

Buttons, corduroys, a bear, oh my

KIDS STUFF

By William Feldman



Welcome to *Kids Stuff*. Today's column includes Part 2 of a walk down memory lane with Roy Freeman, son of the late author, lithographer and artist, Don Freeman. Again, this part of the interview was unique in that it took place over the Internet, because Roy resides in Switzerland.

Last week, I described Don's childhood, educational and training background, why he was a creative artist, how he became an author, and how his work benefited the World War II effort.

I was curious where Don came up with the idea to center a story on a bear that lost a button, and if there was any reflection from his own childhood here.

Roy was quite open with his response. He explained all he could find was on www.donfreeman.info. Here is the quote directly from his dad when he was interviewed in the past by Linda Zuckerman, an editor at Viking Press, years after he published *Corduroy*:

"Just possibly you would like to hear something of the background of Corduroy as I first came upon it... Of course I can't remember exactly how it started, but I do recall wanting to do a story about a department store in which a character wanders around at night after the doors close. Then I also wanted the story to show the vast difference between the luxuries of a department store [and] the simple life [most people live]. The idea of simple basic values was another theme that was running around in the back of my head. I don't remember how or when a toy bear came into my life, but he must have come from way out of my past. You know, I could just see a bear wearing corduroy overalls with one button missing... the minute I settled on Corduroy and Lisa, everything came together."

Roy continued by explaining, "The theme of abandonment and being valued for who you are, no matter your belief, race, class status, artist or non-artist, was very central to Don, even if he never mentioned this outright."

Growing up without a mother or normal family life might have been behind *Corduroy*, Roy added.

I was surprised to hear Don was ostracized

by his own family for his drawings portraying unsavory characters on the streets of New York in the 1930s. They simply didn't approve of this type of realistic drawing.

"This was very devastating for him. Certain family members never spoke to him again. Only his Aunt Julia continued to support him," Roy said.

How does Roy feel about his father's legacy being carried on for a new generation?

"Don's particular quality of writing stories very close to children and illustrating in a natural, simple, but human way is evidently very rare," said Roy, who attends the International Children's Book Fair in Bologna, Italy, almost every year. "I am sure there are courageous children's book illustrators and authors who dare to follow their own deep inner feelings."

In the present day of publishing, it is getting harder and harder to publish, Roy said, but it is still possible. Like Don always said: Do not give up!

By the way, Roy's favorite memory of his dad is playing his trumpet and spontaneously acting out very funny skits to friends.

The decision to re-promote *Corduroy* at this time was done by the publisher, Penguin Books for Young People (Penguin USA), to celebrate the fact that 2008 is the 40th anniversary of *Corduroy* and also the centennial of Don's birth.

I read that Viking Publishing Co. is commemorating *Corduroy 40th Anniversary Edition* with a 30,000-copy printing featuring a larger trim size than the original and an embossed cover. This edition includes handwritten letters from the author, sketches and original drafts of his manuscript.

Also, Scholastic Storybook Treasures (www.scholastic.com) is celebrating this anniversary, too, with a newly enhanced DVD called *Corduroy...And More Stories About Caring*.

According to a news release, the title story features a combination of live action and stop-motion animated adaptation of the original *Corduroy*, which has sold more than 300,000 copies.

Weston Woods Studios originally released the *Corduroy* story in the educational and library marketplace. It's been a featured film and video in the classroom since its original production in the 1980s. The original Weston Woods Studios production won several national awards from the American Film Festival, the American Library Association and the New York International Film & Video Festival. However, I just read that a few



In this photo from the new DVD *Corduroy*, a little girl named Lisa visits a toy shop to buy a stuffed bear wearing green corduroys with a button missing.

years ago, Scholastic acquired Weston Woods.

Corduroy longs for someone to take him home from the department store. Upon noticing one of his buttons is missing, he sets out to find it, thinking that will hasten his purchase. Will he find it first, or be discovered by the store security guard?

Six more animated stories are included, providing more than an hour of classic story time fun for kids: *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*; *The Happy Lion*; *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes*; *Smile for Auntie*; *The Happy Owls*; and *Goose*. The DVD includes an "innovative" read-along function that highlights words as they are read, encouraging kids to follow the narration and develop a love of reading.

And if you do not think *Corduroy* is getting the attention he deserves, volunteers of all ages throughout the entire nation will attempt to break a record for the most read children's book with an adult on the same day. You guessed it. The pick is *Corduroy*. Children and adults will read together on Oct. 2 at events nationwide in schools, libraries, stores, hotels, playgrounds, offices and homes. You can also search by ZIP code for events in your area.

I read that first lady Laura Bush and *Today* show's Matt Lauer and Meredith Vieira are participating in this reading program, along with many other celebrities. For more information, go to www.readfortherecord.org

So the bottom line is whether you are presently reading *Corduroy* or watching *Corduroy* on its newly enhanced DVD, it will entertain a whole new generation of kids while parents, grandparents and great-grandparents reminisce of their childhood reading this book.

Six Flags Great Adventure and the American Red Cross will kick off the park's sixth annual Fright Fest blood drive on Saturday, Oct. 11. All donors participating in this unique "blood letting" must pre-register to receive a free ticket to Fright Fest. To register, call 1-732-928-2000, Ext. 2831.

Up to 200 donors are needed and will be taken on a first-call, first-served basis. You must be age 17 or older and weigh at least 110 pounds. General donor information is available at www.jerseycoast-redcross.org or givelife.com

Also Six Flags is joining forces with the second annual Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure this Sunday. Register now for the largest 5k in New Jersey. You can make a difference. Go to www.sixflags.com/greatadventure and go to the events tab. Six Flags is located in Jackson, N.J.

Answer to last week's cryptogram: Healthy eating makes a healthy mind and body. ●●

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