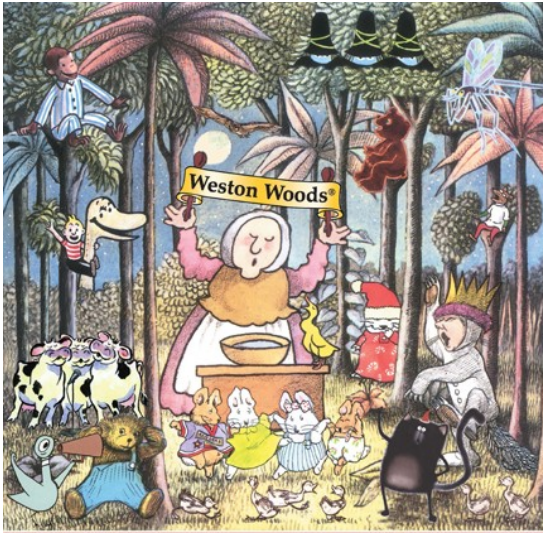


Mort Schindel Bio



Founded by educator Morton Schindel in 1953, Weston Woods (named after the wooded area outside his home in Weston, Connecticut) specializes in animating children's picture books on film. Schindel's cinematic vision not only included making films of children's picture books, but also interviews of the writers and filmmakers themselves. To our mind, this may be the richest element in Schindel's legacy, an element unfortunately ignored by most people familiar with Weston Woods' body of work.

Schindel's own story is a fascinating one, and explains much about the philosophical approach taken by his company. Mort Schindel was born on January 29, 1918 in Newark, New Jersey and graduated from Columbia Teachers' College in 1947, having taken audio-visual courses on subjects ranging from projection techniques to a Margaret Mead-taught course on propaganda and mass media. In 1948, he began working on films for Teaching Films Inc., which soon would declare bankruptcy. As part of the settlement, Schindel retained the rights to six of the films on which he'd worked, and formed his own company, Key Productions. Godfrey Elliott's Young America Films then contracted with Schindel to distribute Key films and make new films on standard topics (e.g. *What Makes Things Float*, 1951). The filmmaker meanwhile had noticed that children who read books in libraries rarely selected "Dick and Jane", but instead gravitated toward colorful picture books. He approached Elliott with the idea of animated picture book films as a new method of teaching reading, but was rebuffed. Schindel soon left for a two-year stint with the United States Information Service in Turkey, where he made films — primarily on health and cultural issues — and traveled by jeep as part of a mobile film presentation unit, equipped with generators to power projectors in the numerous villages without electricity. After returning to the United States, the filmmaker, in 1954, produced the first Weston Woods picture book film, and in 1964, made his first animated film, *The Snowy Day*. For the next several decades, Weston Woods would produce hundreds of titles, including works by authors such as Robert McCloskey (*The Doughnuts* from Robert McCloskey's 'Homer Price'), Tomi Ungerer (*Beast of M. Racine*, 1971, dir. Gene Deitch), and Maurice Sendak (*Where the Wild Things Are*, 1973, dir. Gene Deitch).

One of Weston Woods' most memorable films was *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1962, dir. Edward English), in which artist Lisl Weil, fresh from her performance at Lincoln Center, drew larger-than-life characters in different colored chalks while aggressively dancing to the Dukas score. Perhaps the strongest films produced by Schindel were the 'Signature Series' (see below, for viewing info), in which the people involved in creating these films, from artists, to directors, to producers, were shown animating, reading, and discussing their works. In *Morton Schindel: From Page to Screen* (1981), the producer discusses the painstaking steps of the picture book-to-film process, from selecting artists who stylistically mirror the original artwork, to the spoken aspect, including a scene showing author/illustrator/filmmaker Gerald McDermott narrating his *Arrow to the Sun* (1973, Texture Films). Possibly the most thought-provoking in all the series was the droll interview done by director Gene Deitch with children's illustrator and author Tomi Ungerer (an exceptionally funny and poignant artist in the adult erotic genre as well) in which the artist conveys the joy children express in being scared, and the value of occasional childhood loneliness (*Tomi Ungerer, Storyteller*, 1981).

No commentary on Weston Woods can be complete without discussing the contributions of director Gene Deitch, who Schindel had met during the latter's tenure with CBS as creative director of the "Tom Terrific" black and white minimalist cartoon episodes shown on the 'Captain Kangaroo' television series. Both Tom and wonderdog Manfred, were drawn with as little elaboration as possible, their occasionally transparency allowing the few scenic images in the image to show through their bodies. Deitch was never able to acquire the budget needed for producing the cartoon in color, and was unceremoniously dropped in 1958. In 1959, having been hired as an independent animation director for a studio located in Prague, he was hired by Schindel at Weston Woods to direct efforts utilizing Czech animators in the state-run Kratky studio, whose production manager, Zdenka Najmanová, Deitch would eventually marry. In Prague, Deitch fell in love his colleague and the city, and remained there, transforming over twenty picture books into film. Among them were Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1973), which took over five years to complete, featured a musique-concrète score by written and performed by Deitch himself.

Morton Schindel sold Weston Woods Films to Scholastic Incorporated in 1996 to devote his time to the non-profit Weston Woods Institute which he founded in 1983 to promote innovative cultural education for children. As of this writing, 16mm films are still being sold from the Scholastic Weston Woods catalogue. Gene Deitch and Zdenka Deitchova continue to work in Prague.

In June, 2001, Mort Schindel visited us at the AFA for a screening of several of his films and to meet our audience.

Several films from the Signature Series (below) are now online:

Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller and Countrywoman (?) 58m, Documents the life and times of renowned author and illustrator Beatrix Potter, who penned *The Tale Of Peter Rabbit*. Includes family portraits, photographs of where she lived and examples of her famous watercolor paintings.

Children of the Northlights: a Portrait of Ingri & Edgar D'Aulaire (1977), 20m, prod. Jane Morrison Productions. Features a visit to the studio-home of author-illustrators Ingri and Edgar d'Aulaire, where they discuss the philosophy behind their work and their unique process of creating illustrations by using lithographic stones.

Ezra Jack Keats (1970) 17m, dir. Cynthia Freitag. Combines collage & painting, shows him in NYC studio, poured paint in water to make his own collage/background paper; film includes 7 minute version of his film "A Letter to Amy"

Gene Deitch: the Picture Book Animated (1977) 25m, dir. Gene Deitch. Creator of the Mr. Magoo and Tom Terrific animated characters, Deitch has spent the last several decades in Prague, directing films based on children's picture books along with his wife and colleague, Zdenka Deitchova. Here, Deitch describes the painstaking process of animating a picture book for film and selecting a musical score.

Getting to Know William Steig (1991) Features William Steig, noted children's author and illustrator, discussing his childhood, family and friends, and influences and inspirations for his art.

How A Picture Book Is Made (1976) 9m, prod Morton Schindel. Steven Kellogg, children's book author and illustrator, describes the steps involved in creating his "The island of the Skog", a picture book about the adventures of a group of mice.

Lively Art of Picture Books, The (1964) 57m, Discusses the qualities that make up Weston Woods picture books. Presents three authors/artists who make their living writing picture books (Robert McCloskey, Barbara Cooney, and Maurice Sendak). Exhibits samples of the works of 36 illustrators plus the complete films 'TIME OF WONDER' and 'A SNOWY DAY.'

Maurice Sendak (1965) 19m, prod. Morton Schindel. Sendak began his Caldecott-winning book 'Where the Wild Things Are', in 1955, but it wasn't completed until 1963. Upon seeing this film, it's not difficult to see why it took so long. Sendak is a perfectionist, who built elaborate wooden toys as a child (he shows us a few of them, here), and counts Francisco Goya as one of his bigger influences.

Morton Schindel: From Page to Screen (1981) 27m, prod. Morton Schindel. Here, Schindel describes how a book is transformed into a film. In addition, we see Gerald McDermott, Caldecott winner and two-time ciné16 guest, reading from his book (and film) 'Arrow to the Sun.'

Robert McCloskey (1965) 18m, Visits famous children's author and illustrator Robert McCloskey at home in Maine. Interviews McCloskey about his life, inspirations and work.

Tomi Ungerer: Storyteller (1981) 21m, dir. Gene Deitch. An engaging and funny man, Ungerer is one of the darkest of all writers of children's books. He takes an absolute joy in being an iconoclast, discusses his fear of the dark, and how children enjoy the terror in his books. He defends children's innate intelligence, and notes the harm in being overly protective. Not a word is mentioned about the fact that he's also a noted ribald adult cartoonist. This insightful and humorous interview is filmed in his Strasboug home, with cartoonist Gene Deitch, who says Ungerer enjoyed a whiskey during the filming.

Visit with Rosemary Wells, A (?) 30m, A Focuses on the life and work of renowned children's author and illustrator, Rosemary Wells.

-Geoff Alexander