

## Remembering Maurice Sendak, Who Brought Loneliness to Children's Literature

*Ellen Handler Spitz*

Like many other enduring contributors to children's literature (Hans Christian Andersen, Lewis Carroll, Beatrix Potter, James M. Barrie, and Margaret Wise Brown), Maurice Sendak was childless. For inspiration, he drew not on the diurnal trials, joys, and encumbrances of nurturing the young but on a bygone childhood of his own, which festered within his mind raw and accessible for many years—indeed, perhaps, for his entire life. That childhood, which began in 1928, was spent in marginal health, in a Brooklyn Jewish/Sicilian neighborhood, with ravaged working-class immigrant parents whose efforts were spent rescuing overseas Polish Jewish relatives from impending doom.

Sendak, who passed away yesterday at the age of 83, translated this childhood gradually into books that, particularly in the decade from 1960 to 1970, galvanized the entire field of late-twentieth century American children's literature. He lay bare authentic features of childhood that had, in this genre, previously been overridden by edifying guides to behavior, bypassed by compendia of information thought to be informative for youth, or papered over by merry entertainment. His art opened floodgates that, by now, have been completely broken through. What Sendak let in were surely the dark fantasies that many commentators have noted, but something else too: loneliness.

Sendak knew from within the profound sense in which every child, from time to time, perceives himself or herself to be alone—an outsider—and feels the need to retreat into some private space, some nook or secret hiding place. Sendak's books are themselves such places; they can so function even when being read aloud by an adult. Sendak's supreme gift, as visual artist as well as author, was to discover pictorial as well as verbal and narrative means to portray the existential separateness of childhood. Perhaps his capacity to do this—to recognize, acknowledge, and openly reveal the anomie of childhood—stemmed from his exposure to psychoanalysis, which, during the decade of his finest work was enjoying its American heyday.

Max, Mickey, and Ida are, respectively, the protagonists of Sendak's trilogy: *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), and *Outside Over There* (1981). Each of these child characters exists within a solitary world, and at the end of their stories they remain isolated and apart. All three are, at least momentarily, misunderstood, unrecognized, and insufficiently well loved. Such uncomfortable feelings, rarely if ever explored so openly in the pages of picture books, are ones routinely experienced even by the most cherished child. Who has not suffered the emotional unavailability of one or both of one's parents? In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max's mother (who, like Kafka's insect, is never depicted, and who is thus a fertile field for projection) grows angry at him for his naughtiness and sends him to bed without his supper. Mickey's parents are presumably together in their own room and unresponsive when he becomes upset and hears the "racket" that angers him: "QUIET DOWN THERE!" he shouts. Ida's father is away at sea, and her depressed mother ignores both her and a baby sister. In each story, as the

plot unfolds, Sendak limits his child protagonist's sensibility: He or she remains solely within a private world of fantasy.

As we follow the trajectories and dénouements of each of these stories, we see that Max *sails* away, Mickey *flies* away, while Ida *turns* away and vanishes out a window. When each fantasy ends, however, we are reassured—in a not wholly believable adult voice—that things are fine now. Dinner is hot even though you and your mother have not reestablished any direct rapport or communication. You are carefree and dry in your bed even though you are still clueless about the noise that upset you and that kept you awake in the dark. Your papa loves you still, even though it is not certain that he is alive any more and his letter has charged you to take care of your mom and baby sister indefinitely. Sendak carefully provides imagery to accompany these soothing words, but silently betrays them: Max has food but no suggestion of his mother's arms or smile. Mickey appears smug, hugging his bottle solipsistically to himself. Ida, in profile, wiggling her big bare feet, fondles strands of her own hair and wears a distracted expression as she hears disembodied words about her bravery.

His characters' ambiguous estrangement (we might include Johnny and Pierre from *The Nutshell Library*) lies at the heart of Sendak's legacy. By leaving his protagonists alone, Sendak makes sure his child readers are *not* alone. The children encountering his stories realize that he understands what *they* are feeling, and they are thus empowered to feel less lonely or angry or left out. As children enter the realms of his picture books, they are not wholly disconnected or lost. And, after all, isn't this what literature, at its best, whether for children or for adults, is about?

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