



Dickens and Nicholas Dane

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Melvin Burgess on how Dickens inspired his new novel.

In **Oliver Twist** Charles Dickens wrote about a child in the work house, an institution designed to help the poor and vulnerable that had become a place of misery and fear. In his latest novel, **Nicholas Dane**, Melvin Burgess writes about a teenager in the 1980s in a Children's Home, an institution which also proves to be a place of terror and corruption. **Melvin Burgess** explains how he turned to Dickens as a source of inspiration for his modern take on the institutional abuse of the vulnerable.

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Dickens is one of the great masters of our time ? a seminal writer, and still relevant today, working as he did right at the beginning of our own age, the industrial age. His range of characters is so diverse, so colourful, so full of theatre ? and so English ? that even Shakespeare doesn't seriously rival him on that score. And there is another area in which he leaves the bard behind as well ? politics. Dickens is a national treasure not just because of his imagination, but because he cares. He was able to find the colour not only in the good things, but in the dark side of life, in the heart of the very thing he hated so much ? poverty. The subject matter of Dickens' best work is invariably social injustice. It is for that reason that he represents the very best in our national identity. He is a genuine source of national pride to us all.

Dickens' books are so rich that we tend to forget just how dark his subject matter often is. Fagin is a dreadful monster; Mr Micawber is in chronic debt; David Copperfield is almost crushed by cruelty and poverty. Yet somehow, when we look back on Dickens' work, what we remember best is the sheer exuberance of his work. The question that interests me is this: how on earth does he get away with it?

Loving life and hating evil

The subject of my latest book is institutional abuse ? the terrible failure of care that took place over a period of several decades between the late sixties and the mid eighties, when thousands of boys and girls were subject to the most terrible sexual and physical abuse. I interviewed a number of people who had been through those homes, utterly abandoned to their fate at the hands of a number of dreadful men who had power over them. There is no doubt that the suffering of many of them was truly Dickensian in scale. I wanted my book, **Nicholas Dane**, to reflect that, to be truthful, to be honest, to be a page turner, but not to be so dark and depressing that the human spirit is lost. Naturally, it was to Dickens that I turned for ideas.

So ? how *does* he do it? After reading several of his books I came to the conclusion that he pulls it off by loving life at least as much as he hates evil. This love of his takes many forms, but perhaps is at its best in the wonderfully theatrical sense of character he has, and in the eloquence he brings to even the poorest, most disadvantaged of his people. They all speak like angels; they all have personalities as high as the sky.

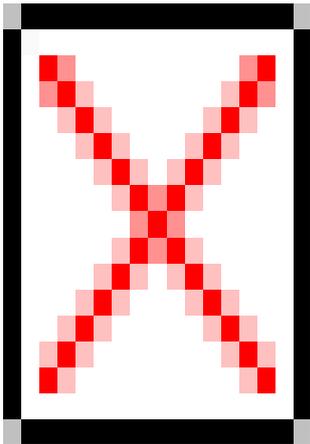
Theatre, then, and colour, and a love of life. And that is what I have tried to do in **Nicholas Dane** ? to make my

characters big, colourful, characterful, and have them speak from the heart, with their whole personality on their tongues.

Poverty is still the beast

The problems we have today may seem different, and take different forms, but I believe they are fundamentally the same problems Dickens saw over a hundred and fifty years ago. I could sum most of them up in one word; poverty. Poverty is still the beast that ravages our young men and women and deforms our children morally and physically. Poverty still spreads disease, ignorance, crime and all manner of vices. In **Oliver Twist**, Dickens is writing about the workhouse, one of the great scandals of the age, when an institution designed to help the poor and vulnerable had become a place of terror and misery. The same thing happened in Children's Homes in the 1980s and so it was that I turned to Dickens to find my way forward.

Anyone looking for a straightforward updating of **Oliver Twist** will be disappointed. Not everything is the same. I'm afraid I had to kill off the kindly old gentlemen ? they just don't cut the mustard any more. On another level, Dickens had Oliver out of the workhouse pretty quick, whereas I have dwelt in my Children's Home far longer. But readers will easily recognise the links. I remember when I realised that Sykes, for instance, had been abused as a child. Anyone who has looked into the subject of abuse will know the terrible levels of violence it can inspire and will recognise Sykes immediately, not only as a monster, but as a victim too. I don't have many advantages over Dickens but I do think we live an age more able to understand evil. Whether we choose to take advantage of that is another matter, of course. Either way, I've done my best, and I like to think the old boy would have shown some degree of what he liked to call 'enthusmoosy' over my efforts.



Nicholas Dane by Melvin Burgess is published by Andersen Press (978 1 84270 181 2) at £12.99.



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