

# JERRY SPINELLI

Newbery-award-winning author of *Maniac Magee*



## FOURTH GRADE RATS



SCHOLASTIC

# 1

## *Rats Don't*

*“First grade babies!  
Second grade cats!  
Third grade angels!  
Fourth grade . . . RRRRRATS!”*

It was the first recess of the first day of school. A mob of third-graders had me and Joey Peterson backed up against the monkey bars.

They were giving us the old chant. When they came to the word “rats,” they screamed it in our faces. Then they ran off laughing.

“I wish I was still in third grade,” I said.

“Why?” said Joey.

“So I could still be an angel.”

“Not me.” He climbed onto the first bar. “I waited three years to be a rat.” He climbed to the next bar. “And now I *am* a rat.”

He climbed to the top bar. He shouted over the school yard: “And proud of it!”

I started to climb. My sneaker slipped on a bar, and I went down instead of up. The first thing I landed on was my hand. My thumb got bent back, way back.

*Pain!*

I howled. As loud as I could.

It still hurt.

I kicked the ground, the monkey bars, the nearest tree. My thumb still hurt, and so did my foot.

Only one thing left to do. I cried.

Joey’s voice came down from the high monkey bar: “Rats don’t cry.”

The bell rang to end recess.

I jogged, sniffing, to the door. When I got there, Judy Billings was behind me. Like a miracle, the pain in my thumb disappeared.

For me, there was no such thing as pain when Judy Billings was around. I loved her. I was sure that any day she would start to love me back. In the meantime, she mostly ignored me.

But I kept trying. Judy was in the other fourth grade class, so I didn’t see too much of her.

When I did, I figured I had to make the most of it.

That's why I held the door open for her. She went through. As usual, she ignored me. I didn't care. For one second, she was inches away. Heaven was a trainload of those seconds.

A little while later, during Silent Reading, a spider crawled onto Becky Hibble's book. Becky screamed and flipped her book into the air. The book landed on the floor. The spider landed in my lap.

Next thing I know, I'm on my desktop, tap dancing and yelling, "Get 'im off me! Get 'im off me!"

On the way to lunch, Joey's whisper came again: "Rats don't get scared of spiders."

We sat together in the lunchroom, just like last year. And we both brought our lunches from home, just like last year.

We sat at our usual table. I opened my lunch box. I was checking out my stuff when I heard Joey snickering. I looked up. He was wagging his head. His face was smirky.

I looked around the lunchroom. "What's funny?"

"That," he said. He was pointing at my lunch box.

## Fourth graders are tough.

They aren't afraid of spiders. They say no to their moms. They push first graders off the swings. And they never, ever cry.

Suds knows that now that he's in fourth grade, he's supposed to be a rat. But whenever he tries to act like one, something goes wrong. Can Suds's friend Joey teach him to toughen up . . . or will Suds remain a fourth grade wimp?

**“[F]unny, believable . . . . A terrific choice.”**

**—*The Horn Book***

**“[G]enuinely comical.”—*Kirkus Reviews***