



Razza, the Rat

By Eric Wagner

Perhaps you remember the curious tale of Razza, the rat.

It began a couple of years ago, when James Russell and colleagues from the University of Auckland in New Zealand tagged a Norway rat and set it loose on a small, rat-free island. Their aim was to see how hard it would be to get rid of small populations of invasive species, a key question when it comes to detecting a first wave of recruits or nailing the last fugitives.

It turned out to be quite difficult because Razza was a capable rat. He eluded capture for some 18 weeks, turning up his nose at food traps and swimming to another island over 400 meters away (a rat record, as it turned out). Eventually, though, after a scorched-earth effort of bait grids and trained dogs, Razza was caught and killed. The message to managers was clear: invasive organisms in small numbers are hard to detect and even harder to catch.

But when Witi Ihimaera read about Razza in the newspaper a few days later, he heard a different story. Instead of being bummed by yet another take on the scourge of invasives, the author of *Whale Rider* was moved by the rat's tenacity, its "strength of spirit," as he called it. Where others saw guile he saw heroism, and he decided to write a children's book about it. "I'm always on the lookout for New Zealand heroes," he said.

The result was *The Amazing Adventures of Razza the Rat*, released late last year. It's a colorful book of about 50 pages that describes in loose verse how Razza, an upstart rat, is captured by scientists and marooned on an island. But he gets bored, escapes, sees the world one vector at a time, and is greeted as a hero on his return.

Now, given the mainstream history of rats in New Zealand—of islands overrun and birds ravaged—holding Razza up as what Ihimaera calls "a sort of Mickey Mouse for the Southern Hemisphere" might seem odd. But Ihimaera is quick to point out that while rats shouldn't get a free pass, they do have other histories. The first people to sail to New Zealand, for instance, brought a species of rat with them in their sea-going canoes. This castaway, the Pacific rat or *kiore*, figures prominently in both the mythological and culinary Maori past. And besides, Ihimaera said, "rats are always being demonized. I wanted to tell some of the other stories that come out of our land."

Ihimaera's book is a fascinating look at how science can be translated into an artistic piece—of what is retained, what is lost, and what is changed. Often, there's more than one way to look at a data point, and not just statistically. Is the urgency of the original message lost? Not by a long shot. But in this case it is subsumed into an older narrative and made richer. The data are transposed from a tale of dread into one of indigenous grit and survival. For kids. ♣

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