



King Rat

James Clavell

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The time is World War II. The place is a brutal prison camp deep in Japanese-occupied territory. Here, within the seething mass of humanity, one man, an American corporal, seeks dominance over both captives and captors alike. His weapons are human courage, unblinking understanding of human weaknesses, and total willingness to exploit every opportunity to enlarge his power and corrupt or destroy anyone who stands in his path.

King Rat Details

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Author : James Clavell

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Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, War, Classics

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Clavell's style here isn't exactly my cup of tea: so many run-on sentences, and I think Peter Marlowe is referred to as "Peter Marlowe" every single time in the narrative, which is very repetitious since he's the second main character. But I was able to put that aside because the plot kept moving and the characters really got under the skin.

I also enjoyed the "extras" that the movie didn't show, such as the cross-dressing POW Sean who serves as the outlet for the prisoners' pent-up desires. His character served to show the mens' vulnerabilities when in captivity, and their cruelties, once the camp is liberated and the world becomes "normal" again. When that happens, Sean isn't a tolerated lust object anymore, but a deviant freak.

I loathed Grey in the movie (Tom Courtenay), but I warmed up to him more in the book. He's still a pompous ass with a huge chip on his shoulder, but in the book version I saw him more as an officer from the lower classes who is trying to be more correct than the officers of privilege and title above him. He's jealous and petty and mean, but I honestly couldn't hate him. He's unable to not be outsmarted, and I have an affinity for underdogs anyway. And the glimpses into his personal life through flashbacks made him more sympathetic. That said, he's still a punctilious little prick and Courtenay delivered that in spades in the movie.

The worst scene in the movie (for me, anyway, animal lover that I am) was here in the book and it was just as sad and morally uncomfortable. Anyone who has read or seen it knows what I'm talking about.

Waaaaaaaaaah.....

It's a book packed full of grey nuance. Even the prison guards - a motley group of Chinese and Koreans under Japanese command - aren't all bad and join their captives in a cat-and-mouse black market game of survival. These 10,000 men, from across the entire Allied forces, are reduced to their basic instincts with a veneer of civil order. If a man steals, he might find himself stuck into a latrine borehole in the middle of the night to suffocate on the fumes and cockroaches, and have it ruled the suicide of a thief with a guilty conscience. But not all wrong doers get punished, as is illustrated with the matter of the false weight measures that Grey discovers. That corruption goes high up into untouchable territory, and there's little he can do about it except become complicit and loathe himself (and others) for it.

I suppose the King is a figure of rugged, predatory individualism, traits that are praised in theory but become bad characteristics when the tables get turned and the prey feels empowered. The main question I had at the end of the book was: Did the camp need the King? Or does the King need the camp? One fed off the other, and when the environment is upended, the symbiotic relationship utterly falls apart. Somehow I feel that once the King goes back to the States, he'll become some kind of sad, pathetic huckster, having to constantly look for someone to fleece rather than having a captive, desperate source to feed off of. It's a rather sad justice that all of his cagey and morally ambiguous gains become utterly worthless once Hiroshima and Nagasaki got trounced and Japan surrendered. To stay on top, he needed that war to keep on going.

There's plenty here to discuss, but the best thing to do is read it for yourself. Then go watch the movie.

Plamena Nikolaeva says

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aPriL does feral sometimes says

The story takes place in an enclosed small wartime POW camp with imprisoned English, Australians, and some Americans. Japanese soldiers guard the camp which is surrounded by jungle and Malay villages.

There is not much food, no medicine, incredible heat and biting insects. Soap is rare, privacy almost nonexistent. Men die every day from disease and despair. Clothes have rotted away and sarongs and rags are all that's available so rank is made known only by arm bands and a slight difference in living huts. Rank and class are important to the British who try to maintain discipline but there is corruption and theft of food.

The Americans are under the thumb of a superb entrepreneur who manages to have nice clothes, lots of food and Japanese money through great risk-taking in black market trading of food, soap and medicine. He is called the King and the other men are forced to do his bidding such as light his cigarettes and tolerate his cooking of rare delicacies such as fried eggs while they starve, hoping for his table scraps in exchange for deals with labor, watches, lighters, and rings.

The King works hard in getting the deal, forging unholy alliances with villagers, Japanese and Korean guards as well as the allied prisoners. People survive longer because of him if they have something to trade. Although he is only a corporal, he is really the king of the camp. However, almost everyone dislikes him to some degree. Staying alive is difficult for all including the King, but he has way more comforts than the others. While the King and his operations are in the center ring throughout this compact book, there are several sideshow plot arcs which illustrate the horror of an imprisoned society of men forced to compete for few resources.

Attempts are made to conduct educational classes which quickly fail. They also try to have religious services regularly. Most of the men are morally compromised to some degree after almost four years as prisoners. Most are fearful of the future, not sure if wives and children survived or waited for them as letters are almost never sent or received through the Japanese.

All in all, a suspenseful story on the top layer, but also a deeper layered exploration of human desperation and survival in a deformed, temporary, artificially civil society. However, the novel is still a quick interesting read. The author was clearly aware of the bad taste left behind when character and morality are tested by suffering, death and uncertainty.

Harv Griffin says

At one time or another I've read most or all of James Clavell's novels. KING RAT is by far my favorite. I've lost count of the number of times I've read this novel. I also own the movie version of the story on DVD; and yes, I've lost count of the number of times I've watched the movie. I like the book better.

Clavell survived as a POW in WWII. The sub-story is that the Peter Marlowe character in KING RAT is a fictionalized version of James Clavell and that the Corporal King character is a fictionalized version of the buddy in the Japanese camp who actually saved Clavell's life.

I think all of Clavell's novels made it to either TV or Movie form; in some cases he wrote the screenplays, in most, not (he was too busy doing other more important things in Hollywood, or writing his next blockbuster novel). His career in Hollywood is almost as impressive as his novels (Due to lessons he learned the hard way in the POW camp? *Correction: Due to lessons he learned the hard way in the POW camp!*). Did you know that Clavell wrote the movie THE FLY? Did you know that Clavell co-wrote the movie THE GREAT ESCAPE? Did you know that Clavell wrote and directed the movie TO SIR, WITH LOVE?

I won't sport with your intelligence by relating the plot of the famous KING RAT story as told in novel and movie beyond to say that it is the story of how an American prisoner in a Japanese internment camp became more powerful than the Japanese warden.

For those fond of "How To" books like How To Succeed In Business, or How To Win At War, I wouldn't mess with SUN TZU or the latest rewording of Machiavelli. Go to KING RAT.

@hg47

Evolots says

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T.A. Uner says

As an Author myself I trace my roots on why I wanted to write back to "King Rat." After "Shogun" this is probably my favorite Clavell story, and rightfully so, as this was written based on Clavell's own experiences in a POW camp in WW II.

What I take most from this book is that it directly inspired me to pursue writing, not for writing's sake, but to leave something worthwhile behind to inspire future generations.

Jim says

I read this once decades ago, but Mom & I were talking about it one morning. When she got her hair cut later that day, she found a copy in their free book rack & loved it. My library has it in an audio edition, so I listened to it. It's a great fictionalized account of American, British, & Australians in Changi, a Japanese POW camp during WWII.

This audio edition has extra material from the original manuscript that's never been published before including an introduction written by Clavell's son. Clavell was a prisoner in the Changi POW camp that this book centers around. He wrote this during a screenwriter's strike in 1962, a fictionalized account of his own incarceration there. While he inspired the Phillip Marlowe character (Who also shows up in Noble House.) there really was a character who inspired The King. I'm not sure how much is fact or fiction, but think there's enough fact to put it on my 'sort-of-nonfiction' shelf.

The extra material are chapters covering the story of some of the women whose men are in the prison camp. They're a great addition. His mother had written to him weekly. On his release he received the letters. During his incarceration, he neither sent nor received any. His mother wrote all those letters not knowing if he was alive or not. Uncertainty is hell & the Japanese, although they signed the Geneva Convention, never ratified it nor did they follow it.

The Princeton Bio for James Clavell:

<https://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tm...>

Wikipedia - James Clavell

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Cl...

IIRC, when I first read this decades ago, 98% of the American's in the Japanese POW camps died. Those are no longer the figures I'm seeing when I google this now & the Princeton Bio says only 1% of the prisoners at Changi died while Clavell says 90%. Overall, 1/4 - 1/3 of the prisoners died according to most sources. By all accounts, most deaths were due to disease & starvation exacerbated by extremely crowded conditions. Clavell does a superb job describing everything, although it's awful. Clavell, a 6' tall man, weighed 98 lbs when released from Changi, likely a bit more than half what he should have weighed. He writes that death was a mercy to some & many lost their health completely, going blind, losing all their teeth, among other horrors.

The end was the most interesting. The entire book is based on how horrible the camp is, yet what happens when the war ends? You need to read it to find out. Wow!

Wikipedia - Changi Prison

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Changi_P...

The original prison was built to hold 600 prisoners, but the Japanese used it to hold 3000 civilians during WWII. This sort of overcrowding was apparently typical.

This was read by Dave Case. He had a lot to live up to since 3 others in this series were read by John Lee who absolutely wowed me. He did a good job.

Wikipedia - King Rat (novel)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Rat...

Wikipedia - King Rat (film 1965)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Rat...

This doesn't follow the book precisely, but was still a great movie.

This isn't quite the correct edition. The ISBN doesn't match & the language is English, but the narrator is Dave Case & the publisher is Books On Tape, so close enough.

I highly recommend reading this book ONCE in any format. I can't recommend a reread. That would be masochistic unless you let at least a couple of decades pass. It's not pleasant, but really good.

Agnieszka says

Changi was set like a pearl on the eastern tip of Singapore Island, iridescent under the bowl of tropical skies. It stood on a slight rise and around it was a belt of green, and farther off the green gave way to the blue-green seas and the seas to infinity of horizon.

This beautiful opening line is like a promise of fantastic adventure, exotic trip, it evokes some delightful place, a mystery island you always dreamt about but it is anything but it. Changi was the inhuman Japanese camp for the war prisoners, for people whom the only sin was that they lost their war and didn't die.

I had read some camp stories already but mostly European, and though my knowledge of the war on the Pacific is only basic this one felt very reliable to me. Not only because it is based on facts from Clavell's life who himself was a prisoner of Changi camp in Singapore and thanks to it the whole story, being still the work of fiction, gained air of realism and credibility; not only because it is a gripping, well paced reading, also because it reads as an excellent study of characters and morality in extreme situations. And is pretty damn well written.

The two main characters of the novel are the men representing totally different approach to life: pragmatic and smart, self-made American named the King and Peter Marlowe, somewhat uptight English guy, well-educated and brought up in the family with military traditions. Both in readers and other prisoners the King arouses mixed feelings. Disgust, sympathy, antipathy, open hostility and then again admiration. For his cleverness, business sense and good fortune he's the object of jealousy and hatred but the King is not a thief. He just has a flair for organizing his life easier and seize any opportunity to gain some money and money will give him the rest. The food, medicaments, cigarettes and something less tangible: sense of power.

Though set in particular time and place it's a fictional account but I think Clavell did fine work here not only showing animosities between ordinary soldiers and officers, confrontation between the King and other prisoners, especially rivetingly is shown conflict with provost marshal Grey, but also indicating different attitudes and class differences of three main national groups of prisoners: British, Australians and Americans. *King Rat* is a clash of personalities, a display of cynicism, lack of scruples and ability to adjust to any situation in the camp. But also an extraordinary courage, solidarity and commitment. It's about a price you are willing to pay to survive and principles you could sacrifice to make it. There is no easy explicitness here, no distinct line between that what you can accept and not feel irretrievably corrupted. It teaches you that to outlast the camp, like on the outside in fact, you need to be a part at least a small group, that the camp is not a place for a lone wolf. But it's also about a fear what life would be alike after Changi since no one escaped the camp unchanged, that place made them, then reshaped and destroyed, and how one can forget about atrocities prisoners were subjected to.

King Rat has a whole bunch finely drawn figures but it's the King and Marlowe that have our interest. I liked the dynamics between them, the way their relationship developed, what they went through and lessons they learnt from themselves. And though I'd like to see them leaving Changi and arm in arm going towards setting sun I somewhat felt the ending, sad as it was, to be more true.

And if someone prefers more concise review, please, here it is. Of rats and men.

Hasham Rasool says

The Asian Saga: survival in a Japanese pow camp.

John Wiswell says

The beginning of Clavell's truly epic series of culture clash novels is a curiously autobiographical book. *King Rat* takes us to Changi, a Japanese prison camp during World War 2, where British and American soldiers are held in dire conditions. We watch as people cling to honor, duty and any semblance of structure for their own mental health and survival. Every observation about humanity in these conditions is more interesting

because Clavell himself was held in a Japanese prison camp during the war. He controls his memories admirably in the novel, to create a very moving, but never selfishly irrational narrative. His control creates a story that is never too hopeless to lose its deeper meaning, and that embraces its characters as real people, rather than tools for social messages. Readers may be surprised by how entertaining such a dark story can be - authors don't usually go the route Clavell travels. *King Rat* has the least culture clash of Clavell's series, as most of the interactions are between the Westerners themselves and the major emotional crux is the captivity. For new readers, do not be daunted by the series - the books are tenuously related and can be read in almost any order you like. As this book is the shortest and deals with the most characters of our own cultures, it may be the easiest introduction to James Clavell, though some readers may prefer to jump right into the deeper culture clash of *Shogun* or *Noble House*. Regardless, please read at least one James Clavell book in your lifetime. There is no one in historical fiction or literary fiction quite like him.

Craig says

In *King Rat*, James Clavell succeeds in doing what countless other authors usually fail at: taken actual experiences from his life and distilled them into a gripping dramatic narrative.

And this praise is perhaps the most damnable understatement the book can receive -- Clavell isn't writing about "experiences," he is writing about the cauldron from which he was "reborn" -- his time in Changi, a Japanese POW camp in Malaysia during WWII.

And yet, the book is mostly comedic -- filled with the hopeful gallows humor of men who are living under the constant shadow of death. It's a story about survival and about friendship --- the true, unspoken kind that men shy away from when it is put into words.

Perhaps the most impressive piece of trivia about this book is that it is Clavell's first novel (of which he would write only 5 more, each a masterpiece in its own right). This is the most intimate of his books (taking place entirely in one setting, and dealing with a fairly small cast of characters), and in many ways my favorite.

The words "read this, it'll change your life" are dropped too often with books, but cannot be dropped often enough with this one.

Jen from Quebec :0) says

I thought his novel was just fantastic! (However, the entire saga of the King and the diamond was a lot of build up for a lot of nothing in the end, wasn't it?)

Mark says

Clavell is better known for his later *Shogun* and other Japanese history novels, but this earlier novel about the lives of Americans and British POWs in a Japanese prisoner of war camp is a classic. The title character is an American with a true gift for survival in the underground economy of the camp, and the book raises many questions about what the most ethical road is to take in an impossible moral situation.

Katie says

This is the first volume in Clavell's "Asian Saga," and was written about the Japanese prison camp of Changi located in Singapore, where the author himself was held as a POW during the late stages of World War II. "The King" is a successful wheeling and dealing American. Using capitalistic initiative, he concocts many money-making schemes, the most shocking of which, involves breeding rats to sell as "rabbit" meat. He generates feelings of hatred or envy in others, but everyone wants to be close to him in order to experience the material rewards that he provides. He befriends an honorable British officer, Peter Marlowe, who acts as his interpreter and learns that many ethical dilemmas may be relative. One of the most fascinating aspects occurs after the end of the war, when many of the POWs are fearful to return to normal life. There are moments of excitement and drama, but mostly it is a testament to the strength and adaptability of the human spirit. The story will be most interesting to those who enjoy military, historical, and cultural topics.

Mel Bossa says

This book was apparently written by Clavell in six weeks during a screenwriters strike in 1963. The story feels rushed and is messy at times with this sort of disconnected feel to it, but yet, I absolutely loved it. Maybe it's Clavell's urgency to tell the tale that gripped me.

This book is not as macho as I thought it would be. There's actually a lot of tolerance and genuine emotion in all of the characters. I was moved by them and I wasn't expecting that. I've read Shogun and Taipan, and though I adored the story lines and over the top drama in those books, I never really connected with the main characters because they were so loud and bold like superheroes... But this book is different. Yes, the King is the embodiment of Capitalism and the "survival of the fittest" theory, but he's also really likable at times and you have to read the whole novel to get the allegory his story is meant to be.

If you build your whole personality and worth using other people, what happens when those people turn their backs on you? What happens when the system that made you King collapses? When you're alone with your own thoughts, can you still be King?

It's weird, I don't know how Clavell did it, because his language isn't extraordinary at all, and his characterization isn't the best out there, and his women always fall short, and his dialogue is sometimes off, but there's something about his writing and what chooses to say and not say that completely resounds with me. There's a silent beast lying under his words and I felt it there all the time.

When I read the last few pages, as the POW were being taken away, each of them nursing their own private fears about returning to a home they didn't know anymore and probably wouldn't know them, I was deeply moved and those last pages were what makes this book great and not just good.

In a strange way, I'm going to miss reading about bedbugs, heat, rice, fried eggs, rats, cockroaches, fences, boreholes, sweat, cards, Sarongs, diamonds, Kooa cigarettes, wireless radios, and of course, friendship.

For those who survived those camps, they were never the same, and in this book Clavell shared a little piece

of Changi with us. And I had to wonder, who would I be in Changi 1945?

The King?

Or Steven, the gay male nurse who tended to every sick man in that camp regardless of their injury or rank?

Or Sean, the beautiful actor who entertained the men at the expense of his own sanity?

Or Peter Marlowe, the one who dipped into what he considered immoral out of the will to live. Dipped his hand in there until he almost lost an arm?

Or maybe I'd be Grey, seething with jealousy, but unable to forfeit my high morality to sate my needs.

Who knows. You never know how you'll behave once they strip you of everything and throw you into a cage.

Like a rat.

Benoit Lelièvre says

I wish every first novels had such ambition, scope and gusto. KING RAT is about the manliest, most violently existential novel south of Hemingway. It's full of dudes lost without the structure and the social status that normal life usually provides and completely adrift, not knowing the faith of the free world during WWII. KING RAT depicts the microcosm that was formed by all this doubt and confusion and follows the faith of men who used to live by the rules and the men who decided to create their own.

It's a fantastic character study written in such a flat, Hemingwayesque prose that it cracked me up for being so alike sometimes. It felt almost like a parody. It's a strange feeling reading something so close in style and philosophy to ol Ernie, but KING RAT was my first Clavell and it sure won't be my last. He's too much fun not to read. What are you worth in a society that doesn't think, act and structures your life with meaningless titles and perceived value? It's the kind of fun questions James Clavell answers with KING RAT.

Paul says

A brutally realistic account of soldier's survival in a Japanese WWII prison camp.

Clavell doing what he does best; making history come to life with very interesting and entertaining fiction.

Back for more...

i just found out that King Rat is in part autobiographical. Clavell was apparently a POW himself. That explains a great deal. i was very much awed that a fictional book could be so incredibly detailed and convey the day to day struggle of the characters so well. JC was writing from experience. Incredible!

