

Teachers' Resource Kit

RATS!

GAVIN BISHOP

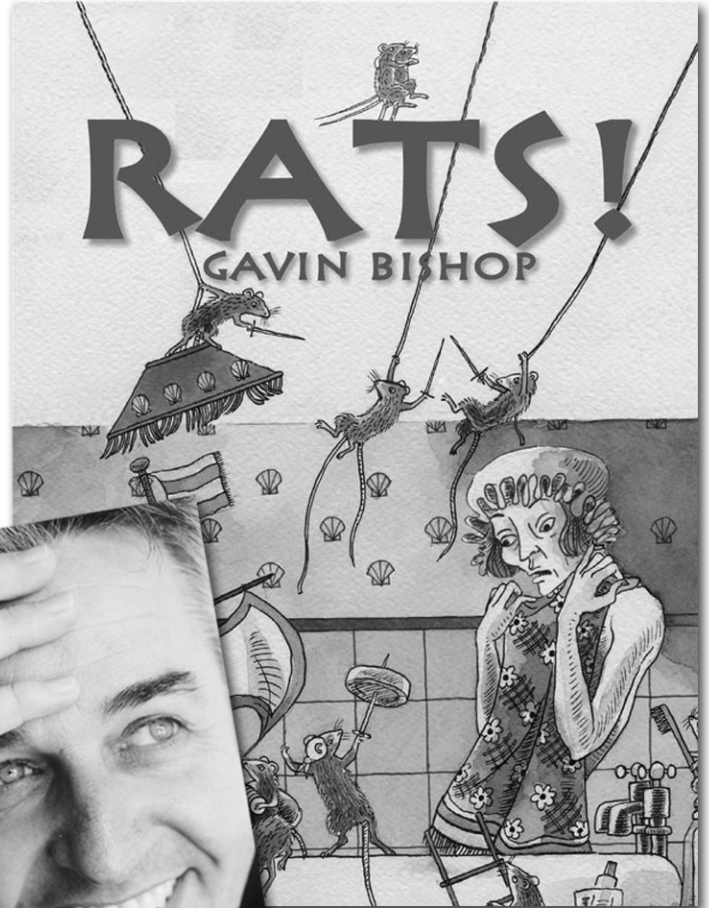
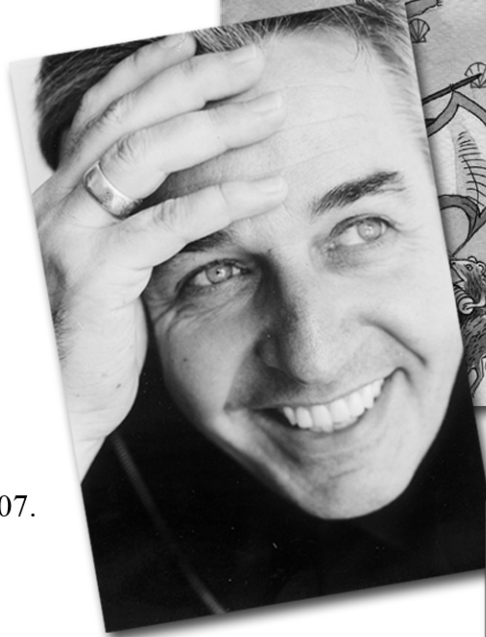
Rats! is a quirky, lively, fun story with stunning illustrations.

Polly Piper's house is infested with rats — they are everywhere. She calls in an exterminator (resembling the Pied Piper), who leads them all away. When they go, Polly finds her life is empty and boring. Miserable, they plead to come back — so of course Polly agrees — and they all live happily ever after!

This book stands out for its finely detailed and exciting illustrations — they are beautiful and will give readers plenty to discover and delight in.

GAVIN BISHOP

Gavin Bishop is a renowned children's book author and illustrator. His book *Weaving Earth and Sky* won the non-fiction section and the Book of the Year Award of the NZ Post Children's Book Awards 2003; *Taming the Sun* was shortlisted for the same award in 2005, and *Riding the Waves* in 2007.



Including classroom activities for students aged 5-10, in the following areas:

- Discussion Questions
- Problem Solving
- Traditional Tales
- Writing
- Research
- Art

Teachers' notes developed by Raymond Huber



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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 Mrs Polly Piper's surname remind you of?
- Look at the bathtub 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?
- What do you think the three women are talking about on the telephone?
- How were the rats treating Mrs Polly Piper at the start? Was this fair?
- Why wouldn't the rats leave when Mrs Polly Piper begged them to go?
- How is Mrs Polly Piper feeling?
- Who does Rapsallion Claw remind you of? What does his name mean?
- Why does he keep saying "No rats here" in a loud voice? Do you think he was fooled by the rats hiding?
- Why do you think the rats like dancing? Listen to some accordion music. What is a jig?
- What is Rapsallion Claw's plan to get rid of the rats?
- How is Mrs Polly Piper feeling since the rats have gone?
- Why does she invite the rats back?
- What does "I'll call the tune" mean?
- Why did the rats fix up Mrs Polly Piper's house? What treats did the rats give 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?

PROBLEM SOLVING

- The rats were making Mrs Polly Piper miserable. List three things she did to try and solve her problem first.
- What new problem did she create by getting rid of the rats?
- In the end, Mrs Polly Piper and the rats realise they both have something to offer (they negotiate a solution). What does Mrs Polly Piper 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?

TRADITIONAL TALES

- *Rats!* makes 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 any differences (for example, the plot, the humour, the ending, the theme and the setting).
- The Pied Piper was made popular by Robert Browning's poem (1842). Memorise the second stanza 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 of *Rats!*

WRITING

- Rewrite the story from the rats' point of view. What would they see and hear?
- Poem: Choose a favourite scene (eg. the bathtub) and write a poem about it. Describe some of the rats' crazy games. Include sensory words that describe sound, smell, and colour.
- Dialogue: Write the conversation of the three women on the telephone.
- Play: Write the rats' story as a play script.
- Argument: People seem to love or hate rats. Write an argument stating the reasons why you either like them or do not like them.
- Write about the further adventures of Rapsallion Claw.
- Review the book. Give reasons for your favourite event, character, and illustration. (Older students could consider quality of printing production, a personal response, a suitable age group for the book, and give it a rating.)

RESEARCH

- Rats have a big impact on humans and on the environment. Choose one of the following 'rat roles' to research:
 - Rats as predators of native New Zealand 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?

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 this have?
- Frames focus the attention, attract the eye. Find examples of windows and open doors that invite you to look in.
- Frames can show events close-up. Look at the floating frame on the highest mountain page. What effect does it have?
- Frames can show parts of the action from different viewpoints (like a comic strip). Create your own framed illustration. Draw a house with windows (similar to that of the page where the rats are watching *The Pied Piper* on TV). Draw a different character or action in each window, to create a story.
- Frames create mood. Find a picture in *Rats!* where its frame creates one or some of the following 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!* How does it reflect the theme of the book?
- Bishop's illustrations also show some New Zealand decor from the 1940s to the 1960s: furniture, clothes, wallpaper and appliances. How many old-fashioned things can you spot? Any modern things?
- Bishop has a recognisable style as an artist. Compare *Rats!* to another of his books, *Mrs McGinty and the Bizarre Plant*.
- Read some of Gavin Bishop's other books. You can find out about them at:
<http://www.gavinbishop.com/home/books.html>
<http://www.randomhouse.co.nz>

- 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 “Mrs 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 of the book?

Illustrating Text

- “They danced behind Rapsallion Claw up a winding path into the mountains.” How would you illustrate this part of the story? Would you

show a close-up or a distant scene? What colours would you use?

- Have you made the same choices as Bishop?

Creative Responses

- Inventions: Look at the inventive picture of the rats’ ‘winter sports’ in the kitchen. Draw some more ‘Rat Olympics’ 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 rat collage 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 sayings about rats, such as “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” and “looking like a drowned rat”. Illustrate one of these using a rat in the picture.
- Make the recipe ratatouille.