

Beetling Away

with M.G. Leonard

After playing out in the garden or exploring in the local playground or park, many young children become attracted to, and interested in, 'creepy-crawlies'. They watch flies walking upside down on the ceiling or become fascinated by bees scouring window panes to escape into the sunshine outside, so I feel certain there is a young readership awaiting the darkly funny, beetle adventures by M.G. Leonard (Maya).

It was a beautiful spring morning at the Birmingham Library when Maya and I met up to talk about her books and how they came about. Maya writes stories, poems and screenplays. She has a first class degree in English Literature and an MA in Shakespeare Studies from Kings College, London. She has worked as a freelance digital media producer for both the National Theatre and Harry Potter West End and spent her early career in the music industry running an independent record label - Setanta Records, and managing bands - including The Divine Comedy. An interesting background for a lady who has become a very successful author having had the first two parts of a *Beetles* trilogy published.

"It was whilst working in an office where there was an old man who, when we came back from a Friday-pub-lunch, would always take his false teeth out and flirt with me. I imagined it would make a good story but when I focused on the word creepy-crawly to describe him I realised that I didn't really know what it meant, so I started investigating. I found out the term included beetles, of which I was terrified."

She soon discovered that these creatures support the whole ecosystem of our planet, deserving to be heroes in a story and not the villains. She scrapped the story about the old man and started afresh. It took six months to create *Beetle Boy*, writing just for two hours a day early in the morning before going to her full-time job.

"When I had finished the manuscript, I felt unable to judge its quality. I had worked and

done my best, but what would anyone else think?" Maya didn't have an agent but was inspired to send a draft to Imogen Cooper. She was an experienced editor who had recently set up The Golden Egg Academy, which aims to help

inexperienced authors to appreciate their story through the eyes of agents and publishers. She suggested that Maya send her a summary - one sentence only - of each chapter. She then requested the whole manuscript and almost immediately suggested that the second half needed altering. "When I re-read it, I understood what she meant so I set about the changes and sent it back. She telephoned to say 'I have forwarded the book to Barry.' At that point, I had no idea who Barry was!"

Barry emerged as Barry Cunningham, the current MD of Chicken House, a children's publisher. He was the man who discovered JK Rowling and commented when he first read *Beetle Boy*; "It gave me that same spine-tingling feeling as when I first read Roald Dahl. I met some unexpected friends, puzzled out a totally thrilling mystery and trembled at one of the yuckiest, nastiest, oh-no-not-her villains I had ever encountered".

From that point on Maya had many meetings with Barry. When they first met, he was wearing a shirt with small images of beetles all over it. Following this, whenever they went together to business meetings, he would always wear that shirt. When the book was finally published, he





presented it to her to wear when she was doing events with children.

In children's literature, it is rare to find a creepy-crawly who has top billing, but in three picture books for younger children, *The Bad-Tempered Ladybird* by Eric Carle, *What the Ladybird Heard* and *What the Ladybird Heard Next*, both by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Lydia Monks, creepy-crawlies are heroes. Other insects that have a top spot include an ant who was granted wisdom by Aesop; EB White used the life cycle of a spider and Roald Dahl transformed a centipede into a top ballooning companion. Here in *Beetle Boy*, a story which has been sympathetically illustrated by Julia Sardà, we have many splendid coleoptera, which is the scientific name for beetles.



Humphrey as her henchmen. The trail left by Darkus' father leads to the creepy corridors of her mansion. This story will entertain the readers, but just as the ending seems to be appearing....

In *Beetle Queen*, the second book of the trilogy, Lucretia is at large with her yellow ladybird spies. However, when the friends discover more evidence of her evil, they're even more determined to stop her. Darkus's dad has forbidden them to investigate further, and Pickering and Humphrey, who are now out of prison, are also on the trail to make money from Lucretia. Lucretia's actress daughter, Novak, appears to be on their side, but can she be trusted? When Lucretia says she is going to the Oscars in Hollywood, taking Novak with her, things become more dangerous and the evil beetle Queen is always one scuttle ahead. The final part, *The Battle of the Beetles*, will be published in 2018.

At the beginning of her writing career, Maya did not like insects, but now she has her own pet rainbow stag beetle, who lives with her husband and two sons in Brighton. She persuaded her eldest son to read the first book, which he declared 'alright' but when the second one arrived he picked it up to read without telling anyone, until he had finished it!



The books have been sold to over forty different countries, and in this country, *Beetle Boy* has been selected for *The Daily Telegraph's* Top 50 Books of the Year, and *The Guardian's* and *Publisher's Weekly* list of best children's books of 2016.

David Blanch

“ I like *Beetle Boy* and *Beetle Queen* because they have amazing storytelling coupled with humour and really cool science. It opened up a whole new world of interests for me, about underappreciated nature. It makes even those scared of insects go WOW! ”

(Mathilde, 12)

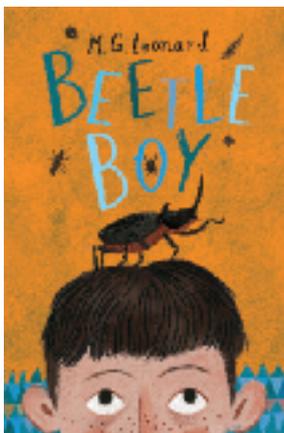
Dr Bartholomew Cuttle, the Director of Science at the Natural History Museum, has seemingly vanished off the face of the earth, disappearing from the beetle vaults in mysterious circumstances. Darkus, his only son, is determined to find him, as he does not believe that his father would wilfully abandon him. He goes to stay with his absent-minded uncle until, with the help of his new friends Bertolt and Virginia, he is able to pursue his quest untroubled. He also has a most unusual partner - a rhinoceros beetle, who he calls Baxter.

Baxter does not talk although he can communicate with Darkus, who is inquisitive, fearless, kind and loyal. He is rescued from his uncle's neighbours, Pickering and Humphrey, who live in a sprawling hoarder's paradise, among rooms full of junk and a tower colony of beetles. Embarking on a quest to find out the truth he meets up with the evil Lucretia Cutter, who has a penchant for living jewellery and uses Pickering and

“ I like these books because of the unusual characters.

I really liked seeing all the pictures of the beetles when we met M.G. Leonard. I love the fact that the villain is half beetle and it's beetle vs beetle. I love the beetles firing acid from their bums! ”

(Imme, 9)



To find out more about beetles there is a useful Entomologist's Dictionary at the back of each book.

Beetle images by courtesy of Julia Sardà.

Bibliography

Published by Chicken House

Beetle Boy £6.99 ISBN: 978-1910002988

Beetle Queen £6.99 ISBN: 978-1910002773

