

Book Review of "Nicholas Dane" by Melvin Burgess

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I first encountered the book "Nicholas Dane", when the author Melvin Burgess contacted me in 2007, following the successful conclusion of the first child abuse Group Action into Manchester Children's Homes, which compensated the victims of abuse at children's homes owned by Manchester City Council. Most of the claims I had been involved with concerned a home called Rosehill in Wythenshawe between the 1960's to the late 1980's. Melvin explained that he wanted my help with a fictional book he wanted to write on the subject. I spent a very pleasant evening with him, during which I tried to paint as many pictures as I could of the scenes and characters, from the cases I had dealt with. 2 years later I eagerly anticipated the publication of the book.

When I am asked to review a book on child abuse, I usually approach it on the basis that it is something I have to do for work. The big difference here was that this was no catharsis of emotion as part of the healing process of a survivor, but rather a work of fiction designed to entertain. First to read it was my 15 year old foster daughter, who devoured it with a passion exclaiming it to be "well good", not the best English but telling considering it runs to 400 pages in hardback. So I approached the read with some scepticism thinking that it would be like reading a file at work. I quickly became completely immersed in the story, and could not put it down.

As the blurb says, it tells the sad story of Nick who loses his mother and is put into the care of a children's home called Meadow Hill where he is brutally abused by the arch paedophile Tony Creal. Using his wits he escapes with another victim aptly named Oliver and Davey (for which read Artful Dodger.) To avoid capture and return to the abusively cruel environment of Meadow Hill, Nick falls into the underground Mancunian world of Shiner, for which read Fagin and his brutal sidekick Ben Jones (Bill Sykes), the orchestrator of most crime in Manchester. Not surprisingly Jones has a sweet girl whom he beats up on a regular basis. Jones is also the victim of the care system. Nick gets all tangled up in crime. I won't give away the ending but it is non too pleasant and very gripping in a Dickensian sort of a way.

The publicity is right when it says it is "a page turning blockbuster of Dickensian scale which will have you furiously turning the pages and longing to rescue the young hero, Nick from his abusers."

What of the unashamed parallels with Dickens? Is it believable or too contrived? It is very significant that our social care system in this country is derived from the moralising charitable acts of the Victorian well to do, who felt guilty about their exploitation of children set to work in poor conditions as a by-product of the industrial revolution. Thus the parallel, which at first blush looks trite, is in fact completely appropriate. Indeed the conditions and standards of care in some ways, have not moved on very much since the turn of the century. Children continued to be used for cheap labour right up to the 70's and 80's. Thus a book about the worst aspects of our social care system neatly links the past with the present.

The other aspect of the Dickens connection of most importance is that it neatly lightens what would otherwise be a deeply dark and foreboding work of fiction. From talking to Melvin in the early stages, I know that he was anxious to entertain not depress the reader. A book about the horrid exploitation and abuse of children could easily descend into an abyss too dark for a work of fiction. Thus the Dickensian parallels neatly remind the reader that, although the story is chillingly accurate, it is after all just a work of fiction to be enjoyed for its own sake. This works very well for me.

How accurate is the book? How close is it to historical fact? Since I was a contributor, as were some of my clients, you would expect me to say that the book is close to actual fact. The truth is that I recognise the character sketches of a number of real life abusers. Their grooming

techniques and behaviour are frighteningly accurate. The atmosphere within the home Meadow Hill is very similar to what I understand it was like in the home it is based on.

So how successful is the book? I found it completely absorbing and gripping. I felt as though I was right there with our anti-hero all the time, even though the things that were happening were very similar to our real life files at work. All my children have read it and think it is brilliant. All the solicitors at work have also enjoyed it. And we are in the business. It is a great book to enlighten the naive adolescent and educate them about the dark side of life that hopefully will never knock at their door. For my clients and the victims of historical abuse, it is not necessarily something they want to read, but rather a story which recognises the reality of what they went through, and desperately needs to be told.

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Peter is the senior partner of a firm of solicitors who have the only dedicated child abuse compensation department in the country. They run several group actions, and have a legal aid franchise. Peter has extensive media experience of Radio, Television, has written articles for many newspapers and other publishers. Peter also lectures on the subject of child abuse for ACAL (Association of Child Abuse Lawyers) and other organisations..