

Stopping by Weston Woods

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An increasing amount of advertising is reaching our elementary schools offering the classroom teacher, or the librarian, literature through sound as well as sight. It arrives as brochures in school mailboxes, as sample records sent to librarians or teachers, and as records included on lists of paperback books for sale to our elementary children. The material advertised has merit, has possible pitfalls, and needs to be considered carefully when looking for a vehicle to bring meaning and enjoyment from the printed page to our children - the eager, the complaisant, the reluctant. One of these companies, Weston Woods, advertises to our school librarians as the people working most closely with children, with books for children, and with the teachers of children.

Speaking at the annual institute on "Creative Writing For Children and By Children" at the Nolte Center for Continuing Education at the University of Minnesota last summer, Morton Schindel, producer, Weston Woods, gave a comprehensive demonstration on what his company is attempting to do with children's literature. Mr. Schindel initiated his presentation through a filmed visit with Maurice Sendak, illustrator, talking about his work. This was followed by a second film covering a book familiar to most libraries and the work of a second illustrator. In this second work, the camera moved in on portions of the illustrations to keep pace with related areas of the text. It is called the "iconographic" approach by Mr. Schindel to differentiate from an animated film. Using this approach, the illustrations are kept as found in the library book and easily recognized by the children.

Broadening the demonstration, Mr. Schindel next showed the filmstrip and record in combination. Newer phonograph/filmstrip combinations key the projector to change frames and keep pace with the text; older models, where they are separate, will work as well because the filmstrip comes with an illustrated pamphlet showing the text that accompanies each frame. The list of books available through this medium is far greater than that for the sound film. Though the films can be rented, to spare the purchase cost, even the rental fee may be prohibitive. The filmstrip may be the better buy for most schools.

Using either media, there are several things to consider with this approach to literature for children. The darkness of the room and the beam of light will help to hold attention. All people will be looking at the same portion of the illustration and hearing the same text with the same emphasis for discussion purposes. Illustrations will be larger for more careful scrutiny; the transparent quality of some colors is further enhanced in the projector making some books appear more a work of art than they exhibit in book form. Background music extends the ability to set the mood for the presentation and contributes to the changing of mood throughout the books.

Records or filmstrips could be used separately, but there are things to consider before doing the separating. One of the purposes in using the records would be to bring into the room new voices, possibly trained voices, reading literature, in addition to the teacher's voice. Interpretation on the record may be far different than that given by a classroom teacher. In some cases, the author, poet, or collector will read the material presented, and it makes these people more real to the children when they are aware of the sound of their voices. If the record is used with the library book in place of the filmstrip, the teacher must hold the book and will therefore limit the child to what he may see through distance from the book and the speed at which the book is flashed.

The classroom teacher or the librarian still must make some decisions if using this medium. There is a need to determine where the material will be used - grade level, area of curriculum, frequency of use. The material will have to be previewed; adding dimensions to an art form changes the response from the audience in some cases, and this needs to be considered here. Some listed books are illustrated by children and are not nearly as spectacular, at first glance, as those done by professionals, but the children need to see that this sort of work has as much merit in beauty and interpretive quality as the other. The library should be checked to see if the books presented are available as the children will surely seek out each new book brought to their attention.

We will never get away from the teacher's, or librarian's, attitude toward books. Their presentation of this new medium by Weston Woods will require as much forethought, preparation, and enthusiasm as any project that we have going in our schools. The thirty day trial provided by Weston Woods does allow for the inspection and selection of material that can best be incorporated into each teaching day.