

Open minded: A Talk with Maurice Sendak

By Dan McCue

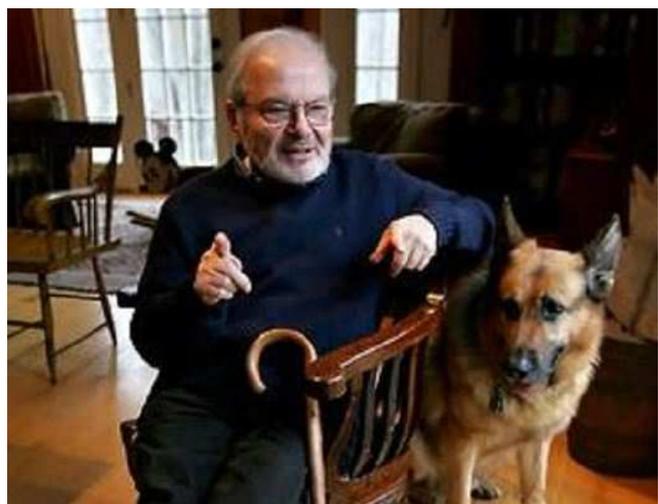
In a typical elementary school, his are likely to be among the first books read aloud to younger students.

The reader, teacher or librarian, hoping to ignite an interest in the wonder of literature in tiny minds, gives voice to a line or two, then turns the page to the children in order for them to take in the illustrations.

What lingers in the mind of the student are images of rooms, much like their own rooms, coming alive with the vegetation of a forest, or becoming the entire panorama of a city. And if that book happens to be *Where The Wild Things Are*, their eyes go wide as the monsters in that distant place “roar their terrible roars and gnash their terrible teeth”

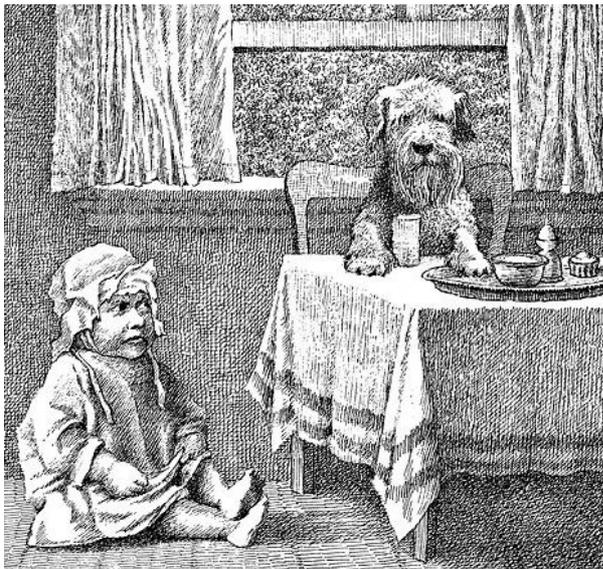
In all, Maurice Sendak has written and illustrated twenty children’s books of his own and illustrated another sixty. Now 62, he was recently awarded the first Empire State Award for Excellence in Literature For Young People, an award presented by the Youth Services section of the New York Library Association.

“I’ve never claimed to know what children like,” says the illustrator during a recent interview. “I seem to know, but that’s through instinct more than anything else.”



As both our conversation and his books attest, it's an instinct expressed more through art than through prose. *Where The Wild Things Are*, arguably his most famous book, originally published in 1964, consists of only 385 words; his pictures, on the other hand, reveal volumes about the artist's sensitivity to the idyllic and not-so-idyllic in childhood.

Finding him at work in his Connecticut home, the object of our talk is to have him tell part of his story – as much as the half-hour asked for will allow – beginning with whether he prefers to illustrate his own words or the words of others.



"My own," he admits. "But I'm a slow writer, so at least in the old days, in between my books – waiting for them to cook, if you will, I illustrated other's books just to keep working.

"These days," Sendak continues, "I'm a stage designer, for operas and ballets, so I don't do it as much. [Now] when one of my books gestates, I'll just stop whatever else I'm doing and do it."

Either way, his process is pretty much the same, the illustrator said. "You listen to what the book is – hopefully you don't have a style to begin with, because that's lethal – you respond, as an artist, according to what the book's needs are," Sendak explained.

"It really is instinctual; I don't pre-decide anything. It's a question of tuning in, catching the sounds of the book, so that I'm translating graphically. That's difficult, but that's the fun of it," he said.

What winds up rendered on paper, usually in tempera paint, pencil, black ink or a mixture of all three, can best be described as the extraordinary distilled from the ordinary. In fact many of the imaginative leaps in Sendak's books stem from his own experiences and thoughts as a child growing up in the Brooklyn, NY of the 1930s and '40s.

"I wasn't your normal outdoorsy kid," Sendak remembers. "I spent my time reading, was not very athletic, and my father was very upset. He thought I should be out playing ball with the other kids."

Instead, Sendak sketched those kids from his bedroom window, some later finding a kind of anonymous immortality as characters in his books, and also found solace in the movies of the day.

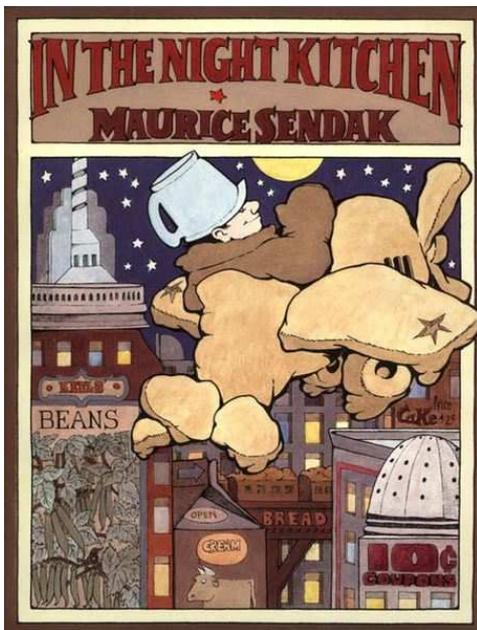
"Laurel and Hardy, Mickey Mouse, Busby Berkeley, King Kong, you name it," he recalls. "Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers..."

And, it turns out, Walt Disney in particular.

“As a little boy growing up I wanted to be an animator before I knew I had any artistic talent,” Sendak says. “[Disney]’s still the best, I think. The liveliness of the graphics of the Mickey Mouse cartoons, they were tremendous. You can imagine, seeing them for the first time, how startling it was.”

And yet, the inspiration for many of his own books was something less than larger than life, or even the local movie house screen.

For *Where The Wild Things Are*, winner of the prestigious Caldecott Award (The Caldecott, named for the man considered the greatest illustrator of Victorian England, is awarded to the best illustrated book to be published each year), Sendak based the personalities of the monsters on relatives who visited his parent’s home every Sunday and seemed perpetually ready to eat his family out of house and home.



For Rosie, the heroine of his *Really Rosie*, Sendak turned to the still-vivid memory of a girl who lived across the alley from his childhood home. Though both books are based on life, Sendak says he doesn’t work autobiographically - at least not purposely so.

“I think if I do it at all, I do it unconsciously,” he says. “Mostly, people are transformed inwardly. In Rosie’s case, I knew I loved her, and she’s the only example of a conscious creation in my work.”

His *In The Night Kitchen* is based on an advertisement Sendak remembered from long ago for the Sunshine Bakers. Their motto was “We Bake While You Sleep.” The book’s cityscape backdrop, on closer inspection, turns out to be packages and cartoons for everything from soup to nuts to soda crackers.

“The mundane is what intrigued me as child,” Sendak says. “But as a child I didn’t know it was mundane. So in writing *In The Night Kitchen*, I tried to treat it with the same respect and sense of beauty I felt for it as a child. I didn’t condemn [that packaging] as advertising, because I didn’t know what it was.

“And I think all the things in my books mostly do come from memories of my childhood, where I didn’t judge them. I didn’t know,” he continues. “That’s why, when people talk about how bad television is, or comic books are – yes, probably, maybe – but since they fed me tremendously as an artist, I have trouble condemning them.

“Even crappy forms, because kids don’t know they’re crappy forms. There’s something to take from there and store, and I’ve been able to use those things as a resource. So I’m not about to knock it,” Sendak says.

Also among *In The Night Kitchen*’s references is a reference to Winsor McKay, the American cartoonist of the early 20th Century. “Oh, I was tremendously influenced by him,” Sendak says. “In fact I included his name in that book because I ripped him off – never rip off without giving credit.”

Take of Mckay, Disney and others leads, in a roundabout way, to asking Sendak his opinion on the ever-present enthusiasm some people have for distinguishing between fine art and illustration, with illustration usually being portrayed as a somewhat less worthy form.

"I remember there was an article about [the painter] Andrew Wyeth and the heading was: *Andrew Wyeth: A Painter or a Mere Illustrator?* That said it all. There is that snob distinction, which is terrible because there is no difference between the two except for the variables of the particular talent you are discussing.

"I think there have been more great illustrators – and I say this cautiously – than there have been fine art painters in America... with somebody like Winslow Homer being one of the rare examples of someone having bridged both.

"And then there's someone like Van Gogh, who collected magazine and book illustrations because he adored them and developed motifs from them into paintings," Sendak continues, growing more impassioned as he goes.



"There are commercial illustrators; I would say even Norman Rockwell was, but even that is not a negative. He made his living from it, and whether you like him or not, technically he was superb. I'm not that kind of illustrator, but I also make my living from it. And I dare say painters, could they, would like to make their living from it, too."

Sendak then goes on to say, "I'm a children's book illustrator because that's what publishing houses call me. I don't call myself that. My books have things in them which seem to be inappropriate for adults: talking pigs... and little boys bathing in milk bowls naked... so they call that a children's book. Well, okay, that can call it whatever they want to call it – as long as it gets published."

As strong as his opinions are on this subject, he was equally passionate about his disdain for traditional education – at least in terms of school's potential to adversely effect an artist's inner life.

"I just don't think certain people should be subjected to the school system" he says. "It kills them emotionally, artistically – sometimes even physically. Now, I went back on that when I gave a class – actually a workshop – but while it was scholastic, it was divorced from a school curriculum of any kind."

Finally, Sendak addresses a question of conjuring and dreams. Did he really think he'd get this far when he first started shopping his drawings around to Manhattan publishers?

"I didn't think I could, I just hoped I could," Sendak says. "I had a brother who was artistic, but neither of my parents were; if I hadn't been successful at this, I suppose I would've been a bag man at Grand Central Station."

Turning his attention from his past to the future, Sendak says he still wants “to do a little of everything”.

“I like book illustrating, and I have two operas coming up, possible movies. I just like to do things a little different,” he says.

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