

Book Title: They Cage the Animals at Night

Author: Jennings Michael Burch

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They Cage the Animals at Night is Jennings Michael Burch's autobiographical account of a rocky childhood that alternates between heartbreaking desperation and salvation in the arms of strangers.

The fifth of six sons, Burch lays his past bare, beginning when he was 8 years old and abruptly dropped off at an orphanage by a mother who could not cope with the financial strains of raising six sons with no help from their absent alcoholic father. It ends with Burch being rescued from a seemingly endless cycle of abandonment when his former school bus driver steps in to become a solid father figure and guardian when Burch is about 14. What happens in between is an amazing story that tests the reader's ability to keep pulling for a child whose situation seems so bleak.

Burch is bounced from orphanage to orphanage, from foster home to foster home, and from school to school. His mother and brothers are in and out of the picture, struggling to keep the family together in the face of extreme poverty. At some of the homes, Burch is treated like a prince and in others he is beaten and abused savagely. The only constant is that there is no constant. Burch resists authority, runs away, hides out at the zoo, and carries around a tattered stuffed animal named "Doggie," which he liberates from his first orphanage.

Outwardly, the story seems to be one of endurance and triumph of the spirit, but Burch is able to write in a perspective very close to the one he must have had as a child experiencing all of these things. There is a childlike detachment to the story which allows the reader to see how the events are shaping young Jennings without him actually telling us. In his first orphanage, Jennings cries and cannot understand why the "lifers," are hesitant to befriend him or anyone for that matter. Years later, after he has been to four or five other orphanages and foster homes, Jennings expresses the same hesitation to get close to people he knows may be called away at any second.

From the perspective of a teacher, it takes no great stretch of the imagination to figure out why a student like Burch would be below grade level, outcast by his peers, untrusting of adults, and in trouble constantly over his behavior. What is amazing to note is the number of people he encountered in his life who were willing to help him but not necessarily able, whether it was because they did not have the background knowledge about his life or whether they lacked the resources to fully move in and take control of the situation.

Burch's story is amazing, in part because the tone is so matter of fact. He is not able to realize that his situation is so abnormal because it is the only one he knows. He puts his

raw childhood out for all to see. Although he does not elaborate on his successful postschool employment as a police officer, it appears that two formative experiences may have influenced this decision. The reader lives through his eyes and sees someone whose everyday life would make most cringe. It is truly an insightful, inspiring, and breathtaking work of honesty.