

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh Short Guide

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh by Robert C. O'Brien

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Overview

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH has been reprinted in paperback as *The Secret of NIMH*, partially because of the movie's title and because many prospective readers were put off by a book about rats. O'Brien himself stated that people often asked him why he chose to write about rats. He also noted that one of the first reviews of this book admitted that the title had put the critic off but once beyond that mental block the critic went on to write one of the most enthusiastic reviews. Rats, however, are only some of the novel's many believable and entertaining characters, which include humans, mice, owls, crows, and cats.

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH tells two stories simultaneously: one is the struggle of Mrs. Frisby to find a way to save her home and to save her son Timothy from a life-threatening illness; the second is the story of the rats of NIMH, their escape to the Fitzgibbon farm, and their plan to move to Thorn Valley. The two stories are interwoven — for Mrs. Frisby and the rats end up working together, for different purposes but for similar ends.

Although never spelled out in the novel, NIMH is the acronym of the National Institute of Mental Health, a government laboratory where some of these rats and mice were kept for three years before they escaped.

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH examines issues of loyalty, independence, and courage, and debates the ultimate uses of knowledge and science. The novel realistically shows both sides of issues and explores the strengths and weaknesses of the characters. Although the scientists of NIMH and Jenner, who abandons his rat friends, serve as antagonists in the plot, they are not presented as starkly evil; both their good and bad qualities are described. Everything, from science to life at the Fitzgibbon farm, is presented as helpful or harmful, depending on the use made of it. Thus, the novel examines some of the complexities of life, where there are no simple solutions. To survive, characters must be courageous and independent, yet they must also learn to rely on others for help.

About the Author

Robert C. O'Brien was the pen name of Robert Leslie Conly, born January 11, 1918 in Brooklyn, New York. He attended Williams College but left during his sophomore year. After studying music, he returned to college the following year and in 1940 graduated from the University of Rochester with a degree in English. In 1943 he married Sally McCaslin, and they had four children. From 1944 until his death of a heart attack on March 5, 1973, O'Brien worked in the Washington, D.C.

area. Although he worked in the city, he spent much time in the country, and for about ten years lived on a small farm.

O'Brien, whose father was a reporter for the New York Herald Tribune, worked as a journalist and editor. In 1941 he was a staff writer at Newsweek magazine; in 1944 he became a reporter for the Washington Times-Herald and later for Pathfinder News magazine. In 1951 he began working for the National Geographic magazine and later became senior assistant editor. As a journalist he wrote under his own name but used O'Brien, which had been his mother's name, for his fiction.

O'Brien wrote fiction only during the last ten years of his life, producing three novels for young people, the last of which, *Z for Zachariah*, was completed by his wife and daughter from his notes and published posthumously. His novels for young readers focus on serious problems of modern society. For instance, *Z for Zachariah* is written in diary form and is a post-nuclear war account of a young survivor. In this novel O'Brien develops his concern that the human race has a tendency to exterminate itself.

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH, however, is the novel which has received the most critical acclaim, winning many awards: Lewis Carroll Shelf award (1972), runner-up National Book Award (1972), Pacific Northwest Library Association Young Reader's Award (1974), and William Allan White Children's Book Award (1974). It also received the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1972 from the American Library Association. In 1982, MGM/United Artists released *The Secret of NIMH*, an animated movie based on O'Brien's novel.



Setting

The story takes place in modern times at the Fitzgibbon farm. The Fitzgibbon house serves as background for the homes of the animals that live nearby.

The animals' abodes are vividly described. Mrs. Frisby and her children, a family of mice, live in a "slightly damaged cement block [that] . . . lay almost completely buried" in Mr. Fitzgibbon's field. The furnishings of this house are "bits of leaves, grass, cloth, cotton fluff, and other soft things Mrs. Frisby and her children had collected." The Frisbys stay here during the winter, when living in the woods becomes too harsh because of the scarcity of food. The farm provides Mrs. Frisby and her family with a home and there are leftover crops for food, but it is also a dangerous place. Mice never forget that this is cat territory, and when Mr. Fitzgibbon begins plowing in the spring "no animal caught in the garden that day is likely to escape alive, and all the winter homes, all the tunnels and holes and nests and cocoons, are torn up."

While Mrs. Frisby's home seems a realistic mouse hovel, the fugitive rats from NIMH have created a fantastic world beneath the rosebush on the Fitzgibbon farm. The rats have established a fully organized headquarters in a cave, using electricity to power lights, an elevator, air ducts, and a radio. They have a fully stocked library and meet in a large assembly hall to discuss the future of their civilization.



Social Sensitivity

O'Brien has stated that, "The mind learns that it is not easy to separate good from bad; they become deviously intertwined. From books [one] learns that not all doors are simply open or shut, and that even rats can become heroes." The novel depicts uses of science and knowledge, yet science is presented neither as all good nor all bad. While Nicodemus tells of the pain of scientific experimentation on animals, neither the scientists nor science itself is seen as evil. Dr. Schultz is criticized because he does not know the implications of the experiments, yet he is not inherently evil; when he holds the rats, he does so "gently but firmly." Mr. Ages is a type of doctor, who helps save Timothy's life with medicines. Moving Mrs. Frisby's home is only accomplished because the rats have knowledge that other animals do not have. The Plan, which requires that the rats leave their comfortable surroundings, still includes the use of science; Nicodemus and others have had to study science in order to learn how to develop their farming community. It would be easy, in a book such as this, to cast science as "bad," but careful reading will show that criticism is coupled with recognition of the advantages—when properly used—of science.

How to use what one learns and how best to live one's life, are perhaps the major concerns of the novel. O'Brien suggests that during today's technological age, using natural resources more responsibly may result in a less physically comfortable way of life, but ultimately a more self-sufficient and rewarding one. Such a use of natural resources requires the positive use of modern technology, not its misuse.

Literary Qualities

Some of the important literary qualities of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* are the use of humanized animals, character complexity and development, interwoven stories, a flashback technique to vividly portray past events, and a setting that demonstrates themes, personalities, and conflicts. O'Brien presents animals that are "humanized;" that is, they think, feel, speak, and react as humans might. Their conflicts can be seen as analogous to human conflicts.

Mrs. Frisby is a believable character who overcomes her fears to develop a sense of independence. Fear and courage, insensitivity and kindness, all are depicted as facets of a character's complex personality.

The author skillfully interweaves the conflicts of Mrs. Frisby and the rats, not merely through plot, but also through the intricate development of similar themes and conflicts. Although Nicodemus's account of their years at NIMH fills eight chapters, the tale is told through action and dialogue, making it a story within the main story. Because it is told in flashback and not simply through monologue, the action, suspense, and interest are aptly maintained.

Settings are distinct and often reflect elements of theme, conflict, or character. The details of Mrs. Frisby's home are realistic; she does not wear miniature clothes nor does she have small versions of human furniture about her house.

While the rat colony is described in more fantastic terms, this description of their use of modern technology contrasts with Mrs. Frisby's natural or primitive surroundings.

The complexity of the constant struggle and balance of life and death is suggested by the home of Mr. Ages, which "had a bleak and almost ghostly look, for the blossoms and the green leaves were gone, and only the dry skeletons of the weeds stood, hung with stalks and seeds and pods that rattled in the wind." Yet, it is from these same seeds that Mr. Ages "made the draughts and powder that could sometimes save the sick from dying."



Themes and Characters

Mrs. Frisby lost her husband the previous summer, but she has been able with "luck and hard work to keep her family . . . happy and well fed." While three of her children are indeed healthy and happy, the story begins as her son Timothy catches pneumonia. Moving Day, when all the animals must leave the field before plowing begins, is rapidly approaching, but if Timothy goes with them to the woods, he may die of exposure. Mrs. Frisby is determined to find a way to keep Timothy safe and warm until he can recuperate. This determination and love for her family leads her into subsequent adventures. Although she wishes her husband were there to help solve their problems, she knows that she alone is responsible for her family's welfare.

Mrs. Frisby is a practical, perceptive character, who does not dwell on her own worries, but instead acts to solve her problems. Although fearful, she travels bravely through cat territory, flies upon the bird Jeremy's back to the house of Owl, and goes to the rats' community. When she is captured by Billy Fitzgibbon, she realizes that she must escape, not just to save herself, but also to save her children and the rats. Her bravery amazes the other characters, and ultimately the information she carries to the rats saves their lives.

While other characters, such as Jeremy and Owl, help Mrs. Frisby, it is the rats who finally save her house. Over a hundred rats live in the community under the rosebush, yet we meet only a few of them—principally, the leader Nicodemus and the handsome Justin.

Nicodemus tells Mrs. Frisby about NIMH, where he and others received injections as part of a laboratory experiment. He says the scientists at NIMH were not intentionally cruel, but while the cages were "not uncomfortable . . .

just the fact that it was a cage made it horrible." Even after they escape from NIMH and use their newly-developed skills to build a technologically advanced society, the rats fear they will lose their freedom, so they plan to build a civilization, not by stealing electricity or food, but by farming and establishing a self-sufficient community. Their plan is not without opposition, however.

Some of the rats are unhappy about trading their present comfort for the hardships of farming, yet Nicodemus and most of the rats assert the importance of freedom and self-sufficiency over comfort. This conflict of freedom versus "captive" comfort is stressed throughout the novel.

The characters display a mixture of individual courage and cooperation.

Courage leads to action, but each character who helps another is later helped in return. If Mrs. Frisby had not helped Jeremy, she would never have met Owl and learned how



to save Timothy. If the rats had not freed Jonathan and Mr. Ages, they would not have escaped NIMH; if they later had not helped Mrs. Frisby, they would not have escaped the rosebush in time to save their own lives.

The interdependence of creatures is stressed in the story. So, too, is the uncertainty of life. From the beginning when Mrs. Frisby finds the food of an animal who may have died, to the end when two rats die to save the others, what happens to some animals remains a mystery. Despite this uncertainty, the world presented here is not unjust. The courage of Jonathan, Mrs. Frisby, and the rats who stay behind emphasizes the values of loyalty, friendship, and love.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why was the rats' stay at the Boniface Estate an important step between their time at NIMH and living at the Fitzgibbon farm?

2. How is life in the rats' developed civilization on the Fitzgibbon farm similar to their years at the marketplace?

3. Jeremy says that the rats on Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm kept to themselves.

What are some of the reasons for that?

What do they learn after they escape NIMH that makes them stay away from others?

4. Why had Jonathan Frisby never told his wife about NIMH? Was his decision the right one?

5. What is the definition of "bravery?"

Which characters display it?

6. Is there a difference in how the personalities of human and animal characters are described?

7. How is Thorn Valley described? Why is it significant that this setting was chosen for the Plan?

8. Do you think that the rats' plan for a civilization in Thorn Valley will succeed? What problems do you foresee?

How do you think they will cope with these problems?

9. What are the uses of science in the novel? Compare its use by Dr. Schultz, Mr. Ages, and the rats.

10. The fate of many characters is not known. For a long time Mrs. Frisby did not know how her husband died. Two unsolved questions at the end of the novel regard Jenner and Justin. What are other unresolved questions? Why does O'Brien allow them to remain unresolved?

11. Some characters, settings, and actions in the novel are both harmful and helpful. The plowing can kill animals, yet it also yields food for the animals.

What are other examples of this mixture of harmful and helpful characteristics?

How does that describe what life is like?

Is that a confusing or accurate portrayal of life?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How important are minor characters, such as Isabella, Jeremy, Owl, or the Frisby children? What do they add to the story?

2. Settings—such as the woods, Owl's tree, Thorn Valley, or the NIMH laboratory—are used in the novel to represent a conflict, character, or theme. Explain how specific settings achieve this.

3. Jenner and Nicodemus present two different views of life for the rat colony.

What are those views? How does each view demonstrate what each has learned from NIMH? How useful is each view?

4. Mr. Frisby used to say, " 'All doors are hard to unlock until you have the key.' All right. She [Mrs. Frisby] must try to find the key. But where? Whom to ask?" What "key" does she and other characters use to solve their problems?

5. Mrs. Frisby is first recognized by Owl, Mr. Ages, and the rats because she was Jonathan's wife, and her first name, unlike other characters, is never given.

Justin may think that drugging the cat, Dragon, is "no job for a lady," but Mrs. Frisby does it anyway. What expectations do characters have of Mrs. Frisby?

How does she overcome these stereotypes?

6. The movie *The Secret of NIMH* presents a very different ending to the story. How is the conflict and resolution different from the novel? What themes and ideas are important to each?

For Further Reference

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Conly, Sally M. "Robert C. O'Brien." In *Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*, edited by Doris DeMontreville and E. D. Crawford. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1978. Conly gives a thorough account of O'Brien's life and interests.

Kingman, Lee, ed. *Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books 1966-1975*. Boston: Horn Book, 1975. The *Horn Book Magazine*, August 1972, contains O'Brien's acceptance speech for the Newbery Award and a biographical profile. This book compiles that information, as well as speeches by other Newbery Award winners, for easy reference. Many of O'Brien's ideas that were incorporated into *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* are included in this speech.

Related Titles/Adaptations

In 1982 MGM/United Artists released *The Secret of NIMH*, a superb movie with vivid, detailed animation that often uses warm and striking colors to enhance mood. The movie is based upon the novel and largely follows its main plot and characters. Mrs. Frisby's name is changed to Mrs. Brisby, but other characters' names remain the same. To portray the humanness of the animals, the mice and rats all wear clothes, and Mrs. Brisby's house is complete with furniture.

The horror of animal experimentation is increased in the movie as Nicodemus describes "the most unspeakable tortures to satisfy some scientific curiosity." The movie also presents a clearer difference between good and evil.

Jenner is consumed with a "lust for power." He determines to "take what you can, when you can," and remains in the rat colony, using the ploy of moving Mrs. Brisby's house to attempt the "undoing of the Rats of NIMH."

While the novel explains the rats' development as a result of the injections received at NIMH, the movie introduces the element of magic. Nicodemus gives Mrs. Brisby a magic amulet and tells her, "Courage of the heart is very rare.

The stone has a power when it's there."

The power of this amulet is unleashed in the movie's climax.

The Secret of NIMH, then, presents a dramatic contrast of character, and good and evil are depicted through magic and violence. The epilogue does not leave the unsolved questions of the novel.



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