless keen to pin his political views about disadvantaged young people to the mast. Following his research for *Kill All Enemies*, he wrote a piece for *The Times* that could have easily appeared in Dickens’ weekly magazine, *Household Words*, arguing that the 2011 London riots were caused by youth responding in a violent and ineffective manner to the general greed and sense of entitlement they observed in adults around them. Moreover, Burgess has become increasingly interested in global storytelling and 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 the child witches in Kinshasa.

*Kill All Enemies* skilfully melds together ideological outrage at the difficulties faced by some disadvantaged teenagers with an affectionate portrayal of those individuals and a gentle incitement to rebel against institutionalization. Despite this potentially radical message, critical reception of the novel has been mostly positive, even from those who work within the institutions being attacked. On the other hand, initial responses to *Nicholas Dane* were mixed, and although Nicholas Tucker felt that Burgess was ‘the ideal author to recount these travails’, many reviewers worried about explicit content as well as structural and stylistic problems. The topics of paedophilia, child sexual abuse and institutional culpability that surface in *Nicholas Dane* remain taboo for YA authors—for any authors perhaps—in a way that drug taking, consensual sexual encounters, and casual violence no longer always are. Burgess may argue that debates about *Junk*, *Lady* and *Doing It* were media hype and a ‘paper tiger’ but he recognizes that ‘there is obviously a great deal more anxiety on all sides that institutional abuse is not a suitable subject for teenagers to engage with’. It is worth briefly exploring some of Burgess’s novels that deal with different sexual appetites to revisit the idea of controversy in the context of
Nicholas Dane, since issues of sexual control, power and normativity are dealt with most dramatically in this novel.

Sexual taboos

As I noted earlier, Reynolds argues that Burgess celebrates adolescent sexuality in a number of his YA novels. She points to his portrayal of canine lust in the playful novel *Lady*, in which Sandra Francy metamorphoses from a highly sexed teenage girl into a highly sexed mongrel dog and encounters the world in a newly direct and sensual manner.36 Sex in *Doing It* is celebrated viscerally too, often to comic effect. Burgess claims to have set out to create a ‘knobby book for boys’ in which young male attitudes towards sex would be presented alongside other discourses of desire in ways that might appeal to an audience of young men.37 The novel relates the romantic and sexual frustrations and adventures of three adolescent boys, and as a number of critics have pointed out, its balance of coarseness and linguistic wit go some way to realizing such an ambition. For instance, Jonathan’s first attempt at describing his ‘snog’ with his almost-girlfriend Deborah suggests it is ‘like drinking Fine Old Wine’38 but he immediately recognizes that he has not yet developed such adult tastes and that the simile is false and pretentious. His solution is to extend and develop the image so that kissing becomes not just an oral experience but a complete bodily one. He also comes up with another simile, based on his own tastes and knowledge rather than on literary convention: Deborah smells like ‘a piece of fruit cake’ and later in the novel she tastes like ‘spices and winegums’ (125) and is a ‘lovely big banquet’ (259). It is significant, of course, that Deborah is linked to foods in this way, since the story thread dealing with Jonathan’s feelings towards her questions attitudes towards ‘fat girls’ and issues of body image in general. It is also pertinent that Burgess mixes sophisticated tastes (fine wine and spices) with more homely and childish tastes (fruit cake and winegums), indicating the underlying innocence of all the boys’ sexual adventures in this novel, despite the explicitness of the narrative content.39

Jonathan’s boyish enthusiasm and Sandra/Lady’s unbounded joy can be read as reflecting Burgess’s official stance on teenagers and sex: ‘When they reach puberty, rather than lecturing them about disease and biology, let’s throw them a party. There should be a cake, fireworks, the lot. Sex! Oh, boy, you’re really going to enjoy this.’40 Nevertheless, he is also keen to point out that ‘[s]ex doesn’t have to mean sleeping with someone at the start. Young people should be encouraged to
progress slowly, but with pleasure’; a relatively conservative ideology that would most likely find relatively few opponents amongst modern parents, educators and commentators. In her article on ‘deviant desire’ in Burgess’s work, Lydia Kokkola observes evidence of this more moderate approach to sex in both Lady and Tiger, Tiger (in which the prepubescent boy Steve is metamorphosed into animal form to mate and impregnate the spirit tiger, Lila). Regarding the former, she argues that by turning Sandra into an animal that only desires sex when on heat, Burgess simultaneously curtails her sexual power and ‘underlines the value of societal regulations’, particularly those regulations that dictate age-appropriate exploration of physical intimacy.

In other words, as a bitch Sandra explicitly displays the desires she was supposed to keep hidden as a girl, but she also welcomes the external controls of seasonal mating to restrict her sexual activity. Kokkola’s interpretation provides valuable nuance, negotiating a critical line between Reynolds’ reading of jouissance and the verdict of one of the original reviewers of Lady who described the novel as a ‘middle-aged man’s fantasy of a teenage girl’.

Other novels in Burgess’s YA canon provide more serious constraints to young sexuality, clearly demonstrating the dangers of precocious sex, or sex that has power rather than pleasure at its core. Several commentators have explored the implications of the teacher–student relationship between Ben and Miss Young in Doing It, which begins as a teenage dream but soon becomes an uncomfortable display of the manipulative power an older, more experienced lover can wield over a relatively vulnerable young man: in her chapter in this volume, for example, Gill notes the surprising reversal of conventional ideas about masculinity inherent in this plot development. Just as disturbing are the sexual dynamics in Burgess’s lesser-known Loving April (which may have gained a bigger readership, jokes Burgess, if he had titled it Shagging April). Set in the 1920s, this unusual novel has as its heroine an adolescent girl called April, who is mocked and mistreated by other villagers because she is an outsider. She is deaf mute, and due to her impairment everyone thinks she is also mentally deficient. Because she has been kept separate from her peers and left to ‘run wild’, she is socially unrefined and sexually vulnerable: as the newcomer to the village, Barbara, puts it, ‘April’s rather backward in some ways but very forward in others.’ The outcome of her unconventional status is destructive. Local boys, as well as a number of adult men, both fear her and think she is fair game for their physical desires, and while April’s promiscuous reputation is unfair, it ultimately results in her rape. In this morally ambiguous scenario, readers have to work hard to
untangle the text’s message: is April being punished for not caring if she attracts male attention through her sensual appearance, or is there an implication that the underdog will always face abuse from those who are socially powerful and sexually controlling, as Pinsent argues in her contribution to this Casebook? In contrast, the altogether more private and gentle love affair that develops between April and Barbara’s son, Tony, is age-appropriate and celebratory, described in terms that are both scintillating and innocent, sexualized and romantic:

the golden days, the idyllic weeks […] brought to life […] by April suddenly leaning up and breathing in his ear, by the smell of dusky liquorice on her breath, by him sliding his hands under her clothes, by lying hidden in the grass, watching the little fishing boats sailing up and down the water, and kissing and exposing her skin to the sun. (117)

Burgess throws April and Tony a kind of pastoral party to celebrate their discovery of sex in this description, and like the ‘spices and winegums’ in Doing It, April’s ‘dusky liquorice’ breath maintains elements of childlike pleasure amongst more mature desire.

The party is spoiled irrevocably in Nicholas Dane, however. It is not only age-inappropriateness and social inequality that shapes Tony Creal’s abhorrent relationships with the boys he grooms at Meadow Hill, but also the novel’s fierce adherence to heterosexual normativity. Burgess describes Creal as ‘an absolute baddie’,47 and clearly this judgement is founded upon the character’s crimes of child rape and abuse of trust; but a further plausible, if inconclusive, interpretation of Creal’s monstrousness might be reached based on the fact that he desires boys rather than girls. While the novel is very clear in portraying homophobia as unacceptable, it mirrors other works by Burgess in explicitly valuing healthy heterosexual relationships, and it is pertinent that Nicholas finally finds love with the loyal Maggie. Contributors to this collection note that Burgess does not necessarily ‘pursue the implications of “otherness”’ in Doing It (Gill), presenting instead ‘a monolithic, undifferentiated view of […] male culture’ (Richards) and their points are significant; although conversely, McCallum and Stephens argue that ‘respect for the otherness of the other’ is a key theme in the Volson novels.

**History and stories**

The reader’s acceptance of certain types of otherness is also important in Burgess’s historical fiction, especially if we take Jerome de Groot’s
point that this genre ‘entails an engagement on the part of the reader […] with a set of tropes, settings and ideas that are particular, alien and strange’. In the Preface to *Burning Issy* (1992), which is set during the seventeenth-century Pendle witch trials, the author/narrator notes that the narrative is not an attempt to show things as they really were, because that would deny the world as [the historical characters] saw it and believed it. Thus, a number of magical and quasi-religious happenings that might challenge contemporary secularism and open up ideas of otherness are related in this novel. For instance, the reader witnesses the young orphan protagonist, Issy, knocking the Witchfinder general off his horse by the force of her mind; and in a final scene, the horned god who the witches worship appears in supernatural form to free her from prison. Nonetheless, Burgess keeps his narrative grounded in historical reality in a manner that also invites the reader to make connections with their everyday experience and to question where exactly difference lies. Underlying the superstition and supernatural elements in this narrative are a series of economic references that tie Issy’s tale more closely to material facts than mysticism. Her long-lost aunt, Iohen, is well known as a wise woman with special powers, but her strongest characteristic is her fierce business sense and the trade she does as a cloth-merchant is as important as her undertakings as a community ‘witch’. At each point of crisis or resolution in Issy’s story, an exchange of money, goods or labour takes place: Iohen pays Old Demdyke the Pendle witch a farthing for some wax to create a new manikin to replace the one Demdyke has made to torture Issy’s brother Ghyll; the pack-horse driver who rescues Issy on her flight from Iohen’s supposed devil worship remarks that it doesn’t matter to him if she is ‘a saint, a witch, a beggar, a queen or a thief—so long as I have your silver in my pocket’ (136); and even Issy’s very origins are bound up with a kind of bargaining, as Iohen swaps her for a loaf of bread when she is a baby. Burgess reveals a seventeenth-century world that exists within a tangible system of exchange, exposing economic realities of the past and therefore avoiding a simple exoticism of history.

In interview, Burgess reflects on this process of telling stories about the past and notes that ‘[e]xploring people and their worlds imaginatively can, oddly enough, arrive at some surprising truths’, a premise that has also shaped his project of creating ‘found fiction’ that tells narratives of real people who seem at first glance to have nothing to say (like children in care in the UK or those accused of witchcraft in the Democratic Republic of Congo). Although it is possible to employ the precepts of literary realism to deconstruct the
very concept of reality and the fragile nature of ‘truth’, as Stephens does in his stylistic analysis of *Junk*, for example, the importance of stories in providing meaning underlies much of Burgess’s fiction. This is made clear in the Author’s Note to *Junk*, in which he states, ‘[t]he book isn’t fact; it isn’t even fiction. But it’s all true.’ In *Burning Issy*, the central puzzle and task for both protagonist and reader is to recover Issy’s own story and storytelling provides a central motif for the whole novel. From Demdyke’s imagined curse to the arrested witches’ fictional confessions, narratives are key; and Iohen explains, ‘[w]ell, I don’t like questions and answers, but I do like a story’ (85). Issy’s story is contained and concealed in her recurring dream of a terrible burning heat, and this phantasy of fire acts as metonym for the widespread pain and persecution faced by many potentially innocent individuals during the witch trials. Just as Issy’s own origins as the daughter of an accused witch have to be reclaimed and resolved, so too does the cultural narrative of the voiceless witches according to the novel’s structural thrust.

**The Casebook**

Stories—and their ability to enlighten or deceive—are important for much of Burgess’s work, from the historical narratives of *Burning Issy* to the layers of postmodern fictions in *Sara’s Face* and the ‘found’ stories of *Nicholas Dane* and *Kill All Enemies*. There is great opportunity for future examination of truth and meaning in his fiction, using critical tools of deconstruction, postcolonialism, or queer theory for instance. There is also scope for future explorations of Burgess’s writings on the edge—his Twitterrales, blogging and cross-platform TV and gaming drama series for the BBC, ‘The Well’ (2009)—as well as adaptations of his work for stage, TV and film, and his novelization of *Billy Elliot* (2001). The current volume of essays will provide a useful starting point for new critical consideration of Burgess’s work.

The first section of this Casebook acts as an introduction to the themes of controversy, cultural context, gender and sexuality, with Chris Richards, Michele Gill and Joel Gwynne working in dialogue with each other to discuss some of the best-known novels for young adults. They represent an important strand of critical enquiry that has thrived during the period in which Burgess has been writing: namely the investigation into identity, its constructed nature, and its manifestation in both fictional portrayals and broader socio-cultural discourses. Richards opens the discussion by alerting the reader to the complexities of Burgess’s authorial persona, exploring his public
engagement with ‘domains of consumption’ and probing his claims for an authentic rendering of adolescent boys in *Doing It*. Richards also provides a useful overview of the contested term ‘young adult’, demonstrating how Burgess has positioned himself within the field of YA between the schools market and popular media in order to appeal to a broad audience of adults and teenagers. Gill picks up on the question of authentic boyhood, placing Burgess’s YA fictions alongside other narratives of young masculinity. She argues that *Doing It* and *Kill All Enemies* go some way to challenge dominant ways of thinking about boys which have centred on sexuality, violence, educational failure and emotional limitations. Like Richards, she acknowledges the role that real readers have in constructing their own versions of masculinity through actively engaging with Burgess’s work on their own terms. Gwynne, the final voice in this trio of chapters, holds a mirror up to Gill’s observations about boyhood in his discussion of postfeminist identities in *Junk*, *Doing It* and *Sara’s Face*. Through analysis of the adolescent female body and sexual expression he makes claim to a feminist reading of Burgess, suggesting that these YA novels dramatize debates about girlhood and challenge conventional ideas that girls require private space and emotional fulfilment in order to mature both socially and sexually. According to Gwynne, Burgess’s fictions show gender roles ‘in transition’ and promote the concept of the ‘can-do’ girl rather than the ‘at risk’ girl.

The first section of this collection is, therefore, socio-cultural in focus, but these contributors also demonstrate the strengths of literary criticism in uncovering nuances in Burgess’s works and the value of theoretical lenses in locating them in broader scholarly debates. The following chapters by Kay Sambell, Robyn McCallam and John Stephens, and Mel Gibson concentrate more explicitly on fictional and stylistic qualities, examining form, genre and theme. Sambell is also interested in identity, but as a postmodern literary device that is fragmented and playful. She analyses *Sara’s Face*, a modern melodrama which tells the story of a teenage girl with body dysmorphia who is so obsessed with celebrity that she is willing to allow the rock star Jonathan Heat to steal her face. Sambell notes the influence of journalism and new media on both the construction of Sara herself (who is ‘nothing but a bundle of texts’) and on the nature of the novel’s fictional status. She argues that this most experimental of Burgess’s works is a ‘producerly’ text that asks readers to enter into the game of meaning-making, yet without alienating them through overly avant-garde strategies. McCallum and Stephens bring to bear their expertise in narratology to produce a reading of Burgess’s Volsung Saga novels.
They show how ‘[f]ictional technique is always implicated in how a novel offers possibilities of thematic meaning’ and demonstrate how shifting narrative perspectives encourage a dynamic development of ethical understanding by the reader. Their careful reading of two of Burgess’s most challenging works, Bloodtide and Bloodsong, moves from a consideration of how individuals respond to the needs and rights of others, to broader discussions of the nature of evil, the moral imperatives of science and technology, and the relative ontological status of human and posthuman characters: their chapter demonstrates both the complexity of Burgess’s narrative structures and the richness of his fiction in philosophical terms. Burgess’s picturebook co-produced with illustrator Ruth Brown, can be considered to be in stark contrast to the multi-narrator, mythic retellings of the Volsunga Saga, but Gibson’s chapter shows how even in this seemingly innocuous form, Burgess can challenge expectations. Gibson demonstrates how The Birdman constructs a reader who must deploy knowledge of other texts ‘to enhance their understandings of the narrative’, and who will confront horror and ambiguity through a relatively simple reading experience. She identifies key intertexts amongst theatrical traditions, children’s literary myth, fairy tale and Burgess’s other story of magical metamorphosis, Lady, highlighting throughout the ambivalent nature of winged creatures.

The final section of the Casebook includes chapters by Peter Hollindale, Pat Pinsent and Karen Williams, and builds on themes of human and animal identity touched upon in earlier chapters, turning mainly to Burgess’s fiction for younger readers to continue an exploration of his philosophical approach to the status of homo sapiens. Hollindale’s chapter usefully identifies a sequence of animal novels—The Cry of the Wolf; Tiger, Tiger, Kite; Lady: My Life as a Bitch; and Bloodsong—which he argues are ‘just as radical and challenging as Burgess’s social realist fictions’. Hollindale pays attention to stylistic and formal qualities of the language used to describe human and animal perspective, showing how Burgess ‘steps into the bubble’ of animal perspective, particularly in his earlier novels. This chapter argues that animals generally have an ‘enhanced value and status’ in comparison to humanity and demonstrates how, in his later works, Burgess moves towards conjoining animal and human in new forms of being. Pinsent focuses on the human side of the equation, exploring relationships between child protagonists and outsider characters, including elderly people and those with mental disabilities. Drawing on traditional literary critical methodology in identifying themes and highlighting symbolism in Burgess’s work, she argues that the harsh realities faced by the heroes of An Angel for May,
Loving April and The Ghost behind the Wall have perhaps ‘predisposed them towards an initially unlikely sensitivity to others who are also on the edges of society’. The shift in emphasis away from Burgess’s young adult fiction helps to offer alternative views on the construction and reconstruction of identity as being not only a task for the youthful but an important part of human experience across ages, abilities and social backgrounds. Pinsent also leads her reader through some of the meanings that can be found in animal figures and symbolic settings in Burgess’s work, which paves the way for Williams’ chapter. Williams reads The Earth Giant (1995) and The Baby and Fly Pie (1993) through the lens of ecocriticism, a stimulating and relatively recent theoretical approach. She shows how Burgess anticipates some of the theoretical interest in interrogating binary oppositions of animal/human, urban/rural, and culture/nature: revealing, for instance, the city to be both a ‘noxious stereotype’ and ‘an evolving, contested habitat’ in its own right. The countryside too, can be wrenched from traditions of the romantic child of nature and be shown as both ‘an escape from urban toxicity and a paradoxical “alien” space filled with danger’. Williams is interested in how animals and humans appear in symbiosis within Burgess’s fictional ecosystems, demonstrating through his writings how intertwined we humans are with the world around us.

These final chapters share with the previous six an interest in the way that Burgess’s fictional universe is carefully crafted with an awareness of socio-environmental realities that young readers must face every day. In a final chapter, I interview the author to reflect on his passion for gathering ‘found stories’ and to try to make links between his writing about contemporary British youth and the experiences of young people in other places and times, in novels such as Burning Issy. It is Burgess’s desire to challenge conventional understandings about young people that emerges most clearly in his recent work, where he continues to promote the idea that ‘teenage qualities are really rather splendid’.

It is the purpose of this collection to encourage a critical recognition of Burgess’s own splendid qualities.

Notes


7. The term ‘hatchet job’ is referred to in Burgess’s ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ (297), and seems to have come from a comment on the Guardian Unlimited website, no longer accessible (http://guardian.newspaperdirect.com).


13. Ibid.: 300.
25. ‘Found Fiction: An Interview with Melvin Burgess’, Chapter 10 in this Casebook.
28. See also Walsh, ‘Troubling the Boundary between Fiction for Adults and Fiction for Children’.
32. Chapter 10, ‘Found Fiction’.
36. Elsewhere, I have described the novel as playing with ‘the idea of teenage desire gone wild and become animal’: Alison Waller, Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism (London: Routledge, 2009): 51.
37. The phrase appears in a number of sources, but Burgess published the phrase first in ‘Fictional Males Lose the Plot’, Times Educational Supplement, 12 May 2008: 23.
39. Interestingly, the US television adaptation of Doing It called Life as We Know It, which ran on ABC between 2005 and 2006, substituted much of this very British discourse of innocence with a more glamorous—yet less biologically explicit—portrayal of beautiful youth.
41. Burgess, ‘Lost your Virginity, Son?’
44. See also Walsh, ‘Troubling the Boundary between Fiction for Adults and Fiction for Children’ and Chris Richards, ‘Writing for Young Adults: Melvin Burgess and Mark Haddon’, in Forever Young: Essays on Young Adult Fictions (New York: Peter Lang, 2008): 51–64.
47. Chapter 10, ‘Found Fiction’.
50. Chapter 10, ‘Found Fiction’.
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