



Rat (Animal)

Jonathan Burt

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The rat has been described as the shadow of the human: from ancient times through today, it has followed man via routes of commerce and conquest to eventually inhabit nearly every part of the world. Rats have a bad reputation—they spread disease, destroy agricultural produce, and thrive in the darkest corners of human habitation—but they have recently found credibility as a major resource for scientific experimentation. Jonathan Burt here traces the fortunes of the rat in history, myth, and culture.

Central to *Rat* is the history of the relationship between humans and rats and, in particular, the complex human attitudes toward these shrewd creatures. Burt examines why the rat is viewed as more loathsome and verminous than other parasitic animals and considers why humans have had diametrically opposed attitudes about the rat: some cultures greatly admire the rat for its skills, while others consider the rat the scourge of the earth. Burt also draws on a wide range of examples to explore the rat's role in science, culture, and art, from its appearances in children's literature such as *The Wind in the Willows* to Victorian rat- and dog-baiting pits to its symbolic roles in folklore.

Rat offers an intriguing and richly illustrated study of one of nature's most remarkable creatures and ultimately finds that the rat exists as a perverse totem for the worst excesses of human behavior.

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