



Celebrating 20 years of the Branford Boase Award

These talking point ideas have been designed to celebrate texts that have been previous winners of the Branford Boase Award. The award was set up to reward the most promising new writers and their editors, as well as to reward excellence in writing and in publishing. The Award is made annually to the most promising book for seven-year-olds and upwards by a first time novelist.

The ideas in the sequence of sessions will support teachers in reading aloud selected texts that have been awarded the prize and talk about these texts with their children, allowing children to respond to and understand the text in greater depth.

Title: Beetle Boy

Author: M.G. Leonard

Publisher: Chicken House

Winner of the Branford Boase in: 2017

When his scientist dad disappears, Darkus determines to find him. Befriending a beetle he names Baxter leads him into some unexpected encounters in a novel that combines an exciting adventure with intriguing information about entomology and an underlying environmental theme.

Before You Start

Session 1: Chapters 1-4, Pages 3-75

Focus: Predicting, clarifying, questioning and thinking aloud.

Begin by discussing the quote which prefaces the text from Charles Darwin. What stands out to the children as they read the quote? They may discuss the imagery around the *old war-horse at the sound of a trumpet*, they might be drawn to intriguing vocabulary such as *capture* and *rare*. What do they expect from this book after seeing the title and the prefacing quote?

Now read the *Message from Chicken House* (the publisher) at the front of the book. What else does this add to your perception of the story that lies ahead? Does what they have said make them think of any other stories they have read? As Barry Cunningham mentions Roald Dahl, they may make links to texts they know of his, or other stories like that such as those by David Walliams and Andy Stanton. They may pick up on the air of mystery suggested and link to stories by Robin Stevens, Katherine Woodfine or Siobhan Dowd's *The London Eye Mystery*. They may pick up on the hints to links with the natural world and talk about texts such as *The Last Wild Trilogy* by Piers Torday. You may wish to have copies of such texts available in the class reading area so that if children do not know these, they can explore these in connection with *Beetle Boy*. Keep notes of children's responses and intertextual connections in a class reading journal or on flipchart paper to display and come back to.

Read the first two chapters of the text aloud to the children. How does what they heard reflect their initial predictions? What do they know about the main character of Darkus? How do they know this? How does his choice of friends add to our understanding of his character?

Now consider the disappearance of Darkus's father. What do they know about this event from what has been read? What questions do they have about the disappearance that they would like to be answered? Make a note of these in the class reading journal or, alternatively, you may wish to set up an investigation board on one of the classroom display boards that can be added to over the course of reading the book. Are there any initial facts they know for sure? Are there any clues or questions that could warrant further investigation? Are any people mentioned in the text that could provide any further evidence?

Now tune back in to the character of Darkus. How does he feel about his father and his disappearance? What does the author do or say in the text to show us how he is feeling?

Read aloud chapters 3 and 4. Ask the children what they already know about beetles and what they are like in the real world.

Watch a video of a rhinoceros beetle, such as: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCxDnILL8dk> so that children can put the beetle Darkus found into context, including clarification around some of the vocabulary in context, such as *elytra*. Why do you think the author describes that this word 'felt like a discovered secret' to Darkus? What more does it tell us about him? You could also read the page about rhinoceros beetles from M.G. Leonard's *The Beetle Collector's Handbook* and look for other clues as to how Darkus feels about the beetle and other information about it. Discuss the significance of Darkus' relationship with the beetle. Would beetles behave like this in the real world? What is Darkus able to do and what benefits does his relationship with Baxter have? How does this new relationship add to the story?

Consider the series of events that took place as Darkus and Uncle Max went to the museum. Who did they see? Where did they go? What happened while they were there? Piece together anything else that they found out during these two chapters. What was concrete fact and what could they infer about Bartholomew's disappearance from things that happened? Come back to the notes made in the previous session, look at what could be confirmed or built upon and any other questions that come up after reading this section of the book. Allow time for the children to discuss whether they have ever been to a museum like this. What was it like to be there? Have they seen insects or even beetles laid out in trays in this way? What was it like? How did it make them feel?

Re-read the initial description of Lucretia Cutter. What do we know about this character from the way she is described and the way others react around her? What other characters in children's literature does she remind you of? Children may draw parallels with characters such as Cruella DeVil in Dodie Smith's *101 Dalmatians*, Dolores Umbridge or Bellatrix Lestrange in the *Harry Potter* series, Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, the Warden in *Holes* by Louis Sachar, The Other Mother in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*.

Session 2: Chapters 5-8, Pages 76-114

Focus: Visualising, clarifying, questioning, predicting

Whilst reading aloud Chapter 5, ask the children to close their eyes and picture the scene unfolding as if this were a scene in a film. What language does the author use that allows you to picture Humphrey and Pickering's house in your mind's eye? The children may be drawn to M.G. Leonard's use of personification in the early part of the chapter, such as *'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 covered beneath tarpaulin. Naked lampstands were bound together with rope. Bedsprings pinged out of mattresses and a giant bathtub reared up into the middle of the yard, a pink scooter dangling helplessly from its taps.'* Ask the children why these words or phrases in particular stood out to them; what made them so vivid or memorable? What mood or sense of place is created by the author through the descriptions? How do these descriptions make them feel? What would you be thinking if you were Darkus? Why do you think he describes this place as 'cool' and 'immediately wanted to explore'?

Carry on reading aloud to the end of Chapter 8. Discuss the character of the girl, who do you think she is? What do you think she thinks about Darkus? Why might she have dropped the card on the floor? Come back to the character of Lucretia Cutter. What more do we find out about her in this part of the text? Look again at how M.G. Leonard describes her on p.113: *'Leaning forward over her canes, she swung away, ignoring the hand of her bodyguard. Her elbows stuck up at right angles like the legs of a praying mantis, her black skirt snaking behind her like the body of a centipede.'* Consider the choice of verbs and similes in this part of the text. What do these choices make you think about the character?

Consider the fascinations that both Bartholomew and Lucretia Cutter have with beetles. What do you think about the possible connections between these two characters? Why might his dad not have told Darkus about his fascination with beetles? Why is Darkus's own fascination with beetles so pivotal to the development of the story?

Session 3: Chapters 8-13, Pages 115-165

Focus: Predicting, Empathising, Questioning and Summarising

Read aloud Chapters 8-11. What more do the children find out about the importance of the beetles? Who are they important to, and for what different reasons?

Now read Chapter 12. What do we learn about Darkus's father in this chapter? What further thoughts does this give us about his disappearance? Allow the children to stop and consider their thoughts about the story so far. What theories and ideas do they have about Bartholomew's disappearance? Why do they think he disappeared? Who do they think might be involved? Why do they think this? Allow time and space for the children to scribe their thoughts on a post-it note and collect these in the class reading journal or on the display. Compare and contrast the ideas shared, looking for similarities and differences and what evidence from the text the children are drawing on.

Now read Chapter 13. Think about the friendships that Darkus has created over the story so far. Why do you think that Virginia and Bertolt gravitated towards him when he started at the school? What do they have in common? Why do you think they want to help him on his quest to find his father? Now consider the character

of Novak? Why do you think she has seemingly chosen to help Darkus? What do you think Lucretia would do if she knew Darkus was in the house? Look at the language throughout Chapter 13 that Novak uses to describe her mother. What clues do you have about the relationship that they share? How do you think this compares to the relationship that Darkus has with his father and with his Uncle Max?

What do you think about Novak's actions? Do you think her intentions are honourable?

Session 4: Chapters 13-17, Pages 182-243

Focus: Predicting, Empathising, Close Reading and Thinking Aloud

Read Chapters 13-15. After reading this section aloud, explore the pacing in this part of the story. The story has slowly developed up to now, introducing the characters and the problem Darkus is facing and now this section is full of quick and immediate action as Darkus discovers more about Lucretia. Look at the language that M.G. Leonard uses to hook you in as a reader and to move the action on at a pace, making you feel like you are caught up in the whirlwind of action and excitement that takes place as Darkus's presence is uncovered and he is helped to make his escape. Look at the use of verbs, at how long and short sentences are varied to heighten tension, at how the dialogue is replaced by description of what is happening, the figurative language that is used to heighten your experience of what is actually happening.

Track the heightening of emotions as Novak is discovered; we think Darkus is safe, then as Lucretia finds him, chases him and Gerard helps him to escape. How did you feel as a reader throughout this part of the story? What did the author do to make you feel this way? Why is this an important section of the story? How does it differ from the first part of the story? What is it leading up to?

Now read on to Chapter 17. Look at how the balance shifts to a re-focus on the dialogue between the characters. Why do you think the author chose to do this at this part of the story? What more do we find out here about Bartholomew and his relationship with Lucretia Cutter and how does this impact on their theories about his disappearance? Go back to the thoughts they had in the previous section and explore how this information confirms or shifts their perceptions.

After reading Chapter 18, explore how the relationships between Darkus and his friends develop as the pinnacle of the action takes place. Why do you think Virginia is jealous of Darkus's plan to give Novak a beetle? Why do you think Darkus puts her in charge of the next part of the plan?

Session 5: Chapters 19-24, Pages 244-311:

Focus: Predicting, Empathising, Questioning and Re-reading

Read up to Chapter 20. Compare the chaos and action in the chapters set in Humphrey and Pickering's flat with the calm opening to Chapter 20. Why do you think the author has chosen to slow the pace down here, providing rich descriptions such as, *'Lucretia Cutter's bedroom was a cavernous chamber with a floor of ebony parquet and a high ceiling of black Gothic arches. The arches were embellished with gold and reached up a whole storey. Hanging from the ceiling were two chandeliers carved from obsidian lava rock. The walls were painted a matt black, and gold arches, echoing those in the ceiling, framed doorways, mirrors and bookshelves. In the centre of the room, a large four-poster bed, turned from African black-wood and hung*



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with hand-spun gold lace drapes that glittered as they looped down, offering a glimpse of black silk sheets.' Look closely at this description of her bedroom, clarifying some of the descriptive vocabulary used by the author where necessary, and think about what more this tells us about the character of Lucretia. What sorts of things does she have in her life? What do these things tell us about her as a person? Why do you think she feels the need to have this opulence all around her? Read on to the end of the chapter. Do you think the story will resolve smoothly from this point on? Why or why not? What potential challenges do they still have to overcome?

Read to the end of Chapter 22. Think about how the action unfolds here, looking again at the change in pacing during this high-action sequence and talking about how the author creates drama and tension by her use of language and sentence choices. Were the children surprised by Bertolt's actions? How had they seen him as a character up to this point? Do they think he was a likely or unlikely hero – why?

Continue reading to the end of the book. Did the story end as they thought it would? Why or why not? Provide ample time for the children to engage in book talk. *What are the children's initial responses to the way the story ends? Are they satisfied with the ending? Why? Why not? Why is it not resolved? What might happen next? Does it remind them of other stories they know? What kind of story is this? Do the children have any questions? Does anything continue to puzzle them? To which character do they relate most? Why? If you had to say what this story is about, what would you say? What could we learn from this story about ourselves and about the way people think and behave?*

Reflect on the character of Lucretia Cutter. What do you think were her motivations? What led to her downfall? What does she have in common with other villainous characters that you have seen in books or films?

Reflect on the fact that the book won the Branford Boase award, *why do you think this book is considered worthy of an award? What makes an award winning story in your opinion? What other books have you read that have won awards? Were they similar or different? What makes this a good book for children aged 7+? What defines a high quality text for you as a reader? What things do you look for when you are considering new reading material?*

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