



Maurice Sendak in a TateShots interview broadcast on YouTube.

Sendak, Maurice (1928-2012)

by Linda Rapp

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Best known for his children's book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), award-winning author Maurice Sendak was an important voice in children's literature in the second-half of the twentieth century, writing and illustrating books that both acknowledge the fears, conflicts, and doubts faced by children and celebrate the imagination, creativity, and resilience with which they deal with them.

The youngest of three children of Jewish immigrants from Poland, Maurice Sendak, born June 10, 1928 in Brooklyn, New York, was a sickly child and spent much time inside watching other children play. A precocious observer of their antics, he would later incorporate their personalities, their creativity, both their fear and mastery of monsters, and their indomitable spirit into his books.

Sendak's father encouraged his son's imagination by telling him traditional stories from his homeland and from the Bible for which the young Maurice made illustrations and his older brother Jack wrote the text.

As a child Sendak was fascinated by comic books, a medium that combined pictures and text. In high school he wrote and illustrated a comic strip for the school paper.

To the disappointment of his parents, Sendak did not attend college but did develop his talent at the Arts Students League in New York.

Sendak and his brother designed mechanical wooden toys that they hoped to sell to F.A.O. Schwartz. They were unsuccessful in that project, but Sendak was hired as a window-dresser at the company's New York store. The artistry of his work led to a commission to illustrate Robert Garvey's *Good Shabbos, Everybody* (1951).

Through his work at F.A.O. Schwartz, Sendak met Ursula Nordstrom, an editor at Harper, who recognized his talent and became a mentor, arranging for him to illustrate a number of children's books. His work on Ruth Krauss's *A Hole Is to Dig* (1952) established him as a first-rate illustrator. The success of that project allowed Sendak to quit his job at the toy store and work at his art.

Because of his versatility, Sendak quickly became a prolific and popular illustrator, but Nordstrom urged him to find his own voice and produce stories that he would both write and illustrate.

His first two independent books, *Kenny's Window* (1956) and *Very Far Away* (1957), achieved some success, but it was with *The Sign on Rosie's Door* (1960) that he began to attract attention as a writer. Rosie, based on a girl whom he remembered from his childhood days in Brooklyn, was typical of his youthful protagonists—bold, self-reliant, and possessed of a vivid imagination.

In 1963 Sendak published the book for which he is most famous, *Where the Wild Things Are*, which quickly became a classic of children's literature.

"I don't think that *Wild Things* is my best book," stated Sendak in a 2003 interview. "I do realize that *Where the Wild Things Are* has permitted me to do all kinds of books that I probably never would have done had it not been so popular. I think I took good advantage of that popularity to illustrate books that I passionately wanted to do without having to worry if they were commercial or not."

Where the Wild Things Are was a radical departure from the typical children's books of the time: it contained no moral lesson, and it dealt with how youngsters use fantasy to cope with and conquer their fears.

Some adults felt that the monsters in the book might be too frightening for children, but Sendak insisted on the resilience of youngsters confronted with new, real, and fearsome situations and emotions. In accepting the Caldecott Medal for children's literature in 1964, he spoke of "the necessary games children must conjure up to combat an awful fact of childhood: the fact of their vulnerability to fear, anger, hate, frustration—all the emotions that are an ordinary part of their lives and that they perceive only as ungovernable and dangerous forces. To master these forces, children turn to fantasy: that imagined world where disturbing emotional situations are solved to their satisfaction."

Sendak continued to do copious work as an illustrator as well as producing independent works, including *Higglety, Pigglety, Pop! or There Must Be More to Life* (1967) and *In the Night Kitchen* (1970).

In 1981 Sendak published what he called in 2003 "my best work," *Outside over There*, the tale of a baby who is kidnapped by goblins and whom his older sister must rescue.

Tony Kushner called *Outside over There* "a picture book unlike any other. Its gripping quest-story tumbles out of the cave of the unknown and the uncanny, . . . out of E. T. A. Hoffmann and the less well-lit corners of Hans Christian Andersen, out of the dark of the unconscious [The illustrations] are so strong they seem to menace the very text they're meant to illustrate, illuminating if not igniting the ambiguities of every sentence."

Sendak again presented a bleak and challenging story in *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993). Set in a community of homeless children, the tale chronicles the lives of the two street-wise title characters as they kidnap and care for an abandoned infant.

Questioned in 1993 about whether the book had a "hidden meaning" such as the representation of a gay couple adopting a child, Sendak denied such an intention, saying, "I like these overtones, but I can't be either praised or blamed for putting them in." He added that he was writing on "the continuation of my oldest theme: the tenaciousness of children to survive They don't stop and say, 'Oh, this is a same-sex marriage.'"

Nevertheless, in the same interview, Sendak endorsed the idea of a chosen family by citing the experience of a friend who had received an advance copy of the book, read it to his daughter, and called the story sad. When the daughter countered, "It's all right, because the baby has a family," the father attempted to "correct" her, saying, "It's not really a family, honey," but, reported Sendak, the daughter persisted: "The baby has a family."

"And," he concluded, "she got it."

Various of Sendak's books have been called controversial or disturbing for reasons great and small. In *Dear Mili* (1988), the retelling of a tale by Wilhelm Grimm, the child protagonist dies at the end as she tries to reunite with her aged and blind mother, a far darker prospect than even the fearsome goblins of *Outside over There* or, certainly, than the easily tamed monsters in *Where the Wild Things Are*.

More trivially, some adults were scandalized when the little boy Mickey "fell through the dark, out of his clothes, past the moon," and into a huge bowl of cake batter in *In the Night Kitchen*. There was a report of a librarian using white-out to put a diaper on Mickey to hide his penis after he lost his pajamas.

Similarly, there were some expressions of outrage at the depiction of a dog defecating in *Some Swell Pup, or Are You Sure You Want a Dog?* (1976, co-authored with Matthew Margolis). Reviewer Jerome Cushman, however, recognized the book's value as a guide for families considering adopting a dog, stating that "it mixes dog training with a bit of child training," and he also took note of Sendak's genius as an illustrator, writing, "Just as I got used to the fast-paced cartoon format, up comes Sendak with a couple of stunning dream sequences that reinforce our belief that this artist/author knows a lot about paint and people."

Sendak's art was not limited to print and prose. In 1975 he directed and wrote the lyrics for *Really Rosie*, a half-hour television special based on *The Sign on Rosie's Door*. He subsequently contributed to operatic adaptations of two of his other works, serving as lyricist and set and costume designer for *Where the Wild Things Are* in Belgium in 1980 and at the New York City Opera in 1984, and as librettist and set and costume designer for *Higglety, Pigglety, Pop!*, a charmingly fanciful tribute to his beloved terrier, Jennie (1984).

Sendak also won plaudits for his costume and set designs for *Nutcracker: The Motion Picture*, a film version of Pyotr Tchaikovsky's classic ballet (1986, directed by Carroll Ballard). He also designed the sets for a 1983 stage production of *The Nutcracker* as well as for a number of operas. The latter was particularly rewarding for him since he has been a lifelong aficionado, with a special fondness for the works of Mozart. His credits included designs for Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1981) and *Iodomeno* (1990), Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* (1997), and Leos Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1981).

Sendak invited playwright Tony Kushner to join him in creating an English adaptation of Hans Krása's *Brundibár*, a children's opera in Czech. Their work was first produced in 2003, and in the same year they published the story as a picture book, with text by Kushner and illustrations by Sendak.

Sendak was the recipient of numerous honors, beginning with the New York Times Best Illustrated Book Award, which he won for the first of eighteen times in 1952. He won both the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and the Caldecott Medal in 1964, and the Hans Christian Andersen International Medal in 1970. President Bill Clinton awarded him the National Medal of the Arts in 1996, and the Swedish government honored him with the Astrid Lindgren Award for Literature in 2003.

In a 2008 interview with the *New York Times*, Sendak, the subject of innumerable stories in the press of decades, responded to a query about what question he had never been asked with a pause and then the seemingly simple answer, "Well, that I'm gay."

Sendak went on to note "that the idea of a gay man writing children's books would have hurt his career" when he was starting out. Indeed, given the social tenor of the times, it might well have prevented it.

Sendak never came out to his parents. "All I wanted was to be straight so my parents could be happy. They never, never, never knew," he said.

While attempting to safeguard his parents' happiness, however, Sendak found his own with Dr. Eugene Glynn, a psychiatrist, author, and art critic. The couple had a loving and committed relationship of fifty years that ended only with Glynn's death on May 15, 2007.

Sendak was feted at a belated eightieth birthday party in New York on September 15, 2008, which council Speaker Christine Quinn proclaimed Maurice Sendak Day in the city. In attendance were such luminaries as

Meryl Streep, Judy Blume, Kushner, and director Spike Jonze, who at the time was filming a live-action version of *Where the Wild Things Are*.

The film of *Where the Wild Things Are* was released in the fall of 2009 to immediate commercial success. Sendak said that he had supported Jonze's vision for the film.

"I advised him to make more mischief, and he made more than most. In plain terms, a child is a complicated creature who can drive you crazy. There's a cruelty to childhood, there's an anger. And I did not want to reduce Max to the trite image of the good little boy that you find in too many books," commented Sendak.

The release of the film brought some comfort to Sendak, who had recently been bereaved not only of his partner but also of his brother and sister. "I will never get over their loss. I don't want to get over their loss," he stated but added, "I'm coming back to life and the movie of 'Wild Things' and everything is life-enhancing."

Sendak also used the occasion of the release of the film to announce that he had two new books in progress.

In 2011, he published *Bumble-Ardy*, the first picture book in 30 years for which he produced both text and illustrations.

Sendak died on May 8, 2012 due to complications from a stroke.

His final work is a poem that he wrote in memory of his brother, Jack, and also illustrated. *My Brother's Book* is to be published in February 2013.

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