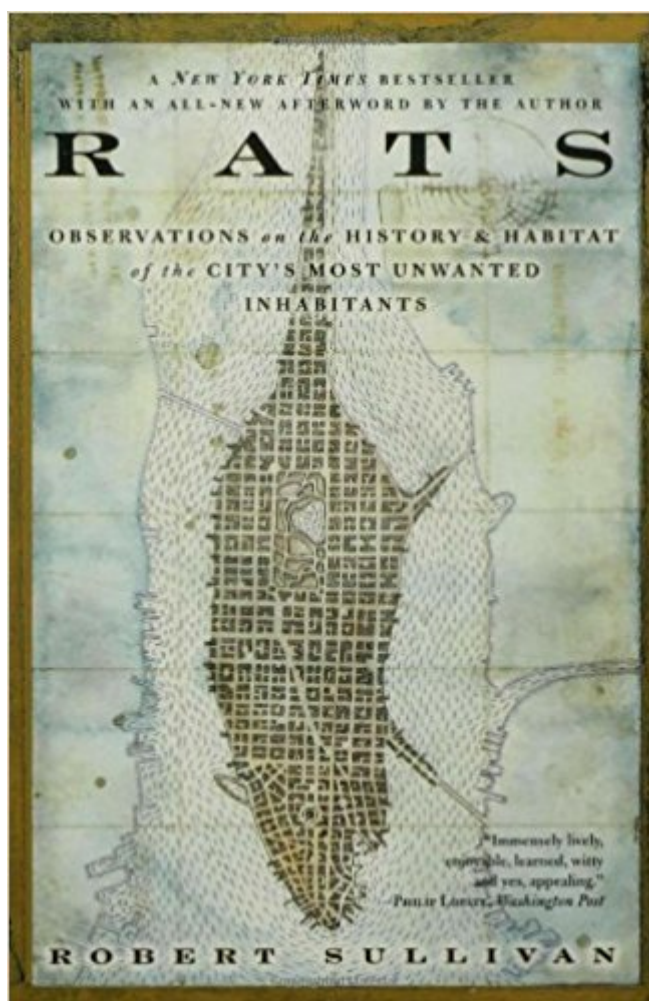


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Rats: Observations On The History & Habitat Of The City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants



Synopsis

—A New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age — A New York Public Library Book to Remember from 2004 — A PSLA Young Adult Top 40 (or so) non-fiction title 2004 Love them or loathe them, rats are here to stay—they are city dwellers as much as (or more than) we are, surviving on the effluvia of our society. In *Rats*, the critically acclaimed bestseller, Robert Sullivan spends a year investigating a rat-infested alley just a few blocks away from Wall Street. Sullivan gets to know not just the beast but its friends and foes: the exterminators, the sanitation workers, the agitators and activists who have played their part in the centuries-old war between human city dweller and wild city rat. Sullivan looks deep into the largely unrecorded history of the city and its masses—its herds-of-rats-like mob. Funny, wise, sometimes disgusting but always compulsively readable, *Rats* earns its unlikely place alongside the great classics of nature writing. Robert Sullivan is the author of *The Meadowlands* and *A Whale Hunt*, both New York Times Notable Books of the Year. He is a contributing editor to *Vogue* and a longtime contributor to the *New Yorker*. He lives in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. With an all-new Afterword by the author A New York Times bestseller A Book Sense selection in hardcover A Book Sense bestseller A San Francisco Chronicle bestseller A NEBA, NCIBA, and PNBA bestseller "Engaging...a lively, informative compendium of facts, theories, and musings."-Michiko Kakutani, New York Times "Immensely lively, enjoyable, learned, witty and yes, appealing."-Philip Lopate, Washington Post "Sullivan's book is a rollicking, richly drawn history...[he] offers up a parade of eccentric characters who deserve to be in the movies."-Boston Globe "Fascinating."-Vanity Fair "Sullivan persuasively associates the 'truth' he learns about rats with a deeper understanding

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In his third book, Robert Sullivan leaves the wilds of the (Meadowlands and the rough whaling waters of the Pacific Northwest to take up rat-watching in the alleys of New York City. Sullivan learned to appreciate the rodents during nocturnal stakeouts; a night-vision scope helped him observe rats without scaring them. As in his previous books, Sullivan uses pointillist details rather than broad portraiture to paint his subject, and the details in *Rats* are devilish. There are plenty of facts in the book to make your skin crawl, such as a description of the greasy skids rats leave on the paths they frequent, and a list of garbage items they prefer to eat. But Sullivan's style is often less that of a nature writer than a historian. In personable, essayish chapters, New York's history is revealed to be particularly ratty, with tall tales about the rodents' disgusting accomplishments going back to the city's founding. Although many people have never seen a rat outside a pet store, Sullivan reminds us that they are our constant neighbors, staring out from dim corners and messy crevices with beady eyes and twitching whiskers. --Adam Fisher --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this excellent narrative, Sullivan uses the brown rat as the vehicle for a labyrinthine history of the Big Apple. After pointing out a host of facts about rats that are sure to make you start itching ("if you are in New York... you are within close proximity to one or more rats having sex"), Sullivan quickly focuses in on the rat's seemingly inexhaustible number of connections to mankind. Observing a group of rats in a New York City alley, just blocks from a pre-September 11 World Trade Center, leads Sullivan into a timeless world that has more twists than Manhattan's rat-friendly underbelly. Conversations and field studies with "pest control technicians" spirit him back to 1960s Harlem, when rat infestations played a part in the Civil Rights movement and the creation of tenants' organizations. Researching the names of the streets and landmarks near the rats' homes, Sullivan is led even deeper into the city's history till he is back to the 19th century, when the real gangs of New York were the packs of rats that overran the city's bustling docks. Like any true New Yorker, Sullivan is able to convey simultaneously the feelings of disgust and awe that most city dwellers have for the scurrying masses that live among them. These feelings, coupled with his ability to literally and figuratively insert himself into the company of his hairy neighbors, help to personalize the myriad of topics--urban renewal, labor strikes, congressional bills, disease control, September 11-that rats have nosed their way into over the years. This book is a must pickup for

every city dweller, even if you'll feel like you need to wash your hands when you put it down.

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This was an unexpectedly delightful read. When I picked up the book I had been expecting a micro-history that was tightly focused on rats with a clinical detachment. What I found instead was a personal narrative that spiraled out from the authors contemplations while observing a colony of rats in a particular alley. The story folds in personalities related to rats in some manner, exterminators and the homeless, both contemporary and historical (by far I love his friends the poet and artist who accompany him on some of his ratting forays). In and around this, the story builds a painting of New York that is impressionist in nature: broad strokes that accentuate the individual bristle. A quick and pleasant read, contrary to how rats make me feel.

When I started losing sense of where the book was headed, I started losing interest...about 70% way in. It'll probably be most interesting to New Yorkers who regularly pass through the areas referenced and have an interest in the unseen, quotidian things that surround them.

Interesting read. It is much more about history than it is about rats. In reality, there is very little to do with rats..than the relationships and fun stories that center around the city of New York. Either way, a decent read.

What this book DOES NOT cover (or at best, barely touches on):- Black Rats (*rattus rattus*)- Any other species of rats besides the Brown Rat (*rattus norvegicus*)- Fancy Rats (domesticated pet rats)- Any rat whose habitat is not a major city (esp. New York)- Rat's social behavior (esp. while they are in their burrows).- Social hierarchies and fighting/play fighting between rats (what I mistakenly assumed to be the topic of his chapter titled "Fights")- Natural predators (besides humans)- Rat biology- Countless other reasonable expectations from a book called "Rats"Ok, that being said, I really did like this book--I enjoyed reading it--so I hate to give it such a low rating. Sullivan is a great writer who kept me turning pages long after I realized that his book didn't live up to its title or description. I read the whole thing, mostly for entertainment and less for my interest in learning about rats. I did actually learn some useful things about rats from this book that I haven't found in my research from sources. The problem is that the useful info is greatly diluted and spread across 250 pages. I think he could have condensed it into about 25, 50 max. The most astonishing

part yet is that during the author's entire year of rat research, he apparently only managed to even get close to the rats on one single occasion. The rest of the time, he was only watching an alley with night vision binoculars from a nearby building. Occasionally he spotted one or two digging through trash. That is literally the extent of his interaction with rats and it contributed zero to the actually useful information that he provided in the book. The useful information came from his research in the library, so seriously, if you have the book, just read the first few chapters (which are the most informative). Another interesting chapter--despite my misunderstanding from its title--is the one called "Fights," which is all about the underground Rat Fighting (or "Rat Baiting") which was a popular blood sport in America and England in the 1800s. After that, I would only recommend skimming and scanning the rest of the book for any sections that you might find helpful or useful. Or just spend a day or two reading about rats online. There's plenty of good sources out there...

I found out about this book by chance when doing an internet search. (A commenter on a newspaper website claimed that there are 32 million rats in New York City, and that seemed awfully high to me; when I tried to research how many there really are, I found this book.) Of course my first reaction was, "A whole book just about the rats of New York?" but the subject was so offbeat that I couldn't resist. Neither should you, because this is a really good book. It contains a lot of fascinating history and some scientific information, but the best part is the local color. The author spent a whole year hanging out in an alley in the Wall Street area and observing the rats there, and he interviewed a number of local exterminators who told him some truly memorable stories about their experiences. The last chapter, which deals with the early Revolutionary War period of New York history, is a little draggy, but otherwise this is a fascinating and highly entertaining read.

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