

# Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH

by Robert C. O'Brien

## Teacher's Guide

Written By Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

**CLASSROOM  
FAVORITES**

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## Synopsis

### The Sickness of Timothy Frisby

Mrs. Frisby, a widowed mouse, lives with her four small children in a cinder block on Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm. One day in February, her youngest son, Timothy, falls ill. She decides that she must visit Mr. Ages, an old white mouse, to obtain medicine.

### Mr. Ages

It takes Mrs. Frisby two hours to make the trip to Mr. Ages' home. Once there, she describes the symptoms. Mr. Ages diagnoses Timothy's illness as pneumonia and gives Mrs. Frisby some medicines that he has made.

### The Crow and the Cat

On the way home, Mrs. Frisby thinks about Dragon the cat, a creature much feared by the mice. She encounters a crow who has become tangled on a fence, unties the wire that binds him, and frees him. In his gratitude, the crow, named Jeremy, promises to help Mrs. Frisby should she ever need it. Jeremy flies Mrs. Frisby home.

### Mr. Fitzgibbon's Plow

Mr. Ages' medicine helps Timothy very much, but he is still weak. Mrs. Frisby is faced with a terrible problem: She must move her family to their summer quarters immediately, or face almost certain death when Mr. Fitzgibbon plows the field. But Timothy is still far too weak to be moved.

### Five Days

The action shifts to Mr. Fitzgibbon and his sons, Paul, age 15, and Billy, age 12. They are starting the tractor and making all necessary repairs in preparation for

plowing. Mrs. Frisby is disconcerted that Dragon the cat does not move when she scurries by. She notices something else that is very odd: a dozen rats carrying a huge piece of electric cable. In a very organized way, they take the cable under the rosebush, where it appears they have a home.

### A Favor from Jeremy

Mrs. Frisby asks Jeremy the crow what she should do. He suggests that she speak to the owl, who is very wise.

### The Owl

At dusk, Jeremy shows up at Mrs. Frisby's home to take her to the owl.

### "Go to the Rats"

The aloof owl suddenly becomes very interested in Mrs. Frisby's problem when he realizes that she is the widow of Jonathan Frisby. He suggests that she ask the rats, especially the guard Justin and a rat named Nicodemus, to move her home to a place where it will be safe from the plow, "the lee of the stone." The owl repeats that he admired her late husband very much, even though they never met.

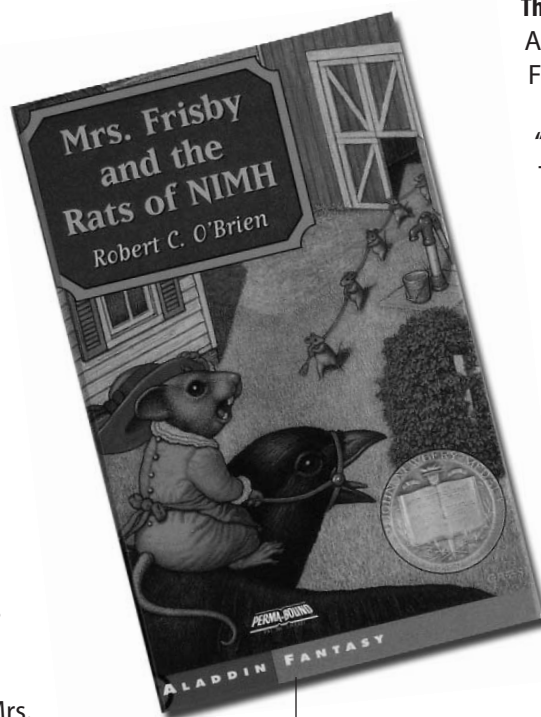
### In the Rosebush

The kids are worried that Mrs. Frisby is late and Timothy can't walk much. The next day, Mrs.

Frisby goes to the rats' home under the rosebush. She encounters the biggest rat that she has ever seen.

### Brutus

The rat is the guard Brutus, who refuses to let her in. Mr. Ages hobbles up—he has recently broken his ankle—and takes her back to the entrance. A handsome rat named Justin comes to the gate. He recognizes the name "Frisby" and treats Mrs. Frisby with great deference since she is Jonathan's widow. She has no idea why everyone knows and respects her late husband, but she is not in a position to ask questions.



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## **In the Library**

They travel through a long tunnel and arrive in a gorgeous carpeted room adorned with electric lights and stained glass. There is even an elevator! The rats have built it all underground. Mrs. Frisby meets Nicodemus, clearly the leader, who also treats her with honor as Jonathan's widow. He mentions the "Plan" and then leaves her in the library while he attends a meeting. She wonders about the Plan, especially when she sees written on a board: "The Plan of the Rats of NIMH."

## **Isabella**

A young rat named Isabella enters. Mrs. Frisby gets some hints about the Plan and learns that Isabella has a crush on Justin. Other rats arrive, including one named Arthur.

## **A Powder for Dragon**

The rats agree to move Mrs. Frisby's house and explain that they regularly drug Dragon, which explains his unusual behavior the previous day when he lay dozing in the sun. Mr. Ages usually drugs the cat but since he has a broken ankle, Mrs. Frisby volunteers to do it. The rats are too large to fit through the small hole in the Fitzgibbons' kitchen. To her astonishment, Mrs. Frisby learns that Mr. Ages broke his ankle drugging the cat the previous day and that her husband was killed by the cat while drugging him. She never knew how her husband died and that he was working with the rats; she had assumed that he had merely run afoul of the cat.

## **The Marketplace**

Nicodemus tells Mrs. Frisby the story of the rats of NIMH. A truck with the letter NIMH captured the rats in a farmers' market. The group included Nicodemus, his brother Gerald, and his friend Jenner. Other rats were caught as well. They joined a small group of mice.

## **In the Cage**

The rats were brought to a lab and caged. Trained with electric shocks, the rats were also given injections of a mysterious drug. Only twenty of the rats received the injections; the others were part of the control group. The injections changed the rats' lives.

## **The Maze**

The experiment was run by a neurologist named Dr. Schultz. The drug apparently increased the rats' intelligence, which Dr. Schultz measured by their progress solving mazes. The rats learned quickly—Justin figured out how they could escape—as the drug also changed their DNA. This means that their increased intelligence

will be inherited by their offspring. In addition, their lifespan is greatly increased.

## **A Lesson in Reading**

Nicodemus continues his explanation. The rats learned to read, much more quickly than Dr. Schultz realized. They read the cage instructions, opened their cages, and went out at night.

## **The Air Ducts**

In teaching the rats how to read, the scientists had inadvertently taught them how to escape—through the air ducts. As the rats planned their escape, a mouse named Jonathan Frisby asked if he and seven other mice could come along. All these mice underwent the same experiment as the twenty rats. In the escape, six of the eight mice blew away; only two survived: Mr. Ages and Jonathan. Mr. Ages and Jonathan got the screen open; without them, the rats could not have escaped.

## **The Boniface Estate**

The rats and mice took refuge in a fine estate, deserted because the owner was on an extended honeymoon. All winter, the creatures read books and practiced their writing.

## **The Main Hall**

Back in the present, Mr. Ages arrives with Dragon's sleeping potion and Mrs. Frisby returns home to reassure the children. That afternoon, she goes back to the rats' cave and learns more of the story. The rats have been stockpiling supplies for two years for the Plan: to live without stealing. They have even built a plow so they can grow their own food.

## **The Toy Tinker**

Nicodemus continues his story. After leaving the estate, the rats found a Toy Tinker. He had died, but his truck was filled with real tools calibrated to work on toys, so they were perfect for the rats' purposes. The rats decided to settle in Thorn Mountain National Forest, where there are plenty of caves as well as isolation.

## **Thorn Valley**

The rats settled in the Valley, not too close to the farmhouse. The colony flourished and grew to 115 rats. But the rats found that they were stealing more and more and decided to become independent. Hence, the Plan. It is now May and the rats plan to leave shortly, by early June.

## Captured

Mrs. Frisby learns that Jenner and his followers were furious when Nicodemus announced that the rats would destroy all their machines and start again. Jenner and six of his followers left, unwilling to build a new civilization. Mrs. Frisby also learns from Nicodemus that Jonathan had put off telling her about the injections because he realized she would grow old and he wouldn't; he had been unable to tell her before he died. Mrs. Frisby sneaks into the Fitzgibbons' kitchen and puts the sleeping potion in Dragon's bowl, but Billy catches her!

## Seven Dead Rats

The Fitzgibbons put Mrs. Frisby in a cage while they eat and she overhears their conversation about six or seven rats that got themselves electrocuted a few days before when they invaded Henderson's Hardware Store. It appears that the rats were trying to start one of the electric motors. The federal government is coming out to investigate. The government plans to gas all the rats on the farm, which Mr. Fitzgibbon eagerly agrees to because the rats are stealing so much.

## Escape

Justin rescues Mrs. Frisby and she tells him about the conversation. Justin guesses that the rats were Jenner and his followers. Meanwhile, the rats move Mrs. Frisby's house to safety.

## At the Meeting

Nicodemus convenes a meeting so everyone can hear what Mrs. Frisby overheard in the farmer's kitchen. The rats correctly assume that the investigators are Dr. Schultz and his fellow scientists from NIMH. The rats devise their escape, leaving their lair looking like a regular rat hole. They plan a rear guard as a sacrifice, if need be.

## The Doctor

The scientists arrive and pump poison gas into the rats' hole. The rats cleverly make the rear guard of seven rats look like five times that number. When the attack is over, one rat is harmed and two do not emerge at all. The scientists take the two dead rats and the rest of the rats revive the injured rat, Brutus. Mr. Ages reveals that one rat went back to help the others, but he died in the hole. The identity of the brave rat is not revealed.

## Epilogue

A few days later, the farmer finishes his plowing. After that, when Timothy is all well, Mrs. Frisby takes her children to their summer house. She tells her children part

of the story of the rats. They talk about perhaps visiting the rats someday.

## Timeline of Technology Impacting Fantasy Fiction

- 1970 liquid crystal watches go on the market
- 1971 CAT scan becomes available
- 1972 pocket calculator hits market
- 1973 car airbags introduced
- 1974 barcodes added on supermarket products
- 1975 home computers become available
- 1976 VHS and Betamax introduced
- 1977 first complete genetic structure of an organism found (Great Britain)  
first flight of the Space Shuttle  
first commercial flight of supersonic *Concorde* between New York, Paris, London  
USA admits testing neutron bomb  
Trans-Alaska Pipeline starts oil flowing from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez
- 1978 Louise Brown, first baby conceived through vitro fertilization, is born
- 1979 graphical user interface developed
- 1980 Sony Walkman introduced
- 1981 compact disks hit the market
- 1982 video keyhole surgery first accomplished
- 1983 synthetic human insulin approved for sale
- 1984 DNA fingerprinting introduced
- 1985 first dotcom registered
- 1986 laptop computer marketed
- 1987 Prozac hits the market
- 1988 first Internet virus attack; 10% of online computers disabled

- 1989 toaster becomes first appliance controlled over the Internet
- 1990 first gene therapy accomplished (four-year-old girl with an immune disorder)
- 1991 1991 Internet browser developed (spawns World Wide Web)
- 1992 text messaging introduced
- 1993 Global Positioning Satellite introduced
- 1994 genetically modified tomatoes hit market
- 1995 *Toy Story*, the first entirely computer-generated feature film, is released
- 1996 The Hubble Ultra Deep Field photograph reveals some 10,000 galaxies at a distance between 2.5 billion and 10.5 billion light years from earth
- 1997 Dolly the sheep, first mammal cloned from an adult cell, is born
- 1998 first segment of the International Space Station launched
- 1999 electronic reusable paper invented
- 2000 Y2K panic sweeps the world
- 2001 implanted microchips give sight to three blind men
- 2002 iris (eye) scanners first used for airport security cosmic background radiation revealed to be polarized
- 2003 China becomes the third country to put a human being in orbit
- 2004 Sedna, a large orbiting body, is discovered and revealed to be just one of many new planetoids
- 2005 NASA launches Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter
- 2006 Scientists decide that Pluto is not a true planet Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter lands
- 2007 NASA's Dawn Mission begins eight-year, 3.2 billion-mile journey to the beginning of the solar system.

## Author Sketch

Robert Leslie Conly, 1918-1973, was born in Brooklyn, New York, attended Williams College and Juilliard, and graduated from the University of Rochester. While there, he studied piano at the prestigious Eastman School of Music and considered being a professional musician. He rejected this plan, however, and turned to a career in publishing. Conly began his writing career in 1941 as an editor for Newsweek, a position he held until 1944. He worked as an editor at Pathfinder from 1946 to 1951. From 1951 until the time of his death in 1973, Conly was employed as a writer and editor by *National Geographic*. For his novels, Conly used the pen name Robert C. O'Brien.

Although Conly was a professional writer for many years, he didn't try his hand at writing for young adults until he was in his late forties. His young adult novels were received with wide acclaim, and he won the most coveted children's book award: the Newbery Medal. In his acceptance speech, Conly revealed his reasons for writing books for children: "I write them because a story idea pops in my mind. And since I am in the writing business, when I get a story idea I write it down before I forget it. It isn't always for children, but those are the stories I most like to write, because children like a straightforward, honest plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end: a problem, an attempt to solve it, and at the end a success or a failure."

In his *A Report from Group 17*, Conly wove a tale involving political intrigue and scientific research. "Make no mistake about it, Robert O'Brien [Conly] is out to make our flesh creep, our spines turn icy, and our hair stand upright. It is a compulsive book, impossible to leave unfinished," commented a critic for *Christian Science Monitor*.

The posthumously published science-fiction thriller *Z for Zachariah* tells the story of two survivors after a nuclear war. According to a critic for *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*: "The journal form is used by O'Brien very effectively, with no lack of drama and contrast, and the pace and suspense of the story are adroitly maintained until the dramatic and surprising ending."

## Critic's Corner

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, Conly's most celebrated book, is a fantasy about a group of rodents who have developed human communication and engineering skills. The novel received many prestigious awards, including the Newbery Award, 1972; the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, 1972; runner-up of the National Book Award, 1972; the Mark Twain Award, 1973; the Pacific Northwest Library Association Young Readers' Choice Award, 1974; and the William Allan White Children's Book Award, 1974.

A reviewer for *The Junior Bookshelf* noted, "This most unusual story well deserved its Newbery Medal. It combines successfully two usually incompatible styles of narration, animals with human names and in human situations, and an accurate study of wild life. It is a beautifully written and thought-provoking book."

Emilie Coulter, reviewing the novel for Amazon.com, was equally laudatory: "This unusual novel...snags the reader on page one and reels in steadily all the way through to the exhilarating conclusion. Robert O'Brien has created a small but complete world in which a mother's concern for her son overpowers her fear of all her natural enemies and allows her to make some extraordinary discoveries along the way. O'Brien's incredible tale, along with Zena Bernstein's appealing ink drawings, ensures that readers will never again look at alley rats and field mice in the same way."

## Other Books by Robert C. O'Brien

*The Silver Crown* (1968)  
*A Report from Group 17* (1972)  
*Z for Zachariah* (1975)  
*The Secret of NIMH*

## Bibliography

*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, November, 1975.  
*Christian Science Monitor*, March 23, 1972.  
*Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2003  
*Junior Bookshelf*, February, 1973.  
*New York Times*, March 8, 1973.  
*Publishers Weekly*, March 12, 1973.  
*Time*, March 19, 1973.

## General Objectives

1. To understand Mrs. Frisby's problem
2. To trace how she gets help for her son
3. To analyze the relationships among the wild creatures
4. To trace how Mrs. Frisby comes to meet the rats
5. To probe the meaning of the novel's title
6. To analyze the symbolism in the novel
7. To recognize the novel's theme
8. To describe the novel's plot
9. To identify foreshadowing and flashbacks in the novel
10. To understand the novel's ending

## Specific Objectives

1. To understand the severity of Timothy's illness
2. To probe Mr. Ages' unusual skill and knowledge of medicine
3. To question why Jonathan Frisby is held in such high regard by the wild creatures, even those who know him by reputation only
4. To understand how the rats were captured and why
5. To explore the experiments performed on the rats
6. To analyze how the rats changed as a result of the experiments, especially the increase in their intelligence and life span
7. To appreciate Mrs. Frisby's great courage and self-sacrifice
8. To appreciate the rats' achievements
9. To understand the Plan
10. To determine what happens to Jenner and the other rats who had joined him

## Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Robert C. O'Brien's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

**Flashback:** a scene that breaks into the story to show an earlier part of the action. Flashbacks help fill in missing information, explain the characters' actions, and advance the plot. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* contains several significant flashbacks, especially the chapters in which Nicodemus recounts the experiments and the changes they wrought in the rats. These flashbacks help readers make sense of the rats' extraordinary achievements.

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**Fantasy:** a kind of writing that describes events that could not take place in real life. Fantasy has unrealistic characters, settings, and events. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is fantasy because the events it describes could not happen in real life. At this time, scientists cannot create a race of super creatures: Intelligence and life span cannot be increased through drug therapy. Further, animals cannot speak and communicate as the creatures in this novel do.

**Style:** an author's distinctive way of writing. Style is made up of elements such as word choice, sentence length and structure, figures of speech, and tone. An author may change his or her style for different kinds of writing and to suit different audiences. In poetry, for example, an author might use more imagery than he or she would use in prose. In *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, O'Brien uses a formal style to create a classic novel in the traditional British vein. His style is characterized here by long sentences, few contractions, and relatively elevated diction. The sentences are complex, too, with frequent embedded phrases and clauses.

## The Importance of Setting

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is set in Thorn Mountain National Forest, a make-believe place. It is inhabited by many creatures, including crows, owls, and groundhogs, as well as rats and mice. The rats live in a natural cave which they have decorated lavishly with carpets, electric lights, stained glass, and a large library. The entrance to the rats' home is under Mrs. Fitzgibbon's rose bush on the Fitzgibbon farm. The rats steal a great deal of grain, electrical parts, wood, light bulbs, and other food and equipment from the Fitzgibbons.

The setting is intentionally vague to give the book a universality. As a result, the rats could have been abducted from any farmers' market; they could have taken refuge in any cave in any national forest.

## Cross-Curricular Sources

### Novels

Betsy Byars, *Bingo Brown and the Language of Love*  
Orson Scott Card, *Speaker for the Dead*  
Ann Halam, *Taylor Five*  
Marilyn Kaye, *Like Father, Like Son*  
Charlotte Kerner, *Blueprint*  
Kathryn Lasky, *Star Split*  
Steven Layne, *This Side of Paradise*

George Orwell, *Animal Farm*  
Mary Doria Russell, *Children of God*  
L.J. Singleton, *Regeneration: The Search*

### Audiocassettes

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*

### DVD/VHS

*The Borrowers*  
*The Empire Strikes Back*  
*Genetic Engineering*  
*Homeward Bound II: Lost in San Francisco*  
*Movie Magic: Final Frontier*  
*Return of the Jedi*  
*Return to Oz*  
*The Secret Garden*  
*The Secret of NIMH*  
*The Wizard of Oz*

### Internet

Robert C. O'Brien  
[www.borism.net/zforz/rco.html](http://www.borism.net/zforz/rco.html)

Robert C. O'Brien - Wikipedia  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_C.\\_O'Brien](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_C._O'Brien)

Robert C. O'Brien  
[www.booksnbytes.com/authors/obrien\\_robertc.html](http://www.booksnbytes.com/authors/obrien_robertc.html)

Robert C. O'Brien Teacher Resource File  
[falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/obrien.htm](http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/obrien.htm)

Robert C. O'Brien: Information From Answers.com  
[www.answers.com/topic/robert-c-o-brien](http://www.answers.com/topic/robert-c-o-brien)

## Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Robert C. O'Brien's *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* should include these aspects:

### Themes

- bravery
- cats
- education
- experiments
- farms
- friendship
- illness
- mice
- rats
- technology

### Motifs

- showing courage under fire
- possessing a fine reputation for honesty and bravery
- becoming very ill
- seeking help from strangers
- experimenting on rats and mice
- increasing intelligence
- becoming self-sufficient
- solving difficult problems
- reading about talking animals who act like people
- tracing the novel's rising suspense and tension

### Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. "Then, one day at the very end of February, Mrs. Frisby's younger son, Timothy, fell ill." (p. 4)  
*(This is the inciting incident that sets the plot into motion. Since Timothy is very ill, Mrs. Frisby visits Mr. Ages for medicine. Since Mr. Ages diagnoses Timothy with pneumonia, Mrs. Frisby realizes that she will not be able to move her family to safety in their summer home. This, in turn, forces her to turn to the owl and the rats for help. This event introduces her to the rats and the truth about her husband's great heroism.)*
2. "Yet she knew she could not leave the foolish crow there to be killed—and killed he surely would be before sunrise—just for want of a few minutes' work." (p. 24)  
*(Mrs. Frisby is a compassionate and brave woman. She could have walked away from the crow, but instead she risks her life to help him. This foreshadows her bravery in putting the sleeping potion in Dragon's bowl herself. In addition, saving the crow, Jeremy puts him in Mrs. Frisby's debt and so he transports her around the forest, which helps her as well.)*
3. "It was in the same kitchen, yesterday, running from Dragon's bowl, that Mr. Ages got his leg broken. And it was in doing the same thing, last year, that your husband died." (p. 95)  
*(Mrs. Frisby is surprised to learn that so many animals know her late husband and hold him in such high regard. She is shocked to learn that her husband was working with the rats for all the animals' benefit. By unfolding details in this way, O'Brien builds suspense and keeps readers at the edge of their seats.)*
4. "It's the new DNA that's doing it. We have a real breakthrough, and since it is DNA, we may very well have a true mutation, a brand new species of rat." (p. 118)  
*(Dr. Schultz's theory is correct: he and his team have indeed succeeded in creating a new species of rats. These new rats are brilliant and long-lived. They are also able to pass down their traits to their offspring, since their DNA has been altered.)*
5. "My name is Jonathan," said the voice. "We have been listening to your talk about going out. We would like to go, too, but we cannot open our cages." (p. 135)  
*(In this flashback, readers learn how Jonathan Frisby, Mrs. Frisby's husband, met Nicodemus, Justin, and the rest of the super rats. We learn that Jonathan and a handful of other mice—including Mr. Ages—were part of a side experiment and so have the same genetically-enhanced intelligence as the rats. We see that Jonathan is courageous as well as brilliant.)*
6. "Why, live without stealing, of course. That's the whole idea. That's the Plan." (p. 157)  
*(The rats could have plotted to take over the world or some other nefarious plan. Instead, they have become humanized and want to live with the respect that comes with independence. They want to shed the stigma that rats have of being thieves. This makes them highly admirable characters.)*
7. "We do know they have inherited the ability to learn. They master reading almost without effort." (p. 180)  
*(It is crucial that the rats' intelligence can be passed down to their children so the race of super rats does not die out. We learn here that the desirable genetic mutations are indeed inherited.)*
8. "The next thing they knew, believe it or not, the federal government got into it." (p. 191)  
*(Mr. Fitzgibbon tells his wife about the rats' odd behavior in the hardware store. Readers realize, as he does not, that it is highly likely that the rats who broke into the hardware store and attempted to start and steal the motor, were Jenner and his accomplices. This foreshadows the federal agents' arrival on the Fitzgibbons' farm and the novel's climax.)*

9. "Whoever he was," said Mrs. Frisby, "he never came out. He died in there."  
"Whoever he was," said Mr. Ages, "he was brave."  
(p. 226)  
*(The rats created a brilliant plan to throw the federal agents off their trail. Several rats volunteered for the most hazardous duty and one dies trying to rescue his fellow rat. This shows that the rats have fully redeemed their reputation: they neither steal nor desert each other. They are admirable and brave characters, the best of "humanity.")*
10. "Children, I have a story to tell you. A long one."  
(p. 231)  
*(Mrs. Frisby tells her children about the rats and their father. Now they know their distinguished and highly unusual heritage and will one day be ready to take their place in the realm of brilliant and compassionate creatures.)*

## Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

### Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. Why does Mrs. Frisby have to move from her winter home to her summer home?  
*(The farmer, Mr. Fitzgibbon, is going to plow the fields and will destroy her home. The mice must move or they will die.)*
2. What advice does the owl give Mrs. Frisby?  
*(The owl tells her to go see the rats and have them move her house to the lee side of the wind.)*
3. What is NIMH?  
*(It is a federal laboratory. The initials are never explained.)*
4. What is rats' Plan?  
*(The Plan is to live without stealing.)*
5. What is the key part of the rats' plan?  
*(The plow is the key part because it enables them to become independent.)*

### Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. Why do you think Jonathan Frisby didn't tell his wife about his extraordinary past and continuing work with the rats?  
*(Perhaps he feared that she would end their relationship because he was not a "normal" rat and the alterations in his DNA affected their children. She would certainly have worried about his continued work with the rats because of the danger it posed. Indeed, he died on one of the missions he undertook with the rats.)*
7. What does the Plan symbolize?  
*(It represents independence and humanity, the desire to be self-sufficient.)*
8. In what ways have the rats become human?  
*(The rats are human because they can communicate, learn, think, and reason. They can read and write as well. But most important, the rats want to be independent—to live without stealing—and they are courageous and self-sacrificing. They have the best traits of humanity, in fact.)*

### Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Which characters did you find especially heroic? Why?  
*(Students are likely to admire Jonathan for his courage, Mr. Ages for his wisdom, Nicodemus for his leadership, and Justin for his charisma.)*
10. Do you think this novel deserved the highest award in children's literature, the Newbery? Why or why not?  
*(Readers are likely to agree that the novel deserved the award for its exciting plot, rich characterization, elegant writing, and finely-drawn and memorable characters.)*

### Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Imagine that you were one of the creatures in this novel. Who would you most like to be and why?
12. Working with a partner, stage a mock interview with Dr. Schultz in which you question him about his work with the rats of NIMH. What was he trying to accomplish? What was his long-range plan?



## Across the Curriculum

### Art/Music

1. Make a model of Mrs. Frisby's summer house in the cinder block.
2. Draw or paint a poster for the movie version of this novel, *The Secret of NIMH*
3. Make a toy that the Toy Tinker might create. The toy should be safe for a child ages 1-3.
4. Choose background music for an especially dramatic scene. Read the scene to a group of classmates as you play the music in the background.
5. Draw a new cover for the novel. Be sure that it entices people to read the book.
6. Construct a three-dimensional model of the Farmers' Market. Use details from the novel to guide you.

### Language Arts

1. O'Brien's daughter Leslie Conly published two sequels to *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*: *Rasco and the Rats of NIMH* (1986) and *R.T. Margaret and the Rats of NIMH* (1990). Read one of these books and write a review of it. How does it compare to the original?
2. Imagine you could interview Robert C. O'Brien. Make a list of ten questions that you could ask him. Then see if you can find the answers in the reference materials listed in this guide.
3. The novel portrays animals as though they were humans, a common characteristic of fables. Write a fable that uses rats, mice, or both. Be sure that your fable has a moral.
4. Who was the rat who went back to rescue the other rat and died in the hole? Support your supposition with details from the text.
5. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Frisby tells her children that she has a story to tell them. Tell the story that she is going to share.

6. Imagine that you are Mrs. Frisby. Write three journal entries: the first when you meet the owl, the second when you hear Nicodemus' story, and the third when the federal agents come to the farm. Explain your feelings about your life and experiences.

### History/Social Studies

1. Find out more about the history of DNA research. Who first unraveled the secret of DNA? Share your findings in a poster, web page, or report.
2. Learn about the negative effects that rats can have, especially as carriers of disease. Concentrate on the plague. Explain how it affected Europe during the Middle Ages.
3. Most of the action in this novel takes place on a farm. How do farmers in your region deal with rats and mice? Locate some farmers via email and interview them to answer this question.
4. Thorn Mountain National Forest is a make-believe place, but the federal government supports many national parks around the country. Make a map showing the national parks in your state. Choose one to study in detail.
5. Make a FAQ page for scientific research. Include at least ten commonly asked questions and answers about clinical trials

### Speech/Drama

1. Give a speech in which you explain the tradition of Groundhog Day.
2. In a group, debate whether or not scientists should experiment with extending our natural life span.
3. Working with some friends, retell this story as a legend. Make your retelling dramatic and suspenseful.
4. With a partner, act out a scene between Mr. Frisby and Nicodemus in which they discuss their shared experiences in the lab.
5. Help teach a young child to read. Use the method described in the novel.

## Science/Math

1. Explain the difference between rats and mice. Show your results on a chart or a PowerPoint demonstration.
2. Mr. Ages makes medicines from plants. Find at least three plants that form the basis of modern medicines. Report on how each of these substances was first discovered.
3. Timothy has pneumonia. What is this illness? Why can it be so serious? Make a bulletin board to educate your classmates about pneumonia.
4. The mysterious drug that the rats receive increases their intelligence. Explain the traditional way that intelligence is measured.
5. The drug that Dr. Schultz gives the rats affects their DNA. Make a model of DNA. Use three-dimensional objects such as balls or marshmallows to show the interlocking genes in a double helix.
6. Choose any five creatures from the novel. Make a poster showing their relative size.

## Alternate Assessment

1. Write and deliver a speech in which you celebrate the achievements of the rats of NIMH.
2. The rats' lifespan is doubled. Make a chart to show the average lifespan for a woman and a man today.
3. Draw or paint a mural showing the main events in the plot.
4. Write a critical review of the novel for publication in the school newspaper.
5. Imagine that you are one of the scientists. Write the report on your efforts to eradicate the rats on Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm.

**Teacher's Notes**

## Vocabulary

Write a synonym and antonym for each of the following vocabulary words from *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. See how many words you can write.

### Vocabulary Word Synonyms Antonyms

1. futile \_\_\_\_\_
2. illusion \_\_\_\_\_
3. puny \_\_\_\_\_
4. pessimist \_\_\_\_\_
5. solitude \_\_\_\_\_
6. rancid \_\_\_\_\_
7. tedious \_\_\_\_\_
8. spacious \_\_\_\_\_
9. cynical \_\_\_\_\_
10. drowsy \_\_\_\_\_

## Comprehension Test A

### Part I: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blanks provided.

- |                    |                |
|--------------------|----------------|
| A. Jonathan Frisby | F. Dragon      |
| B. Mr. Fitzgibbon  | G. Jeremy      |
| C. Justin          | H. Dr. Schultz |
| D. Isabella        | I. Timothy     |
| E. Nicodemus       | J. Mr. Ages    |

- \_\_\_ 1. rat with an air of quiet dignity and an eye patch
- \_\_\_ 2. scientist who performs the experiments on the rats
- \_\_\_ 3. the farmer's cat
- \_\_\_ 4. brave mouse who was killed by the cat
- \_\_\_ 5. pretty rat who has a crush on Justin
- \_\_\_ 6. the farmer
- \_\_\_ 7. the crow
- \_\_\_ 8. Mrs. Frisby's youngest child
- \_\_\_ 9. handsome rat who often serves as a guard
- \_\_\_ 10. white mouse who is skilled in making medicines and diagnosing illnesses

### Part II: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if any part is false.

- \_\_\_ 1. When the novel opens, Timothy is ill with measles.
- \_\_\_ 2. Mrs. Frisby is faced with a terrible problem. She must move her family to their summer quarters immediately, or face almost certain death when the farmer plows the field.
- \_\_\_ 3. Everyone treats Mrs. Frisby very well because her husband has a fine reputation among the animals.
- \_\_\_ 4. The rats' home is a gorgeous carpeted room adorned with electric lights and stained glass. There is even an elevator!
- \_\_\_ 5. The rats were brought to a circus and trained to do tricks. The trainers used sugar water and other sweets to train them.
- \_\_\_ 6. The rats plan to take over the world and kill all the humans. This is "The Plan."
- \_\_\_ 7. The rats can read and write with great skill. They can also talk to humans easily; some of the rats speak several foreign languages.
- \_\_\_ 8. For two years, the rats have been stockpiling supplies, especially food.
- \_\_\_ 9. Mrs. Frisby sneaks into the farmer's kitchen and puts the sleeping potion in Dragon's bowl, but Billy catches her!
- \_\_\_ 10. At the end of the novel, many rats have died and Mrs. Frisby decides to join the rats' colony for her own safety and the future of her children.

## Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

### Part III: Quote Identification (30 points)

Briefly explain why each quote is important in the novel.

1. "He has pneumonia," said Mr. Ages. "I have some medicine that will help him. But the most important thing is to keep him warm. And he must stay in bed." (p. 18)
2. "It was in the same kitchen, yesterday, running from Dragon's bowl, that Mr. Ages got his leg broken. And it was in doing the same thing, last year, that your husband died." (p. 95)
3. "My name is Jonathan," said the voice. "We have been listening to your talk about going out. We would like to go, too, but we cannot open our cages." (p. 135)
4. "We do know they have inherited the ability to learn. They master reading almost without effort." (p. 180)
5. "Children, I have a story to tell you. A long one." (p. 231)

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Describe how the rats in this novel are different from stereotypical rats. Include at least three specific details.
2. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* received the highest award in children's literature, the Newbery. Argue that the novel did or did not deserve to win this award.
3. Explain what makes Mrs. Frisby an admirable character.
4. What function do Mr. Ages and Nicodemus serve in the novel?

## Comprehension Test B

### Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Choose the word or phrase that best completes each of the following statements.

1. Mrs. Frisby, a widowed mouse, lives with her **(four, ten)** small children.
2. Her winter home is a cozy **(cave, cinder block)** on Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm.
3. Mrs. Frisby notices something very odd: a dozen rats carrying a huge piece of **(lamb, electric cable)** to their home.
4. A truck with the letter NIMH captured the rats in the **(town dump, Farmers' Market)**.
5. Only **(two, twenty)** of the rats received the injections; the others were part of the control group. The injections changed the rats' lives.
6. The drug apparently increased the rats' intelligence, size, and **(life span, vision)**.
7. In teaching the rats how to read, the scientists had inadvertently taught them how to escape—through the **(fire escape, air ducts)**.
8. The rats and mice take refuge in a fine estate, deserted because the owner **(has died, is on his honeymoon)**.
9. The rats settle in the Valley, not too close to the farmhouse. The colony thrives and grows to **(115, 1,155)** rats.
10. Six or seven rats get electrocuted when they invade Henderson's **(Hardware, Food)** Store.

### Part II: Matching (30 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blanks provided.

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| ___ 1. Jenner            | A. two of Mr. Fitzgibbon's children                       |
| ___ 2. Gordon Boniface   | B. farmer's cat   |
| ___ 3. Teresa and Martin | C. wealthy man in whose estate the rats live              |
| ___ 4. Billy and Paul    | D. white mouse skilled with medicine                      |
| ___ 5. Mr. Ages          | E. mouse who learns about the rats when she saves her son |
| ___ 6. Dragon            | F. two of Mrs. Frisby's children                          |
| ___ 7. Jonathan          | G. Mrs. Frisby's husband                                  |
| ___ 8. Jeremy            | H. the farmer   |
| ___ 9. Mr. Fitzgibbon    | I. crow   |
| ___ 10. Mrs. Frisby      | J. rat who goes off on his own, opposed to the Plan       |

## Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

### Part III: Identification (20 points)

Explain why each is important in the story.

1. the Farmers' Market
2. the rose bush
3. DNA
4. the Toy Tinker
5. NIMH

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain why *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is classified as a fantasy novel. Include at least three details to make your point.
2. Describe what happens to the rats in the laboratory.
3. Explain how the novel shows this theme: the strength and importance of independence.
4. Who is the novel's main character? Why?



## Answer Key

### VOCABULARY

Possible answers:

Vocabulary Word	Synonyms	Antonyms
1. futile	hopeless, fruitless	hopeful, effective
2. illusion	deception, mirage, fantasy	reality
3. puny	small, weak, feeble	forceful, energetic, large
4. pessimist	grouch, fault-finder	optimist
5. solitude	isolation, privacy, seclusion	publicity, society, throng
6. rancid	spoiled	fresh
7. tedious	boring	exciting
8. spacious	large	small, restricting
9. cynical	asocial, hostile, unfriendly	friendly
10. drowsy	sleepy	awake

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. B  |
| 2. H | 7. G  |
| 3. F | 8. I  |
| 4. A | 9. C  |
| 5. D | 10. J |

#### Part II: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F  |
| 2. T | 7. F  |
| 3. T | 8. T  |
| 4. T | 9. T  |
| 5. F | 10. F |

#### Part III: Quote Identification (30 points)

- This is the inciting incident that sets the plot into motion. Since Timothy is very ill, Mrs. Frisby visits Mr. Ages for medicine. Since Mr. Ages diagnoses Timothy with pneumonia, Mrs. Frisby realizes that she will not be able to move her family to safety in their summer home. This, in turn, forces her to turn to the owl and the rats for help. This introduces her to the rats and the truth about her husband's great heroism.
- Mrs. Frisby is surprised to learn that so many animals know her late husband and hold him in such high regard. She is shocked to learn that her husband was working with the rats for all the animals' benefit. By unfolding details in this way, O'Brien builds suspense and keeps readers at the edge of their seats.
- In this flashback, readers learn how Jonathan Frisby, Mrs. Frisby's husband, met Nicodemus, Justin, and the rest of the super rats. We learn that Jonathan and a handful of other mice – including Mr. Ages—were part of a side experiment and so have the same genetically-enhanced intelligence as the rats. We see that Jonathan was courageous as well as brilliant.

- It is crucial that the rats' intelligence can be passed down to their children so the race of super rats does not die out. We learn here that the desirable genetic mutations are indeed inherited.
- Mrs. Frisby tells her children about the rats and their father. Now they know their distinguished and highly unusual heritage and will one day be ready to take their place in the realm of brilliant and compassionate creatures.

#### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

- |                    |                        |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1. four            | 6. life span           |
| 2. cinder block    | 7. air ducts           |
| 3. electric cable  | 8. is on his honeymoon |
| 4. Farmers' Market | 9. 115                 |
| 5. twenty          | 10. Hardware           |

#### Part II: Matching (30 points)

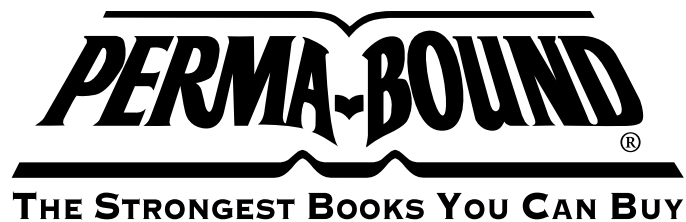
- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. J | 6. B  |
| 2. C | 7. G  |
| 3. F | 8. I  |
| 4. A | 9. H  |
| 5. D | 10. E |

#### Part III: Identification (20 points)

- The Farmers' Market is important because it is where the rats are captured and then taken to NIMH, the federal laboratory.
- The rats have their home under the rose bush. The huge rose bush hides the natural caves that the rats have filled with their stores of grain, tools, and books.
- DNA is the essential building block of life, the protein that carries our genetic materials. It is important in this novel because the scientists succeed in changing the rats' DNA, so the scientists have created an entirely new breed of rats. In addition, all the changes the rats experience—increased size, intelligence, and longevity—will be inherited by their children in their genes.
- The Toy Tinker had died in his truck. The rats find the body and the truck, give the corpse a decent burial, and then use the tools and parts to build their new civilization. The tools especially prove invaluable.
- NIMH is the federal laboratory where Dr. Schultz and the rest of the scientists and assistants experiment on the rats and mice. The name that the initials represent is never identified, but the National Institute of Mental Health shares the same initials.

#### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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