

The Rodent Reader

A Magazine of AristocRATS, Artists o'
'RATS and Insane RAT Love

Quarterly

INTRODUCTORY
ISSUE!

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From the Editor's Nest

Welcome to my *brand new* magazine! I'm so excited to bring you such a scrumptious smorgasbord of articles and pictures and poems and stories, all about my very favorite subject -- me!!! Just kidding. But, they are all about rats. I've always heard one should write about what one knows. And (since I am one!) there's nothing I know more about than rats.

Of course, I also know not everyone is as crazy about rats as I am. That's why my adoptive mom (who *is* crazy about rats, and who's therefore helping me out with this whole magazine creation thing) has provided plenty of explanation as to not only how she and Dad came to love my species, but *why* others of *their* species should re-think how they (you?) see us, too.

For those who already know how wonderful we are, though, you can start at the beginning and just gnaw your way right through the issue. It's filled with a well-balanced serving of material to savor (seasoned with a few pinches of humor and just enough sweetness for an insides-warming dessert), all presented with a love for art and literature in mind. On the art end, there are several full-page photographs (which you can tear out and frame if you want), plus a profile of a fantastic artist who's created paintings and pastels of rats so lifelike I almost said hello to one as I scampered past! And, you can meet my family's veterinarians by way of a piece I wrote featuring a special bit of artwork Mom and I created just for them. Plus, there's a review about an independent-minded animal-lover of long ago, who drew pictures of all her furry friends, and wrote wonderful little stories to help them become other folks' friends as well. And, speaking of stories, this issue includes the first chapter of a fiction book in progress, told from the perspective of another independent-minded female -- a rat named Molly. But, you'll read more about her soon...along with a rat mom named Orvietta, a rat clothing designer named Marna, and a dashing Valentine named Edison.

For now, though, I just want to say again how happy I am to share this wonderful new adventure with you -- and that I hope, once you've had a chance to read this issue, you'll share your thoughts about it with me. I've learned a lot from writing reviews for my web page and offering "madvice" to readers of my mom's newsletter, *Mil Mania*. But, I know I can benefit from *taking* madvice, too, and look forward to your help in learning how to make every issue of this magazine better than the last. So, go ahead and start reading -- and then start writing. Just e-mail keela@artistinsane.com or use the regular address on p.3.

While you're busy, though, I think I'll just creep out to the kitchen and see if I can find a little snack. Working on this magazine is hard work -- and this rodent is *hungry*.

See you next issue!

Keela

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Front cover photo: Bridget by Mil Scott

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It all started with a mailbox...

by Mil Scott

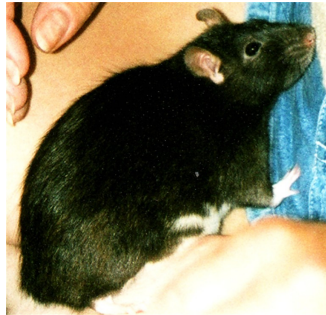


Although her tale's been told countless times to family and friends, and printed in various other newsletters and magazines, there's no way *The Rodent Reader Quarterly* could be launched without its premiere feature article retelling the discovery of our first rat, Molly. For, without Molly, there would be no magazine, no stories of huge spirits in tiny bodies with which to fill it, and no fellow rodent loving acquaintances with whom to share our *ratistic* insanity.

More than that, however, were it not for a series of coincidences reinforcing the adage truth really is stranger than fiction, there would have been no Molly -- neither to come into our lives, nor very likely, to have continued with her own from that day forward. Where those events began for Molly we may never know. For us, however, they started with a snowy March morning that turned into a brisk and blustery preface to spring. Not a day for spending too much time outdoors, we'd decided to use it for running a myriad of errands, one of which was the far from auspicious task of mailing a letter -- or bill -- or some such communication that I

may not remember anymore, but which served as the catalyst for a most memorable occasion. It also serves, in retrospect, to reinforce the point made in my "note from the managing editor" (in the right column of p.4) regarding certain tangible documents being more effective than cyber ones. Had I merely utilized e-mail or online bill-pay (as I often do) to save that one precious minute, we would have missed a timeless blessing. For, shivering on the small patch of earth beside the mailbox, was our Molly.

At the time, of course, we had no idea this was the case. All we knew was that before us stood an animal in need -- one of a supposedly fright-inspiring variety, but who, even from this close prox-



imity, appeared anything but threatening. In fact, if we had any fear at all, it was that she might run away if we tried to pick her up. As it turned out, by contrast, when my husband finally knelt down and held out a hand, the grateful little creature instantly hopped aboard!

Having already begun crushing rat stereotypes with this completely civilized act, it shouldn't have surprised us to find, upon placing her in a small bucket as a makeshift travel carrier, that she very much preferred riding quietly on my lap. Neither should it have surprised us that she was hungry, as she tried to express by gently nibbling on my sleeve. Still in the post office parking lot, we immediately called our vet for a bit of guidance. He told us with great confidence that rats make excellent pets -- and that they eat a wide variety of foods.

We therefore stopped at a convenience store en route to our next errand and bought our new friend (already dubbed Molly) a small bag of party mix (including pretzels, cereal pieces, etc.). And, again, we were amazed at how domestic, even human-like, she seemed as she delicately held each morsel between her tiny front paws and nibbled away. When she finished, I created a makeshift water bowl from the bottom of a soft drink cup and she daintily helped herself. Upon arriving home we hunted down an old aquarium stored in our basement and began providing her with bathroom tissue from which to make a bed. Knowing so little about her species at the time, we were amused and charmed by her industry in constructing from this tissue not merely a nest, but a huge cocoon -- until, two weeks after her arrival, we were given an abrupt lesson in rat behavior when I pushed a bit of the cocoon aside one night to find two miniscule pink babies!

Long story short, these proved to be twin sons, Noonan and Flannery, who became family members as wondrous, loving -- and loved -- as Molly herself. Between the three of them, Molly and her boys won our hearts completely and changed our lives forever. As I've often summed up this experience, the devil you don't know may be an angel in disguise. And, these angels proved the finest ambassadors rats could possibly have -- a gift I here attempt to honor by doing my best to become theirs.



Top: Molly's Mailbox Middle: Molly
Bottom: Noonan (partially white) and Flannery

ARTIST PROFILE: MANON CLEARY

by Mil Scott

WHEN I first decided to include Manon Cleary in this magazine, it was my intent to write something in the traditional third person format -- acting as an invisible narrator, offering facts about her professional history, speaking with the unbiased and seemingly dispassionate voice of a serious "reporter." Toward this end, I dutifully performed extensive research, amassed a collection of notes to remind me of points imperative to include, and spent more time than I generally take to actually write several pages simply readying myself to compose the very first word.

Then I sat staring at the computer screen, anxious to start writing, convinced I'd learned an impressive array of facts with which to educate newcomers to her work. And, still that first word refused to come. What came instead was the nagging feeling that all the intellectual knowledge I'd recently acquired had little to do with what had led me to share Manon with my readers. That's when it hit me. The thing that compelled me to include this amazing artist in this magazine is the very same thing that compelled me to create a

magazine in the first place: passion. Excitement, enthusiasm, or whatever you want to call it, it was that kid in an unsupervised candy store/finding a rat under a mailbox feeling of pure joy mixed with awe you just can't keep to yourself. Something, most definitely, not to be contained within the bounds of journalistic propriety. See. There I go -- already getting carried away.

To bring back some small bit of decorum, let me try to calmly explain where this whole thing started. I was visiting the Rat Fan Club website, a place I go frequently to check out the latest Rat of the Week, see what's new in rat news stories around the web, happenings with club founder Debbie Ducommun's rats, etc. While there, I clicked on the Special Events tab. And, then I saw it. The most amazing pastel drawing of a beautiful white rat. Above it was the announcement:

"Art Show of new pastels by Manon Cleary

At Addison/Ripley Fine Art,

1670 Wisconsin Avenue, NW. Washington, DC.

OPENING RECEPTION: WEDNESDAY, JULY 22, 2009

5- 7PM The exhibit includes 6 rat pictures.

They can be seen on Facebook."

Utterly intrigued, I headed over to Facebook immediately and typed Manon Cleary in the search box. Before I knew it I was staring at even more of the most incredibly detailed, almost touchably lifelike images of rats I'd ever seen. Among the most amazing aspects of these to me was the softness of, and perfect distinction between, individual strands of hair -- a special ability, interestingly, I found singled out in my research for this piece. In a 2004 article, John Metcalfe remarked that, even early in her career, Manon "reveled in painting hair -- the amateur dauber's nemesis."

I put in an "Add as Friend" request right away and sent a brief message to express my appreciation. We subsequently exchanged several e-mails, and



Pastel of Boo Boo, from the collection of Adrienne Black

although she draws and paints many other subjects in addition to rats -- each spectacular in its own right -- naturally this common interest became our conversation starter. I explained about meeting Molly, and Manon in return told of the -- not sur-

prisingly, art related --

manner in which she'd become a rat owner as well.

"My introduction to rats was a bit strange too," Manon said. While teaching at a local University, we were paid on a 9 month basis, so summers were tight. The art critic at the Post suggested to the editor of Potomac Magazine, then the newspaper's magazine, that he should use artists instead of illustrators for the stories for a different and more exciting look to the magazine. I had to do a cover for a piece on using people instead of rats at NIMH and I suggested using a person in a Skinner box and rats outside. A friend brought me to visit a rat to start and later a friend gave me a rat from NIMH as a birthday present. That was 35 years ago. I have had 9 since that time. I used to do huge paintings of them, with and without people, in oil. When I switched from acrylic back to oil in the mid 70s I found the white rat hairs were wonderfully reflective and a great vehicle for oil and the translucency that you get with oil instead of the plastic look of acrylic in figurative painting."

But, as I touched on earlier, rats aren't Manon's only subjects (turbulent, richly textured skies are another favorite theme -- pieces critic Paul Richard has called "little windows cut into the wall"), and as her message on becoming a rat owner indicates, the 6 pastels mentioned in the Rat Fan Club notice are far from her first works. In fact, she's created an enormous body of drawings and paintings in various media -- in a style "already set," as photographer Allen Appel (who once lived in Manon's building) remarked, from the time of her earliest efforts. She was probably the best painter in the building," says Appel. "I would go up and she would have a 6-by-8 canvas and be laying down the grounds. As far as I could see, it was the finest painting I'd ever seen in my life, and she hadn't even started on it."

She's also proved instrumental in helping other artists develop their styles; for 35 years she served as a professor of fine arts at the University of DC, and herself holds BFA and MFA degrees from Washington University (St. Louis) and Tyler School of Arts, respectively -- the latter of which included extensive study in Italy and Spain. In addition to oils and pastels, Manon's work includes many graphite portraits -- crafted via a technique explained succinctly by John Metcalfe. "Using a process of subtraction, she coated pages with graphite powder, cut out a rough figure with erasers, and touched up the image with blending stumps and Kleenex." Among these is a self-portrait which unintentionally led back to Manon's close association with rats... when a gallery owner replaced it with one of her rat paintings -- but failed to change the title "Self Portrait" on the accompanying wall plaque. Manon's reaction? "All of my work has been about self -- even the rats," she laughed. "I do have a rat nose and rat hands."

While the physical resemblance is debatable, clearly Manon reflects the infiltration of the rat spirit into human lives rats touch. "I always go back to rats when I'm experimenting with a new medium," she says, "because I know them so well." And, her ability to capture both the rat spirit and form has attracted the attention of other artists using rats in their own work. "One of my paintings is in Jonathan Burt's [book] *Rats*," Manon says. "He is a British painter, writer and consultant for animals in movies, and did a series of books on animals...[*Rat*] is kind of a definitive rat book as it has art, history and is a quick read. Also, I am reproduced in the NY Academy of Science Magazine -- four or five reproductions and [the] cover, for a story called something like "Rat 64."

Still, like most rat lovers, Manon's use of these creatures throughout her career has won her labels like "eccentric," "somewhat obsessive," and a creator of pieces that are "disturbing" and which "discomfort." At the same time, she's been called "a luminary among Washington DC artists" and (by F. Lennox Campello) an "incarnation of a Renaissance master whose brush translates the greatest achievements of Western realism into a modern contemporary dialogue." Manon's art, Campello continues, "mortally wounds the argument of those who claim that painting is dead."

Sadly, the rampant misplaced view of rats as things ugly and dangerous colors even Campello's lavish praise. "Who else," he asks, "can make a rat's ear (literally!) into a visual poem? And who could possibly make it as beautiful?"

The answer, of course, is no one. But, from the perspective of a rat lover -- i.e. one of Manon's fellow eccentrics, who finds inherent beauty in a rat's ear -- it might be said Campello, for all his admiration of Manon, has failed to fully grasp the epic level of talent her "visual poem" represents. After all, it's often said "art imitates life." In Manon's case, however, it's as though she's managed to defy all we know of two-dimensional form, somehow transferring the beauty of a rat's ear...and eye...and hair...onto canvas in what seems a mirror image of life itself. It's been said, "writing about music is like dancing about architecture." I suspect some similar analogy applies to writing about Manon's art -- though I wonder if the person who coined that sentiment had heard any music that compares. Because when that kid in a candy store/rat under a mailbox feeling takes over, well, you've got to do *something*. And, I dare anyone who loves rats or art -- and particularly rats as art -- to discover Manon's work and *not* start dancing -- or at the very least, start writing about wanting to.



Pastel of a rat's ear, courtesy of the artist

Mailbox

A Rat's Eye View

Molly

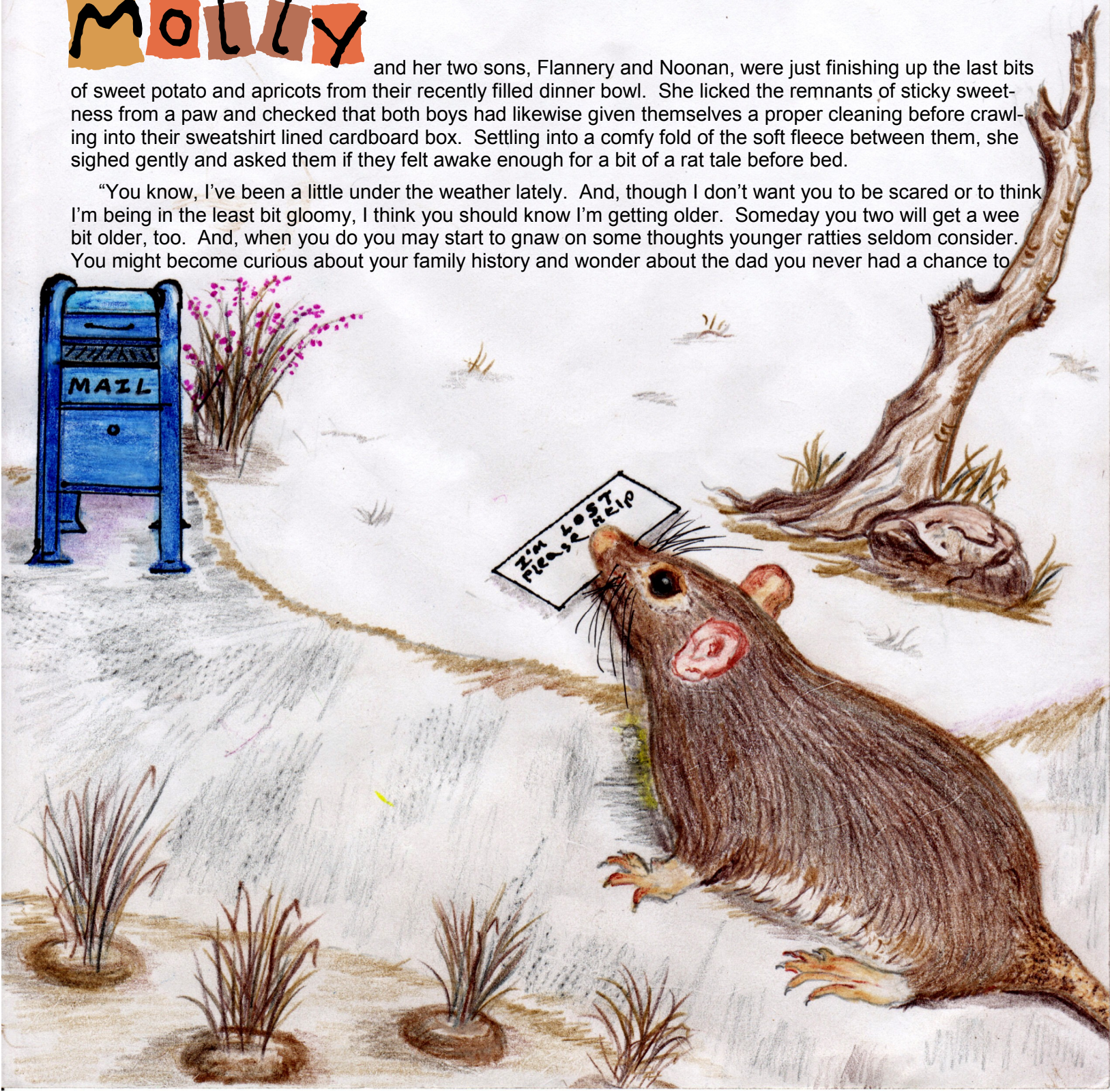
by Mil Scott
Artwork by Corrine Goodwin

Chapter 1

Molly

and her two sons, Flannery and Noonan, were just finishing up the last bits of sweet potato and apricots from their recently filled dinner bowl. She licked the remnants of sticky sweetness from a paw and checked that both boys had likewise given themselves a proper cleaning before crawling into their sweatshirt lined cardboard box. Settling into a comfy fold of the soft fleece between them, she sighed gently and asked them if they felt awake enough for a bit of a rat tale before bed.

"You know, I've been a little under the weather lately. And, though I don't want you to be scared or to think I'm being in the least bit gloomy, I think you should know I'm getting older. Someday you two will get a wee bit older, too. And, when you do you may start to gnaw on some thoughts younger ratties seldom consider. You might become curious about your family history and wonder about the dad you never had a chance to



meet. So, I thought maybe it was time to tell you a few things about my life before we started living here in this wonderfully warm and dry aquarium with our beloved adoptive mom and dad.”

“We never lived anywhere before this, Mama,” Noonan said with a little laugh. It seemed he thought she was joking. Flannery, however, always a bit more serious and thoughtful than his twin, offered his take on the matter.

“No no, we lived in that smaller aquarium at first – the one with the big white cloud for a bed. Isn’t that right, mom?”

“Yes, it is, Flan my handsome man,” Molly chuckled. “What a good memory you have! But, that wasn’t really a cloud, sweetheart,” she continued.

“That was a two-week-collection of tissue Dad kept tearing off a roll for me to make a bed out of. And, I’m sure he and Mom were more than a little puzzled as to why one tiny rat could need such a big bed at that! But, when they found out what was going on at last, we all had a good laugh over it. And, of course, I had to make sure you two would stay plenty warm and safe while I was out for my evening visits on the couch. You babies needed your sleep anyway, so no need to give up what you now know for yourselves is a pretty wonderful routine.”

“Yeah,” Noonan interrupted with a giggle, “especially when Mom eats cereal and watches TV! It’s – *delicious* – sneaking pieces of food off her spoon.”

“You didn’t think it was so ‘delicious’ the night you snuck macaroni and cheese that hadn’t cooled down,” Flan teased back.

Noonan gave Flannery a playful shove to the snout. “How was I supposed to know it was hot? We never had anything like that before.”

“That’s because Mom makes sure the things she gives us are safe,” Molly chided gently. “Which is why you’re supposed to wait for her to give us each a piece. You both know she always shares.”

“Yeah, I know,” Noonan said. “But, sometimes things smell so good it’s hard to be patient.” He paused briefly as a thought occurred, then asked, “Didn’t you ever scuttle in without thinking when you were a ratling?”

“Mama, a ratling,” Flannery scoffed, laughing. “She’s a mom, silly. She was never a ratling. I mean, I know she had to have been born at some point, but who can imagine Mama as anything but – Mama.”

“I know what you mean, Flannery,” Molly replied with a smile. “But, believe it or not, I actually was a ratling once. Of course, being an only rattie I was never all that small.

“I was born in a very nice little house owned by Mr. Potter. Mr. Potter was an elderly gentleman with light grey hair and a very long white beard.”

“Like Santa Claus!” Noonan exclaimed. “Hey, Flan, Mama was raised by Santa Claus.”

“No, Noonan, didn’t you hear mom say his name was Mr. Potter. Santa’s name is Mr. Claus. Besides, how would Mama have scampered to New Jersey from the North Pole?”

“Actually, boys, Mr. Potter did *look* a lot like Santa Claus. But, his beard was so soft it was more like the cotton the Grinch uses to make his Grinchy-Claus suit in that Dr. Suess cartoon we all watch with Mom on the couch at Christmas. I remember how warm and safe I felt when he held me up to his neck as a baby and I snuggled into the cloudlike softness. I could fall asleep there for hours.”

“Is that why you made us a cloud to sleep in when we were babies?” Flannery asked.

“‘Cause it reminded you of Mr. Potter’s beard!” Noonan added.

“You know, I never thought of it that way” Molly answered slowly. “But that makes a lot of sense. I suppose that’s exactly right, now that you mention it.

“Anyway,” she continued, “Mr. Potter kept several rats in a room I didn’t realize then was a small version of what’s called an ‘animal rescue’. Rats of people moving somewhere they couldn’t take them, rats he’d seen in the newspaper and was afraid might go to people with snakes...that kind of thing. As I said, his house was quite small as hu-man houses go, so he couldn’t take in as many as it seemed he would have liked. But he did what he could.

“Your father and I were both born at Mr. Potter’s. I never knew where your father’s parents came from. They were already there when I came along...and so was your father, for that matter, as he was born just a few days before me. My parents, though, had been intended as a breeding pair at a pet shop. The problem was that after the pet shop tried again and again and again, they never had any babies. So, finally, the pet shop didn’t want them any more. Mr. Potter found out about this and took them to his house. Of course, since they’d already lived together for a very long time and never had any babies, Mr. Potter didn’t think twice about keeping them together in the same cage when he brought them home. But once they’d

(cont'd from p.11)

lived with him – for not very long at all, so I was told – wouldn't you know... they had *me*!

"What did Mr. Potter say?"

Flannery asked.

"Yeah, did he scream when he saw you like you said Mom did when she first saw us?"

Noonan asked, laughing.

"Now, now, Noonan. I was the first pet rat Mom ever had and I was only here for two weeks then. You can't blame her for being startled. But, to answer your question, Flan, Mr. Potter was very happy. The only problem was that being an only rat I didn't have anyone my own age - in my family at least -- to play with.

"But, as I said, your father and his brother and sisters were born just days before. So, when I got

old enough to creep around beyond the nest, Mr. Potter would take me out to visit with them. And, before a week had passed, I came to look forward to our daily play sessions from the minute I woke up and finished breakfast.

"It was a very happy time."

"So, why did you leave?" Noonan asked in puzzlement. "Why weren't we born at Mr. Potter's too?"

"And," Flannery asked, his whiskers quivering ever so slightly, "what happened to our dad?"

"Well," Molly began slowly. "Sometimes things happen that we can't do anything about. And, even though we wish certain things could stay the same forever, sometimes they can't. And, in those times we just have to make the best of it – and always, always, always hope there are still good things to come.

"One day, Mr. Potter was very late in bringing all our breakfasts. Usually, when I woke up there were lovely treats waiting in the food bowl, and my mom and dad were already enjoying them. Only this day, my mama and daddy were sitting in a corner of our pen, and at first I thought it was nothing more than my active ratting imagination that made them look a little worried. But, when I pattered over to the food bowl, yawning and stretching from leftover sleepiness along the way, I stared in at the paw prints painted on the bottom, all my tiredness forgotten. It was empty!

"I turned to my parents in alarm, and they rushed over to comfort me. I suppose I must have been 5 or 6 weeks old.

"You see, very early every morning Mr. Potter would come in and collect the food and water bowls from our aquariums – the one I shared with my parents, the one your father shared with his family, and those of the unrelated males and females who lived in separate group tanks on the other side of the room. I was usually still asleep when he did this, but sometimes I'd been awakened by the phone – which was apparently right on the other side of the wall our tank sat near; I swear I could feel the wall literally vibrate whenever it rang. Anyway, it was always Mr. Potter's daughter, who would call at some point every day – most days during her lunch break, but sometimes before she went to work. I never liked that because I had just gone to sleep after finishing the last bits in the food bowl as a late night/early morning snack about an hour-and-a-half before. With a full tummy and all the other rats settled down by this time as well, I was always so sound asleep that the sudden ringing of the phone never failed to scare the wits out of me. "It didn't scare me half as much, however, as the sight of the empty food bowl on this unprecedented day. What's more, my parents said Mr. Potter's daughter had indeed called that morning. I must have been extra tired because for once I'd slept



right through – which was even more amazing since my parents said the phone had kept ringing for far more than the usual 2 or 3 times before Mr. Potter would answer it. More amazing still, this morning they hadn't heard him answer it at all.

"I didn't really know enough about life yet to even vaguely imagine what might have happened. But for the first time ever I nonetheless felt uneasy. My heart was beating faster than it did even after the most vigorous play session with your father and his siblings, and my mouth was suddenly as dry as if I'd eaten unbuttered toast. I crept over to the water dish to at least satisfy the thirst part of my discomfort and my heart started racing even faster. It was empty, too!

"This problem, though, my parents quickly helped me solve. Being older rats who were both much larger than I, they drank from a water bottle that hung from the top of the tank. I only had a dish because I wasn't yet tall enough to reach the sipper apparatus on the bottom of the bottle. As the bottle held more than enough for just 2 rats, and Mr. Potter had filled it with fresh water the night before, they had more than enough to share. So, my father let me crawl up on his back while my mother stood beside with a steadying paw. Still, I didn't like the way the whole thing worked, and I somehow ended up with more on my snout and tummy than in my mouth. But at least I wasn't thirsty anymore. And the necessary task of cleaning and smoothing my fur afterwards helped me calm down a little. I started to think more rationally and began hoping Mr. Potter had just overslept a bit or something...that any minute he'd come in to feed us, pick me up and snuggle me against his beard, and that in no time at all the world would be right again.

"But Mr. Potter didn't come in any minute. And, he still hadn't come in at lunchtime when his daughter called again. And again the phone just rang and rang and rang, without us hearing Mr. Potter's soothing voice beyond the wall.

"I could hear my neighbors shuffling around in their homes, too, and couldn't help picking up on their own feelings of anxiety. Still, my parents pretended not to worry, and snuggled up close to help me not be so afraid.

"Finally when the winter light from the window signaled it must be late afternoon, we heard the front door open and strange voices in the house. We could tell there were at least two men we didn't know, along with Mr. Potter's daughter, and Mrs. Connolly from next door. We knew Meg – Mr. Potter's daughter – from her visits about once a week, and we knew Mrs. Connolly because she would always take care of us if Mr. Potter wasn't feeling well, or had to go on an overnight trip to pick up new rats, or anything like that.

"We didn't know what was going on, but we heard something with wheels being brought into the house, and a few minutes later we heard it taken out again. As this was going on we could hear one of the men and Mrs. Connolly talking in hushed voices, and although I couldn't be sure – and I didn't yet know what the word meant at the time – I thought I could hear Mr. Potter's daughter crying.

"At last Mrs. Connolly came into our room, and quickly began collecting all our dishes.

'You babies must be starving!' she exclaimed kindly. 'But don't worry. I'm going to get every one of you something to eat right now.' "

Molly stopped talking for a moment, and brought her paws up over her ears, pretending to pause for a quick scratch while hiding a tear or two that had oozed into her own eyes as she remembered this difficult day. Noonan and Flannery still nestled beside her listening, but when she felt sufficiently in control of her emotions again to steal a glance at them, she noticed their eyes were getting heavy and realized the story was going to take a bit longer to share than she had thought. She kissed her sons on their snouts, and tucked their bedding closer around them.

"We'll chat more about this tomorrow night. It's way past you boys' bedtime, and I'm getting a little tired myself. Goodnight, my sweeties."

" 'night, Mama," Noonan and Flannery said sleepily in unison. And, snuggling closer against her as she re-settled herself between them, the young rats quickly fell asleep. Molly, however, remained awake a while longer, listening happily to their rhythmic breathing and thinking of how far she had come since learning just how happy life could be at Mr. Potter's.



Watch for the Story to Continue in the Next Issue





Photo by Mil Scott

Happy Valentine's Day

Heart Coat by
Marna Kazmaier.

Edison in Love

By Mil' Scott

*They listen through the night as he walks the roof above,
Each sending up a wish she might become his only love.
But Edison seems unaware, dutifully making rounds
To insure all his rat neighbors might sleep peacefully
and sound.*

*When morning comes he tucks away, pulls curtains
'round his room;*

*While young ladies count the hours 'til the rising of
the moon.*

*They eat oatmeal and whisper, squeaking how handsome
his face,*

*And the way he creeps about with such stealthy rodent
grace.*

*They nap throughout the afternoon, wrapped in romantic
dreams;*

*Whiskers twitching, paws outstretched -- oh, how close
Edison seems.*

*They watch the sun go down, sighing "Night is almost
here."*

*Dinner bowls begin arriving, always greeted with a
cheer.*

*Their tummies full; their hearts as well, they listen for a
sound*

*To let them know, at last, Edison's come back around.
But Edison knows naught of this, for his heart's full
as well.*

*In his head he sees a she-rat, and feels pride begin to
swell.*

*For, you see, his heart is taken, by a special Valentine,
One who also waits for him --
and for morning rays to shine.*

*The ladies will find other
mates than he who walks
above,*

*For it's with Orvietta,
alone, Edison's in love.*





A look at books, movies (and most anything else she feels like ranting about) from a rat's viewpoint. Will she give them her stamp of approval -- or stomp them out? Read on and see!

(for more of Keela's Reviews visit her web page - www.artistinsane.com/keela's_reviews.htm)



Miss Potter (starring Renee Zellweger and Ewan McGregor)



Even though I've reviewed a lot of books and movies for my web page, I was a little nervous about making the right choice as to just what I should feature in this first issue of my brand new magazine. So, I thought and thought and thought (taking breaks for brain food between thoughts, of course!) until finally it hit me. What could possibly be more appropriate for a publication that boasts "Artists o' Rats" as one of its subtitles than a film about an artist/writer who included lots of rodents among the animals that comprised her work? Boy, did I get excited when I remembered that. Oh, surely, that deserves a reward of...hmm...let's see -- sweet potatoes!

Okay, I'm back from lunch, and ready to get started on *Miss Potter*. First, I should probably tell you that my mom actually reviewed this movie for *Mil Mania* last year. And, although I was sitting on her lap enjoying it at the time, I never really gave much thought to providing it the full rat treatment since it isn't really a rodent film, per se -- I mean, not one that's *all* about a rodent character or characters like *Ratatouille* (my absolute fav-o-rat!) or *The Tale of Despereaux*. But, when you really stop to think about it, Beatrix Potter (creator of Peter Rabbit -- and Appley Dappling and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, among so many others) not only did a lot to inspire all kinds of animal love in children, you might say she had a lot in common with us rats. You see, just like we are by so many people, this film shows Beatrix was completely misunderstood -- one might even say persecuted -- by her proper (not at all animal-loving -- nor just plain at all loving) mother. Plus, being a woman in the late 1800's, she had quite an uphill battle to be appreciated by her society in any context that didn't include (or rather, subjugate her to) a man. But, just like a rat, Beatrix was hard-working and persistent. And, she didn't let herself care at all about what others thought. She knew she was a good creature, gifted in the arts, and she tried to use these gifts for others' good, too. Plus, she was willing to squeak for herself when she had to in order to survive on her own. Needless to say, all of this meant she was very different from other young ladies of her time. *But*, that didn't mean everyone looked at her differently -- at least right away. So, when she went to a publisher to have her work considered, the stuffy, conventional Warne brothers weren't greatly impressed. Thankfully, though, they had a younger sibling who happened to be looking to join their business at just the time Beatrix came along. And, because they wanted to give him a little something to do, they assigned her "bunny book" to him. But, he wasn't like his brothers. He saw Beatrix for the beautifully talented rat (albeit in a human -- or, as I always say of females, a *hu-woman's* body) she really was, and did his best to help her work reach lots and lots of other hu-men and women. And, with his help, it did just that. In fact, Beatrix Potter went on to become the biggest selling children's author ever...as she still is today.

What's really great about this film, though, is that it shows just how hard she had to work for that, and all the obstacles and hard times and dark days she knew, in addition to her victories. And, it shows that, just like a rat, she was strong and enduring, while still remaining sensitive and compassionate. What's more, it shows how much she believed in her animals as dear friends and companions -- and how fully she viewed her work as, itself, genuinely alive...the way all true art is. In addition to that, she managed to be fully confident in her abilities without ever becoming presumptuous about their bringing her rewards. She never allowed her work to be compromised artistically to increase her profits -- and was, in fact, the most surprised of anyone (well, except her stubbornly disbelieving mother, of course) to learn her artistic gifts had made her a wealthy woman. Even then, however, she found ways to use this wealth for the good of others, proving in her later life as strong a pioneer in the field of conservation as, in her earlier years, she'd proved a pioneer in writing and art.

Before wrapping this up, I have to add a kind of funny side note -- my mom had never known a thing about Beatrix Potter before seeing this film. Yet, she'd given her last name to the man in Molly's book (the first chapter of which starts on p.10). And, when she found out, she liked her own story even better!

But...Of All Animals -- Why RATS???

As noted in the article on p.5, even having been a lifelong animal enthusiast, I knew nothing whatsoever of rat ownership until Molly appeared one day under a mailbox, and introduced me to a whole new animal world. That's not to say I forgot, or in any way turned my back on, my prior animal friends. I still love dogs and cats and rabbits and guinea pigs and all other of God's creatures, great and small, every bit as much as I ever did. But, I recognize that dogs and cats have long been helped by very large numbers of people across the country and the world (which efforts, don't get me wrong, I applaud and likewise participate in). What's more, I don't think there are many individuals out there who view rabbits or guinea pigs as malevolent threats to their homes or families, or from whom too many run screaming on sight. (Well, I did see a teenage girl run screaming from a deer in her front yard once. But I think it's safe to say that particular phobia is pretty isolated.)

Rats, by contrast, need friends. You don't see celebrities making TV commercials for The Rat Assistance and Teaching Society or urging viewers to adopt them from local shelters. Rats have very few human voices to speak for them, few human hands to reach out to them – be it to help them up from under a mailbox, or to rescue them from the myriad of pet stores where they're sold as something other than pets. And they have far too many completely uninformed voices crying out against them – perpetuating myths about rats as big as cats in city subway stations, portraying them as mean-spirited disease carrying pests, and joining in a centuries' strong chorus singing the broken record of their inherent evil.

What these myths ignore, of

course, is the hard factual reality of rats having made immeasurable contributions to *curing* human diseases and easing human suffering through their years of use in medical research. Despite their enormous sacrifices, there's so little appreciation for rats (and mice) that they aren't even included in The Animal Welfare Act – the code of regulations that demands and enforces humane treatment of animals used in research (and exhibited in zoos, bred commercially, etc.). To many people, it's almost as if rats weren't animals at all. I actually visited a



pet store in PA last year where rats were kept in opaque plastic drawer bins in a back room, clearly seen by the proprietors as nothing more than an extension of the cans and boxes of food (for "real" pets) stored on shelves nearby. And, clearly by the public – both visiting that store and throughout much of the world beyond – rats aren't seen at all...which is how they'd like to keep it.

I'm now ashamed to admit that, until Molly came along, I really didn't see them, either. Sure, I was vaguely aware of their existence, and though not particularly frightened by them (and in no way wishing them harm) I was utterly ignorant of the hardships any members of their species might be enduring.

But, thankfully, through Molly, her two boys, and the many amazing rodent friends I've met since, I've learned that rats are clean, intelligent, warm-hearted companions who exhibit every quality that's made dogs so long beloved – and maybe even (dare I offer such heresy?) one or two more.

I need only reference the photo that accompanies this article to explain. Its subject's name is Oliver (or Ollie, as we know him). We adopted him as an adult, when his former owner was leaving for college, and couldn't keep him where she would be staying. We picked him up the afternoon we received her call, rain pouring down as his transfer was made on the girl's porch, with Ollie wrapped in one of her old sweat-shirts. He rode on my lap all the way home, licking my hands endlessly in thanks for petting him and telling him over and over everything would be all right. He settled into our home beautifully, always exhibiting his unquenchable thirst for life and love. Every morning he's up and waiting for playtime – literally falling over with excitement at wrestling with my or my husband's hand. In the aforementioned photo he's leapt to the top edge of his pen, and is eagerly pulling himself out for a ritual snuggling and hugs. His happiness and joy are unmistakable – as are the happiness and joy he inspires in return.

The thought of someone treating Ollie unkindly is unthinkable to me. So is having his irrepressible enthusiasm ignored. The same applies to Molly's quiet grace, Orvietta's diligent mothering care, or the untold numbers of wondrous qualities that make every rat so individual, and all so worthy of human efforts on their behalf. This magazine is one such effort.

Thanks for reading.

Mil



*This magazine is dedicated to Molly, her boys Flannery and Noonan,
and all the other rats who've touched anyone, anywhere,
in such a positive, meaningful way.*



"You stoop down to make me great."

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