



Rat (Animal)

Jonathan Burt

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The rat has been described as the shadow of the human. From ancient times it spread via the routes of commerce and conquest to eventually inhabit almost every part of the world. Its impact on history has been enormous in terms of the damage done through plague and disease, the destruction of agricultural produce, and the infestations of cities. At the same time the rat has provided science with a huge resource for experimentation. This highly adaptable, fertile and intelligent creature is almost universally loathed, but there are cultures in which it is revered, even deified. This book traces the history of the human relationship with rats from the first archaeological finds to the genetically engineered rats of the present day, describing its role in the arts and sciences, religion and myth, psychoanalysis and medicine. The author includes wide-ranging examples of the rat's appearance: in literature – The Pied Piper; Beatrix Potter stories, The Wind in the Willows; in culture – Victorian rat-and-dog baiting pits, its popularity as a pet, even the subject of a '70s pop song; folklore – it was a good luck symbol in ancient Rome, symbol of cunning in Chinese mythology; and psychoanalysis – Freud's Rat Man, for example. The book also seeks to answer two problems raised by the complexity of human attitudes to the rat. The first concerns how it was that the rat came to be seen not just as verminous, but also as being particularly despised for being so – more so, in fact, than other parasitic animals. The second concerns the manner in which human attitudes to the rat can be so contradictory, when admiration for its abilities are set against this idea of hatred. The rat can be found at the heart of human preoccupations with hygiene, sexuality and appetite, and exists as a perverse totem for the worst excesses of human behaviour. In *Rat*, Jonathan Burt provides a fascinating account of this animal in history, myth and culture.

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