



LIFESTYLE

The *Magical World* of a Carmel Couple



BY SANDRA LEADER

Cross the threshold into the Carmel home of Leonard Filgate and Susan Yost-Filgate and you enter into the point of origin of a magical domain where natural enemies are fast friends and childlike joys prevail.

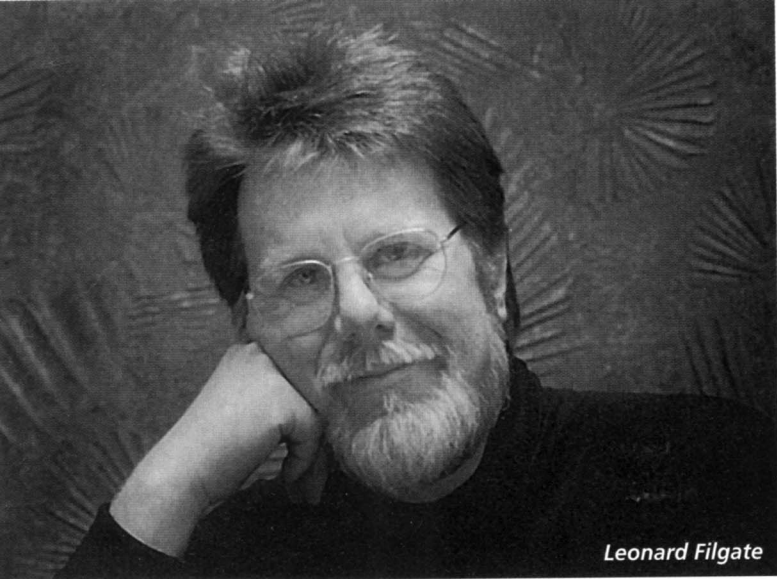
Their two-bedroom cottage is the crucible where an adventurous mouse named Rip Squeak and his assortment of friends take form. Over the past several years Leonard and Susan have collaborated on a number of enchanting books—he's the artist, she the wordsmith—

intended for the child in everyone. The spirit of the characters and their antecedents spills over into every corner of the house, but most particularly into the large day-lit room where the couple works together on their projects.

The walls are covered with reproductions of paintings of the various adventures of Rip and friends, as well as other examples of Leonard's work. The room serves as both office and studio, with a current canvas that Leonard is working on front and center and Susan's

desk off to one side.

Rip Squeak and his friends, including Euripides the frog and Abbey the kitten, are a charming lot, painted by Leonard in acrylic with bright, crisp colors that make them seem to glow with an inner light. Leonard achieves remarkable dimensionality and lifelike movement in his creatures, whether they are doing animal-appropriate things such as scampering through the woods or activities more apropos of humans such as dancing in the rain.



Leonard Filgate

Although the characters and the stories are takeoff points for Leonard's work, his paintings are works of fine art, sold in galleries rather than exclusively appearing as illustrations in the books.

A volume relating the original story behind the characters entitled, "Rip Squeak and His Friends, An Introduction to the Roaring Tales of Rip Squeak" was self published in 1999 by Susan and Leonard under the name Rip Squeak, Inc. as a coffee table/art book. Two more Rip Squeak titles followed, with a third, "Rip Squeak and His Friends Discover the Treasure," due out this fall.

The couple starts their day early, with coffee around 7, then they get to work. Leonard goes to his easel and paints steadily until quitting time. "It's hard to get him to eat lunch," says Susan. She also swings into gear, handling the nuts and bolts of their business: meetings, phone calls, public relations, graphic design. "Sometimes I even get to write and edit," she says wryly. Their professional work day ends at about 6 p.m.

"It's funny," says Leonard, "You think, 'Oh, I'm my own boss, I can work six hours a day.' It doesn't work out that way. It's very demanding."

Working and living together in such close quarters is not a lifestyle that would appeal to all married couples. Do they ever get on each other's nerves? "Mmm hmm," responds Susan, nodding her head affirmatively. "It's quite a small space. We've accepted that we are going to disagree. We can't agree on everything."

"What we're doing is frightening to

Southeast Asia, the South Pacific and the Mediterranean. In 1970 he returned to California where he undertook his own personal study of art.

In the interval before the couple began the Rip Squeak project in 1997, Leonard sold numerous paintings to individuals and completed several commissioned paintings for the U.S. Navy.

"...you don't go to bed without a kiss goodnight."

His subject matter included marine art, fantasy art, landscapes, cityscapes, theatrical backdrops and reproductions of traditional Japanese screens.

Leonard and Susan met in 1977 in San Francisco. She was a recent graduate of the Pennsylvania State University with a bachelor's degree in art education and was working for Determined Productions Inc., which held 80 percent of the rights for Charles Schulz' Peanuts® characters and other licensed properties. "I learned a lot about licensing and mar-

keting," she says. "I always had an interest in doing something that involved licensed products for children."

The couple married in 1979 and over the course of the next years Susan "tried different things, including working in the paralegal field. All along she was doing creative writing on the side. Their daughter, Jessica, whom they describe as their "biggest inspiration" was born in 1984.

A major turning point for the couple came in 1996 when they met their current business partner, Beda Schmidthues, who became Leonard's agent. "He was the person who took our ideas off the shelf and sold them," says Susan.

"Leonard really liked the perspective of a bug's eye view and he wanted the viewer to be able to see the toys and the images in the paintings from the perspective of a bug, from the perspective of a child on the floor," explains Susan.

"I wanted to do something a bit different, I thought, 'Toys would bring out childhood memories.' We had a whole story around 'Pixquiks', small elf-like creatures with tall pointed ears. Rip Squeak evolved from them.

"I had a gallery willing to give [the paintings] a shot, and we thought, 'Let's have a story to go along with it,'" says Leonard. "We thought, 'Toys...mouse, he had to have a friend.' Then we brainstormed: What's the natural enemy of a mouse—a cat. Let's make them friends. What else is the same size as a mouse—a frog"



Susan Yost-Filgate

Rip Squeak



Jesse

They started working on the project in 1997. The first three pieces were in a Carmel gallery by October of that year and they sold within the first weekend, says Leonard.

An overriding theme in the books is getting along despite differences, a topic both Leonard and Susan feel strongly about. "When our daughter was in nursery and elementary school, tolerance was a big theme. From all that exposure to the different holidays and the different traditions, I always thought that it was an important thing to encourage children to understand differences and then they would be more accepting," says Susan. "I felt we could invent a softer adventure where there was no violence."

The Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles apparently felt they succeeded in this goal and included a selection of illustrations from "Rip Squeak and His Friends" in an exhibition that ran for nearly a year celebrating "diversity and tolerance as portrayed in illustrated children's books."

Leonard's art books and paintings are available in more than 60 galleries in the U.S. and Canada, including Phillips Gallery in Carmel. The children's books are carried in bookstores throughout the country and is available locally at Bib 'n' Tucker and Books Inc. in Carmel or on the internet at www.RipSqueak.com. ❖



Euripides