

Meeting a Peripatus on Fraser Island

A Children's Story by John Sinclair

While Grandpa was busy clearing a path through some rainforest on Fraser Island to become part of a great hiking trail, Mary Lou busied herself studying the forest floor to see what interesting fungi in the form of mushrooms she could discover. Most were white or cream or even brown but some were bright red or even blue. She started trying to see what the difference was and then she discovered that most had radiating ribs underneath that were a different colour to the top of the mushrooms. Some of those ribs were black or nearly black while others were either white or a soft pink.



Mary Lou got really excited as she noticed more and more fungi on the damp forest. There were some though that didn't have ribs underneath like the ribs of an umbrella and these looked like sponge. She got really curious and accidentally bumped one of the sponged ones. She then watched with amazement as the part she had hit started to turn blue like a bruise.

Now Mary Lou was really hooked on fungi. When she saw a mushroom, she would almost put her ear on the ground to look under the mushroom to see if they had ribs or sponge underneath. Most were ribbed. While she had her ear on a mossy bit of forest, she heard a sound in her ear.

"Watch out! You might crush me!" the voice said.

Mary Lou instantly lifted her head and was amazed to discover the most unusual, small brown and blue creature where her head had been. It was unlike anything she had seen before. It looked a bit like a centipede but without as many legs. In fact it didn't have proper legs and instead of being shiny, it looked like it had the prettiest velvet skin. She looked in amazement and wondered aloud, *"I have never seen anything like you before. I wonder what you might be!"*

Then to her surprise the creature answered her in the softest voice that only very curious children like Mary Lou can hear, *"I am Perry Perapitus one of the*

velvet worms. You don't see many of us about because we live only on damp forest floors and there isn't very much of that or very many of us left around the world now," the creature told her.



Perry Peripatus an evolutionary link

Mary Lou was eager to know more about this strange creature. *"I have never heard of a peripatus before. Are there any other creatures like you?"* she asked.

"Not far from Fraser Island there are platypus and ceratodus. Have you ever heard of them?" Perry replied.

"I have seen platypus; they are a cross between a duck and a furry mammal but I don't think I have seen a ceratodus. What do they look like?" she answered.

"It isn't surprising you haven't seen ceratodus because although they live in the Mary River and breathe air like you, they look like fish that get their oxygen from the water but they aren't as easily seen as Platypus," Perry told her.

"So, if they both live in the water and you live on the forest floor, what is your connection with them?" the inquisitive Mary Lou asked.

"It is simple. We are some of the evolutionary links. The platypus is a connection between birds and reptiles and mammals. The Ceratodus is the link between aquatic creatures and land animals because they were the first creatures that could live out of the water and breath air. Peripatus are the links between the segmented worms and insects and other arthropods. However while there are countless species of arthropods around the world, there are only a few species of peripatus and we have remained unchanged for 570 million years!" Perry told her.

Just then Mary Lou heard the tractor coming up the track and it drowned out whatever else Perry might have told her. The tractor coming back told her that it was lunch-time and so she said farewell to Perry and went to join her grandfather.