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Meet John Schoenherr—An Old Friend

by Lillian H. Heil

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I’ve known the powerful art created by John Schoenherr for a long time, but the artwork wasn’t attached to a name in my mind. The remarkable line drawings of the fierce mother badger in Eckert’s *Incident at Hawk’s Hill* were my visual images of the story. Julie’s wolves (in Jean George’s *Julie of the Wolves*) were my friends, and Schoenherr’s sympathetic drawings were an important part of my involvement in that story. But when I read Jean George’s picture book about a wounded wolf (1978), Schoenherr’s name grabbed my attention. The plight of Roko, the wounded wolf, was intensified by Schoenherr’s ability to create the vast emptiness of arctic snow fields with a few lines and dark masses of rocks. Schoenherr’s hungry grizzly poses a real threat to the limping Roko. When Roko desperately fights off ravens, a fox, and a grizzly bear, Schoenherr captures his frantic burst of energy. (That happens just before the leader of the pack comes to his aid. Look for the dynamic picture as you read through this issue.) The teamwork of wolves made an appealing story; but it was Schoenherr’s drawings that made the arctic...
wilderness and its animal characters come alive for me. I took note of Schoenherr's name, but I didn't come across it again until ten years later, when Jane Yolen and John Schoenherr won the Caldecott Award for Owl Moon in 1988. In this story, a father teaches his daughter to appreciate nature: he wonders at the wild beauty of owls. Schoenherr's water color illustrations are the perfect visual accompaniment to Yolen’s poetic text: dark woods, milk white snow, and the silent, elusive owl. After reading this book, I remember thinking, "Who is John Schoenherr, and why don't I know about him?" But after puzzling over that question for a while, I remembered that Schoenherr had illustrated Julie of the Wolves. He is an artist I've known for a long time.

Of course, John Schoenherr has illustrated many more books for children than the three I remembered—more than forty, including the well-known Rascal (by Sterling North) and Gentle Ben (by Walter Morey). He has both written and illustrated three books, including his latest, entitled Bear (1991). You can perhaps understand why a friend of Schoenherr’s once commented that Schoenherr is "a bear disguised as a human being" (Something About the Author, vol. 66, p. 196). Schoenherr himself remarks, "I tend to be sympathetic with the large monochromatic animals that I can use a big brush on. Bears, as I say, have a nice form. It’s solid" (Something About the Author, vol. 66, p. 196).

Schoenherr’s started drawing early, in a desperate attempt to communicate. His mother was from Hungary and his father from Germany. His parents came to New York City in 1914 and taught their son, who was born in 1935, to speak German. When he tried to speak German in a multicultural neighborhood that included Chinese, Italian, and English speakers, he was unsuccessful. He finally gave up trying to communicate and drew pictures instead. He learned English from comic strips but kept on drawing. At thirteen he was taking Saturday classes at the Art Students League and climbing rocks, which he claimed made him aware of rocks’ tactile nature and their shapes. After studying at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and with Frank Reilly, a well-known illustrator, Schoenherr at twenty-one was recognized as a successful science fiction illustrator. He’s illustrated more than three hundred science fiction book covers.
He moved his family to rural New Jersey and grew to love nature. Gradually he moved almost exclusively into wildlife illustration. He says his travels to the Black Hills, Yellowstone, Montana, and Arizona taught him his great love. "It’s structure. Back East, everything is covered with trees, whereas it’s stone and dirt that I love. Deep down, I probably want to be a desert dweller\" (Something About the Author, vol. 66, p. 196).

Happily for us, Schoenherr has a driving need to capture the shapes and activities of animals in pictures. But he does more than create accurate visual images of animals—he cares about them, and it shows in his art. We can tell that Schoenherr "knows the feeling of meeting a wild animal on its own ground. I've been face to face with field mice and Kodiak bears, bull moose, and wild geese, wild boar and mountain goats, and of course owls. Large or small, I feel awe and wonder and respect" (Caldecott Acceptance Speech, Horn Book Magazine, August 1988).

As a footnote to Schoenherr's love of shapes and the part they play in good composition, I would point out that besides the shapes of bears, he especially likes the moose. In his words, "They look so awkward in an artificial situation, but I've seen a moose go through a cedar swamp over fallen twisted tree trunks and matted growth without wrestling anything. A moose can be a dynamic, controlled solid mass in movement." I'm hoping that John Schoenherr's love of shape will encourage him to do a book about the seemingly awkward moose. I want to see that "dynamic, controlled solid mass in movement."