



Inspiration

Simon Rae

IT CAN BE ANYTHING. Potholes for instance. Winter 2017 was particularly bad round where I was living in rural Oxfordshire. I had three punctures within a five-mile radius. One bend was a shocker. It looked as if it had been shelled and there was one particularly deep shell-hole. I decided to place a severed head in it and let my Inspector Dalliance knock it for six as he drove home too fast from his mother's funeral, thereby getting my third detective story, *Hangman*, up and running.

Unplayable, my first novel for younger readers, was inspired by the need to write a bestseller as I teetered on the brink of bankruptcy back in 2008. I called a crisis meeting with a bottle of wine, and by the time I went to bed I had the plot of a boy whose shoulder is smashed in a deliberate foul playing football. He comes out of hospital put back together so well that when he takes up cricket in the summer term he can bowl unplayable leg-breaks.

Not that original, I grant you, but the extraordinary thing is that I woke up the next morning and started writing it. And kept on writing for seven weeks, until, you've guessed it, our hero bowls out the Aussies in the fifth test to win the Ashes. It went down incredibly well with eleven-year-olds of all ages. Children – and parents – clamoured for more, and Nicholas Lezard chose it as his paperback of the week in the *Guardian*.

Which is why, a year on, I was sitting in the inner sanctum of David Fickling Books, talking to David Fickling himself about what I would



write next. I hadn't a clue, but felt I needed to make the best of this rare opportunity. In the outer office, someone was tearing their way into a cardboard box: nothing unusual there. But something snagged in my mind. What if the box did not contain new books from the printer? What would be the most unexpected, the most terrifying thing a box could contain?

'I've got it,' I said.

'Do you want to tell me?' David asked.

'Not yet, but it's good,' I assured him.

A few months later I sent him the first draft of *The Stone Butterfly*, the story of a boy who finds a cardboard box containing Medusa's head on his doorstep. Happily he was paying attention when they did Greek myths in school, so he didn't get turned into stone. But a butterfly and his unloving aunt, with whom he lived after the death of his parents, weren't so lucky, and his first task was disposing of a life-sized stone statue. Further horrifying scenarios followed, reaching a shattering denouement.

David liked it very much, but changed the title to *Medusa's Butterfly*.

Inspiration isn't normally as specific as these examples, but I'm amused when asked where I get my ideas from. The imagination is always on the look-out for promising material. The possibilities are endless!