



Beetle Mania! An interview with MG Leonard

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[Michelle Pauli](#) [1]

[229](#) [2]

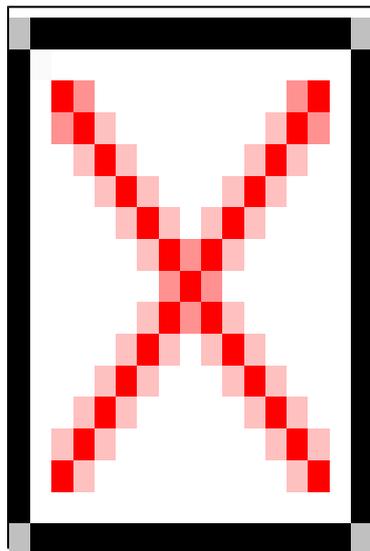
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M.G. Leonard interviewed by **Michelle Pauli**

MG Leonard's bestselling **Beetle Boy** trilogy was born out of what, today, would be called a #metoo moment. Eleven years ago she was temping as a receptionist in a law firm when 'a revolting lawyer got drunk at lunch and decided that he would flirt with me when he got back. It was one of those skin-crawling experiences when you smile and basically try to tell them to sod off without getting fired?? she explains.



Leonard vented her fury by tapping out a piece of fiction on the reception desk computer, immortalising the drunk, lecherous lawyer as a horrible fat man living in a disgusting room full of bugs. Terrified of all insects, from spiders to daddy long legs, she wanted this 'horrific' man's environment to be full of the things she loathed. Leonard disguised it as the start of a children's story and, in doing so, discovered her voice as a writer.

'I'd previously tried to write adult fiction and I tried to sound very grown-up and use clever words. It was the most pretentious, unreadable tosh ever because I was trying to sound 'proper'. My narrative voice is around 12,' she laughs.

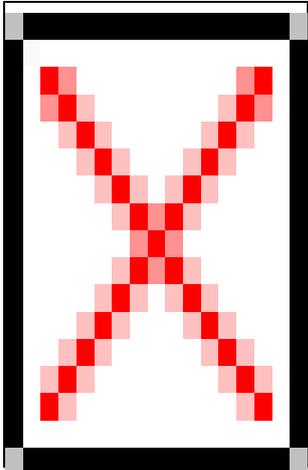
She showed the vignette to her husband that evening. Unexpectedly, he declared it to be good, so she decided to develop it. The trouble was, a key part of the story was those creepy crawlies infesting the room ' and Leonard realised she didn't know what a creepy crawly actually was. Luckily, Google came to the rescue and what Leonard discovered about the insect world blew her mind.

'I reached the page on beetles on Wikipedia and, genuinely, it was like being hit around the face with a large wet fish. I was so shocked,' she says. Six years of intense research followed.

The books start conventionally enough with the parents neatly whisked out of the way. Thirteen-year-old Darkus's mother has died and his scientist father has suddenly disappeared. Sent to live with his eccentric Uncle Max, he is bullied at a new school but finds two new contrasting friends and they set out to solve the mystery of his missing dad.

So far, so classic children's story traditional tropes. But then it all goes completely, gloriously off piste with beetle sidekicks wielding unusual powers ? beetles galore, in fact ? the most fiendish of villains, a pair of slapstick cousins straight out of the Roald Dahl playbook, metamorphosing characters and much, much more. It's a brilliantly bonkers, thrilling adventure that, over the course of the three books, takes the reader from the National History Museum to an Oscars-style awards ceremony in LA to an Eden project-esque biome in the Amazon ? ?like an insect version of Charlie's chocolate factory?, explains Leonard delightedly. Running throughout it all is a deep ecological message and a sense of wonder at the incredible diversity of the world of Coleoptera.

Leonard is truly passionate about beetles. It is impossible to have a conversation with her without coming away not only

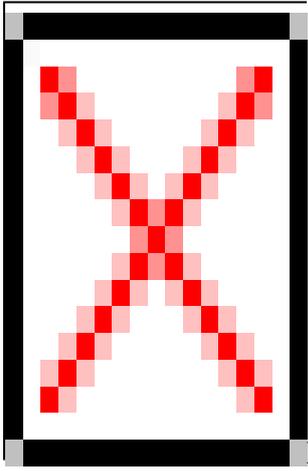


knowing more about them than before but also caring more about them than you might have ever thought likely. It's a feat that she also achieves spectacularly in her books.

?One in every four living organisms on the planet is a beetle yet they get no attention. I recognised that we were doing our children a disservice. I went to the British Library and I searched but couldn't find any children's adventures about beetles where they were heroic or positive rather than terrifying or foreboding. The truth is, if you go to an area of the world and there are no insects, *that* is a horror story and a bad thing about to happen,? she explains.

?The head of the zoology department at Portsmouth, an entomologist in his 80s, contacted me and said ?I really want to thank you because you're going to create a generation of children who may want to study insects. It's a really important science but no one's investing in it because there's no money in it. The planet is heading towards an extreme situation where we need as many scientists and people who understand invertebrates and this country is not investing in that.??

The success of the books took Leonard by surprise. Although she really believed in the story, and, having worked in the music industry and theatre world, knew that word of mouth can build a slow swell of support for a good cultural product, she was unprepared for the sudden effects of being **Waterstones Children's Book of the Month**, winning the **Branford Boase** award and selling rights in more than 40 countries.



Battle of the Beetles rounds off the story of Darkus, Bertolt, Virginia and Novak's adventures into

beetle land. One of the front quotes in **Battle of the Beetles** is by David Attenborough: ?Children start off reading in books about lions and giraffes and so on, but they also see? are able to go into a garden and turn over a stone and see a

worm and see a slug and see an ant.? For Leonard, that sums up her dream for her beetle trilogy.

?I would go into the garden as a child and if I saw a worm or slug or ant I would shriek and run away. What I really want is for children to love the stories, feel great affection for the beetles, go into their gardens and turn over a rock or a stone, see any kind of invertebrate and instead of going ?urgh? and running away, they go ?look, there?s its thorax, oh look, it?s a ground beetle?. I want them to have the vocabulary that awakens curiosity and emboldens them to explore in their own gardens. If fifty percent of the kids who read these books go into their gardens and turn over a stone then I will die a happy human being.?

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children?s books site.

The **Beetle Boy** books are published by Chicken House, £6.99 pbk

Page Number:

14

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