

Q&A with Bill Harley about Night of the Spadefoot Toads

Where did you get the idea for Night of the Spadefoot Toads?

A friend of mine who teaches elementary school science introduced me to spadefoot toads one very rainy night in April. I wanted to know more about the creatures that live in my area, and became interested in frogs and toads and salamanders. My friend, Carol Entin, is a very good naturalist, and we traipsed around our area, visiting ponds and streams.

One night she took me to a vernal pool (a pool of water only present in the spring) to see (and hear) the spadefoots. There was a huge thunderstorm and it was really pouring. We stood in the middle of this small pool, listening to all the sounds and counting the spadefoots. I felt like I was hearing the Earth sing, and decided I wanted to write about it.

But the first book I wrote about this never saw the light of day. It was a book about a teacher who decided to quit teaching because he was discouraged by all the changes in education. While it was a good topic, the book had a lot of problems, and wasn't very believable. But out of the book came a character that ended up being Mrs. Tibbets.

Like most of my books, this book took a long time to get right – seven or eight years I think.

Are spadefoot toads real? Have you seen one?

As I answered above – yes, spadefoots are real, and I've seen many of them. The area where I live, in southeastern Massachusetts, is at the very edge of their northern range – right now there is only one vernal pool I know about in my area. Spadefoot toads are much more common in the South and Southwest, but up here, they are very rare, and growing even rarer.

One of the interesting (and upsetting) facts about spadefoots is that if the spring isn't wet enough in a particular year, the vernal pool where the toads lay their eggs may dry up, so that all the tadpoles die before they get a chance to turn to toads. It's upsetting to go to a dried up vernal pool and see all those poor little tadpoles that didn't make it. But one of nature's ways is to make a lot of everything, and the toads can have three or four bad years and still come up with a bumper crop of baby toads when the conditions are right.

Why are they dying?

Amphibians – frogs, toads, salamanders – are very sensitive to their environments, and are often the first creatures that suffer from changes. And of course, today many changes that threaten amphibians are caused by humans. The major issue for

spadefoots is destruction of habitat – developing land for houses, buildings and roads on places where the toads live. You can't send a toad a change of address card – they're programmed to return to where they were born, and if a little vernal pool is destroyed, you lose that whole community.

On a larger scale, there is a lot of speculation that global warming and the thinning ozone layer has endangered amphibian and reptile species all over the world. While all of this is depressing, it's also something that we can change if we pay attention to it.

Are there really timber rattlesnakes where you live?

I was pretty excited when I discovered that timber rattlesnakes were native to our area. But no one has seen one here for a number of years. I was lucky enough to find a naturalist who knew a lot about both timber rattlesnakes and spadefoots who checked my writing to make sure it was accurate. It is a little bit of a stretch to imagine timber rattlesnakes being reintroduced into an area, but it could happen. Like the toads, timber rattlers are very attached to their place of birth. Adding the snake to the plot sure made things a lot more interesting.

Were you into "critters" as a kid?

Growing up in Indiana, there was a good-sized creek close by my house where I spent a lot of time by myself. I didn't have someone like Mrs. Tibbets to teach me, but I spent a lot of time watching things – fish, toads, frogs, snakes, salamanders, birds, raccoons, and muskrats. Ben is more into it than I was, but I understand his love of nature.

Why'd you write the book?

Like I said before – I wanted to capture that feeling of hearing the Earth sing. But I'm also concerned that we're losing touch with nature and the outside world, and I don't think that's a good thing. I worry that young people don't have enough experience with nature. When we don't pay attention to the rest of nature and spend all our time indoors, or looking at a screen, we forget that we are part of something bigger, and we're likely to cause trouble. And our actions make a difference. Ben worked to save something in his own backyard, which is as important as trying to save rainforest creatures or lions somewhere else.

Since I've written the book I've heard from a number of kids (and parents and teachers) who say they felt like the book was written about them and for them. I'm glad to hear that young people still love being outside.