

Teacher Notes for *The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice*
by Maggie Jankuloska, published by MidnightSun Publishing

About the novel:

Rats have infested homes and alleys in the town of St Ophèlie, France, during the summer of 1665. Twelve-year-old Marie Perrin's life seems predetermined. She is to become a maid, although she hungers for adventure. Her fate is altered, after she inadvertently ruins a countess' wedding gown. The act ruins her mother's reputation as a seamstress and reduces her family to penury. As punishment, Marie is sent to apprentice for the 'grotesque' and 'brutish' rat-catcher, Gustave Renard, until her family's debt to the count and countess is paid.

Marie is away from Henri, her twin brother, and must learn to navigate through her new career, handling traps and killing rats, under Gustave Renard's mentorship. Rat-catching is not a task for girls, Marie's hair is shorn and she wears breeches. But, as months pass, Marie uncovers the gentler side to the rat-catcher and she becomes proud of her skills and purpose as a rat-catcher. Additionally, she bonds with the rat-catcher's herbalist wife, Marion.

However, St Ophèlie is rocked by the dreaded plague. Deaths begin to multiply and no one is spared from the threat. Marie fears for the safety of her family and defies Gustave's instructions by visiting her home, where she learns of her parents' death. Crippled by bereavement, Marie and her guardians flee from the ravaged town after their house is set alight by a conniving merchant, Monsieur LaRue. Homeless and penniless, they trudge to the neighbouring, but hostile town, Quiton, where Henri is working as a shoe-maker's apprentice. Marie and her guardians rescue Henri with the help of Marie's quick thinking.

The four travellers are determined to start afresh, yet they encounter the villainous count again in his hideaway. While tackling the count's tyranny, the four travellers stick together and show resilience. Marie learns that 'courage and kindness make a man noble, not money and a title'. Marie, Henri and her guardians finally find safety and peace in Marseille, a place where 'people are tolerant of strangers' and where Marie's senses and mind are broadened. Marie discovers that despite her hardships, there is still wonder and adventure in the world. *The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice* tackles the themes of class division, non-traditional families, belonging, friendship and female bravery in patriarchal times. It is suited for female and male upper middle-grade readers.

Inspiration behind *The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice*

Initially, 'The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice' was a short story about a young girl being forced out of home to be a rat-catcher's apprentice. But I knew there was more to the story that needed to be shared. I was captivated by the thought of pest exterminators in earlier times and I wanted to explore this world further and base it around a young pest exterminator. My first idea was to write a story about twins who were exterminators, but I wanted to focus more on Marie and her voice as the central protagonist. My aim was to create a protagonist who had a strong sense of self and dreams of a life beyond her limitations. In earlier drafts there was an epilogue



providing a glimpse into a grown-up Marie and even a romance between Marie and Lucien who joined them on their travels.

The novel does contain some dark and heavy themes, like death, grief, exploitation and prejudice. In writing for a middle-grade audience, I didn't want to gloss over some of these heavier topics, because it is what many people around the world experience and they are sadly a part of life.

The very first draft of this novel was conceived in 2013/2014. As an author I never thought that the plague the characters experience would have so many parallels to the current Covid-19 pandemic. While there are many similarities it was not my intention to write a Covid-19-inspired novel.

About the Author:

Maggie Jankuloska was born in Ohrid, Macedonia. She moved to Australia at the age of ten and she has worked as a teacher/tutor in numerous settings.

Maggie was one of the recipients of the 2018 Maurice Saxby Creative Writing Program.

Her short fiction and non-fiction pieces have appeared in: The Age/Sydney Morning Herald, SBS Voices, Award Winning Australian Writing, n-SCRIBE and more. In 2020 she participated in the Written in the Time of COVID-19 public art display and was featured in the subsequent anthology.

The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice is Maggie Jankuloska's first published novel.

Maggie has a passion for writing historical-fiction and is currently working on a new children's novel. She is interested in creating layered and realistic characters who overcome obstacles and impart a message of resilience, tolerance and empathy.

Maggie Jankuloska lives in the northern suburbs of Melbourne with her husband and son. To connect, find Maggie's author pages on social media. Maggie is available for school and bookstore visits.



Historical Context:

Saint Ophèlie is a fictional French town and so is the plague that enters. However, such plagues existed in the mid-1600s, with the Eyam plague being one famous example. A bale of damp cloth containing fleas (carrying the plague) led to the death of 260 people in the English village. This is captured in Geraldine Brooks' novel *A Year of Wonders*.

The villagers of Eyam quarantined from the world to prevent the spread of plague, which is similar to the action of the townspeople of Saint Ophèlie and many of us living in the current pandemic.

Rats would carry fleas carrying bacteria and when the rats would die the fleas would jump to humans and spread the illness. Gustave seems to join the dots and come to this conclusion as the plague worsens. Between 1665 and 1666 a fifth of London's population died from the plague, approximately 100,000 people.

Bubonic plague was rife in the 1600s and it created swellings or buboes in the lymph nodes in the armpit, groin and neck. Those afflicted had a very high chance of death. Various treatments were attempted, such as: smoke cleanses, bleeding with leeches,

arsenic and vinegar. People even chopped up snakes or dead pigeons and applied them to infected body parts.



Credit: Science Photo Library

The large-scale deaths usually meant mass burials and houses marked with crosses, like in *The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice*.

The fear of witchcraft was prevalent during this era and coupled with the fear of the plague, it led to many women being persecuted and sentenced to death for practising witchcraft. Between the 15th and 18th century, '40,000–100,000 people were executed as accused witches' [1]. A woman like Marion would have been an easy scapegoat for her peculiarities.

Le Chasseur de rats | The Rat-Catcher:

Rats and mice would infiltrate many homes, lured by the food stores. A rat-catcher had an important role to play in his town, killing and disposing of vermin. As Marion once says, rat-catching is not an easy job. Marie even calls it undignified and sees her apprenticeship as suitable for urchins or orphans. Rat-catching would have been dangerous, unsanitary and potentially fatal, if it meant handling disease-riddled vermin. At the same time, rat-catchers would have been in demand.

'*Mort-aux-rats!*' or 'death to rats' was a chant by French rat-catchers, who like Gustave carried already dead rats and used animals in their rat-catching. Similarly, many rat-catchers used poison, terriers, traps and ferrets – like Gustave.

One famous rat-catcher of the Victorian era was Jack Black who served as a rat-catcher for Queen Victoria. He caught rats in manors and bred unusually coloured

¹ <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory/chapter/the-witch-trials/>

rats, which he then sold as pets. His customers were usually children of upper-classes and one famous customer was author Beatrix Potter. He started as a child rat-catcher, which was a preferred vocation for many children, when compared to being a chimney-sweep or working in mines.

Here is an extract from an interview with Jack Black from the 1800s.

'I should think I've been ratting a'most for five-and-thirty year. I've been bitten nearly everywhere, even where I can't name and right through my thumbnail too ... When a rat's bite touches the bone, it make you feel faint in a minute, and it bleeds dreadful like you have ben stuck with a penknife. ... The first rats I caught was when I was about nine years of age. After that I bought some ferrets, and I was, I think, the first that regularly began to hunt rats to 'sterminate them' [2]



A rat-catcher (accompanied by two dogs) carrying a cage of live rats in his right hand and a sharpened wooden stick with dead rats dangling from it in his left. Stipple engraving by J. Baldrey, 1789, after H.W. Bunbury.

The Roles of Women in Marie's World:

Marie frets about her lack of freedom in the first chapter. Her apprenticeship as a maid is a great source of pride for her parents, but it fills her with dread. In the 1600s women worked in a variety of fields, usually from an early age, like Marie.

Maids would have worked long hours for low pay and had very modest living quarters usually at their employer's home. Wages could be deducted for disobedience or breaking of items.

² BBC2 Shows what Mayhew's London was Really Like, in *Illustrated London News*, 2 April 1966, p. 16

Some common jobs were: tailoress, milliner, washerwoman, midwife. Women often sold their produce and worked in food preparation. Women had to look after their family, land, livestock and run a household, which would have been a taxing task.

Rich women, like Josette, could organise and supervise servants. They could also pursue hobbies such as music.

Most girls of this time were not well-educated, unless from an upper-class background. Marie's early education would have been quite unlikely and so would have been her dream of writing stories.

Similarly, a woman like Marion would have been an anomaly in a provincial 17th century town.



Film stills from historical films centred around women, 'The Girl with a Pearl Earring' and 'Ever After'.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can we describe Marie and her life while she is still living at home?
2. After being dismissed from her job as a maid, Marie is sent away from home to apprentice as a rat-catcher. Does her punishment seem fair? Why do you feel this way?
3. What are some examples of class differences and prejudice based on this difference?
4. Does the novel contain a central villain? If so, what traits make the character or characters villainous?
5. Are there any characters that would be described as being 'ahead of their time'? Who fits this description and why?
6. How do the people of Saint Ophelie react to the plague as it first spreads? Are there any parallels to the modern pandemic we have all experienced?
7. Compare and contrast Marie's life with her parents and her life with Gustave and Marion. Where does she seem happier and more fulfilled? Why?

8. 'Courage and kindness made a man noble, not money and a title.' What does Marie mean by this? How does she come to this conclusion?
9. What are some examples of selflessness depicted in the novel?
10. Describe Marie and Henri's relationship throughout the novel. In your opinion, does it change or remain the same?
11. Why does Marie refuse Charlotte's dress? Do you think she made the right decision?
12. Who is your favourite character and why?

Writing Tasks:

1. Write a 1st person diary entry from Gustave's point of view after he first brings Marie home. What would he think and feel about her working for him?
2. Write an additional chapter set a year after Marie, Henri, Gustave and Marion arrive in Marseille. What does their life look like? How are they the same and how have their lives changed?
3. *The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice* is a novel about kindness and goodness triumphing over greed and selfishness. Discuss.
4. How does *The Rat-Catcher's Apprentice* showcase the best and the worst of humanity? Discuss.
5. Research life for children in 1600s Europe and write an information report. Focus on children from lower and upper classes.
6. Research rat-catching in more detail. You may choose to focus on one particular era.