

## THE UNKNOWN

HOME SWEET  
HEADSTONEBY YULIYA PARSHINA-KOTTAS AND  
ALEXANDRIA SYMONDS

**B**IG CITIES are full of creepy creatures. There are screeching birds, aggressive squirrels, skittering cockroaches and rats that are much too comfortable around humans. Ick! But before they were drab deserts of concrete, steel and glass, every city was once a natural habitat. And when the humans moved in, all the other creatures that lived there had to go somewhere.

It was a search for those animals that led 15-year-old Chailah Epperson to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn ... in the dark ... with hundreds of creeping, glittering spiders all around her feet. It might sound like a nightmare to some, but for Chailah, it's a hobby. She's studying wolf spiders as part of a program for young scientists at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

It turns out that in big cities, one of the best places to see wildlife is among the dead. There's green grass, trees and rolling hills. And usually, cemeteries are pretty quiet too. Chailah's mentor, Joseph Arguelles, says that even green spaces like city parks can be hard for animals, because they're full

ILLUSTRATION BY  
DANIELE CASTELLANO

of people, noises and trash. Green-Wood Cemetery, Chailah says, is different. "I think the fact that people are so respectful in cemeteries and don't mess up the environment around the cemetery really helps the wildlife to thrive," she says. She and her team found hundreds of wolf spiders, which live in the cracks in rocks or tombstones. But there's so much more: Green-Wood is home to more than 1,500 species of animals, plants and fungi.

It's not just that way in New York. In California, at Hollywood Forever Cemetery, dozens of feral and stray cats wander the grounds along with peacocks, swans and more. And Mount Auburn Cemetery, in Boston, is home to animals including spotted salamanders and coyotes.

Urban cemeteries are melting pots for animals in the same way that cities are for people. "In a city, it's hard to move around — species that don't normally live together might put up with each other," says Seth Magle, director of the Urban Wildlife Institute at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. So if you're ever walking around a graveyard and feel something watching you, don't freak out: It's probably just a critter wondering why you're wandering around its home. ♦

## HOW I BECAME A

## MYSTERY WRITER



BY SHEELA CHARI

**GROWING UP,** I loved to read, and in third grade I told my mother I wanted to be a writer. She was worried. I come from a family of scientists, and I am the unicorn.

In college, I took an introductory fiction-writing class that changed my life. I started writing short stories and got a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing. Then I worked as a technical writer — writing things like help guides.

When I wasn't at work, I really struggled to find time to write a novel. But one year, I didn't have a birthday present for my 8-year-old niece, so I wrote her a story. It was about what would happen if the instrument she played, called a vina, went missing. I discovered I loved writing mysteries. I turned that present into a novel, and found an agent to work with. Two and a half years later, my first book, "Vanished," came out.

Now I have written five mystery books for kids. The plot always starts with the crime. Your main character is your detective, and they need to be smart and willing to take risks. Then you need to come up with a number of suspects, who all have something to hide.

Usually, I sit down and write the first 25 to 50 pages to let the characters and the story emerge. Then I try to figure out the beginning, middle and end. I make sure to put a clue in the first chapter, and I keep them coming throughout the book. Some of them are false clues (also known as red herrings). I write every morning for several hours, except for days that I teach writing to other adults. But even then, I write a little bit every day.

Nothing truly matches the moment you see your writing published, and knowing it will have a place in a library or on someone's shelf. But the real reason I write is to enjoy the relationship I have with my characters. And to have fun. *Interview by Elise Craig*

ILLUSTRATION BY  
CONOR LANGTONILLUSTRATION BY  
TRAVIS LOUIEGIVE  
VAMPIRE  
BATS  
A CHANCE

BY LAUREL NEME

**N**IGHT FALLS. Creatures of the dark awaken. A vampire rises from a crypt, turns into a bat and flies off in search of its next victim.

... That's the classic tale we have been told. Vampires aren't real, of course. But vampire bats are, and they're wildly misunderstood. Sure, they are the only bats — and the only mammals — that live on the blood of other animals. But these smart, surprisingly lovable little creatures get a bum rap.

**1. THEY RARELY ATTACK PEOPLE**

Yes, they sometimes go for humans, but vampire bats are far more likely to bite cows, chickens or other livestock.

**2. THEY DON'T LEAVE TWO BITE MARKS BEHIND**

Vampire bats use their razor-sharp teeth to make a small, shallow, barely noticeable cut in the skin. They typically attack at night, and whatever — or whomever — they bite often sleeps right through it.

**3. THEY DON'T SWOOP IN TO BITE**

They fly to get around. But when they're on the hunt, vampire bats usually climb or run on all fours and sneak up on their prey "like stealthy little ninjas," says Gerry Carter, a scientist who studies them.

**4. THEY DON'T GO FOR THE NECK**

Or not only the neck, at least. Vampire bats have heat sensors on their noses that let them target small blood vessels that are close to the surface of the skin, like in the feet and toes.

**5. THEY DON'T SUCK BLOOD**

Technically, they lap it up, like a cat at a bowl of milk. A special grooved tongue acts like a straw to help them draw blood into their mouths as it comes out of the wound. The bats sip one to two tablespoons per meal.

**6. THEY'RE CUTE LITTLE THINGS**

OK, maybe not everyone thinks they're cute. But vampire bats are only around three inches long and weigh less than two ounces, about as much as two AA

batteries. That's only before they eat, though — they can eat up to half their weight in blood!

**7. THEY'RE SOCIAL AND CARING**

Vampire bats live in groups and form strong social bonds. They often share food — by regurgitating blood into the mouth of a hungry family member or friend. They even remember who has been generous (or greedy) in the past and repay favors. So when you're a vampire bat, it pays to be nice. ♦