

Walt Disney / 2

Maurice Sendak. "Walt Disney/2" from *Caldecott & Company*.



It is the winter of 1940. The world is five months into a new war and I am very aware that it is wrong to be happy. But I am. I have been promised a trip uptown to see Walt Disney's new film, *Pinocchio*, and my only concern is not being late. It is roughly an hour from Brooklyn to midtown Manhattan on the BMT, and my sister and her girlfriend are, as usual, dragging their feet. It is just another example of the awfulness of children's dependence on the adult world to fulfill their most desperate wishes. By the time we reach the theater, I have lost what little self-control I had left. The movie has already begun. I go into a black sulk and my sister, furious, threatens to abandon me altogether. We climb to the balcony in angry silence and clamber across an invisible and endless row of knees to our seats. The sound track, in the meantime, fills the dark with the most irresistible music. I can't bear to look at the screen. I have missed, I feel, the best of everything. But my first glimpse once past the four thousandth knee dissipates all my anguish. Jiminy Cricket is sliding jauntily down the strings of a violin, singing "Give a Little Whistle." (The scene occurs twenty minutes

into the film; I've clocked it often since that day.) I was happy then and have remained forever happy in the memory of *Pinocchio*.

If remembering that day is tinged with a confusing guilt that has something to do with the inappropriateness of feeling cheerful when a world war was hanging over our heads, then that, too, is part of the precious memory of *Pinocchio*. I was only a child, but I knew something dreadful was happening in the world, and that my parents were worried to death. And it seems to me that something of the quality of that terrible, anxious time is reflected in the very color and dramatic power of *Pinocchio*. Certainly, it is the darkest of all Disney films. This is not to deny that it is also a charming, amusing, and touching film. It is, however, rooted in melancholy, and in this respect it is true to the original Italian tale. But that is where any significant resemblance between Disney and Collodi ends.

Disney has often been condemned for corrupting the classics, and he has, to be sure, occasionally slipped in matters of taste and absolute fidelity to the original. But he has never corrupted. If there have been errors, they are nothing compared to the violations against the true nature and psychology of children committed by some of the so-called classics. C. Collodi's *Pinocchio*, first published in 1883, is a case in point. As a child, I disliked it. When I grew up, I wondered if perhaps my early dislike was ill founded. My memory of the book was a mixture of the utterly sad and the peculiarly unpleasant; and when I finally reread it, I found that this memory is accurate. While Collodi's *Pinocchio* is an undeniably engaging narrative that moves with tremendous energy—despite its shaky, loose construction—it is also a cruel and frightening tale. It does not suffer

from whimsicality or sentimentality, but its premise is sickening.

Children, Collodi appears to be saying, are inherently bad, and the world itself is a ruthless, joyless place, filled with hypocrites, liars, and cheats. Poor *Pinocchio* is *born* bad. While still mostly a block of firewood—just his head and hands are carved—he is already atrocious, instantly using those new hands to abuse his woodcarver papa, Geppetto. Only moments after *Pinocchio*'s creation, Geppetto is wiping tears from his eyes and regretting the marionette's existence: "I should have thought of this before I made him. Now it is too late!" *Pinocchio* doesn't stand a chance; he is evil incarnate—a happy-go-lucky ragazzo, but damned nevertheless.

In order to grow into boyhood, *Pinocchio* has to yield up his own self entirely, unquestioningly, to his father—and, later in the book, to the strange lady with the azure hair (the Blue Fairy of the film). When that elusive lady promises to be *Pinocchio*'s mother, there is this nasty hook attached: "You will obey me always and do as I wish?" *Pinocchio* promises that he will. She then delivers a dreary sermon, ending: "Laziness is a serious illness and one must cure it immediately; yes, even from early childhood. If not, it will kill you in the end." No wonder *Pinocchio* soon disobeys. His instincts warn him off and he runs away, apparently preferring laziness and wickedness to the castrating love of this hard-hearted fairy. It's a strange paradox that Collodi equates becoming "a real boy" with turning into a capon.

At its best, the book has moments of mad black humor, with more than a touch of Woody Allenish logic. When *Pinocchio* first meets the fairy, for instance, he is trying to escape from assassins who mean

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to rob and kill him. He knocks frantically on her door, and she appears at her window, with "a face white as wax," to tell him that everyone in the house, herself included, is dead. "Dead?" Pinocchio screams in fury. "What are you doing at the window, then?" That is Pinocchio's true voice. This hilarious, nightmarish scene ends with the exasperating lovely lady leaving the marionette to the mercy of the assassins—who hang him from a giant oak tree. The story is full of such ghastly, sadistic moments, most of them not funny at all.

So far as I am concerned, Collodi's book is of interest today chiefly as evidence of the superiority of Disney's screenplay. The Pinocchio in the film is not the unruly, sulking, vicious, devious (albeit still charming) marionette that Collodi created. Neither is he an innately evil, doomed-to-calamity child of sin. He is, rather, both lovable and loved. Therein lies Disney's triumph. His Pinocchio is a mischievous, innocent, and very naïve little wooden boy. What makes our anxiety over his fate endurable is a reassuring sense that Pinocchio is loved for himself—and not for what he should or shouldn't be. Disney has corrected a terrible wrong. Pinocchio, he says, is good; his "badness" is only a matter of inexperience.

Nor is Disney's Jiminy Cricket the boring, browbeating preacher/cricket he is in the book (so boring that even Pinocchio brains him). In the movie, we watch Jiminy's intelligent curiosity concerning the marionette quicken into genuine interest and affection. He is a loyal though not uncritical friend, and his flip and sassy ways do not diminish our faith in his reliability. Despite his failure to convince Pinocchio of the difference between right and wrong, his willingness to understand and forgive the puppet's foolish waywardness makes him a complicated cricket

indeed. The Blue Fairy is still a bit stuffy about the virtues of truth and honesty, but she can laugh and is as quick as Jiminy to forgive. Who could fail to forgive inexperience?

Disney has deftly pulled the story together and made a tight dramatic structure out of the rambling sequence of events in the Collodi book. Pinocchio's wish to be a real boy remains the film's underlying theme, but "becoming a real boy" now signifies the wish to grow up, not the wish to be good. Our greatest fear is that he may not make his way safely through the minefields of his various adventures to get what, finally, he truly deserves. We still miss the little wooden boy at the end of the film (there is just no way of loving the flesh-and-blood boy as much as we did the marionette), but we are justifiably happy for Pinocchio. His wish to be a real boy is as passionate and believable a longing as is Dorothy's wish, in the film version of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, to find her way home to Kansas. Both Pinocchio and Dorothy deserve to have their wishes come true; they prove themselves more than worthy. Oddly, both of these movies are superior to the "classics" that inspired them.

About two years were devoted to the production of *Pinocchio*, easily the best of the Disney films, as well as the most fearless and emotionally charged. Some 500,000 drawings appear on the screen, and this does not include tens of thousands of preliminary drawings, story sketches, atmosphere sketches, layouts, character models, and stage settings. Extensive use of the Disney-developed multi-plane camera—first tried out in *Snow White*—allows for ingenious camera movement similar to the dolly shots of live movie production. According to Christopher Finch in his book *The Art of Walt Disney*: "A single scene in which

the multi-plane camera zooms down on the village with the school bells ringing and the pigeons circling down and down until they are among the houses cost \$45,000 (equivalent to perhaps \$200,000 today). The scene lasts only a few seconds . . . The result was an animated movie of unprecedented lavishness." The production details are overwhelming, but in the end they are only statistics. After half a century, the movie itself is the vital proof that all that manpower, machinery, and money went into creating a work of extraordinary skill, beauty, and mystery. And if there are flaws—and there are—the sheer force of originality easily compensates for them. If I wish the Blue Fairy didn't remind me of a typical thirties movie queen, and Cleo, the goldfish, of a miniature, underwater mix of Mae West and Carmen Miranda, this merely acknowledges that even masterpieces have their imperfections.

As for those tantalizing twenty minutes I missed back in February 1940, I have since seen them again and again, though that never makes up for missing them the first time. The movie contains so many memorable episodes; for example, the one in which Jiminy and Pinocchio converse in bubbling speech as they move about the ocean floor, looking for Monstro, the whale, and the swallowed Geppetto. And, near the end of the Pleasure Island sequence, there is the starkly terrifying scene in which Pinocchio's new friend, Lampwick, turns into a donkey. It starts amusingly enough, but Lampwick's growing alarm and then outright hysteria quickly become painful. His flailing arms turn into hoofs, and his last awful cry of *Ma-Ma*, as his shadow on the wall collapses onto all fours, makes us realize that he is lost forever.

After the dramatic ocean chase, when the vengeful Monstro tries to destroy Geppetto and Pinocchio, we

see, with relief, the old woodcarver washed up on shore and Figaro, the cat, and Cleo in her bowl washed up beside him. A bedraggled Jiminy arrives next, calling for Pinocchio. Then the camera leaps to a shot of the marionette, face down in a pool of water: dead. That image, for me, is the most shocking in the whole film. Pinocchio has forfeited his life to save his father. Coming only moments later, in the funeral scene, is the Blue Fairy's reward. She revives the brave marionette into a new life as a real boy. Tactfully, we are not permitted to dwell too long on his ordinary, little boy's face.

Watching *Pinocchio* now, I am inevitably struck by a sense of regret—of loss. It would almost certainly be impossible to finance such an enterprise today. The movie has the golden glamour of a lost era; it is a monument to an age of craft and quality in America. It is too easy to shrug and say the money just isn't there anymore. In my own business of publishing, one watches with growing dismay the ersatz quality of bookmaking, the vanishing forever of traditional linotype faces, and the degeneration of paper. Over the past few decades, there has been a collapse of the sense of pride in craftsmanship, of the sense of excellence. Usually, this has nothing to do with money. A rough, early Mickey Mouse short—any one of them!—is superior to the animation that is currently manufactured for television. We are in the dark McDonald's age of the quick and easy. *Pinocchio* is a shining reminder of what once was—of what could be again.

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