

Guinea Pigs: Obscurity in both Domestication
and Literature

Vince Weaver

1 March 2009

Abstract

Guinea pigs are an uncommon pet and even more uncommon in literature. It is somewhat easy to obtain books on pet care, but to move beyond that often requires purchasing books from England where guinea pigs are much more beloved than they are in America. My collection covers a wide array of guinea pig related books, from children's picture books, to youth fiction, to veterinary reference books, and most interestingly (at least to me) books exploring in detail the lives and times of guinea pigs in their native South America.

Guinea pigs are somewhat uncommon as pets, and thus even more uncommon in literature. My family kept guinea pigs as pets; as curious children we attempted to read all we could find about these rodents at the local library. At best guinea pigs are considered a third-tier level of pet, so our findings were meager at best. Because of this scarcity, over the years I have accumulated as many guinea pig books as possible.

The easiest guinea pig books to find are the ones describing pet care. An exclusively guinea pig guide is rare; often in such guides they are lumped together with other small rodents such as hamsters and gerbils. Often the books are written for children and are not very in-depth; an example of this is Nelson's *Guinea Pigs as a New Pet* [27], obtained from a library book sale. I try not to collect many books of this type, as they are repetitive.

Not all pet care books are generic and boring; Mahoney's *The Really Useful Guinea Pig Guide* [23] is not only an in-depth guide to raising guinea pigs, but also includes some of my favorite guinea pig illustrations. Of particular notice is a watercolor involving some of the aforementioned creatures overlooking ancient ruins in their native South America. Mahoney's book comes from England; in fact most good guinea pig books are from there. The English people have a great fondness for guinea pigs dating back to the age of exploration. Guinea pigs are known as "cavies" in England (due to their Latin name *Cavia porcellus*; this is important to know when searching for British books. Many of the books in my collection were ordered directly from England via the internet.

Children's books involving guinea pigs are the second easiest type to find.

For my collection I try to only get books that have the characters act in-character as real live guinea pigs would. It's very common to use a guinea pig in place of any other generic furry animal, even when the character's behavior is not guinea-pig like at all. Another trend I avoid is the youth novel series which might have 30 books, and it happens that by book number 20 they ran out of plots involving more popular pets and resorted to guinea pigs to keep the franchise alive

My collection is heavily weighted to children's books; this tendency is increasing now that I have a small daughter to indoctrinate with guinea pig stories. Bare's *Guinea Pigs Don't Read Books* [11] is a family favorite, I had to go through great lengths to obtain it used because my brother owns our childhood copy. The book's concept is simple; it is pictures of guinea pigs doing inappropriate activities (wearing silly hats is our favorite).

Duke's *One Guinea Pig is Not Enough* [17], *The Guinea Pig ABC* [15], and *Clean-up Day* [16] are cute, though the guinea pigs in the books lean dangerously close to the generic any-small-mammal would do plot that I try to avoid.

Having a young daughter means I currently look preferentially for board books. Strangely, many guinea pig related board books are out of print and only available used at obscene cost. One fun book I obtained just this Christmas is Meade's *John Willy and Freddy McGee* [25]. It is about guinea pigs escaping from their cage and going on a very realistic adventure.

Michael Bond's *Olga da Polga* [12] stories are a good read for older children. Bond, better known as the author of *Paddington Bear*, wrote a large number of

short stories about Olga. One can tell from the details in his books that he is very familiar with the actual behavior of real guinea pigs.

Most of the aforementioned books are obscure; very occasionally guinea pigs do occur in more popular literature (although this tends to be an exclusively British phenomenon). In C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* [21] guinea pigs end up enjoying life in the world-between-worlds. And who can forget the guinea pigs being suppressed in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [13]?

Fiction books are enjoyable, but I am often curious about the real lives of actual guinea pigs. Peter Gurney was a somewhat eccentric English guinea pig owner who had no formal veterinary training but more-or-less lived among a plethora of guinea pigs in his house. He writes vividly detailed guinea pig books: *Piggy Potions* [19] describes natural remedies for guinea pigs and *The Proper Care of Guinea Pigs* [18] is an extensive tome with many pictures.

In England there is a large subculture of guinea pig breeding and shows. Curran's *Your Guinea Pig: A Kid's Guide to Raising and Showing* [14] is a rather dry book with obsessive detail about this aspect of guinea pig ownership. Gurney's scandalously titled *The Sex Life of Guinea Pigs* [20] sounded too interesting to pass up buying; it also details the travails of breeding the animals.

Another category of books is the truly technical, the ones intended for veterinarians. Richardson's *Diseases of Domestic Guinea Pigs* [28] is a bit disturbing; it often reads as you'd imagine a vet's horse book must: many of the "solutions" to some of the diseases unfortunately involve putting the guinea pig to sleep.

The most coveted type of book, at least to me, is one that describes guinea pigs in their natural habitat. Many books will spend a paragraph or two describing guinea pigs in the wild, but there must be a lot more to their lives than that. Morales' book *The Guinea Pig: Healing, Food, and Ritual in the Andes* [26] is the closest book I have found so far, despite the fact that it is really an anthropology book about the guinea pig's role in indigenous South American culture. Guinea pigs have been domesticated for thousands of years in the Andes, where they are primarily used for food and healing rituals. To this day they are raised for food; they are considered a delicacy and you can buy them at the grocery store. There are even depictions of the last supper where the disciples are having guinea pig as the last meal.

This collection of books is not only fun to read, but it has the benefit of being full of practical knowledge useful when one has a guinea pig as a pet. I intend to continue adding books to this collection whenever possible, hopefully increasing it in both number and scope.

10 Book Wishlist

- [1] Eduardo P. Archetti and Valentina Napolitano (translator). *Guinea Pigs: Food, Symbol and Conflict of Knowledge in Ecuador*. Berg Publishers, 1997.

I would really like to have this book, as it is a non-fiction primary source from South America. This is the hardest type of guinea pig book to obtain.

- [2] Peter Beck. *Meine Meerschweinchen: Rund um das Tier. Gut versorgt. Natürlich gesund. Spiel und Spass. Verhalten verstehen*. Kosmos, 2008.

In addition to Guinea Pig books, I like books written in German. It would be nice to have a German guinea pig book in my collection (Incidentally, Meerschweinchen, meaning “little sea piglet”, is German for guinea pig).

- [3] Ellis Parker Butler. *Pigs is Pigs*. Doubleday, 1936.

A classic humorous essay (turned into a children’s book and cartoon short) about a pair of guinea pigs exponentially breeding as a railway agent fights railroad company bureaucracy.

- [4] William E. Castle. *The Origin Of A Polydactylous Race Of Guinea-Pigs*. Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2007.

This book is worth getting solely for the title, even though it is likely to be a boring read.

- [5] Margaret Elward and Mette Ruelokke. *Guinea Piglopaedia: A Complete Guide to Guinea Pig Care*. Ringpress Books, 2004.

This is a very popular British guinea-pig reference book.

- [6] Rachael O’Neil. *Guinea Pig*. Barron’s Educational Series, Incorporated, 2002.

This is a children’s board book, shaped like a guinea pig. There are a number of board books about guinea pigs available, though most are out of print and going for exorbitant prices used on the internet.

- [7] Virginia Richardson and Allan Trigg. *The World of Cavies*. Coney Publications, 2008.

This book intriguingly claims to have full descriptions of all breeds recognized by the British Cavy Council.

- [8] Susan L. Roth. *Great Big Guinea Pigs*. Bloomsbury USA Children's Books, 2006.

A children's book, about a mother guinea pig telling her child about a past day when giant guinea pigs roamed South America (as unlikely as this seems, this is based on a real news story which is based on real paleontological evidence).

- [9] Dana Stewart. *God Made my Guinea Pigs*. Standard Publishing, 1999.

This is a children's board book. I'm mainly intrigued by the title and the religious overtones.

- [10] Lizabeth A. Terril and Donna J. Clemons. *The Laboratory Guinea Pig*. CRC-Press, 1998.

This explores an aspect of guinea pigs not covered by other books in my collection.

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- [19] Peter Gurney. *Piggy Potions: Natural Remedies for Guinea Pigs*. Kingdom Books, Havant, England, 2000.
- [20] Peter Gurney. *The Sex Life of Guinea Pigs*. Kingdom Books, Havant, England, 2000.
- [21] C.S. Lewis. *The Magician's Nephew*. Macmillan Company, New York, 1971.
- [22] Billy Lopez and Josh Selig. *Wonder Pets! The Bengal Tiger Boo-Boo*. Golden Books, New York, 2008.
- [23] Myra Mahoney. *The Really Useful Guinea Pig Guide*. Kingdom Books, Waterlooville, England, 1999.
- [24] Kate McMullan. *Fluffy's Happy Halloween*. Scholastic Inc., New York, 1998.

- [25] Holly Meade. *John Willy and Freddy McGee*. Marshall Cavendish Corporation, Tarrytown, NY, 1998.
- [26] Edmundo Morales. *The Guinea Pig: Healing, Food, and Ritual in the Andes*. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ, 1995.
- [27] Stephen Nelson. *Guinea Pigs as a New Pet*. T.F.H. Publications, Neptune, NJ, 1995.
- [28] V.C.G. Richardson. *Diseases of Domestic Guinea Pigs*. Blackwell Science Limited, Oxford, UK, 2000.