

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Leslie Bulion on *Leaf Litter Critters*

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Have fun on a poetic tour through the leaf litter layer and dig into the fascinating facts about the tiny critters who live there. Nineteen poems in a variety of verse forms with accompanying science notes take readers on a decomposer safari through the “brown food web,” from bacteria through tardigrades and on to rove beetle predators.

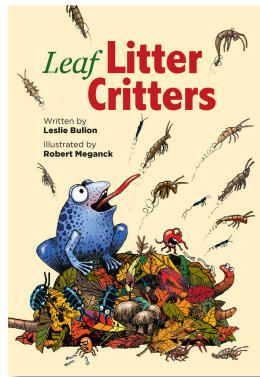
Award-winning author Leslie Bulion provides more insight into the inspiration behind and the creation of *Leaf Litter Critters*.

Q: You were trained in oceanography and social work before becoming a writer. When and how did you decide to write children’s books? Does your background influence your writing?

A: Ah yes, you caught me—I’m a professional career-changer! But my life-long fascination with science, work as a school social worker, and experiences as a kid and parent all inform my process as a children’s writer. A childhood friend (who is a writer and former magazine editor) had a tremendous influence on my decision to write—in fact, it was her idea!

Q: You’ve written multiple other nonfiction books in verse. Why do you choose a verse-and-poetry format when presenting scientific information instead of the more traditional format of nonfiction?

A: Well, that line of work—science poetry—all started when I took a week-long entomology field camp for adults at Cornell’s Adult University. I was learning so



many amazing science stories about insect adaptations, and it struck me that insects are brilliant, small packets of evolutionary information, and poems are small packets of a different kind of information—ideas, emotions, moments; I wondered what would happen if I tried to put the two packets together. My fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Brownworth, had long ago set me on a poet’s path, so I set out again with science and nature in mind.

Q: Why did you choose to examine the bugs that live in the leaf litter instead of other ecosystems where bugs live?

A: My first science poetry collection, *Hey There, Stink Bug!*, was a more general survey of insect adaptations. But in that entomology field camp I mentioned, we spent a couple of days playing with a Berlese funnel—a contraption to sift out litter critters for examination. I have a field notebook full of microscope-view drawings of critters many folks haven’t heard of, so I wanted to revisit those. I love the idea of an ecosystems view, and I’ll be doing more of that.

Q: You dedicate *Leaf Litter Critters* to kids who “can’t resist turning over a rock.” Were you an adventurous and curious child?

A: I think all kids can be adventurous and curious in many different ways. I had endless opportunities to explore outside when I was young—hours of free play, family camping and lots of time at the seashore. I was always digging, sifting and fishing for critters.

Q: What is your writing process like? What is the editing process like for poetry?

A: Process is a long question, so I'll go for an overview: I begin with lots of background research. I read widely (the inimitable Melissa Stewart taught me that helpful process description), then I get more specific as I zoom in on the collection's themes and select individual subjects for the poems. I put myself through a poetry self-study before the first collection and I'm still always learning. I use hands-on learning to immerse myself in the sensory experience. So fun! And essential to my writing. I also ask scientists I meet in the field to read my manuscript to be sure I'm spot-on with the science. By the time I pry the manuscript out of my own hands, I've shared it with my writers group and reworked the poems and science notes so many times. There's always room to edit the notes, but the poems are trickier—you might ask my editor Vicky about that! Her editor's eye is invaluable in every instance, and in science poetry she catches me if I've assumed an understanding readers won't have. Otherwise, we end up talking about commas a lot!

Q: What are some of the challenges of presenting scientific information through poetry?

A: Poems are short! I try not to have each poem be a mini-encyclopedia, so I tap into what I refer to as "cool science stories"—some aspect of behavior, appearance, life-history that POPs! Science vocabulary can have wonderful rhythm, and I find that inspiring. I explain a bit more in the narrative notes, but those are also concise.

Q: How did you discover all of these creatures? What sort of research did you do? Did you ever see these critters in real life during the writing process?

A: So much hands-on! I set up a laboratory in my basement and experimented with different collecting strategies and photography. I have lots of photos and videos of the critters I found. These observational experiences truly inform my writing—the collecting environment, the colors, the backgrounds, the motion—and I hope readers will have some of these experiences, too.

Q: Do you have a favorite leaf litter critter?

A: I'll answer the same way I answer students during school or skype visits: favorites are HARD. I mean, what's not to love about an inch-worming rotifer? Or a claw-waving tardigrade? Or a bendy rove beetle? Or a bacter—ok, maybe not some bacteria! I'll admit, I'm pretty partial to the globular springtail I caught on film.

Q: The back matter features lots of extra science and poetry information, as well as resources and activities. How do you decide what to include in your back matter?

A: I always include resources for further reading, a science glossary, and a poetry glossary. Each reader is a unique learner who might be interested in one section or another. I love hands-on field study so much that I include suggestions for readers to enjoy those types of experiences, too. At NCTE in 2016, I met library media specialist Terry Young, who looked through a mock-up of *Leaf Litter Critters* and pointed out that readers would want a better idea of the relative sizes of the critters. Thank you, Terry—brilliant! That's where Robert Meganck's relative sizes spread was born.

Q: How do you see educators using *Leaf Litter Critters*?

A: My HUGEST hope is that educators can find time to take students outside, collect a bit of soil or leaf litter, and take a close look at what's there. We walk across this hidden world every day and it's so cool and amazing. And it's a great introduction to the ecosystem concept in miniature—all of these tiny critters with a specific job to do. And microscopy (or any kind of magnification) is so much fun!

Q: What do you want readers to take away from your book?

A: I'm regularly bowled over by what readers find in my books—in everyone's books, really! They teach me. But with each book, I hope readers will be inspired to spend time outside, take a closer look at the diversity in our beautiful world, and understand our responsibility to preserve and protect it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie Bulion has written poetry since the fourth grade and has poked through soil and under rocks even longer than that. In addition to her other science poetry collections, *Hey There, Stink Bug!*, *At the Sea Floor Café*, and *Random Body Parts*, she has written several novels for young readers, including *Fatuma's New Cloth*, winner of the African Studies Association's 2002 Children's Africana Books award. She lives in Connecticut.

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REVIEWS

★ “The poems are expertly crafted in a variety of forms (identified in the backmatter). The language is lively and the imagery appropriate. With alliteration, internal rhymes, and careful rhythm, these will be a delight to read aloud and learn.... Meganck's engaging digital drawings give each creature pop-eyes and attitude.... A delightful, memorable introduction to an unsung ecosystem.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, STARRED REVIEW

“In this ecological poetry collection, Bulion works her own magic, turning potentially dull life science into zany fun.... An amusing way to get the dirt on food chains.”

—*Booklist*

“Bulion stuffs her poems with scientific detail and puts even more into accompanying “science notes.” Meganck's cartoons strike sillier notes...balancing all of the information Bulion provides with hefty doses of fun.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Educational and highly entertaining...rich with cross-curricular teaching opportunities. Meganck's humorous, digitally rendered cartoon artwork will have readers giggling as they learn.... An excellent find for science fans and teachers alike.”

—*School Library Journal*


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