A Look at Pre-Writing: An Interview with Leslie Bulion

Nonfiction authors often describe their research process and their writing process, but we don't usually hear about what comes in between, so I asked award-winning nonfiction author and poet Leslie Bulion if I could interview her to explore the details of her pre-writing process. Luckily, she said yes.

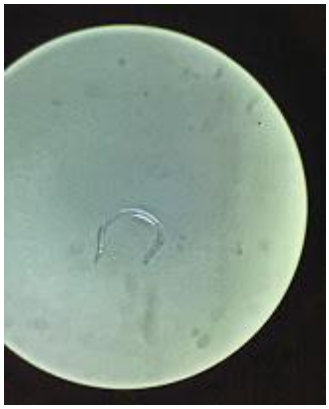
MS: What's your first step when you begin a new book?

LB: Each of my science poetry collections starts with one big idea. For example, the big idea for *Leaf Litter Critters* (Peachtree, 2018), is to take readers on a tour through what scientists call the "brown food web." So I needed to learn how the critter-eat-critter world of Earth's busy decomposer-recyclers works.

I began my research by reading widely about soil and leaf litter communities. When I had a basic understanding of the topic, I returned to the readings I'd found most helpful, and took notes about the many organisms and their brown food web jobs—i.e. which critters start the process (primary decomposers) and how each paves the way for the next level of decomposers to move in and get to work.

Using those notes, I made a list of critters I wanted to write poems about. My choices needed to represent all levels and interactions in the brown food web, and a mix of familiar critters and those that readers may not have met...yet...

MS: Can you tell us about one of the critters on that list?



LB: Here's a fun example: the nematode. Since I was interested in how these (mostly) microscopic roundworms fit into the brown food web, I researched where they live, what they eat and what eats *them*. I found information in books and scientific articles. I also watched videos and observed nematodes flipping around in soil and water samples under my own microscope. I took LOTS of notes.

Here are my nematode notes from *Life in the Soil* by James B. Nardi (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007):

--"Nematodes graze on bacteria and fungi. They are predators, omnivores, plant feeders (those have stylets). They live in soil water films, or within roots- those are parasitic.

--Every kind of soil.
--Go dormant in hot dry conditions.
--Nitrogen cyclers.
--Different mouth structures.
--Bacteria eaters have lots of lips, narrow mouth, vacuum from soil pores.
--Root feeders—piercing spears ram into roots to tap plant.
--Gulp with a muscular esophagus.
--Springtails eat them, so do tardigrades and mites.
--Larger nematodes predators of nematodes, tardigrades, rotifers, protozoa—lips (up to 6) grinding plates just inside.
--Fungus traps nematodes with a noose—strangler fungi!
--Some fungi have sticky spores that latch onto nematodes—fungal hyphae fill the nematode and digest its contents.
--Some fungi produce pheromone and work like flypaper for nematodes and rotifers."

Here are my notes from the video "**Nematode Movement**," which had a terrific narration:
--"Whip like, coil to change direction almost 360.
--Pressure against cuticle to move.
--Longitudinal muscles only."

MS: What did you do next?

LB: I asked myself this organizing question: **Which "juicy science story" will I tell?**

This helped me focus my thinking about nematodes. After all, a poem is *not* an encyclopedia entry, and the science notes I write to accompany my poems are quite specific.

To answer this question, I took notes on my notes. My goal was to synthesize and condense the information I'd collected and mine the most fascinating bits until I found my "juicy science story."

From *Life in the Soil:*
--Nematodes graze on bacteria and fungi, plant feeders (stylets).
--Lots of lips, narrow mouth, vacuum from soil pores.
--Piercing spears ram into roots to tap plant.
--Lips (up to 6).
--Fungus traps nematodes with noose—strangler fungi.

From the video:
-- Whip like, coil to change direction almost 360 degrees.

In my own investigations, I loved watching nematodes in motion!

As I read over these notes and those from other sources, I decided that my poem would tie the nematode's flicking, whip-like motion to its eat-and-be-eaten relationship with "strangler" fungi. *That* was my juicy science story.

MS: Was that the end of your pre-writing process?

LB: No. Next, I asked myself a second key question:

Which powerful words associated with this topic might spark an idea and make my writing *POP?*

To answer this question, I did another round of taking notes on my notes. The result was a list of power words/ideas filled with action, imagery, music, or humor potential:

wiggle
water films
whip
layers of lips
bacteria
sticky
spores
fungus
everywhere
trap
thread
glassy roundworms
soil spaces
stylets
piercing spears
noose
vacuum
coil
strangler fungi
gulp
ram

Finally, I was ready to write.

MS: Can you tell us a little bit about that process?

LB: I played around with my word collection and said the words aloud. Sometimes I walked as I spoke, using my body to feel the rhythm. The short "i" sound in the word *whip* seemed to evoke the nematode's short, quick movements.

Whip led me to *flip*, *slip*, *lips*, *flick*, *quick*, *sticky*, and *tricky*, which then led to *trap*, *attack* and finally a fun rhyme—*snack*. That's when I knew where I was headed. Here's the final poem: