

## 1997/Aug FLUGGE/BURGESS - Publishing News

It's not often that a children's book gets more than a couple of grudging lines of review copy in any of our newspapers, but when Klaus Flugge suggested that Melvin Burgess write a hard-nosed, honest book for teenagers about the drug scene he had no idea quite how controversial it would be. This book, *Junk*, got feature coverage.

"I suggested the idea to Melvin because it was necessary and he was the man to write it, but it was never going to be an easy book to publish," says Flugge. "It's an emotive subject and a hard age group to reach - teens, if they read anything at all, buy adult books." Flugge, though, wasn't courting publicity with this book, he's not that kind of publisher - Burgess describes him as being incredibly supportive and quite unique - and he is vocal in championing his creators. With *Junk* he knew he had a book that, unlike anything before it, wasn't didactic and had been brought off brilliantly by someone who knew what he was talking about.

So was he surprised by the reaction to it? No, he was pleased, especially with the wider exposure the *Guardian Fiction Award* gave it, and all the interest led him to change the habits of a lifetime and let the paperback come out only six months after the hardback edition. "The publicity has certainly meant we've sold more than we normally would - but not that much more," says Flugge. "But Penguin, who have, wisely in my opinion, put the book out as a Penguin and not a Puffin, will reap the benefit more than us."

Burgess himself, who says that *Junk* was very much an experiment for him, had wondered whether he'd ever pull the project off. "It's at the very top of the kid's range," he says, "and not a lot has ever been done within the youth area in books - unlike TV and films - so I did wonder if I'd get away with it and it has kicked up a lot of dust." He also admits to it being a very exacting book to write (two years of hard slog), and then, when it was finished, of not being sure if it would be acceptable to teachers and librarians. "And they are the educators," he says, "they had to pick it up."

And pick it up they did, as was true of the majority of critics and reviewers who, with hardly a dissenting voice, praised what it has to be said is a tough and uncompromising novel. Almost the lone voice of discord, the man from the Campaign for Real Education, was given a bull horn by the press to air his opinions, which turned out to be rather unfortunate as he hadn't actually read the work he was criticising. Burgess felt sorry for him, while Flugge thought he and his organisation were out of touch. "I know teenagers, I know how they feel and what they read - I've got one myself," he says. "But I think the more debate, the more written about books like these the better, so they've done us some good...which probably wasn't what they intended."

Those who don't appreciate books like *Junk* and *The Tulip Touch* are in for a hard time as 'issue' novels aren't going away; they aren't This Year's Big Thing and will continue to be selected for high profile prizes and awards because, says Burgess, teen fiction is still a nascent and exciting area in fiction. "And what are judges supposed to select?" adds Flugge, "Point Horror? These books are written about today and it's not a *bad* thing, it's a response to a need children have - they know what's going on and want to see it reflected in their fiction."