

Wild Things, I Think I Love You: Maurice Sendak, Ruth Krauss, and Childhood

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Max has his roots in Ruth Krauss. You know, her phrase that kids were allowed to be as cruel and maniacal as she knew they were. Studying them at Bank Street, she knew what monstrosities children are.

—Maurice Sendak, telephone interview (2001)

Sendak's work creates a Rorschach test for critics, who inevitably feel compelled to explain what his books tell us about what "the child" is like, can understand, must fear, will enjoy. This is because his books challenge people's assumptions about what children's literature is or should be. As John Cech eloquently notes, Sendak's work has addressed subjects considered taboo for children's books: "explosive anger, frustration, the polymorphous realm of dream and psychosexual fantasy, intense sibling rivalry, existential angst, death" (7). Sendak's acute understanding and vivid evocation of the emotional landscape of childhood tend to produce an emotional response in readers. In an effort to contain that response, critics—including Bruno Bettelheim, Maria Tatar, Geraldine DeLuca, Jennifer R. Waller, and Kenneth Kidd—try to place Sendak in one category or another, often by trying to draw boundaries around childhood and his representations of it.

The tendency to discover one's preoccupations in a text seems especially true in analyses of Sendak. I mention this, first, to acknowledge my own culpability, as Ruth Krauss's biographer, writing in this essay about her influence on Sendak's understanding of childhood. Second, there are good reasons that scholars of children's literature in general and of Sendak in particular find it hard to avoid their affective relations with the work.

"It Freed Me": What Maurice Sendak Learned from Ruth Krauss

[T]he series of books Ruth [Krauss] and I collaborated on, eight in all . . . permanently influenced my talent, developed my taste, made me hungry for the best.

—Maurice Sendak, "Ruth Krauss and Me: A Very Special Partnership" (1994)

In an oft-quoted remark (serving, e.g., as an epigraph of Neil Gaiman's recent novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*), Maurice Sendak observed, "In reality, childhood is deep and rich. It's vital, mysterious, and profound. I remember my own childhood vividly. I knew terrible things . . . but I mustn't let adults know I knew. . . . It would scare them" (Spiegelman and Sendak). This comment about "vital, mysterious" childhood appears in the 27 September 1993 *New Yorker*, the sole issue of that magazine to feature a cover by Sendak. On it he has drawn homeless children from his recent book, *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993), two of whom draw comfort from Ruth Krauss's books. A boy uses *A Hole Is to Dig* as a pillow. Standing beneath a makeshift shelter is a girl with Krauss's dark curly hair. She is holding a copy of Krauss's *I Can Fly*. Her eyes are closed, as if she is dreaming of flying. Krauss had died two months earlier, at the age of ninety-one.

It's apt that Sendak should talk about his sense of childhood in the pages behind this image because his first fictional children come from Brooklyn, by way of Ruth Krauss. In 1951 she had gathered material for *A Hole Is to Dig*, a book of children's definitions: "Mud is to jump in"; "A whistle is to make people jump"; and "Rugs are so dogs have napkins." Though *A Hole Is to Dig* would become the

most influential book written entirely in children's words, initially no illustrator thought it could become a book at all. Fortunately, Krauss's editor, Harper and Brothers' Ursula Nordstrom, believed in the project and in Maurice Sendak, then a twenty-three-year-old F. A. O. Schwarz window display artist. Thus began what Sendak considered his apprenticeship in the world of children's books. Beginning with his work on *A Hole Is to Dig*, he spent weekends in Connecticut with Krauss and her husband, Crockett Johnson, both of whom, he said, "became my weekend parents and took on the job of shaping me into an artist" (Nel 124). When *A Hole Is to Dig* became a popular success, Sendak quit his job at F. A. O. Schwarz, becoming a full-time freelance illustrator. During the 1950s he illustrated as many as nine books a year. Eight of those were by Ruth Krauss. For their second collaboration, *A Very Special House* (1953), he won his first Caldecott Honor.

A Very Special House is in some ways an early rehearsal for *Where the Wild Things Are*. Both books feature an unruly boy who imaginatively transforms domestic space, as George Bodmer notes (181). Both books also have a protagonist whom Sendak has identified with Ruth Krauss. He said that *A Very Special House* "perfectly simulates Ruth's voice. . . . If I open that book, her voice will laugh out to me" ("Ruth Krauss" 289). He so associated the book with her that he brought Max back as a character when in 2005 he re-illustrated her 1948 book *Bears*, dedicating it to "Ruth and Dave" (Crockett Johnson's given name was Dave). These books represent a key lesson from Sendak's apprenticeship with Krauss: children's books can and should convey some of the wildness of childhood.

The second vital lesson Sendak learned from Krauss was the idea of basing his characters on real children. With *A Hole Is to Dig*, Krauss began using children's words in her work. She sat with children, listened to them, and wrote their stories down. Learn-

ing from her, Sendak based his protagonists on real children. In the first three books he both wrote and illustrated, *Kenny*, in *Kenny's Window* (1956), originates from himself and from the therapist Dorothy W. Baruch's case history *One Little Boy* (1952), and a Brooklyn kid named Rosie inspired Martin in *Very Far Away* (1957) and the title character of *The Sign on Rosie's Door* (1960 [Kidd 119; Sendak, *Caldecott* 181]).

More important, working with Krauss affirmed Sendak's impulse to draw on his own childhood experiences and inspired him to give voice to the fears, joys, anxieties, anger, and yearnings of very young children. Observing Ruth also helped liberate him, emotionally: "She taught me how to say 'Fuck you.' I never said things like that until Ruth said them, and she said them with such a joie de vivre. But it's not arbitrary. . . . It was that it freed me" (Telephone interview). The children in the Sendak-illustrated Krauss books and in his own books don't curse, but they do use language forcefully and freely. What children lack in size, they can make up in volume. Max tames the Wild Things by shouting, "BE STILL!" Just before landing in the night kitchen, Mickey shouts, "QUIET DOWN THERE!" (*Where* and *In*). Like Krauss's fictive children, Sendak's are emotionally liberated people.

The third and final important influence of Krauss was versatility. Though Max has come to symbolize the Sendakian child, there is no single Sendakian child, no unified-field theory of childhood that emerges from his work. The experimentation and energy are part of what nurtured Sendak's artistic flexibility (Bodmer 183), but so are the many types of children (observed in real life) and the fact that both Krauss and Nordstrom required him to work in different styles: "Change and change and change it, change the form, change the form, beat the material until you make it scream but give to you what it's all about. Don't assume anything" (Telephone interview).

“On Familiar Terms with Disrupting Emotions”: Affective Relations with Children’s Books

I don’t write for children. . . . I write, and somebody says, “That’s for children.” I didn’t set out to make children happy, or make life better for them, or make life easier for them.

—Maurice Sendak to Stephen Colbert, “Grim Colbert Tales” (2012)

Sendak’s versatility—something to which he consciously drew attention, often mentioning the influences in his ever-expanding literary and artistic pantheon—can distract critics’ attention from the fact that “emotional truth” was more important than style (Marcus 19). Intertextuality is a comfortable area for critics; admitting that emotions inform our responses is less so.

Except in children’s literature criticism, where the personal has a distinctive and useful role. This is not to ignore the many misuses of autobiography in writings about children’s literature: self-indulgence, indifference to or ignorance of scholarship, and, of course, substituting a specific child or one’s own “inner child” for All Children. But there is a special place for the personal in writing about children’s literature because books for the young remind us of that immersive experience of childhood reading—the sense of being transported to another world, feeling the emotional contours of the narrative, and not analyzing. Further, as Martha C. Nussbaum argues, “the childhood history of emotions shapes adult emotional life” (230). Sendak’s narrative artwork enters into that early history, reviving its affective power in adult readers and allowing child readers a space in which to explore their emotional lives. As Sendak observed in his Caldecott acceptance speech for *Where the Wild Things Are*, “[F]rom their earliest years, children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions, . . . [and] fear and anxiety are an intrinsic part of their everyday lives” (*Caldecott* 151).

In his works Sendak explores that fear and anxiety, documenting the sharp, turbulent, powerful feelings of early childhood. Told that his books do not reassure readers, Sendak was unapologetic. He often recounted the story of a mother who said, “I’ve read *Where the Wild Things Are* ten times to my little girl, and she screams every time.” He asks why she keeps reading the book to her daughter. The mother responds, “But it’s a Caldecott book, she ought to like it.” Sendak thinks this attitude is ridiculous: “If a kid doesn’t like a book, throw it away” (Lanes 106). However, as Maria Tatar points out, “Sendak seems unwittingly to acknowledge adult control even as he repudiates it” (225). She makes an excellent point. While some children might be able to toss *Where the Wild Things Are* aside, small people do not always have that power. To be a child is to be subject to rules that you do not always understand, to be compelled to suffer the whims of the grown-ups.

Readers respond emotionally to Sendak’s work because it addresses what most adults prefer not to see in a children’s book and what young readers already know all too well: children’s inherent vulnerability. In a misguided effort to protect overly sensitive children, adults understandably prefer to see childhood represented as a place of safety. It is often anything but. As Sendak observed in his eulogy for Krauss, “Those kids so brilliantly celebrated, loved, and congratulated in Krauss book after Krauss book are, in truth, powerless little tots of no special interest to any group, political or otherwise.” So, he added, “[c]hildren are stoical and suffer silently. What choice do they have? We kiddie-book folk oddly share their humiliation” (“Ruth Krauss” 289).

The “we” in that last sentence underscores why scholars of children’s literature respond so intensely to Sendak. He used his status as a children’s book writer to make himself into a defender of children’s literature and of the complexity of children’s lives. As the

preeminent picture-book creator of the twentieth century, Sendak relished this role, and aficionados of picture books were delighted to have such a spokesperson in their camp.

As a result, Sendak's passing in May 2012 was like a death in the family. He was our most potent advocate and most astute critic-practitioner. Reflecting on his artistic legacy, he told Spike Jonze:

I think what I've offered was different—but not because I drew better than anybody or wrote better than anybody, but because I was more honest than anybody. . . . I said anything I wanted. Because I don't believe in children. I don't believe in childhood. I don't believe that there's demarcation—"you mustn't tell them that." You can tell them anything you want. . . . If it's true, you tell them. . . . Why is my needle stuck in childhood? I don't know. I guess that's where my heart is.
(*Tell Them*)

His work is more complex and nuanced than this self-assessment conveys, and he did believe that children deserve a childhood with some protection from the cruelties and indifference of the adult world. However, he also understood that they live in that adult world and thus can never be fully protected from it. Trying to preserve children's innocence only leaves them more vulnerable. Better to prepare children with truths. An artist with his heart "stuck in childhood," Sendak told the truth about the fleeting, powerful, and varied experience of being young. In so doing, he expanded the range of childhood emotions that could be represented in children's literature, and he won the affection of those who read, write, or study it.

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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, pooh-poohed children's literature, dismissing it as kiddie lit. Like many other academics, I learned to question my assumptions by studiously re-reading *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,