

# LEAF STONE BEETLE

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Text by URSULA DUBOSARSKY

Illustrations by GAYE CHAPMAN

Published by DIRT LANE PRESS INCORPORATED

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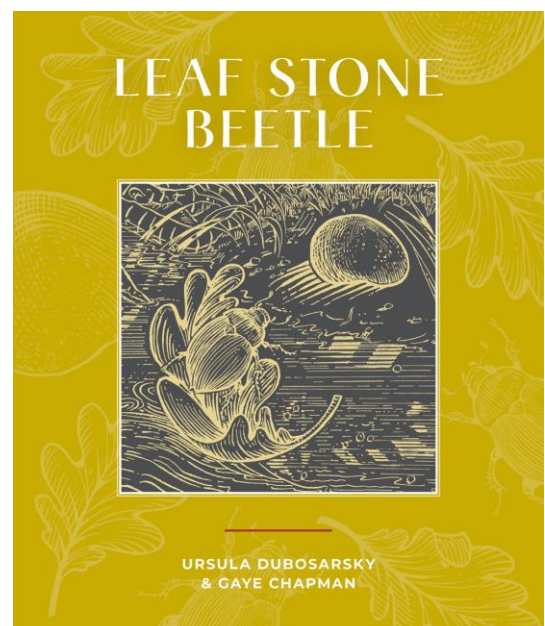
*A leaf falls from a tree.*

*A stone is washed from a stream.*

*A beetle loses her way.*

*A storm brings all three together,  
but only time will tell where they all  
go next.*

*A meditation on nature and transience  
by two of Australia's best-loved  
children's creators.*



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## SYNOPSIS

This book falls into three parts: one part – or chapter – for each of the three characters, and each chapter a seminal moment for these characters as each finds its existence disrupted by a violent autumn storm.

In the first part a little leaf finds itself abandoned on a tree after the older leaves are blown away by the gale. Only when the little leaf is mature enough to leave does it drop from the tree, but when it falls it finds it hasn't dropped to where the other leaves have fallen, and is still alone. In the second part a stone that has lain on the bed of a stream 'forever' is torn from its place by the stormwater and hurled amongst the gnarled roots of a tree. Stone has never been out of the water, and everything around it is strange. In the final section of the book, a dawdling and curious Beetle ignores the bustle of the other beetles and lingers behind, until she too is caught by the storm. Beetle climbs onto the leaf, which has dropped to the edge of the stream, and together they are swept away, only to be caught amongst the twisted roots of the tree where the stone is now nestled.

Each character is in an unfamiliar place and separated from its community but, significantly, none of them is alarmed. Each of the characters are so attuned with nature, and with their places in nature, that the newness and strangeness are simply part and parcel of living in a wider world, and in a broader community, and within a cycle of life.

As Stone reflects towards the end:

*"Here I am, a stone, and here is a beetle, and here is a little leaf, all washed up by the storm. For now, we are together and safe, but in a moment we may be washed away again. And whatever happens, wherever we are washed to, we will always be in the world, like the stars in the sky."*

The story concludes on an ambiguous note, allowing readers to engage with the characters possibilities and to speculate imaginatively about what happens to each of them.

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## THEMES

The back-cover blurb calls this writing "a meditation", and it would be fair to say that *Leaf Stone Beetle* is actually several mediations. On the surface it is an engaging story about a single event that affects numerous lives. But the deeper we read, the more we find this novel is a reflection on multiple universal truths, many of which can be applied to the life experiences of individual readers. These themes include:

- Life cycles
- Circle of life
- Nature and the environment
- Displacement
- Transience
- Community
- Self-awareness
- Acceptance
- Togetherness
- Empathy

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## WRITING STYLE

Ursula Dubosarsky writes *Leaf Stone Beetle* in straight prose. The narrative voice is calm, intimate and reassuring, as well as objective. The author avoids comment, so that most of the narrative seems channelled through the point of view of the three characters, yet this point of view, too, remains calm and objective. The characters do not speak aloud or communicate with each other, and they view other characters as though they were typical rocks, leaves, beetles. However, Leaf, Stone and Beetle conduct interior monologues with themselves, making observations about what is happening to them, expressing fear, loneliness and other emotions, and contemplating their uncertain futures. They are depicted as both natural objects that are subjected to natural forces, and as sentient beings capable of thought and feeling.

While the narrative voice is calm, it also manages to suggest drama, in particular to describe the storm that disrupts everyone's lives. Ursula Dubosarsky does this by using strong verbs that suggest noise and violence.

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## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Author Ursula Dubosarsky was motivated by a sense of wonder about the tiny things of life, and how small things can be affected by larger events that go on around them. Most particularly, Ursula was inspired by a sense of wonder for the vast, inclusive nature of life on our planet, and the idea that we are a huge community that share a common Earth, as well as belonging to smaller communities. Ursula explains this as follows:

“This story is about little things, common things, a leaf, a stone and a beetle, treasures of nature, simple beautiful and mysterious, and which children especially feel so much connection to. It began with the thought of the tiniest leaf on a huge tree, tumbling down from the sky in a storm, forced to leave the place it had grown up in, but then finding itself with other lost wanderers, the stone and the beetle, and together making a new place for themselves where they also all belong, because everything in the world belongs in the world.”

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## ILLUSTRATOR STYLE

As soon as illustrator Gaye Chapman read *Leaf Stone Beetle*, the story conjured images in her mind of black-and-white illustrations from Victorian-era books. Gaye always researches her subject before she begins work on the illustrations. To create the old-world style of illustration she wanted to achieve for *Leaf Stone Beetle*, Gaye researched ancient botanical herbals, Victorian entomology engravings and prints of insects and beetles, and 18<sup>th</sup>-century English woodcut engravers (in particular Thomas Bewick 1753 –1828). See examples below.

Gaye Chapman felt the three characters in the story – the leaf, the stone and the beetle – seemed more like natural objects than fictional characters, which meant she didn't want to give them anthropological qualities. However, the characters were also portrayed with thoughts and emotions as if they were conscious beings, so Gaye's challenge was to draw objects that had just enough character to seem capable of thinking and feeling engaging, but that also looked natural.

The leaf was inspired by Australia's only cold climate winter-deciduous tree, a small Beech tree that grows in Tasmania. This beech is part of the *Fagaceae* family of trees, which includes oak trees, so Gaye chose oak leaves as her model for the leaf because of their interesting shape. Beetle was inspired by Australia's famous Christmas Beetle, part of the huge scarab beetle family.



*A Christmas beetle*



*Oak leaves and acorns*



An illustration by Thomas Bewick, including an oak tree like the tree in *Leaf Stone Beetle*

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## AUTHOR BACKGROUND



Ursula Dubosarsky wanted to be a writer since she began reading the age of six. Her first book was *Maisie and the Pinny Gig*, which was published in 1989. Ursula has since written many novels for both younger and older readers, as well as some best-selling picture books. She has won several awards with the CBCA, as well as other Australian and international literary prizes, including a record five New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards. Ursula was nominated for the ASTRID LINDGREN MEMORIAL AWARD in 2013 and 2014. Sonya HARTNETT, who won this prize in 2000, describes Dubosarsky as the "most graceful, most original writer for young people in Australia – probably the world."

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## ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUND



Gaye Chapman has painted ever since she was a child. She won her first art prize when she was eight, had her own studio by the time she was 11 and took her first commission at 14. She is now an exhibiting fine artist, as well as a writer and illustrator. Gaye has illustrated more than 15 picture books, for which she has received multiple awards, including the Queensland Premier's Literary Award, a CBCA Honour Book and Chrichton Award, an Aurealis Award, a CBCA Book of the Year, and a Wilderness Society Award. Gaye has also exhibited her paintings internationally and been awarded many prestigious art prizes.

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## MARKETING AND PROMOTION

- Advertise in *Magpies*, *Buzzwords*
- launch programs in Orange, Bathurst, Dubbo, Sydney
- Orange launch: Botanic Gardens, Department of Primary Industries (beetle and mineral displays), Regional Library, Regional Gallery, The Peisley Street Gallery, schools, Orange Ex-Services Club, headspace
- Bathurst and Sydney events: in bookstores Bathurst, Beecroft, Newtown

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## STUDY NOTES

1. The leaf is a latecomer to the tree community. It is smaller than the other leaves and longs to be big like they are. When the other leaves change colour in autumn, the little leaf remains green. Even when the other leaves are swept from the tree by a gale, the little green leaf stays holding fast to the tree. Draw a series of pictures showing the life cycle of a leaf — from bud, to maturity, to changing colour and finally falling in autumn. Think about the kinds of leaves that lose their leaves in autumn. What is the name for these types of trees? What is the name for trees that do *not* lose all their leaves in autumn?
2. The leaf experiences an emotional journey. What are the emotional stages the leaf goes through? How does the leaf feel at the end of the story?
3. On page 8 the leaf sees the other leaves lying in piles on the ground. "Oh!" thinks the little green leaf, astonished. "Is that the life of a leaf?" What do you suppose the leaf means by this?
4. Stone's attitude to life is different from Leaf's attitude to life. How do we know Stone's view of life is different from Leaf's? Why do you think would Stone feel differently about life?

5. In this story there are a number of ideas about **loss** and **change**. Each of the three characters loses their home or community during the storm. Invite the class to nominate an experience in their lives that was either a Leaf experience, a Stone experience or a Beetle experience. Suggest the class write a short chapter about their personal Leaf, Stone or Beetle moments.
6. Underlying the ideas of loss and change in the story are ideas about **choice**. Have a class discussion about whether each of the characters has any choice in the loss and change they experience. How are their situations similar? How are their situations different? (For example, Beetle is separated from her friends due to her curiosity. How could her fate have been different had she followed her friends? Discuss the implications of Beetle's choices.)
7. Discuss the ending of the story with the class. What might happen next to the characters in the story? Invite the class to write their own ending to the story.
8. Ask the class for their responses to the ending of the story. Is it a **closed ending** or is it **open ended**? Is the ending **satisfying** or **unsatisfying**? Discuss the meaning of open-endedness in a story like this. Perhaps there is no ending to the cycles of life?