Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH
By Robert C. O'Brien
Illustrated by Zena Bernstein

Teaching Unit

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Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH is a Newbery winning book written by Robert C. O'Brien in 1971. It's a good book for teaching because it includes a lot of vocabulary words to challenge the student, but remains easy to understand. It includes great characters as well as complex ideas that will challenge the students. Some of the subjects discussed in the book are bravery, animal testing, death/loss of a loved one, the importance of family, new friendships, and superiority. It has an open ending which will allow for student discussion at the end of the story and many opportunities throughout the story for students to make predictions about what will happen next or what the best course of action for a character will be.

Included in this teaching unit are worksheets for each two chapter increment of the book. Each worksheet includes vocabulary words from those two chapters, reading comprehension questions, prediction questions, and an activity or journal entry. Answers for the comprehension questions are found at the end of the unit along with additional discussion questions (or journal entries) and activities that may be used to wrap up the unit.

The “theory” of evolution is discussed in the story, but it will give an opportunity to talk about evolution in your classroom and why it is wrong, and there are questions that address the subject. Some of the characters of the story have a strange sense of morality, especially the rats who seem to be kind on first reading the story, but on closer observation are not particularly helpful to others because they believe themselves to be superior to others. Despite their superiority complex, the rats frequently need help from others. The morality of animal testing is another example of a topic in the story that is open for discussion. I personally don't believe that animal testing is wrong in most cases, but it can get to a point where it is simply cruelty. Because those topics of the story are controversial and debatable, the book should make for good class discussions.
Pages 1-19
Vocabulary (with page numbers):
rancid (4)-
fare (5)-
sward (5)-
furrowed (5)-
protruded (6)-
lath (9)-
peered (10)-
complexion (10)-
hypochondriac (10)-
delirious (11)-
vigorous (15)-
perspiration (18)-
pneumonia (18)-

Reading comprehension:
1. Where is Mr. Frisby?
2. What did Mrs. Frisby find in the stump?
3. Who is the oldest of Mrs. Frisby's children?
4. Who is Mr. Ages?
5. What's wrong with Timothy?
6. How many packages of medicine does Mr. Ages give to Mrs. Frisby?
7. How long will it be before Timothy is well again?

Predict:
What do you think will happen to Timothy?

Activity:
Start drawing a map of Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm. Add new locations to it as they are described throughout our reading of the book.
Vocabulary (with page numbers):
apt (21)-
lashed (21)-
abreast (22)-
capacity (24)-
dubiously (24)-
authoritative (24)-
surge (25)-
scarcely (25)-
eaves (29)-
shrew (30)-
illogical (32)-

Reading comprehension:
1. What is the “unpleasant choice” that Mrs. Frisby faces?
2. Who is Dragon?
3. What is Jeremy doing when Mrs. Frisby helps him?
4. What does Mrs. Frisby think of Jeremy?
5. Why does Mrs. Frisby help Jeremy?
6. What is Moving Day?
7. Who is the Frisbys' neighbor?
8. Explain the saying from page 32: “All doors are hard to unlock until you have the key.”
9. Why is Mr. Fitzgibbon starting his tractor “a sound that filled [Mrs. Frisby] with alarm?”

Predict:
What sort of favor with Mrs. Frisby ask Jeremy for?

Journal entry:
Pretend you are Jeremy the crow. Write a story about the events leading up to getting tangled in the string.
Pages 33-44
Vocabulary:
idling (34)-
linchpin (34)-
remounted (34)-
shear (35)-
respite (35)-
vantage (36)-
laboriously (37)-
plummeted (40)-
deliberately (43)-

Reading comprehension:
1. Why doesn't Mr. Fitzgibbon plow right away?
2. When does Mr. Fitzgibbon plan to plow?
3. What is Dragon doing when Mrs. Frisby sees him?
4. What were the rats hauling into the rosebush?
5. Why does Jeremy come plummeting from the sky?
6. Why does Jeremy collect shiny things?
7. How does Jeremy suggest he can help Mrs. Frisby?

Predict:
Why didn't Dragon chase Mrs. Frisby?

Journal entry:
Imagine you are the wise old owl and Mrs. Frisby tells you all about Timothy. What would you tell her to do?
Pages 45-60
Vocabulary:
expedition (45)-
ventured (48)-
descent (48)-
primeval (49)-
sonorous (50)-
dietary (50)-
talons (51)-
feasible (54)-
agitated (55)-
derference (55)-
conceivably (56)-
sentry (57)-

Reading comprehension:
1. Why didn't Mrs. Frisby tell her children the entire problem?
2. What does Jeremy tell Mrs. Frisby to assure her it's safe to go into the owl's house?
3. What caused an extraordinary change to come over the owl?
4. Which rat is Mrs. Frisby supposed to ask for?
5. What does Jeremy think of the rats?

Predict:
Why do you think the owl would be an admirer of Jonathan Frisby?

Journal Entry:
What do you think of rats?
Pages 61-74
Vocabulary:
eavesdrop (61)-
reassuring (64)-
domain (64)-
yielded (65)-
splints (70)-
cordial (71)-
adjourner (74)-

Reading comprehension:
1. How is Timothy doing?
2. Why does Mrs. Frisby lie to Timothy about how soon Moving Day will be?
3. How do the roles between Timothy and Mrs. Frisby switch?
4. What is it like on the other side of the entrance of the rosebush?
5. What friend does Mrs. Frisby meet in the rosebush?
6. What does Mrs. Frisby have to promise in order to go into the rosebush?
7. Why is Justin friendly to Mrs. Frisby?

Predict:
What kind of meeting was Justin at?
What happened to Mr. Ages' leg?

Activity:
Based on the descriptions in the book, draw a picture of either Brutus, Justin, or Mr. Ages.
Pages 75-88

Vocabulary:
scuffle (75)-
recessed (76)-
corridor (77)-
freight (78)-
radiated (79)-
hostile (79)-
dredged (81)-
laboriously (81)-
explicit (84)-
incomprehensible (85)-
irrelevantly (87)-

Reading comprehension:
1. How long have the rats had electricity in their home?
2. Where did the rats get their light bulbs?
3. Who is the rat with an eye patch?
4. Who taught Mrs. Frisby to read?
5. What is Nimh?
6. What does Isabella think of Justin?
7. Who is Jenner?

Predict:
What is “the Plan?”

Journal Entry:
Write a poem about one of the characters of the story
Reading comprehension:
1. What did the owl mean when he said that the house should be moved to the “lee of the stone?”
2. Why couldn't the rats just go out and move the house without any other preparations?
3. What does Mrs. Frisby volunteer to do (since Mr. Ages can't do it)?
4. How did Jonathan die?
5. Why didn't the rats tell Mrs. Firsby how Jonathan died before?
6. Who tells Mrs. Frisby his life story?
7. How was life in the market for the rats?
8. What was on the side of the trucks that came to the market?
9. What happened to Nicodemus at the end of the section?

Predict:
Why were the rats captured?

Journal Entry:
Have you ever been taken somewhere you didn't want to go? Have you ever been glad that you went somewhere even though you didn't want to go?
Pages 103-119
Vocabulary:
incinerator (103)-
inextricably (104)-
dazed (105)-
futile (107)-
partitions (107)-
eagerly (113)-
partition (115)-
hypodermic (117)-
steroids (118)-
wryly (119)-

Reading comprehension:
1. Why did Nicodemus originally think he and the other rats had been captured?
2. Who seemed to be in charge at Nimh?
3. Was were the scientists trying to find out?
4. What did they do to the rats at Nimh?
5. How often did the rats receive injections?
6. What sort of tests are given to the rats?
7. Why isn't Justin worried about what the researchers will do to him if he misbehaves?
8. Who is A-9?

Predict:
How does Nicodemus end up becoming leader of the rats?

Activity:
An acronym is an abbreviation formed by the first letters of the words it stands for. For instance, NASA is an acronym for National Aeronautics and Space Administration. NIMH is actually an acronym. If you had to make up what it stands for, what would you guess? After making up something that it might stand for, do some research to find out what NIMH stands for.
Pages 120-141
Vocabulary:
meekly (120)-
incurring (120)-
prime (121)-
dictated (122)-
inking (123)-
unerringly (126)-
ritual (127)-
preceding (131)-
comradeship (131)-
reluctantly (135)-
plaintive (135)-
consternation (135)-
futile (141)-

Reading comprehension:
1. What happened when the “A group” of rats were given a second kind of injection?
2. Which other group received the same injections as the A group rats? What kind of animals were they?
3. Name 3 rats in the A group.
4. How did Justin open his cage?
5. Where did Justin suggest that the rats might escape through?
6. Why did the rats look to Nicodemus as their leader?
7. What two items did the rats take to help with their escape?
8. How many mice wanted to go with the rats?
9. Why was Jenner worried about the escape?
10. What happened to six of the mice?
11. How did Jonathan help the rats?

Predict:
Who is the “white mouse?”

Journal Entry:
What do you think happened to the six mice that went missing? Why do you think that?
Pages 142-157
Vocabulary:
- puny (144)-
- discontent (144)-
- procession (145)-
- chandelier (146)-
- cursory (147)-
- engrossed (149)-
- skeptical (151)-
- bungle (152)-
- portal (153)-
- lathes (154)-

Reading comprehension:
1. Who is the “white mouse?”
2. Why were the rats discontent about their way of life?
3. How did the rats (and mice) know that there was no one living in the estate?
4. Where were the people that lived in the estate?
5. What was different that the caretaker should have noticed?
6. How many rats did Jenner take with him when he left?
7. Why wouldn't Mrs. Frisby tell her children that she had volunteered to put the powder in Dragon's food?
8. What was Mrs. Frisby worried about?
9. Where does the rats' back door go?
10. What is the Plan?

Predict:
Why would Justin say that the plow is the rats' “most important invention?”

Journal Entry:
The thing that the rats liked most about the Boniface Estate was the books. If you were to choose five books to give to someone who had never read a book before, which books would you choose and why?
Reading comprehension:
1. The idea of evolution is pushed in the chapter “The Toy Tinker.” What are some examples of evolutionary thought the O'Brien puts into the book?
2. Do you believe the writer that Nicodemus pointed out said that rats have a “biological similarity to man?”
3. Who spotted the Thorn Mountains National Park?
4. Name 3 reasons that the rats thought that Thorn Mountains National Park would be a good place for them to live.
5. Who or what is the Toy Tinker?
6. What was the “treasure” that the rats found?
7. What was the point of Nicodemus' story about Mrs. Jones?
8. Why did Nicodemus go to the owl?
9. How did Jenner justify the rats stealing to live?
10. What did Jenner and Nicodemus disagree about?
11. What is the Plan?

Predict:
What happened to Jenner?

Journal Entry:
Do you agree with Jenner that the rats taking food from Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm is the same as humans taking eggs from chickens and milk from cows? Is it stealing?
Pages 178-194
Vocabulary:
distressing (179)-
denounced (181)-
draught (181)-
colander (186)-
absently (188)-
incinerated (192)-
epidemic (192)-
cyanide (193)-

Reading comprehension:
1. Why didn't Jonathan tell his wife about Nimh?
2. Earlier in the story Mrs. Frisby mentioned that Jonathan had taught her and their children to read. Why was it so much easier for the children to learn to read?
3. What happened when Mrs. Frisby went to put the powder into Dragon's dish?
4. What did Billy want to do with Mrs. Frisby?
5. What happened at Hendersons hardware store?
6. Why do Fitzgibbons think that the squad from the Public Health Service wanted to examine the rats?
7. When and why are the scientists coming to the Fitzgibbons' farm?
8. Who do you think that the six or seven rats at Hendersons were?

Predict:
How will Mrs. Frisby warn the rats that the scientists are coming?

Journal Entry:
Have you ever caught an animal and wanted to keep it as a pet? If so, what kind of animal was it and what happened? If not, what kind of animal would you like to catch to keep as a pet and why?
Vocabulary:
deposited (195)-
linoleum (197)-
defective (199)-
defiant (201)-
shrewish (201)-
hulking (202)-
commenced (202)-
hillock (203)-
scaffolding (203)-
taut (204)-
athwart (204)-
poised (205)-
anxious (208)-
vacant (208)-
mechanized (211)-
cryptically (214)-

Reading comprehension:
1. Why does Justin ask, “What kind of bird can that be, with no wings?”
2. Why doesn't Justin just open the door of the cage? What does he do instead?
3. Why do the rats need Mrs. Frisby's help in moving her house?
4. Describe how the rats moved Mrs. Frisby's house.
5. How long does it take for Arthur and Brutus to dig a new entrance hole? How long had it taken Mrs. Frisby?
6. Why does Nicodemus want Mrs. Frisby at the meeting?
7. Who do the rats think that the other rats at Henderson's were?
8. How do the rats plan to escape without the exterminators pursuing them?
9. Why do the rats plan to bring garbage into their hole?
10. How many rats are going to remain behind in the hole until the exterminators come? Who were the first two to volunteer?
11. Why does Isabella want to stay behind?

Predict:
Do you think that the exterminators are from Nimh? Why or why not?

Journal Entry:
Come up with five adjectives to describe each of the following characters: Nicodemus, Justin, Jonathan, and Isabella.
Pages 216-233
Vocabulary:
scaly (216)-
dispatched (218)-
cleated (219)-
inexorable (219)-
donned (220)-
hectic (221)-
abruptly (222)-
elaborate (223)-
frenzy (227)-
intertwining (230)-
deliberation (231)-

Reading comprehension:
1. Why did one of the men wear a gas mask?
2. How many rats came out of the blackberry bramble at first?
3. How did the rats make it look like more came out of the bramble?
4. How many rats were killed by the gas?
5. Why does it take Brutus so long to get out of the hole?
6. Why didn't the rat that helped Brutus make it out of the hole alive?
7. Why does Mrs. Frisby tell her children all about the rats?
8. Why was Janice worried about the Frisbys?
9. How and why does Martin want to get Jeremy's attention?

Journal Entry:
Do you think that the “brave rat” that saved Brutus was Justin? Why or why not?
Additional discussion questions/journal entries:

1. Jonathan Frisby died while doing the rats a favor by putting the sleeping powder in Dragon's dish. The rats didn't tell Mrs. Frisby about her husband until she came for help. It was not difficult for them to move her house, and she did the most difficult part of the work by putting the powder in Dragon's food. She then saved their lives by telling them that the exterminators were coming. Do you think that the rats sufficiently repaid their debt to the Frisby family by moving their home? Do you think that the rats were selfish to not tell the Frisbys earlier what had happened to Jonathan? Do you think that the rats were kind? Why don't the rats help other animals on the farm? Do you think that the rats have a superiority complex?

2. Who was your favorite character in the book? Why?

3. What did the animals on the farm think of Dragon? What did the Fitzgibbons think of him? Come up with other examples of things that can be seen as good or bad based on who you are and what perspective you see them from.

4. Why do you think Robert C. O'Brien included the idea of evolution in the story? Was the inclusion necessary?

5. Was the shrew a good neighbor to the Frisbys?

6. What do you think happened to Jeremy after the events of the story? What do you think happened to Mr. Ages?

7. Do you think the Frisbys will ever meet the rats of NIMH again?

8. Write a story of what happens to one of the Frisby children after the book.

9. What do you think of the idea of experimenting on animals?

10. What did you like about Zena Bernstien's illustrations in the book? What didn't you like about them?

11. Who do you think was the bravest character in the book? Why?

12. If you were a rat, do you think you would have agreed more with Jenner's ideas or Nicodemus's ideas?

Additional activities:

1. Take the map of the locations in the book started in the first activity and add the rest of the locations throughout the book. Color it to make it look nice and hand it in.

2. Draw a picture of your favorite part of the book.

3. Make a poster for a movie version of Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH. (There is a movie based on the book called “The Secret of NIMH,” but it changes much of the story.)

4. Watch the movie “The Secret of NIMH” and come up with as many difference as you can between the book and the movie. Did you like the book or the movie version better? Why?

5. Pick one of the animals met in the book and research it. Were the characters in the book an accurate portrayal of that kind of animal?

6. Make a character map of a character of your choice from the story.
Solutions for reading comprehension questions:

Pages 1-19
1. Mr. Frisby died the summer before the story
2. Various kinds of food: corn, peanuts, hickory nuts, and mushrooms
3. Theresa
4. An old mouse friend of Mr. Frisby
5. He has pneumonia
6. Three
7. The medicine will take away his fever in three days, but he'll be weak and susceptible to getting pneumonia again for at least three weeks

Pages 20-32
1. She can take the safer, longer way home, but it will get dark before she gets there (and there are other dangers for mice in the dark) or she can take the straighter path where she might run into the cat (but will likely get home before dark).
2. The Fitzgibbons' cat
3. He's trying to fly away from a fence but is tangled in some silvery string.
4. She thinks he's foolish (birdbrained)
5. "We all help one another against the cat."
6. The day that the frost thaws so that all the animals that live in the garden have to move or get killed by Mr. Fitzgibbon's plow.
7. The shrew
8. A problem might seem impossible to solve, but as soon as you know how to solve it, it's simple.
9. Because she's afraid that her house is going to get plowed before her family is able to move and before Timothy is well enough to move.

Pages 33-44
1. He needs a new linchpin and the ground is too wet.
2. In five days
3. Lounging, dozing off to sleep
4. Electrical cable
5. He sees a piece of tin foil
6. Because his (girl)friend likes them
7. He can fly her to the owl

Pages 45-60
1. Because she didn't want them to worry
2. He wouldn't hurt you in his own house
3. The mention of her name
4. Nicodemus
5. Answers may vary. He knows that they can do things that other animals can't. He seems a bit suspicious of them.

Pages 61-74
1. He's no longer feverish, but still can't walk much
2. She doesn't want him to worry
3. Timothy ends up reassuring Mrs. Frisby when she is trying to reassure him.
4. It's a large clearing with sunlight filtering in. It's neatly lined with stones, much nicer than Mrs. Frisby expected.
5. Mr. Ages
6. Not to tell anyone anything she sees or hears
7. Because he knew Jonathan

Pages 75-88
1. 5 years
2. From Christmas trees
3. Nicodemus
4. Jonathan
5. The place that the rats came from
6. She wants to marry him when she's old enough
7. A rat that left the group

Pages 89-102

1. To move the house to the side of the stone that would be sheltered from the plow.
2. Because Dragon would be dangerous for them.
3. Put sleeping powder in Dragon's food.
4. Putting sleeping powder in Dragon's food.
5. They say it's because, “It wouldn't have done any good.”
6. Nicodemus
7. It was good. They had plenty to eat and enjoyed their life there with plenty of time to play.
8. NIMH
9. He was caught in a net.

Pages 103-119

1. Because they were stealing food from the market, and some people just dislike rats.
2. Dr. Schultz
3. They were trying to find out if the rats could be made to learn faster.
4. Gave them injections
5. At least twice a week.
6. They're placed in mazes and given “shape recognition” tests.
7. The scientists have spent so much time on the rats that Justin doesn't think that they'll do anything to hurt their experiments.
8. Justin

Pages 120-141

1. Their aging process seemed to stop completely.
2. The G group of mice
4. He read the printed strip that said, “To release door, pull knob forward and slide right.”
5. The air ducts
6. Because he and Justin set them free and he was obviously older than Justin.
7. A spool of thread and a screwdriver.
8. Eight
9. He didn't know where a group of civilized rats would fit in.
10. They were blown away and couldn't be found.
11. He and the white mouse crawled through a small opening then opened the screen so the rats could fit through.

Pages 142-157

1. Mr. Ages
2. Because they were stealing
3. Because the gates were locked and the dead weeds were not bent
4. On a honeymoon
5. That the counters were shiner than they should have been
6. Six
7. She didn't want to worry them, and she didn't want Martin to have a chance to volunteer to do the job in her place.
8. Bungling the job and messing up the rats' plan of moving her house.
9. To a blackberry bramble.
10. A way for the rats to live without stealing.

Pages 158-177

1. That prairie dogs were advanced rats, that humans had tails before they fell off, that animals evolve through struggle, that the earth is millions of years old, that humans were originally monkeys that walked on their hind legs.
2. Answers may vary. I don't think that rats bear any more biological similarity to man than other mammals.
3. Jenner
4. No cars drive through it, no planes fly over it, and there would be caves.
5. An old toy mender that had died in the woods after his truck got stuck.
6. The Toy Tinker's tools
7. Just as the vacuum cleaner had made Mrs. Jones' life too easy, the rats' lives had become too easy because of
the tools they found and the food they stole.

8. The chipmunks told him to when he asked them about a better place for the rats to live.

9. If they were smarter than those they stole from, they should continue to do it.

10. Jenner thought that the rats should stay where they already had a nice home, Nicodemus thought they should move somewhere that they could be independent.

11. The rats' plan to move to Thorn Valley and have an independent civilization.

Pages 178-194

1. Because he knew that she would grow old and die while he stayed young and didn't want to burden her with the thought of it.

2. The learning capacity from the injections at Nimh was passed down to them, just as it was with the rats.

3. One of the Fitzgibbon sons caught her in a colander after she put the powder in.

4. Keep her for a pet.

5. Six or seven rats were electrocuted while trying to move a motor

6. They think it's because they wanted to check for rabies

7. Saturday morning (the day after tomorrow) to exterminate the rats

8. Answers may vary, but the obvious answer is Jenner and the others that left

Pages 195-215

1. Because Mrs. Frisby was put in a bird cage.

2. Because the Fitzgibbons would know that Mrs. Frisby couldn't have opened the cage and would get suspicious. Instead he makes it look like the cage was defective.

3. Because the shrew isn't letting them move it.

4. They lift the block out using pulleys, then place the block on rollers and roll it to the new hole that they dug.

5. Less than 5 minutes; a whole day

6. Because he wants her to tell them more precisely what Mr. Fitzgibbon had said

7. Jenner and the others

8. They plan to make themselves look like ordinary, uncivilized rats by destroying their civilization.

9. To make them look like ordinary, uncivilized rats.

10. Ten; Justin and Brutus.

11. Because Justin is staying.

Pages 216-233

1. Because they pumped cyanide (poison gas) into the hole

2. Seven

3. They made a lot of noise coming out, then quietly regrouped near the bush and ran around in smaller groups to fool the exterminators.

4. Two

5. He tripped over a rat and breathed some of the gas then needed help to get out.

6. He went back to help the rat that had fallen.

7. Because they're the children of Jonathan Frisby who was a friend and she thinks they deserve to know.

8. Because they didn't come to the summer home until after the field was plowed and she knew that they lived in the field.

9. By putting something shiny out in the sun because he knows Jeremy will try to pick it up and because he wants to go visit the rats in their new home.