

Billy Elliot

Melvin Burgess

Three Pre-reading Activities

1. Which profession?

Imagine you are the parent of a young teenage boy who has been talking about what job he would like to have when he grows up. Imagine you were one of the following four people, in your opinion which profession do you think would be most suitable for your son? Complete the table.

A theatre actress from a large city	A businessman	A taxi driver	A coal miner

footballer	ballet dancer	painter	studio musician	surgeon
bartender	university professor		shopkeeper	civil engineer
wrestling coach		coal miner	fisherman	

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2. The Main Characters

The two main characters in this novel are Billy Elliot, an eleven-year old boy and his father, Jackie, who is a coal miner. Billy's mother has passed away, and Billy and his older brother, Tony, live with their father and grandmother. Tony and Jackie worked as coal miners in the local mines, but are currently off work and not making any money as the miners are on strike. Read what Jackie says about his son.

Well, I worry for the boy. There's no one to look out for him since his mam died. I do what I can for him but a boy needs his mother. Especially a boy like that. P. 14

What kind of boy is Billy?

Billy is my son and I stand by him till the day I die, but. Put it like this: he's a bit of an individualist. He's always got these weird things he's trying to do. It used to be balancing a stick on the end of his nose....Then there was the cardboard box. He used to sit in it singing to himself. That's just kids, you might say, but Billy was ten. I'd not be see dead in a cardboard box when I was ten...but what about the neck twisting? That went on for ages. He'd turn round and look behind him, twisting his neck round as far as he could, over and over again. He said it was just a habit, but what sort of habit is that? It's not like picking your nose or biting your nails...You can't stop him. He can't stop himself. P. 36

What does he like doing?

Why is Jackie worried about him?

What do you imagine Jackie might rather have Billy doing?

Look at this fight we're in now. It's a fight for our future, for our community. It's a fight for my job and for Tony's job—but is it a fight for Billy? See our Billy a quarter of a mile underground hacking the coal out, the sweat running black, in your eyes, down your back. That's not our Billy. All I could ever do for him was pay his way and I can't even do that now.

And I'm not sure I ever will again. P. 14

What kind of fight is Jackie in?

Is Jackie a good father? How do you know?

Why does he think Billy could never be a coal miner, like himself and Tony?

Now read what Billy says about dancing.

That ballet, it's addictive, you know. I was thinking about it all the next week. One and two and up and down. When you put your arms and legs into those positions, it's like a note of music. You hold it in the air...and then, whoosh! It goes off into the rest of the tune.

The only thing with it is, it makes me feel like a right sissy. I mean! Ponce, two, three, twat, two, three and prat about and four and five and six and shite shite shite...Imagine what me dad'd say! Or Tony! They'd go barmy! I mean, what good's ballet down a mine? The union leader says they have a secret plan to close all the mines down, so if he's right I might as well be dancing as owt, because there won't be any mines left for me to go down by the time I'm old enough. P. 25-6

What does Billy like about dancing?

What doesn't he like about it?

Make lists below:

Cons	Pros

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3. Communities and Coal Mining

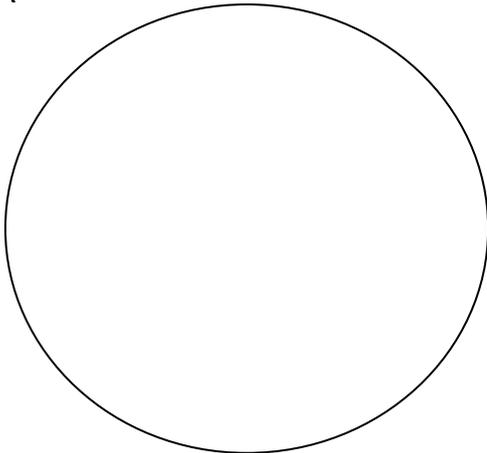
A. Read this definition of community from *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

community [kə 'myoʊnɪtē]
noun (pl. **-ties**)
1 a group of people living together in one place, esp. one practicing common ownership: *a community of nuns*.
• a particular area or place considered together with its inhabitants : *a rural community*.
2 [usu. with ad.] a group of people having a religion, race, profession, or other particular characteristic in common : *Rhode Island's Japanese community* | *the scientific community*.
• a body of nations or states unified by common interests : [in names] *the European Community* | *the African Economic Community*.
3 a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests,

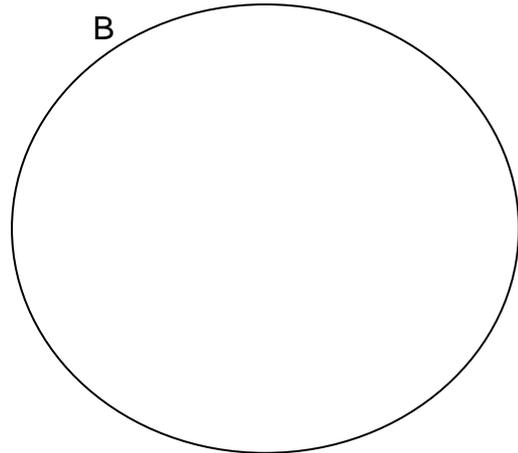
Are you a member of a community? In which sense?

In the circle A write names for the communities you belong to. Now work in pairs. In circle B, write the names of communities your partner belongs to. Are any of them the same?

A



B



What does it mean to you to be part of that group?

What happens when one member of a community wants to be different?

B. Billy Elliot's family belongs to a small, closely-knit community made up of working-class coal miners from northern England. When the miners went on strike to show Parliament they wanted better working conditions, they depended on each other to cooperate, or do the same thing so that their cause would be stronger.

Listen to Jackie Elliot, Billy's father, talking about how important coal mining is to his community. As you listen, read along with the text. Then say whether the sentences below are true or false.

Being owed never won owt. I remember my dad on strike in the thirties. They weren't owed then—they had power. The coal they dug ran the factories, lit the streets and the houses, drove the ships across the water. Without coal the whole bloody country dragged to a halt. Look at it now—natural gas, oil, nuclear energy. You don't have to go and dig oil and gas out of the ground with your bare hands, you just tap down into it and it shoots up like a bloody fountain. Nice and easy. And cheap.

Well, I'll tell you what. If Thatcher came here today and said to me, Look, we're going to close down the mines and we're going to open up a whole bloody great town full of shiny new factories...I don't know rightly if I'd say yea or nay, but at least it'd be some sort of hope. Not like this. Not like, you lot aren't cost-effective, so sod off. That's Thatcher. She must have a fist where her heart is. The whole bloody community is going to be left to rot. She just doesn't care. (Jackie Elliot, p.14-15)

(This text extract can be heard in audio. Audio Text 1A is spoken with the local 'Geordie' accent' Audio Text 1B is spoken in more standard English).

1. Jackie's father, Billy's grandfather, was a coal miner.
2. People in England used coal as their main source of energy.
3. Getting coal out of the ground is easier work than getting oil or gas.
4. Thatcher is going to open up new factories in Jackie's town.
5. It costs too much money for the government to keep the coal mines open.
6. Jackie thinks that Thatcher is a very caring person.
7. Jackie has hopes for the future of his community.