



## Editorial - January 2003

Article Author:

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Editorial

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News and comment from the Editor.

Sometimes writers need a good publisher to save them from themselves. <!--break-->When a writer is well known and sells wells, the temptation for a publisher to evade this responsibility can be great. The large marketing spends currently behind the small number of top selling children's writers can mitigate against editors taking a forthright position when the next manuscript from a famous name is delivered. Turn down a book that is shoddily written or just plain shoddy and you may lose the author to another house. Better, perhaps, to turn a blind eye.

The world portrayed by Melvin Burgess is often bleak and persecutory ? teenage drug addiction in **Junk**, paranoia and betrayal in **Bloodtide** and compulsive behaviour in **Lady**. So far, however, his powerfully imaginative writing and often archetypal characters have enabled him to carry off challenging subject matter in a way that teenage readers can engage with. **Robbers on the Road\***, his latest book and one aimed at a younger age group, is a different matter.

Written for a young fiction series, ?Tudor Flashbacks?, **Robbers on the Road** is the story of two boys, Will and Francis, at school in Elizabethan times and how they get involved with a highwayman. Details of the beatings inflicted by their schoolmaster, Mr Japes, are described with a relish that belies the reality of such cruel treatment: ?It was a usual sort of whipping ? not too hard but enough to leave some good red stripes??; ?Francis showed us all his stripes ? there was blood.? But, most disturbingly, Burgess has Francis deliberately and repeatedly provoking the schoolmaster to punish him and then voluntarily placing himself ready for punishment. Perhaps an adult reader could understand that a very disturbed child might need to act out such a sado-masochistic scenario, longing for rescue. But no such psychological portrait is on offer in this crudely written short novel even if such a thing were appropriate to the age range for the series within which it is published. Instead, with **Robbers on the Road** we have a book that just dumps on children.

\* **Robbers on the Road** by Melvin Burgess is published by A & C Black at £8.99.



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