

1974-2024: fifty years of *Swallows and Amazons* on film

From the book to the film

David Wood talks to Signals about how he adapted *Swallows and Amazons* for the big screen

David Wood cheerfully admits he never read any of the *Swallows and Amazons* series as a child. His cousin had all the books, but David, being a year younger permanently felt they were “too old for me”. So when Neville Thompson of Theatre Productions and Richard Pilbrow, the film’s eventual producer, sat him down in a pub in Drury Lane in 1972 and asked if he’d ever read *Swallows and Amazons* he had to reply “No.” Despite this, they asked him to read it and let them know if he’d be interested in writing a screenplay. (He’d never done one of those either. Or been sailing.)

The upshot of this was that David found himself alone in a holiday cottage in Minorca for two weeks “gutting” the book – analysing it chapter by chapter to see how it works, how incidents link to each other, and contribute to the big moment, how the characters contribute and so on. This resulted in a synopsis. “Everyone was very pleased, and started trying to raise the money. And then I wrote it.”

Faithful to the original

His main aims, he says, were “to always be very faithful to the original, and to show it from the children’s point of view.” And to bring out the real menace in many of the situations. “I realised early on that Titty was going to be the most important character. She was the imaginative one. The whole thing of her being in the boat and on the island alone, she was going to be frightened and cold. There’s a gritty quality that’s often overlooked – the danger with the lake steamer is for real, and there is genuine mystery and fear when they first meet the Amazons. And John’s reaction to the unfairness of Captain Flint’s unjust accusation is very real.”

David was also determined to make the return of Captain Flint’s trunk very moving. “It was more me than Ransome there – he deals with it rather off-stage. I wanted you to empathise with Titty and what she’d done”

Of the others, he comments, “Roger to me is a lot of the humour, but the danger is of getting grown-up laughs at his expense.”



Casting the grown-ups had not been easy. “We were lucky to have Virginia McKenna, and Claude (Whatham, the director) had a kind of repertory company which he worked with, but the main search was for Uncle Jim. Films for children were considered slightly second-division, he explains, and that meant actors tended to avoid appearing in them.

“We eventually got Ronald Fraser – I remember being a bit disappointed, he was known as a comedy actor, but in the end I thought he did rather well and entered into the spirit of it. There are moments of humility – when he

apologises to John – that he handles well.” (As an aside, David mentions the abandoned *Great Northern* project, where they’d been hoping to cast Peter Sellers as Jemmerling.)

One area where the film does deviate from the book is the opening. Instead of Roger tacking up the field at Holly Howe, we discover the Walker family in a railway-carriage, heading north. “I wanted the audience to get to know the children, and I thought, ‘How did they come to be there – the Lake District, Father in the Navy, Mother from Australia?’ It was the perfect way of introducing their different characters and creating a sense of infectious excitement at the beginning of the holiday.”

Evgenia’s blessing

One of David’s potentially fiercest critics was Mrs Ransome herself - Arthur’s widow Evgenia, by then living in a retirement village near Banbury. Her approval was essential, and Richard Pilbrow had the idea of inviting her to the Lake District and taking her out in a boat to Peel Island. “Although rather frail, she leapt eagerly into the boat, and took us round, pointing out things quite like a little girl – it was rather moving.”

Back at the hotel, though, it was time to discuss the script. “She pointed to a line – ‘This line you have given to Susan. Susan would never say a line like this.’ I picked up the book, found the line, which was Susan’s, in it and showed it to her. Realising I’d done my homework, she relaxed. ‘I think it will be alright,’ she said.”