

Imagination and Innovation: The Story of Weston Woods. By John Cech. New York: Scholastic Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Jan Susina

John Cech has written a superb history of Weston Woods, the innovative and influential film studio known for adapting high-quality children's picture books into films and other forms of children's media. Cech reminds readers that although children's media has always been a field that has mingled business with art, Weston Woods stands out as a company that has successfully championed art over commerce.

The story of Weston Woods is essentially the story of its founder, Mort Schindel, the first person to pursue a graduate degree from Columbia University's Teachers College with the desire to become a producer of educational films. Weston Woods was, as Cech points out, the closest equivalent to an "art film" studio for children in the United States (15). Cech makes a telling contrast with the more successful Disney Corpora-

tion and Nickelodeon, which have reshaped children's books into films for their own aims.

As Cech relates, Weston Woods began in the 1950s as "a film studio devoted to making quality films for

children through a process that is not driven primarily by profit or wholly by commercial motives" (14). In a brief foreword to the book, Maurice Sendak, who worked closely with Weston Woods to adapt *Where the Wild Things Are* and several of his other picture books into short films, praises Schindel for having the ingenious idea of "bringing together the isolated world of children's books with the more mainstream media of television and movies" in an atmosphere that valued both writers and illustrators of children's books (7).

When Schindel began working on his first film adaptation, which was James Daugherty's *Andy and the Lion* in 1954, hardly anyone was interested in production rights to children's books. Since then Weston Woods has produced more than four hundred films based on children's literature. These include titles by some of the best-known authors and illustrators of picture books, including Wanda Gág, Leo Lionni, Robert McCloskey, James Marshall, Crockett Johnson, Virginia Lee Burton, Ezra Jack Keats, William Steig, Pat Hutchins, and Rosemary Wells. Weston Woods also created a series of thoughtful documentaries on noted children's authors and illustrators including short films on Beatrix Potter, A. A. Milne, Edward Ardizzone, and Robert McCloskey. As technology has evolved so has Weston Woods. Its visual and oral adaptations have appeared as 16-mm and 35-mm films, audiocassettes, LP records, CD-ROMs, DVDs, and MP3s. While Weston Woods expanded its original goal to create literary films for children into a broader goal of

Book Reviews

creating children's media, the quality of the adaptations has remained consistently high. Weston Woods has established the gold standard in producing high-quality media adaptations of children's books.

Credited with coining the term "edutainment" to describe the work he was doing at Weston Woods, Schindel developed a simple film process of panning a camera over still pictures, which he called the iconographic technique. He pioneered this technique while producing educational films as part of the Marshall Plan in Turkey the early 1950s. Returning to the United States, Schindel established his studio in Weston, Connecticut, and began using the process with children's picture books. Through his cousin, Arthur Kleiner, who composed background music for the early Weston Woods films, Schindel was able to secure a 1956 screening of his first eight films at the Museum of Modern Art with the hopes of sparking interest in showing his films on network television. It didn't happen. However, a production delay of Gene Deitch's *Tom Terrific* cartoons, which aired on the *Captain Kangaroo* program, resulted in an opportunity for Weston Woods films to be shown on *Captain Kangaroo*. Cech notes that the association of Weston Woods with *Captain Kangaroo*, which began in 1956 and continued until the 1970s, was significant for the studio. For adults of a certain age, the film versions of *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, and *Stone Soup*, which were frequently shown on the popular children's television program, remain a beloved memory of childhood. When Weston

Woods moved from iconography films to animation, Schindel turned to Gene Deitch, who had relocated to Prague, as an animator. Deitch would subsequently become the principal animator of many of Weston Woods' classic adaptations. Schindel acknowledges Deitch as "the unsung genius of Weston woods" (68).

Among the strengths of *Imagination and Innovation* are its many illustrations, including of the storyboards of films Deitch created, including *Where the Wild Things Are*. While Weston Woods's films have won numerous awards, including a nomination for an Academy Award for *Doctor De Soto* in 1986, the key to these successful adaptations has been Schindel's "preservation of the integrity of the books on which his films were based" (91). Schindel explains that the inspiration for the creation of Weston Woods came from the reading of picture books to his own children and the belief that the "age-old tradition of storytelling could be preserved and transformed to audiovisual media" (Cech 34). Schindel not only had excellent taste when it came to selecting picture books to adapt but also a careful eye for the look of his visual adaptations and an excellent ear for combining the appropriate voices and music to accompany the animation. As Sendak observes, no matter what technology Weston Woods used in its adaptations, it always tried to preserve "the integrity of the printed page" so that the adaptation "brought you back to the book" (7). While Weston Woods became a subsidiary of Scholastic, the largest publisher of children's books and media in the

world, in 1996, the output of Weston Woods remains unchanged with approximately ten to fifteen films a year. The original studio has now become the Weston Woods Institute, which Schindel intends to become a hub of activities for top-quality children's media. Since his retirement as an advisory consult, Scholastic has begun to outsource some of the projects to other studios.

Cech's *Imagination and Innovation* does for Weston Woods what Leonard Marcus's brilliant *Golden Legacy* has accomplished for Golden Books. Both scholarly books provide carefully researched social histories of innovative and influential companies that have significantly influenced the development and growth of children's literature in the United States. Like Mort Schindel, John Cech has the ability to recognize a significant story worth retelling. In his compelling history of Weston Woods, he provides an indispensable volume for anyone interested in children's media.

Work Cited

Marcus, Leonard. *Golden Legacy: How Golden Books Won Children's Hearts, Changed Publishing Forever, and Became an American Icon Along the Way*. New York: Golden Books/Random House, 2007.

Jan Susina is a professor of English at Illinois State University, where he teaches courses in children's literature and visual studies. Like John Cech, he remembers watching Weston Woods films on Captain Kangaroo as a child.