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Escape from Kiddiebookland

JAN SUSINA

Maurice Sendak can be considered the Randolph Caldecott of American picture books, since Sendak was the country's most influential picture-book author and illustrator of the twentieth century. Sendak perceptively wrote that the work of Caldecott, one of his favorite illustrators, "heralds the beginning of the modern picture book" (21). Likewise, it can be said that Sendak's work heralds the beginning of the modern American picture book. Sendak literally drew the connections between his work and Caldecott's. When in 1986 he created a new cover for the *Horn Book Magazine*, the major American review journal of children's literature, he provided an image of Caldecott drawing while Sendak, presented as a Wild Thing, carefully leans over the artist's shoulder, observing Caldecott's style. Besides being a brilliant illustrator and compelling storyteller, Sendak was a shrewd and insightful critic of his own work as well as that of other picture-book writers and illustrators.

The comparison with Caldecott is one that I think Sendak would have appreciated and acknowledged, although he probably would have preferred to be remembered as the Mozart of modern picture books. Sendak had a deep love of Mozart's operas and of classical music in general. He often recognized the importance of music to his illustration: "Music is essential to my work. I feel an intense sympathy between the shape of a musical phrase and that of a drawn line" (146). Like Mozart, Sendak could be opinionated and harsh in his criticisms, as confirmed by the interviews in Spike Jonze's documentary, *Tell Them Anything You Want: A Portrait of Maurice Sendak* (2009), or by his unfiltered conversations with Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*, which aired in 2012, the year Sendak died. When it came to evaluating picture books and other illustrators, Sendak called them as he saw them—for example, in the essays and interviews collected in his *Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures* (1988). He had no use for "so-called children's books" that provide "false and sentimental recollections of childhood" intended to comfort adults rather than challenge young readers (153). While it might come as a surprise to some of his admirers, Sendak insisted that "I don't write with children in mind." He explained, "When I say I don't write for them, it doesn't mean I don't care for them. I project into all my favorite music and pictures an intense nostalgia for childhood, a passionate affiliation with childhood." Sendak believed that children "make the best audience. They certainly make the best critics" (214, 211, 214). He felt that children, "much more catholic in their taste" than most book reviewers, "will tolerate ambiguities, peculiarities, and things illogical . . . will take them into their unconscious and deal with them as best they can" (192). Writing about Winsor McCay, the creator of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, Sendak observed that they both "serve the same master, our child selves. We both draw not on the literal memory of childhood but on the emotional memory of its stress and urgency" (78). The quality that he admired in illustrators such as Beatrix Potter, William Nicholson, and Caldecott was that they produced books "without any taint of sentimentality" (67). Sendak helped introduce to the world of contemporary picture books the sense that "[c]hildhood *is* a difficult time" (152). He wrote, "Truthfulness to life—both fantasy life and factual life—is the basis of all great art," and practiced that philosophy in his own picture books (149). For Sendak "the awful fact of childhood" was that "fear, anger, hate, frustration" are powerful emotions that "are an intrinsic part of [children's]

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everyday lives." In his picture books, children strive to master these "disturbing emotional situations" (151). He represented childhood as it is rather than how adults might wish it to be. Like Max, the hero of his best-known picture book, Sendak was the Wild Thing of contemporary children's literature.

Elected an honorary fellow of the MLA in 1997, Sendak remains the only children's author to join this distinguished group of writers, which has included Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Toni Morrison, Tom Stoppard, Margaret Atwood, and Seamus Heaney. In recognizing Sendak, the MLA was also acknowledging the field of children's literature as part of literary studies. This was an important step, as were the MLA's creation of a division on children's literature in 1980 and publication of Glenn Edward Sadler's *Teaching Children's Literature: Issues, Pedagogy, Resources* (1992) in the series Options for Teaching Literature. Sendak had become the poster child for the serious study of children's literature.

Sendak earned numerous national and international awards given to recognize lasting contributions to children's literature, including the Caldecott Medal, in 1964, for *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963); the Hans Christian Andersen Award, in 1970; and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, in 1983. While he was gracious when receiving such awards, he retained skepticism toward reviewers and, by extension, literary critics of his work: "I have not learned anything from reviews of my books. And I've rarely seen reviews of other people's books that I thought did justice to a book's special qualities." Most reviewers, he felt, took a limited view of picture books and regarded his books and the rest of children's literature as afflicted with "the fatal Kiddiebooklanditis." When asked what he meant, he explained to Walter Lorraine that too many reviewers of children's literature assumed that

> Kiddiebookland is where we live. Didn't you know? It's next to Neverneverville and Peterpanburg. It's that awful place that we've been squeezed into because we're children's book illustrators or children's book writers. Yes, we are! But isn't our work meant for everybody? How infuriating and insulting when a serious work is considered only a trifle for the nursery! (19)

He argued:

> A picture book is not only what most people think it is—an easy thing to read to very small children, with a lot of pictures in it. For me, it is a damned difficult thing to do, very much like a complicated poetic form that requires absolute concentration and control. You have to be on top of the situation all the time to finally achieve something that effortless. A picture book has to have that incredible seamless look to it when it's finished. One stitch showing and you've lost the game. No other form of illustrating is so interesting to me. (186)

Sendak was as comfortable illustrating *Pierre*, the comic cautionary tale that is one of the four volumes in his *Nutshell Library* (1962), as he was Herman Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1995). While Sendak drew inspiration from the work of Caldecott, Potter, Walt Disney, and Crockett Johnson, his illustrations also show the influence of William Blake, Otto Runge, Marc Chagall, and George Cruikshank. In *Caldecott & Co.* Sendak rarely refers to himself as a children's book illustrator, preferring simply "book illustrator." That is why he was so adamant about the need to escape the condescending world of Kiddiebookland. Along with Max, those of us who teach courses in children's literature have escaped from the island of Kiddiebookland and into the vast seas of literature thanks to Maurice Sendak's work.

Work Cited

Sendak, Maurice. *Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures*. New York: di Capua–Farrar, 1988. Print.