

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.

Billy Elliot

Photocopiable

While reading

Chapters 1–3

- 1 **Who said what? Work in pairs. Imagine who said the sentences below and when.**
- 'He doesn't answer my question because I'm right.'
 - 'He doesn't want to fight for us because he is afraid.'
 - 'I have never seen anyone dancing instead of fighting. I can't believe this.'
 - 'This boy can join the class. I'll get him some shoes.'
 - 'If they see these shoes they will be very angry.'

Chapters 4–6

- 2 **Underline the wrong information in the sentences and correct them.**
- Jackie was afraid that Tony might go to prison.
 - When Tony and Jackie saw Gary Stewart at the supermarket, he had a lot of money.
 - On Thursday morning the picket line was bigger.
 - When Billy visited Michael, he was wearing a red dress.
 - Billy's dad told him to be proud that he was different.

Chapters 7–9

- 3 **Billy writes about the things that worry him and make him happy but some information is missing. Finish the sentences.**
- Miss is a very good teacher and person. Today, after she read my mum's letter ...
 - We have no money and I'm tired ... bread every day.
 - Tony is angry with Dad because he believes he is ...
 - Miss is strange. She is very nice, but today she shouted at me because ...

Chapters 10–12

- 4 **Match and complete the sentences. Write 1–5.**
- When Mrs Wilkinson offered money to Jackie ...
 - Jackie thought that his wife, Sarah, ...
 - The bosses at the mine let Jackie leave because ...
 - George said that they had never ...

- Mrs Wilkinson and George said they would ...
- ... he said he wouldn't take it from her.
- ... give Jackie and Tony all their fifty pence from their classes.
- ... they saw he was ill.
- ... helped any ballet dancer before.
- ... wanted Billy to be a dancer.

Chapters 13–15

- 5 **Underline the mistakes in the sentences and correct them.**
- Gary Stewart was Tony's boss.
 - If Tony found out about the money he would call it good money.
 - Billy's father thought that his son couldn't win against such good dancers.
 - After Billy read the letter, he started laughing.
- 6 **Are these right (3) or wrong (7)? What and who did Billy see on his last day in Everington?**
- the head teacher at school
 - the church
 - George
 - the scabs
 - his best friend

After reading

- 7 **Pair work: Imagine Billy is on TV. With another student, ask and answer questions.**
- Student A: Ask Billy about his childhood, his family, his town, his ballet classes, his best friend, his first girlfriend, the most difficult and the best moments.
- Student B (Billy): Answer all the questions telling things you have never told anyone before.
- 8 **Write: What does Billy think?**
- Imagine you are Billy's grandmother. Write out your feelings in your personal diary. Write about your daughter, your two grandsons, the strike, etc.
 - What did Billy think before, while and after reading the letter from the Royal Ballet School? Write his thoughts.

Billy Elliot

Photocopiable

Chapters 1–3

1 There are mistakes these sentences. Write the correct information.

- a Jackie, Tony and Billy are interested in the same things.
- b Billy is the first one in the family to box.
- c Jackie believes pickets can stop the government.
- d Jackie and Tony stand on the picket lines to hurt the scabs.
- e Nobody danced in Billy's family.

Chapters 4–6

2 Choose the right sentence. Write a or b.

- 1 Billy tells his father that he is practising a spin because ...
 - a it is a boxing move.
 - b he likes dancing.
- 2 When the fat boy knocked Billy down ...
 - a George started shouting and left.
 - b Jackie stopped going to the club.
- 3 Billy's grandmother ...
 - a was sad that Billy wanted to be a dancer.
 - b took ballet classes when she was young.
- 4 Mr Wilkinson believes that ...
 - a the miners can't win.
 - b boys shouldn't dance.
- 5 Michael doesn't want to dance because ...
 - a he's bad at it.
 - b he doesn't want the other boys to laugh at him.

Chapters 7–9

3 Complete with the correct word.

hammer spin ballet audition pickets hall

- a Billy and Mrs Wilkinson practised very hard for the
 - b Mrs Wilkinson told Billy to think of his mother and to do the biggest, highest
 - c The police rode their horses behind the and hit them on their backs and heads.
 - d Jackie and Tony were arguing because Tony had a big in his hand.
- 4 Are these sentences right (✓) or wrong (X)?
- a Mrs Wilkinson decided that Billy should dance to the song that his mother liked in his audition.
 - b Billy was very frightened when he saw his father and brother fighting.
 - c Tony attacked the policeman's horse with a hammer.

- d When the policemen were running after Tony, Billy tried to tell him which way to go but Tony couldn't hear him.
- e Billy was very angry when Mrs Wilkinson hit him on the face.
- f The family needed a fire so Billy's dad broke the table into pieces.
- g When Billy and Michael were dancing in the boxing ring, Billy's dad entered the hall and was shocked to see them.

Chapters 10–12

5 Choose the right words.

- a When Jackie realised how good at ballet Billy was, he decided to ask Mrs Wilkinson / George for help to raise more money.
- b Jackie sold the family piano / Sarah's wedding ring.
- c Jackie needed more money, so he decided to ask his family in London / go back to the mine to work.
- d When Tony saw Jackie crying he got very angry with him / he decided to help his father.
- e A lot of people bought raffle tickets / sold their own things to help the Elliot family.
- f On his way to London, Billy learnt that his father was travelling to London for the first time / his father was frightened.
- g When Billy realised that all boys and girls were very posh and different from him he started crying / did not want to dance at the audition.

Chapters 13–15

6 Are these sentences right (✓) or wrong (X).

- a One of the teachers at the audition wished Jackie and the miners the best of luck.
- b When the letter arrived, the Elliots opened it.
- c The Elliots were happy because Billy entered the Royal Ballet School but the miners were sad because the strike ended and they lost.
- d The teachers at the audition thought that Billy was a good boy.

7 Number these sentences in the correct order.

- a Billy went home and kissed Nan. Then his father and brother walked him to the bus stop.
- b Tony told Billy that he would miss him.
- c Billy said goodbye to Mrs Wilkinson.
- d Billy went to church with his dad.
- e Billy saw Michael and said goodbye.

Billy Elliot

Book key

- 1 a gloves
b coal
c proud
d strike
e Ballet
f argue
g hall
h whispered
i van
j club
- 2 Open answers
- 3 a Tony
b Nan
c George
d Jackie
e Sarah
f Michael
g Mrs Wilkinson
h Debbie
- 4 a Billy lives with his father, brother and grandmother.
b Billy's mother died two years ago.
c She left a letter for Billy, for his eighteenth birthday.
d Billy's father and brother are on strike.
e Billy goes to the boxing club.
f The other boy wins the boxing match.
g The girls in the hall are doing ballet.
h The police are protecting the scabs.
i Billy wants to learn the spin.
- 5 a They are on strike.
b Margaret Thatcher's government wants to close the mines.
c The miners hate the scabs. The scabs are breaking the strike and making it more difficult.
- 6–7 Open answers
- 8 a Mrs Wilkinson
b a scab
c George
d Nan
e Mrs Wilkinson
f a dance
g women's clothes
h ballet moves
- 9 a fourth
b can
c angry
d ballet
e girls
f rich
g lose
h Newcastle
i purple dress
j London
- 10–13 Open answers
- 14 a Billy shows Mrs Wilkinson his mum's letter.
b Tony is angry because Jackie is weak.
c Billy sees his mum in the kitchen.
d Tony attacks a police horse.
e Tony spends the night in the police station.
f Billy misses the audition in Newcastle.
g Jackie breaks up the piano to burn on the fire.
h Billy dances in front of his father.
- 15 a Mrs Wilkinson is talking to Billy about his mother.
b Tony is talking to Jackie about the strike.
c Billy is talking to Mrs Wilkinson about the audition for the Royal Ballet School.
d Jackie is talking to Billy about Billy's mother's record.
e Mrs Wilkinson is talking to Jackie and Tony about the audition for the ballet school.
f Billy is talking to Michael about his feelings.
- 16–19 Open answers
- 20 a ✓ b ✗ c 7 d ✓ e ✓ f 7 g ✓ h ✓
- 21 a Jackie wants to help his son. He knows that Billy is a good dancer. He has also 'listened' to his dead wife.
b The audition is in London. Jackie needs money for the bus journey and a hotel.
c The wedding ring helps Jackie to remember his dead wife. But he can sell it to help Billy.
d He wants to earn money for the journey to London.
e Tony takes Jackie away from the mine. Then he helps to find the money for Billy's audition.
f Billy doesn't like London because it is very big and strange.
g He doesn't like the people at the audition. He thinks they are posh. He is also frightened.
h Billy is unhappy after dancing for the teachers in the audition. He thinks he danced badly. He doesn't want to talk to Simon, so he hits him.
i After the fight, Jackie and Billy go back to Everington.

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22–23 Open answers

24 a 1 b 5 c 3 d 7 e 4 f 6 g 8 h 2

25 a ... he wants to help Billy.

b ... listen carefully.

c ... look at the letter.

d ... he wants him to dance.

e ... say goodbye to Billy's mum.

f ... kisses him.

g ... Billy is the main dancer there for the first time.

h ... jumps very high.

26–37 Open answers

Discussion activities key

1–18 Open answers

Activity worksheet key

1 a Nan to Billy, when she asks if the police are after Tony and Jackie.

b Tony, when Jackie doesn't go to the picket line with him.

c George, when he sees Billy trying to box.

d Miss Wilkinson, when she sees Billy dance.

e Billy, when he takes his dancing shoes home.

2 a go to prison: do something stupid

b a lot of money: a bag full of food

c Thursday: Friday

d red: purple

e Billy's: Michael's

3 Possible answers

a she was crying

b of eating bread

c a silly old man

d I was not trying

4 a 1

b 5

c 3

d 4

e 2

5 a boss: friend from school

b good money: scab money

c such good dancers: posh people

d laughing: crying

6 a ✓

b ✓

c ✗

d ✗

e ✓

7–8 Open answers

Progress test key

1 a Jackie and Tony are interested in fighting, boxing and picket lines while Billy likes playing piano and hates fighting.

b Billy has to box because both his grandfather and father did so.

c He goes on strike because of his son Tony, but he is not sure whether pickets will change the situation in the mines.

d Jackie doesn't like hurting scabs, because he knows many of them.

e Billy's grandmother and mother could dance.

2 1 a

2 b

3 b

4 a

5 b

3 a audition

b spin

c pickets

d hammer

4 a ✓

b ✓

c ✗

d ✓

e ✗

f ✗

g ✓

5 a George

b Sarah's wedding ring

c go back to the mine to work

d decided to help his father

e bought raffle tickets

f his father was travelling to London for the first time.

g he did not want to dance at the audition.

6 a ✓

b ✗

c ✓

d ✓

7 a 3

b 5

c 1

d 2

e 4