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Sendak's Sustainable Art

AMY SONHEIM

In 1963, when Max had just been born between the covers of *Where the Wild Things Are* and I had been alive for three or four years, Max eluded me in the church nursery. While my parents were occupied with choir practice, I bellied up to a child-sized wooden table on which lay *Wild Things*. Never having seen this book, I flopped it open: on the endpapers, I saw bushes in muted colors—olive, eggplant, and ocher—meticulously crisscrossed in black. I panicked. I closed the book, censoring something too dark for me. By its lack of a golden spine, I felt this book probably held no pokey little puppy.

While adults touted Maurice Sendak as an iconoclastic illustrator who struck it big with kids by proffering taboo messages, I as a toddler viscerally reacted to Sendak's crosshatching, responding to his art, not the hype. Had Sendak been a popular illustrator for children during the sixties and seventies and eighties solely because his message was provocative, then, once the shock value had worn off, so, too, would have his marketability. But just as readers still buy Whitman, Joyce, and Salinger, not because these reads still shock but because they still offer moving experiences of art, so readers continue to check out Sendak.

In the early eighties, I began to read Sendak in graduate school at Baylor under the mentorship of Thomas Hanks. When I was twenty-three, neither wild things nor naked boys in giant bottles of milk shocked me. What shocked me was that I did not know how to read a picture book. I could not appreciate a picture book, I discovered, because I had internalized the following shibboleths, which stack children's books below adult ones:

> Texts for children are less thoughtful because children are less intelligent.
> Art for children is less fine because children are less observant.
> Illustrations for children reiterate texts and decorate pages, playing negligible roles in the storytelling.
> If a book is short, it is simple.

These assumptions, rampant at the time, poohpoohed children's literature, dismissing it as kiddie lit. Like many other academics, I learned to question my assumptions by studiously rereading *Outside Over There* (1981), *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), and *Wild Things*. I reopened *Wild Things* in a come-to-Sendak moment.

As sensuously as if peeling an orange, I read *Wild Things* with wonder: Where, exactly,

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PMLA 129.1 (2014), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

does the story start? On the endpapers? On the title page? Why do the pictures wax and the words wane? How do the altering white margins control the changing emotions? Why are the ears on the wolf costume spiked, while the ears on the real dog are cowed? Why, too, are the pillowcase corners spiked into ears like the ones on the wolf suit? What is happening as the plant transforms into flora, the carpet into grass, the bedposts into trees? Why would the images of tents, boat, and bowl be colored in similar rosiness? In the fantastic world, Max tames the Wild Things; having tamed the monsters, Max tames himself back home. So why is Max's journey necessarily chiasmic? Why is the rumpus—in triple centerfold—the climax? And, Mr. Aristotle, how *does* catharsis work? Why the more unruly the action, the more poetic the words, in an alliterative cadence when the Wild Things "roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws"? Why, at the end, do the words taper to five, the pictures to nil?

The more I saw, the more I saw. I began seeing that Sendak's pictures could deviate from his words, his cadence counter his plot, his humor invert the expected. I discovered that interacting with a picture book parallels attending live theater, the focus of the performance expressed through design of lighting and sound, shape of space and texture, pace of lines, movement of bodies. As in live theater, craftsmanship in picture books becomes physical art when focused by a vision like Sendak's.[1]

Max's story, my story, and the story of studies in children's literature started to overlap. Now convinced that reading a picture book could be a transformative encounter with art, I also realized that children's book critics could play a vital role in launching and sustaining live performances, including circle time in kindergarten and bedtime at home. Twenty-five years ago, I began reading picture books aloud to my infant sons, as I undertook to study and critique children's literature and teach it to college students.

Sendak's career as an artist also runs parallel to the rise of studying children's literature as a valued enterprise in the academy. In 1976 his pictures were on the cover of *Rolling Stone* (Cott). In 1977 Simmons College, in Boston, "launched the first Master of Arts degree in Children's Literature, supported with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities" (Drinan). In 1980 *Wild Things* premiered as an opera, and Selma Lanes published the first book-length study of his work, *The Art of Maurice Sendak*. And, also in 1980, the MLA established a division on children's literature (Knoepflmacher 1). In 1992 the MLA published the first title of its kind in a methods series, *Teaching Children's Literature: Issues, Pedagogy, Resources*; tellingly, this publication's afterword is an interview with Dr. Seuss and Sendak. In 2003 Tony Kushner published the second volume of *The Art of Maurice Sendak*, chronicling Sendak's second career as a stage and costume designer throughout the previous twenty-three years. In 2005 Norton published the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (Zipes, Paul, Vallone, Hunt, and Avery). This textbook places at the heart of the matter a double spread from *Wild Things*, hailing *Wild Things* as "probably the most-discussed picture book of the twentieth century[;] Maurice Sendak expanded the possibilities of the genre" (C12). Earlier, Sendak's Dürer-like drawings had immortalized editions of fairy tales that many of us choose to teach, such as Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Zlateh the Goat* (1966), George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* (1969), and *"The Juniper Tree" and Other Tales from Grimm* (1969). Later, in 2009, the *Chronicle Review* ran a hot cover story on fairy tales, fanning the flames of contention over scholarship (Howard). The same year, in the twelve-year wake of the phenomenal Harry Potter crossover from child to adult readers, Spike Jonze's film adaptation *Where the Wild*

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Things Are and Dave Eggers's follow-up novel *The Wild Things* were marketed to adolescent and adult audiences. By 2009 America viewed Max as a totem for reflecting on childhood.

So when Sendak died, in 2012, the MLA's Children's Literature Association mourned that summer by dedicating its thirty-ninth annual conference, Literary Slipstreams, held at Simmons, to him. The first recipient of the master of arts degree in children's literature from Simmons, Gregory Maguire, delivered the Francelia Butler Lecture, eulogizing Sendak with appropriately wicked humor. Listening, we faculty members, librarians, editors, writers, illustrators, and students involved in children's literature knew that Sendak's good work had enabled our own rewarding labor.

Still, toward the end of his life Sendak unleashed captious self-criticism. In 2008, riddled with angst, he wondered whether he had been "a great artist or a mere illustrator" (Cohen). In 2014 we may well look to Max for a posthumous answer. Having turned fifty-one, Max is ripe for a midlife crisis. What can he tell us? Plenty. He now speaks fourteen languages. When Jonze's film debuted, Max could be found worldwide in nineteen million copies (Shafer). As I write this essay, Max resides in 11,081 libraries around the globe, from Thailand to Poland, Korea to South Africa. His "private boat" anchored in many ports, Max is au courant. Having come of age in our present e-book rage, Max answers for the sustainability of the printed picture book. For, in the company of *Wild Things* and scores of other picture books created in the Caldecott tradition in which image and word share narrative weight, we readers have come to savor the delicious experience of art afforded by reading a picture book. *Where the Wild Things Are* ends reassuringly with the news that Max's supper is "still hot," and so, we might add, is Maurice Sendak.

Note

1. The physicality of theater reminds me of the physicality of books prized by Sendak, confirmed by the sandwich size of *The Nutshell Library* (1962) and the grainy-textured endpapers of *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993). That Sendak worked hard for such focused vision in books as physical objects is also shown by his two failures: in 1956 *Kenny's Window* failed from having too many words and too tentative pictures, and in 2013 *My Brother's Book*, a posthumous publication, failed because, I believe, it was never fully edited by Sendak.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900168166 Published online by Cambridge University Press