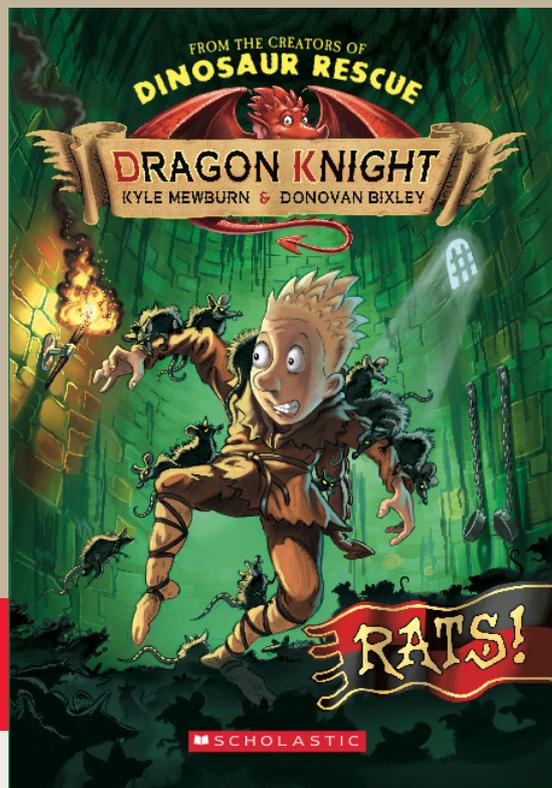


Dragon Knight: Rats!

Text by Kyle Mewburn

Illustrations by Donovan Bixley

- Reading • Writing • Visual Literacy
- Listening • Art • Health



About the Book

Dragon Knight: Rats! is the second title in a hilarious new series for young readers. The book's adventurous hero, Merek, lives in a medieval village and is training to become a knight. He has a big problem, however: he's a dragon, and dragons and people are mortal enemies. Merek and his parents are shape-shifting dragons displaced from their cave home by zealous knights. They are hiding among humans just to stay alive. On this dramatic day, Merek is in class with the other trainee knights and their eccentric old teacher, Sir Gerry. When Sir Gerry takes them through the castle kitchens, the stench affects Merek terribly because dragons are very sensitive to smells. He needs to rush from the room, but ends up stuck in a disgusting slop hole, and must transform himself into a cockroach to escape. Eventually, he rejoins his classmates, only to hear Sir Gerry telling terrible tales about dragons and how he once slew a particularly dangerous one. At this point, Merek's mum, disguised as a wasp, chases Sir Gerry away and then nearly roasts Merek's best friend Brin alive. Merek's next class is weapons practice, and he ends up hitting a cabbage sky high, only to have it land on the head of the tyrannical Lord Crumble. This is how Merek ends up in a rat-filled castle dungeon. It is only by using his dragon skills that he is able to escape.

About the Author and Illustrator

Kyle Mewburn is the author of more than 40 children's books. His works have been published in nine countries and have won numerous awards. His titles include *Old Hu-Hu* (winner of the 2010 New Zealand Post Children's Book of the Year award), *Kiss! Kiss! Yuck! Yuck!* (Best Picture Book and Children's Choice winners at the 2008 NZ Post Book Awards) and *Melu* (Children's Choice winner at the 2013 NZ Post Book Awards). He is also the author of the popular series *Dinosaur Rescue*, his first collaboration with Donovan Bixley. Originally from Brisbane, Kyle now lives with his wife in Central Otago.

Donovan Bixley is a talented artist with a wide range of styles. His work brings another dimension to Mewburn's text, often adding additional humour to enhance the storyline. Donovan has illustrated a number of picture books with Scholastic, including *Phoebe and the Night Creatures*, and the popular Kiwi titles *Wacko Kakapo* and *The Tuatara and the Skink*, as well as *Monkey Boy*, his debut comic novel as both an author and an illustrator. Donovan lives with his wife and family in Taupo.

Writing Style

The *Dragon Knight* series comprises hilarious junior novels that will appeal to young boys (and plenty of young girls) in the 7-to-10 age group. Large dollops of disgusting details and toilet humour will make the most reluctant reader eager to turn the page. These 96-page novels based on fact and fantasy are set in the Middle Ages. They are broken into chapters, and every two-page spread is brought alive with action-packed illustrations. There are also plenty of maps and humour-filled 'fact' boxes that allow young readers to learn about many aspects of non-fiction text in a fun way. *Rats!* begins at the most dramatic part of the story (Merek is being thrown into a dungeon full of starving rats), and then goes back in time to explain how the situation developed. It is written in the past tense with short, highly descriptive sentences, full of both gore and humour.



Shared Learning and Discussion Points

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

- Look at the characters on pages 6 and 7. Why is it useful to have a page like this when you are reading a book with lots of chapters? Which characters look like good people, and which ones look like the baddies? How can you tell?
- Why do you think hungry rats are a bigger problem than well-fed rats? (p.9)
- How does the author describe the sights, smells and temperature of the dungeon? What sounds do you think you might hear in a dungeon? (pp.10–11)
- Read the speech bubbles that begin ‘*Make sure you have sunny open windows ...*’ and ‘*Keep your dungeon cosy and inviting ...*’. Where might you normally see or hear sentences that start like this? What makes these sentences funny when you continue reading? (pp.10–11)
- Why has Merek been put in the dungeon? What do these pages tell us? What else do they hint at? (pp.12–13)
- In the modern world, *night school* is somewhere people take evening classes. What do you think *Knight School* might be? What subjects are taught there? (pp.12–13)
- Read the gruesome facts about rats. What is the most amazing fact? What is the most disgusting fact? (pp.14–15)
- Merek’s teacher, Sir Gerry has had many accidents. Why might this be? Would meeting Sir Gerry make you want to be a knight? Why? (pp.16–17)
- How do the four illustrations on pages 18 and 19 follow the events in the text?
- What happened to the pigeon? (p.20)
- Do Merek and Brin want to do the same things on the field trip? How does the author tell us? How does the illustrator tell us? (p.21)
- What sort of student is Percy? What do the other students think of him? Look at their expressions. (pp.22–23)
- How does Sir Gerry teach his students to stay on guard? Why is this an important lesson for a knight? (p.24)
- How did Sir Gerry know what Percy was doing behind his back? (p.25)
- Most of the weapons on pages 26 and 27 were once real weapons. However, the Trojan dragon idea comes from an ancient myth about a similar weapon. What was the real weapon? Do you know the story? (If possible, elicit or tell the story of the Trojan horse.)
- Why does Merek find the kitchen smells harder to bear than the other children? How would you cope in those kitchens? (pp.28–29)
- Why is the kitchen such a dangerous place for Merek? What might happen to him if he fainted? (p.30)
- The last line on page 31 reads: *Just in time*. What might this mean? Just in time for what?
- What does the author describe the putrid stench of the air as smelling like? How does the illustrator show us this same idea? (p.33)
- In medieval times waste was just dumped nearby or into local streams. What was the problem with that? What happens to our waste these days? (pp.34–35)
- Why does Merek suddenly find the smell delicious instead of disgusting? (p.37)
- Look at the map on pages 38 and 39. Where is the garderobe? Where is the moat? How might the moat become polluted?
- What different shapes can Merek take on? How might having two hearts help him? (p.40)
- All plundered gold is meant to be sent to the King. Why, then, were the knights taking it into Lord Crumble’s castle? (p.42)
- The Barbarians are the enemy. Does this make them the bad guys? Are Lord Crumble’s knights the good guys? What about the King’s knights? (pp.42–43)
- What do you think caused the rumbling noise? What caused the horrible stench? (pp.44–45)
- What did the students think ‘field trip’ meant? What did Sir Gerry mean by ‘field trip’? (p.47)
- Merek was frightened for a different reason than his fellow students. Why were they scared? Why was Merek scared? (pp.48–49)
- The name Sir Cumference is a pun, or joke. Can you work it out? (circumference) What about Sir Gerry? (surgery) (p.50)
- How do you think Merek feels when Sir Gerry says terrible things about dragons. Does Sir Gerry know what he’s talking about? (pp.50–51)
- (Help the students understand the Totgobbler tapestry on pages 52 and 53 by telling them about the Bayeux Tapestry. They might enjoy this clip that animates the tapestry: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtGoBZ4D4_E)
- Why do you think the wasp attacks only Sir Gerry? (p.54)
- Why do you think the medieval people misunderstood dragons? Do we ever misunderstand other creatures or people today? (pp.56–57)
- What was the Totgobbler dragon’s true story? (p.59)
- Why is Merek’s mum angry? What is she worried about? (pp.60–61)
- Is Brin right to be confident, or is Merek right to be worried? (p.65)



- What might the cabbages be used for? (p.67)
- What disguise is Merek's dad using? (p.71)
- How does Merek save his dad? Why might Merek himself be in danger? (p.77)
- Why does Merek think he's going to get away with hitting Lord Crumble with a cabbage? (p.79)
- Why doesn't he get away with it? What does this tell us about Percy? (p.80)
- How might this part of the story link with the start? (p.81)
- Why don't the rats attack Merek? How does he communicate with them? What do they want? (pp.86–87)
- How do Merek and the rats escape? (pp.90–91)
- Why does the guard want to keep what happened a secret? (p.93)
- Why was it a bad idea to make fun of Percy? (p.95)
- What do you think could happen in the next book in this series? Why? (p.96)

Activities

ACTIVITY 1: IS HE RIGHT TO BE A KNIGHT?

On page 60, Merek's mum says she wants Merek to leave Knight School because it is too dangerous. On page 65, Brin suggests that Merek was born to be a knight. Briefly discuss these opposing points of view. Then, using the topic: *Merek should stay at Knight School*, either:

- hold a class debate
- write persuasive letters to Merek, encouraging him to either stay or leave
- create pros and cons lists. This could be done in pairs or in groups. The groups could then share their ideas in order to create class lists.

At the end, hold a class vote on whether Merek should leave or stay.

ACTIVITY 2: HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT

Discuss how we have many health and safety rules in the modern world. Talk about the reasons for these rules. Then discuss how health inspectors examine restaurants and food stores to check how clean they are. Mention that these places get a rating, such as A+ for excellence. Also mention that some places are shut down if they are not clean enough.

Now, talk about how there were no health inspectors in medieval times. Encourage the students to think about the things a health inspector would criticise if they examined Lord Crumble's castle. Start a list on the whiteboard.

Next, encourage the students to imagine that they are a castle health inspector who has been transported back in time to the Middle Ages. Tell them they are going to write a report about Lord Crumble's castle, listing the things that are not up to modern standards. They can also make recommendations and give the castle a grade. Work with the students who find this task especially challenging. Then check the students' drafts before they construct final versions that can be displayed on the classroom wall.

ACTIVITY 3: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME STORY

As a class, discuss the two stories about Totgobbler, or Crinklewings (pp.52–53 and p.59). Talk about how Sir Gerry saw the dragon as a terrible beast threatening people's lives, and how Merek's mum saw the same dragon as a good friend who was horribly murdered.

Discuss the concept of different perspectives. Compare these stories with the different ways humans and tigers might view tiger hunting, or the way the two sides in a battle might view one another.

Pair the students and assign one to write a story from the point of view of a medieval knight and another from the point of view of a dragon. They will need to work together to plan their stories so the events match. Use modelling or shared writing to demonstrate planning such a dual plot.

ACTIVITY 4: WORD ART

Introduce the students to onomatopoeia (words that have a meaning similar to their sound). Discuss words such as *bang*, *whisper*, *slip*, *thunder*, *clang*, *clip clop*, *splash* and *screech*. Create a class list, and encourage the students to add any words they know.

Discuss the way onomatopoeic words in *Rats!* are styled. See pages: 12, 18, 20, 37, 41, 44, 45, 54–55, 70, 91 and 95.

Then, ask the students to each choose an onomatopoeic word from the class list. They can then write a sentence involving a character from *Rats!* and their chosen word. For example:

There was a loud **splash** as Percy fell into the slops.

Breena's horse **clip-clopped** along the cobblestones.

Once all the students have a suitable sentence, allow them to write it on a piece of art paper. The onomatopoeic word should be larger than the other words and styled to match its meaning. The students can then illustrate their sentence.

Allow the students to share their finished work with the class.

Written by Mary Atkinson



teacher toolkit

 SCHOLASTIC