

Rats! by Gavin Bishop

Teaching Notes by Raymond Huber

Note: Gavin Bishop's books are sophisticated in illustration and ideas – so are suitable for a wide age range, Years 1 to 6.

Before Reading:

Discuss the cover image. What does it tell you about the Rats?

Do you know any other Rat stories? Are rats usually portrayed as good or bad? Why?

Do you like rats? Relate an experience with rats.

Discussion questions:

What does Poly Piper's name remind you of?

Look at the bath tub scene. What does it tell you about the Rats? Are they good or bad?

Look at the kitchen scene. What do you learn about the rats behaviour?

Why is there a picture of the 3 women on the telephone?

How were the Rats treating Polly at the start? Was this fair?

Why wouldn't the Rats leave when Polly begged them to go?

How is Polly feeling?

Who is Rapsallion Claw?

Why does he keep saying "no rats here" in a loud voice? Is he fooled by the Rats hiding?

Why do you think the Rats like dancing? (Listen to some accordion music). What is a jig?

What is Claw's plan to get rid of the Rats?

How was Polly feeling now?

Why does she invite the Rats back?

What does 'I'll call the tune' mean?

Why did the Rats fix up Polly's house? What treats did the Rats bring her?

In what ways did the Rats settle down in the end?

What did you think of the ending?

How else could it have ended?

Theme: Problem Solving

* The Rats were making Polly miserable. List 3 things Polly did to try and solve her problem at first. What new problem did she create by getting rid of the Rats? In the end, Polly and the Rats realise they both have something to offer (they negotiate a solution). What does Polly provide the Rats with? What do the Rats offer in return?

* In friendships, people sometimes get upset. When a friend annoys you, imagine if you just got rid of them! Soon you would have no friends left. What are some other ways to solve a disagreement with a friend?

Writing

* Rewrite the story from the Rat's point of view. What would they see and hear?

* Poem: Choose a favourite scene (eg. the bath-tub) and write a poem about it. Describe some of the crazy rat games. Include sensory words that describe sound, smell, and colour.

- * Dialogue: write the conversation of the 3 women on the telephone.
- * Play: Write the Rats' story as a play script.
- * Argument: People seem to love or hate rats. Write an argument that stating the reasons why you either like them or not.
- * Write the further adventures of Rapsallion Claw. What does his name mean?
- * Review the book. Give reasons for your favourite event, character, and illustration. Older students could consider quality of printing production, a personal response, and a suitable age group for the book. Give it a rating.

Research

Impact: Rats have a big impact on humans and on the environment.

Choose one of these 'rat roles' to research:

- * Rats as predators of native NZ animals
- * Rats as carriers of plague
- * Rats as loyal, intelligent pets
- * Rats as laboratory animals.

Present your information inside the outline of a rat.

Rat Biology: Divide a page into four sections and draw a rat in the centre. Make notes on (Juniors could illustrate) these 4 sections:

1. Food- what do rats eat?
2. Habitat- where do they like to live?
3. Senses: what are their special abilities?
4. Enemies- what or who is a threat to rats?

Art

Framing

Bishop makes use of many kinds of frames in the illustrations : windows, doorways, picture frames on walls, and frames floating within pictures. What effect does it have?

1. Frames focus the attention; attract the eye. Find examples of windows and open doors that invite you to look in.
2. Frames can show events close-up. Look at the floating frame on the highest mountain page. What does it do?
3. Frames can show parts of the action from different view points (like a comic strip). Create your own framed illustration. Draw a house with windows (like where the Rats are watching The Pied Piper on TV). Draw a different character or action in each window, to create a story. on each double page spread.
4. Frames create mood. Find a picture where a frame creates these feelings: trapped, lonely, hopeful, scared.

Style

* Bishop has been inspired the style of a traditional folktale. Look at this famous picture by Richard Doyle from The King of the Golden River (1851):



How is it like the picture of the arrival of Rapsallion Claw?

Read the dedication on the first page of *Rats!*

* Bishop also shows some New Zealand decor from the 1940s to 1960s: furniture, clothes, wallpaper, appliances. How many old-fashioned things can you spot? Any modern things?

* Bishop has a recognisable style as an artist. Compare *Rats!* to Bishop's book *Mrs McGinty and the Bizarre Plant*. Read some of Gavin Bishop's other books: <http://www.gavinbishop.com/home/books.html>

* How many different wallpaper patterns can you find in the book? Create your own wallpaper design using rat body shapes (or another animal). Juniors could use cardboard templates.

* Count the Rats hidden in some of Bishop's pictures.

Colour

*Illustrators use colour to create a mood, to make details stand out, or to recreate a setting in time.

What kind of colours has Bishop used? Are they mostly bright or dull? warm or cool?

* Red (and orange) are used sparingly – as a highlight colour (to attract your eye). Find examples.

* What happens to the colours after the rats leave the house? Why?

* Look at the picture that says ‘Polly Piper was lonely’. How has Bishop used colour to make this a lonely, sad picture? What other tricks has he used? (Hint: light, scale, angles).

Paint a ‘sad and lonely’ picture using dull colours. Use a little of a bright colour to make one thing stand out.

What happens to the colours at the end?

Illustrating Text

‘They danced behind RapsCALLION Claw up a winding path into the mountains.’ How would you illustrate this part of the story? Would you show a close-up or distant scene? What colours would you use?

Did you make the same choices as Bishop?

Creative Responses

* Inventions: Look at the inventive picture of the Rat’s ‘winter sports’ in the kitchen. Draw some more Rat Olympic sports events. Create a mountain mural and stick the drawings to it.

* Ratty Art: Create a large, textured rat picture using scraps of fabric / or a collage rat using scraps of coloured magazines.

* Reporter: Write a newspaper report of a rat invasion in your school. Illustrate with cartoons. Make an audio (or video) tape of the news report.

* Rat Sayings: Humans don't usually like rats – so the English language has some negative rat sayings: 'stuck in the rat-race, step on a crack marry a rat, I smell a rat, you dirty rat, caught like a rat in a trap, looking like a drowned rat'. Illustrate one of these using a rat in the picture.

* Make the recipe Ratatouille.

Traditional Tales

* Rats! make some references to The Pied Piper of Hamelin (1450).

Folktales are invented to explain how ordinary folk deal with problems. They often involve talking animals. Is Rats a folktale?

* Find a book or film of the Pied Piper tale and compare with Rats!

List the many differences: for example the plot, the humour, the ending, the theme, and setting.

* The Pied Piper was made popular by Robert Browning's poem (1842).

Memorize the beginning of the poem:

Rats!
They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men's Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women's chats,
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking

In fifty different sharps and flats.

Look for references to Browning's poem in the pictures in Rats!