

Billy Elliot

Melvin Burgess

Guided Reading Activities

1. Billy, Jackie, and Ballet

Read the passage where Billy talks about doing ballet and how it makes him feel.

I was jumping so high, I could see out of the window and right over the shed where they kept the sports gear. Miss kept saying to me, "It's not just height, Billy. Where's your control? You're not concentrating!" Well, I was concentrating. I was concentrating on getting up high. It just made me feel so good, floating up over the heads of them little lasses. They were like little bits of fluff floating around me knees.

I could do all the plies and the jumps and font de bras and all that. Miss says I've got promise. She spends half the lesson just teaching me—she doesn't bother with the others half the time. They're always moaning on about it.

"Can we have a go, miss? When's it our turn, miss? It's not fair, miss, just because he's a boy, miss..."

...Oh, I'd got right into it. I was looking forward to the Saturday lesson all week. Once I started, I could just go on forever. It was right what Debbie said about stamina. It may look easy, but it's not. It's hard. I'd got so fit it'd made me better at footy and running and everything. I could keep going for hours. (p. 46)

Now read the next passage where he gets caught in the act.

I must have been mad.

It had to happen. I was kidding meself. Michael kept warning me. "He'll find out. What are you going to do then?" I knew he was right, but it was like, if I kept on doing it and not thinking about it, nothing'd happen. I kept thinking, just this week, just one more lesson, then I'll go back to the boxing. But I got more and more into it, and better and better at it, and Dad never turned up to watch me at George's any more...I just thought it was going to go on forever.

And of course, when it did happen, it wasn't just questions and getting suspicious and everything. He only bloody turned up right in the middle of class.

"Pick up your leg, Billy. Swing it! Swing two three, round two three, up two three. What do you call that? Let's have a bit of grace, Billy Elliot!"

I was swinging me leg round, slow circle, trying to make it as smooth as cream—and I looked up and there was me dad standing in the door.

Christ! I just froze in me tracks. I thought I was going to die. I thought he was going to rush out and kill me. Miss was still going on...

"Up two three, swing two three. Like a princess, Deborah. Beautiful necks! One two three...what's up with you?"

She said that when she saw me standing still. Then the music stopped and she turned round and saw Dad. He'd gone blood red.

"You! Out! Now!" he snapped. (p. 46-7)

1. Circle the emotions for Jackie. Underline the emotions for Billy:

anger	
shame	
frustration	
joy	
pride	

What are the adjective forms of these nouns?

Can you add to the list to describe how Billy and Jackie are feeling?

2. What do you think is going to happen now? What will Jackie do? What will Billy tell his father? Role-play the argument between father and son.

3. Decide if the following are said/thought by Jackie or Billy.

“What’s wrong with ballet? Look at me...Are you trying to wind me up?”

“Normal?”

“You’re asking for a hiding!”

“As far as he was concerned I was just being stubborn, but I really didn’t understand why it was so bloody important that I shouldn’t...”

“It’s not just poofs...Some ballet dancers are as fit as athletes. It’s hard work. What about Wayne Sleep?”

“I hate you!”

Put these pieces of speech into a logical order. Then, add to them to complete the dialogue? When you’ve finished, compare what you’ve written to pps. 48-51 in the book.

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2. Billy and Miss Make a Plan

Read the following passage and complete the gap fill using the phrases below.

Miss gave me a lift just round the corner from where I lived. She would've taken me all the way home but I didn't want to get caught in her car. She (1) _____ some waste ground near our house.

"Right then," she said. I didn't move, though. I just sat there for a bit....She turned the car off, sighed, and took herself a fag out.

"This'll sound strange, Billy," she said. "But I was thinking of (2) _____ the Royal Ballet School."

I thought, Jesus, she's keen on that dancing then. I thought—I know this is stupid but it was just after that talk with Debbie, like—I thought it must be having no sex was making her want to do something stupid like that.

"Aren't you a bit old, miss?" I asked her.

She snorted. "Not me, Billy. You. I'm the teacher. Christ!" She rolled her eyes. "They hold auditions in Newcastle," she said, and gave me a long look.

Ballet school? Me? But that'd be ... something else. I mean, it was a hobby, that's all. But if you went to a special school...

"Can you do it as a job, then, miss?"

"Course you can. If you're good enough."

"I'd never be good enough. I hardly know owt."

"Look." She (3) _____ in her seat to face me and (4) _____ her shoulder. "Listen. They're not interested in how much ballet you know. They teach you that. That's why they're a ballet school. It's how you move, how you express yourself that's important."

"Express what?" I didn't know what she meant. It's just dancing, isn't it?

"I think you're good enough," she said. And that was the only time she ever told me I was any good. "It'd be an awful lot of work," she said.

"I'm banned," I reminded her.

"Aye, well. Maybe I should (5) _____ him."

"No!" I almost (6) _____ the seat. "Miss! Don't."

"For god's sake." She (7) _____ her fag for a bit, then she said, "You know, I could teach you on your own if you want."

"I've got no money."

"I'm not (8) _____ the money," she snapped, as if I'd offended her.

"But what about Dad?"

"He doesn't have to know, does he?"

"What about me boxing and that?" I wasn't asking her just about the boxing, like. I wasn't even allowed to do that any more. It was about ... being one of the lads. You know. Being a boy. That sort of thing.

"For f***'s sake, Billy. If you want to (9) _____ your little mates, that's fine by me. This is serious."

"All right, don't lose your blob."

"Blob?" she said, and we both laughed.

I thought about it a bit. It was a bit much, wasn't it? (10) _____ me dad's back and that. Training to be a ballet dancer. But—wow! You know? That'd be summat, wouldn't it?

"So we could do it in private, like?"

"Just you and me. No one else need know." (pps. 56-58)

- a. Piss around with
- b. Pulled up on
- c. Auditioning for
- d. Jumped out of
- e. Doing it for
- f. Have a word with
- g. Puffed away on
- h. Twisted round
- i. Blew a spurt of smoke over
- j. Doing things behind

1. Billy confused at first about what Miss is suggesting because_____.
2. The ballet school is interested in how Billy _____.
3. There are two reasons Billy is reluctant to accept Miss' offer. They are _____ and _____.
4. The relationship between Billy and Miss could be described as_____.

What should Billy do now? What are his choices? Discuss in groups.

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3. Climax and Conflict

In the following passages, the three characters, Billy, Tony, and Jackie, express their feelings about the different predicaments they are in.

Having decided to secretly practice to audition for the Royal Ballet School, Billy begins to have doubts as the day of the audition approaches.

Meanwhile, Jackie and Tony are still on strike, and the family is getting poorer. Jackie has no way to provide for his sons and is plagued with doubts about the family's future.

Tony has been involved in the riots, and has spent the night in jail for setting the tail of a policeman's horse on fire.

A. Billy

"Well... the dance was the one thing that was going right for me. I wasn't doing well at school, either. I mean, not bad, but not all that good, you know? But the dance was going well and I felt good about that.

On the other hand, the audition was getting closer and I felt really bad about that. It was scary, you know? Trying for something like that. If it worked, if I passed, what then? I'd have to tell me dad and he'd go mental. And even if he let me, then what? Leave home? Go to live all the way in London on me own? No way! It was bonkers. What was it going to cost? Christ!

But I had me dad right fooled. I was doing ballet every night and he never had a clue. He thought I was out playing with Michael. I had it all arranged. Michael'd come and call for me, or I'd go round to his, and we'd go out together as if we were just hanging around together. He'd even come into the Social with me, but then he'd sneak out the back way and go off to do whatever it was he did with himself on his own—dressing up or whatever, I expect, the big pansy." (pp. 76-77)

B. Tony

"If I'd a been a big union man they'd have put me away inside, out of the way. But I was just a working man with no work so they fined us instead. One hundred quid. They know we've no money. Just before f***ing Christmas and all. Happy New Year, you bastards! Thanks a bunch. Where were we going to find that sort of money?

Dad was furious with me, I could tell, but I wasn't in any mood for it and he had the sense to keep his mouth shut. The fact is, I was f***ed. There's no other word for it. There was a little bit of me kept wanting to giggle because of the memory of that horse with its arse up in flames—just a little bit—but the rest of me was just f***ed. They'd done me over good and proper. I was pissed off for getting caught, I was pissed off for being beaten to buggery by the police. I'd spent a night on a concrete floor in the cells, getting woken up every half an hour for a 'safety check', and I'd been charged a hundred quid for doing it. I was depressed, if you want another word. I felt about half an inch tall. I felt like a piece of dirty little shite. (pp. 91)

C. Jackie

"I practically ran down that road. I felt like crying but I'd had enough of that. I was thinking, I've got to do something about this. I was screwing up my face to hold the tears back.

It's been hard for everyone these past months, but I think most people would agree that the strike couldn't have come at a worse time for me. My wife dead. Two lads to bring up on my own. Tony running wild. The wife's mother living with us, half off her head. And Billy. Well, no one really talks to me about Billy. They just look at me and smile. What can you say about our Billy? He's all half-cock and up in the air and –and, well, he's our Billy, that's all.

But there was something else to say about our Billy that I hadn't realized, and it was this. He was bloody good at something.

Now. All right. I don't know anything about dancing or ballet or owt like that, but I've seen it on the telly and I'm just saying that was as good as any of them. Right? And you see, I'd never thought about it. I never thought it was a runner. The Royal Ballet School! I thought it was just that middle-class lass pissing around finding more ways of spending money I hadn't got. But. What if? And then, well...why not? If he can do it. If he really has some talent. What then?

My head was spinning. There was nothing I could do about it even if he was Rudolf bloody Nureyev. But see, now. That's not good enough. I mean, if he was good enough to be a ballet dancer, and if he wanted to be a ballet dancer, then I had to be good enough to find some way of making it happen for him. I'm his dad. That's what it's about. Right?"

(pp. 105-6)

(There is an audio for this text extract: Audio Text 2A – with local 'Geordie' accent; Audio Text 2B – more standard English)

Write T (Tony), J (Jackie), and B (Billy) after the questions below. Be prepared to explain your answers with evidence from the text.

Which character feels responsible for the others in his family? _____

Which character expresses resentment? _____

Which character cares about how the others in his family feel? _____

Which character expresses mixed feelings about his actions? _____

Which character is the angriest? _____ The happiest? _____ The saddest? _____

Which character makes a decision based on what he imagines someone else would do? _____

Which character is most likely to change at this point? _____

A. Language work: Conditionals

Remember that ...

- We use the first conditional to talk about future situations that are likely to happen.
- We use the second conditional to talk about hypothetical or imaginary situations.
- We use the third conditional to talk about situations which happened in the past and how the outcome could've been different.

Complete the following *If clauses*, basing your answers on the texts. Use *will, should, would, might, could, etc.*

- If Billy is as good at ballet as his teacher thinks he is, _____.
- If Tony hadn't lit the horse's tail on fire, _____.
- Tony wouldn't be so angry if _____.
- If Billy wanted to be a boxer, Jackie _____.
- If Billy's mother were alive, she _____.

Now write four more of your own.

1. If _____
2. If _____
3. If _____
4. If _____

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4. The Audition

The following sentences are about the thoughts and reactions of Billy and Jackie when they travel to London for the audition. With a partner work out whose point of view is being described, and in what context? Write the number in the correct place on the chart.

1. He said something about it feeling like flying.
2. It was more like a whole country than a town.
3. All the time the houses got bigger and higher.
4. Fifty quid. It was enough. It was plenty.
5. All those other kids, they had every advantage you could think of--rich parents, good homes, first-class schools.
6. Like a mansion or a palace
7. The changing rooms...were full of these posh gits.
8. Once I get going I forget what's going on and I sort of disappear.
9. It was just pure torture.
10. The steps...were about the width of our street.
11. They all peered at me and looked at my legs and my arms and my back.
12. I felt a little tingle go down my spine. He'd impressed me anyhow.

Context	Billy	Jackie
The coach trip to London		
The school and the people there		
The audition		
The dancing		

Now read pages pp. 130-143 to check your answers.

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5. The Two Letters

Part 1

There are two important letters which Billy receives in the novel.

Who are they from? _____ and _____

The following passage describes the day the letter from the Royal Ballet School arrives at the Elliot's house.

His nan got hold of it first. She's only got about half her wits, but she had them all lined up and ready for use that morning.

'Post!' she yelled, and she came rushing in with this beautiful-looking letter. Thick, creamy envelope. She handed it over. I knew as soon as I felt the paper.

'This is it,' I said.

'Open it now,' said Tony.

'Don't be stupid. It's Billy's letter.'...Billy was at school and I was dying to have a look myself, but we'd just have to wait. I put the letter propped on the table between the toast rack and the sugar bowl.

And there it stayed. All bloody day, staring at us. Of course none of us could leave it alone. I kept picking it up. Nan picked it up, Tony did. Next door came round and had a feel to see how thick the paper was. Mrs Johnson on the other side. Susan from up the road. George popped round to have a look. It was getting a bit grubby by then, so his nan decided to keep it clean by hiding it in her pinny and I nearly went mad when I found it was gone. Of course she'd forgotten what she'd done with it and it was half an hour before she found it in there. It was a right mess by that time. She used to keep biscuits and bits of bread and butter and stuff in that pocket.

'Just bloody leave it alone! It looks like it's been used to butter the toast,' I told her.

When Billy came back from school at four, we were all three waiting for him. I'd booted the neighbors out. This was a family thing. When—I mean if—he hadn't made it this year, he wasn't going to want half the road hanging over him and patting his shoulder telling him not to worry and that.

The door went. As soon as we heard it we were all like kids, rushing around finding somewhere to sit so we were all in our places looking cool when he came in. The door opened. There he was. I looked up at him. I looked down at the letter. I looked back at him. He was still staring at it.

He walked over and picked it up. No one said a word. It was awful. He walked around the table. I could see Tony nodding at him: Go on, open it then. Billy licked his lips. He walked round the table to his nan's room. He pushed the sliding door open and gave us a quick glance, sort of saying sorry. I don't blame him, but I could've killed him. He went inside and closed the door.

And then nothing. Nothing. On and on, nothing. We could hear the paper being opened. We could hear the letter coming out. There was a long pause while he read it. He knew whether or not he'd got in. We didn't.

Nothing. More nothing.

'F*** this,' muttered Tony. He jumped and went to the door, and I only just managed to push in front of him. Billy was sitting in the chair by her bed. He looked up. He was crying. I thought, Oh, Billy.

'Well?'

'I got in,' he said in a tiny little voice.

'YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEESSS!' You could have heard the roar from me and Tony halfway up the street. I snatched the letter off him and read it...We jumped and shouted.

p.143-146

1.

- a. How many times is the letter picked up or touched before it reaches Billy's hands?
- b. Make a list. _____

2. Circle the correct choice(s):

- a. The envelope was yellow/white/brown.
- b. Nan hid/stole the letter.
- c. Before closing the door to his room, Billy looked at his family apologetically/angrily/absent-mindedly.
- d. Billy's family was excited/anxious while they waited for him to open the letter.
- e. Billy was crying out of sorrow/joy/relief.

3.

- a. A letter of acceptance is written in formal/informal language.
- b. The following phrases could be from the acceptance letter to Billy. Match the formal to their informal equivalents, and then reconstruct the letter.

1. Dear Mr. Billy Elliot	a. We are delighted to inform you that your application to the Royal Ballet School of London has been successful.
2. You must realize how lucky you are to be so good at dancing	b. In addition, this offer of admission is contingent upon your continued success.
3. You won't have time to think about much else besides dancing.	c. Please bear in mind that as a student at our school you will be expected to demonstrate a firm and single-minded commitment to the rigorous study and practice of ballet.
4. and furthermore that is not solely through this that one can strive to become an accomplished ballet dancer	d. Finally, best wishes and congratulations!
5. You'll also need to keep your marks up or you won't be allowed to stay	e. It's not enough to just be good at dancing—you have to work very hard at it too.
6. Well, that's all for now! Good luck!	f. There's a spot starting next month.
7. Great news! We're going to let you come to the ballet school.	g. It is essential that each candidate fully understands the privilege in possessing the unusual talent for the art of dance,
8. You have been admitted to the school for the upcoming term beginning next month.	h. Hi Billy
9. Your friend, John	i. Don't forget to look over the important information about paying, etc.
10. Please review carefully the enclosed materials that pertain to required deposits, deadlines, and other critical information.	j. Sincerely, Mr. John Reed, Director

