

Marketing veteran's cartoon mole finds global success

Stories that Reatchlous wrote for his children have spawned two series and a film company

CHRISTOPHER GRIMES — LOS ANGELES

James Reatchlous spent much of 2016 in what appeared to be a losing battle with Stage Four lymphoma. As he struggled through chemotherapy, his two daughters retrieved some old notebooks containing the handwritten bedtime stories he had made up when they were children and brought them to the Chelsea hospital where he was being treated.

Hearing his daughters read the exploits of Master Moley, a cheerful mole who lives in a town far below Windsor Castle, brought back happy memories and lifted his spirits. Reatchlous believes listening to the stories also helped to save his life.

"The doctors came in and said, 'We don't know what has happened, Mr Reatchlous, but you are going into remission,'" he told the Financial Times in an interview. "I am convinced that it was partly because of Moley."

After he was discharged from hospital, the then 68-year-old marketing and publishing executive went to the nearby Chelsea Physic botanical garden and wrote a business plan to turn Moley into a franchise — maybe a series of books, or animated films.

Today, the animated series based on his Moley character has been beamed into 180 countries in 30 languages, and will soon expand into China following recent approval from Beijing.

His company, Two Daughters Entertainment, has three full-length animated films in the works, starting with *The Land of Sometimes* featuring the voices of Ewan McGregor, Helena Bonham Carter and Mel Brooks, to be released in December 2025. And this month, those actors — along with his daughters Henrietta and Tatiana — will join him in Los Angeles at The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures for a reception to celebrate his Hollywood expansion plans.

"I knew nothing about animation six or seven years ago. Absolutely zero," Reatchlous said. "For a man at the age of 74 to get through all this [cancer] crap and come out the other side with this gift of working with the most extraordinary people . . . you couldn't make it up."

Reatchlous may not have known the animation business, but he had notched up decades of experience in Canada, the US and the UK as a marketing executive, including at PepsiCo in New York and Guinness in London. He later started his own marketing and publishing businesses in London.

He is also a consummate networker, as evidenced by the names of some of his initial investors in 2017. Lord Stuart Rose, former executive chair of Marks and Spencer, and Lord Tim Bell, the British advertising and public relations executive who co-founded Bell Pottinger, were among the figures who invested seed money. In that first fundraising he pulled in £150,000. There have been five more since, bringing in more than \$18m in total.

After deciding against publishing books about Moley, Reatchlous began making connections in film and animation. He has brought in Alan Yentob, former BBC creative director, to play



The animated series based on Master Moley has been beamed into 180 countries, and three films are in the works. Below, Two Daughters Entertainment founder James Reatchlous with Henrietta and Tatiana — Darren Dwyer



the same role at Two Daughters. Bonnie Arnold, whose CV includes work on Pixar's *Toy Story* and DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon*, is an executive producer on *The Land of Sometimes*.

The company also developed a close partnership with Tony Nottage, a British producer and animator who helped adapt Reatchlous' ideas for television.

Like Reatchlous, Nottage has two daughters, and he tested the Moley stories out on them. "In every project I get involved in, I take it home to my girls and show them to see what they think of it," Nottage said. "James's original idea sparked with me," he added, saying that the stories had "a lot of heart" and conveyed a moral message without being "preachy".

Still, they had been written with no intention of ever being turned into a

script. "They needed a lot of work," Nottage recalled. "I tried to stay true to James's original stories and vision that he used to tell his daughters. It was fun bringing Moley to life."

Besides being parents of two daughters, the men had something else in common: doctors had discovered a tumour in Nottage's brain in 2012. "I kind of went through a similar thing as James — being told you're going to die and having tests," he said. He still has the tumour, but medication keeps it in check.

Nottage produced a 30-minute short film called "Master Moley: By Royal Invitation" that premiered in 2019 and was broadcast on Sky via the Boomerang channel owned by what was then WarnerMedia. As the pandemic took hold — and created huge demand for streaming and TV — Warner commissioned a Moley series that would reach 52 episodes over three years, with Nottage producing.

Warner paid \$1.7m for the European rights, and the show has brought in millions more in broadcast rights globally. A second series is in the works.

At the same time, Two Daughters is building out its film slate. After *The Land of Sometimes* next year, the company is planning to release two more animated feature films: *Reds and Grays* and *A Christmas Twist*. Both will be produced by Nottage.

Simon Bobin, chief executive of Two Daughters, notes that animation has done well on the big screen since the pandemic, while the movie industry

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overall has struggled to attract the audiences of the late 2010s.

Recent animated successes, including Disney's *Inside Out 2* and Universal's *Despicable Me 4*, have stood out in an otherwise patchy year for cinemas.

"The big studios basically don't make enough feature animation," Bobin said. "If you look at the calendar there is one every two or three months. But there needs to be one every week. I think Two Daughters can easily help fill that gap."

Its expansion plans come as the UK film industry was given a boost by the most recent Budget, which introduced a tax credit of about 40 per cent for local productions with budgets up to £15m.

The country has several animation success stories including Aardman, home of Wallace and Gromit and Shaun the Sheep, and Peppa Pig, created by animation studio Astley Baker Davies.

With another animated series in the works, Reatchlous wants to develop merchandise, and possibly expand into apps, stage plays and video games. "We may even have Moley in a British theme park," he said.

Reatchlous also wants to build up his library of intellectual property with an eye to a possible exit from the business by the end of the 2020s — when he will be nearing his 80s.

"We may do a partial exit first, then a full exit," he told the FT. "I always want to have some kind of relationship with Moley until the day I leave this Earth. He was my creation and I would always be happy to be an ambassador for Moley if we were bought by a larger company."