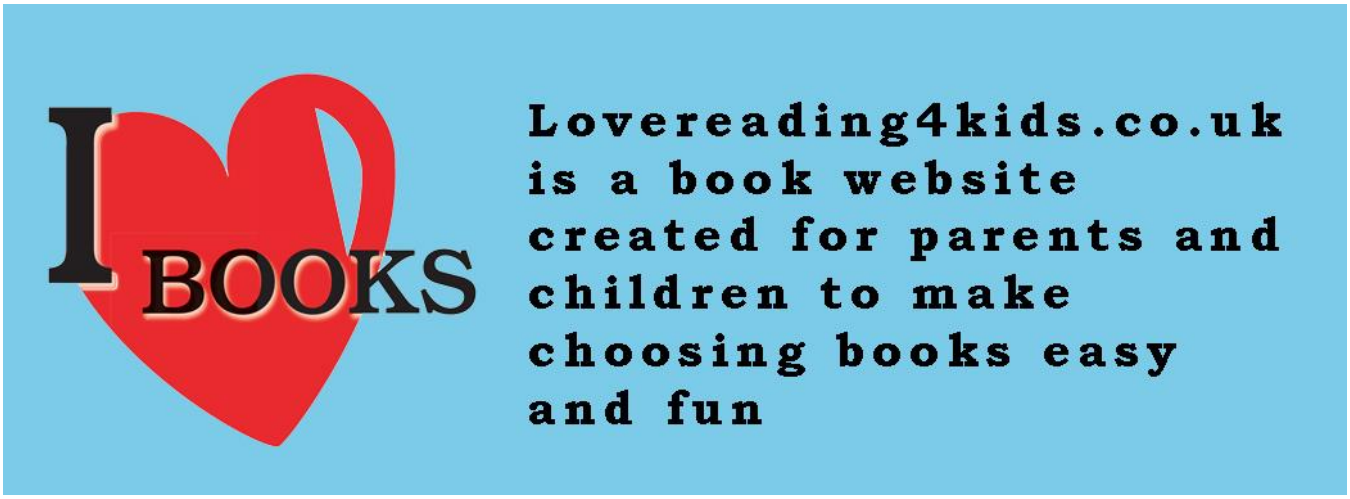


an extract from

Beasties in My Backyard

Written by

Camilla de la Bedoyere

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WATER BEARS

Water bears are so small that most people do not even know they exist. These invertebrates belong to a group of about 1,000 animals called tardigrades. They are among the toughest and smallest creatures alive. Water bears have been on the planet for about 500 million years.

TOUGH BEASTS

Water bears prefer to live in damp or wet places. They can squeeze between particles of sand or soil in a garden, and they can also survive in rivers and oceans. They can live in extreme conditions and have been found in deserts and even in solid ice.

SURVIVOR

When a tardigrade's home dries out, it lets its body dry out, too. In this process, most of the water in its body is turned into sugar. The tardigrade lives off the sugar. and can survive on it for 10 years or more.

SPACE BEARS

Water bears and other microscopic organisms were sent into space to test their survival in extreme conditions. In space, the water bears survived deadly levels of solar and cosmic rays, as well as solar winds. Not only did these hardy animals survive in space, but they also laid eggs there.



***This water bear's egg** was laid in damp moss.*



Piglike
Water bears are also known as moss piglets because they often live in moss and they look quite like little pigs!

FACT FILE

TYPE
Phylum: Tardigrada

DIET
Plants and small animals

FOUND
Worldwide, including land, sea and fresh water

0.2 mm

SIZE • 0.3–1.2 MM

CLAWS

A water bear's feet are equipped with sharp, curved claws. The animal uses its claws to dig itself into a safe, damp habitat, such as moss or soil.



Hooked claws, seen using a powerful microscope.

Legs
There are four pairs of short legs. They are used for crawling, running and swimming.

Repair
Scientists do not know how tardigrades survive extreme heat and cold, but they know that their bodies can quickly repair any damage.

Teeth
A water bear's mouth is equipped with dagger-like teeth. It eats plants or other small animals.

Tun
A water bear can survive some extreme conditions by turning itself into a 'tun'. It withdraws its head and claws into its body, and dries out.



LIVING IN EXTREMES

Water Bears can survive temperatures as hot as 151°C and as cold as -200 °C.