



PICK IT UP—AND KEEP IT HIDDEN.

TRASH

andy mulligan

CHAPTER SAMPLE

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TRASH

In an unnamed third world country, a boy named Raphael Fernandez makes his living picking through mountains of garbage on the outskirts of a large city. One day Raphael and his friends find something very special—so special that they decide to keep it, even when the city police show up and offer a handsome reward for its return.

Their decision brings with it furious and terrifying consequences, and the dumpsite boys will have to use all of their cunning to stay ahead of their corrupt and determined pursuers. Can they solve the mystery behind what they found and right a terrible wrong?



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1

My name is Raphael Fernandez and I am a dumpsite boy.

People say to me, 'I guess you just never know what you'll find, sifting through rubbish! Today could be your lucky day.' I say to them, 'Friend, I think I know what I find.' And I know what everyone finds, because I know what we've been finding for all the years I've been working, which is fourteen years. It's the one word: *stuppa*, which means – and I'm sorry if I offend – it's our word for human muck. I don't want to upset anyone, that's not my business here. But there's a lot of things hard to come by in our sweet city, and one of the things too many people don't have is toilets and running water. So when they have to go, they do it where they can. Most of those people live in boxes, and the boxes are stacked up tall and high. So, when you use the toilet, you do it on a piece of paper, and you

wrap it up and put it in the trash. The trash bags come together. All over the city, trash bags get loaded onto carts, and from carts onto trucks or even trains – you'd be amazed at how much trash this city makes. Piles and piles of it, and it all ends up here with us. The trucks and trains never stop, and nor do we. Crawl and crawl, and sort and sort.

It's a place they call Behala, and it's rubbish-town. Three years ago it was Smoky Mountain, but Smoky Mountain got so bad they closed it down and shifted us along the road. The piles stack up – and I mean Himalayas: you could climb for ever, and many people do . . . up and down, into the valleys. The mountains go right from the docks to the marshes, one whole long world of steaming trash. I am one of the rubbish boys, picking through the stuff this city throws away.

'But you must find interesting things?' someone said to me. 'Sometimes, no?'

We get visitors, you see. It's mainly foreigners visiting the Mission School, which they set up years ago and just about stays open. I always smile, and I say, 'Sometimes, sir! Sometimes, ma'am!'

What I really mean is, *No, never – because what we mainly find is stupp.*

'What you got there?' I say to Gardo.

'What d'you think, boy?' says Gardo.

And I know. The interesting parcel that looked like something nice wrapped up? What a surprise! It's stupp,

and Gardo's picking his way on, wiping his hands on his shirt and hoping to find something we can sell. All day, sun or rain, over the hills we go.

You want to come see? Well, you can smell Behala long before you see it. It must be about two hundred football pitches big, or maybe a thousand basketball courts – I don't know: it seems to go on for ever. Nor do I know how much of it is stupp, but on a bad day it seems like most of it, and to spend your life wading through it, breathing it, sleeping beside it – well . . . maybe one day you'll find 'something nice'. Oh yes.

Then one day I did.

I was a trash boy since I was old enough to move without help and pick things up. That was what? – three years old, and I was sorting.

Let me tell you what we're looking for.

Plastic, because plastic can be turned into cash, fast – by the kilo. White plastic is best, and that goes in one pile; blue in the next.

Paper, if it's white and clean – that means if we can clean it and dry it. Cardboard also.

Tin cans – anything metal. Glass, if it's a bottle. Cloth or rags of any kind – that means the occasional T-shirt, a pair of pants, a bit of sack that wrapped something up. The kids round here, half the stuff we wear is what we found, but most we pile up, weigh and sell. You should see me, dressed to kill. I wear a pair of hacked-off jeans and a too-big

T-shirt that I can roll up onto my head when the sun gets bad. I don't wear shoes – one, because I don't have any, and two, because you need to feel with your feet. The Mission School had a big push on getting us boots, but most of the kids sold them on. The trash is soft, and our feet are hard as hooves.

Rubber is good. Just last week we got a freak delivery of old tyres from somewhere. Snapped up in minutes, they were, the men getting in first and driving us off. A half-good tyre can fetch half a dollar, and a dead tyre holds down the roof of your house. We get the fast food too, and that's a little business in itself. It doesn't come near me and Gardo, it goes down the far end, and about a hundred kids sort out the straws, the cups and the chicken bones. Everything turned, cleaned and bagged up – cycled down to the weighers, weighed and sold. Onto the trucks that take it back to the city, round it goes. On a good day I'll make two hundred pesos. On a bad, maybe fifty? So you live day to day and hope you don't get sick. Your life is the hook you carry, there in your hand, turning the trash.

'What's that you got, Gardo?'

'Stupp. What about you?'

Turn over the paper. 'Stupp.'

I have to say, though: I'm a trash boy with style. I work with Gardo most of the time, and between us we move fast. Some of the little kids and the old people just poke and poke, like everything's got to be turned over – but

among the stupp, I can pull out the paper and plastic fast, so I don't do so bad. Gardo's my partner, and we always work together. He looks after me.

2

So where do we start?

My unlucky-lucky day, the day the world turned upside down? That was a Thursday. Me and Gardo were up by one of the crane-belts. These things are huge, on twelve big wheels that go up and down the hills. They take in the trash and push it up so high you can hardly see it, then tip it out again. They handle the new stuff, and you're not supposed to work there because it's dangerous. You're working under the trash as it's raining down, and the guards try to get you away. But if you want to be first in line – if you can't get right inside the truck, and that is *very* dangerous: I knew a boy lost an arm that way – then it's worth going up by the belt. The trucks unload, the bulldozers roll it all to the belts, and up it comes to you, sitting at the top of the mountain.

That's where we are, with a view of the sea.

Gardo's fourteen, same as me. He's thin as a whip, with long arms. He was born seven hours ahead of me, onto the same sheet, so people say. He's not my brother but he might as well be, because he always knows what I'm thinking, feeling – even what I'm about to say. The fact that he's older means he pushes me around now and then, tells me what to do, and most of the time I let him. People say he's too serious, a boy without a smile, and he says, 'So show me something to smile at.' He can be mean, it's true – but then again he's taken more beatings than me so maybe he's grown up faster. One thing I know is I'd want him on my side, always.

We were working together, and the bags were coming down – some of them already torn, some of them not – and that's when I found a 'special'. A special is a bag of trash, unsplit, from a rich area, and you always keep your eyes wide for one of them. I can remember even now what we got. Cigarette carton, with a cigarette inside – that's a bonus. A zucchini that was fresh enough for stew, and then a load of beaten-up tin cans. A pen, probably no good, and pens are easy to come by, and some dry papers I could stick straight in my sack – then trash and trash, like old food and a broken mirror or something, and then, falling into my hand . . . I know I said you don't find interesting things, but, OK – once in your life . . .

It fell into my hand: a small leather bag, zipped up tight and covered in coffee-grounds. Unzipping it, I found

a wallet. Next to that, a folded-up map – and inside the map, a key. Gardo came right over, and we squatted there together, up on the hill. My fingers were trembling, because the wallet was fat. There were eleven hundred pesos inside, and that – let me tell you – is good money. A chicken costs one-eighty, a beer is fifteen. One hour in the video hall, twenty-five.

I sat there laughing and saying a prayer. Gardo was punching me, and I don't mind telling you, we almost danced. I gave him five hundred, which was fair because I was the one who found it. Six hundred left for me. We looked to see what else there was, but it was just a few old papers, photos, and – interesting . . . an ID card. A little battered and creased, but you could make him out easy enough. A man, staring up at us, right into the camera, with those frightened eyes you always have when the camera flashes. Name? José Angelico. Age? Thirty-three years old, employed as a houseboy. Unmarried and living out somewhere called Green Hills – not a rich man, and that makes you sad. But what do you do? Find him in the city and say, 'Mr Angelico, sir – we'd like to return your property'?

Two little photos of a girl in school dress. Hard to say how old, but I reckoned seven or eight, with long dark hair and beautiful eyes. Serious face, like Gardo's – as if no one had told her to smile.

We looked at the key then. It had a little tag made of yellow plastic. There was a number on both sides: 101.

The map was just a map of the city.

I took it all away and slipped it down my pants – then we kept on sorting. You don't want to draw attention to yourself, or you can lose what you find. But I was excited. We were both excited, and we were right to be, because that bag changed everything. A long time later I would think to myself: *Everyone needs a key.*

With the right key, you can bust the door wide open. Because nobody's going to open it for you.

3

Raphael still!

I'll hand on to Gardo after this – after the evening.

You see, just after dark I realized I had something very, very, very important, because the police arrived and asked for it back.

You don't see many police in Behala, because in a shanty you sort out your own problems. There's not a lot to steal, and we don't usually steal from each other – though it happens. We had a murder a few months ago, and the police came then. An old man killed his wife – slit her throat and left her bleeding down the walls to the shack underneath. By the time they came he'd run and we never heard whether they got him. We had four police cars come on an election visit, surrounding a man who wanted to be mayor – lights flashing and radios crackling away, because they

all love a show, these police. Otherwise, they have better things to do.

This time it was five men, one of them looking very important, like a senior officer – older man, fatter man. More of a boxer, with a smashed-up nose, no hair, and a mean look.

The sun had gone down. There was a cooking fire, where my auntie was boiling up the rice, and tonight – on account of the money I'd found – we were having that precious one-eighty chicken. About thirty of us were gathered – not all to eat the chicken! – that was just for the family. But it's hot in the evenings, so people are out squatting, standing, roaming.

I think Gardo had a ball and we'd been fooling around under the hoop. Now we all stood still in the headlights of this big black four-wheel-drive, and the men got out.

The boxer cop had a quick chat with Thomas, who's the main man in our little patch, and then he was talking to all of us.

'A friend of ours has a problem,' he said. Voice like a megaphone. 'It's a pretty big problem, and we're hoping you can help. Fact is, he's lost something important. We're giving good money to anyone who finds it. Another fact is, if anyone here finds it, we're going to give a thousand pesos to every family in Behala, you understand? That is how important it is to our friend. And we're giving ten thou to you – to the one who actually puts it in my hand.'

'What have you lost?' said a man.

‘We’ve lost . . . a bag,’ said the policeman, and my skin went dry and cold, but I managed not to show it. He turned and took something from the man behind him, and held it up. It was a handbag made of black plastic, big as my hand. ‘It probably looks like this,’ he said. ‘Bit bigger, bit smaller – not exactly the same, but similar. We think this bag might have something important in it that’s going to help us solve a crime.’

‘When did you lose it?’ said someone.

‘Last night,’ said the policeman. ‘It was put in the trash by mistake. Out on McKinley Hill, somewhere round there. And the truck picked up all the McKinley trash this morning. That means it’s either here right now, or coming in tomorrow.’ He watched us, and we watched him.

‘Has anyone found a bag?’ I could feel Gardo’s eyes fixed on me.

I so nearly raised my hand. I so nearly spoke up then and there, because ten thousand is good money. And a thousand to every family? That’s what they were promising, and if they gave it, oh my! I’d be the most popular boy in the neighbourhood. But I didn’t, because I was also thinking fast, thinking that I could as well give it up in the morning as now. I better be clear: I’d never had any trouble with the police before then, so it wasn’t that I didn’t like them or didn’t want to be helpful. But everyone knows not to trust too far. What if they just took it and drove off laughing? What was I going to do to stop them? I needed time to think, so I stood there, dumb. Maybe there

was a bit of calculation going on as well. If they had money to give away, then they could be raised up over ten, and we could get it all up front. If it was precious enough for them to come all this way out to see us, then perhaps ten thousand would turn into twenty?

My auntie said, 'Raphael found something, sir.'

She nodded, and all the police were looking straight at me.

'What did you find?' said the boss.

'I didn't find a bag, sir,' I said.

'What did you find?'

'I found a . . . shoe.'

Somebody laughed.

'What kind of shoe? One shoe? When was this?'

'One shoe, sir – just a lady's shoe. I can get it – it's in my house.'

'What makes you think we're going to be interested in that? You playing games?'

He was looking back at my auntie, and her eyes were back on the rice, then on me, then on the rice.

'He said he found something,' she said. 'He never said what he found. Just trying to be helpful, sir.'

The cop in charge spoke loudly. 'Listen. We're going to be back here in the morning,' he said. 'We are going to pay anyone who wants work. One day, one week – however long it takes. We need to find that bag, and we'll pay to find it.'

One of the other policemen walked over to me, quite

a young man. Gardo was right next to me then, and the policeman put his hand under my chin and tilted my head up. I looked into his eyes, trying so hard not to look scared. He was smiling, but I was glad to feel Gardo right up against me, and I smiled back as best I could.

‘What’s your name?’ he said.

I told him.

‘Brothers? Sisters? This your brother?’

‘My best friend, sir. This is Gardo.’

‘Where do you live, son?’

I told him everything, fast and happy, smiling hard – and I watched him fix our house in his mind, and then fix my face. He rubbed my ear gently, like I was a kid. He said: ‘You gonna help us tomorrow, Raphael? How old are you?’

‘Fourteen, sir.’ I know I look younger.

‘Where’s your father?’

‘No father, sir.’

‘That was your ma?’

‘Auntie.’

‘You want work, Raphael? You gonna help?’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘How much are you paying? I’ll work for ever!’ I made my smile bigger and my eyes wider, trying just to be an excited, harmless, cute little trash boy.

‘One hundred,’ he said. ‘One hundred for the day, but if you find that bag . . .’

‘I wanna help too,’ said Gardo, pretending to be eight years old and showing his teeth. ‘What’s in the bag, sir? More money?’

‘Bits and pieces. Nothing valuable, but—’

‘What kind of crime?’ I said. ‘How’s it gonna help you solve a crime? Is it a murder?’

The policeman smiled at me some more. He looked at Gardo too. ‘I don’t even think it will,’ he said. ‘But we got to give it our best shot.’ He was looking at me hard again, and Gardo’s arm was right round me. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’

Then the policemen climbed back into their car and drove on, and we made sure we stood right up close to show we weren’t afraid, and we made sure we ran with the car and waved. Now, Behala’s full of little neighbourhoods just like ours. The shacks we live in grow up out of the trash piles, bamboo and string, piled upwards – it’s like little villages in amongst the hills. We watched the car, rocking over the ruts and holes, the lights going up and down. If they wanted to talk to everyone, they’d have to make the same speech ten times.

Later on, my auntie came close and said, ‘Why are you telling lies, Raphael Fernandez?’

‘I found a wallet,’ I said. ‘I gave you what I found – why did you say that to them?’

She came close and she spoke quietly. ‘You found the bag, didn’t you? You tell me now.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I found money.’

‘Why did you say a shoe? Why did you not tell the truth?’

I shrugged, and tried to be sly. ‘Ma, I thought they might want the wallet back,’ I said.

‘Money in a wallet? Where’s the wallet now?’

‘I’m going to get it! I just didn’t want to speak up in front of everyone, everyone looking right at me, and—’

‘You found the wallet in a bag? You can’t lie to me.’

‘No!’ I said. ‘No.’

She looked at me hard again, and shook her head. ‘You gonna get us into a lot of trouble, I think. Whose wallet was it? People always have a name, and if you—’

‘I just took the money,’ I said. ‘I’ll throw the damn thing away right now.’

‘You give it to the police.’

‘Why? It’s not what they’re looking for, Ma. I didn’t find a bag.’

‘Oh, boy,’ she said. ‘Raphael. What I’m thinking is, if they’re throwing money around to get that something back, you don’t want to be caught messing about with it. I am serious, Raphael. If you found anything like the thing they’re wanting, you need to give it up – first thing in the morning, when they’re back.’

Gardo ate with us. He often did, just as I often ate with him and his uncle. I spent the night at his, just as he spent the night at ours – I’d wake up forgetting which place I was in and who was under the blanket with me. Anyway, just as we finished, the police car came back, big and black, and drove right out of the gates.

We watched it go.

I couldn’t believe Auntie had said what she said. I knew she’d had problems with the police before, on account of

my father, and I guess she had some feeling, even then, that things were going to get complicated. I think she wanted to stop it all there, all at once – but I still say she was wrong. It was one of the things that made leaving easier.

I went up to my house, Gardo following. We live high, compared to many. Two rooms built out of truck-pallets with plastic and canvas holding it fast, and it's stacked over three families below. You go up three step-ladders to get to it. First, the bit where auntie and my half-sister sleep, and beyond that's another little box, about the size of a sheet. That's where me and my cousins go, and Gardo too when he's with us. My cousins were in there now, snoring away, and all around was the noise of neighbours' chatter and laughter, and radios, and someone calling.

I moved one of the cousins along, and we got close in to the side, where I store my things. It's a crate that beer came in, and it's up on one side. I've got a spare pair of shorts, another two T-shirts and a pair of slippers. I've also got my little spread of treasures, like all the boys do. With me it's a penknife I found, with a broken blade – still a good little tool. I've got a cup with a picture of the Virgin Mary. I've got a watch that doesn't go. I've got a little plastic duck, which the cousins play with, and I've got one pair of jeans. The jeans were wrapping up the precious bag, and it felt dangerous just to be unwrapping it.

Gardo held a candle close and sat hunched, watching me. We were both bending over it. When I glanced up at him, his lips were thin. The whites of his eyes stood out like

a pair of eggs.

‘We gotta move it,’ he said. ‘You can’t leave it here, boy.’

‘I think you’re right,’ I said. ‘Where to?’

He paused.

I pulled out the ID and looked at the man. Jose Angelico, looking back at me sadly. And his little girl, more serious.

‘What do you think he’s done?’ I said.

‘Something bad,’ said Gardo. ‘And when they come back, I think they going to talk to you again . . . You see the way that guy was looking at you?’

I nodded.

‘You see the way he was touching you? He’s got you fixed.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘You too, maybe.’ I laughed. ‘You think he wants to be our special friend?’

‘This isn’t funny,’ said Gardo. ‘We need Rat.’

‘Why Rat?’

‘I’m thinking it’s about the only place they’re not gonna look.’

‘You think he’ll take it, though? Rat’s not stupid.’

‘Give him ten, he’ll take it. Break his arms if he doesn’t.’ Gardo took the ID and put it away. ‘They won’t go down there, the police – they won’t even see him.’

I knew it was a good plan. I knew it was the only plan as well, because we had to get it out of the house.

‘Do it now?’ I said.

Gardo nodded.

‘Don’t threaten him, though,’ I said. ‘He’ll do it for me.’

4

Still Raphael.

So sorry, but I want to tell about Rat, and then I will hand over.

Rat is a boy – three or four years younger than me. His real name is Jun-Jun. Nobody called him that, though, because he lived with the rats and had come to look like one. He was the only kid in Behala that I knew of who had no family at all, and at that time I didn't know too much about his past. There were plenty of boys without fathers, and a lot like me without mothers either. But if you had no parents, you had aunties or uncles, or older brothers, or cousins, and so there was always somebody who would take care of you and give you a bit of the mat to sleep on, and a plate of rice. The thing about Rat was, he had nobody, because he'd come from some place way out of the city –

and if it hadn't been for the Mission School he'd have been dead.

Gardo and I went back down the ladders with the candles. I'd put the bag under my T-shirt, and tried to hold my arms so it wasn't too obvious – but it was as if people didn't want to see me anyway. Auntie especially was looking away, and shifted so she had her back to us both. We crossed the roadway and were soon deep in amongst the trash.

I better say, the trash is alive at night: that's when the rats come out strong. During the day you don't see so many, and they stay out of your path. You get a surprise now and then when one jumps up, and sometimes you get a good kick and send one spinning. Not often, though. They're quick, and they can dive, jump, fly and squirm their way out of anywhere.

I followed Gardo, and on either side I was aware of the little grey movements. There is light over Behala, because some of the trucks come at night – they've rigged up big floodlights, and they're usually on. We'd gone left, right, over the little canal that just about gets through, stinking of the dead – and then off we went into a lane only the trash people use – no trucks, and not even many people. It was dead trash underfoot, and it was damp – you were up to your knees. Soon we came to one of the old belt-machines, but this one was disused and rotting. The belt itself had been stripped out, and the wooden panels had been taken. It was just a huge metal frame, rusting away.

The arm that held the belt pointed up into the sky like a big finger, and now and then kids would climb it and sit in the breeze. At ground level, its legs were sunk into concrete piles, and underneath the legs was a hole.

I suppose machinery must have been down there at one time, because there were steps down, and they were slimy. Trash is often wet, and the juices are always running. Maybe the ground here was a bit lower, I don't know – but it was always muddy.

We stopped at the top of the steps, and I called out: 'Rat!'

I called quite soft – I didn't want anyone to know what we were doing, or where we were. The problem was, the kid couldn't hear me if he was down there, and I was pretty sure he would be. Where else would he be?

'Hey, Rat!' I called again. I could hear the little cheeps and squeaks. Gardo was following me now, because even though he's braver than me and stronger, he's not easy with rats. I'll kill one with my foot, but Gardo got bitten badly a while ago, and his whole hand went bad. He'll kill them, but he'd rather stay away from them. I was halfway down the steps, and a little one streaked up past me, then another.

'Rat!' I called, and my voice echoed in the machine-chamber. I got down low with the candle, trying not to breathe too deep because of the stink – and I heard him turn in his bed.

'What?' he said. He's got a high little voice. 'Who is that?'

‘Raphael and Gardo. We got a favour to ask you. Can we come in?’

‘Yes.’

It might seem crazy asking a kid if you can come into his hole, but this hole was about the only thing Rat had, apart from what he wore. I would not have lived there – anywhere would have been better. For a start it was damp and dark. For another thing, I would have been scared that the trash above would fall and pile up down the stairs, trapping me, like it did on Smoky Mountain. These mountains do move. It’s not us climbing about on them that makes them fall, it’s usually just their own weight as the belts pile more and more stuff on. You can get caught in a fall, and it’s heavy stuff. I’ve never known anyone killed, but one kid broke bones, falling badly. When Smoky went down, there were nearly a hundred killed, and everyone knows some of those poor souls are still down there, down with the trash, turned into trash, rotting with the trash.

Anyway, I got to the last step, trying not to think of all that, and put my candle low. There was a sudden flicker of black, and another rat – this one big as they come – shot past me, right over my shoulder.

The kid was sitting up, just in his shorts, gazing at me with frightened eyes and his big broken teeth sticking out of his mouth.

‘Raphael?’ he said. ‘What do you want?’

I thought, I should have brought him a bit of food. He goes hungrier than most, and his face is pinched. Kids used

to call him Monkey Boy before Rat, because his face does have that wide-eyed, staring look that little monkeys have. He was sitting on some layers of cardboard, and around him there were piles of rubbish that he must have been sorting. The walls and ceiling were damp brick, and there were cracks everywhere. That was where the rats came in and out, and I guessed there were nests just the other side. He had arms skinny as pencils, and Gardo's crack about breaking them had made me smile. You could break Jun's arms with your finger and thumb. He was a spider, not a rat.

'We need your help,' I said.

'That's OK.'

'You don't know what we want,' said Gardo. 'How's it OK already?'

'It's OK.' The boy smiled, and his teeth gleamed out crookedly. He blinked. He has a twitch, and when he's scared, his whole head starts to shake. He wasn't scared right now, though – he was more interested. Also, I know he liked me. I wouldn't say he and I were friends, not at all. But I didn't mind working next to him, which meant we'd talk a bit, and I'd listen to his chit-chat-singing. A lot of kids would just throw things at him and laugh.

I sat down, but Gardo stayed on the step, squatting. 'You gotta hide something,' I said. I put the bag on the cardboard, and put my candle next to it. He found another and lit it, and all three of us sat in silence.

'OK,' he said. 'What's in it? Who's it belong to?' He had a thin, breathy little voice like he was six years old.

I opened the flap and unzipped it. I took out the items and laid them down. The wallet. The key. The map.

'You happy to hide it? You didn't hear the police come, did you?'

'I didn't see any police,' said Rat. 'But I can hide it if you want. See that brick? That comes right out, and the next one too. Won't last long, though – it's gonna get eaten, OK?'

'Wait,' said Gardo. 'I'm thinking about this. It's not the bag they want, is it? It's what's in the bag.'

'We've still got to hide it,' I said.

'Why don't we just sling it?'

'If we sling it,' I said, 'and they find it . . . then they'll know someone's got what's inside, maybe. If they know what they're looking for.'

'Who's looking?' said Rat. 'What did the police want?'

I told him quickly, and his eyes widened. 'Ten thousand, Raphael!' he said. 'You're crazy! Give it in and get the cash.'

'Oh yes,' said Gardo, sneering. 'You really think they'll give it? You taken in by that? And if they do, boy – you think he'll hold onto ten thousand?'

Rat looked from me to Gardo and back again.

'Look,' I said. 'We've got to hide it. They come back tomorrow – they say they're going to pay everyone to work. We all get a few days' work, maybe – give it up next week.'

'Everyone's happy,' said Rat. 'That's a good idea, maybe. But you got to ask, why do they want it so bad, OK? How

much was in this?' His thin fingers opened the wallet and pulled out the papers.

'Eleven hundred,' I said.

He smiled right at me. 'Anything for using my house?'

'I'll give you fifty,' I said, and he grinned even wider and touched my arm.

'You promise, OK? That's a promise?'

'Promise.'

His hands went to the map. 'We ought to find out what they want,' he said. 'What is this – buried treasure?'

'There's nothing on it,' I said. 'It's just a city map.'

He looked harder at the ID then, staring at the photograph.

'Who is this?'

'Jose Angelico,' I said. I knew Rat couldn't read. He turned the paper over and over, looking at the face.

'Jose Angelico,' he said slowly. 'You think the police want him? You think he's a wanted man? He looks nice enough. This his little girl?'

He was looking at the child, putting the faces next to each other.

'Maybe,' I said. 'I don't know.'

'He's rich enough to send her to school,' said Rat. 'That's a school dress.'

'What if he's been murdered?' said Gardo. 'Maybe they're looking for his body – looking for the murderers too. This could be part of something bad.'

'Who lost the bag, though?' I said. 'How do you lose

a bag in the trash?’

‘Not by accident,’ said Rat. He was staring at the photos again. ‘We ought to find out who he is, OK? He might give more than the police.’

‘And what’s the key?’ said Gardo, pointing to it. ‘That’s his house key, maybe. Maybe he’s locked out of his house? Find out where he lives—’

‘Oh no, that’s not a house key,’ said Rat, staring. He hadn’t noticed the key in the darkness. Now he picked it up and put it next to my candle. He looked up at me again. ‘Oh, my. You don’t know what that is, do you?’

‘Could be to a safe,’ I said. ‘What is it, a padlock key? What’s the one-oh-one?’

‘You don’t know what that is!’ said Rat slowly. He was teasing us. ‘I do. I’ll raise you to a hundred.’

‘What?’

He was smiling wider than I’d ever seen him smile, and his broken teeth stuck out like straws. ‘I’ve seen these so many times, OK – I can tell you exactly what it is and where it is. You give me that fifty? Now? Make it a hundred, or you get no further.’

‘You know what it is? Really?’

Rat nodded.

I pulled out some notes, and counted them out on the cardboard. There was a skittering of feet behind the wall, and I heard something running right round the little room, surrounding us. There were squeakings again: the place was alive. Gardo and I sat on, looking at Rat, waiting

for his great piece of information.

‘Central Station,’ he said softly. ‘I lived there nearly a year, when I came in first of all. I can tell you for sure: this is a locker key for the left luggage. Just outside platform four, last block on the right. One-oh-one’s small, up at the top – the cheapest they do. This man’s left something there.’

He smiled again and we sat there, just looking at each other. Gardo whistled, and I felt my heart beat faster and faster.

‘You wanna go there?’ said Rat. ‘We go there now if you want.’

5

Gardo here, and I take the story on from Raphael.

We agreed to split the story because some things he forgets – like he wanted to go to the station that night, right then, and then the next day, like a little kid. He got so excited thinking about what he might find, I had to say no about ten times, because one thing I knew was that we had to be there, in Behala, for the big search – especially if the policeman who talked to us were there.

I had to get a hold of his hair and I said, ‘How is it going to look when everyone is there to earn money, and the boy they know found something – maybe a shoe, or maybe something else – doesn’t show?’

Raphael is my best friend but he’s like a kid, always laughing, playing, thinking everything’s fun, thinking it’s a game – so I said they have to see us working and looking,

and that way maybe they leave us alone: and so we waited.

Next morning, like I said, the whole of Behala turns out, early and ready, before dawn. Like Raphael said, we get money for what we can sell, hand to mouth, so getting paid for the day is like a dream, and there were way too many pickers – I guess people had told people, and there were crowds of us, all piling in. Then the police arrived early also, and even as the sun came up, everyone was way up on the trash – men, women and every damn kid, even the tiny ones – earning their precious hundred, some without even hooks, just using hands – in fact, there were so many of us, it was dangerous, and you could feel the trash sliding about, and there was no room to throw the stuff you'd sorted.

I was hooking stuff up, scratching other people almost, and it was more and more dangerous, so after one hour all us kids were ordered off, and just the men stayed on, and the trash was being gone through again – right by where we'd been the previous day. The managers were there, talking to the police, shouting up to the men – and it was all being picked over and over, again and again. But nothing was coming up.

All the while, more cars – police car, then another police car, then a police truck, motorbikes, more police cars, and then big cars like government cars – and men in suits as well as police, getting out and their nice shoes getting wet and filthy. And it's still not seven o'clock and you can't move for the cars and people, like it's a festival.

No belts were working, as they turned them all off.

Things get worse.

Soon we can see the line of trucks coming in is stretching right back through the gates and down the road, waiting to unload: after just one hour I'd counted twenty-six. The drivers didn't even care at first – they squatted in the shade, and some boys went off to get them tea and cigarettes. There were kids jumping into the trucks then, and picking there, on the roadside, but me and Raphael stayed down, listening around for more 'information', me wondering all the time where this was going to end – knowing, because I knew, that people were going to be angry soon, and it would be these police losing patience first. When the police get mean, you don't want to be around. On the other hand, I did not want Raphael hiding and drawing attention that way, so that was why I kept him right in the middle of it.

One man had a box with a great wad of notes in it, and he'd shown it around to prove we'd all be paid. I overheard another one talking, and I worked out what was happening – they were using their brains. Somehow they knew the bag had been lost in this place called McKinley – which is a rich area – so it wasn't hard to trace the trucks that look after that neighbourhood. Now, the McKinley trucks had made one visit yesterday, which is how we found what we found – and more were coming in again today. So, for today's trucks, all the police had to do was get them to drop the loads on a clear patch of ground, and we could pick it

on the ground, easy, in an hour.

Sure enough, just before noon they brought up the three special McKinley trucks and they dropped their loads, and they kept us all back, so we were all just looking at it. I said to Raphael then, turning him round so no one saw: 'Are you still sure, friend?'

He was looking scared because I think he was just beginning to realize how big this must be.

He said, very soft, 'I'm more sure than ever, Gardo,' so I stayed close.

We tried to look just happy and excited then, because the last thing I wanted was for anyone to think we were suspicious or scared or worried or hiding something – but I was frightened too, and I grabbed Raphael and made sure we joined in the pushing and shoving, like we hadn't a care in the world. When we saw Rat, we waved: he was squatting close by, smoking, and he would look over at me sometimes, but nobody looked at him, because Rat is grey as trash, and he had only the clothes he wears, which are so filthy he can move around and no one sees him.

After a while the police gathered all us kids together and got us working – they'd got extra hooks from somewhere, and as we were on level ground it wasn't a hard job: we just ripped and ripped, and spread it all out.

There were about a hundred of us.

The people in McKinley have toilets, so there wasn't any stupp – McKinley trash is good-quality trash: food, newspaper, a lot of plastic and glass, but the police wouldn't let

us take anything, because as far as they were concerned, we were looking for just one thing.

Then someone found a handbag, and there was real excitement, lots of shouting: it was blue, and old, with one stringy little handle, so it was thrown back, everyone very disappointed, and the police just watched us work, looking grim and their patience running out.

By mid-afternoon, I guess, we'd finished, and I don't think a pile of rubbish had ever got a better looking at: the men on the trash piles had finished as well, and everyone was ordered down. Of course, we all would have worked for the rest of the day, and the rest of the week – we were hoping to string it out and get five hundred out of it – but the police were smart, and could see that even in a mountain of rubbish, you can pick through what's up top pretty fast, and you can see what's new and what isn't.

I saw the boxer policeman was back – the big guy who'd made the speech yesterday – and he was talking it all over with the site managers and two men in suits by one of the big black cars. There was a lot of arguing going on, a lot of calls being made, and I could see the managers weren't happy – I think because the line of loaded trucks was getting longer and longer, and the drivers were finally getting itchy, drinking tea all day and not knowing when they were going home. And you could see what the problem was: if the police allowed these trucks to unload new, fresh trash, the precious bag was going to be buried even further down, if it was there. But on the other hand, this was the

city dumpsite, and how long can you close down a dump when all these millions of people are sending stuff to it? How long before the city stops?

But what must have been burning them up was that no one could be sure the bag had ever got here. After all, kids go through the trash straight out of the bins, in McKinley same as everywhere. Sometimes you see them in the street, sorting on the pavements. Also, like I said, kids get up inside the carts before they've even reached the dump – so they could not know a bag had even got to the dumpsite. It was strange to think there were just three boys in the world who knew exactly where it was.

We all sat around.

Money got paid out at last, and everyone was one hundred pesos richer. It was getting dark, the sky red all over, and the police finally gave up and started leaving, me and Raphael smiling. Then all the belts started with a sound that splits your ears, and the trucks started crawling through again, and they brought out more lights and worked on and on, right through until the morning.

In our little neighbourhood there were more cooking fires than usual, and a few cases of beer. There was music and singing, and everyone was happy – most of all Raphael, who thinks the job is done and he's been so smart.

But inside Raphael's house, right by me – because I was staying close now – after the food, his auntie says to both of us: 'Are we safe?'

I knew she wasn't, and I also knew she'd brought it on herself. Opening her mouth had not been smart – in fact, I hate to say it, but we talked about it since: if she had kept her mouth shut, things would have been so much easier. 'Are we safe?' she said again.

I said, 'We are completely safe. Don't worry,' which was a lie.

'I was spoken to,' she said to me. 'They wanted to know why I said he found something. A policeman asked me about it again, and I shouldn't have spoken, but I did. Now they're wondering about both of you. They got both your names.'

'Yes, but we told them,' said Raphael, doing his smile and pushing back his hair, 'it was just a shoe, and they know nothing.'

She was quiet, but only for a moment.

'I saw you go out last night,' she said, very soft like you could hardly hear, so we were huddling close. 'I don't want to know where, I don't want to know why, but I just want to know we're safe. There's nothing in the house, is there?'

We both said: 'No.'

'You promise me that? Because they will take these houses apart—'

'I promise,' said Raphael, so light and bright. All I could think about was the lies, stacking up now, and how I hoped it was worth it. The bag was safe, down with Rat – I wanted to get away and check it.

Raphael's auntie kept at him, though: 'They're talking

about searching here,' she said. 'That's what people say. Ours will be the first, you can bet on that. If they take it apart again—'

Raphael took her hand then: 'There's nothing in the house,' he said.

'Ten thousand is a lot of money!' she said, and her voice rose up. 'Have you thought what we could do with that?'

I interrupted then. 'You think they'd give it?' I said. 'You really think they'd give it?'

'I think they would!' she said.

Raphael shook her hand gently. 'Ma,' he said. 'Ma. If someone here – one of us – if one of us got all that money, you think we'd be allowed to keep it for long?'

She reached out to me then, and took hold of my arm, so we were all three linked together. 'You're smart,' she said to me. 'Gardo, you're smarter than this boy, and I know you can run fast and get clear – and maybe I shouldn't have spoken, and I'm sorry I did. But I'm too old to move again, and the two little ones . . .'

Her eyes were all full of tears, glittering wet – and I got scared because she was scared, and I know Raphael was most scared of all, though he won't ever say so. 'I don't want us getting caught up with the police,' she said, gripping us hard. 'Everyone knows what things they do.'

I couldn't meet her eye.

For one thing, I was mad she'd spoken up – it was still the dumbest thing she could have done. For another, I had a feeling things were going to get bad. Sure, I wanted to be

smart, like she said I was, and I knew I had to lead this, because Raphael needs to be led. I needed to keep a hold of him.

I was planning it fast, and that's why I said nothing.

We just had to get to the railway station – that's what I thought. We had to find out what was in the locker, and do it fast. Then, maybe, in a few days' time, we could give up the wallet with the key inside it and get everyone off our backs.

If that was too suspicious, I could get Rat to give it up – nobody would suspect him, because he worked alone, he didn't talk to people. So I thought, *Let Rat be the little hero and bring them what they wanted in a few days' time.*

But if even that was too dangerous, I was thinking – then we could just throw the wallet and key up into the trash, and wait till somebody – anybody – found it, if they ever did.

There was nothing in the house, that was true – and nobody could prove anything, and we were *not* in danger, and we could still make money – that is what I told myself, and Raphael was thinking just the same kind of thing, and we talked it through all night, thinking we were being smart and so not knowing what we were getting into. Not dealing with the fact that if the police think you've got something, they won't stop till they've got it from you.

About the Author

Andy Mulligan

was brought up in South London. He worked as a theater director for 10 years, before travels in Asia prompted him to re-train as a teacher. He has taught English and drama in Britain, India, Brazil, and the Philippines. He now divides his time between London and Manila.



Photo courtesy of the author.

Get to know

ANDY MULLIGAN!

Q. Where did you get the idea for TRASH?

A. I live in the Philippines in Manila, the capital. The idea came from the horrifying facts that are presented in the opening pages . . . that the city's dumpsite children do spend their day opening parcels of human excrement as they hunt for things they can recycle or sell. A proportion of the rubbish they deal with really is that disgusting and unhealthy. I heard that story, and the image was so disturbing that I visited the dumpsite to see for myself. It was a small step to start thinking, "what if . . . one day . . ."—instead of feces, a key to a better life. Thus the key became both real and metaphorical, and the plot evolved swiftly.

Q. What inspired you to create TRASH's setting?

A. In the U.K., the poor are successfully hidden from view. When you travel in places such as India, the Philippines, Brazil, you can't avoid them. You go through the most shocking shanties, and the street-people invade even the wealthiest areas. One thing that soon strikes you is the

ingenuity of the poor, forced to make money out of nothing—forced, for example, to rake through the piles of stuff others throw away. There’s nothing romantic about it. On the city dumpsite, it’s unhealthy, dangerous, repetitive, never-ending—and the landscapes you see, of trash heaps on which human beings are becoming indistinguishable from the trash they’re collecting, is a an awful sight. You can’t make sense of it, you can only turn away and pretend you haven’t seen it. It’s slavery, pure and simple, and for the vast majority, it’s inescapable. What hurts as well is that there is no solution because the job the scavengers do is an essential one, so it all adds up to the simple realization that those grim lives will never change—it’s in our interests that they don’t. Once you understand that you’re complicit, and the life you lead necessitates those scavenger-children, you don’t know what to think or do. A donation to UNICEF seems inadequate. So the setting of *Trash*—the dumpsite I visited—did have a profound effect on my imagination, especially when you juxtapose it with the tourist side of the Philippines—the glorious unspoiled beaches. When I wrote the book, the two landscapes were side by side in my mind, all the time.

Q. Have your travels inspired the world of TRASH? If so, where was the most inspirational location?

A. As above, but a major inspiration is also Kolkata, formerly Calcutta, in West Bengal, India, where I worked

for six months. When George Orwell spent time with the poor—I'm thinking of *Wigan Pier* or the essays—he dwelt on the squalor and the exhaustion, and spent a lot of time chronicling defeat and misery. As a tourist, perhaps those things are still hidden, for what I see is ingenuity, and an unbroken passion for life. I see extraordinary support structures and loyalties; I see people determined to grasp opportunity when it comes. I meet people who are tireless, still convinced that they can make their lives—and their children's lives—better. When you compare that to your own laziness and decadence, it is shocking. And, like I said above, you don't know what to do with the shock. Being rich involves a huge amount of deliberate blindness: you cannot believe the poor are letting you get away with it.

Q. Who is your favorite character in TRASH?

A. I don't really have one—I am very fond of them all. I love Olivia for her understanding of the situation, and her recognition that she had been used. She is a smoldering revolutionary, and I like the fact she has no trite answers. I'm fond of all three boys, and they lock together to form an unbeatable team. I suppose, if I were pushed, I'd say Rat is my favorite because he is so needy and so lost, so rejected, so ugly . . . such a little boy, and yet older than both the others, wiser, fiercer—and I gave him a more poetic register because I think he loves life, and clings to that crazy dream of being a fisherman.

Q. Have you ever found something that you considered a treasure that belonged to someone else?

A. No, I don't think I have.

Q. In your opinion, does TRASH appeal to a wide audience of readers? If so, why?

A. I hope it does.

I hope it's a good page-turning thriller. I love plots and I love worrying what's going to happen to characters I like. My favorite writers—whether it's Charles Dickens or John Grisham—keep you guessing, and have an uncanny ability to make you care. So I hope readers will care about the boys and want them to succeed. I like to think that the book also allows underdogs to fight back, and right a wrong. That doesn't happen enough in real life, so I hope a lot of people will celebrate it in a novel.

Q. What led you to write your first children's book?

A. Simply the fact that, as I spend so much time with children, as a teacher, it seemed to come naturally. I have loved writing since I was about 11 years old: it was the only thing I could do without being laughed at. *Ribblestrop* is my first children's book—a very anarchic story about a dysfunctional school. I hope *Trash* has the same anarchy as the children tear up the rulebook and fight, but clearly, it's a bit more serious than *Ribblestrop*.

Q. What's on your bookshelf these days?

A. I'm re-reading Marquez. Anne Tyler is never far away, as is my collection of unabridged Dickens audio books. I'm not reading much contemporary stuff, I'm afraid. I love Evelyn Waugh, and I constantly dip into Elmore Leonard. When it comes to children's books, I love plot-driven books like *The Time Warp Trio*, which has a sense of humour I adore. My seminal children's book, though, is still *Holes* by Louis Sachar, which is the perfect page-turner, with stunning characters—it's a little hall of mirrors that leads you to that glorious redemption at the end. I have no time at the moment for books that preach despair, and I love *Holes* for its certainty and symmetry.

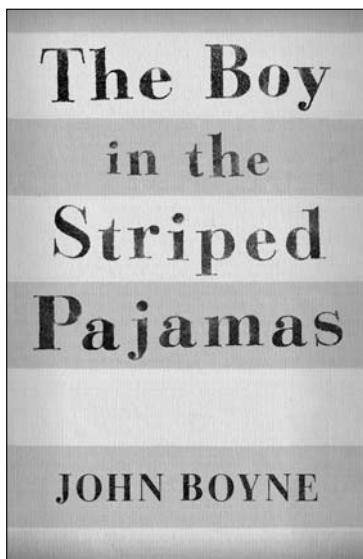
Q. What are you working on next?

A. I'm writing a book I have been trying to write for a number of years, but have always got stuck. I really think I'm going to finish it by Christmas, and am very excited. It's the story of a wealthy white girl, who runs away with an Indian boy. They're both 13, and the girl's family is desperate to find her—for all the wrong reasons. Their journey—across India—is harrowing. It's a thriller again, but it's a love story too (so is *Trash*, of course). It's all I can think about at the moment, and I'll be in India writing it very soon.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Author Andy Mulligan has come up with a wonderfully original and dynamic way to tell his story. Discuss the way Andy uses his multiple narrators and the different roles they play.
- 2.** Andy is a teacher. Discuss the way in which education is portrayed in the novel.
- 3.** How did the ending make you feel, and why do you think Andy chose to end his story in this way?

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