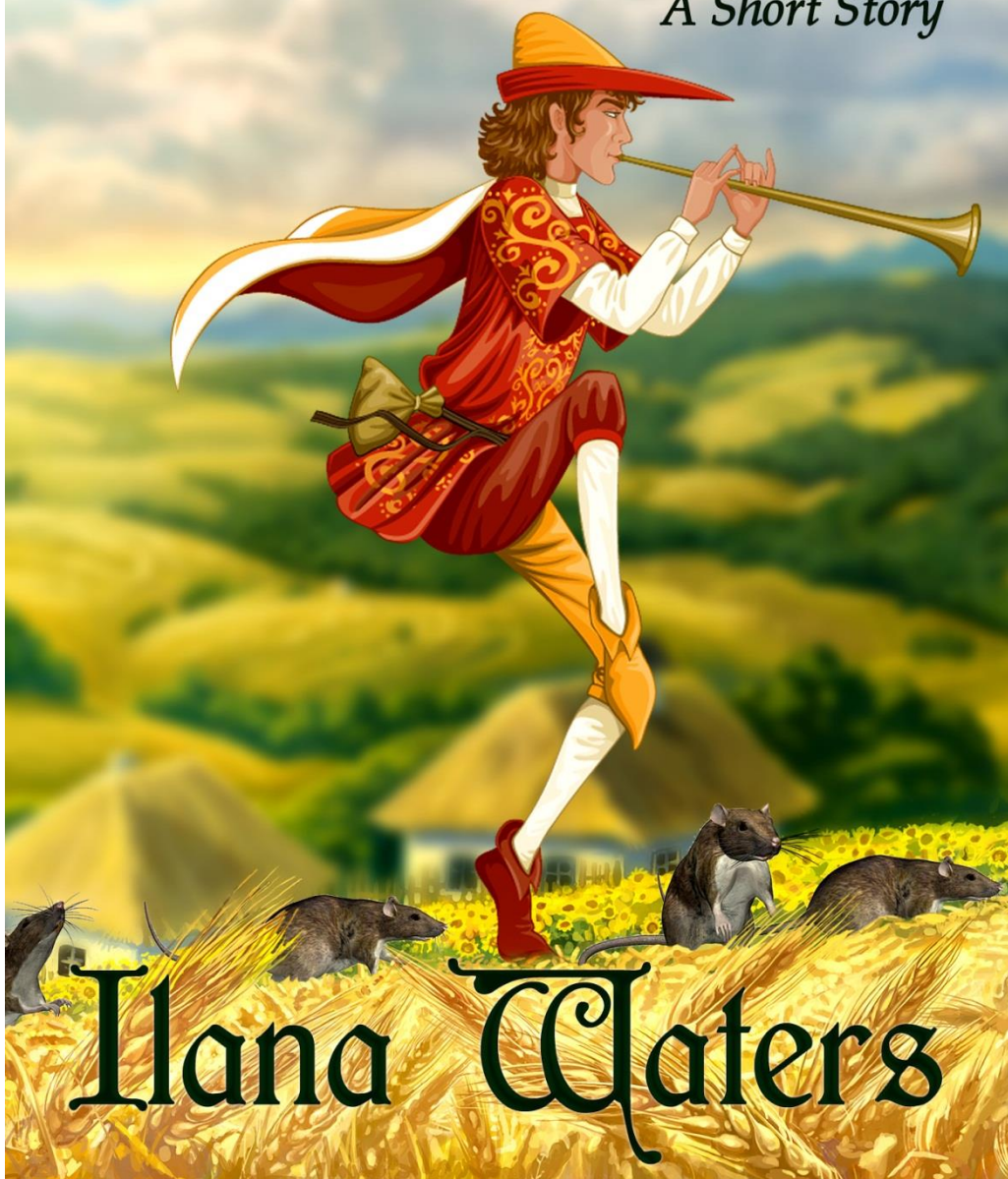


Paying Piper

(or What Happened in Hamelin Town)

A Short Story



Ilana Waters

“Paying Piper”

(or “What Happened in Hamelin Town”)

A Short Story

Copyright © 2013 Ilana Waters

The people of Hamelin have a problem with rats. There are rats in their houses, their stores—even swimming in their stew! The rats don’t think they’re a problem. They just want to live their lives in peace. With the town’s approval, the mayor thinks of a clever way to solve the problem. He offers twenty gold pieces to a piper to rid the town of rats. He delivers only five.

But he’s cheated the wrong piper, who’ll have to use both skill and wit to teach this town a lesson. Because there’s more than money at stake. An evil pattern is emerging in the way Hamelin treats any creature it considers inferior. And the Piper vows to put an end to it—once and for all.

Think you know everything about this classic folktale of greed and cunning? In “Paying Piper,” you’ll learn what really happened the day a magical musician came to Hamelin—and why.

Fans of fairy tales with a twist will delight in this tricky, witty middle-grade short story. (And if you’re a parent or teacher, stay tuned for bonus discussion questions at the end!)

“Paying Piper”

THE RAT SNIFFED THE AIR. Something was coming. It wasn't cheese—he'd know that smell anywhere. It wasn't a pretty lady rat. There was none of that perfume in the air, of warm, cozy holes and fat rat babies. No, this was a different smell. It was carried on the wind from far, far away. It smelled like music. Dangerous, haunting music.

The rat sniffed again, and a fierce shudder went through him. Then he scurried home in the darkness as fast as he could, heart pounding all the way.

The town of Hamelin had a problem with rats. Big ones, little ones, young ones, and old ones. The townsfolk thought the rats were nasty, stinky, and disease-ridden. They hated the rats in every way imaginable.

The rats, of course, did not think they were a problem. They went about their rat business every day, just like always. The people did people things—made food, had children, cleaned the house. The rats did rat things—stole food, scared children (accidentally), and dirtied the house. This seemed reasonable to the rats, as things had never been any other way.

But Hamelin town did *not* want things this way. They yelled and screamed at the rats all the time. Often, the rats weren't even doing anything wrong. They were just *there*. But the people of Hamelin liked to scream when they got angry. They even laid down poison-laced cheese to tempt the rodents; Hamelin was known for its fine range of gourmet cheeses. The townsfolk didn't have enough poison to kill the rats—just enough to make them sick. If they couldn't get rid of the rats, the people figured they could at least make them suffer.

The mayor of Hamelin was especially against rats, having found a live one in his stew only a week ago. He made a vow to the entire village that he'd solve the rat problem . . . and soon.

Now, it is well-known that rats love all manner and type of music. They've been known to throw enormous rat parties that last until dawn. The mayor was aware of this, of course. So when a traveling bard came to Hamelin one day, he was quick to take advantage of the opportunity.

"My good bard!" he said over a mug of ale at the local tavern. He shook his head at the stew offered, lest a rat be swimming in it. "I've got a proposition for you. We've a bit of a rat problem here in Hamelin. You may have noticed." He leaned forward on his tavern stool and gave his usual phony smile.

"I did notice, as a matter of fact," the musician replied. He watched as a rat scampered up the bar and snatched some (un-poisoned) cheese off his plate. "Though I wouldn't call it a 'problem' as much as a 'rat-astrophe.'"

"You're absolutely right, my humble bard!" The mayor banged his mug on the bar for emphasis. "It's a complete ratastrophe! And you're just the stooge—I mean, man—to help us out."

"How is that, my lord?" The bard sipped his ale. Luckily, it had not been tampered with by rats. "I am, as you say, but a humble bard."

"It's like this," the mayor said, rubbing his hands together. Musicians were a simple lot, in his opinion. Why, just look at the mismatched clothing on this one! He'd take care of the town's problems for next to nothing. And the sound of rats leaving Hamelin would be music to everyone's ears. Music to their ears! What a clever turn of phrase, the mayor thought. He made a mental note to write it down later, in case he needed it for a speech.

"Rats love music," he explained. "I'll bet you didn't know that, did you?" He looked at the bard with fake pity in his eyes.

"I did not, my liege," the bard replied, even though he had.

"Well, it seems they love it so much they'll follow it anywhere. We had a parade just last week. Rats followed it all the way down to the offices of Bumble and Stumble Law Firm. Took two motions and a subpoena just to get them out of there. I figure all you need to do is play

something on that . . . that flute thing of yours.” He gestured toward the long pipe lying on the bar.

“Then,” the mayor continued, “you can lead them to where they’ll never bother anyone in Hamelin again. And for this tiny, ridiculously easy task, the township will pay you *five* gold coins! Can you imagine? Five gold coins for half an hour’s work. No, no—don’t thank me for my generosity. It all comes from the taxpayers. What do you say?” He gave another phony smile and waited for the reply of “yes.”

The bard paused for a moment. “That is indeed generous, kind mayor. And I am inclined to agree to your request. But at a price of twenty gold coins.”

“TWENTY?” The mayor gasped. “You must be mad. That’s outrageous!”

“Perhaps.” The bard sipped his ale again. “Or perhaps not. Rats are a tricky business. Much more so when they exist in such great numbers.” The pair watched one grab an olive from a martini and race off.

Oh dear, thought the mayor as his eyes followed the tiny bandit out the door. This will never do. That silly musician is right, blast him! I need to get this ratastrophe taken care of quickly.

“All right,” he said with a heavy sigh. “I could see my way to . . . ten gold coins. But not a single one more!” He wagged a finger at the bard as if he were a naughty child.

The bard pushed a few strands of hair back behind his ear. They seemed a little pointed to the mayor, those ears. He’d once heard that people with pointy ears had magical powers. That they could change things into other things, or some such nonsense. Still, the tavern light was dim. They might have been just ordinary ears.

“I’m afraid that is still insufficient, my lord. I have great skill, and that comes at a great price.”

The mayor blustered and bumbled. “Great skill, indeed! I’ve never even heard of you. What be your name, bard?”

“They call me ‘The Piper.’”

“Well, *Piper*—”

“Begging your pardon, sir, not ‘Piper.’ *The* Piper.”

“Yes, well . . .” The mayor wrinkled his nose. These bards could be awfully touchy. But if this one could remove the rats, what difference did a few coins make? The mayor could always take it out of next year’s budget.

“Fine, then.” He rolled his eyes. “*Twenty* gold coins. Whatever-your-name is, do we have a deal?”

“We do,” answered The Piper. “I remove all the rats from Hamelin town, and you pay me twenty gold pieces. Consider it done.”

With that settled, the two men stood up and shook hands. Then the mayor wiped his hand on his shirt. After all, he thought, you never knew where a musician’s fingers had been. And so they left the tavern and went about their business. The rat who’d been swimming in the mayor’s mug popped his head out, belched, and sank back into the ale.

After leaving the tavern, The Piper walked Hamelin’s narrow, cobblestoned streets. As he did so, he played his flute and mulled over his strategy. You see, he understood what the mayor did not. That the task at hand required a certain diplomacy, a few ounces of finesse. So he sat down at a doorstep, playing all the while, and waited for a rat to appear. This being Hamelin, he knew he wouldn’t have to wait long. And he was right.

After a few minutes, a rat came and sat next to him. She had a sad, forlorn look about her. Resting on her little rat haunches, she wiped sweat off her brow and sighed a deep sigh.

“What seems to be the matter, my fine rodent friend?” The Piper asked. He stopped playing the flute and leaned his elbows on his knees, bringing his face closer to hers.

The rat looked up, surprised. Most residents of Hamelin didn’t address rats with such respect. In fact, most didn’t even know rats could talk! But clearly, this young man was different. He wore colorful, happy clothes that seemed to sparkle a little. His face was sly yet gentle, and he had pointy ears. Even his voice sounded musical. This was someone with whom the rat could share her burdens. She was sure of it.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said in a voice which was anything but “nothing.” “It’s just that all day long, we try to go about our rat business. We steal food to survive, have babies when we can. We leave our droppings in the most inconspicuous places, like bedroom corners. But *still* the humans dislike us. They yell and scream at us for no reason. They even trick us into eating poisoned cheese! I tell you, it’s not easy being a rat in Hamelin.”

“Sounds awful,” said The Piper, shaking his head. “I bet you’d rather be somewhere else. Somewhere food was plentiful and rat children could run free. Where music played all day and all night, and all you need do was dance to it.”

The rat’s eyes lit up. “Why, yes! I would certainly love that. We all would. To sing and dance and make merry. To not worry where our next meal would come from. As it is, things are very unpleasant here.” The light went out of the rat’s eyes, and she put her forehead in her palm.

“Don’t despair just yet,” said The Piper. “Because I know a place where you can do all you mentioned and more. There’s a clearing deep in the forest: my home. There are plenty of nuts and berries for you to eat. Your children could play in peace. And as for droppings, why, you can leave them anywhere you like! The whole forest floor’s your bathroom. My friends and I sing and dance all day and night, and anyone who lives there is welcome to join us.”

The rat’s mouth opened so wide you could see every one of her little rat teeth. “Why, sir,” she exclaimed, “do you really mean it? That sounds like heaven itself! But tell me,” she leaned in close, “is there . . . *cheese* in the forest? Real cheese? Cheese that isn’t poisoned?”

“My friends and I have been known to make a batch of un-poisoned cheese once in a while,” The Piper replied.

“Splendid!” the rat squealed. “Simply splendid. It would be grand to go there with you right away, except . . .”

“Except what?”

“Well, it’s your music. It gives me the shivers, you see. I can’t really explain it. It just sounds . . . dangerous.”

The Piper gave a little laugh. “It is only dangerous to those who do not understand the song. It is a song of change, and of things yet to be. That is danger to some. It is happiness to others.”

The rat, being only a rat, did not comprehend most of this. But it sounded true and wise enough. So she agreed to tell all her family and friends that the next day, they were leaving Hamelin town for good.

Sure enough, the next day, the rats followed The Piper and marched merrily out of Hamelin. They carried suitcases and walking canes. They rode on large beetles and in cloth-covered

wagons. They laughed and danced and sang, and one cheeky rat even *pphhtt* his tongue at a passing lawyer.

The entire town gathered to watch the rats go, and to celebrate. They shivered at the peculiar, captivating music played by The Piper. But what difference did it make if the tune was strange? The rats were leaving, and so the villagers were happy. They popped their heads out of shuttered windows, cheering, or stood on doorsteps and shouted “Good riddance!” None of this bothered the rats, of course. They knew they were leaving for someplace far, far better.

“Where do you suppose he’s taking the rats? I mean, what does he plan to *do* with them?” one man asked the woman next to him.

The woman shrugged. “I don’t care if he drowns them in a river, so long as he does it far away from Hamelin.”

But contrary to what the townsfolk thought, The Piper did not drown the rats in a river—or anywhere else. He took them to the clearing in the forest, just as he said he would.

“Why, it’s beautiful!” exclaimed a female rat. It was the same one The Piper had met on the doorstep yesterday. “Chester! Millicent!” she called to her fellow rats. “Come look at all these delicious nuts and berries. And how big the clearing is! There’s plenty of room for our children to play here. And that grove of trees will make a lovely bathroom. Who needs cramped little Hamelin anyway? We have this huge forest to run around in now!”

“It seems my fellow musicians are away at the moment,” said The Piper, looking around. “No doubt playing for other local towns. Still, I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you tried our new cheese-making machine . . .”

The Piper taught the rats how to make a few basic cheeses. He even played several dance tunes for them. But later that evening, he had to return to Hamelin.

You see, the mayor had called everyone to the town square for a party in honor of the Great Rat Expulsion. He also wanted to claim credit for finally getting rid of the pests, even though it was The Piper who’d done the work. Earlier that day, he’d hung celebratory banners all over the square. Maybe they’d even rename the town “Meadowwood,” he’d thought, just like he’d always wanted. “Mayor of Meadowwood”—now *that* had a ring to it! And then he’d nailed the last banner in place.

But all that could wait. Right now, he had to perform a ceremony before the entire village, and present the bard with his reward. Mayor and musician stood in front of a large fountain in the middle of the square. The townsfolk around them all smiled broadly.

“Here you are, then,” the mayor said. He handed a small leather sack to The Piper. “Five gold coins, as promised.”

“Five?” The Piper arched his eyebrows. “I believe we agreed on twenty, my lord.”

“Twenty?” The mayor grinned. “You were serious about that? I thought you were in jest!” He turned to the townsfolk and chuckled, and soon they were laughing with him.

But The Piper was not laughing. “I assure you, Mr. Mayor,” he said quietly, “that I was in earnest.”

“Well, I’m sorry for our little misunderstanding, my dear fellow. But I’m afraid we don’t have twenty gold coins to give you. You’ll just have to take this as our best offer.” The mayor was still smiling pleasantly. But his face had a hard look about it when he turned to The Piper again.

“Really?” The Piper gave the mayor a hard look of his own. “From what I can see, Hamelin doesn’t appear to be an impoverished town. The cheese business is booming. The larders are well-stocked. In fact, there are several gold coins at the bottom of this very fountain. No doubt they were thrown in by folks making wishes. Therefore, I find it hard to believe you can’t pay me what you owe.”

The townspeople didn’t look very happy anymore. A few of them were starting to grumble.

So was the mayor. “Look here, you silly flute-player,” he snapped. “We don’t have money to throw away on frivolous things like rat-catchers. We are a hardworking town, and we like to keep what we make. So you’ll take those five gold coins and like it!” This was met by several cries of “That’s right” and “You tell ’im!” from the townsfolk.

The Piper opened his mouth as if to say something sharp. He seriously considered scooping up a handful of gold coins from the fountain and dashing off. But in the end, he did neither of these things. He narrowed his eyes at the mayor, squeezed the tiny sack of coins, and bowed. Then he slipped away down the streets of Hamelin faster than anyone thought possible.

For a while, the townsfolk of Hamelin thought they were pretty clever, especially the mayor. After all, they'd gotten twenty gold coins' worth of rats gone for a fraction of the price.

But the townsfolk were not as clever as they thought. You see, with the rats gone, they had no one on whom to take out their anger. When things went wrong, who would they blame? Who would they punish and scold and scream at?

Their children, that's who. The residents of Hamelin began yelling at their children for talking too loudly. They yelled at them for talking too softly. They punished them for getting dirty—even when they ordered them to play outside, where the dirt was. In short, they were annoyed at everything the children did, and never tried to hide it.

Well, The Piper knew a problem when he saw one. It wasn't about the money. Oh sure, he'd been angry when the mayor and townsfolk cheated him. But then he thought it over. And he realized that it was only the beginning of a much bigger problem. An evil pattern was emerging in the way Hamelin treated *any* creature it considered inferior.

The Piper had been to many towns like this one. Towns in which the grown-ups did terrible things. Towns where people yelled and screamed at those who did not deserve it. Towns in which the children grew up to lie and cheat and steal because they'd never known anything different.

Not this time, The Piper thought. This time, instead of standing idly by, he was going to *do* something about it. Again, he walked the narrow streets of Hamelin, playing a strange tune on his flute. Again, he sat on a doorstep and waited for someone to sit beside him. And indeed, someone soon did. This time it was not a rat, of course. It was a little girl who'd run out of the house after her mother yelled at her.

Soon she was tapping her feet and clapping her hands, laughing along with the crazy flute music. When The Piper's song was done, she begged for another, and another. Finally, he had to stop playing and rest.

"I'll bet your parents never let you sing and dance as much as you want," he said to the little girl.

The girl snorted in a way that only this particular girl could. "As much as we want? Ha!" she scoffed. "That's a joke. They never let us dance and sing *ever*. They tell us it's too noisy, even when we do it outside."

“That’s a pity,” The Piper said, shaking his head the same way he had with the rat. “I know a place where children do nothing but sing and dance all day.”

The little girl’s ears perked up. “Really? Where?”

“Hmmm . . . it’s difficult to say,” The Piper replied, polishing his flute. “It would be easier for me to show you.”

“Oh, could you?” The little girl clasped her hands.

“Sure I could.” The Piper finished cleaning the flute and slipped it into his belt.

“What’s your name?” the little girl asked.

“Most people call me ‘The Piper.’ But my friends call me Pied.”

“Pleased to meet you, Pied!” said the little girl, for she felt they were instantly friends. “I’m Sally.” Then she giggled. Sally didn’t know why, but she liked this silly-looking man with his bright, shiny clothes and slightly pointed ears.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well,” replied The Piper. He reached for her hand and shook it warmly. “Now Sally, I want you to run and tell all your friends something. Say, anyone under the age of ten.” He leaned forward. “You see, I have a little plan . . . and I need your help.”

That night, the grown-ups had a very hard time tucking their youngsters into bed. All the children were very excited about *something*, but wouldn’t say what. The adults scolded them extra hard for chattering, and rushed through story time. They breathed a deep sigh of relief when they believed the children were sleeping. At least now, they thought, all would be quiet until morning.

The children were indeed quiet the next morning. So quiet that no one tried waking them up until lunchtime. It was then the grown-ups realized their children *weren’t* still sleeping. They weren’t even in their beds. The children of Hamelin town were *gone!*

A cry arose from the village parents as had never been heard before. Wails were wailed and vases were thrown. Teeth were gnashed and guns were loaded. The townsfolk knew something had to be done, and it had to be done *now*. So, they gathered in the main square to yell about it.

“I’ll kill Tanner when I find him, just you wait!”

“See if I *ever* serve Henry dessert when he gets back, that little brat!”

“I’ll give Sally the spanking of her life, so help me!”

“That doesn’t sound very parental, now does it?” said a soft, musical voice. The townsfolk turned to see The Piper sitting on the side of the fountain, one hand rolling his flute along the broad rim. It was the very Piper they’d refused to pay yesterday.

“We don’t have time to be all ‘parental,’” a man snapped. “Can’t you see our children have run away?”

“Really?” said The Piper. “Run away? Why would you think that?” He looked down and examined his fingernails.

“Because they’re not here, you dolt!” cried the mayor, who was also in the town square. He didn’t have any children of his own. But if he failed to bring back the town’s youngsters, he was sure to lose reelection. It had him worried.

“That’s certainly true,” said The Piper. “The children aren’t here. But they didn’t exactly leave on their own. Let’s just say they had . . . help.”

“Help?” said the mayor. “Who on earth would help a town-full of children run away? What kind of sneaky, evil person would do such a terrible thin—?”

“Me,” replied The Piper. He stopped looking at his fingernails and tucked a strand of hair behind one pointy ear. “And as far as I can see, I’m not the one being sneaky and evil. I never said I *wouldn’t* lead the children out of Hamelin.

“You, however,” he looked at the mayor, “promised me twenty gold coins to cure you of rats. Twenty gold coins that you didn’t pay, and perhaps had no intention of paying. Pretty sneaky and evil, if you ask me. In fact, all I needed was one gold coin from, say, each family here. You could easily have supplied it. But when the time came to ‘pay the piper,’ so to speak, no one did.”

“*You* helped our children run away?” one man exclaimed. Other townsfolk gasped and shrieked.

“What did you do with them?”

“What’s *happened* to our children?”

“The children are hidden from you,” The Piper replied. “And they will remain in a secret location until you prove you can act properly.” He stood up from the fountain to better address the crowd. “But I assure you, they are all perfectly safe. They are making friends with the rats in their new home as we speak.”

“They’re running around with rats? Oh!” One woman fainted into the arms of her husband.

The mayor was so angry he could hardly speak. The townsfolk were starting to yell louder than ever. Some of them were even calling for feathers, tar, and pitchforks.

But The Piper wasn’t finished yet. “Did it ever occur to you that you treated your children no better than you treated the rats? You scolded and screamed and punished them for no reason. You’re screaming about them right now! In order to have your children returned,” he continued, “you must prove to me that you are truly worthy of them.

“Thus far,” The Piper said, “all I’ve seen are a group of nasty, greedy people who lie and cheat and holler. And not just the politicians either,” he hinted to the mayor, who at least had the good sense now to blush. “Is that the kind of people you want your children to be? Are those the kinds of parents you think they deserve?”

For a moment, the entire town was silent. Never before had they felt so ashamed. A few men wrung their hands, and a woman or two sobbed. The Piper felt a burst of sympathy, but knew he must hold firm.

“But what are we to do?” It was the mayor who finally spoke. “Look, we’ll pay your twenty gold coins and more. In fact, take all that we have. But please, *please* bring our children back!” And the other townsfolk were quick to agree.

“Yes, please bring our children back!”

“We’ll do anything!”

“Here—you can have my goat instead.”

But The Piper just shook his head. “You misunderstand me. It’s not about the money—or me. And I’m afraid that even the promise of a goat is insufficient. It’s just as I told you. You must prove to me that your town is *worthy of its children*.”

“But how are we to do that?”

“Yes, please tell us!”

“I’ll give you *two* goats if you do!”

“That’s very generous of you,” replied The Piper, “but I have no use for goats. Why not give them to a neighbor instead? Why not be nicer to each other in general? No more snapping and snarling when things go wrong. No more fibbing, tricking, or thieving. Just be kind and fair.

Do you think you can do that for, say, at least a week? If you can, then trust that your children will return to you.”

“Wait a minute,” said one man suspiciously. “How do we know you’re being honest?”

“Yes, how do we *know* the children are safe?” asked another. “Or that you really do plan to return them?”

“He’s lying!” said a woman. “Let’s poke him with sharp things until he tells the truth!”

The townsfolk of Hamelin started arguing amongst themselves again. The Piper just kept shaking his head. While everyone was busy yelling at each other over what to do, he took his flute and quietly slipped away. No one even saw him leave.

“You have to separate the curds from the whey,” one rat explained to a little boy. “Otherwise, the whole thing will just be a big sloppy mess. Now you try it.” The boy grabbed the handle of the wooden cheese machine and gave it a hearty turn.

Despite the doubting townsfolk, the children were actually getting along quite well. At first, they’d been afraid of the rats. But they soon learned there was nothing to fear, and became fast friends. The rats had a lot of fun showing the children how to make different kinds of cheeses. They had moved on from the ordinary varieties, like cheddar and mozzarella. Now they were experimenting with more exotic fare, such as Brie and Camembert. When cheese-making didn’t occupy their time, everyone sang and danced to tunes played by The Piper.

Of course, when the grown-ups of Hamelin realized The Piper was gone, they were angry for a while. They yelled and screamed some more, but eventually, they calmed down. What choice did they have but to obey the strange man’s wishes? It was their only hope of having their children returned.

Little by little, the townsfolk learned to act rightly. It wasn’t easy at first. Hamelin was used to doing things in a certain manner. Used to lying, cheating, and stealing. Used to blaming others when things went wrong. Or yelling at them for the smallest reasons. And it was *very* tempting to turn on one another now that they didn’t have children or rats to single out.

But little by little, the grown-ups learned other ways. They worked hard not to lie and cheat. They lowered their voices and took responsibility for their actions. They even donated

some of the money in the fountain to charity. All in all, they had to agree life was more pleasant this way. But the people of Hamelin still missed their children terribly. A few even said it was too quiet and clean without them!

Then a week later, when no one was expecting it, The Piper returned. He just appeared sitting on the fountain rim as if by magic, his flute again at his side. A washerwoman spotted him and ran to get her husband, who ran to get the mayor. Soon all of Hamelin was in the town square, anxiously waiting to see what The Piper would say.

“Well,” he started. “It’s been a week. Have you learned to get along better?”

Everyone started talking at once.

“Oh yes, absolutely!”

“I paid off my debt by giving a neighbor my goat.”

“And *I* didn’t even yell when that new goat piddled on my roses.”

“Can’t blame a goat for having to go, after all.”

“That does sound promising,” agreed The Piper, running his fingers along the flute. “And the rest of you didn’t lie or cheat? Steal or scream at each other?”

“No, no, we promise we didn’t!” the townsfolk replied earnestly.

The Piper looked at the mayor. “Well?”

The mayor fumbled with his coattails. “Ah, er, that is to say . . .”

“Out with it.”

“The lawyers at Bumble and Stumble overcharged a client last week!” the mayor blurted out, wringing his hands. “But really—they’re lawyers. What do you expect?”

The Piper sighed. Some things you just couldn’t change. Still, he knew in his heart that the people of Hamelin were telling the truth. He could see it in their eyes, and he felt an air of kindness all around him. The Piper was proud that the town had learned its lesson. He put the flute to his lips and began to play.

A little rat came running into the square from behind one of the buildings. Then another small rat came running. Soon dozens of tiny rodents surrounded the fountain, dancing to The Piper’s tune.

“He’s tricked us!” shrieked the washerwoman. “Look—he’s brought all those horrid rats back!”

“I knew it!” cried her husband. “I *knew* he couldn’t be trusted.”

“Do you remember any of the rats wearing clothes?” the man next to him said.

“No, I don’t,” said the washerwoman’s husband. “Do you?”

“No.” The other man scratched his head. “But that one is wearing a dress that looks awfully like the one I gave Sally for her birthday.”

“Wonderful!” The mayor threw up his hands. “Now The Piper has sewn them all little outfits. No doubt he’ll want us to wash them or something, just to prove how kind we are.” The man buried his head in his hands. After all, he was a politician. He didn’t know how much more of this “being nice” he could take.

“That’s it!” the washerwoman declared, pointing to The Piper. “Get tar and feathers and pitchforks! He lied to us!”

But The Piper had not tricked or lied to anyone. Talk of revenge against him soon ceased, because something rather strange started happening. The rats began dancing faster, and while they danced, they giggled. And the giggles sounded very, very human.

Suddenly, The Piper hit a note on his flute that no one had ever heard before. It wasn’t harsh, exactly. But it wasn’t soft either. It was the loud sound of a laugh and a cry and a sigh all at once. Then, a brilliant white light surrounded the rats, who were dancing now with incredible speed. The villagers shielded their eyes. When the light died down, the children of Hamelin were standing before them. No longer disguised as rats, they ran into the arms of their parents.

“We fooled you, we fooled you!” they cried. “You thought we were rats, but *they’re* all back in the forest! Ha-ha!” They clapped their hands and whooped with delight. The grown-ups wept with relief, and hugged their children tighter than they ever had before. They were so grateful to have their sons and daughters back, no one minded the rat prank.

The tune played by The Piper wasn’t dangerous or haunting anymore. It had become a lively melody, full of celebration. The townsfolk of Hamelin danced with their children, hearts full of joy. They laughed too loudly and even got mud on their clothes.

And somewhere, deep in their new forest home, the real rats were dancing too.

THE END

Discussion Questions

The following are discussion questions for younger readers, parents, and teachers:

1. If a stranger approaches you and asks you to go somewhere, what should you do? Run away? Tell a grown-up you trust?
2. What if a stranger offered to take you away to somewhere better? Would you go with them then? Why might this be a bad idea—even if they seem nice?
3. Is there ever a time when it's okay to trust a stranger, or go somewhere with them?

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading “Paying Piper” (or “What Happened in Hamelin Town”). Look for more of my middle-grade fiction later in 2013!

In the meantime, feel free to visit me at ilanawaters.com, [stalk me on Twitter](#) or [Goodreads](#), [like me on Facebook](#), and e-mail me at [ilanabethwaters\[at\]yahoo\[dot\]com](mailto:ilanabethwaters[at]yahoo[dot]com). You can also [sign up for my newsletter](#). You'll receive insider information on new releases, contests, giveaways, and other supercool stuff!

If you enjoyed this story, why not tell the world about it? You can link to it, share it with friends, review it on Amazon, Goodreads, LibraryThing, Shelfari, and more. You can post about it on Facebook, Twitter, or even your blog. If you are kind enough to do even *one* of these things, you'll make my day—I guarantee it.

[Check out my other work here.](#)

The Adventures of Stanley Delacourt: Book 1 of Hartlandia

Ten-year-old Stanley Delacourt loves his quiet life in the peaceful village of Meadowwood. At least, he does until his best friend is killed. Then the town library—where Stanley lives and

works—is burned to the ground. The individuals responsible for both tragedies are a nasty group of soldiers. They work for the kingdom’s new leader: Christopher Siren.

No one understands the rules Siren’s creating. They don’t know why breaking them means death, or why the leader is so keen to destroy books. And no one can figure out where the former queen and king disappeared to—or if they’ll ever return.

With the grown-ups too fearful to take action, Stanley vows to confront Siren. He plans to get answers and demand justice. Little does he know that his journey will involve sword-wielding knights, kidnapper fairies, and dark magic.

Stanley has only two allies back home. One is an intimidated witch named Meredith. The other is a young apothecary called Sophie—who may have enchantment problems of her own. Can they help him discover the reason behind Siren’s crimes and end this terrible reign? Or is Stanley set to become the next victim in the tyrant’s evil plot?

If you enjoy the fantasy works of Rick Riordan, Lemony Snicket, or Philip Pullman, then explore the world of Stanley Delacourt today. [Read the first chapter here for FREE!](#) Or, you can buy it at [Amazon](#), [Amazon.com/uk](#), [Barnesandnoble](#), [Apple](#), [Kobo](#), and [Smashwords](#).

About the Author

Ilana Waters is a freelance writer who lives in New Jersey. When not creating content for websites, she can be found working on novels and short stories—as well as nibbling string cheese. She once pet-sat an electric eel, and enjoys walking in circles around the park for no particular reason.

Acknowledgments

Again, many thanks to [Marcia Trahan](#) for her understanding and assistance with this story. And I am eternally grateful to the team of [Streetlight Graphics](#) for creating my cover and e-book files.

As always, this project would have gone nowhere without my beta readers. Thank you, Naia T., Melanie C., and Alexandra C., for working through my drafts.

Finally, if I accidentally omitted anyone from this list, my humblest apologies. A hearty “thank-you” to everyone else who may have helped with this project!