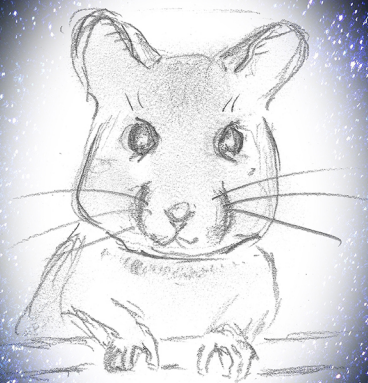


How Mother Rat Invented the World

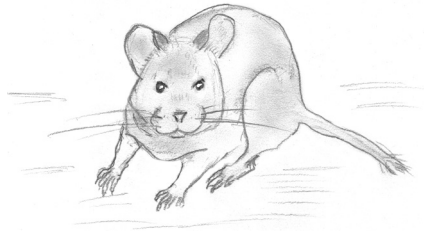
A Fanciful Tale
About Creation,
Love, Serendipity,
Rats, and Other
Serious Subjects



William Stubblefield
Illustrations by Merry Stubblefield

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*We dedicate this book to all the animals
and plants who make our home on this planet
beautiful, life-giving, and irreplaceable, and to
all the people who work to protect them.*

A long time ago, before the sun, the moon, the stars—even before the Earth and sky existed—Mother Rat lived in the workshop. It is impossible to tell precisely how long ago it was, since there was no sun rising and setting to let us count the days, nor was there a moon changing from a shining white disk to a half-circle, to a smiling crescent, to a shadow in the night sky, and back again to let us count the months. Most importantly, since the sun, moon, stars, sky, and Earth did not exist, there were no people to do the counting. There were no clocks or calendars since there were no people to make or look at them. All we can do is call it “a long time ago” and continue with our story.

The problems with this missing “when” don’t stop there. Without “when,” the events surrounding Mother Rat and the world’s invention could not arrange themselves in the logical order



*Mother Rat lived in
the workshop*

storytelling requires. They either happened all at once or didn't happen at all. You'll have to decide for yourself which is true, but either case makes storytelling impossible. As the author of this tale, I'll pretend things happened in a way that makes the story easy to tell, which is what writers always do, anyway.

However, the missing "when" is the least of our worries in telling Mother Rat's story. Since the world did not exist, there was no "where" either. We can't say the Old Man and Woman's workshop was down the road that followed the river around the mountains into a green valley because there were no roads, rivers, mountains, or valleys—green or otherwise. We can't say it was on the corner where a wide avenue filled with cars met a quiet street lined with houses, trees, lawns, and children riding bicycles because there were no streets—either busy or quiet—no cars, no houses, and certainly no children with bicycles to live on them.

We could say the workshop was everywhere and nowhere at the same time, but such things are terribly hard to think about. They can give the smartest people headaches if they think about them for too long. We call people who like to think about such things scientists or philosophers, and they often have headaches.

But there was the Old Man, the Old Woman, and the workshop with its workbench, cabinets, and chalkboard, and living among them was a contented, practical Mother Rat, her children, and her friend Blue Jay. This is enough to start our story, and I hope you'll find it worth the time you will spend reading it—now that time does indeed exist.



Mother Rat lived in her nest underneath a cabinet by the wall, from where she could watch the Old Man and Woman go about their work. If days had existed, hers would have been much like the days enjoyed by rats today—filled with practical business, such as waiting for the Old Man to leave the workshop so she could steal bits of cheese or lettuce from the half-eaten sandwiches he often left behind or enjoying the pieces of apple and nuts the Old Woman left for her when the Old Man wasn't around.



Mother Rat and her children at home

When she wasn't busy, Mother Rat enjoyed talking to her friend Blue Jay, who perched either in the rafters above the workshop or between the lace curtains on the windowsill over the workbench from where he could steal bits of food from the Old Man's lunch. Blue Jay was an abundant source of gossip about events in



Blue Jay with the old man's lunch

the workshop, although Mother Rat wondered if his stories—while entertaining—were anything more than made-up tales.

But her favorite pastimes were sleeping in her cozy nest with her three children—Elizabeth, Lucy, and Charlie—tucked snugly against the soft fur of her stomach or searching the workshop for shiny things to add to the collection she kept in her nest underneath the cabinet. You see, Mother Rat was no ordinary rat. Mother Rat was a packrat. Had she known about the many types of rats that were to evolve from the trick she and the Old Woman were about to play on the Old Man, she would have known she was different from water rats, white rats, field rats, house rats, and the brown rats we sometimes see in our larger cities. Instead of

a long, pointed face like the other rats, Mother Rat's face was softly rounded, giving her a sweet, inquisitive appearance. Instead of having a long, hairless tail, hers was covered with lovely fur, which made her very proud. What is most important to our story was that—besides doing ordinary rat things like eating, sleeping, and caring for her children—she had an overwhelming urge to find shiny objects and bring them to her nest.

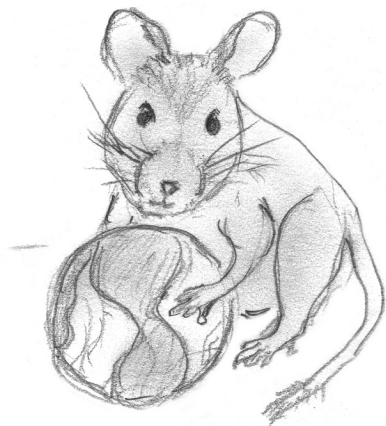
Admittedly, this is an impractical thing for such an ordinarily practical creature to do, but for reasons no one knows, packrats do this impractical thing, and it is an essential part of our story. Mother Rat loved to stare at the bright treasures she'd found around the workshop. She would watch them shine until the soft snores of the little rats snuggled against her tummy lulled her to sleep to dream of apples and nuts, crusts of bread, baby rats, and all the bright things she might find when she awoke.



Dreaming of bright things

As any old man can tell you, packrats find workshops to be perfect places to search for shiny objects since they are filled with so many of them. For example, my workshop is filled with nails, bolts, nuts, washers, screws, and other bits of polished metal that have lured the occasional packrat to my workbench. Sometimes I may drop an old mason jar full of nails or screws, and

pieces of broken glass will wind up under the workbench where I can't clean them up. Packrats prize these bits of broken glass because nothing catches the light as well as they. Since packrats do this impractical thing, a workshop is a practical place in which to do it.



Mother Rat and her bright treasures

Of course, the Old Man and Old Woman's workshop did not have nails, bolts, washers, or pieces of broken glass since none of these things existed. Instead, they worked with stardust, swirling bright mists, dancing dots of light, bits of spinning rock, and particles with strange names like quarks, leptons, and bosons that

came from nowhere and usually went back to nowhere before Mother Rat could steal them. She would spend hours watching the Old Man mix these together in different combinations or watching the Old Woman fill her chalkboard with strings of numbers and symbols she called "equations." Once, when neither the Old Man nor the Old Woman was in the workshop, Mother Rat asked Blue Jay why they worked so hard.

"They're trying to create a universe," Blue Jay snickered, pulling a slice of tomato from the sandwich the Old Man had absent-mindedly left on the workbench.

Mother Rat thought about this while turning an exceptionally brilliant piece of stardust over in her paws. "What's a universe?"

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"A long time ago, before the sun, the moon, the stars—even before the Earth and sky existed—Mother Rat lived in the workshop."

The opening words of *How Mother Rat Invented the World* tell of a workshop that existed outside of space and time, but to Mother Rat, a very practical packrat, it was simply the home she shared with her three children, her friend Blue Jay, and the Old Man and Woman. For a long time—although since time did not yet exist, we cannot say how long—the Old Man and Woman struggled to create a universe. But, despite all their knowledge of physics and mathematics, all their care and hard work, something was missing from their creation's vast, shining clockwork—until Mother Rat showed them the importance of chance, diversity, imagination, and love in making a world we all can share.

Mother Rat's story is a secular creation myth, a love letter to science and invention, a celebration of nature, and a children's story for everyone, no matter their age, who embraces imagination, an open heart, and an enduring sense of wonder.

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