

Peter Beagle's 'Unicorn' becomes a screen star

By RICK CHATENEVER
Sentinel Staff Writer

WRITER PETER BEAGLE got a long distance phone call from a complete stranger late one night a few weeks ago. She had heard they were making a movie out of his fantasy classic "The Last Unicorn" and she wanted to know how he could have let them do it? That's the nature of the lyrical fairy tale which follows the odyssey of a lonely unicorn and a bumbling magician. It inspires devotion and possessiveness on the part of its readers. It is also inspiring some jittery nervousness on the part of its creator as he prepares for the release of the film.

"People always think if you have your name on several books and up there on the screen, you're a writer," says the bearded 43-year-old Beagle. "But it's not like that. You know when you get it right . . . but you never catch up with your own standards. And if it bombs, it's going to hurt. I'll whistle and pretend . . . but it will hurt."

"The Last Unicorn," an animated production by Marble Arch Films and Rankin-Bass Films featuring the voices of Alan Arkin, Mia Farrow, Tammy Grimes and Christopher Lee and the music of Jimmy Webb will have its world premiere Nov. 18 at Capitola's 41st Avenue Playhouse. The Capitola Book Cafe and the Pizza Company are sponsoring this festive event, which begins with a book-signing at 6:30 p.m., followed by film showings at 8 and 10, with a "unicorn contest" sandwiched in between.

The premiere is a benefit for the Santa Cruz Film Council which will present the second annual Santa Cruz Film Festival in January, 1983.

Everyone loved the book — but what if they don't like the movie? How are the images on-screen going to match the ones in their imaginations? Peter Beagle worries about such things.

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The once-upon-a-time New Yorker has lived for years on five rural Corralitos acres. These days he shares the estate with his son and assorted animals, including the world's oldest kinkajou, Miss Lucy Brown. Saturday nights he sings, mostly in French, and plays guitar at the local restaurant L'Oustalou. His eyes tell ironic jokes; he has the face of a mischievous cherub.

Over the last 20 years he has learned about being a writer by being a writer. He has done it all — six books of fiction and non-fiction; screenplays; magazine journalism. He's in "Who's Who," identified as "writer." He has a cult following.

Being a writer got easier, he says, "once I realized I was never going to play guitar in Count Basie's band or play first base for anyone."

But it still isn't easy. There were years of waking up in cold sweats, of only being able to afford one book at a time at the bookstore, of wondering if the check for this or that story would be the last money he would ever make. He wrote his first novel "A Fine and Private Place" before he turned 20 — but he remembers the writing of "The Last Unicorn," begun when he was 23 and living in a shack in Massachusetts, as "two solid years of agony. I hated it when I was through — I wasn't sure it was any good, or if anyone would read it."

The writing may have been difficult, but the fantasy came naturally to him. He grew up with it. His grandfather wrote fairy tales in Hebrew (a collection of which were recently translated and published by his mother.) His parents were both teachers; his family was full of painters, dancers, artists.

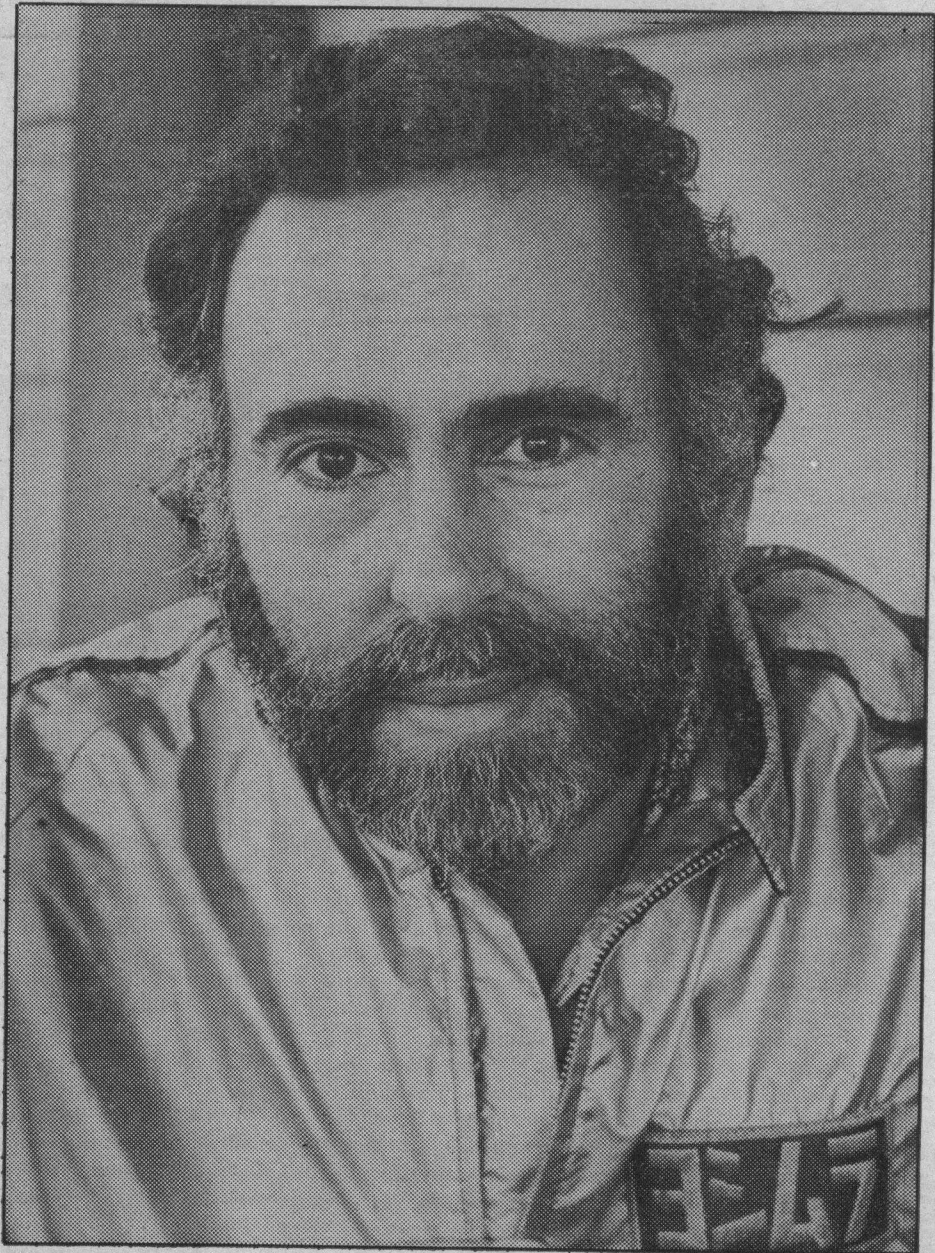
In his family, "making up fairy tales as a kid was not to be weird, but was perfectly normal," he says. That, in turn, led to writing, especially since Beagle claims, "as a kid, I wasn't good at anything else."

To his surprise he won a scholastic magazine writing award and a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, one of a handful of colleges offering creative writing classes at the time.

Now, he jokes, "there's a creative writing empire," full of people who take writing classes and then write about romances that develop in writing classes. A lot of would-be writers are more enamored with their images, the notion of being a Writer, than with actually doing it, he observes. "I know people who think if only they could get a word processor, then they'll get on the Johnny Carson Show," he laughs.

Such delusions are only one of the pitfalls in his chosen profession. There are also the awful things you discover about yourself, and the crass carnival aspects of both the publishing and movie businesses.

"I don't really hold a brief for starving or for the school of hard knocks," says Beagle, "but I have



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

PETER BEAGLE: The joy of writing, and other fantasies

learned things from having to make a living from this. And for all the bad times, I feel I'm luckier than a lot of people."

He attributes much of his past success to others — his agent Maggie Field ("she's like a sister, the kind who will break the kneecaps of anyone who looks at you cross-eyed,") and the various "people who took pity on me."

These include "the editor of Holiday who thought he could make a journalist out of me," and the story editor at Lorimar "who knew I knew nothing about screenwriting, but then lied to his bosses and told them I was exactly the right man for the job." This particular individual would take Beagle out to lunch "and give me crash courses in screenwriting."

The courses paid off, and five years ago Beagle started getting work in Hollywood. He rewrote the script for the animated film "Lord of the Rings" and his "The Greatest Thing That Almost Happened" was produced as a TV movie.

Along the way he learned to negotiate his way through filmdom's never-never-land, where "packaging" rather than creativity is the key, but he confides, "I don't do it well. I can fake it and can even go down and 'take a meeting' — but I can only last about a day."

Despite his solid reputation as a screenwriter and his cult following as a novelist, Beagle is skeptical about The Big Break.

"I know too much about accidents," he says. "If I have a big success of a book or a hit movie, it will be an accident — the result of being at the right place at the right time."

The weaver of splendid fantasies for his legions of fans, Beagle admits if he has a fantasy himself, "it's when I'm 60 I'll know what I'm doing."

In the meantime, he has made his peace with the ups and downs of the business he's in. The journalistic side of writing has gotten him to places and into situations he might not have seen otherwise. After maintaining a low profile locally, he recently joined the Film Council as a way of staying in touch.

(The Council's plans for the Santa Cruz Film Festival Jan. 20-23 include the world premiere of "Sting II," which was filmed partially on the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. Director Jeremy Kagan plans to attend. There are also negotiations under way to show Neil Young's new film "Human Highway" and Joni Mitchell's Canadian film "Love." Independent filmmakers Les Blank, John Else, James Broughton, Faith Hubley and Marc Huestis will be on hand and Tandy Beal will also take part, narrating a program of films on dance.)

But the premiere of "The Last Unicorn" comes first, to kick it all off. The festivities following the local screening will be at the Pizza Company, but Beagle recalls a similar event a few years ago in Southern California. It was the night of the premiere of "Lord of the Rings," and after the film, he and his agent went to the gala dinner party at the Beverly Hilton.

Beagle recalls looking around the room at the vaguely famous faces, and asking, "is this is — is this the glamor, is this the decadence?" To which she answered, "finish your dinner — and go back to work."