

Behind the Scenes of the Movie

The Tale of Despereaux

BY C.M. TOMLIN

In the movie *The Tale of Despereaux* a tiny mouse named Despereaux finds himself cast out of the mouse world and into a society of evil rats seeking to kidnap a princess. Only the noble Despereaux can save her.

NG KIDS takes a look back into medieval Europe to see if the movie is true to life, or just a fairy tale.

Does Princess Pea's voice sound familiar? It's Emma Watson, who plays Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* movies.



Royal Treatment

Princess Pea touches Despereaux's head – even though touching a mouse is unthinkable for a princess. She's so lonely, she can't resist. "Most medieval princesses wouldn't have been lonely, because they were hardly ever alone," says Margaret Cole, an expert on the medieval period, between A.D. 500 and 1500.

Queens and princesses were surrounded by their ladies-in-waiting, a group of high-ranking girls and women whose job was basically to be their mistress's friend and servant. These ladies had little choice – they usually served a queen or princess because their husbands or fathers served the king.

Even royal women had little choice. Princesses as young as 14 years old were often married off to men they had never met to form an alliance between two royal families.

Honour System

After reading the tale of a brave knight who slays a dragon, Despereaux finds his own honour and courage and vows to defend the princess against plotting rats. In real life, knights did try to follow a code of chivalry, which included defending women, fighting fair and treating prisoners well.

But the code wasn't always followed, especially during battle. Knights were known to slay innocent civilians, loot churches and mistreat enemies. "After all," Margaret says, "this was a time when kings became powerful by being ruthless, not by being nice."

Book Smarts

Despereaux scampers over pages of books to read tales of brave knights, but he's scorned by other mice for *reading* pages instead of eating them. Of course mice don't read. In real medieval Europe, most *people* couldn't read.

Early in the medieval period, only high-ranking religious officials could and for a good reason: there weren't many books! "Each book had to be hand-copied by a monk," Margaret says. "Usually there was only one copy of a book."

Down Under

Despereaux is banished to the damp, rat-infested dungeon after he breaks mouse rules and befriends the princess.

In real medieval life, not all dungeons were dark, scary places. "Prisoners were usually well-kept because they could be ransomed for money," Margaret says.

Sometimes underground dungeons held jewels and other "bling" – after all, an underground room with no windows is incredibly secure.

Soup's On

On the annual Royal Soup Day celebration in the kingdom of Dor, an assembly line of cooks chop ingredients and pour broth down long tubes and chutes in a frenzy of cooking. Real medieval feasts were also amazing productions, with elaborate pies and cakes shaped like animals and castles (even though the food may have been a little rotten).

But forget proper silverware – people ate by spearing their food with knives. If you couldn't afford your own knife, you'd eat with your fingers.



DESPEREUX GREETSS PRINCESS PEA.

The scene in which the rats force Despereaux to fight a cat in an arena filled with a cheering crowd was inspired by the battles in the Colosseum of ancient Rome. Armoured gladiators fought each other for people's entertainment.

DESPEREUX OUTSMARTS A TRAP.