

This bug gets a feature: Denton author and illustrator launch children's book series about a dung beetle named Lulu

Series aimed at getting young readers thinking — and cooking

By Lucinda Breeding-Gonzales Staff Writer

Dec 1, 2023



Denton illustrator Lo Ellis, left, and author Tanya Blixt, right, have created a children's book series about a dung beetle named Lulu and her friends. Some of Blixt's inspiration came from her godchildren, including Ponder student Lily Sorensen, center.

It took 10 years for Denton resident Tanya Blixt to create her illustrated children's book series.

At long last, Blixt and local artist Lo Ellis have released the first book in a series about a plucky little dung beetle named Lulu — and poop. (It’s no surprise that a dung beetle and her community are preoccupied with poop.) Blixt and Ellis said *Lulu the Dung Beetle: In Search of the Perfect Poop! That’s Bananas!* began before they met.



The cover of *Lulu the Dung Beetle: In Search of the Perfect Poop! That's Bananas!*

“Actually, it started right there,” Blixt said, pointing to Lily and Brogan Sorensen. “Because my godkids — Brogan, Brannock,

Beckett and Lily — when they were little, we used to have mad scientist parties.”

Blixt doesn't have children of her own, but being godmother to her best friend's four children kept her busy. First, she said, the mad scientist parties started at her kitchen table. That made a surprisingly big mess, Blixt said, so the parties moved into her garage, where she built mazes and devised the kind of play that could wear out a highly imaginative quartet of kids.

“We used to make really crazy recipes,” Blixt said. “We made ‘edible poop,’ and we dissected brains and we did all sorts of stuff.”

There was one activity that was a favorite: hanging sugary doughnuts from the trees in her yard and having the Sorensen clan race to see who could finish the treat first, with their hands behind their back.

Blixt, a 1987 Denton High School graduate and a University of North Texas alumna, experimented with the idea for *Lulu* in a Denton writers group nearly a decade ago, where she said she got a lot of support. Her idea finally got picked up by a publisher, but Blixt and Ellis — a Texas Woman's University alumna — felt too restricted by the publisher and its conventional approach to their idea.

So the pair left their publisher, launched their own business — called Pouvile, Utopia — and started the project all over again. There are about seven books finished out of a plan for a 13-title series.



Readers can whip up a batch of “edible poop” from recipes in *Lulu the Dung Beetle* by Denton creators Tanya Blixt and Lo Ellis.



Denton illustrator Lo Ellis created the typeface used in *Lulu the Dung Beetle*, and she opted for a darker color palette “because these beetles like dung, so I wanted dark, dank colors.”



Tutu the elephant gets a big hug in this page from *Lulu the Dung Beetle* by Tanya Blixt and illustrated by Lo Ellis.



Dung beetles have sweet dreams in *Lulu the Dung Beetle*.



A page from *Lulu the Dung Beetle*, an illustrated children's book by Denton author Tanya Blixt and Denton illustrator Lo Ellis.

Lulu and Niko were thrilled at the new flavor
and the smell of the poop.
Eating became more exciting for both of them,
and Niko had a new feeling of satisfaction
and delight from eating.



Beetles share bonds in *Lulu the Dung Beetle*, an illustrated children's book by Denton author Tanya Blixt and Denton artist Lo Ellis.



“I think we’ve figured out that we can take it further,” Blixt said.

Ellis tried to ignore her talent for art all the way through college. Her family urged her to try out an art school or institute.

“I was too scared to try that. I just didn’t have the confidence,” Ellis said.

She didn't even register for a studio art class at TWU — she was still too intimidated to try her hand at fine art, she said. She did funnel her creativity into a design career, which she paused when she and her husband started planning for children. Ellis and her husband's craving for a family was temporarily derailed by infertility. But thanks to a lot of patience and in vitro fertilization, the Ellis family grew by two: two cherry-cheeked boys with platinum blond hair.

Ellis said after she met Blixt and the two started planning *Lulu*, her older child became her most important editor.

“I definitely have to give credit to my oldest son, Niko,” she said. “He's 3 now and we read. We go to the library weekly. We read about three to four books every single night, and through him, I was able to really learn what attracts his little attention span, and what he gravitates towards.

“He's a very spunky, fiery 3-year-old,” Ellis said. “Sitting him down for any length of time is difficult. But through reading I've kind of navigated which colors help keep him focused, or what kind of illustrations and what's going on on the page that interest him. The words are important, of course, but when you have a little kid that doesn't know how to read, they're looking at the pictures.”

Ellis eventually crafted the font for the books, which looks a little like stems dipping and reaching. She opted for a darker color palette “because these beetles like dung, so I wanted dark, dank colors.”

Ellis' art, which blends whimsy with beautifully drawn characters and dark colors, keeps the illustrated poop more cookie-like than literal. And as the reader turns the pages, they aren't pelted with scatological saturations. They are drawn into a story about interdependent creatures. Adorable, big-eyed beetles meet soft, happy monkeys and bashful elephants. The creatures work together to feed each other, and there's a sort of side quest where Lulu helps get a tiny, weak dung beetle named Niko to try a new food.

"I think it's really about being open-minded," Ellis said.

That exhortation to try new things and take risks is extended to readers. Each book contains a recipe for an "edible poop" (the debut book has two) tested and approved by "Chef Lily." Lily Sorensen, a seventh grade cheerleader and theater student at Ponder Junior High School, said Blixt shared edible poop recipes, and she tried them out and sent notes back to the author.

"There was one where you put everything into a cake decorating bag and squeeze it out to get the right shape," Lily said. "It turns out that when you put too much in, not only does it come out through the bottom where it's supposed to, it also comes out of the top. I sent back a note that said you need an adult around to finish this recipe."

Lily Sorensen said her godmother's mad scientist parties were a favorite of her siblings, and she's both surprised and excited to see Ellis' depiction of her as the bespectacled chef.

Lulu the Dung Beetle: In Search of the Perfect Poop might sound either high on the “ick” factor or possibly derivative of beloved 1977 illustrated children’s book *Everyone Poops*.

Blixt said she and Ellis avoided the ick factor by plunging into silliness.

“There are so many funny ways to talk about poop,” she said.

Blixt has done hours of research on poop so that the recipes will bear some resemblance to the real thing. Whale poop can be blue or green, and it floats. Aussies can tell a wombat has been nearby thanks to their telltale square poop. The recipes are meant to be as whimsical as the stories, and the Sorensens have sampled the goods.

If Blixt seems like a natural teacher — someone who would dream up a book that is ready-made for school and public libraries, complete with recipe kits and one day, perhaps an action figure and an animated series — it’s because she works in health care with older adults and did her share of training sessions in hospitality.

The *Lulu* series is a 100% local project and business, and each book will include some Denton-specific Easter eggs.

The book is available for purchase online at luluthedungbeetle.com.