

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH/The Secret of NIMH

by

Robert C. O'Brien

Book Information

Robert C. O'Brien, Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH/The Secret of NIMH

Quiz Number: 62

Aladdin, 1986

ISBN 0-689-71068-2; LCCN

233 Pages

Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: MG

When Timothy, youngest of a family of field mice, becomes ill, his mother, Mrs. Frisby, enlists the aid of the Rats of NIMH to move their home from the path of the farmer's plow.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Newbery Medal; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Animals, Mice; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club - Kids Reading List

Main Characters

Billy Fitzgibbon boy who captures Mrs. Frisby after she puts the sleeping powder in Dragon's food

Brutus a young, large rat who first refuses Mrs. Frisby entry to the rat hole

Dr. Schultz the scientist running the experiment at NIMH

Dragon the Fitzgibbons' cat

Jenner one of the experimental rats, who had been a friend of Nicodemus before they were captured by NIMH

Jonathan Frisby one of the two experimental mice who escaped (the other was Mr. Ages)

Justin the "captain of the guard," one of the youngest experimental rats

Martin, Teresa, and Cynthia Mrs. Frisby's other three children

Mr. Ages a mouse who makes medicines

Mr. Fitzgibbon the farmer in whose garden Mrs. Frisby's winter house is located

Mrs. Frisby a field mouse who asks the rats to help move her house

Nicodemus one of the experimental rats and the eventual leader

Timothy one of Mrs. Frisby's children and the reason Mrs. Frisby has to ask for help

Vocabulary

colander a bowl-shaped sieve or strainer usually with handles and a base

cyanide a very poisonous crystalline salt

draught variety of draft, in this case meaning a drinking or inhaling, hence, a drink, a dose

harrow a cultivating implement set with spikelike or spring teeth or disks, used primarily for pulverizing and smoothing the soil

injection fluid forced into something by means of a syringe

laboratory a place devoted to experimental study in any science

pneumonia inflammation of the lungs with exudation of fluid into the lung spaces and resultant solidification of lung tissue

scaffold an elevated, and usually temporary platform

Synopsis

Mrs. Frisby returns home one early spring day to find one of her children is sick. She goes to see Mr. Ages to get medicine for him. On the way back she rescues a crow, Jeremy, from the farm cat, Dragon. She soon learns that Mr. Fitzgibbon, the farmer, is planning to plow up the field where she has her house, and it will surely be destroyed. Timothy is too ill to be moved, so she asks Jeremy for advice, and he takes her to the owl. He is basically no help until he learns her name, then says she should ask the rats for help.

The rats are willing to help her because she was married to Jonathan Frisby. They can move her house to a place safe from the plow, but the cat has to be put to sleep while they do this. Mrs. Frisby volunteers, and then learns that Jonathan died while doing the same thing. While she and Nicodemus

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wait for Justin and Mr. Ages to get the sleeping powder, Nicodemus tells her how the rats came to be the way they are. Basically, they are experimental rats who escaped. Nicodemus hates stealing to stay alive, and has come up with a Plan. The rats will move to an area uninhabited by people and grow their own food and begin a new rat civilization.

After Mrs. Frisby puts the sleeping powder in Dragon's food, she is captured by Billy Fitzgibbon and placed in a birdcage. She hears Mr. Fitzgibbon describe the death of a bunch of rats around a motor, the interest of some government people in the rats, their interest in Mr. Fitzgibbon's rats, and the fact that they are planning to come to the farm and exterminate the rats. Justin rescues Mrs. Frisby from the cage, and she tells them what she heard. They make plans to make the rat hole look like an ordinary rat hole and they escape, making it look as if there were a large number of rats in the rat hole. All the rats escape but two, one of whom is presumably Justin.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

After they escaped from NIMH, the rats had several pieces of good luck. Describe them.

First, they found the Boniface Estate with its extensive library. Then they found the Toy Tinker's truck with its miniature tools. Then they found a cave near a farmhouse with a rosebush and an underground electric cable.

Literary Analysis

How does Mrs. Frisby change during the course of the story?

She goes from being a fairly ordinary field mouse, afraid of most things, to knowing she is strong in her own way, and able to help other animals and get help in return.

Inferential Comprehension

Even though there are no roads to Thorn Valley and no planes are allowed to fly over it, one cannot help but believe that humans will one day explore and find it. What do you think will be their reaction to the "new rat civilization"?

Humans probably would not be able to deal with intelligent rats. Humans would start out being curious and might treat the rat civilization as a circus sideshow, and if the rats didn't go along, humans would try to exterminate them.

Constructing Meaning

Has reading this book changed your opinion of using rats in laboratory experiments? Why or why not?

In answer to this question a student has to think about what his or her opinion was before he or she read the book, and then think about his or her reaction to how the rats were treated in the lab and afterward when they were to be exterminated.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot In the book, the rats run through mazes and are motivated by views of the outside world. Have the students create a maze and have some animals run through it (mice, rats, humans, etc.). Note what it takes to motivate the maze-runner. How quickly does the maze-runner improve?

Recognizing Plot Have the students do some research on NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health). Does this organization use lab animals? Does it do animal experimentation? Does it study the enhancement of intelligence?

Recognizing Plot In the book, the rats draw electricity from an underground cable to use in their home. Have the students build a simple electrical circuit. Figure out how much power is needed to light increasing numbers of small light bulbs.

Understanding Literary Features The theme of the book is that you can do anything, even the

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seemingly impossible, if you want it enough. Ask the students to think of what they might want enough to be willing to risk their lives for it. Ask them how they would move their house if they had to. Ask them how they would protect a sick family member.

Understanding the Author's Craft The story is told from Mrs. Frisby's perspective. Have the students rewrite a part of the story from a different perspective, say from Dragon's perspective, or Mr. Fitzgibbon's, or Jenner's, and see how the story would change.