

Meet Rip Squeak and his friends



A Carmel husband-wife team dreams up artful characters

By **LISA CRAWFORD WATSON**
Special to the Herald

He's rather small, very brave and exceptionally kind. He has big ears, bright eyes and a penchant for high-top red sneakers. He adores his little sister, Jcsse, admires his thespian friend, Euripides, and adopts a small cat named Abbey. He's the kind of fellow who pushes past prejudice to defend or befriend others. His approach to life is that it's all one big adventure.

His name is Rip Squeak and, as mice go, he's a fine one. His story's full of exploits and escapades, but his image alone is worth ... well, it says it all. You might even call it a work of art. Fine art. In fact, that's how it all began.

"Rip Squeak and His Friends" is an artfully illustrated story intended for children and destined for the child in all of us. Its pictures, more beautiful than we might imagine, were not designed to illustrate the story. They are, instead, the fine-art images that inspired the story.

Carmel artist Leonard Filgate was painting a series of still lifes—not the traditional dewy apples and aging blossoms, but toys. In presenting his work to (the fine-art market, he decided his compositions needed something. A character, perhaps to play with the toys.

Nothing saccharine. Nothing scary. An animal maybe, but not a mouse. OK, a mouse, but not Mickey or Minnie, not Tom or Jerry, not even Stuart. It would not be ugly. He would not be characteristically cute. He would be a work of art.

"I wanted a small creature with a big character," said Filgate. "I drew him to stand up and be animated. I gave him a little sister to play with. I gave her a rag doll to cuddle and brought in a kitten to play cat and mouse."

And, for dramatic contrast he introduced a performing frog.

He also introduced the creative talents of his wife, Susan Yost-Filgate, who brainstormed a



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The images of Rip Squeak are Rip the Pirate, top; and The Conversation, above; The Musicians are below.



storyline with him and wrote a story consistent with the characters.

"The story sort of evolved," said Yost-Filgate. "It was quite long, at first, true to form for a coffee-table book. I condensed it for the children's book that followed, but I

must say, I'm not a believer in sacrificing words so children will understand. If they want to know they'll ask."

Yost-Filgate based the story on friends—different creatures—who get along even though they aren't supposed to. It was a theme she recognized in her daughter's school, kids who are friends despite their differences.

Rip Squeak's adventures will continue to evolve with the 2002 release of "Pirate Tales," a children's book whose prequel, a coffee-table book of the same theme, was launched this month. In addition, the Filgates will introduce a Rip Squeak Christmas story in 2003, followed by a sequel to "Pirate Tales."

"Leonard and Susan are an amazingly creative and talented pair," said Rohana LoSchiavo of Phillips Gallery of Fine Art in Carmel, which represents Rip

Squeak originals and prints. "We're very excited to represent not only art of this caliber, but this delightful story about loving, caring friendship, and a nonviolent adventure that shows us how to work through conflict in healthy ways and overcome our differences. He's become very real for us. Walking into the Filgate home is like going back 100 years into the life and cottage of Rip Squeak. It's obvious that he actually lives in this place."

Filgate recently completed a painting, [a portion of proceeds] donated to "Providing Art That Heals" or PATH, a local nonprofit organization that provides art to public institutions and nonprofit agencies serving people in physical, psychological and emotional transition. The image pictures "Bunny," Jesse's beloved rag doll, in a hospital bed receiving Care from Rip and his friends, Abbey and Euripides.

"I do paint for myself first," said

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Filgate, "but this hospital scene is all for the kids who will see it from their beds, to have something to look at when they wake up."

Rip Squeak, it seems, appeals to a very broad and diverse audience. Intended for children, everything from the children's book to the original fine-art paintings are selling to adults, ostensibly for the grandchildren, the baby who's yet to be born or the little brother. But plenty of adults have betrayed their own attraction to the characters and their indomitable spirit, under the auspices of fine art.

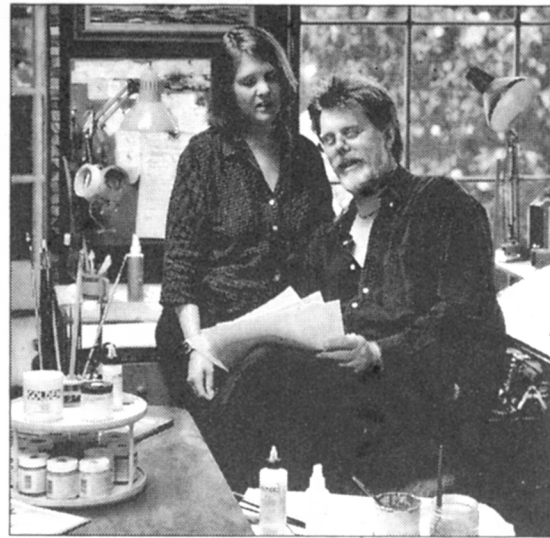
"Rip seems to have piqued the interest and emotion of the child within every adult," said Filgate. "He crosses cultural,

socioeconomic, gender and age boundaries. I think this is the beauty of animals. They free us to see and accept ourselves in them."

From all appearances, Filgate might seem the most unlikely candidate for the creation of Rip Squeak and his miniature pals. A towering man with a voice meant for radio, he has a weakness for Wagnerian opera and an impressive portfolio of maritime images, landscapes and theatrical sets. But he's also the man who created a silly dance for Euripides and a rag doll named Bunny, for Jesse. Likely, though, it's the fatherly spirit brought out by daughter Jessica, 17, to whom "Rip Squeak" is dedicated.

"Susan started writing stories of this nature when Jessica was born." Filgate said, "and my images grew-up simultaneously."

The couple, married 24 years, moved from San Francisco to Carmel nearly four years ago because they saw the Peninsula as a better place to raise a



MARTHA CASANAVE/Special to The Herald

Leonard Filgate and his wife, Susan Yost-Filgate, created Rip Squeak. "Rip seems to have piqued the interest and emotion of the child within every adult," said Filgate.

teenager and their menagerie of artful characters.

Together, with agent Beda Schmidthues, they formed Rip Squeak, Inc., through which they have continued to develop the concept in foreign, as well as domestic markets. Locally, Lasting Impressions shows Rip Squeak prints at the Barnyard in Carmel, while Phillips Gallery

of Fine Art represents original and print works, as well as preliminary drawings in Carmel-by-the-Sea.

"This is the first time in my entire career," said Filgate, "that it's a joy to get up in the morning and get to work. I know I'm doing something for kids, for the kid in everyone. And that's a very happy thing."