



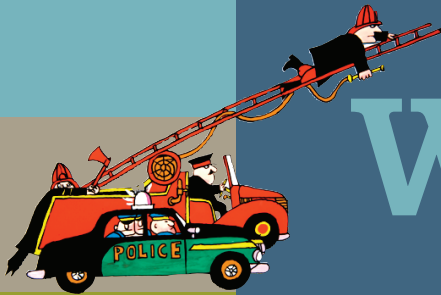
Imagination and Innovation



The Story of



Weston Woods



by John Cech



Into the Woods

Maurice Sendak

For me, Mort Schindel represents a part of the children's book world that we've lost now—with his unique kind of homemade collaboration that involved a team of writers, artists, and filmmakers working closely together. Mort was inventing something that hadn't been there before, carefully putting picture books on film, and he was of that particular time of exhilarating, bold publishing—the beginning of the golden age of children's books in America right after, or soon after, World War II. Literally going into the woods at Weston Woods and making movies and talking about books was great fun, and it seemed like the most natural thing to do. The assumption was that it would always be this way—and it was that way for three decades.



Maurice Sendak (left) and Mort Schindel on the lawn at Weston Woods in the mid-1960s.

Mort was at the high spot of my younger life as an illustrator. I can't remember the actual event of meeting Mort—but I do remember liking him right away. And that was certainly true for the people I published with, the artists growing up around me, and for the editors with whom we worked. Weston Woods was a thriving world that had nothing to do with the bottom line. In fact, we never even thought of such things. And Mort was emblematic of the energy, excitement, and spirit of that period—a great contributor and a great man.

Where the Wild Things Are was my first animated film with Weston Woods and with Mort and director Gene Deitch. That project was difficult because resources were really limited. I also gave Mort and Gene a work that was unmovable. I mean, the big problem was that the animals in *Wild Things* are cross-hatched, and to make a work like that move on film and keep the integrity of the cross-hatching is impossible.

But I think Gene came up with a very good idea—a montage effect of the animals moving. It's not the way I would have imagined the Wild Things moving if we could have done it, technically, but we couldn't. And even though there were these impossibilities, Weston Woods still did an exceptional job, and I know just how hard and long they labored to make a film that was true to the book.

From the beginning, I think, Weston Woods was an amazingly ingenious idea for using all forms of media, including television and movies. Children's books were always a very isolated world, and Mort brought these isolated elements together. You can have your book and see it on the screen at the same time; the printed book kept its integrity even though it was on film, and the films were

a whole new way of seeing that brought you back to the book. In the end, it was an exploration and an emancipation of the picture book itself, and the result of the process was done so beautifully that it wasn't ever hokey or compromised. Mort was as serious as everybody else in those days about how this should be done and about being sure to honor, truly honor, the book. What Mort did was to literally bow to the book. And his work proves that he felt that way whether it was a filmstrip or an animated film—whatever the medium was.

It was nirvana in Weston Woods—there was such great freedom. Looking back on it, you can hardly believe it existed. We did books and films just the way we wanted to do them, and nobody said, "Oh, who's going to buy that?" or "Where is that going to go on the shelf in the bookstore?" Weston Woods was a flourishing, happy world, and I was one of the lucky ones who were there. —MS



Chapter 1 State of the Art

Knufflebunnies, Founding Fathers,
and Cows that Type

Chapter 2 Tough Luck

Persistence, Synchronicities,
and Vision

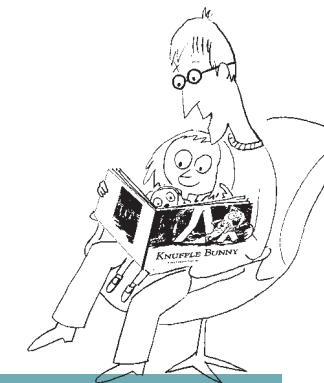


Chapter 3 Launching the Ducklings

Artistic Triumphs
and Financial Catastrophes

Chapter 4 Weston Woods' Golden Age

Chapter 5 Wild Things, Three Robbers, Harold, and an Auntie



Chapter 6 Storytelling

Before, Beyond, and Along With
the Picture Book

Chapter 7 Experiments

Chapter 8 A Diverse and International Vision

Chapter 9 Continuing the Tradition

Chapter 10 The Future

Chapter 5

Wild
Things, Three
Robbers,
Harold, and an
Auntie



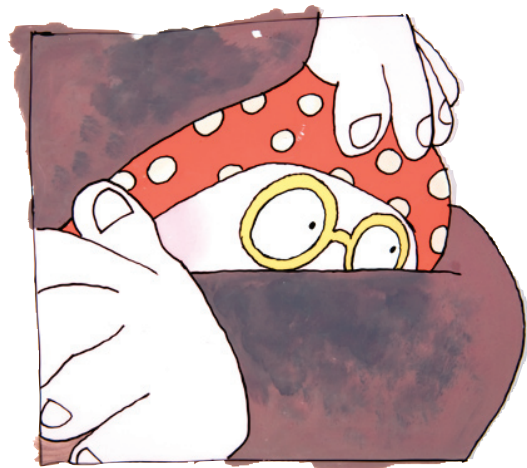
Each new decision to build [the studio] was a step into the unknown. The phenomenal thing is that it was possible to build a successful business with my heart, rather than my head. I was a driven, compulsive person. I knew no other way.
— Mort Schindel

One of the unexpected and obscure convergences of the Cold War is that Sputnik made possible the Weston Woods that we know today. Although this would take a decade, the launch of the Soviet satellite in 1957 eventually led, by 1965, to major support from the U.S. government for the purchase of audiovisual materials in American schools. With the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), good fortune once again knocked at Weston Woods' door. Schindel reports that in March of 1966 one could literally watch this dramatic sea change in the growing thickness of the daily stack of orders that the studio received for its films. In 1967, the year following the implementation of the ESEA bill, orders from school libraries had easily quadrupled. The labs that supplied the films and other media to Weston Woods were seriously overextended, so much so that Schindel agreed to pay for weekend and evening shifts to fill the studio's orders. And of course, Schindel added, "everyone at Weston Woods gave up whatever they were doing to type, wrap, and ship orders."

Along with this sudden surge of new business came an expanded public profile for the studio. In 1967 the American Library Association was holding its annual meeting in New York, and Schindel took this opportunity to all interested attendees for a day trip to Weston Woods on buses that he would provide; and, he remembers, "seven hundred librarians were our guests for lunch or dinner and a tour of our facilities that week." Schindel's hospitality is legendary. He has maintained a virtual open-door policy, one that has extended into the present, to anyone interested in the work of the studio. On any given week, Schindel can be found hosting old colleagues or new, or talking with teachers, librarians, or aspiring young filmmakers who stop by for a visit.



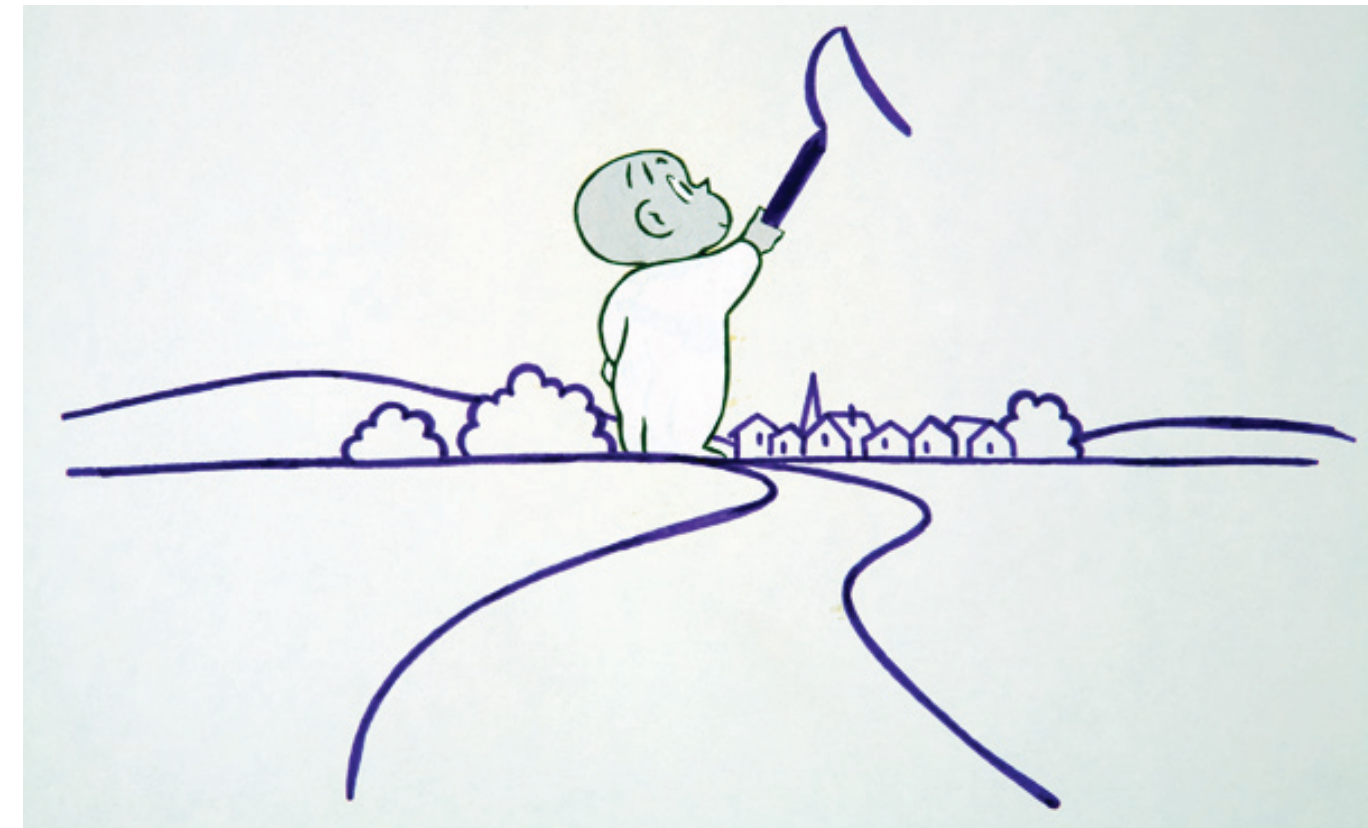
For Diane Paterson's *Smile for Auntie*, animators used photographs of an actress in costume as reference to capture Auntie's movements and gestures; an animator's rendering is shown, top right.



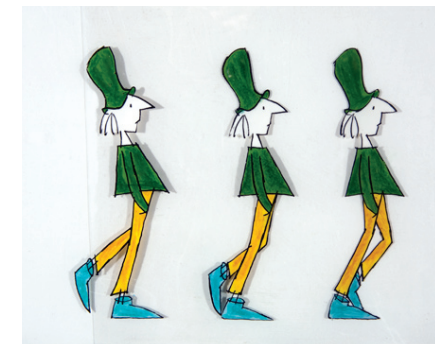
Dianne Paterson's book *Smile for Auntie* (1976), which was released by Weston Woods in 1979, presented particular challenges for modeling the physicality and the gestures of the main character. Perhaps the first children's book about irony, it is centered around an old-world "Auntie" figure who tries, with a series of tricks, to get a baby to smile. Auntie

is very old-school, with old-fashioned shoes and a babushka tied around her head. Throughout the story, she mugs for the unresponsive child, making use of faces and sound effects, absurd poses and facial expressions—the stock-in-trade of most baby charmers—all in an attempt to win over the child. Nothing works. The baby is too serious a creature to be tickled by ordinary vaudeville schtick, and the infant just won't give the grownup the satisfaction of any sign of amusement. But as soon as Auntie delivers on her threat to "go away," the baby exhales a rolling wave of laughter. Here the director, Gene Deitch, opts for no music at all—just the sounds of Auntie marching around the frame, out of breath from her antics, sending the film into vibrations from her somersaults, gesticulations, and heavy footfalls. To capture the action correctly, Deitch again turned to the author, and Paterson provided him with a visual key to Auntie's gestures. Deitch also hired a Polish character actress and had her dress like Auntie and reenact the story, again to be filmed for later reference for the studio's animators. The film ended up winning a string of awards, including a CINE Golden Eagle; it was named Outstanding Film of the Year at the London Film Festival, and Best Children's Film at the Zagreb International Animation Film Festival.

One of the first books that Deitch animated for Weston Woods was the 1971 release, *A Picture for Harold's Room* (1960), a sequel to Crockett Johnson's classic picture book, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (1955), which featured the same night-shirted boy artist. The technical problem with *A Picture for Harold's Room*, Deitch discovered, was that it could not be rendered chronologically, from beginning to end. Had he tried to animate Harold drawing his drawings, there would have been a jerkiness between the frames, and it would have been impossible to perfectly match the lines. The solution, Deitch found, was to work backward from the completed pictures that conclude each segment, erasing until there was nothing left, and then filming in reverse order, after which the film could be run forward with smooth, seamless continuity.



An animation cel of Harold's character is laid over a painted background in this still from *A Fairy Tale for Harold's Room*. Harold's drawings were shot first in their complete form and gradually erased and photographed at regular intervals. The final animation was shown in the reverse sequence, so that Harold's drawings would appear to be drawn smoothly.



Animation cels from Quentin Blake's *Patrick* show three stages of the title character's idiosyncratic, ambling gait. Gene Deitch demonstrated the walk for animators in a series of Polaroid photographs.

In his adaptation of Quentin Blake's *Patrick* (1973), the sticking point for Deitch was getting a feeling for the main character. It ended up being all in the walk that Deitch and the animators would eventually give to the young fiddler who occupies the imaginative center of Blake's book. Deitch would demonstrate with great élan, in *The Picture Book Animated*, the idiosyncratic walk that he developed for Patrick, with his shoulders tipped back and his long legs carrying him forward into his music-touched ramble.

The other key element that Deitch needed in order to spark the film was music that would embody Patrick's generous spirit and his ability to bring joy and healing through his playing. As Deitch explained, he just happened to be playing a recording of a Dvorák violin concerto at home one evening when he came to a passage that brought him and Zdenka, who was in the other room of their apartment, to exclaim simultaneously, "Patrick!" Once Deitch had the rhythms of the concerto, he also had the rhythms he needed for the film.

But nothing Deitch had done before quite prepared him for what he called "the Mount Everest of children's books," *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). When Sendak and Deitch first met in Prague in 1969, Deitch reports, they "had some long walks through old and dark corners of the town" and agreed to make "a magical film."



Imagination and Innovation

The Story of Weston Woods

by John Cech

*An informative pictorial tribute to the leading force in films for children—
Weston Woods Studios and its founder, Mort Schindel*

For more than half a century, Weston Woods has been regarded as the leading creative force in the production of films for children. The list of the authors and artists whose works have been transformed from books into films by the studio includes the most significant figures in children's literature—Robert McCloskey, William Steig, and Maurice Sendak to Margaret Mahy, Sims Taback, Rosemary Wells, and Mo Willems.

In this lush nonfiction volume—rich with archival photographs, animation cells, historical references, and first-person accounts—readers get a personal, behind-the-scenes look at the man and creative empire who have garnered nearly every award for distinguished productions in the field of children's media.

John Cech is an award-winning author of fiction, prose, poetry, and criticism for adults and children, including a book about Maurice Sendak, *Angels and Wild Things*. Mr. Cech is a frequent contributor of articles, essays, and reviews to such publications as *The New York Times Book Review*, *Washington Post Book World*, *USA Today*, *Child*, *The Horn Book*, *Children's Literature*, and *The Lion and the Unicorn*. Mr. Cech has also contributed commentaries on children's culture to National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. He is a past president of the Children's Literature Association and currently serves on the advisory boards of the Weston Woods Institute.

10" x 10"

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