

Anthony Burgess

by Rob Spence



English Association Bookmarks
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Scope of Topic

Anthony Burgess, who died in 1993, wrote over thirty novels, as well as works of literary criticism, musicals, poetry and a vast quantity of book reviews. In fact, it is for his literary fertility that he is best known. This *Bookmark* examines three contrasting novels which show the range of this fascinating writer. In the course of the discussion, it is hoped that the reader will understand something of

- i) the principal themes that recur in Burgess's fiction;
- ii) his ability to write in a variety of literary styles;
- iii) the diverse uses he made of the novel form.

BOOKS TO READ

A Clockwork Orange (1962); Penguin Books, 1996 (new edition)

Nothing Like the Sun (1964); Vintage Books, 1992

Earthly Powers (1980); Penguin Books, 1981

NOTES

These three novels show something of the range of Anthony Burgess, but can only give you a glimpse of his astonishing variety. He wrote spy novels, science fiction, comic novels, experimental fiction, novels in verse, historical novels, short stories and much more. Whichever of his books you choose, you are assured of a fascinating, inventive, challenging read.

A Clockwork Orange

This novel, published early in Burgess's career, remains by far his most famous work, largely because of the Stanley Kubrick film made several years later, which is still the subject of controversy and cannot be screened in this country. The film, although quite faithful to the novel in most respects, was based on the American edition of the book, and therefore omitted the events of the last chapter, in which the hero, Alex, is seen renouncing the violence which has characterised his life up to that point. The violent nature of some of the scenes in the novel, heightened by the brutality of some of the film images, has overshadowed the serious concerns of the novel, which explores the nature of good and evil and the question of free will.

Perhaps the most startling aspect of the novel is its style. From the opening paragraph, it is clear we are in a world very different from our own. The central character, Alex, introduces himself and his three friends, Pete, Georgie and Dim, the four of them constituting a teenage gang bent on destructive pleasures, but does so in a language significantly different from Standard English. The reader at first struggles with words like "droog", "rassoodocks", "skorry" and "horrorshow" but quickly you begin to enter this strange landscape, and the vocabulary becomes more and more intelligible as you progress. It is clear from the

language and from other references that the setting is a Britain where young people have become heavily influenced in their slang by Russian, and where violence has become a way of life for the drug-influenced teenage gangs who speak this "Nadsat" language. This vision of the future is perhaps one which we would not anticipate now, but must have seemed plausible at the time of writing, the height of the Cold War.

Alex, we learn, is an intelligent, clever leader of the gang. Unlike the others, he has a feeling for old fashioned culture, represented by his liking for the classical music which is the soundtrack to some of his excesses. The descriptions of the violent random attacks in which the gang specialise are startling in their brutality, but the effect is softened somewhat by the use of the nadsat slang, distancing the reader from the true horrors of the events described.

After a particularly brutal encounter with a writer and his wife, and an attack on an old woman, Alex is arrested and in turn beaten up by the police. He finds himself in jail and subject to a treatment, "Ludovico's Technique", which exposes him to horrific images and electric shocks in order to create an aversion to violence. The result of this therapy is to turn Alex into a kind of automaton, unable to exercise choice in his actions. It is this battle between free will and the social control of the repressive state that is at the heart of the novel. Alex is, evidently, completely immoral, and we probably feel no sympathy for him when he is imprisoned. Then, however, when the full horror of the treatment becomes apparent, we begin to sympathise with him. Burgess achieves the remarkable feat of making the reader identify with a totally unsympathetic character. It means that when he emerges from his prison treatment, we are on his side.

The world Alex returns to has changed: a lodger has taken his place at home, and two of his "droogs" have become policemen. As he moves to maturity and understanding, the reader wants him to achieve the state of free will he used to such destructive effect before, and in the final third of the book, we observe his struggle to regain that state. It is important to ensure that you read the complete version, and not the American edition with the missing final chapter, as the original ending leaves us with a totally different perspective on events. Indeed, it is arguable that the fuss over the film version might not have happened if Kubrick had used the original version.

In *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess explores a theme to which he returns obsessively: the battle between good and evil. He paints a frightening picture of an amoral, bleak future where life is valued as little by teenage thugs as it is by a corrupt government. Much of the symbolism in the novel revolves around the use of black and white, but the usual associations of those colours are blurred: this is a world of grey areas, with no absolutes. Burgess seems to stand on the side of freedom of choice, even if that freedom is the freedom to harm others, especially if the alternative is the brutal social control experienced by Alex when he undergoes his treatment. What lodges in the memory most, though, is the extraordinary technical achievement of telling the story through the first-person narration of Alex in the bizarre invented language of the "droogs". Here is a taste of Alex's vivid descriptive powers:

I take it up now, and this is the real weepy and like tragic part of the story beginning, my brothers and only friends, in Staja (State Jail, that is) Number 84F. You will have little desire to slooshy all the cally and horrible raskazz of the shock that sent my dad beating his bruised and krovvy rockers against like unfair Bog in his Heaven, and my mum squaring her rot for owwwww owwwww owwwww in her mother's grief at her only child and son of her bosom like getting everybody down real horrorshow.

A Clockwork Orange is a dazzling *tour de force* which by turns enralls, disgusts and amuses. It is challenging reading, but well worth the effort.

Nothing Like the Sun

Burgess was an accomplished literary critic, especially when writing about modern figures such as D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. He also, however, had great affinity with another prolific, inventive writer, Shakespeare. He wrote a well received biography of the bard, and, to mark the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, published this "novel of Shakespeare's love life." Using the very few documentary sources relating to Shakespeare's life, Burgess constructs a thoroughly believable portrait of Elizabethan and Jacobean life. Burgess's extensive knowledge of the history of the English language is apparent throughout as he reconstructs the lively, bawdy, playful dialogue which permeates the book. This is not a straightforward historical novel, but a very modern, inventive and amusing tale which uses as a framework the character of a contemporary English teacher giving his final lecture to a group of overseas students. He is drunk, and becomes progressively drunker through his lecture, which imparts a certain wildness to the narrative.

We follow Shakespeare's progress from the gauche young man of Stratford to his success in the new theatrical world of London, from his first encounter with Anne Hathaway to his relationship with the mysterious dark lady of the sonnets. On the way, the novel is populated with the vivid portraits of Shakespeare's contemporaries: characters from the theatre, such as Burbage the leading actor, and Henslowe, the actor-manager; his errant wife Anne Hathaway, and his cheating brother Richard; the aristocrats with whom Shakespeare became acquainted in London, such as the Earl of Southampton; but most of all, it is a portrait, warts and all, of Shakespeare as a passionate, bawdy, dynamic, life-affirming man, the centre of attention in the London literary world of his day. Burgess moves from third person narration, to a kind of stream-of-consciousness style in which we are privy to Shakespeare's innermost thoughts, to diary entries and finally in his last sickness to semi-coherent ramblings. This mixture of narrative modes is never perplexing, however; Burgess is able to guide the reader carefully through the various voices, producing a pleasingly complex whole.

The world Shakespeare inhabits is vividly described. This is a world where death is an ever-present danger, whether from the plague or from an alehouse fight. Burgess relishes the richness of the Elizabethan language, and manages to convey the flavour of both the intellectual word-play between Shakespeare and his aristocratic patron, and also the earthy, argumentative relationship between Will and Anne.

This is by no means a pretty portrait. Shakespeare emerges not as our dignified national poet, but as a man of common appetites and failings, particularly in his love life. Burgess revels in the sights, tastes and smells of seventeenth century life; reading the novel is a sensuous experience, as the reader becomes immersed in the marvellously realised scenes of low and high life in Stratford and London. As is the case with much of Burgess's fiction, the language used here is appropriate to the situation, and has not been made artificially innocuous. Those who are easily offended by swear words are forewarned. Having said that, the language is entirely in keeping with the story, and the verbal inventiveness which is such a characteristic of Burgess's work is present throughout in this novel, strongly suggesting the atmosphere of the heady times in which Shakespeare lived.

Earthly Powers

Burgess's most acclaimed novel in the later phase of his career was this sprawling narrative, six hundred pages long, with a time span covering most of this century, and a cast of characters which included many historical figures. The central character is Kenneth Toomey, an eighty-one year old novelist and playwright, identified by critics as being based on Somerset Maugham, the famous British novelist who died in 1965. Toomey, who is the novel's narrator, seems to be well-placed to observe some of the most memorable events of the century: thus, we are with him in the prohibition era in America or in Nazi Germany, and we encounter many well-known historical figures whose real lives are entwined with Toomey's.

Toomey is homosexual, and this makes him an outsider, a mordant observer of events, which he recounts in prose which is by turns delicate and earthy. Toomey's counterpart in the novel is Carlo Campanati, a priest whose brother marries Toomey's sister. The novel chronicles Carlo's rise to the papacy in parallel to Toomey's literary career, and Burgess skilfully entwines the real and the fictional to present an extremely believable version of recent history. The focus of the novel, as in *A Clockwork Orange*, is on the nature of good and evil, and the value of free choice. Toomey's fatalistic acceptance of the hand life has dealt him, and Campanati's belief in a real and active devil form opposing points of view in a debate which is played out against the backdrop of world events.

Burgess's original title for the book was *The Prince of the Powers of the Air*, a reference to a description of Satan in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and there is a sense of the presence of evil as an absolute force in many of the incidents in the novel, none more so than when Carlo Campanati seems to conjure up a rat which represents the devil, and which he then dismisses. These elemental forces are fully integrated into a realistic novel which makes full use of the broad canvas on which it is painted, and which allows Burgess full scope to produce a typically exuberant and linguistically challenging narrative.

In *Nothing Like the Sun*, Burgess was at pains to convey the flavour of seventeenth century life through authentic sounding dialogue. In *Earthly Powers*, the reader is shown the full range of Burgess's linguistic knowledge in a twentieth century setting. The realistic exchanges between the international cast of characters feature contemporary slang, and many references in languages other than English. Rather as with *A Clockwork Orange*, this recourse to other languages can be off-putting at first, but even the reader with little knowledge of European languages will be able to understand much from the context. This lack of compromise is typical of Burgess's approach to fiction: he demands an active reader.

Earthly Powers is an excellent place to begin your acquaintance with Anthony Burgess. Although longer than nearly all of his other works, it rewards the committed reader, who will be immersed in dramatic and farcical events in turn, and will come to relish the rich language used throughout. Burgess, throughout his career, was a professional man of letters, and his knowledge of the capabilities of English shines through all he wrote. Although *Earthly Powers* is much less experimental than *A Clockwork Orange*, we can still see typical Burgess touches on every page. The way in which the idiosyncratic habits of speech are used as devices to characterise people, the use of intriguingly obscure, but always apposite vocabulary, the swift changes of scene, the constant references to the underlying large themes, the delight in the sheer variety of language; all of these features are typical of Anthony Burgess.

CONCLUSION

These three novels show something of the wide range of this writer, an author showered with honours overseas, but who rarely received the recognition his work deserved in his own country. All of his novels, and these three are merely representative, present the reader with an intellectual challenge. They are not easy, but they are certainly rewarding.

FURTHER READING

The following novels will show you more of Burgess as a writer of many parts. Burgess's career cannot easily be broken up into sections. He produced an array of work in different styles and genres throughout a prolific thirty five year period. These examples are chosen to be complementary to the novels discussed above. All are available in paperback.

The Wanting Seed, a novel set in future Britain where overpopulation has caused the government to use oppressive measures of control.

A Dead Man in Deptford, which does for Christopher Marlowe what *Nothing Like the Sun* did for Shakespeare.

Any Old Iron, a saga which traces the lives of a group of interconnected Welsh and Russian families over the years, and the strange power of King Arthur's sword in their lives.

CRITICISM

The only readily available books on Burgess are

John J. Stimson, *Anthony Burgess Revisited*, Twayne, 1991. An excellent general survey of Burgess's work.

Harold Bloom (ed.), *Anthony Burgess: Modern Critical Views*, Chelsea House, 1987. This is a collection of essays on the major novels, including *A Clockwork Orange* and *Earthly Powers*.

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