

RIP SQUEAK: THE MOUSE THAT ROARS!

by Sarah Seamark

The whimsical story of a little mouse Rip Squeak, his sister Jesse, an abandoned kitten called Abbey, and a frog named Euripides has developed into a worldwide publishing and licensing business.

The tale begins when industry veteran Beda Schmidthues, who headed up Julianna Art publishing company, was introduced through a friend to artist and illustrator Leonard Filgate. At the time, Leonard was painting pictures of antique toys, trains, tops and so forth, as well as doing elf-like illustrations for a children's story written by his wife, author Susan Yost-Filgate. "I saw his artwork and fell in love with it," says Beda. "As soon as we met we struck a chord, and said, 'Let's do something together.'"

Later, Beda introduced Leonard's work to Tom Barnes of Richard Thomas Galleries. "We talked about what we could do with children's art—and Leonard and Susan came up with the idea of doing animals," he recalls. Susan's imagination started flowing, and she came up with a story about a mouse, and that was how Rip Squeak and his friends came into being.

In March of '97 Leonard created the first painting of Rip Squeak, and Richard Thomas Galleries commissioned three more. The following fall, they were presented in the Carmel gallery and all three sold within days. On the basis of this success, it was decided to start a publishing program for Leonard's paintings of the adventures of the little mouse and his assorted friends. The first big push to the trade was Artexpo New York 1998, when seven or eight giclée editions published by Richard Thomas were exhibited. They were an immediate hit. "Within the first three hours we had 15 companies asking for licensing rights—from puzzles to toys to figurines.

"We knew we had something here," says Beda, "and decided to go to the Licensing Show in New York in June." Again, the interest was tremendous—overtures from Mattel, Hasbro, a chil-

dren's TV program, and more. They were told their characters have the potential of a classic.

But they decided to step back and assess the situation. "We didn't want to blow this out of the window, and then it's gone. You don't have that many chances when you have something good in your hands," observes Beda.



"Wow!" is available as a giclée on canvas in an edition of 195, 15 APs, with a 21- by 12-inch image that retails for \$350.

With their belief in the viability of Rip Squeak et al confirmed, the Filgates and Beda contemplated the future. "We didn't want to lose the integrity of the story or the quality of the art. We very carefully planned our next steps."



"Harmony," one of the earlier prints, is a giclée on canvas in an edition of 195, 15 APs, with a 25- by 20-inch image that sells for \$800.

First, they started building a network of higher-end art galleries for the print program. As the publishing program grew, the Filgates and Beda parted ways with Richard Thomas Galleries.

"We were going in different directions," Beda explains. "They wanted to concentrate on retail, and us on publishing."

In the summer of '99 Rip Squeak Inc. of San Luis Obispo, CA, was established by the creators, Susan Yost-Filgate and Leonard Filgate, Beda Schmidthues and his wife Helga, and outside investors, to further promote the characters.

The company's first project was to produce a coffee table art book to give the story and illustrations legiti-

macy. *Rip Squeak and His Friends, An Introduction to the Roaring Adventures of Rip Squeak* was published in English by Rip Squeak Inc. and in German by Baumhaus Medien, AG, of Frankfurt, with distributed in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

Enough copies were pre-sold prior to publication in November '99 to pay for the entire first run of 3,000 for the U.S., 3,000 for Germany, all of which were sold through art galleries.

The book, available in three editions, open, deluxe, and collectors, tells the story for the first time of the friendship between the two mice, the kitten, and the frog—giving the artwork

substance, and gallery sales consultants a narrative to share with their customers.

The artist and author explain, "While we create this unreal world of mice that are friends with a cat and a frog, characters which in reality have violent interactions, our point is to stress that they can get along despite their differences and their natural inclinations. Each of our characters learns the value of the other is far greater as friend than as foe.

"We intend that our stories have adventure without gratuitous violence—that violence does not an adventure make. Each may face potential danger but each can overcome it with courage, creativity, and quick thinking."

With the book as a selling tool, galleries were now able to present the artwork more imaginatively and draw collectors in. Galleria di Sorrento in Las Vegas made a tree house as the setting for its Rip Squeak exhibit and book signing, bringing theatre to the sales process. This summer, the gallery is using the Rip Squeak pirate ship that made its debut at Artexpo in March, to promote the artwork for the new coffee table art book due out in November. The book's working title is *Pirate Tales and Finding the Treasure*.

A network of about 30 galleries in the U.S. now carry the artwork, including The Studio of Long Grove in Long Grove, IL; MacArthur Gallery, Tampa, FL; Every Picture Tells a Story, Los Angeles; as well as the Richard Thomas Galleries.

The Rip Squeak program has already penetrated several markets: the higher-end gallery program for the originals and limited edition prints; frameshops, gift shops, and other galleries for the posters and figurines, and the book market for the children's book. A 32-page children's book, *Rip Squeak and His Friends*, that was first released by Baumhaus in Germany, is now made available in English by Smallfellow Press, Los Angeles. (Rip Squeak exhibited at the Children's International Book Fair in

Bologna in April, and will be at the Frankfurt International Book Fair in October.)

As Rip Squeak and his friends gain notoriety, prices for Leonard Filgate's artwork has gone up. Acrylics on canvas or board now sell for \$3,000–\$8,000, giclées in editions of 250 or less for \$200–\$800, posters for \$15.

Licenses include: Baumhaus Medien worldwide for children's picture books, bookmarks, music CDs, and audio tapes; and Europe for calendars, puzzles, and postcard books; First Impressions, Carmel Valley, CA, North America for greeting cards and other stationery; Inkognito GmbH, Berlin, Germany, Europe for greeting cards and postcards.

Plans in the works include a sculpture program, probably in the medium of poly resin, in editions of about 150, with prices in the \$1,000–\$2,000 range. Also toys are on the drawing board, including life-size replicas of Rip Squeak and Abbey.

A second printing of 2,000 U.S. copies of the art book *Rip Squeak and His Friends* in September 2000 has sold out, and a third printing of 3,000 more for the U.S. has just been made.

It is available in three editions: an open edition, priced \$30 retail; a deluxe edition of 1,000, signed by both Susan Yost-Filgate and Leonard Filgate, is priced \$150 for the final 250; a collector's edition of 500 boxed, signed, and accompanied by a signed limited edition giclée, "Abbey's Surprise," now retails for \$300 for the final 45 books.

For more information on Rip Squeak Inc., go to www.RipSqueak.com or telephone (805) 594-0184.