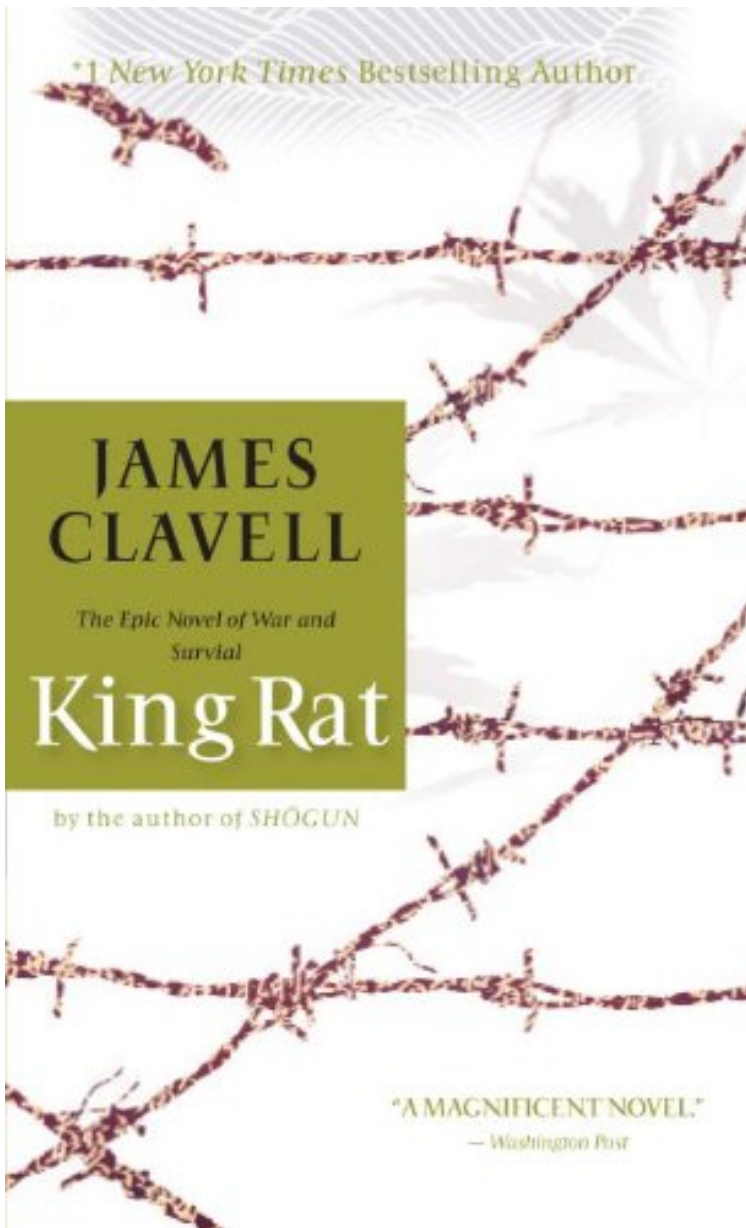


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King Rat



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe 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.From the Paperback edition.ExtraitChapter OneIm going to get that bloody bastard if I die in the attempt. LieutenantGrey was glad that at last he had spoken aloud what had so long

been twisting his guts into a knot. The venom in Greys voice snapped Sergeant Masters out of his reverie. He had been thinking about a bottle of ice-cold Australian beer and a steak with a fried egg on top and his home in Sydney and his wife and the breasts and smell of her. He didnt bother to follow the lieutenants gaze out the window. He knew who it had to be among the half-naked men walking the dirt path which skirted the barbed fence. But he was surprised at Greys outburst. Usually the Provost Marshal of Changi was as tight-lipped and unapproachable as any Englishman. Save your strength, Lieutenant, Masters said wearily, the Japsll fix him soon enough. Bugger the Japs, Grey said. I want to catch him. I want him in this jail. And when Ive done with

him I want him in Utram Road Jail. Masters looked up aghast. Utram Road? Certainly. My oath, I can understand you wanting to get him, Masters said, but, well, I wouldnt wish that on anyone. Thats where he belongs. And thats where Im going to put him. Because hes a thief, a liar, a cheat and a bloodsucker. A bloody vampire who feeds on the rest of us. Grey got up and went closer to the window of the sweltering MP hut. He waved at the flies which swarmed from the plank floors and squinted his eyes against the refracted glare of the high noon light beating the packed earth. By God, he said, Ill have vengeance for all of us. Good luck, mate, Masters thought. You can get the King if anyone can. Youve got the right amount of hate in you.

Masters did not like officers and did not like Military Police. He particularly despised Grey, for Grey had been promoted from the ranks and tried to hide this fact from others. But Grey was not alone in his hatred.

The whole of Changi hated the King. They hated him for his muscular body, the clear glow in his blue eyes. In this twilight world of the half alive there were no fat or well-built or round or smooth or fair-built or thick-built men. There were only faces dominated by eyes and set on bodies that were skin over sinews over bones. No difference between them but age and face and height. And in all this world, only the King ate like a man, smoked like a man, slept like a man, dreamed like a man and looked like a man. You, Grey barked.

Corporal! Come over here! The King had been aware of Grey ever since he had turned the corner of the jail, not because he could see into the blackness of the MP hut but because he knew that Grey was a person of habit and when you have an enemy it is wise to know his ways. The King knew as much about Grey as any man could know about another. He stepped off the path and walked towards the lone hut, set like a pimple among sores of other huts. You wanted me, sir? the King said, saluting. His smile was bland. His sun glasses veiled the contempt of his eyes. From his window, Grey stared down at the King. His taut features hid the hate that was part of him. Where are you going? Back to my hut. Sir, the King said patiently, and all

the time his mind was figuring angles had there been a slip, had someone informed, what was with Grey? Where did you get that shirt? The King had bought the shirt the day before from a major who had kept it neat for two years against the day he would need to sell it for money to buy food. The King liked to be tidy and well-dressed when everyone else was not, and he was pleased that today his shirt was clean and new and his long pants were creased and his socks clean and his shoes freshly polished and his hat stainless. It amused him that Grey was naked but for pathetically patched short pants and wooden clogs, and a Tank Corps beret that was green and solid with tropic mold. I bought it, the King said. Long time ago. Theres no law against

buying anything here, anywhere else. Sir. Grey felt the impertinence in the Sir. All right, Corporal, inside! Why? I just want a little chat, Grey said sarcastically. The King held his temper and walked up the steps and through the doorway and stood near the table. Now what? Sir. Turn out your pockets. Why? Do as youre told. You know Ive the right to search you at any time. Grey let some of his contempt show. Even your commanding officer agreed. Only because you insisted on it. With good reason. Turn out your

pockets! Wearily the King complied. After all, he had nothing to hide. Handkerchief, comb, wallet, one pack of tailor-made cigarettes, his tobacco box full of raw Java tobacco, rice cigarette papers, matches. Grey made sure all pockets were empty, then opened the wallet. There were fifteen American dollars and nearly four hundred Japanese Singapore dollars. Where did you get this money? Grey snapped, the ever-present sweat dripping from him. Gambling. Sir. Grey laughed mirthlessly. Youve a lucky streak. Its been good for nearly three years. Hasnt it? You through with me now? Sir. No. Let me look at your watch. Its on the list! said let me look at your watch! Grimly the King pulled the stainless steel expanding band off his wrist and

handed it to Grey. In spite of his hatred of the King, Grey felt a shaft of envy. The watch was waterproof, shockproof, self-winding. An Oyster Royal. The most priceless possession of Changi other than gold. He turned the watch over and looked at the figures etched into the steel, then went over to the tap wall and took down the list of the Kings possessions and automatically wiped the ants off it, and meticulously checked the number of the watch against the number of the Oyster Royal watch on the list. It checks, the King said. Dont worry. Sir. Im not worried, Grey said. Its you who are to be worried. He handed the watch back, the watch that could bring nearly six months of food. The King put the watch back on his wrist and began to pick up his

wallet and other things. Oh yes. Your ring! Grey said. Let's check that. But the ring checked with the list too. It was itemed as A gold ring, signet of the Clan Gordon. Alongside the description was an example of the seal. How is it an American has a Gordon ring? Grey had asked the same question many times. I won it. Poker, the King said. Remarkable memory you've got, Corporal, Grey said and handed it back. He had known all along that the ring and the watch would check. He had only used the search as an excuse. He felt compelled, almost masochistically, to be near his prey for just a while. He knew, too, that the King did not scare easily. Many had tried to catch him, and failed, for he was smart and careful and very cunning. Why is it, Grey asked harshly, suddenly boiling with envy of the watch and ring and cigarettes and matches and money, that you have so much and the rest of us nothing? Don't know. Sir. Guess I'm just lucky. Where did you get this money? Gambling. Sir. The King was always polite. He always said Sir to officers and saluted officers, English and Aussie officers. But he knew they were aware of the vastness of his contempt for Sir and saluting. It wasn't the American way. A man's a man, regardless of background or family or rank. If you respect him, you call him Sir. If you don't, you don't, and it's only the sons of bitches that object. To hell with them! The King put the ring back on his finger, buttoned down his pockets and flicked some dust off his shirt. Will that be all? Sir. He saw the anger flash in Grey's eyes. Then Grey looked across at Masters, who had been watching nervously. Sergeant, would you get me some water, please? Wearily Masters went over to the water bottle that hung on the wall. Here you are, sir. That's yesterday's, Grey said, knowing it was not. Fill it with clean water. I could've sworn I filled it first thing, Masters said. Then, shaking his head, he walked out. Grey let the silence hang and the King stood easily, waiting. A breath of wind rustled the coconut trees that soared above the jungle just outside the fence, bringing the promise of rain. Already there were black clouds rimming the eastern sky, soon to cover the sky. Soon they would turn dust into bog and make humid air breathable. You like a cigarette? Sir, the King said, offering the pack. The last time Grey had had a tailor-made cigarette was two years before, on his birthday. His twenty-second birthday. He stared at the pack and wanted one, wanted them all. No, he said grimly. I don't want one of your cigarettes. You don't mind if I smoke? Sir. Yes I do! The King kept his eyes fixed on Grey and calmly slipped out a cigarette. He lit it and inhaled deeply. Take that out of your mouth! Grey ordered. Sure. Sir. The King took a long slow drag before obeying. Then he hardened. I'm not under your orders and there's no law that says I can't smoke when I want to. I'm an American and I'm not subject to any goddam flag-waving Union Jack! That's been pointed out to you too. Get off my back! Sir. I'm after you now, Corporal, Grey erupted. Soon you're going to make a slip, and when you do I'll be waiting and then you'll be in there. His finger was shaking as he pointed at the crude bamboo cage which served as a cell. That's where you belong. I'm breaking no laws. Then where do you get your money? Gambling. The King moved closer to Grey. His anger was controlled, but he was more dangerous than usual. Nobody gives me nothing. What I have is mine and I made it. How I made it is my own business. Not while I'm Provost Marshal. Grey's fists tightened. Lot of drugs have been stolen over the months. Maybe you know something about them. Why you Listen, the King said furiously, I've never stolen a thing in my life. I've never sold drugs in my life and don't you forget it! Goddammit, if you weren't an officer I'd but I am and I'd like you to try. By God I would! You think you're so bloody tough. Well, I know you're not. I'll tell you one thing. When we get through this shit of Changi, you come looking for me and I'll hand you your head. I won't forget! Grey tried to slow his pumping heart. But remember, until that time I'm watching and waiting. I've never heard of a run of luck that didn't sometime run out. And yours will! Oh no it won't! Sir. But the King knew that there was a great truth in that. His luck had been good. Very good. But luck is hard work and planning and a little something besides, and not gambling. At least not unless it was a calculated gamble. Like today and the diamond. Four whole carats. At least he knew how to get his hands on it. When he was ready. And if he could make this one deal, it would be the last, and there would be no more need to gamble not here in Changi. Your luck'll run out, Grey said malevolently. You know why? Because you're like all criminals. You're full of greed I don't have to take this crap from you, the King said, and his rage snapped. I'm no more a criminal than Oh but you are. You break the law all the time. The hell I do. Jap law may say To hell with Jap law. I'm talking about camp law. Camp law says no trading. That's what you do! Prove it! I will in time. You'll make one slip. And then we'll see how you survive along with the rest of us. In my cage. And after my cage, I'll personally see that you're sent to Utram Road! The King felt a horror-chill rush into his heart and into his testicles. Jesus, he said tightly. You're just the sort of bastard who'd do that! In your case, Grey said, and there was foam on his lips, it'd be a plea - sure. The Japs are your friends! Why, you son of a bitch! The King bunched a hamlike fist and moved towards Grey. What's going on here, eh? Colonel Brant said as he stomped up the steps and entered the hut. He was a small man, barely five feet, and his beard rolled Sikh

style under his chin. He carried a swagger cane. His peaked army cap was peakless and all patched with sackcloth; in the center of it, the emblem of a regiment shone like gold, smooth with years of burnishing. Nothing, sir. Grey waved at the sudden fly-swarm, trying to control his breathing. I was just searching for Corporal. Come now, Grey, Colonel Brant interrupted testily. I heard what you said about Utram Road and the Japs. It's perfectly in order to search him and question him, everyone knows that, but there's no reason to threaten or abuse him. He turned to the King, his forehead beaded with sweat. You, Corporal. You should thank your lucky stars I don't report you to Captain Brough for discipline. You should know better than to go around dressed like that. Enough to drive any man out of his mind. Just asking for trouble. From the Paperback edition. *Revue de presse* A magnificent novel. *Washington Post* A dramatic, utterly engrossing novel...harsh and brutal in its revelations...James Clavell is a spellbinding storyteller, a brilliant observer, a man who understands much and forgives much. *New York Times* Tension wound up to the snapping point. *Christian Science Monitor* "Breathtaking....worth every word, every ounce, every penny." *Associated Press*