

The Story of Mrs. Jones and Her Vacuum Cleaner

Please read the following excerpt from a popular children's book. Note that the narrative is told from the point of view of a super-intelligent rat!

I was reminded of a story I had read at the Boniface Estate when I was looking for things written about rats. It was about a woman in a small town who bought a vacuum cleaner. Her name was Mrs. Jones, and up until then she, like all of her neighbors, had kept her house spotlessly clean by using a broom and a mop. But the vacuum cleaner did it faster and better, and soon Mrs. Jones was the envy of all the other housewives in town—so they bought vacuum cleaners too.

The vacuum cleaner business was so brisk, in fact, that the company that made them opened a branch factory in town. The factory used a lot of electricity, of course, and so did the women with their vacuum cleaners, so the local electric power company had to put up a big new plant to keep them all running. In its furnaces, the power plant burned coal, and out of its chimneys black soot poured day and night, blanketing the town with soot and making all the floors dirtier than ever. Still, by working twice as hard and twice as long, the women of the town were able to keep their floors almost as clean as they had before Mrs. Jones ever bought a vacuum cleaner in the first place.

The story was part of a book of essays, and the reason I had read it so eagerly was that it was called the "Rat Race"¹—which, I learned, means a race where, no matter how fast you run, you don't get anywhere. But there was nothing in the book about rats, and I felt bad about the title because it was a *people race*, and no sensible rats would ever do anything so foolish!

¹O'Brien, Robert C. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. New York: Atheneum, 1971, pp. 169-170.