

*Melvin Burgess. Nicholas Dane.* Andersen Press, London: 2009. ISBN 978-1-84270-181-2. pp. 408.

What would the story of *Oliver Twist* look like today? How would Dickens deal with the challenges facing orphan children in the twenty-first century? How would he depict these problems so as to make them accessible to young readers? These are some of the questions raised by Melvin Burgess's new novel, *Nicholas Dane*, which is a re-writing of the story of *Oliver Twist* for our own times. The result is a powerful and shockingly explicit story of the violent ill-treatment and sexual abuse of young boys in a children's home in Manchester.

Burgess is one of Britain's foremost writers of social realist stories for teenagers, several of which have been the subject of public controversy. His novel, *Junk* (1996), for instance, which received the Carnegie Award for best teenage novel of that year, caused an outcry for its uncompromising portrayal of the lure of drugs among runaway children. His latest book is in the same vein – a fast-paced thriller that captures and holds the reader's attention from the first page to the last while covering such difficult issues of drug addiction, criminality and sexual abuse. Burgess has himself stated that it is a book that should not be read by anyone under 14 years of age and I must admit that this is one of the most disturbing teenage novels I have ever read.

The story follows Dickens's original very closely, except for the first part which depicts the horror of Nicholas's life in a children's home, both in terms of the brutal violence and bullying, as well as the sexual abuse of the boys by one of the teachers. Burgess has said that writers of teenage fiction should not shy away from portraying painful and sensitive issues, since many teenagers are faced with these problems anyway. He also wants to show how victims of abuse can learn to deal with such a trauma, although some less successfully than others. Even as a novel, it goes a long way in helping young readers understand the reality of child abuse, as well as the different strategies of survival that victims of it try to develop in order to deal with such terrible experiences. As with his other books, Burgess has once again pushed the boundaries for what subjects teenage fiction may cover. This is an important, if heart-wrenching novel, which should be in every school library.

*Ronald Paul*