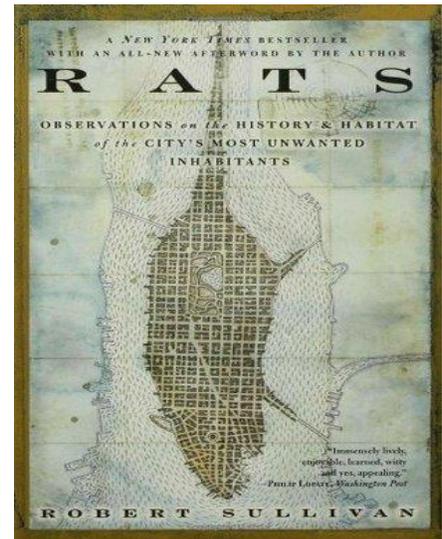


September 28, 2016

*Spotlight on Books:*

*Rats: Observations on the History & Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants* by Robert Sullivan

This week's review appears on the eve of Canadian Library Month which is dedicated to celebrating libraries. Those of us who believe in the public library's empowering role can perhaps express our conviction no better than did Scottish American library philanthropist Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) so many years ago – "A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people".



The truth of this was reinforced for this reviewer recently when a rat infestation on her recreational property in B.C. kick-started an intense interest in these vermin (and how to eradicate them)! Where did I find the perfect book? Of course, at our public library! Robert Sullivan's classic work on rats grew out of a personal fascination and his environment (New York City) provided an ideal laboratory given the fact that rats live where humans live, particularly in urban environments. Alleys and food scraps abound in NYC and so Sullivan had his pick of venues setting up finally in *Eden's Alley* near the old World Trade Centre where for two years he observed the nocturnal resident brown rats (*rattus norvegicus*) in all their glory. During the day the author compiled his notes and conducted extensive research that resulted in this compelling work of natural history.

*Rats* is a superb example of the best sort of creative non-fiction – the factual content is impeccable but information is couched in literary techniques that result in prose that is as compulsively readable as that of any novel. We learn, to our horror, how prolific rats are – evidently, males can mate with twenty females in a few hours and the resulting litters arrive in three weeks averaging twenty pups per litter. Their teeth are extraordinarily strong and they use them to gleefully chew through electrical wires causing, it is believed, 25% of all fires of unknown origin. There is wry humour in Sullivan's prose as when he describes himself at his viewing post – perched on his camp stool with his thermos and night vision glasses at hand.

*Kirkus Reviews* has described *Rats* as "skittering, scurrying, terrific natural history" and it is but there is one area in which the author did not succeed. In his introduction, Sullivan expressed puzzlement that rats do not seem to make an attractive topic for a coffee-table book but few who read this book will agree with his premise that they have a rightful place in the evolutionary scheme of things. The interviews with exterminators about these elusive, crafty creatures and the information provided about the varied diseases they carry are unlikely to reduce the fear factor in most readers. *Rats: Observations on the History & Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants* is currently available for check-out at Yellowknife Public Library from a display of superb examples of creative non-fiction.

- Review prepared by Deborah Bruser, Library Manager