



Connecting with the Disconnected

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Buy *Disconnected* from Amazon.co.uk

On New Year's Eve 2002, two teenage girls were shot dead in Birmingham as they stepped outside a party for some fresh air. Nick Barham was more than a little surprised by the debate that followed. The media focussed on what they thought had 'caused' the tragedy just as much as the tragedy itself. The spotlight fell sharply upon the cultural activities of the younger generation. The press regularly aired the views of politicians and other prominent people who were keen to blame foul-mouthed rap lyrics, vicious computer games and violent films for the increase in unsociable behaviour among young people. Barham was disturbed by the negative 'kid bashing' media coverage, and the moral panic that often ensued. He believed the media simply wanted to 'demonstrate how shallow, violent, stupid and self-deluded British youth is' (p. 6). He was annoyed at the way the media were able to represent an entire generation by using a few bad examples.

Before taking time out to compile his book, Barham worked in the world of advertising, carrying out research and compiling reports on various cultural changes. In 2003, he travelled the country visiting festivals, skate parks, protest marches and shopping malls, meeting and

interviewing a great number of young people. His approach differed from the media's in that it involved *talking with* young people, rather than merely *talking about* them. Throughout *Disconnected*, Barham appears to genuinely value what his young interviewees have to say. His book offered them the opportunity to have their say, and it provides us with a fascinating, and sometimes frightening insight into the hearts and minds of the younger generation.

On his journey around Britain, Barham discovers a nation inhabited by cybers, chavs, Goths, townies and many other cultural sub groups. These groups generally felt disconnected from mainstream society and often acquired a shared identity through dress and musical preferences. Barham's book reveals that the leisure activities that young people participate in have produced in many a disposition towards creativity. *Disconnected* is packed with stories of young people who have found ways of expressing their creativity in a number of wide-ranging ways. Barham meets eleven-year old Heathcote, a skater who makes his own films, and nineteen year old Gemma who is a DJ and makes her own music. Saru is sixteen and has created a website to display his photography, clothing and paintings. Often this creativity draws upon technology, and the younger generation seem to have an uncanny knack for getting to grips with all sorts of complicated technological programmes and devices.

In *Disconnected*, Barham rightly notes the media's tendency to blame music, films and games while ignoring entirely the effects that education, poverty and family have on behaviour – but he generally seems reluctant to acknowledge that films, music, games etc. can have *any* effect on young people's behaviour. Throughout *Disconnected*, American colloquialisms litter the vocabulary of the young interviewees revealing that certain cultural activities *do* have the ability to 'bleed' into the real world. If music, games and films are able to affect the way we speak, then surely they are also able to influence other areas of our lives, even if we are not consciously aware of it. Kim Howells from the Department for Culture suggests that, 'we let much of modern entertainment flow over us, without understanding what it is signifying' (p. 35). Those who do extract meaning from music or films often do nothing

more than scratch the surface and end up reacting to a specific sentence, or even a particular word. Others end up finding meaning in ambiguity or emotional declarations, allowing hidden, underlying principles to be absorbed blindly.

The media often portray 'the youth' as drug addicted, sex mad criminals, while touting 'youth' as the epitome of cool. As a result, a paradoxical condition is created whereby those who have 'it' are vilified, whereas those who do not are considered uncool. Barham never really tackles the relational interaction that takes place between media and culture. He ignores the influence the media have over youth culture, and he ignores the influence that youth culture is able to exert over the media.

In *Disconnected*, Barham is unable to find anything negative within youth culture, insisting instead that all of it is positive. Where the media are quick to condemn youth culture, Barham is equally quick to endorse it. Alice O'Keefe, in her *New Statesman* book review, says, 'You get the feeling that even if his research had uncovered an entire generation of suicidal heroin addicts, he would still have managed to put a cheery spin on it' (www.newstatesman.co.uk). Barham believes that there is a new radical morality being fashioned in society by the young people of today. He describes it as 'a personally defined legal code' (p. 78). Evidence of this personally defined code is seen throughout *Disconnections* in statements like, 'you have to make your own rules,' or, 'It's my choice if I want to f*** myself up.' Barham is a keen supporter of this new morality, and it is its subjective nature that permits him to fully endorse every aspect of youth culture. In his opinion, traditional attitudes towards sex and drugs are now outdated and therefore they no longer apply. Consequently he believes that the problems created by teenage sex should no longer be seen as problematic. According to Barham, the answer lies in sex education simply helping teenagers to have better sex. He asks, could pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections be seen as nothing more than a temporary 'blip' as young people come to terms with a freedom that has been denied them for years? His views on drugs are equally permissive. He states that the goal of drugs is to change your perception, therefore he reasons, they hardly

differ from the goal of great literature or surround sound widescreen TV.

The Russian novelist Dostoevsky said, 'Everything is permissible if God does not exist' (quoted in Nick Pollard, *Teenagers Why Do They Do That* [Damaris Books] p. 118). God does not appear to exist in Barham's world. It stands to reason that without God there can be no absolute values. Without God no individual has the authority to declare what is absolutely right or what is absolutely wrong. Morality has to be determined by some other means. In this situation moral decisions are often made on the premise of what 'feels' right or what feels good, consequently morality acquires a subjective nature. This subjective nature leaves Barham incapable of offering any sound advice to those who feel that they want to partake in any unconstructive or even deeply harmful activities. *Disconnected* was meant to represent a generation that had been treated unfairly by the media, but Barham's nihilistic ideals have the potential to cause more harm than all the negative media coverage put together. And it is to this end that he lets down the very people that his book was meant to defend.