

Inkheart - A Mix Of Fantasy & Ferrets

The book Inkheart is now a major motion picture, and gives ferret enthusiasts something to look forward to at the movies.

By Staci Layne Wilson

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Young Meggie Folchart is just minding her own business, sitting outside while reading a book, when an adorable fuzzy creature runs up to her in greeting. His name is Gwin, and he's a horned marten — something that's part weasel, and part whimsy. She has never seen anything quite like him, and is enchanted by his antics. Gwin is a friendly little emissary for Dustfinger; Dustfinger is a perhaps not-so-friendly character who was born in the fairy tale world of Inkheart.

Photo courtesy of Birds & Animals UK

Training ferrets for the movie was challenging because they're such intelligent animals.

Inkheart is also the title of the feature film from New Line Cinema coming out in theaters January 23. The magical marten was actually portrayed by a troupe of acting ferrets, which were trained and wrangled by Sally Jo Sousa of Birds & Animals UK of London, England. His keeper is played by actor Paul Bettany, whom fans of fantasy movies will probably remember from *The Da Vinci Code* and *A Knight's Tale*.

The Facts Of This Fantasy World

The movie is based upon a bestselling series of young adult novels by Cornelia Funke, and the story centers on a teenage girl, her dad, their search for her missing mom, and a series of nefarious characters who have been "read out" of an enchanted novel called Inkheart. These beings — including Dustfinger and Gwin — now reside in our everyday world, wreaking otherworldly havoc.

Meggie's father, Mo, has a unique talent. "When reading aloud, Mo has the ability to pull characters he is reading out of the book into real time," Sousa explained. That did not always work out so well, so he suppressed his reading voice. "He hadn't read aloud for many years, until one day when his daughter was 9, he read to her from the book Inkheart. As a result, villains were pulled from the pages and his wife was pulled into the book, never to be seen again unless he read aloud from a copy of Inkheart." Regrettably, the book is out of print and the bad guys are in possession of Mo's copy.

"This is where the story begins," Sousa said. "He is on the quest to find another copy of Inkheart so he can be with his wife and be a family again. The unfortunate part for him is that he is fighting against villains who happen to love being in our reality. Therefore, they are finding the books and destroying them so they will not have to return to the pages of the story." Sousa added, "The movie is full of mystery and adventure."

Sousa is absolutely right. I was treated to a preview screening and was thrilled to see the most ferret action in any movie since 1982's *The Beastmaster*.

How Ferrets Became Gwin

Gwin, embodied by a collection of similarly marked sable ferrets, is not an evil character, but he goes to great lengths to protect and assist his master. Dustfinger, a skilled fire-eater and flame-thrower, wants nothing more than to return to the world of Inkheart. In the process, he straddles the sides of good (Meggie and Mo) and bad (Capricorn and his henchmen). At his side, always, is Gwin.

The ferrets were painted with non-toxic, easy-to-rinse brown mascara to create a uniform look. They were also obliged to wear tiny little horns on their heads, which proved to be quite a challenge at times. They worked out well, but there was the occasional "wardrobe malfunction" during the more taxing action sequences. "They are such good workers, they didn't mind wearing the horns at all," Sousa reported. "I really don't think they even knew they were on. They were very lightweight and affixed with beard glue, much like actors use. It can be removed easily with water, which is why we used the product. Some were good biters, so putting horns on them was quite the challenge."

Gwin In Action

In the movie, we see Gwin running, jumping, attacking, chasing, shimmying up drainpipes, and helping Dustfinger acquire needed items such as keys and coins. Ferret fanciers will be delighted to see that Gwin not only gets several close-ups,

but he also plays an integral role in the resolution of the mystery.

Thankfully, New Line did not go the computer-generated route for Gwin's character. "The original character of Gwin was supposed to be a pine marten," Sousa explained. "Pine martens have never been used for film because of their aggressive nature. So we showed the filmmakers the ferrets and the great potential of these animals. Then they realized they could make the film with real animals. They intended on computer generating the entire character of Gwin. We trained for four weeks, then showed them the results, at which point they continued on with the film with real animals."

Sousa used a buzzer to train her ferrets to follow Bettany, plus food rewards. In nearly every shot of the film you can see Gwin noshing — but it was cleverly incorporated into the action.

Trained For Success

When you see the results of the ferret fun on film, you might be surprised to learn that Sousa had never worked with these little critters before. "All of the training is pretty much the same, for any species," she said. "You just have to adapt to the natural instincts of the animal you're working with and apply the techniques accordingly. I did do *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory* with squirrels, which was much the same."

In working with ferrets, she learned that, "Ferrets are very curious and hard animals to work [with]. A lot of film companies don't realize how intelligent these animals are." She believes this explains why we don't see more ferrets in movies and on TV.

There is a caveat: "Ferrets are very difficult to prepare for film because they are so smart. They are quick-thinking little guys, so when training you need to be ready or you will confuse them when you pay them for a behavior. Meaning, they won't know what they got paid for — treat for doing something right — because they are already doing something else. Very smart creatures, with a lot of heart and wit."

Author Bio

Staci Layne Wilson's latest book is called *Animal Movies Guide*. It includes a list of ferret films, a story about the mustelid stars of *Along Came Polly* and *The Beastmaster*, and notes about celebrity ferret enthusiasts.