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Junk at twenty

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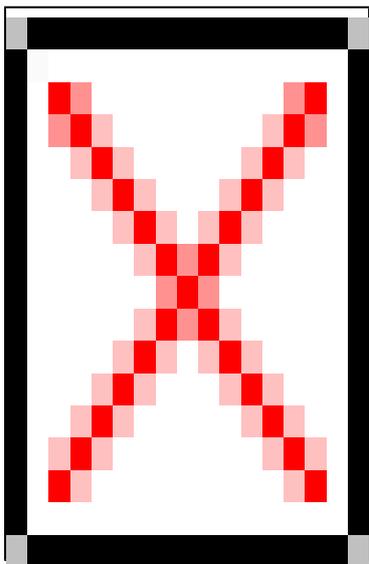
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Byline:

Twenty years since publication of **Junk**, **Geraldine Brennan** assesses its impact

It was a love story. Me, Gemma and junk. I thought it was going to last forever.

Twenty years after it was first published, Geraldine Brennan assesses the impact and influence of **Junk**, by Melvin Burgess.



Twenty years ago, **Junk** by Melvin Burgess and **The Tulip Touch** by Anne Fine were the must-reads. **The Tulip Touch**, highly commended by the Carnegie judges who gave the medal to Burgess, was also a trail-blazing novel in its depiction of the chaos caused by a manipulative and troubled adolescent. **Junk**, meanwhile, was ground-breaking in its in-your-face depiction of the art and science of using heroin, as told by teenage addicts and the adults who crossed their path.

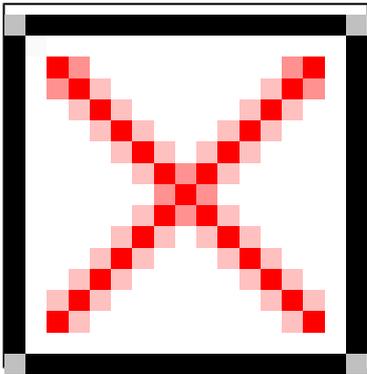
Burgess's reference to a young mother injecting heroin while breastfeeding made her veins prominent and accessible, and his accounts of the physical symptoms of withdrawal, appeared as uninhibited as much of the content in Irvine Welsh's **Trainspotting**, published three years previously.

While **Trainspotting** was written for adults, **Junk** is aimed at readers of the same age as its key characters who were missing out on GCSEs while immersed in the drugs scene in Bristol from the early 1980s. **Trainspotting** is also remarkable for its colourful swearing and frequent passages of comic relief; these elements are missing from **Junk**, which takes its subject seriously. Entertainment in **Junk** is provided by the lively voices of the young protagonists and the detail of a world that Burgess has observed closely.

He is honest about the pleasurable sensations that lead the young runaways Tar and Gemma to embrace heroin. In the first half of the novel, which outlines the path to addiction (Tar has alcohol abuse in the family; Gemma suffers terminal boredom in a seaside town that fears and despises its young people), life in Bristol with its network of squats, alternative communities and punk culture represents freedom, rebellion and fun as well as illegal substances.

This honesty about the lure of drugs and the sense of escape they offer provided the focus for most of the post-publication critiques of the book. The distinction between the fiction market for teenagers and that for young adults (over 14) was yet to be established and debate focused on whether younger teen readers would be disturbed by encountering the world of **Junk** fresh from reading Jacqueline Wilson and Brian Jacques.

Burgess's defence then was that only readers already aware of drugs would be drawn into the story. It is true that the



multiple narrators and the initial slow narrative build-up of the story require perseverance from readers before the second half of the novel explores the dark side of addiction and delivers a cautionary tale in the form of the outcomes for characters the reader by then cares about.

Life with heroin is shown as scary, dangerous and deadly (especially as Tar, Gemma and their friends are resorting to theft and prostitution to fund their habits) but above all rather dull. There is much waiting around to score, only able to interact with others doing the same, with friendships and relationships subservient to the drug. The message is clearly that addicts are boring to others and themselves. One of the most chilling chapters is the account of a group trip to a country cottage for a spell of DIY rehab, in which the friends' sense of shared purpose and mutual support is infected by distrust and betrayal.

Junk remains a useful text for group discussion or for young adults to read alongside parents because it offers its conclusions without moralising, through the observations of onlookers who chart Tar and Gemma's disappearance into the world of addiction. Some of these secondary characters actively try to help with varying degrees of success (Richard and Vonny); the cynical shopkeeper Skolly is briefly rattled out of his voyeur status; Tar and Gemma's parents are forced to examine their own lives and salvage breakthroughs out of shock and bewilderment.

There are comforting insights alongside the tragic waste of potential. Gemma, who had a stable family life in her recent past, is presented as having the most success at kicking the habit; Tar's path is much tougher but seems to end with light at the end of the tunnel.

The account has not dated: none of Burgess's young drug users can afford cocaine so heroin is likely to remain their drug of choice. Their circumstances are likely to be tougher today (free temporary housing has almost vanished) and their lives shorter.

The playlist that Burgess compiles in his chapter headings may have changed (even when life is bleak, his characters love their music) but the psychology behind addiction is constant and this account of attraction, denial and destruction still has much to offer us.

Geraldine Brennan is a journalist specialising in children's books and education. She regularly reviews for the **Observer** and has judged several literary awards.

Junk is published by Andersen Press, 978-1-7834-4062-7, £7.99 pbk.

The Tulip Touch by Anne Fine is published by Puffin, 978-0-1403-7808-5, £6.99 pbk.

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