

## The Ratcatcher's Daughter Pamela Rushby

### Book Summary

'A brilliant and richly evocative insight into a fascinating and little-known aspect of our past.'  
**Jackie French, Australian Children's Laureate**

### Curriculum areas and key learning outcomes

*The Ratcatcher's Daughter* is an excellent resource for Year Nine and could be used for the following subjects:

- English
- SOSE
- History

It could also be used to achieve the following learning outcomes:

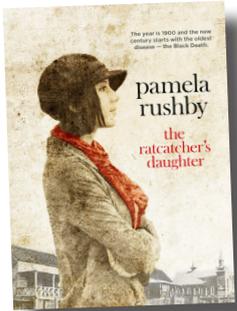
- ACELY1729 • ACELA1550
- ACDSEH090 • ACELA1552
- ACDSEH091 • ACELA1770

### Themes

- The Plague (Black Death)
- Wealth, Class and Unemployment
- Death and Burial Customs
- Women's History and Rights
- Racial Prejudice

**Appropriate Ages:**  
10+

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Notes By: Robyn Sheahan-Bright



## The Ratcatcher's Daughter

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### Themes

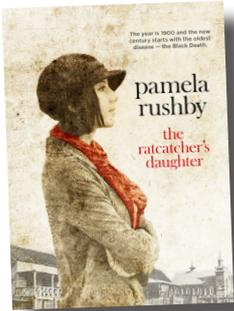
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## The Ratcatcher's Daughter

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### Outline

'There!' she said. 'There! Now you're all absolutely safe!' (p 43)

In 1900, in Brisbane, thirteen-year-old Issy McKelvie is about to leave school to take on her first job – although she'd prefer to continue her studies – to become a maid to the Lewis family who run an undertaking business. Her Da works on the docks and is a part-time rat-catcher and her mum works terribly hard to care for her family, including her elderly mother. Her elder sister Kate has taken a job as a domestic servant in a Dr Slade's home. Issy is desperately unhappy that she is to become such a lowly worker, especially since she and her best friend Trudy have been offered jobs as pupil teachers. But there's even worse in store for her. For the plague – the Black Death – arrives in Australia and suddenly kills their neighbour Albert Howard. The authorities panic with the arrival of what is regarded as one of the most terrible epidemics in history, and quarantine all the neighbours including Issy's family. So from emptying chamber pots, Issy finds herself bundled off to a makeshift camp at Colmslie. When they are finally released, her Da comes down with influenza, and Issy (who hates rats!) becomes her father's unwilling standby as a rat-catcher. Issy also has no idea how she'll handle her father's terriers. But it's up to Issy to join the battle to rid the city of the plague-carrying rats, and to support her family. In the process, Issy discovers another more vital reason to return to education; but will Issy achieve her dream?

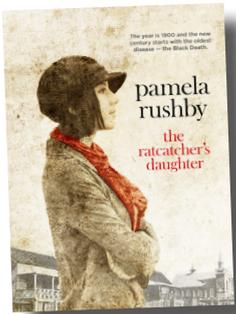
### About the Author

Pamela Rushby is the author of over 200 books for children and young adults, as well as children's television scripts, documentaries, short stories and freelance journalism. Pam has been an advertising copywriter, pre-school teacher, and producer of educational television, audio and multimedia. She's won several awards, including the NSW Premiers' Ethel Turner Prize, two CBCA Notable Books – and a bag of gold coins at a film festival in Iran! Pam believes the strangest, the most riveting, heart-breaking, laugh-out-loud stories aren't fiction. They're real. They come from history. And she loves tripping over unusual incidents from history – and then writing about them.

### Author Inspiration

Pamela says:

'My inspiration came from visiting an exhibition at the Museum of Brisbane, some time ago. I saw an old photograph of men with packs of terriers, and another of men with a pile of dead rats, and the captions referred to the plague in Brisbane in 1900. The plague?? As in the Black Death?? I thought that was extremely interesting – I didn't know we'd had the plague in Brisbane, so I wanted to find out more about it. The more I researched, the more I discovered what I thought could be a great story. Government bungling, panic in the streets, people forced into quarantine, illicit burials in ordinary cemeteries ... who wouldn't want to write about it?!



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# Notes on Themes and Curriculum Topics

## Language and Literacy

This novel is a work of **Historical Fiction** or **Faction** — a genre which relies on the author weaving together fact and fiction seamlessly. In this novel the experiences of people during the plague in Brisbane, are juxtaposed against the imaginary story of Issy and her family.

**Discussion Point:** How much did you recognise from the history you have read?

**Narrative Structure** — The novel takes place during the course of a year 1900-1 and traces the arrival of the plague in Brisbane.

**Activity:** Create a timeline of all the incidents referred to in the book and some of the key milestones or turning points in the action.

**Narrative Perspective** — Issy's story is written in first person.

**Discussion Point:** How might the story have changed if it had been written in third person? Re-write a passage to see how it would change.

**Literary References** — *Oliver Twist* is referred to and a long quote included (pp 13-4).

**Discussion Point:** Discuss this passage with your students in terms of the use of language. How does it relate to Issy's situation? Were there any other literary references that were particularly noticeable? eg Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* is also referred to a number of times.

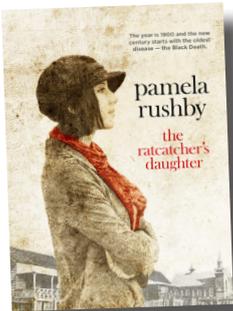
**The Cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents and a marketing tool as well.**

**Activity:** This cover is a **realistic portrait** of Issy. Create a new cover using a different artistic style (eg naive art, impressionistic art, collage). Write a blurb for the back cover of the book as well.

## Whose History?

History can be recounted from many different perspectives and in many different voices. Imagine if a bureaucrat had described the outbreak of the plague in Brisbane? How different would a wealthy person's experience of the times (eg John Slade) be as opposed to a poor person like Issy? Try to find any first person accounts and diaries of this era as an introduction to this topic.

**Activity:** Choose an incident referred to in the



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novel and re-write it in Ben Lewis's voice.

### History of Queensland

There is much to discuss in this novel about the history and the topography of Brisbane.

**Activity:** Research any topic suggested by the novel eg Town planning, Woolloongabba, Gibson Island and the Colmslie Hospital, Toowong Cemetery.

**Activity:** Colmslie was not the only quarantine station in Queensland. Research the history of others such as Peel Island.

### Social Class

Kate has a small crush on Dr John Slade but Issy is aware of the class gulf between them, just as Kate is.

**Discussion Point:** What does this novel demonstrate about class in Australia at the turn of the century?

### Living Conditions

Issy's family are poor and their living conditions very constrained.

**Activity:** Outdoor toilets are largely a thing of the past in Australia now. But in 1900, and indeed, well into the 1960s in some places, people had an outdoor 'dunny' as described in this book (pp 44-5), so they often had to use chamberpots at night and empty them in the morning. What other aspects of the life did you discover from reading this book?

### Values

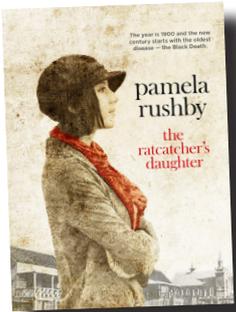
This novel demonstrates certain aspects of 'character' and values.

**Activity:** List some of the values demonstrated in any of the scenes or events in this book with a corresponding quote to illustrate it.

### Individual/Community

Issy's primary duties are to her family but she is also aware of responsibilities to the community as well. For example, she is initially shocked that the Slades and Lewises are breaking the law to allow plague victims to die at home and to be buried in cemeteries. But she begins to realise that they are simply allowing the families involved the dignity of caring for their loved ones in a respectful fashion.

**Discussion Point:** What other examples of responsibility to the individual or family, coming into conflict with community responsibility are there in this novel?



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## Themes

### The Plague (Black Death)

**Discussion Point:** This novel describes one of the most terrible epidemics suffered on earth. What caused the plague and how was it eradicated?

**Activity:** Do an 'image search' using the key words 'Black Death' or 'Plague' to give students some idea of the conditions in which people suffered this terrible illness.

**Activity:**

'It was December, and hot, and a sea breeze slid up the Brisbane River in a limp, lacklustre way. The breeze was good, cool on my summer-damp skin, but the smell it brought with it wasn't. Drains and sewers — they all emptied into the river. Rotting food and off-cuts from the butcher's. That got dumped in the river, too. And — I sniffed — rats. Yes, I could definitely smell rats. There were always plenty of rats where there were drains, sewers and rotting food. And I hated rats. No, I didn't just hate rats: I loathed rats. They made my skin twitch and crawl and break out into a cold, clammy sweat. I always knew when rats were about — I could feel them, and I hated the feeling.' (p 6)

This passage gives some indication of the public health problems which caused the spread of this illness. In **Ch 6**, Albert is stricken with the plague and the symptoms are described. It is clear, too, how rapidly the illness spread (pp 70-1).

Research the origins of the epidemic more fully.

**Discussion Point:**

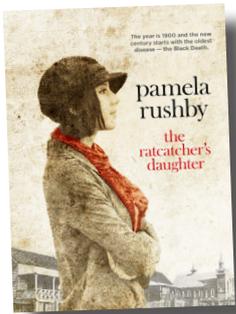
'A notice in the paper said that the Board of Health was concerned about the numbers of rats around and wanted them destroyed. In order to prevent the spread of disease, the notice said. But what really interested Da was that the board offered to pay two shillings a dozen for dead rats. A whole two shillings a dozen! That was two pennies each! Da's terriers could kill dozens of rats in an hour. So Da had gone out at once, looking for rats.'  
(p 27)

Rat catching was a paid occupation at one time as described here. How do present day councils deal with this issue?

**Discussion Point:** The spread of rats and the plague is described (pp 37-8). Did the Australian authorities wait too long to act?

**Activity:** Read **Ch 3** about Issy helping her Da round up the rats at the Howards'. How would you have coped with that?

**Activity:** Read some of the novels listed in the **Bibliography** in these notes, which are set in this era and which are about such a plague, and compare them to this one. Read for example,



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Mark Svendsen's *Ratface and Snake-eyes* (Lothian, 2003) which is about a group of kids paid to catch rats in Gladstone between the wars.

**Discussion Point:** The various treatments used to treat the symptoms of the Plague, including cocaine, (p 100) demonstrate the lack of clarity about how to deal with the crisis. Some denied it existed and in this novel a Dr Thomas Lucas suggests it is a type of typhoid (p 101). People were frightened of catching it from the victims despite evidence to the contrary. 'Kate hesitated, then she put her chin up. 'It seems to mean that people aren't catching it from each other,' (p 104).

Bureaucracy dealt with the crisis (p 122) very erratically, and two *Worker* cartoons (pp 225-6) demonstrate the panic and the confused mixed messages which were conveyed. The terrible conditions at the 'Plague Hospital' at Colmslie (pp 72-3) were further evidence of the crisis. Are such epidemics dealt with any better now?

### Wealth, Class and Unemployment

**Discussion Point:** 'The people in our street mostly worked at the docks, too, in one way or another. There was little chance of breaking away from that kind of work for families like ours.' (pp 2-3) Discuss the generational

class system and unemployment determined by wealth and education. How might Issy and Kate's future education change their prospects?

**Discussion Point:** Why work so hard to find in Brisbane in 1900?

### Discussion Point:

'It seemed there could be. If you had the money. One rule for the rich and one for the poor, I thought. That made me angry.' (p 150) ... 'The Lewises and the Slades, I suspected, could be in this up to their necks. (p 150)

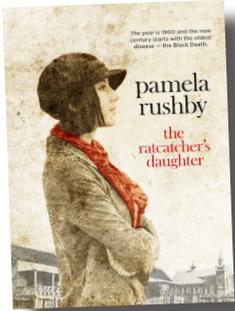
Find examples of the class differences between the McKelvies and the Slades and Lewises.

### Death and Burial Customs

**Activity:** Mourning jewellery (pp 22-3) is mentioned several times. Research and find images of such jewellery and some of the stories attached to various pieces.

**Activity:** Ben describes the wealthy funeral (pp 47-8) to which Issy replies:

'But what about really poor people?' I asked. 'What if they've got no money at all?' Ben looked serious. 'Well, they wouldn't come to us,' he said. 'There'd be other arrangements



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for them. But you really wouldn't want to know about that, young Issy.' (p 48)

What other arrangements were made for poor people and those who were destitute (called paupers)?

Research this topic more fully.

**Activity:** *Memento Mori* (p 52) were photographs taken of dead relatives. Is this sort of practice still common today?

**Activity:** Some history of graveyards and cemeteries (pp 57-61) is discussed including the Necropolis Railway in Britain. Research this and the history of graveyards in Brisbane. Toowong Cemetery, for instance, is referred to a number of times.

**Discussion Point:** 'I'd be a proper businesswoman, with my own printed business cards, and I'd help families at some of the saddest times of their lives. I'd arrange funerals that had respect and dignity, consideration and comforting ceremony. I knew I could do it.' (pp 219-20)

How important is the role of the undertaker and funeral director? Discuss the various aspects of this profession.

## Women's History and Rights

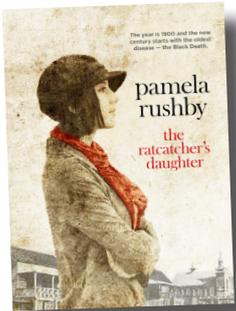
**Discussion Point:** Issy has no real choice about going to work as a maid at an undertaker's despite being offered a pupil teacher's position. Her elder sister Kate has taken similar work in a doctor's surgery but would like to be a nurse or doctor herself. What choices did women have at this time? How have women's rights changed since 1900?

**Discussion Point:** 'The fact I work for him and the fact I'm a female doesn't mean I don't have a brain!' she said. 'When he answers, when he explains things, it's like — oh, like he's kind of amused that I'm asking a serious question. It's, it's patronising.' (pp 133-4)

Do some men still speak to women in this tone today?

**Discussion Point:** 'Getting married wasn't what I was hoping for. I was hoping for something, though, something quite different, something very special.' (p 186)

How does the expectation that a woman should marry or find a partner limit or curtail her professional opportunities?



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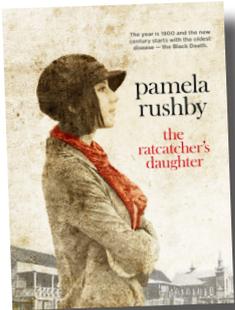
### Racial Prejudice

**Discussion Point:** 'People have been complaining about the houses and alleys down where the Chinese and those Islanders live. They reckon the Chinese have brought the plague, and they're spreading it further.'  
(pp 135-60)

Was this sort of prejudiced view common in this era?

**Activity:** The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, or the so-called 'White Australia Policy' was the first piece of legislation laid down by the new federal parliament the following year. Research this policy and how it is reflected in the following quote:

'Everyone knows the Chinese brought typhoid and smallpox into the country, and they're involved in gambling and bribery and, um, loose moral practices. Islanders, too. Can't trust 'em. They're saying everyone should boycott Chinese businesses, and make them all stay in their own area so they don't spread the infection.'(p 136)



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### Further Points for Discussion

1. This novel is about the bubonic plague or what was known as the 'Black Death'.

**Discussion Point:** Has this disease been eradicated or does it still exist? Is there any chance that it could appear in Australia again?

2. 'I was still staring after Trudy. I remembered how I'd avoided her when I first started work, jealous that she was still learning. Had I hurt Trudy's feelings then? Now I knew how that felt.' (p 166)

**Discussion Point:** Issy is hurt that Trudy seemed to avoid her after she had been quarantined, but later realises that she was avoiding Trudy when she went out to work, as she was upset to be missing out on further education and ashamed of her lowly position. Friends can often hurt each other through a false sense of pride. Will Trudy and Issy recover their friendship with each other?

3. 1900 was the year before Federation was declared in 1901.

**Discussion Point:** How is this event observed or commemorated today? Research how it was celebrated at the time in text and images.

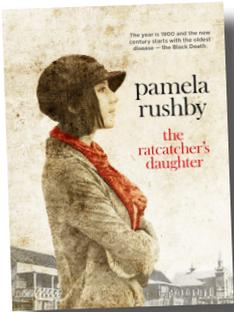
4. Superstitions and 'old wives' tales are often detrimental to the treatment of real health issues, but can equally be founded on traditional remedies which are very useful.

**Activity:** 'We all knew about Gran and her miasmas. Gran was convinced you got sick from unclean air rising from dirty water and earth. She believed wearing a block of camphor in a little bag around your neck would protect you from breathing in these dangerous miasmas. She'd insisted on hanging one around Kate's neck, and mine too, every day for years, when we were little, until we'd got tired of going around smelling like old wardrobes, and quietly got rid of them.' (p 42)

How might such beliefs have deterred a family from seeking real medical assistance?

5. Higher education was largely the province of the rich, at this time.

**Discussion Point:** How might Kate's desire to become a nurse or doctor have progressed?



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How difficult was it in these times for a poor woman to achieve such training?

6. The authorities burn and destroy everything in the McKelvies' and their neighbours' houses.

**Discussion Point:** Would authorities be able to take such drastic action today without the householder's agreement?

7. 'Yes, a new serum from the Pasteur Institute in Paris; Yersin-Roux serum it's called.'  
(p 200)

**Discussion Point:** Is this still the method which would be used to cure the plague?  
Research this further.

8. The practice of quarantining people with dreaded illnesses led to families being separated for months and years.

**Activity:** Research the history of quarantining in Australia and Queensland.

9. If there were a sequel to this book, what do you think might occur in it?

**Activity:** Write your own synopsis for a sequel. Design a cover for that sequel.

10. What was the major idea or theme that this novel conveyed to you as a reader?

## Notes

At the back of the book, there is an **Author's Note** (pp 221-4) by the author Pamela Rushby, and later an Appendix (pp 225-6) containing some of the cartoons referred to in the text. Use these resources with your students to further explore the concepts outlined in the book. Find similar resources to discuss in relation to the text by referring to the **Bibliography** below.

## Key Quotes

'But enthusiasm didn't do me any good when I talked to my family about it. Gran was against it from the start. 'Education! Never saw much use for it myself. You're better off out earning!'' (p 5)

'We knew there was no more chance that Kate could be a nurse than that I could be a teacher. There weren't many opportunities for girls like us. And even if one came up, it simply wasn't possible for us to take it.' (p 8)

'We'd been able to afford meat more often, now that I was working and Da was ratcatching.' (p 57)

'Though I suppose,' he said slowly, 'they'd be buying hope.' (p 131)

'I thought how that was still true today, how it was true in my own town, where the poor and powerless had been forced into quarantine, while the rich and privileged bypassed the rules.' (p 197)

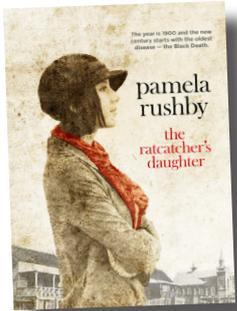
'She hadn't gone — well, why would she, she was a maid, not family or a friend. It wouldn't have been proper, she said resentfully. No, she'd stayed at the house and got on with the washing.' (p 205)

'The council was wanting as many men as it could get to clean up areas where rats have been seen, or are suspected ... They want rubbish cleared up and burned. Buildings swept and washed, whitewashed and disinfected. Broken drains mended.' (p 120)

'Maybe if we put up mortality lists about measles and scarlet fever, more research would be done into them.' (p 133)

'Today, there was just one coffin being unloaded from a cart, ready to be carried down to the waiting boat. The people on the quay were making way for it, not from respect, but from fear.' (p 146)

'So now I knew. The girl detective had found her proof. The thing was, what was I going to do with it? Well, the first thing I was going to do was get out of here, as fast as I could. Mr Lewis and Ben could be back at any moment.' (p 161)



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Refer to the Bibliography at the back of the novel (pp 229-30).

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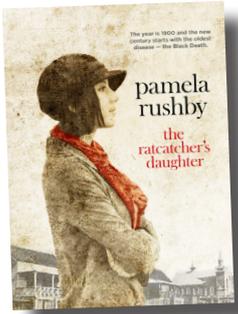
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Toowong Cemetery History  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toowong\\_Cemetery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toowong_Cemetery)



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## About the Author of the Notes

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates Justified Text writing and publishing consultancy services, and has published widely on children's and YA literature. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, and in 2012 the CBCA (National) Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature in Australia.