Weston Woods Company is well known to teachers and librarians as the very creative, small film company that has done more to encourage children to read than any other company, including Disney or Sesame Street’s creators. The person behind Weston Woods has always been its founder, Morton Schindel, a very innovative person who was inspired by the imagination of the pictures in children’s books. The company’s hallmark is short films that capture the actual artwork of the illustrator and the exact words of the author. Imagination and Innovation is the perfect title for this beautifully illustrated book, which chronicles the history of Weston Woods, showing how at each step in development or expansion over the past fifty plus years, Schindel used innovation to capture the imaginative stories found in children’s books. John Cech obviously worked closely with Schindel when he researched the company, and he has placed his emphasis on Schindel’s experiences as a filmmaker and innovator in children’s literature.
Like many great aficionados of children's books, Schindel began his great love for children's books, not through his own childhood experience, but through his children's eyes: “My kids were an important part of my work . . . I first became involved with picture books reading them to my daughters. The excitement and the way they noticed little details was an inspiration” (qtd. in Cech 33). In the late 1940s Schindel became aware that no film company was excited by or paying any attention to picture books, so he tried making a live-action film of James Daugherty's *Andy and the Lion* by dressing an actor in a lion costume. According to Schindel, the project “just didn’t work” (34). He had to abandon the undertaking and his idea of reproducing children's books until several years later when he returned from two years working for the United States Information Service in Turkey. This time he used a film technique he had seen in Turkey that used a moving camera to pan over a still picture, allowing the original illustrations of children's books to simulate animation without the expensive process of fully animating a film. This idea led to his first innovation, a technique he named “iconographic filming.” Cech faithfully records how this process works, allowing his reader to see how details from the original pages in the book are selected, framed, and filmed.

Cech retells Schindel's early journeys into the world of children's publishing and children's libraries, detailing how Schindel began working with Viking Press in 1954 to produce the short film adaptation of James Daugherty's *Andy and the Lion*. Much of Schindel's early collaborative work is revealed in the book, illuminating his connections with New York Public Library and his desire to closely conference with the illustrators and authors of the books selected for adaptation. Schindel's films were well received in the early 1950s. When they were screened at the Museum of Modern Art, the *New York Times* said the books were “virtually unchanged from their original state. . . . ‘brought to life’ by . . . storytelling technique, original music, sound effects, and skilled camera work” (43).

Cech has added numerous artifacts that illustrate the growth of Weston Woods from a small one-man business to an internationally acclaimed film company. These documents, combined with Cech's chronological text, will help any reader understand why Weston Woods productions have long been acclaimed in the field of children's literature. For instance, when he discusses Schindel's work with filmmaker Gene Deitch, he shows Deitch posing in clothing and a walking stance that emulate Quentin Blake's hero in *Patrick*. These detailed accounts aptly demonstrate Schindel's enthusiasm and creativity, carefully defining what made Morton Schindel and Weston Woods very attractive. It is not surprising that Scholastic, the world's largest publisher of children's books, was interested in acquiring Weston Woods in 1996, nor is it surprising that the company published *Imagination and Innovation*.

*Imagination and Innovation* is an excellent introduction for school librarians and teachers who will be motivated by Cech's detailed account of Morton Schindel's innovative film adaptations and his children's film company, Weston Woods. Many teachers today may
have forgotten the beauty of his early films. Reading *Imagination and Innovation*, or even just glancing it, readers will see that each Weston Woods film is not only based on the illustrations of an original children’s book, but it is accompanied with carefully recorded narration and specially composed music. There is another use for *Imagination and Innovation*, however. Upper elementary children could easily find it a useful resource when studying film production in literature adaptations. There is sufficient information and illustrations to show students how these films were designed and filmed. Students could use this as a jumping off point for developing their own films. In addition, upper level students might be motivated by looking at and reading *Imagination and Innovation* to find the films and create “storytelling” events for younger children. Such a unit would give them a second chance to enjoy some of the best picture books from the twentieth century.

This beautifully illustrated book written by John Cech is a tribute to Schindel. Cech himself is a writer, critic, and teacher of children’s literature. Here in *Imagination and Innovation* he does for Schindel’s life what Schindel did for all those children’s books: he brings Schindel to life. A delightful reading experience, *Imagination and Innovation* is intended for teachers, librarians, and parents, but it could also serve as a resource for upper level students interested in the filmmaking.

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**About the Author**

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