

Rats Short Guide

Rats by Paul Zindel

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Overview

Rats is a thrilling page-turner with a fast, exciting narrative that makes it hard to put down. In a landfill near New York City, a horde of rats has something that other rats lack—a leader with the cunning of Attila the Hun. When humans cover the mounds of the dump with thick layers of tar, the rats are cut off from their food supply. With their existence threatened, they react with ferocity and a sense of purpose. Zindel says that in real life large packs of rats are known to have leaders and a leadership hierarchy such as that of the rats portrayed in the novel. He works this and other bits of the natural history of rats into his plot, giving it a sense of possibility and making readers believe that the events could really happen.

Against the rat horde stand two youngsters, whose knowledge of the behavior of rats is pitted against a clever, ruthless adversary.

About the Author

Paul Zindel was born on Staten Island, New York, on May 15, 1936. His father abandoned his family when he was still very young, and this abandonment may be the source of the many broken families in his writings. His family moved around frequently in New York, dogged by poverty.

At fifteen years old, Zindel was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was placed in a sanatorium for a year and a half, delaying his graduation from high school by a year. He attended Wagner College, earning a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 1958, and eventually a master's degree in chemistry. After a brief stint as a technical writer, he became a high school chemistry teacher, teaching on Staten Island from 1959 to 1969. Zindel married on October 25, 1973, and has two children. He presently lives in New York and has become one of the most admired writers for young adults.

He had already begun writing plays while in college, and his interest in writing combined with his interest in his teenage students resulted in *The Pigman*, a novel for young adults that was well received and ended up on several best-books-for-children lists. Although he published additional well-received novels for young adults, it was a play that brought him national stature as an important writer. Produced off-Broadway, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* was a notable success, winning several drama awards and the 1971 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Although generally regarded as a play for grownups when it was first produced, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* has since been recommended as a best-of-the-best work for young adults by the American Library Association.



Setting

Among the strong points of *Rats* are the descriptions of its settings. Zindel creates a strong sense of place, as in this passage: The pier stretched out into the Hudson River, thousands of pilings reaching up from the black water like dark fingers clutching the main pier and its extensions.

The beginning of the pier was covered with a flow, like dark lava. Sarah stared down from the chopper window at the lights and vast nets of the golf range.

Everything was ablaze with floodlights except for the amusement park annex. Its metal-tube roller coaster, Ferris wheel—all the rides—sat in darkness like the skeleton of a leviathan carcass.

As this description shows, creating a feel for a place depends on more than just identifying what can be seen. It requires words chosen for their connotations, so that not only is the place described, but its meaning for the characters observing it—in this case, Sarah and Michael—comes through. Zindel achieves this with metaphorical language such as "pilings reaching up from the black water like dark fingers clutching the main pier." In this description, the commonplace becomes ominous, as if the pilings were alive. The apprehension felt by the youngsters is echoed in the description of the darkened amusement park as a "skeleton of a leviathan carcass." It is not only a vivid way of showing what the amusement park looks like, it is also a reminder of death and the crawling mass that brings it, looking like "a flow, like dark lava."

It is tempting to skip descriptive passages in any book—especially a thriller in which action is an important element—but one would be missing a treat by skipping the descriptive passages in *Rats*. Anyone who wishes to write fiction could learn much from Zindel's technique. For instance, note how Zindel makes the description of the area in which Sarah and Michael live work for him, advancing his ideas and the narrative: She and Michael started their trek through their sprawling housing development.

There was no end to split-level ranch houses lining the east border of the garbage dump. Richmond Estates was the next development to Springville Gardens—and that was all Cape Cod-style homes.

The other major housing tract was Holly Farm Homes, the cheapest built of them all, on the south side of the dump. Sarah knew for a fact that the walls of the houses there were paper-thin.

Zindel needs his main characters to be involved in the description, to show the setting as part of their lives. He does this by choosing an everyday activity: Sarah and Michael are selling candy to earn money for the Woodland Bird Sanctuary. This means that they must walk through their neighborhood and nearby neighborhoods—an excellent excuse for a quick description of how the neighborhoods fit together. The passage avoids being



forced, instead seeming a natural outcome of something schoolchildren often do. When the rats flow out of their mound and into the neighborhoods, their movements will be easier to follow because of this passage.

In a *Globe* article, "How I Write My Books," Wilkie Collins, author of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, remarked that he thought it the job of an author of fiction to show the romance in everyday life. In *Rats*, Zindel chooses an everyday American setting. In other thrillers such as *Reef of Death* and *Raptor*, the author has sometimes chosen exotic settings for the adventures of his main characters. In *Rats*, the adventure takes place in a suburb of ranch houses, a city dump, and the edges of New York City.

This helps make Sarah and Michael seem like fairly ordinary young people living fairly ordinary lives in a fairly ordinary place. Using a setting common to many readers, Zindel makes his characters' experiences in *Rats* seem like experiences that Zindel's audience could have also.

Further, his description of settings invites people to reconsider their own surroundings, to see where the mystery and romance may be found in the sights that they have taken for granted. For instance, in one paragraph, Sarah and Michael make their getaway in a motor boat: She threw the throttle wide open. The prop of the outboard screamed as it bit into the water and threw a wake of bubbles and oil out behind the boat. Sarah sat behind the wheel, flicked on the head and safety lights, and steered the boat away from the pier. Michael scooted about after the few rats in the boat with a fishing net.

He caught them one by one and dropped them into the black oil-slicked water.

The tone is intense, here, because Sarah and Michael are barely escaping the rampaging rats, some of which have pursued them right onto their boat. In this intense action, Zindel slips into a description, seamlessly, as if it were only natural to consider the setting for a moment: Strings of lights came on suddenly across the huge mounds of asphalt. Crude streetlights lined the main roads linking the mounds. Sarah slowed the boat. She didn't want to run into any flotsam, planks of wood, or tin cans and bottles—anything that could shatter the cotter pin of the prop. The last of the twilight made the Jersey side of the river surreal. Factory lights burned brightly. Smokestacks coughed forth tremendous white streams of smoke, ghostly fingers reaching high into the blackening sky. The tops of the refinery chimneys shot out flames and ripples of yellow sulfur. Circles of light marked the several platforms that clung to the enormous Staten Island Con Ed plant.

Mentioning the flotsam is an especially effective touch, because it makes the point that Sarah must consider the setting in order to safely navigate her boat. In addition, the setting is eerie, with "ghostly fingers reaching high into the sky." Even further, the description of the setting promotes the themes of the novel. The wood, tin cans, and bottles, as well as the smoke and flames are reminders of the polluted environment that fosters the rats but threatens the habitat of other, some might say more desirable, animals.



Social Sensitivity

Environmental issues frequently appear in Zindel's thrillers. For instance, the destruction of Australia's natural environment is a prominent issue in *Reef of Death*, in which unscrupulous corporations despoil the land and coastal waters. In *Rats* human beings have despoiled much—perhaps most—of the land in and near New York City. The landfill in which the rats live has been placed in a bad spot, right next to a community of homes. Its smell is foul and it is infested with vermin. Zindel contrasts this with the Woodland Bird Sanctuary, a place that represents hope for undoing the destruction that people have wrought on the land.

This environmental theme is nicely worked into the plot of *Rats* so that it appears to be a natural part of the novel. The rats themselves have adapted to the polluted landscape, becoming creatures who can survive where others cannot. Without natural checks on their population, the rats have swarmed through the dump and the city. Zindel has Sarah mention what she has learned about rat behavior in order to underscore the point that the rats are behaving much as they would in the wild. The problem is that the human habitat has become so unbalanced that a single rapacious species of animal can come to dominate its part of the land.

By having the rats turn on humans in a fury of destruction, Zindel makes two points.

One is that the natural world can fight back; the other is that a poisoned land will poison human beings as well as animals. The furious rending apart of human beings is a consequence of human carelessness, of many years of ruining the environment to the point that humans become the only available prey. Therefore, when the rats attack and overwhelm human technological defenses such as the fishing boat, they represent the wretched, polluted natural world in conflict with the modern human environment—a spasm of violence doomed by humanity's superior brain and ability to adapt to a corrupted environment in which kill-or-be-killed is the only choice left for animals.

Like other of Zindel's thrillers (*Loch*, *Reef of Death*, *The Doom Stone*, and *Raptor*), *Rats* has scenes of grotesque violence like this one where Sarah struggles to free herself from Hippy's rotten corpse: As though alive, the bones and flesh of the body followed her, followed her screams and terror, and she felt as if her heart would shatter. She pulled and yanked at the legs and disembodied arms, until finally she was free of it and the snake and the sickening stench of rotting flesh.

Terrifying stuff, the material is perhaps more explicit than some readers would care for, although most teenagers would take this and other such scenes in stride. *Rats* also has scenes in which people are eaten alive, as well as scenes of dismemberment as the rats swarm through city streets in search of revenge, prey, and a new home.

These scenes add to the dramatic intensity of the novel. In addition, these incidents make the rats' efforts to enter Manhattan menacing and suspenseful because their potential for destruction has been made clear. Even so, some parents may wish to read

the novel before they decide whether it is suitable for their youngsters. Sensitive younger readers may find the images of rats swarming into automobiles and homes, while devouring people, to be the stuff of nightmares.

Literary Qualities

It takes talent and skill to write truly frightening scenes. The writer has only ink on paper to work with, without sound effects, scary voices, or other advantages a live performance offers. Zindel is one of only a few writers for any age group who can compose prose that actually frightens.

For instance, Mrs. Carson and her son Kyle confront a rat in their bathroom. The scene begins with a common human response to a surprise: hesitation. "By the time it was clear that it was a living thing it was too late," Zindel notes. "In a flash, Mrs. Carson's instincts interpreted the movement as beyond the parameters of anything inanimate. Concern, apprehension, and even fright raced electrically through her as the thing swam upward in the bowl." In this brief passage, Zindel accomplishes three things: He foreshadows the thrills to come by mentioning "it was too late"; he ties in his environmental theme by mentioning Mrs. Carson having "instincts," putting her into a violent natural world for which her experiences have left her unprepared; and Zindel places his characters in a vulnerable position likely to be familiar to his readers— using the bathroom.

Further, Mrs. Carson is a mother with a child to protect; this makes her even more vulnerable to the rat than she would otherwise be. She was stunned "as she realized a head with snout and teeth was exploding— erupting!—straight at her." Then, "Mrs. Carson jerked her head back and away, but the large rat had launched itself into the air now. Its body was sleek, with powerful legs and claws digging into the air." Zindel says, "She had a single moment to push Kyle away from the bowl into a pile of laundry and get to her feet." By now, the nature of the threat has been established, and Mrs. Carson's dire situation is plain.

She has neither powerful legs nor claws.

What can she do?

Before she could get to Kyle, the powerful and wet writhing body of the huge rat was half out of the toilet and heading for her.

She held Kyle as the rat leaped from the bowl and charged at her. With her free hand she grabbed a broken mop and swung it with full force.

Here, Mrs. Carson has become primeval woman, determined to protect her young, and she does what human beings have done for thousands of years, she tries to compensate for her lack of claws by using a tool, whatever her environment offers: in this case, a broken mop. Earlier passages have made clear what the rats can do when they surprise and overwhelm people, but in Mrs. Carson's case, the human assesses her situation and replaces surprise with an aggressive defense: At first she missed, stroke after stroke, and she settled instead for diverting the dark, snarling mass. It scooted like a shadow, a horrible stalking shadow that closed on her feet. She leaped

and stepped to one side faster than she knew, and an innate ability to battle replaced any thought of fleeing. Blood rushed into her head, and her brain pounded as she brought the stick down on top of the rat. Again.

And again.

There is a master hand at work in this passage, because it not only contains frightening and captivating action, but also because the author's few words speak volumes about Mrs. Carson. A character about whom little can be known at the start of the scene, Mrs. Carson immediately becomes a fleshed-out figure. Through her behavior, without any explanation from Zindel, Mrs. Carson is shown to be passionate about the welfare of her child, as well as courageous, smart, and quick witted.

Occasionally, *Rats* seems somewhat mechanical. For instance, Zindel hammers on foreshadowing for creating suspense. That Surfer's collar can spark is mentioned often enough that readers should notice this must be an important detail to remember. Other instances include the "moaning" in the mound, Surfer's penchant for visiting the dump, taking boats across the river—showing that the rats are right by the river, and "the real nightmare was just beginning." These instances of foreshadowing are sometimes awkward enough to affect the style of the narrative because they become a distraction from events, making *Rats* somewhat inferior to novels such as *Raptor* and *Loch*.



Themes and Characters

The main theme of *Rats* is that of a corrupted environment. Sarah believes that the rebellion of the rats is a logical outcome of people despoiling the land: "People had ruined the water and the land and the air for as far as she could see. Oil-and-greasecovered barges lined a dead black shore.

Everything was endangered. Crawling.

Dying." Sarah and Michael are shown to be on the right side of the battle over the environment by their selling candy to raise money for a bird sanctuary. Sarah in particular has a strong interest in natural history and wildlife, and Michael's research into wild rats proves essential in the war against the rats from the local dump.

Environmental issues appear in other Zindel novels. For instance, in *Loch*, youngsters try to save some ancient animals from extinction at the hands of adventurers, and in *Reef of Death*, the destruction of Australia's wild lands by unscrupulous international corporations is an important motif. Even so, in *Rats*, the idea of environmental destruction is taken to new extremes. New Jersey and New York are portrayed as areas of poisonous ruin caused by poor disposal of urban wastes, festering with polluted air and water caused by factories and people who live along the Hudson River. In this context, the rats are symbolic: They represent the natural world rebelling against human despoilment of the land and water.

Where few other animals can exist, the rats have thrived on garbage. When humans pave over their dump the way the land around them has been paved for homes, schools, and roads, the rats fight back.

This helps to explain the gruesome opening of the novel. Leroy Sabiesiak is a killer of the rats, taking pleasure in shooting them while he is riding his bulldozer. This makes him a representative of all the people who treat the lives of the rats as worthless, as well as representative of the people who intend to encase the dump and its rats in asphalt. In terms of the environmental theme, his death suggests that the poisoning of the land will eventually affect human beings. It also suggests that there are more frightful thrills to come.

Central to the plot are Sarah and Michael Macafee, whose father Mack is in charge of the local dump. Sarah is the novel's main character and point-of-view character, meaning most events are seen through her perspective. She is smart, tough, and quick to take action, all good qualities to have for the main character of a thriller. Her brother, Michael, is harder to understand, because he is unusually immature for a ten-year-old. His fifteen-year-old sister spends a lot of time dealing with his childish ways, because their mother is dead and their father works long hours. Near the end of *Rats*, he insists on pursuing Surfer, his pet rat, in the rat-infested dump, even though common sense says that it would be a wasted effort. His sister, obliged to follow him, nearly dies because of his foolishness. Sarah thinks that he remains immature because of the



shock of losing his mother. The young boy also exhibits strange behavior, such as fixating on his pet rat to perhaps compensate for his absent mother. In any case, he is fortunate that his sister is forgiving, courageous, and quick witted.

Surfer is Michael's pet rat or "Michael's friend," as Sarah reminds herself. That something strange is occurring is evidenced by Surfer's behavior. When he and the youngsters watch television, he will change channels with the remote control, settling on shows about nature. When taken outside, he often rushes into the dump. This is one reason why he has been equipped with a transmitter, to help Michael find him after he runs off. Further, he seems to talk to other rats: "He's been making sounds like that a lot lately," Michael says to Sarah.

Surfer functions as a spy in the enemy camp of humans, learning about wildlife and humans and telling the landfill rats what he has learned. Although he seemingly saves Sarah and Michael's lives at one point in *Rats*, he is vengeful and has Sarah endure a physical examination the way he did when she brought him to school to teach other youngsters about rats. He pays for his vengeance in a nice turn of events involving methane gas and his transmitter.

Other characters in the novel are not particularly well developed. Mack Macafee is a kindly father but a bit befuddled by the rats' behavior. In fact, the only official who seems to apply common sense to the crisis of the invading rats is the local mayor, in a reversal of stereotype common for thrillers.

Usually, politicians are villains, but Zindel avoids the stereotype, perhaps because he wants to make the corruption of the environment the fault of everybody, rather than just politicians.

Most of the rest of the characters exist mostly to be victims of the rats. Like Miss Lefkowitz, an English teacher, they are killed and devoured. On the other hand, Mrs. Carson defies the pattern of terrified victims by fighting back, defending her child.

Aunt B uses good sense in her handling of the rat invasion, but most characters serve as grisly reminders of the hatred of the rats, as Hippy does, whose cadaver is devoured in the rats' caves.

Given that multitudes of people are killed, individually or in mass in New York City, death is an inescapable theme. Although not as important as the main theme of environmental corruption, it is important in how it supports the main theme. Although *Rats* is a thriller, meant more to entertain than enlighten, the idea that humans polluting the environment will eventually result in the deaths of humans is significant.

Topics for Discussion

1. Does the brutal violence of *Rats* make it unsuitable for children? In your opinion, what should be the appropriate age for readers of this book?
2. How well does Zindel show what he means as opposed to telling what he means, especially when speculating on the rats' motivations?
3. How intense are the scenes in the rats' caves? Why would Zindel send Sarah and Michael into the caves? Did you enjoy those scenes?
4. Why would Zindel include scenes of goo and slime in *Rats*?
5. What is the point for having the rat leader examine Sarah the way Surfer was examined?
6. Why would workers at the landfill not realize that they had a serious rat problem, one much worse than usual for a dump?
7. What purpose does the absence of Sarah and Michael's mother serve in the plot of *Rats*?
8. When does it become apparent that Surfer is up to no good? What are the clues Zindel provides before the scenes in the caves?
9. Mentioning that Surfer's collar can spark is called "foreshadowing" because it sets up the scene in which the mound is blown up. What other instances of foreshadowing are there in *Rats*?
10. Why do people in *Rats* underestimate the rats?
11. Why would Michael, supposedly an intelligent youngster, insist on going into the rats' lair to find Surfer?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Real-life rat behavior is mentioned now and again in *Rats*. How accurate is Zindel's portrayal of rat behavior?
2. What are Norwegian rats? Where are they to be found? Why would people be afraid of them?
3. What is the situation for rats in New York City? Where in the city are they to be found? What problems do they create? Do they do anything beneficial to the city? How successful have efforts been to control them?
4. From Zindel's description of the area along the Hudson River, locate where Sarah and Michael's home should be.

Draw a map showing where their house, their aunt's house, and New York City are in relation to each other.

360 *Rats* 5. How polluted is the Hudson River area near New York City? Who or what is doing the polluting? What are the pollutants?

6. Sarah's research into the natural history of rats says that Malaysia has large packs of rats like those described in *Rats*. Look up the real-life accounts of the Malaysian rats. Is Sarah accurate in her depiction of their social structure?

7. What actually happens to old dumps when they have outlived their usefulness? Are any paved over like the dump in *Rats*? Would the people in *Rats* have had alternatives to paving over and sealing their dump?

8. Do fishing boats such as the *Parsifal* actually exist. If so, how do they function? If not, what sort of boats would come close to being like the *Parsifal*?

9. What bird or wildlife sanctuaries are there on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River? What animals are to be found in them? Is there a place like the Woodland Bird Sanctuary?

For Further Reference

Review of Rats. Publishers Weekly (August 2, 1999): 86. The reviewer insists that ideas are secondary to violence in Rats, claiming, "The book does contain a somewhat watered-down message about environmentalism, but readers caught up in the fast-paced, blood-spewing action may not take time to ponder the moral."



Related Titles

Rats is one of a series of thrillers that Zindel has recently written. The others, so far, are Loch, Reef of Death, The Doom Stone, and Raptor. These novels feature frightful monsters, but Rats finds its chills in a common animal. Like that of Rats, the plots of The Doom Stone, Loch, and Raptor turn on the fates of their monsters; in Reef of Death, the monster fills a secondary role as one among several sources of chills. In Loch, three youngsters defy a rapacious research expedition bent on capturing the plesiosaurs dead or alive—more likely dead. In Reef of Death, two young adults and an elderly man confront an illegal mining operation that is disguised as a research ship. The bloody scenes in Reef of Death, Loch, and Raptor equal or exceed those in Rats, providing vivid descriptions of dismemberment and gore. The Doom Stone is more circumspect about gory scenes, relying on a hideous monster and perilous situations for its scares.

Of Loch, Reef of Death, The Doom Stone, Raptor, and Rats, Loch has the most complex plot, one into which the characterizations are seamlessly woven. Reef of Death and Raptor feature somewhat more common plots, familiar from numerous monster movies. Of the novels, The Doom Stone and Raptor surpass the others in sheer, gripping suspense, although those who enjoyed reading them are likely to enjoy Loch, Reef of Death, and Rats as well.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996