Resonance is a monthly journal of science education published by Indian Academy of Sciences, Bangalore, India.

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R B Woodward (1917-1979) was one of the giants of modern organic chemistry. Born in Boston on April 10, 1917, Woodward (RBW) obtained his B.S. (1936) and Ph.D. (1937) from MIT. It is interesting to read what J F Norris, MIT organic chemistry professor at that time, said about RBW: "We saw we had a person who possessed a very unusual mind in our midst. We wanted to let it function at its best. If red tape which was necessary for other less brilliant students had to go, we cut it. We did for Woodward what we have done for no other student in our department, for we had no student like him in the department."

During his almost four decade long career at Harvard University, he synthesized a large number of complex natural products: Cholesterol (1951), Strychnine (1954), Lysergic Acid (1954), Reserpine (1956), Chlorophyll-a (1960), Cephalosporin C (1965), Vitamin B_{12} (1976), Erythromycin (1980), etc. He was awarded the Chemistry Nobel Prize in 1965 "for his outstanding achievements in the art of organic synthesis".

In addition to his synthetic achievements, he is also widely known for a set of orbital symmetry rules he developed with Roald Hoffmann for pericyclic reactions ("Woodward-Hoffmann rules"). Woodward was a pioneer in using modern instrumentation in chemical research. The empirical rules he developed for determining structural details from UV-Visible spectroscopy are still in use ("Woodward-Fieser rules").

Woodward trained over 400 students and postdoctoral fellows during his career. J.-M. Lehn, whose article appears in this issue, is one of his illustrious coworkers.