

The Case of the Purloined Professor

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Recommended for age: 6-9

Frederick and Ishbu are a pair of brother rats, Frederick loves adventures, likes reading and learning, while Ishbu is interested almost entirely on food and comfort. They are classroom pet rats living in a San Francisco school, but previously had an adventure and faced off against the Big Cheese, a gangster Opossum in the area and his criminal followers: The Bilgewater Brigade. This time, their friend Natasha (Russian rat and Frederick's love interest) shows up with troubling news, her father, a prominent rat scientist, is missing. Frederick sets out with her to investigate the scene of the crime and notices several clues laying around, including a cryptic medal. The two separate and agree to meet at a pet shop. While journeying there, Frederick is ambushed by two rat terriers, Snip and Snarl, who are members of The Bilgewater Brigade. At the same time, worried by his brother's absence, Ishbu decides to go search for him. The two are reunited in Chinatown after Ishbu is seized by ferrets, also members of the gang and is taken to a restaurant where the enemies are gathered. The Big Cheese demands to be taken to Natasha, but none of the characters know where she is. The two are reunited and manage to escape, journeying to the pet shop, where they encounter Natasha along with her British mouse friend, Mo-mo, a pompous, well-spoken show animal. Frederick warns Natasha about the danger, and along with some suspicious spying by Mo-mo, the group finds out that the Big Cheese is in Scotland and that he took the rat professor with him.

The four animals travel in Mo-mo's cage, since his owner is travelling to Switzerland, via Scotland. The trip is uneventful until Frederick realizes that the two rat terriers are on board, he quickly finds out that Mo-mo is part of their gang, and realizes that they are heading for a trap. Before he can do anything, the two brothers are pushed off the airplane.

Landing in the Scottish Highlands, they are rescued by a badger named Duncan, who nurses them back to health and houses them. After finding a banner with the same same lettering as the medal he found in San Francisco, Frederick decides to trust the badger, he explains the reason for the trip. Duncan takes them to a meeting with the Ancient Brotherhood of Badgers, who gave the medal to the professor for help that he provided them in the past. The two rats are initiated into the brotherhood after succeeding in the demanding rite of passage. The group designs a plan to break into the castle where the Big Cheese is holding the two prisoners and a battle ensues, with Ishbu and the badgers fighting the dogs outside while Frederick infiltrates the castle. He finds the cell empty, but combining a message that Natasha left carved in the walls with the label on the collar of one of the dogs, Frederick figures out that the prisoners were taken to Zermatt, at the foot of the Matterhorn in Switzerland. The rats journey through Europe, aided by the lodges of the Brotherhood as they make their way to Zermatt. After help from a raven, a train ride up the Alps and a long journey, they arrive at the Big Cheese's secret factory in a WWII bunker inside the Alps. The two are captured, and reunited with the professor and Natasha, who explain how the former's research into pet foods led to the development of a drug that can control the animal that ingests it, the Big Cheese plans to use this to feed pets and overthrow the humans in the world. Using the drug, the rats trick Mo-mo and escape using a catapult and a paper airplane. They are thrown outside to a blizzard and chased by the Big Cheese on a Dog Sled, Frederick uses his reading abilities to trap the sled with an avalanche and the group returns home. The professor destroys the formula for the drug and returns to Russia along with his daughter.

The book was a clever adventure story, although there were gaps in reasoning, and the pacing is somewhat off. There is a lot of text devoted to the exposition, with around 11 chapters taking place in

San Francisco. Later, the journey through Europe is described in a matter of 3 paragraphs. That really hinders the resolution, and the ease with which the rats escape the bunker might be slightly disappointing for readers that stuck with the story. Another problem is the over-emphasis on Ishbu's gluttony, while it is changed slightly in one moment of heroism in Scotland, the character is most of all a bother, who grumbles about cake while the other brother moves at 10,000 miles per our. The fact that Ishbu follows him is hard to believe as a result. The European animals were stereotyped from speech to appearance, something that might be fun for older readers, but the accents and names might be too much for the younger ones. The other large issue is the ambiguity on how much human qualities the animals have. There is an alleged animal language, but they also understand human languages. They eat traditional rat food, but a French rat is able to make coffee, cake and ratatouille. All of these discrepancies slightly weaken the animal world, which causes Frederick to be an almost human character, only distinguished by his keen smell.

This would be a good book to read out loud to the younger children and possibly integrate lessons, the mention of San Francisco Chinatown, Scotland, the Matterhorn and the European characters can help introduce children to new concepts and are valuable, due to the connections that Frederick makes all throughout the story to the lessons that Miss Dove teaches her 5th graders.

Recommended Readings:

Basil of Baker Street by Eve Titus

Redwall by Brian Jacques

Pet Detective by Patricia Guiver

The Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo