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Richard Seiter

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## MRS. FRISBY AND THE RATS GO TO HOLLYWOOD

**Richard Seiter**

As teachers of language and literature within the classroom, we are acutely aware of the inroads made by non-print media in our culture. We witness the popularity of video cassette rentals and the relative indifference to checking out books from the library. How can we motivate children toward reading, an activity which requires the total engagement of the mind, as opposed to the passive viewing of a narrative on the screen in the local movie theater or the video monitor in the living room? One way is to read aloud in the upper elementary classroom a Newbery Medal book such as Robert O'Brien's *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, followed by the viewing of the feature length animated interpretation of this book, *The Secret of NIMH* (1983), co-written and produced by former Disney animator Don Bluth. The heart of O'Brien's science fiction/animal fantasy extols the importance of reading and problem solving within a lively storyline, while the movie demonstrates what Hollywood typically adds to a movie to make it more appealing to the movie-going public. Encouraging children to assess non-print materials will hopefully produce more critically astute adult viewers, who can derive pleasure from the screen while engaging their minds.

George Bluestone points out in his preface to *Novels Into Films* that literature and film are "marked by such essentially different traits that they belong to separate artistic genera .... the novel is a linguistic medium, the film is essentially visual" (viii). The filmmaker, he notes later, "becomes not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right" (62). In the *NIMH* adaptation, part of what Bluth places on the screen is recognizable from O'Brien's original book, but what is added through changes in characterization and in scenes emerging from these changes produces a decidedly different atmosphere in the storyline, one filled with

villainy, violence, and dazzling magic. Questions about whether these addenda are compatible with the original narrative threads illuminate the distinctions between print and non-print media. Obviously, extensive classroom discussion of such questions is unlikely at the elementary level; however, casual discussion of the differences between the two versions, complemented by some written or oral sharing among class members about which version they liked best, can deepen students' experience of the *NIMH* stories.

Both book and movie focus in part on the quest of a courageous, widowed mother mouse (Mrs. Frisby in the book, Mrs. Brisby in the movie) to save the life of her youngest son, Tim, with help from a group of rats who are struggling with their new identity. These rats have escaped from NIMH, the National Institute of Mental Health, where they have been genetically altered by injections which have increased their intelligence and learning capacity to a level nearly equal to that of humans. The rats have taken residence in a rosebush on the Fitzgibbon farm, diverting some of the farmer's water and electricity (with borrowed outdoor strands of Christmas lights). Near the rosebush is the garden where Mrs. Frisby and her children make their winter home in a partially submerged cinder block. Mrs. Frisby needs to move her home because Tim's lungs are weakened from pneumonia and cannot be exposed to the raw, March air.

Mrs. Frisby eventually accomplishes this task by giving and receiving help from other characters in the animal community. She saves Jeremy the crow from the clutches of Dragon, the prowling farmyard cat; in turn, Jeremy flies Mrs. Frisby to the Great Owl's tree, deep in the forest, to ask advice about moving her cinder block home. The Owl tells her that the rats are the only ones who can help, but he doubts whether they will until he discovers her name is Mrs. Jonathon Frisby. The importance of her name and the Owl's directive to the rats to move the cinder block home to "the lee of the stone" remain baffling to Mrs. Frisby and the reader until she meets the rats in the rosebush. Other unusual occurrences bewilder Mrs. Frisby, such as Dragon's indifference to her when she literally runs into the cat's path. Anticipating the answers and explanations to these questions and unusual occurrences creates a suspense and interest in the young readers that is as much intellectual as it is visceral or emotional.

When Mrs. Frisby is eventually introduced to Nicodemus, one of the respected leaders of the rats, she is informed that her husband had helped

the rats escape through the ventilation system at NIMH, and had continued to help them by drugging the cat whenever they wanted to work in the farmyard, until his death at the jaws and claws of Dragon. Although these revelations are startling for her, she and the reader are even more amazed by the intelligence and ingenuity of the rats. One of the most exciting scenes recalled by Nicodemus, through a flashback narrating the history of the rats, occurs when the rats break the code and learn to read, thereby enabling themselves not only to read the instructions on opening their cage doors but virtually assuring their escape from NIMH. This scene demonstrates how the rats use cause/effect reasoning to conceal their intelligence from the scientist and laboratory assistants. In the same way, they conceal their presence at the vacated Boniface estate and spend the winter devouring books from the library and clam chowder from the kitchen, carefully disposing of the cans to avoid the notice of the caretaker in his weekly visits. Although these disclosures and discoveries are not particularly dramatic in action, they do make for fascinating reading and discussion.

The major issue the rats struggle with in O'Brien's work is their newly evolved state as an intelligent life form.

We don't know where to go because we don't know what we are. Do you want to go back to living in a sewer pipe and eating other people's garbage? Because that's what rats do. But the fact is, we aren't rats anymore. (137)

Nicodemus grows more restive because the colony continues to rely on stealing even though they are intelligent. Stealing produces boredom and restlessness: "We did not have enough to do, because a thief's life is always based on someone else's work" (144).

Nicodemus wants the rats "to live without stealing," so he devises "the Plan" which would require the rats to sever all ties to the comfortable lifestyle in the rosebush and migrate to a remote area called Thorn Valley, where, using their intelligence, they would grow their own food and live as an independent civilization. The successful moving of Mrs. Frisby's cinder block home and the harrowing and heroic escape of the rats to Thorn Valley dominate the closing chapters of the book. Again the rats know they must conceal their intelligence from humans, so all evidence of their use of

electricity, including motors used for ventilation in the rosebush, is removed to a remote cave and replaced with predictable rat fare—garbage.

The exciting story of the rats' narrow escape just ahead of the invading exterminators from NIMH is an example of how the courage, ingenuity, and perseverance of the rats and Mrs. Frisby in solving their problems dominate the book. The film adaptation, on the other hand, gives less play to character and problem-solving, opting instead to mingle magic, villainy, and more violence in certain characters and additional scenes. For example, an aura of magic surrounds Nicodemus early in the film. He is more than an intelligent leader; he is a wizard replete with a staff that comes to his bidding, a red stone amulet or brooch possessing special powers, and a spinning orb resembling a video monitor which enables him (and the viewer) to see concurrent scenes of action. In the book the reader makes many discoveries along with Mrs. Frisby as she learns the answers to the questions concerning her husband and the rats. In the film Nicodemus becomes the informant for the whole narrative, having the ability to reveal important narrative threads or sidelights to a viewer before they are revealed to Mrs. Brisby. The red stone brooch with its inscription, "Courage of the heart is rare, the stone has power when it is there" foreshadows its magical importance and the audience senses Mrs. Brisby will be its destined recipient. When this occurs, it triggers violence in Jenner, one of the rats who opposed Nicodemus's leadership and the Plan itself.

Jenner is similar to his counterpart in the original fantasy in that he does not want the rats to move from the creature comforts and conveniences in the rosebush. In the original storyline he disagrees with Nicodemus and the consensus of the majority concerning the plan to move to Thorn Valley and chooses to leave with a small group of followers since the rosebush will be destroyed when the others leave. In the movie Jenner is portrayed as a treacherous villain; he plots to kill Nicodemus, eventually succeeding when the rats attempt to move Mrs. Brisby's cinder block home. With Nicodemus dead, Jenner attempts to become the leader and decree that the others remain in the rosebush. Hypocrisy exudes from this villain, and his lust for power overwhelms him when he sees Mrs. Brisby wearing the brooch. He attempts to kill her and anyone else in his way in a dramatically animated sword and dagger duel which ends when one of his former conspirators dispatches him with a dagger in the back—a satisfying end for the cinematic, snagged-toothed villain. This swashbuckling villainy is very captivating; it

brings intense moments of violence and bloodshed to the screen before the major, magical climax created especially for the movie. At the same time, and on a different plane, the differences in Jenner's character in the two versions provide focus for some interesting discussion among young viewers and readers.

The new scene required the screenwriters to create even more emotional intensity than Jenner's treachery. To accomplish this they used the strategy of placing all the Brisby children in mortal danger. They are assumed to be safe since they are in their cinder block home; however, heavy rains saturate and undermine the ground so the block starts to sink into the mud. The frantic and futile attempts of the rats trying to attach ropes to the sinking block cause Mrs. Brisby despair until the power of the brooch she is wearing intercedes and lifts the block from its grave with spectacular, glowing, fireworks-like animation. This miracle provides a grandly animated conclusion for the film.

The most delightful character innovation in the film comes with giving the voice of Dom DeLuise to Jeremy the Crow. This character's "bird brain" intelligence is given greater exposure to provide comic, slapstick animation. His limited attention span and memory are complemented by his physical and emotional clumsiness as he searches for a girlfriend or mate. The scenes where Jeremy wants to be helpful, but often gets in the way, as in the moving of the cinder block home, force Mrs. Brisby to tactfully make Jeremy think he is truly helping her, when in reality she is removing his presence for everyone's safety. The scene where the distrustful and cynical Auntie Shrew binds Jeremy with rope and the Brisby children conclude he is a "turkey" and "loonie" is especially delightful. Jeremy effectively provides the comic relief following the violent and villainous additions in the screen production.

Both book and film succeed in their respective media. The movie accentuates cloak and dagger villainy and magic by projecting intense images saturated with bloodshed and miracles. If the audience is unfamiliar with the book, there is a sense of satisfaction knowing miracles come for those who deserve them; however, if the audience is familiar with the book, they know that the intelligence and resourcefulness within the characters themselves can overcome obstacles and resolve issues which shape their destiny without their having to resort to violence or depend on magic. O'Brien stated in his Newbery acceptance address that he was particularly intrigued with developing a new life form that was challenged to think "to engage the

mind in solving problems when something doesn't work, or when something new comes up ... I believe it [the mind] is improved and strengthened by being used." Both O'Brien's book and the film made from it, whether dealt with independently or presented together, achieve his goal by opening our young students' minds to an exciting and unexpected world that will—with some help from us—engage their minds as strongly as their hearts.

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**Richard Seiter teaches Children's Literature in the English Department at Central Michigan University.**