Remembering Maurice Sendak

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The death in May of Maurice Sendak just a month shy of his 84th birthday was greeted throughout the publishing, art and reading world with deep sadness. Sendak, perhaps best known for his book, *Where the Wild Things Are* (first published in 1963), was beloved by millions, and for good reason.

Whether Sendak worked on his own stories or collaborated with other writers, his portrayal of children was always humane, and often humorous. No matter the emotions involved, Sendak pulled no punches, and illustrations such as that of the fit-throwing Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*, or the range of feelings in the otherwise simple *One Was Johnny* (1962), are honest depictions of children's intense feelings.

Sendak did not consider his books to be children's books per se, remarking once that he did not believe there was an absolute demarcation between children's and adult literature. He objected to the way children were treated when it came to literature, saying, " 'Oh, you can't tell them this, oh you can't tell them that.' You tell them anything you want. Just tell them if it's true. If it's true, you tell them."

What is clear in all of Sendak's work is that he considered children to be complex beings possessing a full complement of emotions and all the wonder and distress entailed therein.

Although the writer said he had "an intense nostalgia, a passionate affiliation for childhood," Sendak did not let that nostalgia descend into the mawkish celebration of a lost utopia. He rejected the trend to idealize childhood, commenting in a *New York Times* interview late last year, "There's a certain passivity, a going back to childhood innocence that I never quite believed in. We remembered childhood as a very passionate, upsetting, silly, comic business."

Since its release in 1963, Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* has been repeatedly pulled from library shelves by those considering it to be "too dark." In the early days of the controversy, he calmly explained, "It is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis."

The 2009 film adaptation by Spike Jonze, who worked closely with Sendak to bring the story to the screen, received a PG rating and again provoked comments about the work's being "too dark" for children. Sendak's response in this case was not as measured. His declaration that anyone who thought it unfit for children could "go to hell" was delivered with a characteristic bluntness. One could not help but cheer.

There is certainly darkness in his work, especially when compared to the often sanitized and one-sided offerings of most children's literature. His last book, *Bumble-Ardy* (2011), about a pig's birthday party, the first he had both written and illustrated in 30 years, raised eyebrows and some ire for his inclusion of the Grim Reaper (death) in the story. Although he did change the book so that the pigs drink brine instead of wine, Sendak waved off objections to the appearance of the Grim Reaper in typical fashion, saying it was the parents who were afraid of the "murderous" impulses children have.

Born in June 1928 in Brooklyn to Jewish immigrants from Poland, Sendak was himself very much aware from a young age of the uncertainty and darkness of life. His parents did not hide from him his own fragility, nor the deaths of a number of his relatives during the Holocaust.

Sickly as a child, Sendak was often confined to his home and left in the charge of his sister Natalie, later portrayed in *Outside Over There* (1981) as Ida: "Ida, very brave, very strong, very frightening, taking care of me." Other family members were also transformed into characters in his books as the years passed; the *Wild Things* was based on his aunts and uncles who appeared to the young Sendak as unruly and, though well-meaning, potentially dangerous.

His ability to see and articulate the contradictions

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within people—for example, Ida's simultaneous love for and impatience with the baby, the *Wild Things*' tender and terrifying sides—is in itself a remarkable thing. His stories are intricate, even when very short, and children (and adults) have loved them for generations because of this. Sendak did not lie or cover up the frightful things in the world or in the minds of children. Rather, he sought to understand and to let us know that we were understood. Even when we were beastly.

He did not give in to pessimism, however, and there is also great joy to be found in much of his work. *A Hole Is to Dig* (1952), done with Ruth Krause, depicts children in often high, happy excitement as they define holes and other various things—often hilariously. *What Do You Say, Dear?* (1958), written by Sesyle Joslin, is one of the funniest books on manners ever produced for children.

The vast majority of Sendak's works were done in collaboration with others, and he had an extraordinary ability to bring out the nuance in even very simple stories, revealing layers that might otherwise have been missed.

This author's early personal favorite, Amos Vogel's *How Little Lori Visited Times Square* (1963), displays the range of Sendak's illustrative powers—Lori is by turns bored, curious, frustrated, bereft and overjoyed in his complicated journey, and every page is believable, though the story itself is a ridiculous yarn. As was the case with the vast majority of Sendak's young creatures, human or otherwise, Lori is rendered with tremendous empathy.

There is one more book yet to come from Maurice Sendak. Set to be published in February 2013, *My Brother Jack* is a poem about his own brother, who died in 1995 and also wrote several children's books, some of which Maurice illustrated.

Ultimately, Sendak was not only true to himself and his artistic vision, he was true to life itself.

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