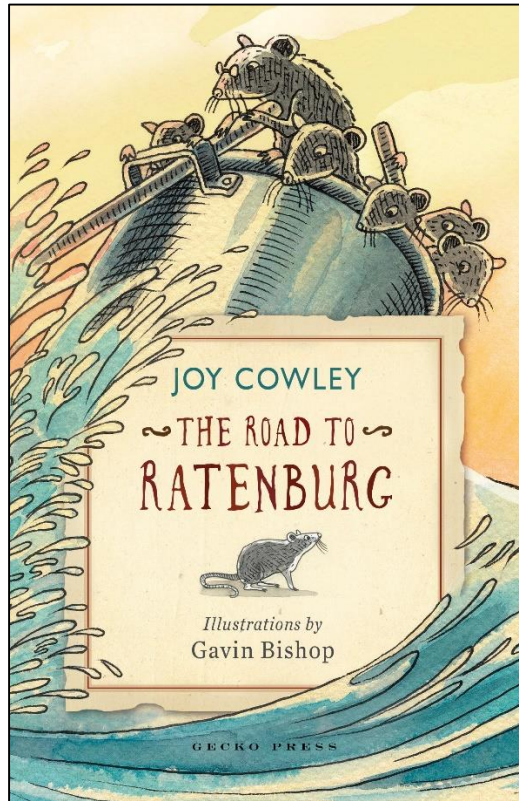


Teaching Notes

The Road to Ratenburg
by Joy Cowley and illustrated by Gavin Bishop



Synopsis

A family of rats is forced to leave its home, so sets out to find the fabled city of Ratenburg. Along the way the family members outwit vicious dogs, tricky rat traps, sharp-beaked hawks, and make some very dangerous crossings. The rat family's adventures test their characters and strengthen the bonds between sisters and brothers, father and uncle, mum and dad.

Narrating the tale is Spinnaker Rat, a classic Edwardian father, full of wisdom about the ways of the world, who finds himself learning more than expected as he and his family brave the adventure of a lifetime.

The Author

Joy Cowley is one of New Zealand's best-loved writers whose work is enjoyed by children all around the world. She began writing for children at the age of 16 when she had an after-school job editing the children's page for a local newspaper. Since then she has written and published books, stories and learning materials for both children and adults. She has been awarded an OBE for her services to children's writing, the A W Reed Award for Contribution to NZ Literature, and the Prime Minister's Prize for Literary Achievement. After many years living in the Marlborough Sounds, Joy now lives in Wellington, New Zealand.

Themes

This rollicking and gripping adventure has several themes, including family relationships, journeys and quests, bravery and determination, gratitude and love, as well as realisations leading to acceptance.

A prominent theme is that of the importance of family and the relationships within. At the start of the book Spinnaker Rat and his family clearly have strong bonds and appear to already have an insight into, and appreciation of, each other's personalities, character traits, strengths and weaknesses. The love of the family is evident and it is a desire to give the family a better and safer life which drives the action of this exciting book.

Another theme throughout the book is that of journeys and quests. Spinnaker Rat and his family, after the demolition of their home, are forced to undertake a journey in the quest to find a fabled city where they have been told they will finally be able to inhabit a place that is free of the seemingly omnipresent 'ratophobia'. This quest journey is fraught with dangers and challenges which tests the steel of every family member.

The themes of bravery and determination in the face of adversity are clearly evident as the rats must rise to meet and overcome the myriad of challenges that they encounter on their journey with true bravery and fortitude, either individually or as a tight family unit.

Acceptance, appreciation and gratitude are other themes illustrated. During the journey they encounter a variety of animals, some of which they would normally be prejudiced against. As the adventure unfolds they discover that, despite their own strengths and their ability to work as a team, they also need to listen to and accept the advice and knowledge of, and help from, others, including such unlikely characters, as the railway rats, a hedgehog, a vegetarian cat and even Jolly Roger. Initially they are forced, and then wisely choose, to place their trust and often their very lives in the hands of these kind strangers. The family members soon realise that they must, and can, overcome their prejudices in order to accept, appreciate and survive in the world around them. They, in turn are able to express their gratitude to these helpful characters. Spinnaker Rat in particular grows to more fully accept and appreciate the help of others as well as the skills and abilities of his family as the story progresses.

A further and important theme is found at the end of the book when the rats, having reached the end of their quest, realise that in fact the journey and what you learn about yourself and from the characters and the world around you, is infinitely more important than the desired final destination. Also, that it is having family with you, whether they are new family members or old, that creates and makes a place the home you most desired.

Activities

1. Before reading the book, look at the cover image and title. Discuss what you think the book might be about.
2. This book is an adventure-filled tale of a family journeying on a quest to find the fabled city of Ratenberg. In pairs, research the literary genre of adventure. Find and list any examples of passages from the book that fit the criteria of this genre.
3. The book is rich with language features. Define, then find two other examples from the book of each of the following and list any other language features you may discover within the text:
 - A. Simile - 'The sky had clouded. It hung like a grey roof propped up by dead trees' (p. 89)
 - B. Onomatopoeia - 'slosh-slosh' (p. 67)
 - C. Puns - 'a trip across the lake will be a piece of cheese' (p. 45)
 - D. Alliteration - 'reckless ratlet' (p. 95)
 - E. Idioms - 'they avoid the town like the plague' (p. 133)
 - F. Adjectives - 'excited, curious, anxious' (p. 180)
4. The book explores the relationship between Spinnaker Rat and his family, including his wife, children and brother. In groups, discuss the following:
 - Do you like Spinnaker Rat and his family as characters?
 - What do you think of their reactions to different situations and what do their reactions tell us about them and their personalities?
 - Do you think they have a realistic familial relationship? Why or why not?
 - Do you believe that their relationships develop and change through the book? If so, how and what are the main events which contribute to the development and change?

In pairs, write character studies on three characters, other than Spinnaker Rat. Begin by making a chart to list the main character traits they display. How do their particular traits affect the part they play in the novel?

5. Spinnaker Rat states, 'I felt great pride in our ratlets, who were proving themselves to be intelligent and resourceful' (p. 65). Spinnaker expounds his children's virtues and attributes (pp.8-9), as well as those of himself (p. 5) and Jolly Roger (p. 143). List what he says about them and himself.

Do you agree with his opinions? Find examples of if and when they display them, for example, tender-hearted Beta crying for the drowned terrier (p. 56). Do Spinnaker's opinions of himself and others change by the end of the book?

In pairs, think of five examples from the book where this is proven to be true. What does the book say about adults and their influence over, and opinions of children, and the

importance of adults during difficult times on a quest? List examples of episodes when the adults in the novel have been either a help or a hindrance on the journey.

6. Choose and complete one or more of the following writing tasks below:
- A. The family follow the 'star' Venus (p. 10). Write a poem or descriptive short story using Venus as your inspiration.
 - B. Ratenburg is based on the story *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (p. 13). Research the traditional story. Then re-write, illustrate and bind it in a children's picture book format. Remember to include a back cover blurb.
 - C. Jolly Roger likes to tell embellished and fantastical tall tales of events that have taken place, such as his and Spinnaker's escape from the apartment building (p. 22). Choose one of the events from the book and write a fantastical re-telling of it from Jolly Roger's point of view. Present it as a monologue to your class.
 - D. Alpha tells Spinnaker that his suggestion that a 'wooden jetty that looked as though a road had waded out into the water and stopped, perhaps afraid of the eels' (p. 47) makes him seem fanciful in his old age. Using the author's style as inspiration, write your own descriptive paragraph or poem about either another physical setting from the book, or a place, object or person that is important to you. Read it aloud to a classmate and then get them to draw what you have described.
 - E. Write either a song or poem that Moonshine the Mouse would have composed about Restina (p. 110).
 - F. Spinnaker thinks that the breathing of his sleeping family members is 'the most beautiful sound on earth' (p. 111). Choose smell, or one of the other senses, as inspiration to write a poem or descriptive paragraph.
 - G. Write the thank you speech that Spinnaker Rat had wanted to deliver to Barker before he was interrupted (p. 135).
 - H. After the shock of the rat trap Restina delivers some insults against human beings (p. 138). Think of four others that Restina might have invented.
 - I. Spinnaker Rat describes the face of the woman who discovers them in the mailbox (p. 148). Choose a classmate, family member or celebrity and write a detailed physical description of their face.
 - J. Choose a character, other than Spinnaker Rat, and a main event from the story. Write a personal diary entry about the event from your chosen character's point of view. Think about how you would describe the physical scene, any other characters who were involved, and your feelings about the incident.



7. Spinnaker Rat and his family describe humans and the world from a uniquely ratty point of view, for example, the rat family call humans 'humming beans'. They also make interesting observations and learn from human actions, such as describing clothes hanging on a clothesline as 'coloured skins' (p. 46) or admiring the logic of the good hygiene practices they observe in a cowshed on a farm (p. 70). Barker the cat also interprets, or misinterprets, humans and their desires, when he becomes a vegetarian and offers safe passage to the rats through the 'ratophobic' town of Grissenden after he states that 'The woman told me I had one important duty. 'Take care of the rats and mice, she said, and I did. I've been taking good care of them, from that day.' (p. 129).

Imagine you are another animal that is featured in the book, such as the mice, hedgehog, cat or hawks. Think of ten human objects or actions that might fascinate you and how you might describe them or what you could learn from them.

8. The book is full of dramatic, highly-descriptive, suspense-filled action sequences, particularly escape scenes, for example, when the rats must work as a team to cross the swing bridge (pp. 164-168). Choose an action sequence from the book. In pairs, study and discuss the language the author uses. Then write a dramatic, suspense-filled action sequence of your own about something that has happened to you.

9. Which is your favourite chapter in the book? Why? Write a plot summary of the chapter.

10. Examine the illustrations in the book. Do you like the style? What kinds of lines and textures are used? Do the pictures mirror the text or go beyond what the story tells you? Which is your favourite illustration and why? Design your own illustrations for the cover and/or one chapter. Find another book illustrated by Gavin Bishop. Compare and contrast the illustrations. Are there many similarities or differences?

11. Debate the statement: 'I had already decided that prejudice came from ignorance' (p. 113). Divide the class into two teams and debate the pros and cons of this statement. Find examples from the book as well as any relevant current events to back up your arguments.

12. Create an illustrated timeline of the main events of the novel, or choose your favourite moment from the book and create your own artistic interpretation of it, for example, a diorama, painting, model, poem, cartoon strip, movie storyboard, video, etc.

13. Write a review of the book, aiming it at the children's page of your favourite magazine, newspaper, website or blog. What did you like about the book? Why? What did you dislike about the book? Why? Give it a rating, such as stars or a number out of ten.

14. Joy Cowley is an award-winning author. Research and write a short biography about her and one of her other books, such as the following Gecko Press books: *Snake and Lizard*, *Friends: Snake and Lizard*, *The Fierce Little Woman and the Wicked Pirate*, *Stories of the Wild West Gang*, *Just One More*, *Dunger* and *The Bakehouse*.