

Smack Short Guide

Smack by Melvin Burgess

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Contents

Smack Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	10
Topics for Discussion.....	13
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	14
For Further Reference.....	15
Related Titles/Adaptations.....	16
Copyright Information.....	17

Overview

Smack presents a fairly realistic view of life on the streets in Bristol in the 1980s through the eyes of two runaways, Gemma and Tar. During the course of the four years the novel records, Gemma and Tar link up with drug addicts and participate in prostitution, petty thievery, and burglary in order to sustain their drug addiction. Unlike other books for young adults about drug addiction, this novel never preaches. Burgess uses the first-person perspectives of Gemma and Tar to effectively tell the story.

Other characters' voices are included to round out Gemma's and Tar's perspectives.

About the Author

Melvin Burgess was born on April 25, 1954 in Twickenham, Surrey, in southeastern England to Christopher and Helen Burgess. He did not enjoy school very much and often did not do well. However, he did enjoy writing and reading. His favorite book as a child was Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*. As a teenager he enjoyed fantasy novels, particularly Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* novels. Other writers who influenced Burgess as a writer are George Orwell and the German poet-dramatist Bertolt Brecht. Though he had some encouragement to write when he was a teenager, Burgess did not consider writing seriously until he was twenty when he started writing fantasy novels and experimenting with different forms. Later, as he thought more carefully about plot, his books improved.

Burgess lived on the streets of central London and Bristol in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s and worked at odd jobs in the building trades. He participated in squatting (living in an abandoned house) and his time on the streets gave him an opportunity to witness the experiences of heroin addicts. While Burgess himself was never addicted to heroin, his brother was. His experiences with his brother are the foundation for some of the incidents in *Smack*, which was published in England as *Junk*.

In the 1980s, Burgess married the dancer Avis von Herder and with her set up a fabric marbling business, all the while continuing to write. In 1990 his debut novel, *The Cry of the Wolf* was published. Since then he has published eight novels for children and young adults, most recently *Bloodtide*.

Burgess currently lives in Lancashire with his second wife Judith, his son Oliver, and his stepson Tom.

Setting

The novel is set in Bristol, England during the 1980s. During this time period, Bristol was suffering from an economic depression. Its heyday as a manufacturing town had declined. Many businesses failed, and as people lost their jobs, they had to give up their homes. Those economic circumstances underlie the actions of Richard in the novel.

As an anarchist he views his behavior as political action. He lives on the fringes of society, opening squats (abandoned houses) so that runaways and other street people will have a place to live. He also creates "lock-outs"—in the middle of the night Richard and his friends dress in costumes and squirt superglue in the locks of bank doors.

Eventually British authorities stiffened the laws about "squatting" and the practice was abandoned in the middle of the 1980s.

However, at the time in which the novel is set, squatting was tolerated without too much interference from the authorities. In the novel, as long as the characters are not caught breaking into the house, the authorities are willing to tolerate their presence in the house.

Burgess convincingly describes the life of runaways on the street. When Tar first runs away to Bristol, before Gemma has joined him, he is living very badly. He tries to sleep outside in his sleeping bag but gets so cold he ends up wandering around most of the night. He then discovers that people wrap themselves in cardboard boxes to stay warm. While the boxes are an improvement, Tar still is uncomfortable: The thing is, you're in public. People can see you all the time, even when you're asleep. Sometimes at night you wake up and the police are shining a torch into your face. I hated that—the thought of people examining you while you're asleep, all those strangers. I began to feel like something in a zoo.

Burgess's typical technique is to forego emphasizing the gritty details of Tar's experience in favor of developing the psychological experience. Though we understand that Tar is dirty, hungry, and uncomfortable, we also know that those experiences are less important to Tar than the exposure he describes in the quotation above.

Bristol also functions as "the big city" that offers opportunities for a "real life" to Gemma who seeks to escape her quiet middle-class life in the tiny seaside tourist town of Minely. Both Tar and Gemma view Minely as "the most awful dump" and "terminal." Gemma explains, There is a myth amongst the local traders that all the trouble in Minely was caused by the local kids. If someone bent a car aerial or turned over a wastebin on the seafront, they'd all gather together like gulls and mutter darkly about youths and no discipline and how the young people were ruining Minely. Of course they were quite happy to welcome any number of out-of-town thugs. They could run around the town vomiting, screeching and kicking wastebins over as long as they liked, and it was just youthful high spirits.



Gemma especially associates the town with her parents' rules which she sees as confining and unfair. When Gemma arrives in Bristol, she decides to quickly shed her identity as a good girl and to identify herself with the punk culture that appears in, but does not dominate, the novel. Punk culture shows up in the dance club Gemma visits early in the novel, in the clothes she buys to remake her identity, and in the lyrics of the songs that Burgess frequently uses as epigraphs to the chapters. Punk culture remains as a background to the events of the novel.



Social Sensitivity

What is most remarkable about *Smack* are the number of issues that are treated matter-of-factly rather than as issues to be discussed and developed as "themes." This book refuses to be categorized as a "problem novel," though it is rife with problems: alcoholism, abusive relationships, drug abuse, both hetero- and homosexual prostitution, premarital sex, teenage pregnancy, criminal behavior. All of these topics take a back seat to how Gemma and Tar develop as people. The lack of an authoritative narrative voice to condemn such behaviors is the cause of much of the controversy that surrounded this book when it first appeared.

It would not be accurate to say that Burgess is not sensitive to these social problems; however by presenting them by means of the characters involved in them, he requires the readers to use their own moral judgment and interpretive skill to come to some conclusions about them. Even an issue such as the use of squatting is not wholeheartedly endorsed (though Burgess himself participated in squatting—see the author's "A Note on Squatting" at the end of the novel).

Richard's political actions are undercut by Vonny who sees a need for more pragmatic rather than symbolic action. On the whole, readers themselves are left to draw their own conclusions about Gemma's and Tar's behavior.



Literary Qualities

The outstanding literary achievement of *Smack* is Burgess's development of ten distinctive voices to tell the story and the placement of those voices in such a way that they comment on each other. Gemma and Tar narrate just over half of the chapters. The other chapters are distributed among Skolly, the tobacconist; Richard, the anarchist; Vonny, Richard's girlfriend through much of the novel; Sally, Rob, and Lily, all heroin addicts; Emily Brogan, Gemma's mother; and Mr. Lawson, Tar's father. Each character has a distinctive voice that conveys a complex view of the situation. None of the characters seems to speak for the author.

Because there is no consistent narrative perspective in the novel, readers must recognize irony and think carefully about what the characters are saying. An obvious example is when Gemma explains directly to the reader that using heroin is just a part of life: "You poor brat, you've been brainwashed.

Look, drugs are fun. They make you feel good, that's all. Sure, they're powerful, that's why they're dangerous. So's life. If you're in control, then it's okay." However, by the end of the chapter, readers are skeptical that Gemma or any of the other characters is in control. Gemma reports that Tar had been painting a big dandelion on the wall but quit when they were doing heroin.

When they "gave up junk for that week he almost finished it." Gemma assures readers that giving up heroin is not hard: "It wasn't difficult, coming off. I could do it again any time. So long as I feel like that I know it's all right." However, we never see Gemma give up heroin until she realizes that she is completely out of control.

Other character yokes help to clarify what is actually going on. Skolly happens to witness the raid on the house and does not recognize Tar and only recognizes Gemma as the girl he used to know from the massage parlor. His comment that "she looked about forty" helps readers to recognize the ways in which the characters' versions of events might not be very accurate.

Similarly, Burgess uses Vonny and Richard to comment on what has happened to Gemma and Tar. Richard sees Tar several years later when he is trying to come clean and characterizes him as "shifty" and compares him to his earlier self: "He'd lost that open look he used to have about him quite early on, after about six months of leaving the squat, I'd say. It was funny. I hadn't actually liked him for years. I loved him when he first turned up. He had this way of trying to hide everything but it all came shining through anyway." When Gemma turns to Vonny for help after she has called the police, Vonny's assessment of Gemma puts Gemma's experience in a new perspective: "She looked like death. I sat on the bed and listened to her story, and I kept thinking, she's eighteen and I'm twentyfour, but she's so much older than me. She's an addict, she's fallen in love, she's slept with dozens of men, she's pregnant. She was only eighteen but I felt like I was sitting there listening to an old, old woman telling me what had happened to her when she was still young."



Burgess uses one character to comment on another but not until readers have identified with the characters and recognized a level of authority in their own accounts. In other words, Gemma's and Tar's chapters are not completely undercut by older, wiser, voices. Instead, Gemma's and Tar's versions are made more complicated by the versions of other characters which also have their own ironies.

The use of multiple narrative perspectives mitigates to a degree Burgess's use of other literary strategies such as motifs to unify the novel. The dandelion does appear periodically in the novel as a symbol of Tar's openness and vulnerability, but Burgess's use of the motif simply marks Tar's changes rather than signals a development of character.

Rather than use motifs to unify the narrative, Burgess organizes the narrative perspectives chronologically so that some overlap occurs and readers can maintain the flow of the narrative. For example, at the end of the chapter in which Vonny narrates her meeting with Gemma, Vonny calls Mrs. Brogan, Gemma's mother. The next chapter, narrated by Emily Brogan begins with her thoughts when she received the phone call from Vonny. While not all chapters are so closely linked (this one had to be because Vonny and Emily Brogan share no common experiences), enough overlap occurs so that the readers do not feel that they are reading a series of short stories.

The use of British slang throughout the novel may cause some confusion. However most of the unfamiliar words are listed in a glossary at the end of the novel. Some critics have argued that the language is not gritty enough to represent realistically the characters in their situations (i.e., the minimal amount of swearing and vulgar language) but they concede that Burgess might have felt obliged to limit such language in a novel for adolescents.



Themes and Characters

Smack is narrated by ten different voices, but Gemma's and Tar's voices dominate, which is fitting because they are the central characters of the novel. Burgess's strategy of using multiple first-person narrators demands that readers pay close attention to what the characters say about themselves, and each other, and demands that readers be sensitive to the irony of these statements.

Tar (his real name is David, though Gemma calls him Tar because he disapproves of her cigarette smoking) runs away from his home because of his alcoholic parents. His father, a schoolteacher, beats him. His mother manipulates him into hiding her own alcoholism by doing the household chores and protecting Tar from his father. Tar's father recognizes his wife's alcoholism and manipulative behavior but does not understand how to deal with the problems. So he beats Tar to try to prevent him from helping his mother.

Tar's situation is very difficult, and he has no help to deal with it other than Gemma's emotional support. His decision to run away is accepted as legitimate by Richard and Vonny. They are Bristol anarchists who support Tar, both physically and emotionally when he moves in with them at the new squat. They become Tar's surrogate family.

Tar is very sensitive and passive. He has none of the defenses that would protect him from difficult life experiences. One of the reasons Skolly, the tobacconist, wants to help him is because "he has no front" (33).

He is not fragile as much as willing to be led, unable to make decisions on his own.

His love for Gemma is at once a desire to replace the love he does not experience in his own home, as well as a dependence on someone who can make decisions for him.

Hence when Gemma leaves him to live with Lily and Rob, who are heroin addicts, Tar is devastated. It does not take him too long to rejoin Gemma at Lily and Rob's squat and to try the heroin that the three offer him.

Becoming a heroin addict only magnifies Tar's weaknesses. Any initiative he may have had is directed into petty thievery, shoplifting, and drug dealing. Burgess does not focus on Tar's criminal activities to a great degree, and readers are left with the impression that it is Gemma's and Lily's prostitution which is really the stable income that allows the foursome to buy heroin. Eventually, Tar begins to steal from Gemma and to hide rather than share any heroin he has. He is the first to admit defeat when they try to quit cold turkey and quick to lie about the amount of heroin he is using.

Tar's love for Gemma does motivate him to rise above the level of a junkie on occasion. When the house is raided by police, he protects Gemma by taking the blame. To avoid prison, Tar agrees to a stint in a drug treatment center. However, he is not strong enough to stay clean. At the end of the novel, after Gemma and Tar's relationship has



fallen apart and he is no longer living with her and their daughter Oona, Tar gets drunk and beats Gemma. He is clearly following in his father's footsteps, unable to deal with the complications of his life other than with violence.

On the whole, Tar never outgrows his weaknesses. While his vulnerability was attractive when he was younger and made people want to protect him, four years later, at the end of the novel, he seems only slightly more aware of his weaknesses and not any more able to deal with them. Despite making progress toward entering an art school and trying to start his life over again in Hereford with a new girlfriend, readers are hardly confident that Tar will be able to overcome his addictions and make a stable life for himself. He is still lying to the doctor in order to gain a prescription for methadone. He has not told his new girlfriend Carol that he sometimes takes "a handful of methadone - you know, as a drug." He still has a vague, unrealistic hope that Gemma will take him back. However, readers know that Tar is not seeing the situation clearly.

Compared to Tar, Gemma is a much stronger character. When Gemma runs away, she is not doing so to escape a situation in which she is a victim but to rebel against the rules her parents have established. From Gemma's point of view, her parents are unreasonable, limiting her activities and friends unfairly. And, to a certain extent the reader agrees with her. However her act of running away to Bristol is not one of self-preservation. She thinks of running away as having an adventure. Richard and Vonny disapprove of Gemma's decision. Though they are willing to allow her to live with them briefly, they soon suggest that she return home and try to get along with her parents.

In Bristol, she quickly finds the rules of Richard and Vonny's squat to be as restricting as those at home in Minely. In various ways she rebels in Bristol too - spending the one hundred pounds she stole from her father's bank account on punk clothing instead of contributing the money to the upkeep of the squat, complaining about chores, and distracting Tar from his. She eventually leaves the squat to move in with Lily and Rob. Lily is Gemma's role model, someone who seems to be able to violate the rules without guilt, who is "more herself than anyone else ever was."

Gemma's rebellion leads her to try heroin and to become addicted to it. She willingly follows Lily into prostitution, convincing herself that the job is no more degrading than any other job. However, once Tar is arrested, Gemma begins to cut back on her use of heroin and to look more carefully at what she is doing. She limits her prostitution and begins to think about coming clean so that she can have a child. Lily becomes a useful foil for Gemma's character at this point. As Lily degrades further, prostituting on the street instead of in the massage parlor she and Gemma originally used and shooting up heroin while nursing her baby, Gemma begins to act on her own.

When Gemma discovers she is pregnant, she realizes that the only way she can save the baby from the same fate as Lily's is to phone the police. Gemma is selfish enough to leave before the police arrive, so she does not suffer the same fate as the other characters. But because she is pregnant and that has been her motivation in phoning the police, we see that her decision as her first effective step toward a heroin-free life.



Gemma is the only character of the four who truly beats her addiction. She withdraws cold turkey. She reconciles with her parents and becomes a loving and careful mother to Oona, her daughter. At the end of the novel, readers see a Gemma who is just as strong as ever, but smarter, wiser, quieter.

Though both Gemma and Tar are heroin addicts, this novel is hardly anti-drug propaganda. Unlike other novels where drug abuse is central to the theme and the characters' developments, *Smack* is much more complicated. By utilizing the multiple narrators, Burgess offers a very complicated view of drug use, both its pleasures (which are documented early after the introduction of heroin) and its horrors. As critics have noted (both positively and negatively) Gemma and Tar do not try heroin until half-way through the novel. At that point readers know them as complicated people rather than as simple cardboard characters manipulated to convey the author's message. Their complications also allow room for other themes besides drug abuse.

Both Gemma's and Tar's backgrounds present the problem of how to relate to one's parents. Their different situations allow readers to think carefully about appropriate roles and interactions between adults and children. This theme is maintained by periodic phone calls between the children and their parents. While most of the novel is told through Gemma and Tar's perspectives, late in the novel Burgess includes a chapter told by Gemma's mother and one told by Tar's father. In both cases, readers clearly find that the parents are human beings instead of ogres, and they have weaknesses and concerns that their children do not understand.

Burgess also develops the theme of constructing one's identity. This idea is most evident in Gemma's development since she chooses her friends and activities self-consciously rather than simply accepting the situation she finds herself in as Tar does.

Gemma's admiration of Lily is an admiration of Lily's complete sense of self-satisfaction, her ability to flaunt society's rules and customs to the degree that she can walk unselfconsciously through the streets of Bristol with nothing on but a long string vest.

As Gemma says, "She was more real than anyone I'd ever met."

Underlying these more obvious ideas is the theme of listening with some sympathy and respect to the experiences and stories of people. By telling the story with various narrative voices, Burgess not only conveys an immediate experience, but allows readers the opportunity to identify with the characters. Tar's father explains, "Murderers, psychopaths, angels - everyone has a point of view. You don't have to agree with it but if you're going to have some sort of a relationship with them, you have to understand it." This strategy, plus the ambiguous ending of the novel, prevents readers from condemning the characters outright. Instead, readers see Gemma and Tar especially as complicated people who have lived through a difficult time of their lives.



Topics for Discussion

1. Is Gemma justified in running away?

How would you characterize her relationship with her parents? Are her parents justified in the rules they establish for her?

2. Who is to blame for Tar's miserable home? His mother? His father? Does Tar bear any responsibility?

3. Each of the narrating characters has his or her own weaknesses, biases, and flaws. How do Vonny's, Richard's, Skolly's, or any other character's problems affect their perception of Gemma and Tar?

4. Discuss Gemma's decision to make herself over as punk? What does this help us understand about her character?

5. Discuss Tar's development in the novel. How does he change?

6. Discuss Gemma's development in the novel. How does she change?

7. Why do you think that Tar is willing to try heroin? Why is Gemma willing to try it? What do their motivations say about their characters?

8. Is Gemma acting selfishly when she phones the police and reports the house?

9. Does Burgess make using heroin look attractive? Is that appropriate?

10. None of the characters seems to suffer any serious consequences for their numerous crimes in this novel. Is that realistic?

11. Discuss the role of adults and other authority figures in the novel. Explain why the adolescents in the novel do not respect them.

12. If the dandelions that Tar sees and tries to paint are symbols, what might they represent?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the physical and psychological effects of heroin addiction?
2. This novel was controversial when it was first published in Britain because some critics believed that it was inappropriate for adolescents. Agree or disagree with the critics' position and defend your answer using the text to support your position. See articles in For Further Reference for more information about the controversy.
3. Compare methadone to heroin. What does it do that helps the heroin addict?
Why is it more addictive?
4. Rewrite one of the chapters from your own point of view and in your own conversational voice.
5. What were the causes of the economic depression in England in the late 1970s and 1980s?
6. What was the punk music scene in England in the 1980s? Who were the important bands? What were the best songs?



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Related Titles/Adaptations

Smack was been adapted as a stage play and performed by the Oxford Stage Company and nominated in England for the Equity Award for the Best Show for Children and Young People in 1998. The novel is being adapted for a three-part TV movie currently under production. Many of Burgess's earlier novels are difficult to obtain in the United States and some are out of print. *Burning Issy*, a novel set in the seventeenth century, focuses on a young girl who befriends both white and black witches and is imprisoned herself as a witch. Another book by Burgess about teenagers living on the street is *The Baby and Fly Pie*, a futuristic novel about three street kids who intercept the kidnapping of the infant of a wealthy family and must decide what to do. Other books about drug abuse include *Go Ask Alice* (1971), the supposed diary of a middle-class teenager who is tricked into taking drugs. Alice Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich* (1973) portrays the effects of Benjie's choice to take drugs as a way of escaping the tensions in his home, his school, and his neighborhood in Harlem.

Like *Smack*, *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich* is narrated in multiple voices. For books about being an adolescent in Britain, try Aiden Chambers' *Dance on My Grave: A Life and Death in Four Parts*, *NIK: Now I Know: A Novel*, or *The Toll Bridge*.



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