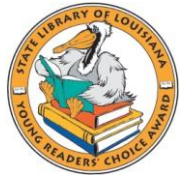




State Library  
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## Educator Discussion Guide

### *Ratscalibur: Part One of the Chronicles of the Low Realm*

by Josh Lieb

Illustrations by Tom Lintern

**Louisiana Young Reader's Choice Nominee 2018**

**Grade 3-5**

*Submitted by Soline D. Holmes*

*School of Library and Information Science, LSU, Baton Rouge*

#### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

Author Josh Lieb uses puns and clever wordplay to tell the story of aspiring seventh grader Joey. When Joey's mom receives a job offer in NYC, the entire family is forced to relocate. Shortly after they arrive, Joey's Uncle Patrick brings him a "pet" rat. The rat turns out to be a "Ragician" named Gondorff who practices "Ragic" (rats' version of magic). Gondorff—who, to Joey's surprise, can talk—explains that he is severely injured and asks Joey for his help to deliver a message to the Rat King, Uther. Gondorff bites Joey's finger, turning him into a rat! As a rat, Joey's sense of smell is heightened, and he uses it to scamper through the City to deliver Gondorff's message and to try to find someone to turn him back into a boy. On his way to the King, he must dodge cats, sewer rats, and crows.

Hungry, Joey pulls a spork from a scone, fulfilling an age-old prophecy because this was not any spork but "Ratscalibur!" The rats declare Joey a "hero" and send him on a quest to find Squirrelin the Squagician to seek his help to stop the destruction of Ravelon from the Black Claws. Joey does not feel like a hero, but he must decide whether to accept this role and help his friends, the rats of Ravalon, fight the evil Salaman or merely try to return to his human form. Illustrator Tom Lintern's detailed black and white drawings help tell Lieb's loose retelling of the legends of King Arthur.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

From 2010 through 2016, Josh Lieb was a producer and "showrunner" of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. He also served as a writer and producer for *The Simpsons* and *NewsRadio*, and he won seven Emmy Awards as a writer and producer of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. In 2009, his first novel, *I Am a Genius of Unspeakable Evil and I Want to Be Your Class President*, was published and became a New York Times Bestseller. Originally from Columbia, South Carolina, Lieb received his undergraduate degree from Harvard University where he was an editor of "The Lampoon" (one of the college's humor magazines.) In addition to his novels, to raise money and awareness for Water.org, Lieb also wrote and directed a series of



comedic shorts starring Matt Damon, Bono, and Jessica Biel. Mr. Lieb is married with two children, several dogs, a cat, and a turtle.

Biographical information taken from the publisher's website at <http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/237500/josh-lieb/>  
Accessed June 11, 2017.

### **ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

Tom Lintern is an illustrator of children's books and also creates artwork for advertisements. He has worked for clients such as Harper Collins, Simon & Schuster and for companies including, but not limited to Disney, Starbucks, Blackberry, Macy's, and Barneys. Mr. Lintern lives in New York City.

Biographical information taken from the illustrator's website:  
[www.tomlintern.work](http://www.tomlintern.work)  
Accessed July 11, 2017.

### **PREREADING ACTIVITIES**

#### **Hero**

Ask your students to think about what it means to be a "hero." The dictionary provides several definitions of "hero." According to Merriam Webster, a "hero" is: *1. a. a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability; b. an illustrious warrior; c. a person admired for achievements and noble qualities; d. one who shows great courage; 2. a. The principal male character in a literary or dramatic work; b. the central figure in an event, period, or movement.* (Hero. (n.d.) In Merriam-Webster online. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hero.>) Ask your students if they can think of any "everyday heroes" in their personal lives at school, at home, or in the community. Ask them what qualities or traits these people have that make them "heroes." Discuss with your students how they would respond if they were faced with a challenge to do something that scared them. How would they react? Would they accept the challenge? How would they try to overcome their fears? Would they be considered heroes by themselves and others for facing the challenge?

#### **Sword in the Stone**

Ask your students if they are familiar with King Arthur or "the Sword in the Stone" legend. Show the students Arthur A. Dixon's painting "The Youth Pulled it out Easily" from Doris Ashley's *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20060904191928/http://www.lib.rochester.edu:80/camelot/images/adyouth.htm>. Site accessed 6/27/2017. Explain that an "adaptation" is "a composition rewritten into a new form" (Adaptation. (n.d.) In Merriam-Webster online. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptation>). The *Harry Potter* movies are examples of adaptations because the movies were adapted from the books. Explain that the story of King Arthur is a legend that has been adapted many times in books, films, and music. Two examples of adaptations of the Arthurian legends are:

1. 1963 Disney animated film *The Sword in the Stone* [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057546/?ref =nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057546/?ref =nv_sr_1)
2. 1960 Broadway musical *Camelot* [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057546/?ref =nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057546/?ref =nv_sr_1)

Divide students into groups and ask each group to read one of two adaptations of the Arthurian legend of the sword in the stone and to share it, in their own words, with the class. After each

group has shared their adaptation, ask the class what was the same and what was different between the adaptations. Possible versions students can read are:

1. 1911 Henry Gilbert's *King Arthur's Knights*, Chapter 1 available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22396/22396-h/22396-h.htm#1>. (Gilbert rewrote the legend so that it would "be interesting to every boy and girl who loves adventures").
2. Sir James Knowles' *King Arthur and His Knights*, Chapter 2 available at [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12753/12753-h/12753-h.htm#chapter\\_ii](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12753/12753-h/12753-h.htm#chapter_ii).

## **Magic**

Ask students if they have ever been to a magic show or seen one on television. What were some of the tricks that they witnessed? Could they figure out how the tricks were done or were they really "magic?" Learning and performing magic tricks is not just fun but it can also build confidence in students and requires hand-eye coordination and creativity. Divide students into groups and have each group research, learn, and present an easy magic trick to the class. For ideas, students can go to <http://magictricksforkids.org/> Site accessed 6/24/2017. Ask your students whether they think that magic is all a "trick of the hand," or if they think that there can be everyday magic that occurs around us? Have the students discuss some examples of what every day magic might be.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. At the beginning of the book, Joey has just moved to New York City with his mom. What are some of the things that are different for him? How do these affect him?
2. What kinds of noises does Joey hear when he is trying to fall asleep in his new home? How do these noises make him feel?
3. How does Joey react to the rat that his Uncle gives him? Does his reaction change when Gondorff starts talking to him? Is Joey sympathetic to the rat?
4. What mission does Gondorff give to Joey? Does Joey freely accept this mission and the transformation? Why does Gondorff have to transform Joey into a rat for the mission? Do you think Joey goes on the mission for Gondorff, or is Joey pursuing his own interests? Support your answer with examples from the book.
5. Once transformed into a rat, Joey leaves the apartment without telling his Mom goodbye. Was this responsible of him? Was there any way that Joey could have left a message for her or given her a sign? Later in the book, how did Uncle Patrick leave a message for Joey's mom?
6. How is Joey different once he has been transformed into a rat? How is the world around him different? How does he react to these changes? Provide specific examples from the text.
7. What are some of the everyday "found-objects" that the rats use in their world? How do they use these objects differently from how humans use the same objects? Do you think this is a form of recycling? Explain why or why not.
8. Why does Joey decide to take the spork out of the scone? Was this a wise choice? How is he treated differently after he pulls the spork from the scone?
9. Gondorff asks Joey to deliver the message that he has "failed." Did Gondorff really fail? Explain why or why not.
10. On page 41, King Uther keeps repeating that "All is lost." Why is King Uther so dejected? Is everything really "lost"? Do you think this is appropriate behavior/an appropriate attitude for a ruler to display?

11. Explain what a “prophecy” is. Sir Parsifur tells Joey the prophecy of Ravalon. What is the prophecy? Do the other characters believe that the prophecy is true, and do they think that Joey has fulfilled it? Do you think that Joey has fulfilled it?
12. Joey has several opportunities to run away from/to abandon his quest. Is choosing to stay and fight for Ravalon a wise choice? Explain why or why not.
13. On page 58, Parsifur says that “From what I’ve seen of people, I’d rather stay a rat.” Why does Parsifur say this?
14. How does Joey, as a rat, know when an enemy is near? Why does Joey not know that Sir Aramis is really an enemy?
15. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of being the size of a rat for Joey? Does his world become more or less dangerous than it was when he was a human?
16. Do you think that Joey is a hero? If so, what makes him a hero? Does Ratscalibur make him a hero? Name some other heroes in the book, and explain why they are heroes.
17. What are some of the examples of human Magic that Yislene tells to Joey? What powers human Magic, and is it a common occurrence in the world? Explain your answer using examples from the book. Can you think of some additional examples of human Magic?
18. Greed plays an important role in the book. Which characters exhibit greediness and how?
19. On page 124, Yislene encourages Joey to accept the transformation back into a human. Why does she do this? How does Joey respond? Was this a wise choice?
20. How does Joey explain his disappearance to his mom? Do you think that she responded appropriately? Explain why or why not.
21. Did Joey’s transformation into a rat and his quest change his feelings about New York City? Explain your answer with specific examples from the book.
22. Tom Lintern’s illustrations are throughout the book. How do they help tell the story? Give some specific examples. Would the story have been as powerful without the illustrations? Why or why not?
23. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story with animals as the main characters? How would the story be different if the main characters were all humans or were all animals? Make specific comparisons from the book.
24. Explain the title “Ratscalibur.” How and why did the author choose this title?

## **CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

### **Health and Physical Education:**

As a rat, Joey uses his sword, Ratscalibur, to protect and defend himself. Uncle Patrick is impressed with Joey’s sword fighting and asks, “Did they have a fencing team at your school or something?” (100). Fencing is a sport in the Summer Olympics in which two people “fight” using rapier-like swords. Fencing is a mental sport as well as a physical sport. Show students this video on fencing which gives a brief history of the sport and shows how it is played. <https://www.olympic.org/fencing>. Students can also see <http://www.watchknowlearn.org/Video.aspx?VideoID=22873> which provides more details on the sport. Divide students into pairs and have them engage in a game of “Toe Fencing.” [https://www.education.com/pdf/Toe\\_Fencing/](https://www.education.com/pdf/Toe_Fencing/). After the activity, students can write about

their experience, their impressions of fencing, and two facts that they learned about the sport of fencing using

<https://worksheets.theteacherscorner.net/seasonal/summer-olympics/summer-olympics-journal23.pdf>.

### **History:**

While *Ratscalibur* is set in present-day New York City, the characters and plot are based on the Arthurian legends of the Middle Ages. Play medieval music for the students (<http://www.curtisclark.org/emusic/medieval.html>). Using the Smartboard or equivalent, show students the different areas of the medieval castle using [http://web.archive.org/web/20060207050920/http://kotn.ntu.ac.uk/castle/castl\\_fm.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20060207050920/http://kotn.ntu.ac.uk/castle/castl_fm.html).

Using this lesson plan as a guide (<http://www.discoveryeducation.com/teachers/free-lesson-plans/the-middle-ages.cfm>), have students brainstorm on what life would be like in a castle. Then instruct each student to write a journal entry as a king, lord, lady, knight, or monk describing a day in their life at the castle or monastery. At the end of the project, encourage students to share their journal entries with the class.

### **Art:**

- Many of the items that the rats use are made out of recycled items. On page 115, when the rats are in Squirrelin's lair, Joey asks, "What's with all the junk on the floor?" Brutilda replies that the rubber bands and Styrofoam peanuts are "Squirrel furniture." Provide students with a box of "found objects" including, but not limited to, toothpicks, popsicle sticks, paperclips, torn-up pieces of paper, rubber bands, and Styrofoam peanuts. Divide students into pairs and have them design and build Squirrelin's furnished lair.
- Ask each student to pretend that they are a knight such as Sir Parsifur or Sir Joey, and have them design their own medieval coat of arms.  
[http://www.yourchildlearns.com/her\\_act.htm](http://www.yourchildlearns.com/her_act.htm)

### **Language Arts:**

- On page 51, Sir Parsifur tells Joey that the prophecy of Ravalon is a poem and then recites it for Joey. Ask each student to think about something that they think will happen or that they wish would happen in the future. Instruct them to write their own prophecy in poem form. Ask each student to read their prophecy to the class.
- Joey is thrown into the world of animals. "Anthropomorphism" is "the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a[n]...animal." (Anthropomorphism. (n.d.) In *Oxford Living Dictionaries*. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/anthropomorphism>). Ask students to think about their favorite story that uses humans as the main characters. Instruct students to rewrite this story but with the main characters as animals. They can choose whichever animal they like. (For example, how would Harry Potter be different if he were a cat? Or if Pippi Longstocking were a monkey?) Invite students to read their adaptations to the class.

### **Science:**

- The sense of smell is one of our five senses. When Joey is turned into a rat, his sense of smell is heightened, and he thinks that, as a rat, “a nose might be the most valuable thing he owned” (15). Divide students into pairs or small groups and blindfold them. Provide them with five to seven different aromas to see if they can identify the smell. This works best if you place the item to be smelled in a Ziploc bag with small holes punched in it. Examples of potential items that can be used: a flower, cinnamon, other spices, coffee granules, a cotton ball dipped in vanilla extract, cocoa powder, a cotton ball dipped in almond extract, tarragon, a “stinky” cheese such as blue cheese, a slice of onion, and peppermint. Instruct each group to keep a list of the aromas that they smell, trying to identify the aroma and noting whether they thought it was a pleasant or a bad smell. When everyone has smelled all of the aromas, ask the class which aromas smelled “good” to them and which smelled “bad.” For the ones that smelled “bad,” do you think that you would like that smell if you were a rat?
- Joey thinks that the “weirdest part” about New York City was “all the *noise*” (7). As a rat, his sense of hearing is heightened. For three days, have students keep a journal of the various sounds that they hear throughout the day. At the end of the three days, have them summarize their entries—Which sounds did they hear the most frequently? Did they hear different sounds at night than during the day? Would these sounds be different if they lived in a big city, or if they lived in the country?
- As a rat, Joey is the hero of the story. Ask the class how they feel about rats? Did their opinion of rats change after reading the story? Provide students with more information about rats.  
<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/subjects/mammals/rodent/Ratprintout.shtml>. Students can also learn more about rats at <http://easyscienceforkids.com/all-about-rats/>.

### **Math:**

- Squirrelin uses his lair to store food and the offerings that he receives from the rats. Joey is surprised by how much food can fit into Squirrelin’s tree. A jelly bean plays an important role in the story. Discuss what an estimation is. Put together four or five different jars filled with different, pre-determined numbers of jelly beans. These each represent “Squirrelin’s oak” filled with food. Divide students into groups so that there are as many groups as there are jars. Pass the jars around to each group, and have each group guess how many jelly beans are in the jar. After everyone has made their guesses, show students this video to explain that there is a mathematical way to estimate how many jelly beans are in the jars.  
<https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/vtl07.math.number.ope.jellybeans/how-many-jelly-beans/#.WWw77oWcHRM>
- Early in the story, Joey undergoes a transformation and becomes a rat. Take a survey asking each student if they could be transformed into an animal, what kind of animal would they like to be and why. Write down students’ answers, and keep a tally chart on the board. Have the students draw a bar graph or pie chart using the data. Ask the students to use their graph to help visualize the data to answer: Which animal is most popular? Which animal is least popular?

**Social Studies:**

- Use Google Earth to zoom in and show the students where New York City is. Show them New York City on a globe and on a physical map as well. Divide the students into pairs and have them use an Atlas to find: a. the continent of North America; b. the state of New York; and c. New York City. Instruct each student to draw a map of the Lower Realm using the cardinal points of direction and showing specific locations mentioned in the book such as Squirrelin’s oak, the spork in the scone, King Uther’s throne, and Joey’s apartment.
- The rats live in a world filled with trash, and many of the objects that they use are recycled from litter that humans have left behind. Have students complete Discovery Education’s *Treasure in Your Trash* activity.  
[https://www.lifeofacan.com/sites/lifeofacan.com/files/2016-09/Novelis\\_TreasureInYourTrash\\_4.pdf](https://www.lifeofacan.com/sites/lifeofacan.com/files/2016-09/Novelis_TreasureInYourTrash_4.pdf)
- If possible (and if not already in place), with the support of the administration, have your class start a recycling program for the school. For guidelines and suggestions, <http://www.greeneducationfoundation.org/nationalgreenweeksub/start-recycling.html>.

**Vocabulary:**

Arrogance	Duchy	Ovoid	Squire	Varlet
Attribute	Dunce	Prophecy	Stalwart	Vizier
Bravado	Emissaries	Quest	Stripling	Wizened
Bulbous	Feinting	Reeking	Tapestries	Yielding
Capitulation	Liege	Rogue	Tribute	
Doughtier	Mirthlessly	Spindly	Valiant	

**RELATED WEBSITES**

**An Interview with Author Josh Lieb and a Discussion with Jon Stewart about *Ratscalibur***

<http://ew.com/article/2015/04/22/watch-zombie-jon-stewart-and-josh-lieb-discuss-ratscalibur-exclusive/>

Jon Stewart and Josh Lieb talk about *Ratscalibur* and Mr. Lieb’s inspirations for the story.

**The Camelot Project: Artists and Images**

<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/artists>

The University of Rochester’s digital library of resources about King Arthur and Arthurian legend. The “Artists and Images” page provides multiple images and visual interpretations of the Arthurian legends.

**Arthurian Legend**

<http://www.ancientfortresses.org/arthurian-legend.htm>

Explores whether the Arthurian legends are fact or fiction.