

# YOUR FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

THEY SLEEP RIGHT UNDER YOU. ENJOY THE SAME RESTAURANTS. USE THE SAME STREETS. BUT THAT'S OKAY, BECAUSE YOU LIVE IN THEIR CITY. IN HIS LATEST BOOK, WRITER ROBERT SULLIVAN EXAMINES THE DARKER, DIRTIER, TRASH-STREWN HISTORY OF RATS IN AMERICA—ONE TAIL AT A TIME

There are 8 million people in New York City, and each one of them has a rat story to tell. That's because there is another population, uncoupled by the census, flourishing in the same buildings and zip codes, and enjoying the same restaurants, public parks, and subway lines that these 8 million New Yorkers use on a daily basis. This population does not have voting rights, but it owns the other side of every wall, water pipe, and garbage Dumpster in town. Rats are more New York than the Yankees, more terrifying than street gangs, and perhaps more like us than any other animal with which we've shared our apartments. For a New Yorker, confronting a rat for the first time is baptism by fire. And in a period that has seen the city become increasingly polished and gentrified, the local wild life, the *rattus norvegicus*, is the unbudging reminder that not all ghosts vanish just because the cemetery gravestones are torn down.

Writer Robert Sullivan has taken all that we knew about rodents, mixed it with all that we didn't, and published a phenomenal tome on the secret life of urban rats. He takes us back to their early immigrant days of crossing over on ships, traces their activities in seaport dives, in the Harlem tenements, and in Lower East Side parking lots and Park Avenue sidewalks. In so doing, he maps a second history of America buried just underneath the far-comelier founding-fathers surface, revealing as much about human power-struggles over turf and social class as he does about rat diet, after-dark roaming, and advances in pest control. Of course, we also get fascinating gross-out revelations, like the fact that adult rats have sex up to twenty times a day and one couple can produce up to fifteen thousand descendents in one year. Or that certain rats have become immune to widely used poisons and can eat through metal. Or that it isn't surprising to find a rat beating a cat in a fight, or rats hanging out in trees. But Sullivan's brilliant, every-direction reporting teaches us that while rats often play Hyde to our Jeckyll, they're frighteningly close, absolutely invincible, and love New York so much they are literally eating it whole. **Christopher Bollen**

**CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN** How did you first get interested in rats? All of your books involve a certain sense of condemned nature. But wild city rats?

**ROBERT SULLIVAN** I look for places that people generally don't care about. If nobody wants to be there, if everybody hates it, then I'm very interested. How could it be so bad? The first book I did was about polluted swamps in New Jersey. The second book was about a tribe of Native Americans that no one was really happy with because they were hunting a whale. I wanted to know, hey, why exactly are you beating up on Native Americans again? For rats, I remember there was an old dump out on a Native American reservation. Also in the Meadowlands, lots of rats. Turns out, if abused nature were a theme park, like Disneyland, then rats are the Mickey Mouse of it. Rats are the mascot of that place. Then it becomes a question: Why doesn't anyone like rats? What did they ever do?

**CB** Besides spread plague.

**RS** There are a lot of answers to that. But I was interested in what makes one thing less "nature" than the other, what makes one thing less beautiful than the other. Why is one thing abhorred?

**CB** Rats and cockroaches are found in the same places. But whereas cockroaches are these armor-plated, evil-machine bugs, rats really do have all the physical qualities that you'd think would make us like them—furry bodies, big, glassy eyes. I always found it interesting that people liked squirrels so much but hated rats.

**RS** I know! It's really just a tail difference. That's all it is.

**CB** Maybe we hate animals that invade our space. Maybe we are still instinctual and hate animals that threaten our own food supply.

**RS** It turns out that rats are kind of like us. When they move to a new place, they completely take over. They start eating up everything. They defile and destroy the land. They are immigrants who become sole owners. They destroy the environment to such an extent that they start to die and have to move out and go to a new place. There are similar themes in human history.

**CB** You put your finger on so many rat-human correlations. Like the fact that they turn cannibalistic when they've got nothing left to eat. Or that they can actually kill themselves by overexercising.

**RS** I wanted people to think about that connection. At the end of my book I was literally looking down into this deep rat hole by the Seaport, and I accidentally saw the beginning of America down there, the America that no one thinks about. Everyone sees George Washington—an athletic, strongly built, handsome man who never lied. He's the guy for the billboard. But there's the other America—mobs and immigrants and the people that the upper classes called vermin. As I explain in the book, these are the people who rallied and kept the British from taking New York. We could argue that because the British didn't take New York, they didn't keep America.

**CB** Rats function as a rather intrepid metaphor, and in a way, your book traces the historical underbelly of America through

them. Did you realize when you started literally following rats down an alley that you'd end up pulling this historical thread? **RS** No. I had no idea. I chose to focus on the Seaport because there are rats down there. It's the beginning of Broadway, which was probably first an animal trail and then an Indian trail. The alley that I picked for my research turned out to be the site of the first battle of the Revolutionary War, the battle that nobody cares about because it wasn't patriots but a bunch of drunken sailors who fought. It was the first violent act of the revolution. So in looking down into this rat hole, I discovered in my research that it used to be a hill. You can't have a hole without a hill. You can't have George Washington without the other side. The sublime is the beauty of the horrible. What is beautiful about the disgusting? Ancient Chinese paintings of dragons are horrific, terrifying, but they are sublimely executed.

**CB** It's the same thing with rat stories. Why do we tell stories of rats we've encountered? We love the horrific.

**RS** Why do we think so much about rats? They are our neighbors. They are like the people in the next apartment who we don't really like and can't stop thinking about. Oh my god, yesterday the Smiths came down and ate all our food and crawled in the gutter. I can't believe the Smiths!

**CB** In the book, you take to task the oft-quoted figure that there is one rat for every one person living in New York City. According to you, that's wildly exaggerated. I did an Internet search and found that in the past few years, certain news agencies have gone so far as to report anywhere from 44 million to 96 million rats living in the city.

**RS** We want to believe there are that many, but I found the famous guru of rat studies, Dave Davis, who debunked that number. He's like the Calvin Klein of rat studies. He found one rat for every thirty-six persons, or 250,000. That's not the population of New York. That's the population of Akron, Ohio. That's less than expected, but at the same time, the city of Akron, Ohio, all in rats? You can destroy the myth, but that's still a hell of a lot of rats.

**CB** Politically, rats have been very active in New York. You could go as far as to say that they are one of the most manipulated minority groups that live here. The book traces their history in the tenant protests in Harlem and the infamous garbage workers' strike in the '60s all the way to Giuliani appointing a rat czar.

**RS** We are in the midst of a war on rats right now. Do you ever watch Letterman? He has a joke every night about rats. Last night was, "A guy bought a Christmas tree in Times Square. He took it home, strung it up with lights, plugged it in, and said, "Oh my god, I just electrocuted a rat." Two nights ago: "Mayor Bloomberg declared that the war on rats would continue until the rats ruled themselves." Self-ruled rats, get it, like Iraq. The point is that the rat is an iconic element of New York. And it's a perfect metaphor to use to see what immigration is, what humans are, what fear is.

**CB** New York has changed so much in the past decade. Crime has gone down, neighborhoods have been cleaned up. You don't have that sense of danger anymore. There is no longer a stigma about the subways or Central Park at night, like there was in the '80s. In a way, rats are the last collective emblem of fear left, the only residue of that grimy street-world that was New York. That's the excitement of those rat tales.

**RS** Every time I mention the word *rat*, someone has a story to tell.

**CB** What's the best one you've ever heard?

**RS** I think it's the one I reported in the book about the guy who tries to kill the rat he finds in his bathtub. I like that one because it is filled with haphazard elements. You relate to the guy who has absolutely no idea what to do to get rid of it. He tries Lemon Pledge, peanut butter, drowning it with water—nope, rats swim—Comet. There is this guy named Bobby Corrigan who is the number one rat man living. When he talks to new exterminators, he makes a point of telling them how he understands when a pest control guy freaks out on the job and starts beating a rat with a spray container. That's what he did the first time. Oh god, a rat is coming up the toilet!

**CB** Okay, I didn't know rats could come up through a toilet.

**RS** Oh yeah. If you did the archetypes of rat stories, the rat-up-the-toilet story is a favorite. It's so rich. They are really coming at a moment of vulnerability.

**CB** It's a bit like the definition of the uncanny. You are most afraid of what's in your own house. The worst fear isn't what's out there, it's what is inside.

**RS** Yes. And when you have that fear of something entering your own house, you can never have happiness.

**CB** You make the point that rats and humans are such mirror species that we will never be separated. We think that with enough poison we can one day get rid of rats, but you say we never will. In fact, there's one frightening part of the book where you explain that the strongest, healthiest rats are so deep down in the underworld of the city that they've never seen daylight or a human being before.

**RS** Those rats are doing fine. People talk about the size of rats all the time. "I saw one as big as a cat." But evolutionarily speaking, you wouldn't want to get much bigger as a rat. If you were a rat the size of a dog, you couldn't get into the holes, run away like you need to, and you'd be easy to kill. If I show you a picture of a rat, or you see one in a cage, you think, oh, yeah, that's a normal rat. It's when you see them by surprise, when they run by you unexpectedly, that you say, whoa, that was a huge rat.

*Rats* by Robert Sullivan is out in April from Bloomsbury  
For information: [www.bloomsbury.com/usa](http://www.bloomsbury.com/usa)

**Photography Billy Jim**

Photo assistant Payam

Postproduction Pier 59 Digital Evolution



