



## Sewer Rats

Sigmund Brouwer

Interest level: ages ten to fourteen

Reading level: 2.7

978-1-55143-488-9 PB

978-1-55143-527-5 LIB

AR Quiz # 106553

### Book Summary

Jim, Micky and Lisa belong to a secret club called the Sewer Rats. Every Saturday, the Sewer Rats reign supreme in paintball wars held in the city's storm drain system. A new kid, Carter, wants to join, but Lisa doesn't want him in the club. When Carter is hurt in his first paintball war, Jim and Micky suspect that Lisa planned the accident. They try to confront her, but she runs into the tunnels just as a rainstorm begins. Jim and Micky have to get Lisa out before the tunnels fill with water.

### Author Biography

**Sigmund Brouwer** is the best-selling author of many books for children and young adults and is an active literacy advocate. Sigmund enjoys the chance to visit schools to talk to students about reading and writing. Also available by Sigmund Brouwer through Orca Book Publishers is *Wired*. Several titles in the Orca Sports series will be available soon.

## Connecting to the Text

### Story Setting and Reading Comprehension

The setting gives the story a context in which the events of the story can unfold. The Sewer Rats—Jim, Lisa, Micky, Carter and Al and Dave Cooper—play paintball war games in a series of storm drain tunnels under the streets.

1. Ask students to work in small groups to complete one of the following options. Students will need to draw from the text in order to complete this exercise.
  - Map: Draw a map of the Bell Park and the tunnels, complete a glossary identifying the symbols and elements of the map. The map should include references to the story; for example, a reference to the place where Carter was hit, or where Lisa got stuck. Present your map to the class, explaining the main features and elements of your map.
  - Rule Book: Make a set of rules for the Sewer Rats' paintball game. Write a short paragraph giving an overview of how the game works, followed by a list of four key points to the game. What are the boundaries and time limits? What are considered fair hits? What disqualifies players? When do you know if you've won? Present your rule book to the class as though they have never heard of this game before.
  - Strategy and Checklist: Imagine your team is preparing to play paintball in the tunnels against the Sewer Rats team. Draw up a strategy you will use, naming two things you will do as a team to beat the Sewer Rats. Include a checklist of items that each player must bring with them. Present your strategies to the class. Explain why you chose each item on your checklist.

### Foreshadowing

Use of foreshadowing helps build suspense and keeps us interested in the story as it unfolds.

1. Divide the class into small groups. Have each group choose one example of foreshadowing found in *Sewer Rats* from the list below. Follow the plotline through the story to see how it takes shape. Have students storyboard its development either by making a point-form list or by drawing pictures of the events.
  - (p. 4) *[Lisa's] frown told me it would also be stupid to ask why she hated the new kid so much.*
  - (p. 12) *"Nice try, McClosky," she said, smiling. "I know you're joking. I also know you have a great imagination. Ever dream of writing stories?"*

- (p. 21) *A one-hour rainstorm might not sound like much, but after a few minutes thousands and thousands of little streams empty into the tunnels. It adds up. Fast. In fact, after a couple hours of rain, the main tunnel that drains into Bell Park is a solid pipeline of fast-moving water as high as a person's waist.*
- (p. 24) *"And Lisa, make sure you don't get lost."  
We always teased Lisa about the fact that she wasn't good with directions. Actually, I thought Lisa was brave to go into the tunnels even though she might get lost.*
- (p. 55) *Once, and only once, Micky had spoken to me about his Dad: a cop at a car accident. He went into a burning car to rescue a woman. The car had exploded. Micky thought heroes were useless.*

2. Once completed, have students present their storyboards and discuss each as a group.

### Vocabulary Building

The following words were used in *Sewer Rats* in the context of the paintball game between the Sewer Rats and the Medford gang.

1. Ask students to write a paragraph, letter or journal entry using six or more of the following words or phrases below.

army recruiting poster    march    at ease    battle    operation  
"Move out, men"    boundaries    salute    Cadets    soldiers    crew cut

### Character Description

Even brief descriptions can tell us about a character. The following are descriptions of the main characters in *Sewer Rats*. These descriptions are given to us early in the story, before we really know much about the characters; they are our first impression of them:

- Carter    (p. 3) *He wore black jeans, a black T-shirt and black Nikes.*  
Jim    (p. 10) *I'm skinny and dark-haired, with a big nose that's always stuck in a science fiction book...I'm short too. Really short.*  
Al & Dave    (p. 14) *...are tall, skinny, redheaded and hardly ever speak.*  
Lisa    (p. 10) *...is blond and pretty in a tough-looking way.*  
Micky    (p. 10) *He has a crew cut, square face and big shoulders.*

1. As a group, discuss the following:
  - What can you guess about the characters by these brief descriptions?
  - If these descriptions were of new kids in your class, what could you guess about what they are like?
  - Pose alternate descriptions of these characters—a description that is opposite or very different—how does our sense of the character change?
  - How does the way we choose to present ourselves (our hair style, the way we dress, our body language, facial expressions, etc.) send a message to others about what we're like? What are other people's first impressions of us?
2. Ask each student to write a brief physical description of a well-known celebrity, musician or sports figure, using no more than ten words. Ask the students to read their descriptions aloud. See if the rest of the class can guess who they described.

***Connecting to the Story—Chapter by Chapter***

1. Using the model below ask students, working either individually, in pairs, to answer the questions in two stages: first, as they finish reading each chapter (encourage students to guess, based on what they know so far); and second, after they have finished the book.
2. Hold a group discussion to compare the students' findings. How did their understanding of the story change the further into the book they got? Did early foreshadowing used in the story help them guess some of the answers?

Chapter Questions	After reading the chapter, what can you <i>guess</i> is the answer?	After reading the book, what do you now <i>know</i> is the answer?
1 Why does Carter want to join the Sewer Rats?		
2 Why does Carter take all the blame for the incident at the sewage lagoon?		
3 Lisa gets Carter into a lot of trouble. Why isn't Carter mad at Lisa?		
4 Why don't they play paintball wars if it looks like rain?		
5 Who do you think will win the paintball war between the Sewer Rats and the Medford gang?		
6 How does Jimmy's "mind map" help him while he's in the tunnels?		
7 Jimmy hears "a loud scream of pain." Whose voice does he hear?		
8 At the end of the chapter, Jimmy shouts "Micky, Micky!" What will happen next?		
9 Jimmy feels like he has seen Carter's father before. Where could he know him from?		

Chapter Questions	After reading the chapter, what can you <i>guess</i> is the answer?	After reading the book, what do you now <i>know</i> is the answer?
10 Although Carter has only just moved to town, Lisa clearly hates him. Why?		
11 Lisa runs deep into the tunnels just as there is a “crack of lightning” and it begins to pour. What is going to happen to Lisa?		
12 Why does Micky say, “Heroes are stupid. Dead heroes are even stupider”?		
13 Do you think Jimmy and Micky will be able to save Lisa? How will they do it?		
14 Jimmy stays to help Lisa while Micky runs for help. Where will Micky go?		
15 Lisa confesses why she hated Carter so much. If Lisa is saved, do you think she and Carter can ever be friends?		
16 Jimmy said he “couldn’t believe the heat and pain of broken bones.” What happened?		
17 Why does Mrs. Pohl believe in Jimmy?		
18 Why doesn’t Jimmy need Zantor anymore?		

## Connecting to the Curriculum

### Science and Social Studies

The setting for *Sewer Rats* is the water drainage tunnels that run under the streets:

(p. 21) *Running through the middle of Bell Park was a drainage ditch that led to the river. At the bottom of the big hill that looked down on Bell Park, a big tunnel emptied into this drainage ditch. The tunnel was connected to the entire drainage system below the streets.*

*It was a big system, a whole maze of tunnels.*

*The main purpose of the tunnels is to collect water. When it rains, water drains into street gutters. The small streams in the gutters reach grates and drop into the tunnels below the streets.*

Exercises to present to students:

1. As a class project, contact your local municipality, county, city hall or local government offices and ask how the rainwater in your community is handled. If possible, take a field trip to a water treatment station or sewage facility, or ask a city worker who specializes in this field to visit your class. Have students prepare questions ahead of time.
2. Consider where the water goes when it rains; in particular, the rainwater that falls on your school. If possible, take a brief walking tour around your school, asking students to point out manhole covers, ditches, grates and storm drains. Draw a map showing the path of rainwater where your school is: where does it go in your neighborhood?
3. As a class, participate in a community service project by stencil-painting on storm drains in your neighborhood.  
For ideas and resources, see [www.protectingwater.com/storm-drains.html](http://www.protectingwater.com/storm-drains.html).
4. As a class, brainstorm all the things that go into storm drains and pollute the water. For example, leaves, garbage, car oils, etc. Brainstorm ideas to avoid this water pollution.

### Drama

1. Divide the class into small groups, and ask students to improvise skits based on key scenes from *Sewer Rats*. Have students create their own scenarios or choose from the examples below:
  - Lisa and Jimmy are in the tunnel, waiting for Micky to return with help. The water is slowly rising around them. What do they talk about while they're waiting? What emotions do they experience?

- Mrs. Pohl is talking to Jimmy, Lisa and Micky the day after Lisa and Jimmy were saved in the tunnel. The kids are telling Mrs. Pohl what happened. How do they describe the experience? What is Mrs. Pohl's response?
- Micky talks with his Mom after he saves Lisa and Jimmy in the tunnel. How does he feel about heroes now? How does he feel about his Dad now?
- Imagine Lisa and Carter getting together after Lisa and Jimmy are saved in the tunnel. What will Lisa say to Carter about how she treated him in the past? Can they be friends now?

### Map Making

Jimmy is able to visualize a “mind map” to find his way around in the dark tunnels.

(p. 36) *For some reason, I am good at making maps in my head. All I do is pretend I'm a bird looking down. I keep track of turns and twists, and I never get lost in the tunnels.*

Map Making Exercises for Students:

1. Ask students to draw a map of the route they take each day from home to school. Have local city and community maps available for them to peruse. Each student's map should have a title and a north arrow. Each map should use symbols and a glossary which defines the symbols.
2. Ask students to draw a map of their school. Each student's map should have a title and a north arrow. Each map should use symbols and a glossary which defines the symbols. Give students a list of main areas in the school that they should include on their maps (school office, library, cafeteria, their locker, gym, entrance, parking lot, etc.).

Option: Once finished, have students indicate their daily routine on the school map using a dotted line to represent their steps.

### Connecting to the Students—Ideas for Discussion and Exploration

#### Reflection and Personal Planning

Early in the story, the main characters in *Sewer Rats* (Jimmy, Lisa and Micky) are called dysfunctional by some of their teachers and losers by a police officer. However, when they are truly challenged, they each prove to be courageous and thoughtful of others. Later, they are called heroes.

1. Post the following quotations around the room. Ask students to walk around the room and take a moment to reflect on each, keeping in mind where each fits in the story, and also in a wider context—is there one quotation/theme that fits in their own lives? Ask students to choose one of the quotations and write a journal entry about it, answering the question on the right.

*I read somewhere that as people age they get the face they deserve. Crabby people have a face that looks crabby from all the hours and hours spent with a crabby expression on their face. Mean people get a mask of a face with all their meanness settled right into it. I think there's some truth in it.* [Jimmy] pages 8–9

Based on what you know about Jimmy, what will his face look like when he's an old man? What will it tell us about his life? What will yours look like?

*It makes me angry when a police officer comes into this school and calls all of you losers. It makes me angry when I hear other people say it too. Because I know it's not true. You are not losers...I just wish you kids would figure that out before it's too late.* [Miss Pohl] page 10

What does Miss Pohl mean when she says “before it's too late”?  
How can you use this advice in your own life?

*It doesn't matter where a person comes from...What really matters is where a person chooses to go. Believe me, after all my years of teaching, I've seen a lot of kids grow up. Some have all the advantages—great family, money and connections—and choose to do nothing. Other kids face every and any obstacle you can imagine and choose to do what it takes to reach their dreams. And they succeed.* [Miss Pohl] page 99

What does Miss Pohl mean when she says they do “whatever it takes to reach their dreams”? What are your dreams? Can you do whatever it takes to reach them?

*School's an important step in following those dreams...Even when you don't enjoy every minute of it, you can use what you learn in school as a foundation for all the great things you want to accomplish later in life.* [Miss. Pohl] page 100

How can Jimmy use his experience in school to become “a great writer”?  
How can your experience in school help you achieve your dreams?

### **Coping with Stress**

Jimmy has a pretend world, which he uses to cope with stressful and fearful situations. He imagines he is Zantor, soldier of the galaxy. When he pretends to be Zantor, the “spiders of panic” in his stomach go away.

1. Post two flipcharts in the room or divide the blackboard into two columns. Title one “What Stresses Us Out” and the other “Ways to Deal/Cope.” Assign or elect two scribes to record the findings of the group.
  - Brainstorm situations that are fearful or stressful, such as the first day of school, the first day on a new job, moving to a new neighborhood, feeling pressure from friends, taking a test in school, relationships with parents, struggling with homework, etc. Record these on the first chart.
  - Then brainstorm ideas for ways to cope in these situations, such as: deep breathing, imagining you are a superhero or are somewhere peaceful, journal writing, squeezing a tension ball, shooting some baskets, lobbing a tennis ball against a wall, going for a walk or jogging, or talking it out with friends.

Option: Collect enough ideas on ways to cope so that each student can take one and make a small poster out of it. Display these posters around the room.

### **Groups, Belonging and Fitting In**

The Sewer Rats don’t fit in with other kids their age and are looked at as outsiders. Some of their teachers call them dysfunctional and a police officer calls them losers.

(p. 17) *When people called us losers, it just made our group stronger.*

(p. 18) *“Come on,” I said. “You guys are friends. Think of all the times you’ve helped each other in the tunnels.”*

1. As a class consider/discuss the need for youth to belong to a group while at school or in their home life. Introduce into the discussion groups and clubs that adults belong to as well.

Have students consider the following:

- Why do you think the characters Jimmy, Lisa, Micky and the Cooper twins are friends? What do they get from and give to each other?
- What do you imagine these characters growing up to be? Do you think they will stay friends when they are adults? Why or why not?
- Are there distinct student groups (cliques, teams, etc.) in your school? Describe the central element of each group. What brings the students in the group together? Brainstorm ways that these groups can have negative or positive effects.

- Are there youth clubs in your school that you might want to try out? (For example, a drama club, after-school club, sports team, etc.) If so, how can you find out about them?
2. As a group, agree upon an idea for a new club for your class or school. For example, a drama club, reading club, story circle, homework help club, a crazy hat club, etc. Brainstorm the necessary steps to organize this club in your class or school.

Option: Students may wish to do this activity in pairs or small groups. Ask students to list the steps necessary in establishing their new club. Have each present their findings to the large group, answering the following questions:

- Do you have permission to start a club?
- What is the club about? (You may wish to give the club a name, slogan, etc.)
- Where will the club meet?
- When will the club meet?
- How long will the club meet for? (A few meetings, over the school year, etc.)
- How will you get new members?
- Will there be a leader? (You may wish to rotate leaders)
- What will you talk about at your first meeting? (You may wish to make an agenda)
- How will they know if your group is successful?

### **Web Resources**

**[www.protectingwater.com/storm-drains.html](http://www.protectingwater.com/storm-drains.html)**

Ideas, information and resources on water pollution, water protection and service projects, including Adopt A Stream and storm drain stencil painting. See tab “Your Area” for a list of state resources.

**[www.epa.gov/](http://www.epa.gov/)**

United States Environmental Protection Agency. Includes many educational resources including basic environmental concepts and teaching aids.

**[www.ec.gc.ca/water/e\\_main.html](http://www.ec.gc.ca/water/e_main.html)**

Government of Canada’s Freshwater Website (Environment Canada). Includes fresh water maps, quick facts and a “Teacher’s Corner” with lots of ideas and resources.