



KICK

MITCH JOHNSON TEACHERS' NOTES

THEMES

This thought-provoking novel about a young boy with a huge heart explores the imbalance of a world in which it takes a Western football star a mere one hundred seconds to earn the monthly wage of the child labourers who make his boots. Themes of being proud of who you are, holding onto hope, and the importance of friendship and family bonds are explored with depth, compassion, and moments of heartfelt humour, against a keenly-evoked backdrop of global socio-economic inequalities.

SYNOPSIS

Football-mad Budi lives in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, and works long hours sewing football boots in a factory owned by a wealthy tyrant known as the Dragon. The working conditions are extremely harsh (child employees are beaten, pay is low, and often late), but Budi takes joy from the fact that his Real Madrid idol, Kieran Wakefield, wears the kind of boots he makes. Budi also has a condition that means his blood doesn't clot properly, so every scratch could prove fatal. It's a "family curse" (p.12) also suffered by Elvis, his hardworking dad, and his uncle Aaron, who's taken a "one-way trip to Execution Island" (p.12). While life is tough, and plays out against an atmosphere of social tension as people protest for the introduction of a minimum wage, Budi's grandmother is an uplifting influence, with a sage story for every situation, and his parents ensure he has the very best birthday by gifting him a poster signed by Kieran Wakefield.

Budi's special day takes a troubling turn when the Dragon orders him to steal a pair of boots from the factory. To attempt the theft would put his job at risk, but to refuse could mean much worse, so he hatches a plan to steal them. While Budi's first attempt is thwarted, he arrives at work the next day to find the factory closed. Boots have been stolen, says the supervisor, and a reward is offered to anyone with information. During the day, a girl accused of the theft is beaten and dragged off. Matters escalate when soldiers come to the factory, a scaremongering tactic designed to oblige the workers to sign a document saying they won't take the proposed pay rise. At this, Budi is struck by the realisation that this is the way of his world - a chain of people are forced to follow orders, and "beneath them all, obeying them all, is me" (p.173). All he can do is imagine that he's signing a Real Madrid contract as he signs away his rights to a rise.

There's worse to come when Aaron escapes prison, Elvis is snatched for questioning, and the Dragon puts Grandma in an impossible position. If she reveals Aaron's whereabouts, Elvis will be released. If she refuses, Elvis will be sent to Execution Island. After chancing upon his uncle, Budi makes this decision on behalf of Grandma. Further dilemmas and dangers unfold as Budi's unforgettable story hurtles to its gripping conclusion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mitch Johnson graduated from the University of East Anglia with an award-winning first class degree in English Literature with Creative Writing. Like Budi, the hero of *Kick*, Mitch is a huge football fan, although he admits that his chances of turning professional are considerably slimmer. As well as writing, Mitch works as a Waterstones bookseller in Norwich, where he lives with his wife. *Kick* is his debut novel.



FROM THE AUTHOR — Mitch Johnson Q&A

Was Budi part of your original eureka moment, or did his character come to you later, as you developed the idea?

Budi was there from the start; he is, in fact, one of the few elements of *Kick* that made it through the editing process practically unchanged. In many ways I built the story around him, using his humour and humanity as an anchor in what can sometimes be a harsh and unforgiving world.

What was your research process? What was the most surprising thing you discovered during the process? Did anything you discover along the way change the course of the novel?

Most of my research was conducted through books, articles, and documentaries. I spent a lot of time learning about the garment industry and the unethical practices that prevail in sweatshops across Asia. Having never been to Jakarta, I drew on an earlier visit to Mumbai for a sense of the chaos of an Asian metropolis that would form the backdrop of Budi's daily life.

The colossal disparity between rich and poor was one of the most surprising and shocking things I encountered. Some garment workers earn little more than £1 a day; the best-paid footballers earn £1 a second. But it was the discovery of Nusa Kambangan (also known as Execution Island due to the high-security prisons that are located there), which altered the course of the novel. It was this piece of research that led to the creation of Budi's shadowy uncle, Aaron.

Did you know the title from the outset? Did it have a different working title?

The book had a few titles before it became *Kick*. *The Football Factory* was ruled out because of the film about hooliganism with the same name, while *Made in Indonesia* didn't feel punchy enough. *Stitch*, *Sweat*, and *Sidelined* were all rejected. Another title was vetoed for legal reasons. Eventually the editorial team at Usborne suggested *Kicks*, which we soon shortened to *Kick*, and it quickly became difficult to imagine the book being called anything else. I think *Kick* works as a title because it suggests not only Budi's love of football, but also hints at the challenges he must struggle against to keep his head above the surface.

Which moment or scene was most difficult to write? Which brought you most joy as a writer?

Kick deals with a difficult subject, and as a result many of the scenes were difficult to write. However, the scene in which Budi's colleague is wrongfully accused of stealing and violently ejected from the factory was particularly harrowing to imagine.

The scene that brought me most joy is actually a very sad one. The moment when Budi uses his idol's autograph to sign away the pay rise (and with it all his unrealistic hopes for the future) feels like a neat distillation of the whole book, which as a writer is quite satisfying. I also can't help but smile when I reread the last scene – there's just so much at stake in those final moments.



What do you hope readers take from the book?



I would love children (and adults) to read *Kick* and believe that, no matter what they dream of doing or becoming, they must never give up hope of achieving that goal. I think it's also important for children to read stories that take them beyond their own experiences: to encounter unfamiliar characters, places, and ways of living that create space for empathy to grow. Books are a brilliant means of discovering other worlds and other lives, and as a writer I feel a certain responsibility to facilitate that exploration.

With *Kick* in particular, I wanted to make readers more aware of the nature of advertising and capitalism – that they are being sold to continually, in thousands of subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways – and that they don't have to buy into a system that is flawed and exploitative. If *Kick* could kick-start a progressive conversation about the way we make, consume, and dispose of things – especially amongst younger people – I would find that immensely gratifying.

FOR DISCUSSION



1) *"He went to school until he was thirteen so he knows pretty much everything"* (Budi talking about Rocky, p.7). Why does Budi think Rocky must know "pretty much everything" if he's finished school at this young age? What does this reveal about a) Budi and b) life for young people in Jakarta?

2a) *"What Uston doesn't realize is that having a bleeding problem makes you the best at dodging tackles, so it's actually a blessing"* (Budi, p.13). What does this reveal about Budi's character? Would you consider his "bleeding problem" to be "a blessing"?

2b) *"Bleeding on the inside is the worst. Most people think having a bleeding problem means you're going to bleed to death from the tiniest cut, but the real problem is bleeding on the inside.... It's that feeling like when you've done something bad and Grandma or Rocky find out, and there's a knife in you somewhere, near your heart"* (p.20). What does Budi mean by "bleeding on the inside"? How might that be worse than his condition?

3) What was your initial impression of the Dragon? How does the author create a sense of the kind of person he is (pages 8-9)?

4) *"You don't have an uncle. Not any more"* (Grandma, p.21). How did this denial of Uncle Aaron make you feel? Why do you think Budi's family pretends that Aaron no longer exists?

5) *"Stitching the upper is the most important job in the factory because that's the part you use to kick the ball. If there's a crease in the material the consequences could be disastrous. Someone might end up missing a penalty in the World Cup Final. It could literally change the course of history"* (Budi, p.34). What does this reveal about Budi's character? Do you think he'd have a different attitude to work if his factory manufactured a different product?

6a) *"Change is coming. Things **will** get easier. Besides, we'll be rich when Budi plays for Real Madrid"* (Budi's dad, p.23).

"Everything will be fine when I'm a footballer" (Budi, p.76). Do you think Budi's dad really thinks his son will play for Real Madrid? If not, why do you think he says this? And do you think Budi really believes his dream will come true?

6b) *"We're never getting out! Never!"* (Rocky, p.207)? Do you think Rocky is right and they will never realise their dreams? Do you agree that Budi needs to "grow up" because "this is all there is" (p.207)? Discuss the importance of optimism. What is the difference between being optimistic and being naïve? Do you think Budi is naïve? If so, why? Do you think Rocky is too pessimistic? If so, why?

7) *"I'm just bored of ... everything.... It feels like I'm constantly waiting for something that's never going to happen"*

"It could be worse", I say. What would you do if you didn't have a job at all? What if you lost your job like that girl who was caught stealing? Things would be a lot worse then" (Rochy and Budi, p.148).

Compare and contrast Rochy and Budi's views. What do their differing opinions reveal about their characters? Which of these characters are you most like?

8a) Re-read Rochy's explanation of the adverts shown during the football match (p.57-59). What does this conversation between Rochy and Budi reveal about the cultural differences between your society, and the boys' lives in Jakarta?

8b) *"Everyone on television is being bribed to make you want things"* (Rochy, p.102). Discuss this view of advertising. To what extent can large companies paying celebrities to endorse products be considered a bribe? For example, do you think stars truly rate the products they advertise?

9) *"Being famous is not as much fun as it looks"* (Budi, p.65). Discuss the pros and cons of fame.

10) *"It's way too valuable to just stick on the wall"* (Budi, p.85). Do you think Budi's poster of Kieran Wakefield really is valuable, and at risk of being stolen? What does this view reveal about a) Budi's character and b) his family's situation?

11) *"So you see, his best friend was right – he **could** fly"*(Grandma, p.113). In what sense could the boy in Grandma's story fly (pages 108-113)? What does her story mean?

12) *"If no one took any risks everyone would be doing the same thing forever. And how boring would that be?"*(Grandma, pages 113-114). Discuss this opinion. Are some risks worth taking? How does this relate to what happens in the novel?

13) *"Sometimes I feel really sorry for Rochy, because he has to share just one room with his mum and two older sisters. Imagine having two sisters – what a nightmare"* (Budi, p.53). Did you ever feel sorry for Rochy? If so, explain why.

14) *"What choice do I have?"* (Budi, p.96). Did Budi have a choice when the Dragon asked him to steal the football boots? What would you have done in his position?

15) *"Sometimes you have to rely on the ones you love to help you out of a sticky situation"* (Grandma, p.114). How is this demonstrated in the novel? Give at least two examples of characters helping loved ones out of "a sticky situation".

16) *"For some reason I don't feel like telling him about Grandma"* (Budi, p.133). Why do you think Budi didn't feel like telling Rochy that his grandmother was ill?

17) Were you surprised when you discovered that Rochy had stolen the boots? How did this make you feel? Why did he do it? Would you have done the same?

18) *"They can't be trusted, can they?"* (Budi's mum, p.192). Did you think the Dragon and Chief Inspector could be trusted to release Budi's dad, and to keep his uncle out of prison if he agreed to work for him? What would you have done in Budi's situation? Would you have revealed where Uncle Aaron was hiding? Why do you think he did it?



- 19) What is the significance of Budi discovering that his poster of Kieran Wakefield was mass-produced, and not personally signed? What does Kieran Wakefield represent to Budi?
- 20) *"I think it takes Kieran Wakefield a hundred seconds to earn as many rupiah as we earn in a month"* (Rochy, p.164). Were you surprised by this fact? Is this fair?
- 21a) *"There will always be something – or someone – stopping you from realizing your potential. Always a groundskeeper tending the fence. Always a goalkeeper guarding the goal. You've just got to see beyond him"* (academy groundskeeper, p.182). What does this mean? How is it relevant to what happens in the novel? Can you relate to this statement?
- 21b) *"The problem with being a dreamer is that occasionally you'll have nightmares – you've just got to make sure they don't ever spook you enough to want to wake up"* (academy groundskeeper, p.182). What does this mean? How is it relevant to Budi's story?
- 22) *"Sometimes sharing is the selfish thing to do"* (Budi, p.244). What does Budi mean by this? Can you think of any examples of when sharing might be selfish, either in the novel or a real-life situation?
- 23) Were you shocked when the truth about the Dragon's export business was revealed, or did you suspect that there might have been something sinister about the work Uncle Aaron would have to do?
- 24) Why do you think Budi chooses to give the money to Rochy rather than use it to take "the first step to Madrid" (p.276)? What would you have done with it?
- 25) Which character would you most like to meet in real life, and why?
- 26) Consider the book's cover. What is the significance of depicting Budi standing high above the city on a pile of shoeboxes? Consider his stance and posture. What does it reveal about him, and the themes of the book?
- 27) What did you think of the book's title? Think of three alternative titles.
- 28a) What does Budi learn about himself and the world during the course of the novel? Do you think he changes?
- 28b) What did you learn from this book? Has reading Budi's story changed any of your opinions?
- 29) Why do you think the author wrote this book? What are its main themes?
- 30) What did you think of the book's ending? Was it the conclusion you'd hoped for, or expected?

*

*

*

*

*

*

*

*

BEYOND THE BOOK

a) Creative activities

What happens next?

Write an additional chapter to the novel set a year later. Is Budi still working in the factory? Is he still obsessed with Real Madrid and Kieran Wakefield? Is Rochy still at school? Has anything changed about any aspect of their lives? Before you begin to write, consider Budi's character. Think about how he speaks, and the kinds of words he uses (his "narrative voice"). Then try to re-create his voice in your own piece of writing.

Create a collage

Using images sourced from magazines, newspapers, the Internet, and perhaps also even your own drawings, create a collage representing Budi's world, character and story. Think about his family, his passions, and his hopes. Think about the setting of the novel (perhaps re-read p.17 and p.45 as reminders). You might also like to include some key quotes to convey Budi's character.

Create a comic strip

Illustrate and write an eight-frame comic strip that tells the story of Kick. Before starting, break down the book into key episodes and plan each frame.

Create a cover

Design an alternative cover for *Kick*. Think about the themes and setting of the book, and the mood you wish to convey. Think about whether it should feature an illustration or photograph. Choose a font for the title and author name that will reflect the themes, setting and mood. You might like to write and include your own strapline to express the essence of the book.

b) Further reading

Trash, Andy Mulligan

Millions, Frank Cottrell Boyce

The Garbage King; The Fastest Boy in the World, Elizabeth Laird

Broken Glass; Spilled Water, Sally Grindley

For older readers (14+):

Keeper; Penalty; Exposure, Mal Peet

The Bone Sparrow, Zana Fraillon

Here I Stand: Stories that Speak for Freedom, Amnesty International



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK

Amnesty International UK endorses *Kick* because it upholds and illuminates many children's rights. Children have the right to be protected from work that harms you and is bad for your health and education. If you work, you have the right to be safe and to be paid fairly.

ENDORSED BY

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



Amnesty International is a movement of millions of ordinary people around the world standing up for humanity and human rights. We try to protect people wherever justice, fairness, freedom and truth are denied.

Human rights are universal and all children and adults have them, no matter who we are or where we live. Human rights are rooted in values that include truth, justice, freedom, safety and equality. They help us to live lives that are fair and truthful, free from abuse, fear and hardship. But they are often abused and we need to be alert and to stand up for ourselves and for other people. We can all help to make the world a better place.

Here are some recommended links from Amnesty International UK on how you can find out more about children's rights and take action:

Take action for individuals at risk around the world at www.amnesty.org.uk/actions

Find out how to start a Youth Group in your school or community at www.amnesty.org.uk/youth

Join the Junior Urgent Action network at www.amnesty.org.uk/jua

Learn about children's rights, global trade and social justice: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/resource-pack-human-rights-primary-school-ed139>

Read a summary of the UN Convention on the rights of the child via UNICEF: <http://bit.ly/2w2WNbm>

Explore human rights through more great books: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/fiction-and-human-rights>

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/amnesty-cilip-honour-carnegie-and-kate-greenaway-story-explorer-resources-2017>

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/amnesty-cilip-honour-carnegie-and-kate-greenaway-teaching-resources-2016>

If you liked *Kick*, you might enjoy *The Bone Sparrow*: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/book-and-activities-bone-sparrow>

