

ERIC BOGOSIAN TALKS HIS WAY UP, UP, UP, BY PETER BLAUNER
MICE AND THE MIDDLE CLASS • CHRISTMAS BOOKS AND RECORDS

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58 Middle-Class Mice

BY MELINDA BLAU

Mice can invade any apartment: No one is too neat, too clean, or too rich to have them. Once indoors, mice travel vertically and horizontally, on wires, around pipes and cables, under floorboards, and over dropped ceilings. Mice aren't cute or harmless: They are capable of stripping a stove or refrigerator of its insulation. And they multiply rapidly. "There's no



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AND HOW TO GET RID OF THEM

BY

MELINDA BLAU

MICE HAVE CHANGED MY LIFE. I remember what it was like when it was safe to leave the Brie out to breathe, when I could eat rye bread without the dark seeds' making me queasy. Those were the days when I'd hear friends complain of rustlings behind the stove and—reeking with arrogance—simply couldn't picture myself having to deal with anything like that.

Neither could most people in my building, an early-eighties co-op conversion in the West Village whose shareholders had paid anywhere from \$100,000 to \$800,000 for a piece of downtown chic.

The first scurrying rodent was sighted last June. Within a few months, one of my neighbors had found a dead mouse in her dishwasher and another had discovered a nest of babies in an old pair of Frye boots. A penthouse owner was skeptical of these tales until, late one night, he felt something furry underfoot as he padded off to the bathroom; when he turned on the light, that something zipped across the floor in a black blur.

Most of us had similarly revolting experiences. A six-year-old on the first floor

stared open-mouthed as his mother, wielding a hefty piece of firewood, dealt the fatal blows to a mouse struggling knee-deep in a glue trap. (He's had nightmares ever since, but they're no worse than hers.) Another mom dropped a seemingly dazed mouse into the toilet for a burial at sea—but only after several flushings did the little bugger stop swimming.

Practically everybody spotted furry gray objects skidding at breakneck speed across the oak floors. We found small, dark, rod-shaped droppings on countertops, in bath towels, behind baker's racks stocked with cereals, in toasters and stoves, in closets, and behind almost everything. Worst of all was the acrid scent of rodent urine: Like the mice, it was everywhere.

This is a cautionary tale for other smug New Yorkers who think they're above it all. No one in this modern-day Hamelin is too neat, too clean—or too rich—to have mice.

Take my friend Debbie, who lives in the East Seventies. She expressed detached sympathy when she heard my story—and called back a couple of days later in apologetic panic: Was there anything she could do to stop the inva-

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sion? She'd had to sling a wastebasket at a fat mouse she discovered in the middle of her kitchen floor; instead of skidding away when it saw her, it turned and approached her boldly. She went to sleep only after creating a kind of DMZ between the kitchen and the bedroom by laying down a lake of Clorox at the kitchen entrance.

What happened in her apartment and in my building can happen—is happening—virtually everywhere in the five boroughs, and in the outlying areas as well.

THIS HAS BEEN A TREMENDOUS year for rats and mice in New York City," Dr. Austin Frishman, a world-renowned entomologist and author of *The Rodent Handbook*, pointed out a few weeks ago. He was talking to the only New Yorkers happy to hear the news—the diners at a monthly meeting of the Professional Pest Control Association (PPCA) of New York City. "They're all over—Manhattan, Queens, Suffolk County. Living in very good neighborhoods, too."

Dr. Frishman explained that a flurry of construction in the past two years has evicted hundreds of thousands of mice from their cozy homes in abandoned buildings and trash-laden lots. Add to that last summer's record-breaking heat—it was too hot and dry outdoors even for the adaptable house mouse—and New York apartment dwellers have a mass immigration on their hands.

"You can find 'em everywhere. They require very little food, very little space—they can live around you forever," says Solomon Peeples, director of the New York City Bureau for Pest Control. Peeples, whose agency deals mostly with rat complaints, admits, "If we went after all the mice in this city, I'd need 500 to 600 more people on my staff."

It's a banner year, then, and this is the height of the "season." As the temperature drops, rodents gravitate to warm, supportive environments like my apartment—or yours. They come into the building through openings as small as the tip of your pinky—little wider than a quarter of an inch. Once inside, mice journey throughout the "chase" walls that house the electrical, gas, and plumbing lines.

Hungry for food and nesting materials, they travel vertically and horizontally, on

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wires, ropes, and cables, around pipes, under floorboards, and over dropped ceilings. They start in the basement or on the ground floor. And if one mouse squeezes into Apartment 1A, his cousins are probably making their way across to 1B and up to 2A. "Once one gets into your house," Peeples says, "it's like a geometric progression."

"There's no such thing as one mouse," cautions Al St. Cyr, an environmental specialist and associate of Frishman's who also acts as a pest-management consultant. "There are always six to eight more nearby. And if you do see one, it's probably a pregnant female!"

A female mouse can have a litter of five or six every 50 days. If the offspring from one pair of healthy mice survive and procreate, within two years the mouse population will increase by 3 million. Granted, such projections assume optimal conditions, but middle-class Manhattan, with its cozy co-ops and abundance of food (chocolate is an all-time mouse favorite), is practically nirvana to rodents.

BY THE TIME WE FINALLY DID something, we were totally infested," admitted a member of our co-op board. "No one took it very seriously until it got out of hand."

At first, most of us considered the problem more of a nuisance than a threat, and everybody was relieved that we didn't have rats. Nevertheless, this invasion was serious. Mice, like rats, will bite if cornered. Mice, like rats, spread bacteria—salmonella, for instance—through their droppings. And mice carry a host of parasites that can transmit more than 70 diseases. One of them, rickettsialpox ("Kew Gardens fever"), starts with a lesion that is followed by high fever, chills, headaches, and a rash covering most of the body. And mice, even more than rats, are responsible for the destruction of billions of dollars' worth of food every year.

The life of a mouse—on the average, fifteen to eighteen months long—can be summed up in two words: eat and excrete. Each day, a single mouse leaves behind a minimum of 50 droppings and urinates 300 times. It will nibble and gnaw constantly, munching whatever's in its path, be it bread, pet food, soap, or crayons. It also can eat through cardboard boxes, plastic

bags, and Sheetrock walls; destroy electrical wiring; and even cause fires. A pregnant female, mainly interested in acquiring soft, fuzzy materials for her nest, is capable of stripping an entire range or refrigerator of its insulation.

That's why if you see even one harmless-looking rodent, you should get in touch with someone who makes mouse calls. An exterminator, that is (now often called a "pest-control operator," or PCO). You'll want someone who has a six-digit identification number indicating that he has been certified by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) for his knowledge of the use of pesticides. Any PCO who has passed the requisite state examinations will have this I.D. number, which is validated at least every three years. If the operator is a trainee, working under someone else's I.D. card, he should have a copy of his supervisor's number. In either case, you can call the Pesticides Unit of the DEC (718-482-4994) to check a PCO's status. The Better Business Bureau (533-6200) can tell you whether any complaints have been registered against the PCO you're thinking of hiring.

It makes sense to look for an exterminator who has been around for at least three years (or who has had experience in the environmental or health fields) and who belongs to a professional organization like the PPCA (such membership usually means he's serious about his trade). Solomon Peeples cautions, "Pesticides are designed to kill. They can't be used by someone who's careless or inconsistent. And an exterminator shouldn't have any qualms about telling you what he's doing."

After January 1, 1989, the DEC will require every exterminator to give a building's owner or super a list of the chemicals he intends to use and indicate when he'll use them. (These notices must be posted.) This requirement applies to both residential buildings and public places like restaurants. Mian Shah, a pesticide-control specialist at the DEC, adds that even when work is done in a private house, if a poisonous substance is used, "the exterminator is supposed to give you a copy of the label. It lists the ingredients, tells you what to do if someone's poisoned, and even gives you an emergency number to call for immediate assistance."

IF YOU RENT AN APARTMENT, THE landlord is obligated to make sure it's rodent-free. He can provide extermination service himself if the building has fewer than three units; for multiple dwellings, he must use an independent PCO. But that doesn't mean your landlord will hire a certified exterminator—or that if a problem arises, the PCO will be conscientious and careful about his work.

When Debbie reported the mouse-

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sighting to her superintendent, he alerted the building's exterminator—who simply dropped bags of rat poison behind the stove. The mice kept coming, so she finally called in her own professional, Ronnie Meringolo, a congenial, diligent, certified PCO (385-2406). He explained that the previous exterminator's "work" could make him liable for a \$5,000 fine from the DEC: Rat poison must be placed in tamperproof bait stations.

Mouse control involves two elements: safely leaving poison or traps to kill the mice, and plugging up holes to keep them out. Debbie's landlord's exterminator hadn't even bothered to do the latter.

Meringolo filled in some holes under the sink, then tried unsuccessfully to pull out the stove (gas lines are notorious as major mouseways). Most stoves have flexible gas lines, but my friend's didn't. Meringolo's flashlight picked out several telltale holes that he wouldn't be able to reach. "Uh-oh," he muttered, spotting droppings and torn-paper nests. "They've been partying back there."

The problem is now the landlord's, according to Solomon Peeples: "The landlord must, by law, do whatever's necessary to keep every apartment free of vermin." If the landlord doesn't do this, tenants should call the New York City Department of Health (DOH), which handles all complaints about "rodent infestations" (285-9503). The complaint will go to either the Bureau of Pest Control (BPC) or the Department of Housing Preservation & Development (HPD). After an inspector verifies the problem, the landlord will be given a specified number of days in which to correct matters. If he doesn't do so and the BPC is handling the case, it will dispatch an exterminator to fix the problem, sending the bill to the landlord and fining him for any health-code violations. If HPD is handling the case, it will cite the building for a violation, and the Housing Litigation Bureau may take court action.

A GOOD PCO IS AN INVALUABLE ally in the war against mice. The prices quoted to me ranged from \$25 for one visit to \$1,000—for a six-week job in a 26-room Sutton Place apartment whose residents, before they left to winter in Europe, had sealed the windows with heavy plastic, creating a veritable mouse solarium.

My building decided to call in Meringolo. (He charges \$25 per apartment vis-

it.) He's a busy man these days. "This is the worst I've seen it in years," he says; he's even considering changing his firm's name (The Bug Doctor), because "every call I get, every complaint, is mice."

Meringolo confirmed that our building was indeed infested—the new "tenants" had probably immigrated during the construction of a condominium building across the street. But, he reassured us, we could definitely control, if not stop, the invasion. Equipped with the arsenal of his trade—coarse, industrial-grade (number 4) steel wool, rodenticide (rat poison), plaster compound, mousetraps, and glue boards (super-sticky, peanut-butter- or chocolate-scented cardboard that work like flypaper)—the Bug Doctor started us on the road to recovery.

Locating and following the droppings, Meringolo traced the "runways," or paths used over and over by the mice. (You, too, can do this—by leaving a trail of harmless talcum powder on floors and countertops overnight and looking for tiny footprints in the morning.) Once he found out where the mice were coming in—through holes they gnawed in the Sheetrock or, more often, through too-large openings left behind stoves and other appliances—Meringolo poured poison into these openings, thus killing any mice living near the points of entry. (Be forewarned: The mice may die and decay in the walls. Fortunately, the foul odor lasts only a few days.)

Then he plugged up the holes with steel wool and plaster to keep the mice from running back into apartments. He also inspected common areas like the compactor room (a favorite spot in most buildings) and the trash areas on each floor, and left a smorgasbord of poisons and extra-large glue boards, as well as a few menacing-looking multiple traps designed to catch up to 50 mice.

Meringolo gave individual tenants glue boards or mousetraps for stragglers. Although he provided a running lecture on mouse habits along with his service, I wasn't prepared for the inevitability of finding a live catch in one of my traps. Seeing not one but *four* tiny, doe-eyed creatures stuck on a four-by-six-inch glue board was enough to stop my heart.

I madly leafed through the annual rodent-control issue of *Pest Control Technology*. Drown the mice, the magazine suggested, by submersion in a pail of water. Fine. But how could I get the glue board off my kitchen counter? Boldly, and with absolutely no help or encouragement from Carol, a disapproving, nonviolent friend, I tried to maneuver the glue board with a broom handle. To my surprise and horror, the handle stuck, too—and there I was with a giant, living "mousesicle."

I've since discovered that there are better ways to dispose of live mice on glue

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boards—and methods other than glue boards for those whose antivivisectionist principles or spiritual instincts are offended. My experience also underscores the importance of knowing what to expect in the war against mice. Even if you call in a reputable PCO, you'll need to work *with* him; after all, he'll spend only a few minutes ferreting out an enemy that will undoubtedly prefer to appear when you're alone.

"If you don't want to help me get rid of your condition, it's a losing battle, I tell my clients," says Andrew Esposito, owner of Unlimited Pest Control (718-966-1234). Esposito, president of the PPCA of New York City, adds that when he first meets customers, he asks whose side they want to be on. "They must support the exterminator, not the problem."

Esposito warns his customers not to leave stovetops greasy and to avoid clutter. "People store things around the holidays and forget them for a year, or they keep loose paper bags around. I tell them to keep bags inside a sealed plastic bag and, from time to time, to move things around."

CUSTOMER COOPERATION IS VITAL, but so is thoughtful assessment of each individual situation. As you hear Andy Esposito and other PCOs discuss "integrated pest control" and extol the merits of one rodenticide over another or talk about different types of glue boards and traps, it becomes clear that there's more of a science to mouse control than Tom-and-Jerry cartoons have led us to believe. (Speaking of Tom, don't rely on feline protection: Most domesticated, well-fed cats aren't mousers, and even if they were, they couldn't plug up the mouse-entry holes. And, contrary to popular wisdom, the smell of cats won't keep mice away: If it did, would mice be so crazy about cat food?)

A good PCO will determine how and where the mice are getting in, use steel wool or quarter-inch-gauge chicken wire to keep them out, and, most important, find out what they're eating.

"I won't get good results using a meat-flavored rodenticide in a fish market," Esposito says. He points out that mice are finicky, compulsive eaters; once they get used to a particular food, that's all they'll eat. They are truly creatures of habit, too, using the same runways each

time they travel to the food source—and that could be as many as 33 times a day. This kind of information is critical in determining what kind of bait or traps to use and where to place them.

Most experts issue strong warnings against do-it-yourselfers' using rodenticides. "Individuals ought to stick to glue boards," Al St. Cyr says, intending no pun. "Or snap traps. Rodenticides are dangerous, because the majority of people don't understand the use of poison or how it's best applied."

It's wise not to use rat poison at all, especially if you have pets or children. However, if there's a serious infestation and you are determined to use an over-the-counter rodenticide, put the poison in a tamperproof bait station and place it where only the mice can get at it. Read the label. Some retailers, worried about their liability, will even ask you to sign an affidavit confirming that you've been advised to read the label.

Despite some people's ethical objections to them, glue boards are fast becoming the mainstay of do-it-yourself mouse control. They are nontoxic. And if a child or pet happens to get stuck on one—or, like a nine-year-old I heard about, uses it as a weapon against a younger sister—vegetable oil, mineral oil, or rubbing alcohol is a simple remedy. The flat traps are more effective than the tray-style ones: Unsuspecting, nearsighted rodents (they're myopic, not blind) traveling the perimeters of your room are more likely to skid onto the flat boards than to bother climbing up into a tray.

As I found out, disposing of glue traps is not the easiest or most pleasant task. Still, I became amazingly hardened after catching a record twelve mice in one week. I learned to slap a piece of newspaper over the trap so I couldn't see my captive's eyes. After a quick plunge into a bucket of water, the trap and dead mouse (or mice) went into a plastic bag and then down the compactor chute. Andrew Esposito also suggests, "Have a child's shovel on hand. Do *not* pick up the tray. Sometimes the mice play dead—and bite when you get too close."

THE OLD-FASHIONED, SINGLE-USE, wooden snap trap, which has been around for more than 50 years, is still a popular method for executing mice quickly, although it will catch only one mouse at a time. There are other alternatives, however. Some are more efficient; some are more humane.

For a wealth of information on this subject, I visited Barry Glass and his wife, Nora, owners of Big Apple Pest Control. At their retail store at 356 East 19th Street, those who seek weapons in the war against rodents will find things

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they've never even dreamed of. For example, there's the Ultrasonic PestChaser (\$55), which emits a high-pitched sound that makes your living room sound like the runways at JFK to the mice—but not to humans.

"It will make mice run to another room but not necessarily out of your apartment," Barry Glass admits. "It is only effective if used in conjunction with other rodent-control activities." (Tenants who know there are mice running around their apartment, Nora Glass says, will put a sonic device in—say—the bedroom so they know *that* room, at least, will be free of rodents.)

Ronnie Meringolo notes that this kind of unit has a limited range: Like an electronic eye, he says, it deters only the mice that are directly in its path, and therefore, to be sure of its effectiveness, users should aim the unit at the spot they suspect is the mice's entry point. Glass disagrees, claiming that the ultrasonic devices "broadcast" a stereo beam that can effectively clear the mice from an entire room.

Glass, who often tests pest-control products for manufacturers, says that when he put the PestChaser into an aquarium full of mice, "they went crazy for several minutes." There are many other such devices on the market, some much more expensive; Glass has a personal preference for the PestChaser, based on tests he's made and his field experiences.

He filled me in on the latest in mousetraps: "The wooden traps cost 50 cents to \$1 and must be thrown away. The plastic 'Snap E' mousetrap, at \$3.50, is easier to set, very efficient, and can be used over and over." He demonstrated, using a rubber mouse, but somehow I couldn't picture myself flicking the lever to propel a dead mouse into the garbage.

Then there's the trap that animal lovers favor, the Havahart, which catches the mouse in a tiny cage. (I saw one of my more humane neighbors march out the front door one day, Havahart in hand, to deposit his prey across the West Side Highway; I imagined the same mouse finding its way back to the building that night.)

Finally, Glass brought out the granddaddy of what the industry calls multiple-catch traps—the Ketch-All (\$19.95), made of aluminum and not much bigger than a lunch box. When an inquisitive mouse enters the small hole on the side to investigate the front section of the

trap, the movement trips a windup paddlelike mechanism that kicks the mouse into the other compartment, a holding chamber. The first mouse becomes the lure. It will stay alive—the trap has plenty of air holes—and its friends will be attracted to the smell.

According to Glass, this type of trap can catch and maintain "as many as 25 mice, maybe more." (Trade journals say fifteen or more.) The thought chilled me, but Glass was resolute: "When you have a lot of mice, you can't just use single traps." But I couldn't help wondering: If the average apartment dweller has trouble disposing of one dead mouse, how would he deal with getting rid of fifteen or twenty at a time?

Mousetrap placement is a hotly debated subject. Most PCOs recommend putting traps at three- to four-foot intervals along runways and doing whatever is likely to confuse mice. "I put the snap traps along the wall, one facing in and one out, to form a maze," reveals Nick Lamattina, whose PCO Supply in Brooklyn (1812 Flatbush Avenue) and Staten Island (159 Main Street) sells to private customers and the trade. When baiting traps, Lamattina finds Goobers effective; other PCOs mentioned Reese's peanut butter cups and Tootsie Rolls (the latter are almost impossible for mice to steal without tripping the trap lever).

My neighbors and I have come up with our own tricks. Martha, a self-proclaimed "expert" after months of trying every method to stamp out and ward off the invaders, went so far as to buy feta cheese for her traps. "I figured that it smelled stronger. And if it crumbled when the mice nibbled, maybe they wouldn't be able to steal it!" It didn't work; she switched to glue boards.

CLEARLY, THE PEOPLE IN MY BUILDING have become a resourceful lot over the past several months. And our diligence seems to be paying off. The Bug Doctor caught about 25 mice in the common areas the first week he set traps. Our building no longer smells of mouse urine, and my neighbors tell me they haven't had any intruders lately. As for me, I feel triumphant: I was so delighted the morning I found no mice in my traps, I began counting Mouseless Days, and I'm now up to 21.

Still, none of us can afford to be complacent. Just when I thought the rodents were moving out of the neighborhood, my friend Pamela, who just moved into that new condominium across the street, called my Mouse Hot Line in a hysterical frenzy. In defiance of its stereotypical reputation for shyness, a small gray mouse was re-enacting the *High Noon* showdown in her kitchen. At least on this block in Manhattan, we are barely winning the battle, much less the war.