

Book Reviews

Rat

J Burt (2004). Published by Reaktion Books Ltd, 79 Farringdon Road, London EC1M 3JU, UK. 208 pp Paperback (ISBN 1-86189-244-1). £12.95.

Here is a quiz. What do the following have in common: Albert Camus, George Orwell, Jean de La Fontaine, Sigmund Freud, lustful depravity, champagne, a cure for baldness and the reason why cats are forgetful?

You may have guessed that the answer is in the title of this book. Written by Jonathan Burt, *Rat* is part of the successful and innovative 'Animal' series (see www.reaktionbooks.co.uk) edited by the same author.

Perhaps only a minority of people, such as biologists and pet (rat) owners can afford the luxury of appreciating rats for what they really are: a sophisticated and intelligent product of evolution that deserves to be marvelled at and respected. For most, its diseases and general economic impact has reduced its status to that of vermin. If there is any respect, it is of the kind that one might grudgingly grant to an arch enemy. The American National Association of Exterminators and Fumigators, for example, felt obliged, in 1936, to change the name 'Exterminator' to 'Pest Control Operator'. A grudging recognition that rats are here to stay, or, as Burt points out in a typically astute turn of phrase: "No matter where they are born, rats always seem to come from somewhere else".

Although rats have sometimes been revered, even elevated to the status of divine agents, this is the exception that confirms the rule, and their association with humans has, therefore, been generally bleak. As the author points out, even the rats' more recent role as "hero of science" is "a long history of victimhood, doomed heroism or martyrdom: the rat has been dissected, vivisected, electrocuted, given diseases, drowned, genetically manipulated, controlled at a distance by radio signals, and sent into outer space". But Burt is neither emotive nor judgemental. He just tells it how it is/was with the aim of illustrating a general theme: that rats represent what he calls a "totemic animal for the modern world", epitomising the interaction between technology and nature, always central to human preoccupations, and a symbol of a dark vitality that is both admired and reviled: "the rat treats humans as human treats other animals".

This book represents an altogether very impressive effort of drawing on examples from the arts, science, religion and folklore of the six continents that rats have colonised and arranging them into six well-written chapters: Natural History; Natural Historian and the Rat; Rat Representations; The Hero of Science; Plague and Pollution; Pets, Vermin and Food.

They contain myriads of anecdotes and many illustrations addressing for example (and as an answer to the riddle above), their prominent role in various works of literature and films, such as *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1947), or *1984* by George Orwell (1949). How the fable writer Jean

de La Fontaine used the rat in one of his fables to reflect upon the difference between the mind of humans and animals. How rats have managed to find their way into the Chinese horoscope but also enter human psyche, as recorded in Sigmund Freud's *Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* (1909) also known as the "Rat Man" case.

The rats' high reproductive output was not only of grave economic concern but also highlighted taboos of sexual lawlessness. Some early observers even believed that rats were so fertile that copulation was unnecessary, and described a female that had embryos that were themselves pregnant. Controlled breeding in general, and the production of inbred strains in particular, is of course one of the central tenets of modern biomedical science, but is also the pre-occupation of rat fanciers. 'Fancy' is the term descended from 'fantasy' describing, from the 19th century, a hobbyist and collector; members of the British rat fancy were interested in creating animals of beauty, and rats made their first appearance in pet shows in the early 1900s eventually giving rise to over 60 varieties with lofty names such as Russian blue, Topaz and Champagne.

Although Burt describes a few recipes, you won't be surprised to learn that the opinion concerning rats as a culinary delicacy is, at best, divided: rat meat is not generally sought after, and remains the only animal that SAS soldiers are not allowed to eat in the field. Interestingly, however, in China, eating rat meat is considered good for preventing baldness, but the claim to these medicinal properties is countered by my personal favourite, the 18th century claim that eating rats is bad for the memory, thereby (and finally) providing an explanation for why cats do not show the attachment characteristic of dogs: a rodent diet simply makes them forget about their owners.

You will find all this, and a lot more in this lovely book. Given the mountain of potential material it is inevitable that some of it is only glossed over, or left out altogether. Moreover, and perhaps frustratingly, you will not learn much about the rats themselves. This is because, in a biological sense, this book is not about truth. It is about perceptions. And perhaps herein lies the message. We can laugh at, or be shocked by, the range of prejudices that have plagued our attitude to rats. But one cannot help wonder how many misconceptions still lurk in our current, albeit more sophisticated, mindset. I would argue that progress in animal welfare is essentially grounded on attitude, that attitude is based on perceptions, and that perceptions should be founded on knowledge. In a world where prejudices of all kinds still abound, there is, therefore, a lesson: let the obviously naïve misconceptions of the past serve as a warning, and remind us to examine the more subtle ones that we may hold in the present.

Manuel Berdoy
Oxford University, UK