

Billy Elliot

Melvin Burgess



About the author

Billy Elliot is originally a British film (2000) directed by Stephen Daldry. The screenplay was written by Lee Hall and then adapted as a novel by Melvin Burgess, who is a popular and prolific writer of young adult fiction. Some of his works are *Junk*, *Bloodtide* and *Doing It*.

Summary

Billy Elliot is the son of a poor coal miner in Northern England who is very different from all the other boys: he prefers dancing to boxing and he wants to become a ballet dancer!

Chapter 1: Billy, whose mother has died, stays at home taking care of his grandma, Nan, while his father and brother are on strike on the picket line fighting for the coal mines not to be closed.

Chapter 2: Billy's father, Jackie, worries about his country and about the future and particularly about his son, Billy, because he is different from other boys. When Jackie sees Billy dancing round the boxing ring instead of fighting, he gets very angry.

Chapter 3: After taking his boxing lessons, Billy sees the girls in Mrs Wilkinson's class across the hall. As he watches them, he starts making the same ballet moves and he soon ends up in the ballet class learning how to spin and even wearing ballet shoes himself.

Chapter 4: Jackie worries about his two sons. Tony is always angry and acting crazy trying to start a fight with the scabs, since they want to break the strike. Billy spins round in circles saying he is practising a boxing move but he looks like a ballet dancer. Jackie learns Billy has not taken his boxing classes for months and has kept the money.

Chapter 5: Jackie sees Billy taking ballet lessons and gets furious. They both argue and Billy runs away to Mrs Wilkinson's house. She tells Billy that he should audition for the Royal Ballet School and that she will teach him.

Chapter 6: Billy visits his friend, Michael, who is wearing his sister's clothes and lipstick. Billy tells Michael that he wants to be a ballet dancer in London. They both realise that they are different from the other boys of their age in their town.

Chapter 7: Billy starts practising for a ballet audition and gets very nervous as it gets closer. Jackie and Tony have a fight and Tony runs away. One night Billy sees his dead mother, Sarah, and feels that she wants him to dance at the audition.

Chapter 8: Tony attacks a policeman's horse and ends up in jail. Jackie and Billy go to court to fetch him and Billy misses his audition. Mrs Wilkinson gets furious and tells the Elliots what has happened. Tony can't believe that his brother wants to be a ballet dancer.

Chapter 9: Michael, in a dancing skirt, and Billy, in his ballet shoes, stand in the boxing ring. While Billy is showing his friend some ballet moves, his father enters the hall and sees them. Billy jumps, spins and dances for his father, who leaves the hall upset but very surprised with what he has seen.

Chapter 10: Jackie wants to help Billy audition in London and he knows that he needs a lot of money for that. He sells Billy's mother's ring and decides to go back to work in the mines although he will become a scab.

Chapter 11: Tony is shocked to see his father inside the bus entering the mines. He tries to stop him but Jackie tells him in tears that he is doing it for Billy's future. Tony persuades his father not to work in the mines and they both ask George, Billy's former boxing teacher, for help. They soon organise a raffle to raise money for Billy's audition.

Chapter 12: Jackie and Billy go to London. Billy is very nervous and feels he doesn't belong there. When he finishes the audition, he is sad and hits a boy. The teachers call Billy and Jackie into the audition room. They tell Billy off because of what he has done and they also ask him some questions.

Chapter 13: All the family is nervous after the audition and, when the letter from the Royal Ballet School finally arrives, they are all gladly surprised to learn that Billy has got into the school. However, there is no party because the strike ends on that day and the workers have to go back to work because the bosses have won.

Chapter 14: Billy leaves for London and says goodbye to Mrs Wilkinson, his friends, neighbours and especially his mother.

Chapter 15: Time goes by and Jackie and Tony go to London to see Billy on his first night as the main dancer in the Royal Ballet Company. Billy dances wonderfully and they are all proud of him.

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Background and themes

Billy Elliot is set against the background of the 1984/5 Coal Miners' Strike in Northern England during Margaret Thatcher's administration, a defining moment in the economic and social history of the United Kingdom. The story shows how the son of one of these miners overcomes social prejudice to make his dream of being a ballet dancer come true.

Some of the main themes of the film and the book are:

Coming of age and self-discovery: Billy Elliot explores the growth and change of a pre-adolescent boy and his own discovery and acceptance of the fact that he is different from other boys of the same age.

Fulfilling one's dreams: Billy's initiation into adolescence faces him with the challenge of standing up for his beliefs and dreams regardless of his social and economic background and the expectations of society.

The father-son relationship: Two generations clash due to their conflicting views of life, gender roles and the future. "Lads do football, boxing, or wrestling – not friggin' ballet!" complains Jackie when he learns that his son wants to be a ballet dancer. However, as Billy finds the courage to rebel and shows his talent to Jackie, the father overcomes his prejudices and decides to support him at any cost.

Gender and class issues: *Billy Elliot* presents class stereotypes exploring diverse socio-political realities. The Elliots represent the hardships of working-class miners during the mid-eighties in Northern England; the Wilkinsons reflect how the middle class is practically unaffected by such political developments in spite of being the victims of unemployment as well, and posh Londoners at the Royal Ballet School show how the upper class remains indifferent to what is happening at the time.

In addition, *Billy Elliot* questions gender stereotypes. Billy must struggle against society and his own family, since it is generally believed that ballet is either for girls or for gay boys. Both his father and brother are shocked when they find out that Billy prefers ballet to boxing and that his best friend, Michael, is probably gay. But Billy never gives up and succeeds in challenging all stereotypes and getting support not only from his family but also from his community.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- 1 **Discuss:** Have students talk about boys and ballet dancing.
 - a Get students to look at the cover and answer these questions: *How old is the boy? What is he like? What is he doing? What do you think he does everyday? What does he like? Why? How different does he look from other boys?*
 - b Divide the class into two groups. Tell Group One to write down what hobbies, sports, activities, etc. boys generally do. Group Two should write what girls generally do. Ask students to read their lists out loud and write the points on the board. Have your students look at the board and discuss why there are such differences.
 - c Tell your students that they will read a book about Billy Elliot, a ballet dancer, and to answer the same questions in Activity 1a. Discuss whether or not their perceptions have changed and why.

Introduction

- 2 **Discuss:** Have students talk about strikes and pickets.
 - a Ask students to read the Introduction and underline what they learn about Billy's family and circle what they learn about his country.
 - b Bring pictures of coal mines and miners and discuss their working condition and the problems they may have. Ask students to imagine what would happen in Billy's town if they closed the mines forever: *How would people be affected? What would you do if you were Billy's father and brother?*
 - c Ask students whether or not workers go on strike or on picket lines in their home towns: *What do they ask for? Which results do they get?*
- 3 **Guess:** Billy Elliot was originally a film which has been made into a book. Divide the class into those who have/haven't seen it. Have each group retell or predict what the story is about using the words below: *ballet dancer miners poor family small town twelve-year-old boxing strikes pickets*
- 4 **Tie in with films:** Watch the first three to five scenes of the film *Billy Elliot* with the sound off. Have students choose one of the scenes and imagine what the characters say. Play the film again and check whose guess was closest to the original.

Chapters 1–3

While reading

- 5 **Pair work and role play:** Have students choose between any of the two situations below and get them to dramatise them:
 - a *Imagine you are Debbie and Billy. Continue their conversation on page 10 on boys and ballet dancing.*
 - b *Imagine you are Billy and his father after Billy's terrible boxing display with the strong fat boy. Write out what they both say.*

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After reading

6 Guess: What will happen?

Write five questions you would like to know about how the story goes on. Make sure each question is about a different character.

Chapters 4–6

While Reading

7 Research: Have students research the miners' strike. Give your students the following instructions.

- In groups, re-read pages 13–14 and discuss what you know about the miners' strike and strikes in general.*
- Decide what you would like to learn about the miners' strike in the United Kingdom in Thatcher's time. Use the library or the Internet to find out.*
- Tell other students what you know.*

After reading

8 Discuss: Have students talk about being different. Guide your students with the following questions. In what way are Billy and Michael different from other boys? How does each of them feel about this? Why? What does Billy's attitude teach us?

Discuss why it is important to respect differences.

9 Guess: Who's who? Have students play this game. Choose one of the characters in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Walk around the class and describe yourselves and what you do. The others must guess who you are.

Chapters 7–9

While reading

10 Pair work and role play: Get students to plan and dramatise this conversation.

Imagine you are Jackie and Tony. Jackie has just hit Tony and the boy has left the house.

Student A: You are Jackie. Stop Tony and tell him you are sorry. Explain to him why you are so worried.

Student B: You are Tony. Tell your father why you are so angry with him and about the situation.

11 Write: Get students to retell part of the story changing the point of view.

In Chapter 8 Tony tells us what happened, how he felt and what everybody did. Imagine you are one of the policemen. Tell his view of the story. How did he feel at the picket lines? What does he think of the pickets and the scabs?

After reading

12 Write: Get students to see the story through Michael's eyes.

Imagine you are Michael. You write in your diary what happened at the hall: what you told Billy, what Billy told you, how Mr Elliot felt when he saw you and Billy in the boxing ring. Write your feelings about all this.

Chapters 10–12

While reading

13 Pair work and role play: Get students to plan and dramatise this conversation.

Look at the picture on page 36. Imagine you are Tony and Jackie.

Student A: You are Jackie. You are crying. Your son comes to you. Tell him how you feel.

Student B: You are Tony. You have never seen your father so sad. Give him ideas. What can you do?

After reading

14 Write: In groups, have students write the following and then read it aloud to the rest of the class. Do they agree?

Imagine you are the five teachers in the audition. Write what they all said after they saw Billy dance. Write different views.

Chapters 13–15

While reading

15 Guess: What happens next?

Before you read Chapter 15, discuss how the lives of Billy, Jackie, Michael and Tony will change in the few months after Billy leaves. Write ideas for a chapter that could be included in the book and decide where you would put it.

After reading

16 Artwork: In groups, get students to draw and write a storyboard on their favourite chapters.

17 Role play: Have students act out these situations.

Imagine Debbie and Billy meet before he leaves. What do they say?

18 Discuss: Have students talk about the film. If you have access to the film video or DVD, you can discuss scenes in *Billy Elliot* and related films. Here are some suggestions.

- Play the film *Billy Elliot*. Watch the scene in which Billy meets all the boys and girls that will dance at the audition in the dressing rooms of the Royal Ballet School. Discuss how they treat him and the effect that this has on his audition.
- Watch the scene in *The Full Monty* (1997) in which the aspiring male dancers stare at a tape of Jennifer Beals in *Flashdance* (1983) and compare this to the scene in which Billy dances at the audition.
- Watch the film *Brassed Off* (1997) and compare the situation of the coal miners to that in *Billy Elliot* and how the arts help people escape and even improve their difficult circumstances.