



Nicholas Dane

Books Reviewed:

[Nicholas Dane](#) [1]

Issue:

[177](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Peter Hollindale](#) [3]

Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

2

Set in 1984, **Nicholas Dane** is Burgess's modern updating of **Oliver Twist**. 'Times have changed a lot since Oliver Twist,' remarks the officious and incompetent social worker charged with the welfare of 14-year-old Nicholas, orphaned when his mother dies of a heroin overdose. So they have, and mostly for the worse in Burgess's grim scenario. The parallels with Dickens are numerous. For the workhouse, read Meadow Hill children's home, officially an assessment centre. For Fagin's den, read Shiner's run-down labyrinthine lair in Manchester. Like Oliver, Nicholas escapes from one to the other. At Shiner's hospitable, nefarious abode he meets Jones and Stella, exact equivalents of Bill Sykes and Nancy. Stella perversely loves Jones as Nancy does Sykes (expressing her feelings in a loud echo of Lionel Bart) and meets (very graphically indeed) the same fate for the same reason. There is even a lazy but good-natured version of Mr Brownlow waiting in the wings.

But Dickens's workhouse cannot match the horrors of Meadow Hill, where Nicholas enters a nightmare world of paedophilia, savage beatings, bullying and rape. This is of course Burgess's version of the physical and sexual abuse which went unchecked till recent times in some children's homes and the guilt by association of the police and social services. Burgess's equivalent of Fagin and his business practices comes as a relief from this, though Shiner's trade is not in pocket handkerchiefs.

The Dickensian parallel is cleverly worked, and the subject is both gruelling and important. Burgess could argue that, like Dickens, he is using fiction to expose an ugly truth. So he is, and it would be nice to report that he makes a good job of it. But the timely subject matter does not excuse the overall poor and erratic quality of the writing. Sometimes Burgess sounds like a social studies casebook, full of potted psychology (well-researched but clumsily introduced). Sometimes there are moral homilies of the kind that Dickens could do superbly and Burgess can't. The characters speak an unstable, synthetic vernacular 'now you hear it, now you don't' while the author's voice repeatedly points and nudges the reader to conclusions that most teenagers will reach unaided. Burgess is trying to be conversational and teacherly at once, and his throwaway style shows casual indifference to competent narrative English. The book's well-documented and appalling subject matter deserves something better.

Running Order:

3

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/nicholas-dane>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/177>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/peter-hollindale>