

2004/August JULIE BURCHILL- Publishing News

Julie Burchill. Where exactly do you start? Opinions differ wildly - she's been described on the one hand as 'the Queen of English journalism', and also as 'the hack from hell' - but one thing is pretty constant, she is never, ever ignored. For last almost 30 years, from her punk days on the NME to her most recent move from the *Guardian* to the *Times*, she has delighted in outraging her detractors and surprising her fans. And now? Now she's written a teenage novel.

Burchill is no stranger to the world of publishing, having produced many books, including the definitive S&F novel *Ambition*, plus newspaper and magazine columns and works of non-fiction, so why a teen novel? "It doesn't do me much credit - and I'm not putting myself down - but I didn't think the world was exactly waiting for another adult novel from me," replies Burchill.

"I had a No. 1 novel in 1989 but since then it's been pretty much downhill. Also, inside me there's no angst and no problems, and I think to write a great adult novel, like Graham Greene or Zoe Heller, you have to have a bit of angst inside you and I've reached a place in my life where I'm very happy and contented." When she thought about attempting a teenage novel, Burchill was, she admits, delighted when she found out they were half the size of adult novels, ergo she wouldn't have to "bang on for so long" and she also says she'd realised she hadn't properly grown up. "I've not tried to keep being young, I just haven't developed; my emotions, for good or ill, are teenage emotions."

For these reasons a novel for teenage girls seemed like a pretty good idea; here was an audience to whom she could be honest in a way she couldn't be in her adult novels, where, Burchill says, she was always trying to be something she wasn't. Her teen debut, *Sugar Rush*, has a very strong voice - a tad editorial sometimes, perhaps, but old habits - and she found it came very easily. "I normally write with the word-count on, but with this one not only did I not use it, when I finished I felt really bereft, and I thought 'I've

got life without [the central character] Kim now', and that did make me feel really odd."

While she has loved the experience so much this doesn't apparently mean we should expect there to be more teen novels on the way. "Once I've done a thing I get fed up with it, which is part of my immaturity, but I enjoyed writing this book so much more than any other since I can't remember when - I wrote it in about eight afternoons, really quickly. Normally I write under, I'll ring up and ask what's the least I can do and what's the latest date, but with this I turned in about 20,000 words more than they needed - and it was all cut! All the sex was cut!"

This, in true Burchill fashion, is more than a slight exaggeration. There's still sex - enough, probably, to raise certain eyebrows - but "a certain level of clammy intimacy" was excised by her editor, Sarah Davis, and she's very pleased it was as she now thinks it probably wasn't appropriate. "I am so not a diva - that's just part of my image - and I really like working with people, professional people who tell me what to do; because I've gone through life with a child-like disregard for convention, when people step in and tell me what to do it makes me happy. So when Sarah said 'Ugh, get your clammy mitts of those girls!' I liked it!"

Sugar Rush also had a lot of what could be called it's geographical content cut out as well, because this book has not only been bought by the States, it's also being made into a TV series for Channel 4 by the same production company who make *As if*. It's become, says Burchill, far more of a universal story and so had to have less local colour. "I'm very much in love with Brighton, and I put in too much detail, stuff like exactly how to get from Preston Park to Hanover. In the past I'd've stopped just for the hell of it [about editing], but because I was writing as a teenager, and was being given my head, I could somehow afford to be a more mature teenager, to write with a sensible voice."

It would be easy to assume that there's a strong autobiographical element to this book, but when asked if this was the case Burchill blows a raspberry and dissolves into her trademark laugh. "I wish! I wish I'd had a massive affair with a girl when I was 15, but I didn't - my bedroom was just filled

with underground records and I was so miserable.” The sensible side of Kim is also not based on her in any way, continues Burchill, then admitting that the absent, monstrous mother, Stella, is the one character who is at all like her. Although more monstrous. And actually, yes, if pushed, maybe there’s a tiny, tiny bit of her in Maria, aka Sugar.

“What I’ve tried to do with this book, without putting it on with a ladle, is say that this is the first generation that’s had to bring their parents up,” says Burchill. “I have an 18 year-old son, and from the time he was 12 he’s been more mature than me, and that’s a *shameful*, dreadful thing to have to say about oneself. When I was growing up the downside was my Mum seemed old when she was 35, but the upside was the appropriate generation was bringing the appropriate generation up. To some extent my son is older than both my ex-husband or myself and has always been the mature one in the relationship, which isn’t probably the way it should be. He’ll never, ever be the test of patience to me that I’ve been to him.”

The book has the effect of being an almost surgical slice through teen life at the very moment it was written, a kind of time capsule of the days and weeks during which the story is set - the music, the attitudes, the cultural references and the emotions of a time and a place. What kind of research did she have to do to achieve this? “It was a terrible sacrifice to make, because, goodness knows, I’m an intellectual person, but for 18 months I had to read magazines like *Sugar* and *Bliss* - and I’ve got three teenage godchildren.”

Burchill’s own opinion of herself is, only slightly disingenuously, that she’s a one-trick pony who’s been doing the same thing for the last quarter century. “If it’s any comfort, I, too, am sick of the sound of my own voice, and people think they can predict to the nearest weekend when I’ll be regurgitating a certain theme,” she says. “I was looking for something to do, apart from my column, that would allow me to lie on the sofa most afternoons yelling at the TV, but I wanted what I did to be socially relevant.” Oddly enough her e-mail to Sarah Davis, with three ideas for books, crossed with Davis’s asking whether she wanted to write a teen

novel. A nice piece of synchronicity that's led to an extremely entertaining book.