

THE *BATTLE OF THE BEETLES* SERIES BY M. G. LEONARD

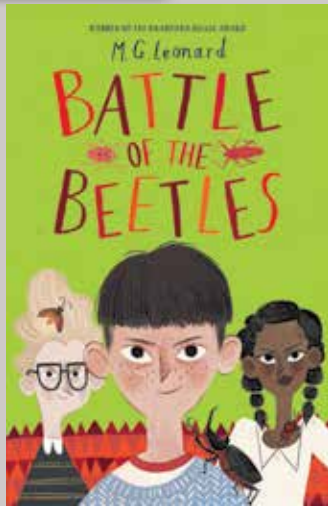
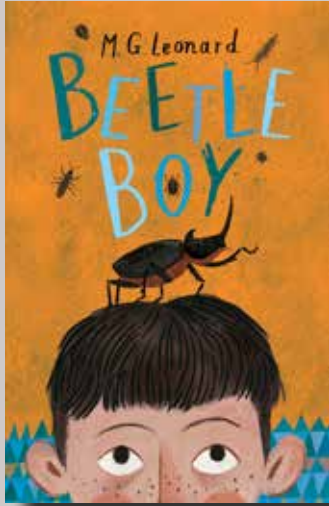
SERIES SYNOPSIS

In book 1, *Beetle Boy*, thirteen-year-old Darkus Cuttle has been sent to live with his Uncle Max after the mysterious disappearance of his father, Barty, a beetle expert at the Natural History Museum. Determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, Darkus and Max begin to investigate – aided by Darkus’s two new friends, Virginia and Bertolt.


During a run-in with some bullies, Darkus is rescued by an incredible rhinoceros beetle who seems to understand him, which he names Baxter. With Baxter’s help, Darkus discovers something amazing in the filthy and dilapidated house next door, belonging to the hapless Pickering and Humphrey – a giant mound of coffee cups (which they name ‘beetle mountain’), wherein live thousands of intelligent exotic beetles.

Darkus and Max begin to suspect Lucretia Cutter, a famous fashion designer who sponsors the museum’s beetle collection, may have something to do with Barty’s disappearance. When Lucretia hears about beetle mountain, she offers Pickering and Humphrey a suspiciously large sum of money to obtain the creatures.

Darkus befriends Lucretia’s lonely daughter, Novak, and together they realise that their parents used to work together at an organisation called the Fabre Project – originally a study on how the powers of beetles could be harnessed for the good of mankind, until Lucretia began to play with beetle genetics for her own gain. Darkus realises that Baxter and the beetle



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mountain bugs are genetically enhanced.

Together, the three friends, aided by their beetles, Uncle Max and Novak, manage to rescue Barty and bring him home. Pickering and Humphrey are arrested and the bugs from beetle mountain set up a new home in the sewers, but Lucretia manages to escape ...

In book 2, *Beetle Queen*, Lucretia and her evil ladybird spies are still at large. Darkus, Virginia and Bertolt are determined to find out what she's planning. They are forbidden to by Barty – but of course they continue anyway. After a run-in with Pickering and Humphrey, they meet a friendly entomologist, Dr Appleyard, who tells them about Lucretia's strange experiments. As the friends start to connect the clues, they realise that she is planning something more devastating than any of them can imagine.

The novel culminates in the friends travelling to Hollywood to attend the Film Awards – where Novak is nominated for Best Actress – to stop Lucretia once and for all. She reveals that she's unleashed a whole plague of crop-eating beetles, and is determined to stop humanity inflicting damage upon the environment. After a face-off where Lucretia reveals that she's altered her own DNA to become a beetle, she escapes, taking Barty with her.

In the final book in the series, *Battle of the Beetles*, the friends journey to Lucretia's secret hideout, the Biome, located in the Amazon rainforest. Determined to find Barty, the group infiltrate the Biome with the help of Novak – now part-beetle herself, the victim of her mother's experiments. In the Biome they find even more genetically altered creatures, such as dinobeetles and beetle cyborgs – and realise that Lucretia is making clones of herself.

Together, the group set the beetles in the Biome free and Darkus, Barty, Novak and their beetles face Lucretia Cutter in a final showdown. Lucretia is supposedly killed by a piano – thrown from the floor above by blundering Pickering and Humphrey – but after she survives and attacks Darkus, Barty uses a harpoon gun to kill her for good.

The group travel home with their beetles. Novak, now at school with Darkus, Virginia and Bertolt, uses her mother's money to build a beetle zoo and research centre in the house next door to Darkus's, and makes Barty the director.



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 read the first book in M. G. Leonard's series, 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 series 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
- Ecology, entomology and entomophagy
- Sustainability



WRITING STYLE

M.G. Leonard’s *Beetles* books are zany, creepy, funny, bug-filled adventures. The action takes place all over the world, beginning in London, England, and travelling as far afield as the Hollywood hills and the Amazon rainforest.

The series is told using the third person perspective. Throughout the series, 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 series explores the fine line between using science for the benefit of mankind versus its exploitation for personal gain. The books also explore loyalty, friendship and what can be achieved through determination, as well as posing important ecological and scientific questions.

At the end of each novel there is a short section called ‘An Entomologist’s Dictionary’ which provides a glossary of beetle-related terms and anatomy. The series is illustrated throughout by Julia Sarda (*Beetle Boy*) and Karl James Mountford (*Beetle Queen* and *Battle of the Beetles*). **3 novels, between 320-356 pages, age 9+**

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. *Beetle Top Trumps*

‘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, series author)

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. Working as a class and using the brilliant list of beetles in *Beetle Boy* on pages 239-240, write down a comprehensive list of beetles mentioned in the book to create a set of Top Trumps cards.

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’). 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.

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 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, which you could either find online or draw yourself.

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.



2. 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.

(Beetle Boy, 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. On page 82 of *Beetle Boy*, the objects in the yard are in a jumbled chaos and the author’s choice of words and images reflects this. 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? 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.

3. *Cracking the code*

The firefly started flickering and flashing again, in exactly the same pattern as before.

'Is that Morse code? Are you using Morse code?'

Newton nodded proudly.

(Beetle Queen, page 108)



In *Beetle Queen*, Newton lets Darkus know where Bertolt is by using Morse code. Morse code is a way of sending someone a message without writing anything down – usually using a series of noises or flashing lights. You might know one of the most famous examples of Morse code – SOS – as ‘dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot’.

Morse code was invented by a man called Samuel Morse, who also invented the telegraph. In pairs, choose a famous example of when Morse code has been used in history, and present it to the class using a PowerPoint presentation.

Then, individually or in pairs, have a go at writing your own messages in Morse code. Using a torch or your hands, join up with another pupil or pair to see if you can understand each other’s messages.

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The more [Darkus] thought about it, the more certain he was that the idea behind the Fabre Project was a good one.*

Beetles could be employed in environmental healing.

(Beetle Queen, page 208)

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? What about the dinobeetles in *Battle of the Beetles*? 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?

2. *'In the West we have a strange relationship with insects. We'd never think of eating them, but one day we may have no choice.'*

(Beetle Queen, page 77)

In *Beetle Queen*, Professor Appleyard tells Darkus that it may not be sustainable for humans to continue eating meat, and that eating insects – entomophagy – could be a good replacement. He even tells them that eating insects is a delicacy in some countries!

Why do you think eating meat might not be sustainable? For what reasons do you think eating insects could help the planet? Would you eat bugs? What pros and cons can you think of for eating insects? Which bugs would you really not like to eat?

3. *'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.'

(Beetle Boy, 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?

