

Nicholas Dane by Melvin Burgess

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Introduction, Audience, and Grade Levels

Nicholas Dane by Melvin Burgess (2009) is a riveting novel that addresses the effects of abuse in a corrupt social services system. After Nick's mother dies of a heroin overdose he goes into the system and is placed in a boys home called Meadow Hill. Inmates of Meadow Hill are often victims of brutal beatings when persons of authority are displeased in any way. Nick's decision to fight back early on makes him even more of a target amongst both authority figures and other inmates. One deputy, however, named Tony Creal becomes rather attentive toward Nick, providing him with special privileges. The seemingly innocent relationship takes a turn when Tony Creal begins to sexually abuse Nick. The rest of the story follows Nick in his efforts to escape not only his physical environment but the abuse that haunts him as well.

Throughout the course of the novel, Melvin Burgess addresses controversial subjects including drugs, physical and sexual abuse, violence, challenging authority, and nontraditional family dynamics. Although some may perceive these topics as difficult or even inappropriate, a substantial amount of respected critics praise Burgess' work including reviewers from *The Horn Book Magazine*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, *School Library Journal*, and *BookSmack! Reviews*. In particular, Ronald Paul (2009) of the *Anderson Press* writes that *Nicholas Dane* should be made available in every school library because of its potential to promote understanding amongst adolescents. The population needs to accept that society is far from perfect, and these difficult topics are a reality and should not be ignored. He recommends the novel for those in grades nine and up (p. 68).

While some may prefer to ignore the harsh realities of society, such abuses are most definitely relevant issues today. There is a good chance that a student will encounter multiple victims of abuse throughout their school years. It is crucial that students are educated and understanding when it comes to these sensitive topics so that they do not further contribute to the pain of such victims. Promoting understanding and tolerance can only help in the creation of a positive learning environment for all.

Abuse is more prevalent in society than some may recognize. According to the *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), 773, 792 children suffered some sort of abuse whether it be neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional maltreatment, medical neglect, or some other form in 2009 (p. 215). Statistics reveal that a similar number of males and females are victims, specifically victims were 48.3% male and 51.1% female in 2009 (p. 215). Clearly, abuse impacts the lives of a number of our society's youth so the issue demands attention.

Melvin Burgess (2009) is known for his portrayal of controversial topics and his previous works have received much recognition. Particularly, his novel *Smack* was a

Carnegie Medal Winner, A Guardian Prize for Fiction Winner, A *Publishers Weekly* Best Children's Book of the Year, A *School Library Journal* Best Book, and An American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults. Burgess' novel *Doing It* was also highly acclaimed with a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Young Adult Fiction Winner as well as being recognized as A New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age.

This novel encourages readers to think critically about difficult and controversial issues in society. These issues require attention for there to be any hope of change for the better. Ten renowned reviewers agree, praising Burgess for his efforts in bringing awareness to the harsh realities of our world. In conclusion, *Nicholas Dane* by Melvin Burgess should be available in every classroom and every school library.

Plot Summary

Nicholas Dane was a typical fourteen-year-old boy residing in Manchester, United Kingdom when his mother died of a heroin overdose. No family members are willing to take Nick in so social services sends him to Meadow Hill Assessment Centre, a home for boys. The inmates of Meadow Hill are not allowed off the grounds and are frequently subjected to violence. It does not take Nick long to realize the truth behind the warning he received upon his arrival. His escort told him that in the home "they beat you up like a man" (Burgess, p.67). When Nick fails to have his bed made and pajamas folded properly on his first day his prefect, Andrews, is beaten. Andrews later attacks Nick for revenge but to his surprise Nick fights back. As a result, Nick quickly becomes a target for fights amongst the other boys in the home. Not only do the inmates beat Nick, but when he is caught fighting he suffers additional beatings from the staff as punishment.

After some time at the home, Tony Creal, the deputy of Meadow Hill begins to take a particular interest in Nick. Creal invites Nick to his flat on numerous occasions, allowing him to relax, watch television, and providing him with treats such as cigarettes, beer, and adult magazines. Eventually Creal's true motives are revealed when he sexually assaults Nick in his flat. Mortified, Nick attempts to report the incident but his accusations are met with a night in solitary confinement where he is raped by Tony Creal along with two other men.

As time goes by Nick and his friend, Davey, devise a plan to escape. Their first attempt fails and the repercussions are torturous. Their second attempt, however, is a success but Nick has nowhere to go. The boys turn to Davey's friend Sunshine who provides them with a place to stay and introduces them to a life of crime. At night, the boys raid cars and homes stealing anything they believe to have value to sell to Sunshine.

Through Sunshine, Nick begins work riskier jobs with Bob Jones. Jones is a menacing middle-aged man with a violent side. He abuses his girlfriend, Stella, and easily intimidates anyone who even thinks of countering him. After a job one evening, Jones takes Nick to a bar to celebrate and they happen to run into Tony Creal. As it turns out, twenty years earlier Jones had also been a victim of Creal at Meadow Hill. This

realization is too much for Nick and he runs from the bar, hoping to avoid Jones from then on.

The encounter reignites a hatred that had been manifesting in Jones since the abuse began. Jones solicits the help of old acquaintances from the home and devises a plan get the ultimate revenge. Jones plans to murder Tony Creal. When Stella learns of the plan she sends a warning to Creal in an attempt to save Jones from himself. When the police question Jones and his accomplices, Jones discovers Stella's betrayal, becomes enraged, beats Stella to death, and makes a run for the border.

The police begin their investigations and because Stella and Nick had been seen together as well as Nick's connection to Jones, the police were looking for Nick. Nick takes refuge at Sunshine's house until about ten days after the murder when Jones shows up with a sawed off shotgun. Nick runs to the attic to hide but the police must have been watching the house. Ironically, Jones also makes his way to the attic to hide, which is where he ultimately shoots himself right in front of Nick following police confrontation.

After the incident Nick is questioned and then taken back to Meadow Hill where he is greeted by Tony Creal. Creal, however, has it in his mind that Nick had something to do with the letter warning him about the plot on his life and agrees to send Nick to another home as thanks.

Following his release, Nick eventually gets his life together. He completes his education and even attends university where he meets a girl named Maggie. Maggie and Nick are married and have children together.

One day on his way to work an image catches Nick's eye. An older man was leading a young boy across the street in a way that was all too familiar. That man was, in fact, Tony Creal. Everything comes rushing back to Nick. He confesses his past to his wife and finally takes his story to the police. While Creal is deemed unfit for trial because of his age, justice is served on other staff members of Meadow Hill. Even though Creal may not have suffered, Nick knows that any abuse that his report may prevent was worth the effort.

Literary Qualities and Summary of Reviews

A substantial number of critics highly recommend Melvin Burgess' novel, *Nicholas Dane*. In the *Anderson Press* (2009), Ronald Paul suggests that *Nicholas Dane* should be available in every school library. He comments that this novel has the potential to help young readers develop an understanding of painful and sensitive issues which is crucial because such issues are a reality for a number of children. This book can also teach victims of abuse strategies to cope with their ordeals. A writer for *BookSmack! Reviews* (2011, February 17) agrees, commenting that while the novel may include difficult material, the subject matter deserves our attention.

Renowned reviewer Kevin Brophy (2011, February) for the *Children's Book Council of Australia* recommends *Nicholas Dane* because although the novel may not include strictly happy endings, the author maintains a sense of realism. *Nicholas Dane* prompts the reader to consider the government welfare policies, the legal system, and other social issues. Within the violence and tension lies not only the motivation to question those topics, but still a confidence in the good to be found in the majority of people. Readers may find the novel to be relatable, as Dean Schneider (2011, January-February), a reviewer for *The Horn Book Magazine*, regards *Nicholas Dane* as an investigation of the significant impact of a bad environment on a good child. Similarly, Uma Krishnaswami, a reviewer for *Children's Literature* (2010) suggests that this compelling novel raises questions about violence, power, social service interventions, and institutional care. Despite addressing the dark place where fear, pain, and love become indistinguishable, a story of survival and hope persists. Uma Krishnaswami was not the only reviewer to find the hope *Nicholas Dane*. A reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* (2010, November 1) recognizes that in its gripping examination of institutional cruelty, violence, and addiction, as well as the effects of fear, anger, and desperation, lies an overall glimmer of home. Also, in *Inis—The Children's Books Ireland Magazine*, Carole Redford (2011, Winter) commends this novel for its frank depiction of the lasting impact of sexual abuse and violence on its victims. The story stays true to the harsh effects and does not romanticize the issues at hand. Despite grim details, hope and human sympathy show through.

In the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, Karen Coats (2010, December) describes the novel as a portrayal of both the causes and effects of violence and other abuse, compelling the reader and bringing about an understanding of situations that exist in the world today. Not only that, but *Booklist* (2010, November 1) reviewer, Gillian Engberg comments that in addition to the exploration of the dynamics of abuse and healing, *Nicholas Dane* will motivate the reader to consider those who need protected in our society and how best to do so.

Patty Saidenberg of *School Library Journal* (2010, December) suggests that Melvin Burgess “is a genius in drawing readers into a compelling, dramatic, and candid read” (p. 102). Although the novel explores the dark issues of corruption and exploitation of society's youth, the overall message is positive. Saidenberg is confident that the message of hope that Burgess establishes in the reader will be long lasting. In all, the majority of reviewers agree that although *Nicholas Dane* addresses difficult material the message is one that should be available to young adult readers.

In addition to critic recommendations, *Nicholas Dane* by Melvin Burgess meets Petitt's (1961) criteria for quality literature as well. In her book *A Study of the Qualities of Literacy Excellence Which Characterize Selected Fiction*, Dorothy Petitt establishes criteria for assessing “literary excellence.” The subsequent section confirms the status of *Nicholas Dane* as a well-written young adult novel of literary excellence by the standards of both teachers and librarians.

Nicholas Dane is, in fact, a novel by Petitt's standards. Its 403 fictional pages meet the length requirement and are structured in a way that no "vital qualities destroyed" (p. 128). The novel is of sufficient length to develop both plot and characters. In those 403 pages, Burgess takes the reader through a young boy's struggles in a dark world.

Burgess constructed the novel so that the different features compliment each other to create a unified final product. The technical aspects of *Nicholas Dane* work together to present the book as a whole. While at times the story may seem to stray from the protagonist, those details that Burgess provides are critical to the overarching story. For example, one character that Nicholas encounters is Bob Jones. Jones is a complex and intimidating individual who contributes to Nicholas' life of crime. Part of the story follows Jones and his feelings surrounding his plot to murder Tony Creal. The story comes full circle when it is revealed that Tony Creal had molested Jones just like he had Nick. Details such as that of Jones' upbringing provide insight into why certain characters are the way that they are. These stories within the story unite and contribute to the successful delivery of an important message that will resonate with readers.

The theme is "a facet of the general theme of all fiction—the individual in society" (p.129). The book explores the effects of a corrupt social services system and what can happen when a good, normal individual enters that corrupt institution. These themes are developed through a deliberate series of events in which the main character is placed into a home for boys where he is subjected to both domestic and sexual abuse. Nicholas Dane enters the system a relatively normal, innocent child and leaves it having experienced much more than any child should ever have to. Bob Jones, who suffered through an experience similar to that of Nick, exhibits the longstanding effects of such abuse. The story motivates readers to think about society and the changes that must be made to protect those who cannot always protect themselves. External events are reflective of the inner turmoil of the characters and the voices of those characters are unique in themselves.

Characterization is strong throughout the course of the story and with critical reading, the reader can find a deeper meaning beyond the character's facades. Burgess writes in such a way that "individual characters fully enough developed to become the focus of the reader's interest" (p. 132). Burgess is able to not only develop the dynamic characteristics of Nicholas Dane, the protagonist, but supporting characters as well. By devoting chapters to supporting characters, the reader gets a glimpse into the background of those individuals and therefore gains a greater understanding for them as characters. The characterization is interdependent with the plot as the characters have distinct attributes that drive the action of the plot. In creating characters of depth, Burgess evokes feelings and a greater understanding about a difficult topic.

The main round character, Nicholas Dane, undergoes significant change throughout the course of the novel. As the novel begins, Nicholas is introduced as a young boy to whom everything has come relatively easily. He skips school to spend time with friends, playing sports, and watching cartoons on the television. His life appears to be relatively normal until his mother dies and the abuse he undergoes in his new home

turns his life around completely. He suffers both physically and mentally, and his greatest concern becomes avoiding the sexual advances of a pedophile. The consequences of abuse are countless as a young boy is robbed of his innocence.

Burgess is successful in developing dialogue revealing of both characters and their relationships with others in addition to advancing the story. Each character has a distinct personality that shows through in their voice. Those characters are thoroughly developed to where a reader could easily distinguish between speakers without being explicitly told as to who is speaking. These exchanges are very telling of relationships and are presented in a way that is most definitely artistically valid.

Overall, Melvin Burgess was successful in achieving literary quality of *Nicholas Dane* by meeting Petitt's criteria and therefore producing a fiction that would be approved by both teachers and librarians.

Theoretical Support and Redeeming Values

The following section defends the novel *Nicholas Dane* as a valuable contribution to young adult literature. The research of Louise M. Rosenblatt (1983) and Erik Erikson (1968) supports young adult literature content on the basis of various concepts and theories. These individuals are experts in the field and their theoretical standpoints justify *Nicholas Dane* by Melvin Burgess for young adult reading.

In *Literature as Exploration*, Louise M. Rosenblatt defends the value of literature for young adults. According to Rosenblatt, literature enables the reader to "sympathize or to identify with the experiences of others" (p. 37). Sympathizing and understanding others is a significant benefit of a book like *Nicholas Dane*. *Nicholas Dane* and other supporting characters of the book have been subjected to both physical and sexual abuse. As if the experiences were not traumatic enough, the victims of sexual abuse are paralyzed by the fear of their peers finding out their secret. They are terrified of social rejection and further ridicule. The victims worry that they will not be viewed as victims, but rather, they will be blamed and ostracized for their encounters. Burgess writes in a way that evokes great sympathy within the reader. The reader really begins to feel the pain and struggles of the victims.

Writing has the ability to alter opinions and change attitudes. As Rosenblatt notes that "because the literary experience tends to involve both the intellect and the emotions in a manner that parallels life itself, the insights attained through literature may be assimilated into the matrix of attitudes and ideas which constitute character and govern behavior" (p. 274). If a reader had any preconceptions about abuse, there is the possibility that those would be changed by the time that they put the book down. Since attitudes and opinions influence actions, literature has the ability to change both emotions and behaviors. This understanding and tolerance for the lives of others can only benefit our society. By challenging any stigmas that surround these and similar issues, literature has the potential to prevent further pain of victims.

Raising awareness of difficult or controversial topics prompts intuitive thought. He asserts that “frequently literature is a means by which the youth discovers that his own inner life reflects a common experience of others in his society” (204). While abuse is not necessarily a “common” experience in society, it is more prevalent than some may know or wish to recognize. It is crucial that attention be paid to these topics for change to ever take place. Rosenblatt theorizes that the “discussion of literary experiences make possible rehearsals of the struggle to clarify emotion and make it the basis of intelligent and informed thinking” (p. 238). Reading encourages students not only to acknowledge issues but also to seek out more information as opposed to making rash, uninformed judgments. Burgess takes the reader into the lives of these characters and their struggles. Readers can put themselves in the place of characters and consider, or “rehearse,” how they may handle similar situations.

For those who have gone through hard times or encountered related problems, this book can provide that individual with perspective. Rosenblatt agrees in his theory, “literature may suggest socially beneficial channels for drives that might otherwise find expression in antisocial behavior” (p. 223). By addressing these topics that are often avoided, literature can prompt both thought and dialogue. A reader can connect with the characters and realize that they are not alone. If a reader is not allowed this opportunity to explore these emotions and know that it is okay to share their feelings antisocial or even destructive behavior is a potential consequence.

Similarly, Erik Erikson, notes the significance of literature for introspection. Erikson says that “the adolescent may recoil ‘to a position of strenuous introspection and self-testing which can lead him into a paralyzing border state this state consists of isolation, a disintegration of the sense of inner continuity and sameness, a sense of overall ashamedness, an inability to derive a sense of accomplishment from any kind of activity’” (p. 169). Adolescence is a difficult time, characterized by many different changes. Adolescents are experimenting socially trying to figure out who they are and where they fit and literature can help in their self-discovery.

Through Nicholas Dane and other characters, Melvin Burgess examines identity exploration in a way that adolescents can find relatable. Nicholas Dane goes from being an average, essentially carefree young boy to an abused orphaned teenager over the course of this book. Essentially overnight his life is completely different. He is thrown into an abusive environment where choice and opinions result in beatings. Later on, one of the only adults in the home who he has grown to trust begins to sexually assault him. Nicholas decides he will not let the assault define him and is determined to escape his aggressor. When he does escape, Nicholas is thrown into a life of crime in order to survive. Nicholas’ struggle to find himself in his new world can help readers as they strive to find their own identity.

Objectives, Teaching Methods, and Assignments

Academic content standards from:

Ohio Department of Education. (2011). *Academic content standards: K-12 english language arts*. Columbus, Ohio: Author.

Academic Content Standards for Eleventh and Twelfth Grade

Reading Process: Concepts of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies Standard (p. 32)

- Benchmark B. Demonstrate comprehension of print and electronic text by responding to questions (e.g., literal, inferential, evaluative and synthesizing).

Reading Applications: Informational, Technical and Persuasive Text Standard (p. 35)

- Benchmark A. Analyze the features and structures of documents and critique them for their effectiveness.
- Benchmark C. Critique the effectiveness and validity of arguments in text and whether they achieve the author's purpose.
- Benchmark E. Analyze an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

Reading Applications: Literary Text Standard (p. 39)

- Benchmark A. Analyze and evaluate the five elements (e.g., plot, character, setting, point of view and theme) in literary text.
- Benchmark B. Explain ways characters confront similar situations and conflict.
- Benchmark D. Analyze how an author uses figurative language and literary techniques to shape plot and set meaning.
- Benchmark E. Critique an author's style.

Writing Applications Standard (p. 45)

- Benchmark A. Compose reflective writings that balance reflections by using specific personal experiences to draw conclusions about life.
- Benchmark B. Write responses to literature that provide an interpretation, recognize ambiguities, nuances and complexities and that understand the author's use of stylistic devices and effects created.
- Benchmark D. Produce informational essays or reports that establish a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject, include relevant perspectives, take into account the validity and reliability of sources and provide a clear sense of closure.

Teaching Methods

- Students could write reflections before, during, and after reading *Nicholas Dane*. These reflections could reveal if and how their thoughts and perceptions regarding child abuse changed at all as a result of their reading.
- It has been said that *Nicholas Dane* is loosely based off of the novel *Oliver Twist*. Students could read *Oliver Twist* as well, comparing and contrasting the story lines, writing styles, and characters.

- Have students analyze the differences in Nick between the beginning and end of the book. Students can compare and contrast the relatively immediate effects of the abuse on Nick to the long-lasting effects on Bob Jones in order to promote a greater understanding of the impact of abuse.
- Have students discuss alternative routes that the book could have taken, had characters made different decisions surrounding the abuse. Also have the students brainstorm what to do in situations that seem as though no one will listen and how to combat that type of corruption in society.
- Students could look at the overall plot and its relevance in today's world. Students can discuss any thoughts or experience that they may have had with abuse or corruption. They could also research other instances of social corruption in the past or even the present and the implications of taking or avoiding action.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does Tony Creal manipulate his victims?
2. Explain the mental ramifications of Nick's abuse. How did his opinion of himself change? What are Nick's most prominent concerns?
3. Explain the dynamic between Nick and Oliver early on. How does this relationship change once the abuse begins?
4. What or who could Oliver symbolize? How is this representation used to further themes of the novel?
5. Do you think that Nick and Davey's experiences made them more susceptible to Sunshine as he introduces them to a life of crime?
6. How does the realization that Tony Creal had once abused Jones effect Nick?
7. What is the lesson to be learned in how Nick feels after he finally reports Tony Creal and others who work at the home?

Possible Objections

Edward B. Jenkinson (1986) identifies 60 common targets of censorship protest groups in "Appendix A: Common Targets of Censorship" from his book *The School Protest Movement: 40 Questions and Answers*. The novel *Nicholas Dane* by Melvin Burgess could potentially be targeted for: drug education, conflicts between children and authority figures, profanity, violence, description of sexual acts, negativity about authority, and the portrayal of nontraditional a family unit.

"Drug education" (p. 50)

As the story opens it is revealed that Nicholas Dane's mother Muriel is a heroin addict. Burgess (2010) describes her final experience as, "Heaven ran into her arm. There was nothing on earth like it" (p. 7). In a disturbing instance following Muriel's overdose, her best friend and fellow drug user named Jenny holds back giggles thinking, "Hope you enjoyed it, babe. The biggest hit of all" (p. 15). Jenkinson (1968) recognizes that many censorship advocates argue that such drug education through literature only "intensifies their desire to experiment with drugs." Instead, these disturbing scenes illustrate the negative, detrimental impact of drugs and how they can overtake one's life.

"Conflicts between children and persons in authority" (p. 51)

The main conflict in the story begins after social services places Nicholas in a home for boys. The authority figures in the home are physically, emotionally, and even sexually abusive toward the boys. Nick's initial instinct to fight back makes him a target of both the authority and other boys from the start. Nick struggles to cope with the trauma, knowing who to trust, and attempts to escape his new reality. Margaret T. Sacco (1994) claims that such novels "can give adolescents the opportunity to talk in third person about a problem that embarrasses them, and it can give readers the confidence that they can solve problems, assuring young adults that they are not the only ones who have fears, doubts, and problems" (p. 69). She states that students should be taught to "think critically and formulate their own values" (p. 69). Adolescents should not blindly accept all authority, but instead think critically about what is right in order to have a successful society.

"Profanity or any 'questionable' language" (p. 51)

While it is relatively infrequent, *Nicholas Dane* includes instances of profanity in dialogue. The vulgarities of the rough, intimidating Bob Jones in particular would likely be considered inappropriate in society. However, according to O'Donnell (1994), "What must be guarded against is any sort of restriction that will interfere with the freedom of expression and the free flow of ideas that are essential to the health, and indeed the continuing existence, of a democratic society" (110).

"Violence" (p. 51)

Violence is another factor of *Nicholas Dane* that would be likely to receive backlash. The boys in the home are frequently subjects of brutal beatings at the hands of persons in authority and there is violence amongst the boys themselves as well. In one particularly violent depiction, Jones learns that his girlfriend Stella has betrayed his trust and he beats her to death in a graphic scene. In no way does Melvin Burgess support such violence. Instead, he is sure to elaborately explain the injustice and negative ramifications of such violence.

"Passages that describe sexual acts explicitly, or passages or passages that refer to the sex act" (p. 52)

Tony Creal, who works for the home, is a pedophile that takes advantage of boys in the home. These sexual acts are referenced at various points in the novel, but Nick's first sexual encounter with Creal is described in detail. On another occasion, Nick is put in solitary confinement after making accusations of abuse and Tony Creal and two other men repeatedly rape him. Margaret T. Sacco (1994) argues that, "Teachers should use literature about people who are different to help teenagers develop compassion, understanding, and tolerance" (p. 67). By educating students on controversial topics such as sexual abuse, it is more likely that adolescents will react empathetically to victims rather than negatively.

"Negative statements about persons in authority" (p. 52)

Negative statements about authority figures are a given in this novel, as the plot is driven by a corrupt system. These persons in authority are physically, emotionally, and sexually abusive toward the children in the home. Accusations of abuse are not only ignored, but those who make the accusations, such as Nick, are often punished for their claims. The truth of the matter is that not all authority is just and good. Authority should sometimes be challenged and individuals should not stand by and watch injustice take place, but rather be instruments for change.

"Stories that do not portray the family unit" (p. 52)

Rather than the traditional two-parent household, Burgess (2010) reveals that Nick "hadn't heard anything about his dad for years, didn't even know where he lived." Muriel is introduced as a single mother caring for her son, Nicholas. Like Muriel, her best friend Jenny, is also a single mother of two children with boyfriends coming in and out of her life. Once again, Margaret T. Sacco's (1994) assertion that "Teachers should use literature about people who are different to help teenagers develop compassion, understanding, and tolerance" (p. 67) can be used to defend nontraditional elements found in *Nicholas Dane*. The fact is that not every family in today's society is a picture of the traditional family unit. Students should be knowledgeable about different dynamics in order to be tolerant of differences.

Why Novel Should Not Be Banned

The novel *Nicholas Dane* by Melvin Burgess, or any book of similar literary excellence, should not be banned from schools or libraries. The National Council of Teachers of English and The International Reading Association have prepared what they refer to as *Common Ground*, which defends books against censorship. *Common Ground* intends for those who advocate censorship to "reconsider your decision for the sake of your students, the ideals of education and knowledge, and also the freedom of speech and thought. We shall not be protecting our youth if we swathe them in ignorance, not shall we earn or deserve their respect, if we cannot place enough trust and faith in them to reason and respond on their own behalves" (p. 1). *Nicholas Dane* is a perfect example of just that. The book challenges students to think about difficult, but necessary societal

issues. By provoking thought books such as these have the potential to bring about change.

Similarly these organizations advocate that “schools should teach students how to think, not what to think. To study an idea is not necessarily to endorse an idea” (p. 1). Although this novel does address controversial issues, it is in no way supporting those issues. Instead, the book clearly characterizes child abuse as a problem that deserves attention and encourages readers to actively seek out change.

In addition to the moral implications surrounding the censoring of books, *Common Ground*, recognizes the legal aspects as well. Citing the First Amendment and Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the organizations assert that “All students in public school classrooms have the right to materials and educational experiences that promote open inquiry, critical thinking, diversity of thought and expression, and respect for others. Denial or restriction of this right is an infringement of intellectual freedom” (p. 3). These students have a right to have access to this quality literature, controversial or not.

In addition to *Common Ground*, The National Council of Teachers of English (1981) combats censorship in the article “The Student’s Right to Read.” The article proposes “Censorship leaves students with an inadequate and distorted picture of ideals, values, and problems of their culture” (p. 3). By ignoring real societal issues in literature censorship intentionally blinds students of harsh realities. This not only puts students at a disadvantage but society as well by robbing the population of potential advocates for change.

Jonathan S. Weil (1987) suggests, “Part of reality is that there exist many different peoples, ideologies, and problems. We must instruct students to accept open inquiry as a basic requirement of freedom” (p. 448). Advocates of censorship must recognize that these problems exist and that ignoring difficult topics will not make them any less real. We need to educate students about reality rather than establishing an artificial façade of society.

Banning the novel *Nicholas Dane* would be doing a great disservice to our youth and educating them about a topic of concern in today’s society.

Alternative Books

- Coman, Carolyn. (1995). *What jamie saw*. Arden, N.C.: Front Street.

Nine-year-old Jamie leaves his home after his mother’s boyfriend attempts to throw his sister against the wall and finds himself in a consistent state of fear. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

- Cunningham, L. *The midnight diary of zoya blume*. New York, NY: Laura Geringer Books.

- In search of herself, an adopted 12-year-old named Zoya begins a diary to cope with her fears. Recommended for grades 4 through 7.
- DeFelice, C.C. (2009). *Signal*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Twelve-year-old Owen moves to New York with his withdrawn father and makes friends with an abused young girl who could possibly be an alien. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.
 - Ellsworth, L. (2007). *In search of mockingbird*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

A young orphaned girl named Erin connects to her dead mother through the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* and learns about herself during her journey to find the books' author. Recommended for grades 8 through 12.
 - Haas, J. (1999). *Unbroken*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.

After her mother passes away, a grieving thirteen-year-old Harry moves to her Aunt's farm where her life is changed through her interactions with her colt. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.
 - Harlow, J.H. (2009). *Secret of the night ponies*. New York, NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books.

Thirteen-year-old Jessie, her family, and her dog rescue three victims of a shipwreck off of the island where she lives. She befriends the victims and they support her through her relationship with an abused child and her plot to save ponies from the slaughterhouse. Recommended for grades 4 through 7.
 - Harty, Nancy. (2009). *Watching jimmy*. Plattsburgh, NY: Tundra Books.

Eleven-year-old Carolyn witnesses her friend Jimmy being abused by his uncle. The abuse results in brain trauma and Jimmy's mother struggles to provide him with the necessary care. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.
 - Lowry, Lois. (2011). *Like the willow tree: The diary of lydia amelia pierce*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.

During the influenza in 1918, eleven-year-old Lydia loses her parents and she and her brother go to live with their uncle. Recommended for grades 4 through 7.
 - Magorian, Michelle. (1981). *Good night, mr. tom*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Tom Oakley has not been able to move forward from the deaths of his wife and child but when World War II brings about the evacuation of children from London, he takes in an eight-year-old named Willie. Willie appears to have suffered abuse and the two form a strong bond. Recommended for grades 6 through 9.

- Mills, R. (2011). *Charlie's key*. Custer, WA: Orca Book Publishers.

A young orphaned boy seeks to uncover the importance of a key that his father left behind. Recommended for grades 5 through 9.

- Nelson, S.K. & Desrocher, J. (2008). *Stay safe!: How you can keep out of harm's way*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications.

This book addresses the prevention of abuse including bullying, what is inappropriate amongst family members, the Internet, and public threats in order to promote safety. Recommended for grades 4 through 7.

- Neufeld, J. (1995). *Almost a hero*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Twelve-year-old Ben Derby is assigned to work at a day care center for homeless children. He believes that he witnessed one of these children being abused. When his efforts to seek help fail, he and his friends devise a plan to rescue the child themselves. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

- Newman, S.P. (2000). *Child slavery in modern times*. Danbury, CT: Watts.

Regards the labor and poor working conditions forced upon children around the world. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

- Parker, R.B. (2007). *Edenville owls*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.

Fourteen-year-old basketball player is suspicious when his English teacher shows up with facial injuries after witnessing an altercation in a parking lot. He recruits his basketball team to look out for his teacher. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

- Ross, R.R. (1993). *Harper & moon*. New York, NY: Atheneum Publishers.

Twelve-year-old Harper has a revelation after his abused, orphaned friend Moon joins the Army. Recommended for grades 3 through 5.

- Simons, R. & Stewart, S. (2011). *When daddy hit mommy*. Broomall, PA: Mason Crest Publishers.

Discusses domestic and child abuse in the home. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

- Spinelli, J. (1990). *Maniac magee*. New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company.

A young orphan named Jeffery Magee flees the unpleasant atmosphere of his guardians' home. He finds himself in a racially divided community and his feats bring the small town together again. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

- Vigilante, D. (2011). *Trouble with half a moon*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Thirteen-year-old Dellie develops a friendship with her neglected neighbor after her brother's death and finds a renewed sense of hope. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

- Weeks, S. (2006). *Jumping the scratch*. New York, NY: Laura Geringer Books.

Eleven-year-old Jamie Reardon and his mother move to a trailer park in order to help care for his Aunt and he attempts to deal with the abuse he experienced. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

- Woodson, J. (1994). *I hadn't meant to tell you this*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

A young black girl named Marie befriends a white girl in her class named Lena only to discover that her father is abusing her. Recommended for grades 5 through 8.

Bibliographical Information About Author of Novel

According to the British Council Literature website and an article by Elizabeth O'Reilly (2007), Melvin Burgess was born in England in 1954 but currently resides in Manchester. Burgess is quoted saying, "My books are about important, exciting issues. I look for an imaginative, adventurous way of writing about them that isn't preachy" (p. 3). He claims that his memories of his own adolescence enable him to strongly identify with teenagers and their struggles, who are therefore the subject of many of his novels.

Melvin Burgess is passionate about addressing the difficult issues that teenagers experience today. He states, "I think that writing for children is blossoming in all sorts of directions at the moment, and it's a very exciting area to be involved in. My work for teenagers comes about because I feel there is a great, big hypocritical gap between the kinds of media they are officially supposed to have access to, and what they actually do have access to, which means that in your teen years, you can hear or see almost anything, so long as you poach, steal or eavesdrop it, but very little that is real is addressed directly

to you. I want to address people directly” (p. 4). He feels so strongly about this issue that he makes these controversial topics a focal point of his work.

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