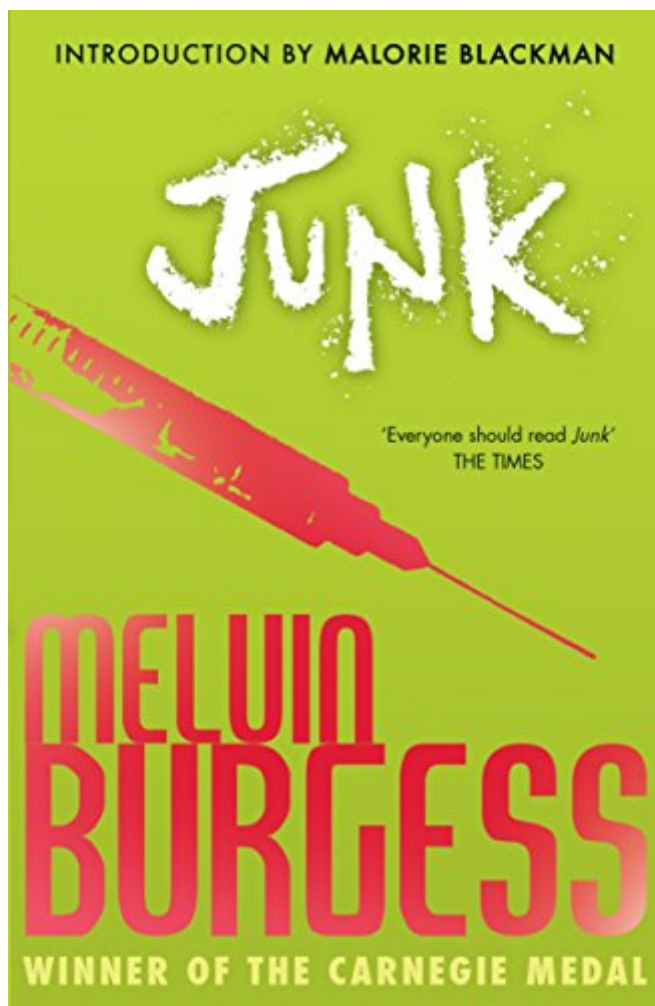


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# Junk



## Synopsis

The love story of two runaway teenagers, Gemma and Tar, and their struggles with heroin addiction. Melvin Burgess's most ambitious and complex novel is a multi-faceted and vivid depiction of a group of young people in the grip of addiction. It is told in many different voices, from the addicts themselves to the friends watching from the outside who try to prevent tragedy. Winner of the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I liked all about the book. The author used a style that made me addicted to the story. Depiction of such a hard and harsh reality was shocking and I believe that all teenagers should read this book. Prevention is the strongest tool. Learning from mistakes of others can open eyes to many.

Enjoyed it a lot. It was raw but showed me exactly how fast society is going. Totally recommend it

Awesome gripping realistic look at drug addiction

I enjoyed the story when I read it as a novel so I enjoyed the play. It seems appropo to the times even now but I think the music needs to be updated. My own experience was way back in the 90's, not much different than the 70's or 80's. I was small-town U.S.A. so found similarities with small town U.K..

Potential buyers should be warned that this pamphlet consists of material that will be offensive to many readers. It should not be confused with the book Junk English. Also, this is not really a book, but a ... pamphlet.

First, to clarify something - "Junk" and "Smack" are the same novel. It's just two different titles. Now, to get to the point: whatever you want to call it, the story of Tar and Gemma is a calculated, horrifying tale of young adulthood, and how easily addiction can rob a person of the rest of one's life. Tar and Gemma's relationship transforms from sweet young love into a sick, codependent lifestyle that continually drags them down into the mud, again and again, in a novel that only becomes increasingly painful to read as it goes along. The portrait painted of Tar, a character who is at first tremendously likable, depicts a terrifying downward spiral, and many of the gruesome images that Burgess writes about will stick in the reader's minds for years to come. Highly recommended.

"Junk" is an immensely difficult book to review, simply because it's so many different things to different readers. One reader may find it enlightening, sobering and realistic; another will find it dated and irrelevant. The subject matter tackles such a weighty issue that it's almost inevitable that readers would be divided. Admittedly, I have very little experience with the world of drugs, addition and rehabilitation, so it is impossible for me to deem the book's authenticity. What I can say is that Burgess's award-winning novel (winner of the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Children's Fiction Award, to be precise) had me engrossed from start to finish. What drives a person to take drugs? Why do they let themselves become so helplessly addicted? What goes on in an addict's mind? Why do they go to such lengths to get their drugs? Before reading, I had very little of idea as to what went on in the minds of people like those found in "Junk". By the end of the novel (though I don't confess to being any sort of expert on the subject), I had some inkling as to why some people do the things they do for drugs. Told in first-person narrative by a wide range of characters, the novel

mainly focuses on David "Tar" Lawson and Gemma Brogan, two teenagers who run away from home to Bristol. Finding a place amongst a group of anarchists, the two eventually move in with Rob and Lily, two fellow teenagers who get them hooked on heroin. From there, it is a downward spiral into desperate addiction, as Tar turns to shoplifting and Gemma becomes a prostitute in order to fund their need for heroin. There is some truly heartbreaking stuff in here, as the teens first try to convince themselves (and the reader) that they are completely in control of their lives, then justify their illegal actions, and finally find that they're unable to break their habit when a friend gets pregnant. An especially harrowing passage describes Gemma's feelings after a failed attempt at going cold turkey: "I knew I was really a junkie this time because, what's a junkie scared of? Not Aids, not overdosing, like you might think. We were scared because there might be no more smack at the other end." What is apparent to everyone but the ignorant teenagers is that the much-celebrated freedom from their parents is only temporary - soon enough they make themselves prisoners of a far more restrictive lifestyle, one that eventually strips away all their opportunities for a decent life. Their joy at their initial independence gradually gives way to a de-habilitating desire for heroin, and watching their world shrink down to a dismal cycle of drug abuse is (in my opinion) vividly portrayed by Burgess. Tar and Gemma's stories are closely intertwined, and it's hard to place blame on just one of the teens for the predicament they find themselves in. Tar is the first to run away, (understandable considering his abusive father and drunken mother) but he encourages Gemma to join him. Gemma runs away simply because she is not getting on with her strict parents, but her loud and stubborn personality (which often slips into obnoxiousness) is the reason Tar gives up the relative safety of the anarchists squat for the home of the drug-addicted Rob and Lily. Surrounding them are chapters devoted to others in their immediate circle: Richard and Vonny, the anarchists who do their best to help the teens, Rob and Lily, the hopeless addicts who live each day to the fullest, and even the teenagers' parents, who recount their devastation and sense of failure. These chapters help round out the point-of-view of the main narrative (for instance, Vonny recounts how spoilt Gemma is, a trait that Gemma certainly doesn't recognize in herself), as well as reveal information about grey characters - the storekeeper Skolly for example, seems like a helpful guy at first, though several chapters on we realize that he's unknowingly part of the cycle of addiction that entraps Gemma. The book was first published in 1996, and so many may feel that it has dated. However, it's worth saying that even though it was written in the 90s, Burgess sets it in the 1980s - as such, many components (such as the song lyrics that head several chapters) are intended to be old-fashioned. Whether this upsets your reading pleasure or not depends on how well you can relate to teenagers of an older generation. As I said at the

beginning of the review, "Junk" is a book that you'll find meaningful or worthless. The controversial subject matter means that audiences will have widely different opinions on how effective it is as a reading text, probably depending on their own experience (or inexperience) with drugs. There's really no way to tell until you've read it. For what it's worth, I found it a worthwhile read, and would particularly recommend it to parents who want to share the subject with young teens (thirteen to sixteen year olds, possibly) as Burgess describes drug-use, sex, prostitution, violence and unwanted pregnancy without ever resorting to gratuitous descriptions or by abandoning everything to despair, despite the ambiguous ending.

Winner of the Guardian Fiction Award and the Carnegie Medal, the novel *Junk* by Melvin Burgess successfully allows readers to gain insights into what teenage drug life was like in Bristol during the mid 1980s. The characters in the novel go through many struggles and the biggest struggle is the challenge to get off 'junk', or heroin. Throughout the novel, Burgess focuses on four characters in particular: Tar, Gemma, Lily and Rob. Lily and Rob are senior users of junk. Partying, taking drugs, even prostitution is nothing new to them. Tar, the protagonist, is sensible and responsible but unlucky. Unlucky to be born into a family with alcoholic parents; unlucky to have met Gemma, his girlfriend, who introduced him to drugs; unlucky to be the only one caught. He represents the typical teenager: confident to say 'no' to drugs but slowly being dragged in due to peer-pressure. 'The thing I have to remember is that I'm weak and that they're weak' said Tar after being in the 'detox' centre for a while. Is he strong enough to stand firm and quit drugs or is the temptation towards heroin too strong for him to handle? The novel *Junk* is easy to understand and is suitable for people of all ages. I would strongly recommend this novel to teenagers who are curious about drug-taking. It is a fast-paced book that depicts the daunting reality of drugs. What I find fascinating is the way Burgess describes the characters and the settings which provide the readers with an image that is very real. 'As for the people here... some are pure invention, some are seeded from real people and then fictionalized, some are fictitious with bits of real people stirred in,' commented Burgess in the introduction of his novel. Burgess, using the style of a teenager, writes his novel in the form of diary entries by different people. Furthermore, his style includes conversations and slang words which help make his fictional characters more realistic. To conclude, *Junk* is a compelling novel of truths about drug-use and certainly a must-read for teenagers.

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