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BEETLE BOY BY M. G. LEONARD

SYNOPSIS

We first meet thirteen-year-old Darkus Cuttle after the unexplained disappearance of his father, Bartholomew 'Barty' Cuttle, from the Natural History Museum in London. Darkus is desperate to solve the mystery.

Darkus goes to live with his eccentric uncle, Professor Maximilian Cuttle – famous archaeologist and Barty's brother – in his flat on Nelson Road. Max is also determined to get to the bottom of his brother's disappearance, but warns Darkus that it will require 'grit and determination' from them both.

As well as getting used to his new home, Darkus also has to get used to his new school. Despite encountering schoolyard bullies on his first day, Darkus makes two new friends: the feisty and capable Virginia Wallace, and the nerdy and sensitive Bertolt Roberts. His new friends are thrilled at the prospect of helping Darkus in his quest to find his father.

But Darkus makes a third, decidedly more unusual friend in the form of a rhinoceros beetle he later names Baxter. Astonishingly, Baxter comes to the rescue when Darkus is pounced upon by the bullies. The beetle seems determined to come home with Darkus and the boy soon realises he has made a firm and loyal friend.

Darkus and Max decide to do a little digging. They begin at the Natural History Museum – the scene of Barty's disappearance. It soon becomes apparent that beetles feature in the mystery, as Barty disappeared from the 'Coleoptera Collection Room', which houses the largest collection of beetles in the world. When Baxter locates Barty's spectacles in an air conditioning shaft, Darkus suspects, more strongly than ever, that foul play is at the heart of the mystery.



Darkus and Max's investigations are cut short by the surprise arrival of Lucretia Cutter, the rich and famous sponsor of the beetle collection. The immaculately groomed villainess sweeps into the museum in a fit of fury demanding to know who has been given access to the private collection room. Luckily, Darkus and Max manage to dodge the terrifying benefactress. But Max seems unsettled by the new revelations and appears to know more than he is prepared to let on.

Back at Nelson Road, Darkus makes an incredible discovery in the filthy and dilapidated house of his next-door neighbours, cousins Humphrey and Pickering. Humphrey's room contains a filthy mountain of unwashed dishes, cups and saucers: but on closer inspection, the giant mount of teacups is heaving with thousands of the most exceptional and exotic beetles. The beetles seem to be invested with the same keen intelligence displayed by Baxter.

Darkus soon learns that he is not the only one interested in 'beetle mountain'; Lucretia Cutter has her own designs. She turns up unannounced on the cousins' doorstep and makes them a six-figure offer for the creatures. Meanwhile, her young daughter, Novak, waits by the car and on spotting Darkus in an upstairs window she drops a card in the street for him.

Darkus realizes Lucretia is behind his father's disappearance and enlists the help of Virginia and Bertolt in deciding what to do next. Though initially sceptical, his two friends are quickly enthralled by beetle mountain and its inhabitants. The trio build a base camp in the neighbours' junkyard and plot their next steps. Darkus goes to Tower Heights, Lucretia Cutter's sprawling mansion, to meet Novak. The dramatic little girl is lonely and living in mortal dread of her mother. The cousins are also at the mansion and Darkus and Novak watch in secret as they sign a deal with Lucretia.

Lucretia catches the spying pair and Darkus only narrowly escapes – though poor Novak is taken to the cells for punishment. Before Darkus leaves, he hears the familiar cries of his father and realizes that his dad is being held captive at Tower Heights. He also spots a photo of his dad and Lucretia with a bunch of other scientists in lab coats under the title, 'Fabre Project'.

Darkus confronts his uncle who confesses that Lucretia and Barty once worked on the top-secret Fabre Project together. Initially begun as a study into how the power of beetles could be harnessed for the good of mankind, the project took a sinister turn at the hand of Lucretia (then named Lucy Johnstone), as she saw an opportunity to play with genetics for her own gain. Barty severed ties with the project, but Lucretia has continued her research behind closed doors.

The three children, Max and the beetles form a plan to thwart Lucretia's attempts to get her hands on beetle mountain



and release Barty from her evil clutches. Through careful planning, a little help from Novak, and plenty of grit and determination, the team succeed and Barty is brought home. The cousins' house is left in ruins and the pair arrested for kidnapping a minor, the bugs set up a new beetle mountain in the sewers under Nelson Road, and Lucretia's plans to steal the beetles are in tatters. However, in the chaos and commotion, the evil Lucretia manages to evade capture ...

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

'Roald Dahl used to tell me funny stories – laugh-out-loud but a little bit gross, and hugely heart-warming too. When I first read M. G. Leonard's Beetle Boy it gave me that same spine-tingling feeling. You're going to love making some very unexpected friends, puzzling out a totally thrilling mystery and trembling at one of the yuckiest, nastiest, oh-no-not-her villains I've ever encountered.' **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

M. G. Leonard has a first-class honours degree in English Literature and an MA in Shakespeare Studies from Kings College London. She works in London as the Senior Digital Media Producer for the National Theatre, and previously worked at the Royal Opera House and Shakespeare's Globe. Leonard spent her early career in the music industry running Setanta Records, an independent record label, and managing bands, most notably The Divine Comedy. After leaving the music industry, she trained as an actor, dabbling in directing and producing as well as performing, before deciding to write her stories down. Leonard lives in Brighton with her partner and two sons.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'The first book I ever wrote was about a witch whose spells always backfired. I was twelve. Now, I like to hand-make books for the people I love. I write every day, usually early in the morning, or on the train into London, or in the Dyke Park Cafe at weekends, or whenever I can.

'My stories are for young people, or people who are young at heart, who embrace nature and its wild and



crazy majesty. But right now, for me, it's beetles that are blowing my mind. There isn't anything as wild, crazy or majestic as the beetle.

'Ever since I was little I've been frightened of creepy-crawlies. Then I found out that beetles can be pretty, brightly coloured, even gold. Others are as strong as the Incredible Hulk. Some shoot acid out of their butts, and all beetles have wings! My fear had stopped me from seeing how fantastic beetles were, and so I decided to write an adventure with the beetles as the good guys.

'The beetles in this book are factually accurate, thanks to the expertise of Dr Sarah Beynon, entomologist extraordinaire. If you are interested in learning more about beetles, then you should visit her brilliant website www.thebugfarm.co.uk. And if you are ever in the UK, you should take a trip to her Bug Farm in Pembrokeshire.'

M. G. LEONARD

The author has also published four short podcasts about how to write which are available to download for free on iTunes.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Evil and greed
- The amazing attributes of beetles
- Science and responsibility
- Grit and determination
- Planning and cooperation

WRITING STYLE

Beetle Boy is a zany, creepy, funny, bug-filled adventure, with a cracking mystery at its heart. The action takes



place in London, England where thirteen-year-old Darkus Cuttle is living under the care of his uncle Max following the disappearance of his father Dr Bartholomew Cuttle. The story is told using the third person perspective. Throughout the novel, the language is colourful and visceral and great care is taken to describe, visually, the different human and non-human characters we encounter along the way – in particular the assortment of majestic and alien-like beetles. The novel explores the fine line between using science for the benefit of mankind versus its exploitation for personal gain. It also explores loyalty, friendship and what can be achieved through ‘grit and determination’. At the end of the novel there is a short section called ‘An Entomologist’s Dictionary’ which provides a glossary of beetle-related terms and anatomy. Though the novel stands alone perfectly well, the story ends with a view to be continued in planned sequel, *Beetle Queen*. **24 chapters, 311 pages, age 10+**

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. ‘Grit and determination’

‘Just because a person is young doesn’t mean they don’t they don’t have the curiosity, determination and grit to do what a grown-up can do, eh?’ Uncle Max (page 12)

‘Grit and determination’ are two qualities that are mentioned throughout the novel as being important. It is through ‘grit and determination’ that Darkus, Bertolt and Virginia manage to rescue Bartholomew Cuttle and halt the evil Lucretia Cutter in her tracks. As Uncle Max points out, young people can achieve the most remarkable things with a little grit and determination. Choose a young person you admire for something remarkable they have achieved. It could be someone famous or in the public eye but it could just as easily be someone you know in your own personal life, such as a friend or relative. Create a profile for this person. Explain what it is that they have achieved, why you think it is remarkable, and in what ways they showed grit and determination (or any other positive character traits) in achieving it. Each member of the class should create a profile on an individual piece of A4 card, with a picture of the person on the front if possible. The cards should then be laminated and kept in an ‘inspiration’ box or



file. You could designate one day of the week as 'inspiration day', and have either the teacher or a member of the class read out a profile during morning registration. Or the box could simply be there for you and your classmates to dip into as and when you feel the need to be inspired by the great things that young people – yourself included – can achieve with a little 'grit and determination'.

2. Animal studies

'Right now, for me, it's beetles that are blowing my mind. There isn't anything as wild, crazy or majestic as the beetle.'
M.G. Leonard, author of *Beetle Boy*

By her own admission, the author is just a little bit bonkers about beetles. But it hasn't always been that way. She also admits to having been frightened of bugs – before she made an effort to learn about and understand them, that is. Whether you are an out-and-out animal-lover or are a little nervous about all things animal, choose one animal (or species of animal) and study it in as much detail as you can. If you are actively terrified of a particular creature – spiders for example – it could be an interesting experiment to choose that one as the focus for your studies. Learn everything you can about your chosen animal: What do they eat? What are the hallmarks of their behaviour? What are they frightened of? What is their habitat like? What remarkable things can they do? How have they evolved? How do they move? Read about them, watch programmes and clips about them online or on TV. Better still, study them in their natural environment or in the flesh if you can. Draw pictures of them, sculpt them.

Your research should culminate in a class 'drama' session where you use everything you know about your chosen animal to become that animal for the whole lesson. The whole class should improvise, and move around the space as their animals, and should interact with and respond to the other animals in the class how they imagine their animal would. Try keeping the session non-verbal and instead use the sounds and calls of your animal and your physicality in order to communicate.

At the end of the session, the group should gather together and talk about their animals. Has studying your



animal given you a new-found respect or love for the animal? If your animal made you nervous before, do you still feel the same way now you have taken time getting to know your chosen animal?

3. Making the inanimate animate

It looked as if a mob of brawling furniture had been frozen with a ray gun. Table and chair legs stuck out, their feet like clenched fists about to land a punch. A brave hatstand was making a break for it at the south side of the yard, held back by tendrils of bindweed. Wardrobes cowered beneath tarpaulin. Naked lampstands were bound together with ropes. Bedsprings pinged out of mattresses and a giant bathtub reared up in the middle of the yard, a pink scooter dangling helplessly from its taps. (Page 82)

In this brilliantly vivid paragraph, the author brings the heap of yard rubbish to life by imbuing inanimate objects with human characteristics – making them feel like living, breathing things. Attributing human characteristics to non-human things is called ‘anthropomorphism’ and it is a lively and helpful tool that writers often draw upon to bring a scene to life.

Using a room in your house, or a location in your school, take a look at the objects around you. In the scene in page 82, the objects in the yard are in a jumbled chaos and the author’s choice of words and images reflects this; the ‘brave’ hatstand is ‘making a break for it’; the tables’ feet are like ‘clenched fists about to land a punch’. Take a look at your own scene and the objects inside it. What kind of personality traits would you imbue your objects with? Are the objects in a state of activity or are they laid back and relaxed? What is happening in the scene? Have they all been called to a very serious meeting, for example? What could the scenario be? Using your imagination and treating the objects in your scene as though they have human qualities, write a short creative piece – from a paragraph to a page in length – describing what you see. Share your pieces with the rest of the class.

4. Beetles Top Trumps

Darkus tried to take them all in, but there were so many different species, shapes, and colours of beetle that



his mind couldn't hold onto them: dung beetles, jewel beetles, giraffe-necked weevils, Goliath, stags, bombardiers, fireflies, lavender beetles, ladybirds, Atlas, Hercules, and titan beetles, tiger beetles, rhinoceros beetles, carpet beetles, deathwatch and tok-tokkies hammering their heads and abdomens against the cups for all they were worth.

(Page 239-240)

The aim of this exercise is to create a set of Top Trumps cards based on the beetles in this book. Working as a class and using the brilliant list of beetles on pages 239-240 as a starter for ten, write down a comprehensive list of beetles mentioned in the book.

Divide into a several smaller groups and divide the listed beetles between your groups evenly. In your groups you will research the beetles on your list, but first as a whole class you need to establish a list of categories your beetles will be competing on. Try to aim for around 5 or 6 categories – for example, 'strength', 'weight', 'speed', 'danger factor', 'length'. You will have to enter into some discussion about how you will assign ratings in each of your chosen categories. For example, whilst weight might be rather straightforward, you still need to agree on the actual unit you'll be using (i.e. grams; 'g') and remember to convert the weight accordingly (for example if you've chosen to list weight in 'g', a beetle weighing a hefty kilogram (kg) would need to be written down as 1000g). Some other categories may require some 'subjective' rating. For example, 'danger factor' could be given as a number out of 10 or out of 100. So, the blister beetles might earn a rating of, say, 6/10 or 64/100. When it comes to rating your beetles on these more subjective measures, you might wish to consult with members of another group or your teacher in order to get a second opinion.

In your smaller groups, research your beetles and make sure you have a rating for your beetle in each of the card categories. You may find it useful to enter this information into a table at this stage.

Once you have all the information you need, you will need to design your cards. You should decide upon the size and layout of your playing cards as a class, so you are all working along the same lines. Each card will need a picture as well as the information needed to play the game. You could either download pictures from



the internet of your beetle, or you could get creative and draw or paint your beetles.

Once you have a complete set of cards, you are ready to play the game in your teams. Remember to give the cards a good shuffle before dealing them out.

5. Starting the sequel ...

The novel ends with the promise of a sequel – after all, the evil Lucretia is still at large and she certainly seems to match Darkus, Virginia and Bertolt when it comes to grit and determination.

Using all your creative skill and imagination, write your own first chapter for the sequel *Beetle Queen*.

You can pick up from exactly where the story left off or you could decide that some time has elapsed since we last met the characters. You could continue to tell the story using the ‘third person perspective’ (as if it is being narrated by someone witnessing the events from the outside) as the author chose to do in *Beetle Boy*. Alternatively, you could choose to tell the story in the ‘first person’, in Darkus’s own words. You can share your chapters with the rest of the class, and see how much they all differ. It will be interesting to see where you all think the story might go next ...

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On page 12, Darkus’s Uncle Max says *‘The past always has a way of catching up with you, lad, even when you don’t want it to’*. What do you think he means by this and whose past do you think he might be referring to?

2. *‘I’m the middle child.’ She pulled her lunch box from her satchel. ‘Mum says I’ve got the syndrome.’ She threw it down on the table with a clatter and slid on to a chair.*

‘What syndrome?’ Darkus asked, sitting opposite.

‘The one where you have to be a famous explorer or sail round the world to get noticed.’ (Page 23)

Virginia is convinced that she suffers from ‘middle child syndrome’. Do you believe there is such a thing as



‘middle child syndrome’? Are you a middle child? If so, do you think middle children get treated differently than their older and younger siblings? Do you think being the youngest or oldest means you get treated any differently to your siblings?

3. What other books, movies, comics or graphic novels are you aware of which feature friendships and alliances between animals and humans? Why do you think novelists and writers are so fascinated by animal-human friendships? Do you think it’s possible for humans and animals to communicate and be friends with one another in real life? How much do you think it’s possible for an animal to understand? How much do you think humans understand their pets?

4. *‘The Fabre Project had a bold remit: to see if it was possible to reverse the damage humans have done to the planet by harnessing the power of insects [...] Your father was working with a geneticist to see what could be achieved by tampering with the genetic make-up of beetles.’* (Uncle Max, page 228)

The Fabre Project was begun with noble aims of using science and genetics for the good of human kind. However, Lucretia Cutter’s motives for continuing with the project were much darker; she wanted to shape the project for greed and personal gain.

Do you think that it is ever possible for science to be used for the good of humanity, or is it always at risk of being hijacked for profit or personal gain? Do you agree with genetic engineering and modifying nature if the intentions for doing so are noble and good? Should we interfere with nature or should we leave nature alone? Where do you think the lines should be drawn when it comes to what we use science for?

5. *‘Do you think being famous is silly?’*

‘A person ought to be famous for doing something really good or really difficult, like climbing Mount Everest or landing on Mars,’ replied Darkus. ‘If you were a famous explorer, I’d think you were amazing.’ (Page 180)

Lucretia Cutter places a great deal of importance upon being famous and has convinced her lonely and dramatic daughter that she doesn’t need friends because everyone will want to be her friend when she’s a



famous actress.

Do you think being famous is something people should aspire to? Do you think being famous would help you to make friends, or would forming friendships be more difficult? If so, why? Do you agree with Darkus's point of view that there are some things worth being famous for? Would you like to be famous? If so, what would you like to be famous for and why?

6. *'Are you going to be all right? – You know, with all the beetles?' Darkus asked.*

'I'll be fine.' Bertolt smiled. 'Newton's made me see I was being silly. I'm not frightened of them anymore.' (Page 246)

Do you think it's silly to be frightened of creepy crawlies? Are you frightened of them? If so, what it is about them that makes you scared? If you aren't frightened of bugs, why aren't you? Do you think there's a good reason why lots of people seem to be frightened of even those bugs that we know can't do us any harm?

