

Walt Disney / 1

Maurice Sendak's "Walt Disney/1."
from *Caldecott & Company*



This year, Mickey Mouse and I will be celebrating our fiftieth birthdays. We shared, at least for our first decade, much more than a first initial; it was the best of relationships and one of the few real joys of my childhood in Brooklyn during the early thirties.

Those were the Depression years and we had to make do. Making do—for kids, at least—was mostly a matter of comic books and movies. Mickey Mouse, unlike the great gaggle of child movie stars of that period, did not make me feel inferior. Perhaps it was typical for kids of my generation to suffer badly from unthinking parental comparisons with the then-famous silver-screen moppets. There is no forgetting the cheated, missed-luck look in my father's eyes as he turned from the radiant image of Shirley Temple back to the three ungolden children he'd begotten. Ah, the alluring American dream of owning a Shirley Temple girl and a Bobby Breen boy! I never forgave those yodeling, tap-dancing, brimming-with-glittering-life miniature monsters.

But Mickey Mouse had nothing to do with any of them. He was our buddy. My brother and sister and I chewed his gum, brushed our teeth with his tooth-

brush, played with him in a seemingly endless variety of games, and read about his adventures in comic strips and storybooks. Best of all, our street pal was also a movie star. In the darkened theater, the sudden flash of his brilliant, wild, joyful face—radiating great golden beams—filled me with an intoxicating, unalloyed pleasure.

In school, I learned to despise Walt Disney. I was told that he corrupted the fairy tale and that he was the personification of poor taste. I began to suspect my own instinctual response to Mickey. It took me nearly twenty years to rediscover the pleasure of that first response and to fuse it with my own work as an artist. It took me just as long to forget the corrupting effect of school.

Though I wasn't aware of it at the time, I now know that a good deal of my pleasure in Mickey had to do with his bizarre proportions: the great rounded head extended still farther by those black saucer ears, the black trunk fitting snugly into ballooning red shorts, the tiny legs stuffed into delicious doughy yellow shoes. The giant white gloves, yellow buttons, pie-cut eyes, and bewitching grin were the delectable finishing touches. I am describing, of course, the Mickey of early color cartoons (his first being *The Band Concert* of 1935). The black-and-white Mickey of the late twenties and early thirties had a wilder, rattier look. The golden age of Mickey for me is that of the middle thirties. A gratifying shape, fashioned primarily to facilitate the needs of the animator, he exuded a sense of physical satisfaction and pleasure—a piece of art that powerfully affected and stimulated the imagination.

I'm less a lover of Mickey's personality—the All-American Boy—than of his graphic image. (His provincialism disturbed me even as a child.) That

golden-age Mickey metamorphosed, alas, into less original forms roughly at the end of his first decade. Every addition and modification to Mickey's proportions after that time was a mistake. He became a suburbanite, abandoning his street friends and turning into a shapeless, mindless bon vivant. Those subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle nuances pushed Mickey out of art into commerce. (Mickey, surely, was *always* commercial, but now he *looked* commercial.) This transformation, which I take so to heart, apparently made not a jot of difference to following generations. Mickey is as popular as ever. But those kids, like Mickey, were missing the best.

My own collection of Mickey Mousiana is rigidly bound by that first decade of his life. There is no end to such a collection, nor, oddly, is there any wish to end it. Happily and incredibly, there was an infinitude of Mouses manufactured in those early days (as there still is), and the search for an early Mouse becomes a delightful obsession. To seek out that face—that completely nuts look of fiery, intense animation—to find it on a postcard, box top, piece of tin or porcelain, is an enduring pleasure.

The Mickey who exerted influence on me as an artist is the Mickey of that early time—my early time. Playing a Kafka game of shared first initial with most of the heroes in my own picture books, I only once broke cover and fused a very particular character with the famous Mouse. That is the Mickey who is the hero of my picture book *In the Night Kitchen*. It seemed natural and honest to reach out openly to that early best friend while eagerly exploring a very private, favorite childhood fantasy. *In the Night Kitchen* is a kind of homage to old times and places—to Laurel and Hardy comedies and *King Kong*, as well as to the art of Disney, comic books in general, and the turn-of-

the-century funny-papers fantasist Winsor McCay in particular. It was also an attempt to synthesize past and present, with Mickey as my trusty stand-in. And if the Disney studio irritatingly refused to let me paint his revered image on a cooking stove that figured in my plot, I put it down to the general decay of civilization.

Fifty is the notorious middle age of crisis and flux. But I have a fantasy of Mickey at this great age busting loose—à la Steamboat Willie—and declaring his independence by demanding back the original, idiosyncratic self that prosperity and indifference have robbed him of. Hardly likely, I suppose. But middle age has been known to precede a rebirth of spirit and inspiration, so maybe the Mouse has a chance.

[1978]