

Q&A with MITCH

Mitch, we'd love to hear a little more about what inspired you to write this story?

The spark for *Kick* came when I was working in a sports shop and found a crumpled energy gel sachet in a shoebox between a brand new pair of football boots. I couldn't help but imagine who had left it there, and what kind of working environment would force someone to consume a product normally used by endurance athletes. The idea crystallized a few weeks later as I channel-hopped between "Match of the Day" and a programme protesting against the use of sweatshops. The outrageous disparity between top-flight footballers and garment workers compelled me to do something about it, and I began work on *Kick* the same evening.

What research did you do while you were writing *Kick*?

Researching sweatshops is a difficult business. Companies spend huge sums of money to ensure we only see what they want us to see: their immaculate, branded products. However, there are lots of authors, charities, investigative journalists and documentary makers reporting on working and living conditions in the garment industry, and these offer invaluable insights into the lives behind the logos. Having never been

to Jakarta, I made Indonesia and its capital a focus of my reading, and drew on an earlier visit to Mumbai for a sense of the chaos of an Asian metropolis. While Jakarta and Mumbai are vastly different places, the trip allowed me to experience many things – the oppressive heat, the endless traffic jams, the stifling pollution, the round-the-clock cacophony, the masses of people, the explosion of cultures, the wealthy living alongside the destitute – that are characteristic of both cities, and would later help me to visualize Budi's world.

Did you ever find it hard putting yourself in Budi's shoes?

My life is not like Budi's. I do not know what it is like to go hungry, or to work in fear of violence, or to live next-door to destitution. I have never set foot inside a sweatshop. And yet, we also have everything in common. To have dreams, to search for happiness, to want a better life for your family – these are fundamental human traits that we all share. And when you focus on our inherent similarities – rather than the circumstantial differences that separate us – it becomes so much easier to see things through the eyes of others. Budi's life is tough, and there were many occasions when I did not want to confront it any longer. But problems rarely get better by pretending they don't exist, and I took heart from the people for whom sweatshops are an everyday reality. My hope is that this book will make these people more visible and kickstart

an important conversation. Exploitative labour practices are a global problem, but empathizing with its victims is a crucial step towards change; if you felt the heat of the factory, flinched at the swish of the *rotan*, or bled a little bit on the inside while reading *Kick*, you are already part of the solution.

Which football team do you support?

Growing up, I was a huge Newcastle United fan. Supporting Newcastle United is the polar opposite of being a glory supporter; there is nothing but heartbreak and despair. Nowadays I am a lot kinder to myself and enjoy being a neutral, although I followed Real Madrid closely while working on *Kick*. Cheering them on to two Champions League titles was a fantastic experience – especially as both finals were won against Atlético Madrid.

What's the best goal you've ever scored?

That's easy! I only ever scored once for my childhood team, Billing United, and it was an absolute worldie! The ball came out to me on the edge of the box after a corner and I hit it first time, lobbing the keeper. The crowd (about a dozen parents) went wild (clapped politely). As a defender who never, ever scored, I didn't have a celebration so I think I just ran around a bit. It obviously affected my defensive duties because we went on to lose 4-2.

Budi's grandma tells him amazing stories; were there any stories that inspired you growing up?

My favourite book as a child was *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster – I love the way Juster plays with logic and language, twisting the everyday into the magical and making the rational seem nonsensical. I loved it so much that the school librarian let me keep the copy I'd borrowed! My grandparents also inspired me; aspects of Grandma's character were drawn from my own doting grandmother, and my grandfather always had lots of stories from his time at sea. I always loved to hear their stories – grandparents are real-life time-travellers!

What can we expect from you next, Mitch?

My next book will be about a boy called Oscar and how his family is pushed to breaking point by the after-effects of war. It will be similar to *Kick* in the sense that I'm tackling a serious issue with warmth and humour, so you can expect video games and a militarized pug, as well as tough decisions and lots of bravery.