

ROLLING STARS

THE BAND'S ALL-STAR ADIEU By Greil Marcus
MAURICE SENDAK — KING OF ALL THE WILD THINGS By Jonathan Cott





This is the story of Mickey and Max and Rosie (& the Nutshell Kids) and King Grisly-Beard and Hector Protector but mainly
MAURICE SENDAK, KING OF ALL WILD THINGS

For 25 years his bizarre books have captured the young at heart and terrorized fogies of all ages

By Jonathan Cott

OVERTURE: LITTLE BROTHER, LITTLE SISTER

This is the way the fairy tale begins: "Brother took his little sister by the hand and said, 'Since our mother died we have not had one happy hour. Stepmother beats us every day and when we want to come to her she kicks us away with her foot. Come, we will go out into the wide world together.' All day they walked over meadows, fields and stony paths and when it rained sister said, 'God and our hearts are weeping together.' In the evening they came into a great forest and were so tired from misery, hunger and the long journey that they sat down in a hollow tree and went to sleep." Bewitched by the evil stepmother, Little Brother is transformed into a deer, but Little Sister promises never to leave him. Untying her garter, she ties it around his neck and leads him deeper into the forest. "And when they had gone a long, long way, they came to a hut and the girl looked in and thought, here we can stay and spend our lives. And so she collected leaves and moss to make a soft bed for the deer, and every morning she went out and found roots and berries and nuts for herself, and for the deer she brought tender grasses which it ate out of her hand and it was happy and gambled all around her. At night, when sister was tired and had said her prayers, she laid her head on the fawn's back and that was her pillow on which she fell gently asleep. And if only brother had his human form, it would have been a lovely life."



PERHAPS IT IS ONLY IN CHILDHOOD," Graham Greene has said, "that books have any deep influence on our lives." But it is important to realize that it is exactly in those books that children have adopted as their own that our deepest wishes and fantasies are most simply expressed.

One of the most haunting of these fantasies concerns the Two Forsaken Children who, as these archetypal siblings are beautifully described by the poet H.D. in her meditative *Tribute to Freud*, form a "little group, a design, an image at the crossroads." One child, H.D. tells us, is sometimes the shadow of the other, as in Greek tragedies. Often one is lost and seeks the other, as in the oldest fairy tale of the twin brother and sister of the Nile Valley. Sometimes they are both boys, like Castor and Pollux, finding their corresponding shape in the stars. In the 19th century we discover them in the story written by Edmond Goncourt about two acrobats (actually foils for himself and his beloved brother Jules) who "joined their nervous systems to master an impossible trick," as well as in the unsurpassed visionary tales of George MacDonald. But they are most deeply imprinted in our minds in the Grimms' "Little Brother, Little Sister."

When Maurice Sendak was six years old, he and his 11-year-old brother Jack collaborated on a story called *They Were Inseparable*, about a brother and sister who, Maurice says, "had a hankering for each other—it was a very naive and funny book. We both idolized our sister, she was the eldest and by far the prettiest, and we thought she was the crown jewel of the family. So because we idolized her, we made the book about a brother and a sister. And at the very end of the story, as I recall, an accident occurs: the brother's in the hospital, they don't think he's going to recover, the sister comes rushing in,

and they just grab each other—like at the conclusion of *Tosca*—and exclaim: we are inseparable! Everybody rushes in to separate them as they jump out the hospital window. . . . Yes, you see, we did know dimly that there was something wrong, we were punishing them unconsciously.

"I imagine that all siblings have such feelings," Maurice continues. "The learning process makes children become aware that there's a taboo with regard to these feelings, but before you learn that, you do what comes naturally. My parents weren't well-to-do, and we had only two beds—my brother and I slept in one, my sister Natalie in the other, and often we'd all sleep in the same bed. My parents would come in—sometimes with my uncle and aunt—and they'd say: 'Look, see how much they like each other.' I loved my brother, and I didn't know that that could be this, and this that . . . kids find that out later."

THREE YEARS AGO SENDAK illustrated "Little Brother, Little Sister" in *The Juniper Tree*, a collection of 27 tales by the Brothers Grimm—with accompanying Dürer-like drawings by Sendak—in the brilliant, unadorned translations of Lore Segal and Randall Jarrell. "A story like 'Little Brother, Little Sister' says everything in metaphor," Maurice comments, "so that it isn't upsetting to anybody. It's something we've always known about fairy tales—they talk about incest, the Oedipus complex, about psychotic mothers, like those of Snow White and Hansel and Gretel, who throw their children out. They tell things about life which children know instinctively, and the pleasure and relief lie in finding these things expressed in language that children can live with. You can't eradicate these feelings



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—they exist and they're a great source of creative inspiration."

This is, of course, what the child psychologist and writer Bruno Bettelheim has pointed out in his recently acclaimed *The Uses of Enchantment*, a strong, humanistic/psychological defense against the always continuing attempts to bowdlerize and palliate fairy tales. But Bettelheim has certainly made an about-face since the time he admonished parents not to buy Sendak's immensely popular *Where the Wild Things Are*, warning them that little Max's dreamlike foray into the world of befangled and beclawed monsters would scare children, and that Max's rebellion against adult authority was psychologically harmful.

Sendak himself has answered these and other criticisms (my favorite comes from the *Journal of Nursery Education's* review of *Wild Things*: "We should not like to have it left about where a sensitive child might find it to pore over in the twilight") in the acceptance speech he gave upon receiving the 1964 Caldecott Medal:

"[There are] games children must conjure up to combat an awful fact of childhood: the fact of their vulnerability to fear, anger, hate, frustration—all the emotions that are an ordinary part of their lives and that they can perceive only as ungovernable and dangerous forces. To master these forces, children turn to fantasy: that imagined world where disturbing emotional situations are solved to their satisfaction. Through fantasy, Max, the hero of my book, discharges his anger against his mother, and returns to the real world sleepy, hungry and at peace with himself.

"Certainly we want to protect our children from new and painful experiences that are beyond their emotional comprehension and that intensify anxiety; and to a point we can prevent premature exposure to such experiences.



Brother and sister apply for the leading roles in the Grimm Brothers' *King Grisly-Beard*.

That is obvious. But what is just as obvious—and what is too often overlooked—is the fact that from their earliest years children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions, that fear and anxiety are an intrinsic part of their everyday lives, that they continually cope with frustration as best they can. And it is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming Wild Things.

"It is my involvement with this inescapable fact of childhood—the awful vulnerability of children and their struggle to make themselves King of All Wild Things—that gives my work whatever truth and passion it may have."

BROOKLYN KIDS

HERE ARE THE INESCAPABLE facts of Maurice Sendak's childhood. Born in Brooklyn in 1928, he was the youngest of three children of Philip and Sarah Sendak, both of whom came to America before World War I from Jewish shtetls outside Warsaw.

One of Maurice's earliest memories dates from the age of three or four. "I was convalescing after a long, serious illness. I was sitting on my grandmother's lap, and I remember the feeling of pleasant drowsiness. It was winter. We sat in front of a window, and my grandmother pulled the shade up and down to amuse me. Every time the shade went up, I was thrilled by the sudden reappearance of the backyard, the falling snow, and my brother and sister busy constructing a sooty snowman. Down came the shade—I waited. Up went the shade—the children had moved, the snowman had grown eyes. I don't remember a single sound."

Perhaps Sendak's later interest in animated toys and transformation books begins here. His love of wonder tales certainly derives from the stories his father told him as a child. Philip Sendak was apparently an inspiring improviser of stories, and would embroider and extend a tale over a period of nights. Maurice recalls one of the more memorable of these in an illuminating *New Yorker* profile written in 1966 by Nat Hentoff:

"It was about a child taking a walk with his father and mother. He becomes separated from them. Snow begins to fall, and the child shivers in the cold. He huddles under a tree, sobbing in terror. An enormous figure hovers over him and says, as he draws the boy up, 'I'm Abraham, your father.' His fear gone, the child looks up and also sees Sarah. He is no longer lost. When his parents find him, the child is dead. Those stories had something of the character of William Blake's poems. The myths in them didn't seem at all factitious. And they fused Jewish lore with my father's particular way of shaping memory and

desire. That one, for instance, was based on the power of Abraham in Jewish tradition as the father who was always there—a reassuring father even when he was Death. But the story was also about how tremendously my father missed his parents. Not all his tales were somber though. My father could be very witty, even if the humor was always on the darker side of irony."

Maurice's sister Natalie gave him his first book, *The Prince and the Pauper*. "A ritual began with that book," Sendak once told Virginia Haviland, "which I recall very clearly. The first thing was to set it up on the table and stare at it for a long time. Not because I was impressed with Mark Twain; it was just such a beautiful object. Then came the smelling of it . . . it was printed on particularly fine paper, unlike the Disney books I had gotten previous to that. *The Prince and the Pauper*—smelled good and it also had a shiny laminated cover. I flipped over that. I remember trying to bite into it, which I don't imagine is what my sister intended when she bought the book for me. But the last thing I did with the book was to read it. It was all right. But I think it started then, my passion for books and bookmaking. There's so much more to a book than just the reading. I've seen children touch books, fondle books, smell books, and it's all the reason in the world why books should be beautifully produced."

Following his brother Jack's example, Maurice first began writing his own stories when he was about nine, hand-lettering and illustrating them on uniform pages, then binding them with tape and decorated covers. He combined cutout newspaper photographs and comic strips with sketches of the Sendak family. And he began to draw.

"I was miserable as a kid," Sendak recalls. "I couldn't make friends, I couldn't play stoopball terrific, I couldn't skate great. I stayed home and drew pictures. You know what they all thought of me: sissy Maurice Sendak."



Opposite: 'In the Night Kitchen': Mickey falls through the night into a dream

When I wanted to go out and do something, my father would say: 'You'll catch a cold.' And I did . . . I did whatever he told me.

"People imagine that I was aware of Palmer and Blake and English graphics and German fairy tales when I was a kid. That came later. All I had then were popular influences—comic books, junk books, Gold Diggers movies, monster films, *King Kong*, *Fantasia*. I remember a Mickey Mouse mask that came on a big box of cornflakes. What a fantastic mask! Such a big, bright, vivid, gorgeous hunk of face! And that's what a kid in Brooklyn knew at the time."

In the *Night Kitchen*, one of Sendak's greatest works, shows little Mickey falling naked through the night into the Oliver Hardy bakers' dough, kneading and pounding it into a Hap Harrigan plane, flying over the city, diving into a giant milk bottle, then sliding back into his bed to sleep. It is a work that pays extraordinary homage to Sendak's early aesthetic influences—especially to Winsor McCay—to the cheap, full-color children's books of the period, as well as to the feelings about New York City he had as a little boy.

"When I was a child," he told Virginia Haviland, "there was an advertisement which I remember very clearly. It was for the Sunshine bakers, and it read: 'We Bake While You Sleep!' It seemed to me the most sadistic thing in the world, because all I wanted to do was stay up and watch . . . it seemed so absurdly cruel and arbitrary for them to do it while I slept. And also for them to think I would think that that was terrific stuff on their part, and would eat their product on top of that. It bothered me a good deal, and I remember I used to save the coupons showing the three fat little Sunshine bakers going off to this magic place at night, wherever it was, to have their fun, while I had to go to bed. This book was a sort of vendetta book to get back at them and to say that I am now old enough to stay up at night and know what's happening in the *Night Kitchen*!"

"Another thing is: I lived in Brooklyn, and to travel to Manhattan was a big deal, even though it was so close. I couldn't go by myself, and I counted a good deal on my elder sister. She took my brother and me to Radio City Music Hall, or the Roxy, or some such place. Now, the point of going to New York was that you ate in New York. Somehow to me New York represented eating. And eating in a very fashionable, elegant, superlatively mysterious place like Longchamps. You got dressed up, you went uptown—it was night when you got there and there were lots of windows blinking—and you went straight to a place to eat. It was one of the most exciting things of my childhood. Cross the bridge and see the city approaching, get there and have your dinner, then go to a movie and come home. So, again, *In the Night Kitchen* is a kind of homage to New York City, the city I loved so much and still love."

At 15, Sendak worked after school drawing backgrounds for All-American Comics, adapting Mutt and Jeff comic strips, filling them into a page, filling in backgrounds (puffs of dust under running heels) and extending the story line when necessary.

"I began illustrating my own books during this period," Maurice recalls. "My first book was Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*, which is a story I don't admire anymore, but as a young person I felt was extraordinary. And I illustrated Bret Harte's *The Luck of Roaring Camp*. It was my favorite story, and what is it about? A baby that is adopted by a lot of rough men, lumberjacks—an illegitimate child abandoned after the death of its mother. I'm writing a book now about a baby—most of my books are about babies—and it seems as if I've been doing the same thing since I was six years old. I'm a few inches taller and I have a graying beard, but otherwise there's not much difference."

"People used to comment continually on the fact that the children in my books looked homely—Eastern European Jewish as opposed to the flat, oilcloth look considered normal in children's books. They were just Brooklyn kids, old-looking before their time. But a baby does look 100 years old."

"I love babies' faces and I draw them all the time. They're uncanny. When my father was dying, he'd

dwindled—he had the body shape of a boy—and as I held him, I noticed that his head had become bigger than the rest of him and was rolling back like an infant's. Death at that moment was like going to sleep: "Shhhh, it will be all right." It's what you'd say to a feverish baby, except that he was dead.

"Infants' heads are wonderful to draw because they're so big and ungainly. You know how they fall back? Babies cry when they're held badly, they always know when they think they're going to be dropped, and when some klutz holds them, they cry. They're enormous kvetches with those mean little faces—"Give me this!"—and at the same time there's a look that they get that makes them so vulnerable, poignant and lovable."

Shortly after graduating high school, he began to work full time at Timely Service, a window-display house in lower Manhattan, where he assisted in the construction of store-window models of figures such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs made out of chicken wire, papier-mâché, spun glass, plaster and paint. With his brother, he began to make animated wooden toys that performed scenes from *Little Miss Muffet* and *Old Mother Hubbard*, which led to his being hired as a window-display assistant at F.A.O. Schwarz toy store. His only formal art study took place at this time—two years of evening classes at the Art Students League. Unbeknownst to him, Frances Christy, the children's book buyer at Schwarz, and Richard Nell, the store's display director, arranged for Ursula Nordstrom of Harper and Row to see his work, and she immediately asked him to illustrate Marcel Aymé's *The Wonderful Farm*, which was published in 1951. "It made me an official person," Maurice says.

Since then, as a writer, illustrator, and both, Sendak has published more than 70 books here and abroad, and he has been the recipient of scores of prizes and awards. He thinks of *A Hole Is to Dig* (1952)—with his exiguous and playful illustrations accompanying the poet Ruth Krauss' assemblage of children's definitions like "A face is so you can make faces"—as "the first book that came together for me." And he is still half-pleased with *Kenny's Window* (1956)—the story of a little boy who, upon waking from a dream, remembers meeting a rooster who gave him seven questions to answer ("Can you fix a broken promise?" Kenny's reply: "Yes, if it only looks broken, but really isn't"). "It's the first thing I wrote," Maurice explains. "The pictures are ghastly—I really

Rosie could, in her creator's words, "imagine herself to be anything she wanted..."



REALLY ROSIE BY MAURICE SENDAK

'Really Rosie Starring the Nutshell Kids' is a half-hour animated film written and directed by Maurice Sendak, with music by Carole King. It was originally televised on CBS on February 19th, 1975, and was shown again on June 8th, 1976. The following article was written in February 1975 and is published here for the first time.



MY RELATIONSHIP WITH ROSIE, THE HEROINE of *Really Rosie*, began 27 years ago. My earliest reference to her appears in a tattered, homemade sketchbook titled "Brooklyn Kids, Aug. 1948." I was 20 and she was 10. We never officially met; once, however, when we passed on the street, she saluted me with a "Hi, Johnson!" Bewildering, but typically Rosie. She'd made me up on the spot. I don't recall her taking any further notice of me, though she must have been aware of the pasty-faced youth (me) watching from a second-floor window.

It seems, on the evidence of that sketchbook and the ones that came quickly after, that the better part of my day was spent at that window, Rosie-watching. The books are jammed with drawings of Rosie, her family and friends, and—along the sides of the pages—frantically jotted bits of precious Rosie monologue. My Rosie fever passed, so far as the sketchbooks are concerned, within nine months. One of the last sketches is captioned "Easter Sunday, April 1949" and depicts a very glum Rosie awkwardly arranged for church.

Who was Rosie and what was she to me? I was out of a job, out of sorts and money, and (worse) had to live at home with my parents, without a clue as to what to do next. Rosie occupied both hand and head during that long, languishing time and filled my notebooks with ideas that later found their way into every one of my children's books. Rosie was a fierce child who impressed me with her ability to imagine herself into being anything she wanted to be, anywhere in or out of the world. She literally forced her fantasies on her more stolid, less driven friends, and the tremendous energy she put into these dream games probably activated my own creativity. Her games were based mostly on the movies. She managed both the Charles Laughton and the Maureen O'Hara roles in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—one of her finest performances.

I became absorbed in the lives of the children across the street. I recorded their delight in the blizzard of December 1948, the well-attended, first appearance outdoors of Rosie's new brother (she looks particularly piqued in these sketches), and a fantastic battle between her mother and her grandfather on the front stoop. There is Rosie cheering them on and giving a blow-by-blow description to the entire world via a make-believe radio microphone. These early, unprecise, wavery sketches are filled with a happy vitality and a joy that was nowhere else in my life at the time. They add up to the first rough delineation of the child all my future characters would be modeled on. I loved Rosie. She knew how to get through a day. A page filled with fat, snowsuits kids is punctuated, always, with her familiar form. There is Rosie, the living thread, the connecting link between me in my window and the outside over there.

I did, finally, get outside over there. In 1956, after illustrating some dozen books by various writers, I did a Rosie and wrote my own. It is called *Kenny's Window* and in it I paid homage to Rosie's street and house. *Very Far Away*, a year later, again takes place on Rosie's street, and the hero, Martin, acquired some of her aggressive personality. In 1960 Rosie made her official debut in my third book, *The Sign on Rosie's Door*. The events described in that book were culled and reworked from my 1948 sketchbooks; two episodes actually occurred and a lot of the dialogue is original Rosie. She had lost none of her luster and fascination over the 12 intervening years. My *Nutshell Library*, two years later, is intricately tied to *The Sign on Rosie's Door*. Alligator, Pierre, Johnny and the nameless hero of *Chicken Soup with Rice* are modeled on the "men" in Rosie's life; the originals, in fact, appear in *Rosie's Door* under their proper names. Pierre, perhaps, is the most typical of all my published children—he could be Rosie playing Pierre!—and it was only a short step from Pierre to Max of *Where the Wild Things Are*. A mere change of sex cannot disguise the essential Rosieness of my heroes. I was not, however, finished with the real Rosie.

I have long wanted to make an animated film. This particular form is a deep old love of mine—beginning, as it does for all Thirties children, with Walt Disney—and the influence of animation and flip-book techniques is plain even in my earliest work. The richness of the early Disney shorts, their dazzling impetuosity, guaranteed their

claim as a new art form, and the claim survived the test of Disney's first full-length animated features. It is easy now to scorn Disney's famous poor taste, but no creator of animated films since has matched his dramatic gifts. If anything, the anxious emphasis on so-called good taste enfeebles and drains the dramatic energy from most contemporary animation (I refer here to animation done with integrity, not the dread hokum of Saturday-morning TV). *Pinocchio*, my favorite of the full-length Disneys, combines his best and worst features. It is a passionate film, shrewdly paced, overwhelmingly inventive. There are flaws (Cleo's fluttering eyelashes and the pallid, unctuous Blue Fairy, for two shuddering examples), but the emotional conviction of the drama far outweighs them. Most important, Disney took maximum advantage of his medium. It is astonishing, considering the labor, time and expense involved, how exacting he was. There is, alas, no longer the money to fund such films; animation has become too costly a process. The cheating, short-shrift "animation" seen too often on television today—the dull, static figures merely moving their mouths or a finger or a foot, or blinking ad nauseam—is clear evidence of this. But there is no excuse for shallow content or lack of imagination or dishonesty. A slick surface does much to mitigate financial limitations and to deceive the eye but, ironically, it draws attention to the emptiness below the surface.

When Sheldon Riss, an independent producer, approached me four years ago, suggesting I work with him on an animated film for television, I was anything but enthusiastic. Not only was I turned off to animated TV specials (they were never special), I had learned, through the punishing experiences of friends, to dread the networks. In the world of book publishing, I have command over my work—how it is printed and presented. I have earned that privilege and I am proud of it. I feared losing it in the world of despotic networks, among the vast crew of collaborators necessary for such a project. I held out for two years. Happily, so did Riss. There was no clink of coin in his enthusiasm, and his excitement and optimism finally won me over.

Once I'd committed myself to conceiving an animated film, I decided to play it safe and stick to what I know best: those hurdy-gurdy, fantasy-plagued Brooklyn kids. My scenario, which incorporates the four books of the *Nutshell Library*, is about the ability of these children to overcome the tedium of a long summer's day and enforced imprisonment on an ordinary block. (You were never allowed to cross the street, walk in the gutter or, on pain of death, come upstairs except at mealtime or to go to the bathroom or to stop profuse bleeding. Food and other necessities were dropped out the window, and street fights were screechingly arbitrated by mamas in adjacent windows.) It is no surprise that Rosie became the drama's connecting tissue, the point of it all.

Of course I overwrote, forgetting the limitation of 24 minutes of showtime for a half-hour feature. At one point, my scenario's bulk might have been mistaken for an adaptation of *The Don Flows Home to the Sea*. Carole King's score simplified everything. The seven songs she composed and performed (the four *Nutshell* texts, plus three new lyrics for Rosie) set the color and shape of the show; their length told me exactly how much script I had to cut. Rosie was finally becoming *Really Rosie*.

I embarked on a wild and woolly year as apprentice animator and director. I painted backgrounds and had the pleasure of rendering hundreds of drawings of Rosie and her gang that became the film's storyboard. Though *Really Rosie* was exhaustively delineated on paper, it took on a life of its own up there on the screen. The necessity of copying my style seemed not to shackle the animators; the staff of D&R Productions managed to get their own "schticks" into the work, and Rosie benefited.

It became, oddly, coincidentally, a Brooklyn project. Carole King, Sheldon Riss and I had all grown up in roughly the same neighborhood. I revisited it in order to refresh my memories, and Rosie's street—my street—brought back the boredom and loneliness of my time there. It was an ugly, bleak street. Rosie's old house was a nightmare of brand-new siding. I decided right then to move the setting of *Really Rosie* to another block. Every third year my sister, brother and I had acquired a new apartment-street-school-neighborhood, for my mother loathed the chaos and stink created by house painters—and in those faraway, dim days, they *did* paint every third year. As a result, I had my choice of many streets. I decided to set Rosie on the shortest and best of them, only four blocks away from her real street.

We began this project with some heroic convictions in tow. First, that we really would create something special. I had no desire to contribute to television yet another ersatz, ground-out kiddie thing. We vowed to pay attention to detail, we concentrated on content, and we let the form of the show evolve naturally—as naturally, I hoped, as children playing in the street.

It is immensely right that Rosie is the heroine of my first animated film. I believe in her now as firmly as I did 27 years ago. She always did want to get into the movies!

wasn't up to illustrating my own texts then—and the story itself, to be honest, is nice but overwritten: "Singing chimes in the city lights and the songs of the city." Today that kind of stuff sounds like Delius combined with Bruckner!"

After the introverted Kenny, Sendak introduced us to the fussy and sulking Martin in *Very Far Away* (1957). But it was in 1960 that Sendak's most indomitable character appeared on the scene: Rosie of *The Sign on Rosie's Door*. Based on a ten-year-old girl he spotted on the streets of Brooklyn in 1948, she is the prototype of all Sendak's plucky children, and he lovingly describes her genesis and transformations in his essay-portrait, "Rosie."

Sendak's *Nutshell Library* (1962)—four tiny books, each of which can be held in the palm of one's hand—is intimately tied to *The Sign on Rosie's Door*: Alligator, Pierre, Johnny and the nameless hero of *Chicken Soup with Rice* are modeled on the "men" in Rosie's life. In 1975, Sendak drew all these characters into a marvelous half-hour animated film entitled *Really Rosie Starring the Nutshell Kids*—a film which Sendak both wrote and directed and which features the music and singing of Carole King. (The film soundtrack, *Carole King—Really Rosie*, is available on Ode Records.)

From Kenny and Martin to Pierre, Max and Mickey, Sendak's characters have their origins in those Brooklyn street kids he used to observe and sketch while leaning out of his parents' second-story window—all of them enlivened and connected by that amazingly animated anima-figure who could, in Sendak's words, "imagine herself into being anything she wanted to be, anywhere in or out of the world." As her discoverer and creator remarks: "A mere change of sex cannot disguise the essential Rosieness of my heroes."

THE HUNGER ARTIST



ALTHOUGH SENDAK HAS AN apartment in New York City, he works and spends most of his time in the country just outside a small Connecticut town which, ironically, is the birthplace of Samuel Griswold Goodrich (1793-1860)—perhaps the best-known and most influential figure in 19th-century American children's literature. Goodrich's Peter Parley books (about 116 of them) sold 7 million copies—not including the thousands of imitations and pirate copies printed and sold in the United States and England. Illustrated with wood engravings, they were generally nationalistic but occasionally tolerant utilitarian schoolbooks written in the compendious and moronic style that has served as the model for generations of first-grade primers: "Here I am! My name is Peter Parley! I am an old man. I am very gray and lame. But I have seen a great many things, and had a great many adventures, and I love to talk about them. . . . And do you know that the very place where Boston stands was once covered with woods, and that in those woods lived many Indians? Did you ever see an Indian? Here is a picture of some Indians."

Aside from the fact that—a century apart—they resided just a few miles down the road from each other, two creators of children's literature more dissimilar than Goodrich and Sendak would be hard to imagine.

At the age of 12, Goodrich read *Moral Repostory* by Hannah More (1745-1833), an ill-tempered, evangelical English educator and writer, and was instantly bowled over. (To counter what she considered "vulgar and indecent penny books" popular among young people at the time, More produced amiable-sounding works such as *The Execution of Wild Henry*. It is frightening to remind ourselves that 2 million of her Cheap Repostory Tracts—sobering and moralistic tales largely designed to keep the poor in their place—were sold in their first year of publication, and this at a time when the population of England numbered fewer than 11 million.) So, when Goodrich visited More in Bristol (he was 30 and she was 78), he was thrown into a state of ecstasy. As he recalled this meeting in his *Recollections of a Lifetime*: "It was in conversation with that amiable and gifted person that I first formed the conception of the Parley

Tales—the general idea of which was to make nursery books reasonable and truthful, and thus to feed the young mind upon things wholesome and pure, instead of things monstrous, false and pestilent.”

Goodrich particularly objected to the moral obliquity of *Puss in Boots* and *Jack the Giant Killer* (“tales of horror, commonly put into the hands of youth, as if for the express purpose of reconciling them to vice and crime”) and he detested nursery rhymes, declaring that even a child could make them up. To prove his point, he produced the following nonsense on the spot: “Higglety, pigglety, pop! The dog has eaten the mop! The pig’s in a hurry, the cat’s in a flurry, Higglety, pigglety, pop!”

Irony upon irony. A century later, Maurice Sendak wrote and illustrated perhaps his most mysterious and extraordinary work, *Higglety Pigglety Pop! or There Must Be More to Life* (1967), a modern fairy tale about Jennie the Sealyham terrier—modeled after one of Sendak’s own dogs—who packs her bag, goes out into the world to look for something more than everything, and winds up as the leading lady of a theatrical production (costarring Miss Rhoda, Pig, Cat and a lion) of the “Higglety, Pigglety, Pop!” nursery rhyme itself. “Hello,” Jennie begins the letter to her old master that concludes the book: “As you probably noticed, I went away forever. I am very experienced now and very famous. I am even a star. Every day I eat a mop, twice on Saturday. It is made of salami and that is my favorite. I get plenty to drink too, so don’t worry. I can’t tell you how to get to the Castle Yonder because I don’t know where it is. But if you ever come this way, look for me. . . . Jennie.”

THE MORNING I WAS SUPPOSED to take the train up to visit Sendak in Connecticut, I received a call from him. Visit postponed, I thought. “My dogs aren’t well,” Maurice said sadly. “But I think it will cheer me up to have company. . . . It’s my birthday today.”

“What would you like as a present?” I asked. “Well, if it’s no trouble, some sandwiches from a deli. Any kind. Anything. It’s hopeless around here.” “What about hot pastrami with coleslaw and mustard on rye?” “Fantastic.” “And pickles?” “Fantastic. And perhaps a really gooey chocolate layer cake for dessert?”

WHEN MAURICE PICKED ME UP at the station, he apologized for being late. “There are hundreds of children parading through town,” he said incredulously. And as we began to drive slowly back to his house, I saw hordes of kids marching silently along the roads, as if they were following an invisible and inaudible Pied Piper. “What’s going on?” I wondered aloud.

“I live here,” Maurice grimly replied. Sendak’s house is hardly grim, surrounded as it is

by beautiful ash, sugar maple, dogwood and locust trees, and with irises, lilies, phlox and roses growing near a little wood hut, the whole scene reminding me of a German landscape.

“Mahler went into the woods to write his symphonies in his little *Waldhütte*,” Maurice says as he shows me his cottage. “And in the first movement of his Third Symphony, you can almost hear him in those woods, with those menacing trees and ferns that turn into fingers—like the trees that catch Snow White. You get a sense of that forest in the first movement—very ambivalent to the artist: is it going to give him something or frighten him to death? [See Sendak’s cover illustration for RCA’s new recording of Mahler’s Third, which depicts a silhouetted Mahler in his *Waldhütte* receiving the gift of inspiration from an angel.] And Mozart, too. When he was alone in Vienna writing *The Magic Flute*, he was invited to live in a tiny summer cottage outside the theater grounds to continue his work. . . . The only way to find something is to lose oneself: that’s what George MacDonald teaches us in his stories. And that’s what this little hut, where one can be alone, means to me.”

Sendak takes me back to the main house, which is filled with the most wondrous, imaginative and variegated things. On the walls are posters by Penfield, Will Bradley, Lautrec and Bonnard; a glorious Winsor McCay triptych showing Little Nemo and a princess walking down a resplendent garden path surrounded by daffodils with smiling faces; children’s toys, a pillow in the shape of the *Night Kitchen*’s Mickey and his bottle of milk, and a bunch of stuffed Wild Things; and, in almost every room, books by James, Melville, Dickens, Stifter, MacDonald, Blake, Beatrix Potter, Palmer’s illustrated Milton . . . as well as art books (Dürer, Grünewald) and books on music (Mahler, Wolf, Wagner, Beethoven and Mozart).

Birthday presents from friends are lying on the dining room table: a Mickey Mouse mirror and Mickey Mouse music box, an 18th-century tin coach from Germany, miniature bottles of Dry Sack, a floral bouquet, a T-shirt inscribed “Some Swell Pup”—the title of his recently published cartoon book—and three little scissors for cutting cloth, paper and letters. I add the sandwiches, and we begin lunch.

Beware of the Wild Things: ‘As I Went over the Water’ (top); ‘Pierre’ disgorged by a lion; out pops the mop in ‘Higglety Pigglety Pop!’ (below)



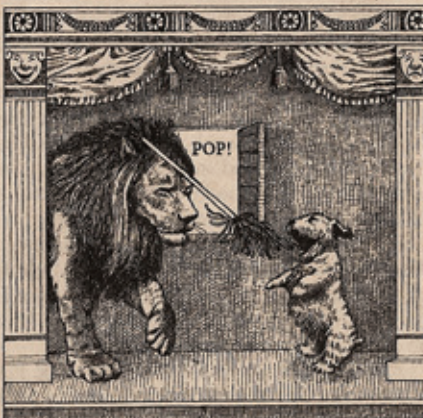
“Maurice, this is as good a time as any to ask you about the idea of incorporation in your work.”

“While I’m eating the sandwich?”

“In *Pierre* the lion eats Pierre. In *As I Went over the Water* a sea monster ingests a boat. In *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* Jennie eats a mop. Things and people get swallowed, and out they come again. And in one of your best fantasy sketches, you show a mother eating a baby and then the baby eating the mother. This happens a lot in Grimm’s tales and especially in Winsor McCay’s early animation films about dinosaurs. What’s this all about?”

“Well,” Maurice says, “I’m certainly not going to disgorge this sandwich—it’s delicious, and I feel better already. You know, I used to love biting into my first books when I was a child, so maybe it’s a hangup from that time . . . but a pleasant one: things being eaten and then given out again, it’s an image that constantly appeals to me, and to most children, too. It’s such a primary fantasy of childhood—the pleasure of putting things in the mouth, of chewing, of swallowing, of spitting and pissing. Before children are told it’s not a nice thing—the whole toilet training process—there’s nothing nicer.”

“Sometimes, though, it can be scary,” I add, remembering how Maurice once described his feelings as a child when grown-ups would endearingly lean over him and say: Oh, I could eat you up! “I was very nervous,” Maurice had then recalled, “because I really believed they probably could if they had a mind to. They had great big teeth, immense nostrils



and very sweaty foreheads. I often remember that vision and how it frightened me. There was one particular relative who did this to me, and it was really quite terrifying. I immortalized him in *Wild Things*.”

“In the fantasy sketch that shows the child devouring his mother,” Maurice now adds, “. . . of course that’s what children must feel: that great big luminous breast hanging over its head is sent there by God. Obviously it’s there for you, why not? Until you’re told differently, how are you going to know? There’s something both monstrous and poignant about it: the poignancy comes from the fact that a child’s going to realize soon enough that it’s not so, that he’s mortal, that he’ll have to compete for it, but that for the second’s worth that it’s there it’s a glorious pleasure. And all I’m saying is, what’s wrong with the pleasure? Why must we assume that the knowing is the correct thing and that the pleasure is the bad thing, which is what most people do feel.”

“People who objected to Mickey bathing in milk and floating naked—every part of his body having asensuous experience . . . as

Variations on a theme: the later sketch (top) was done after Sendak’s mother died. Right: Stella’s 17th-century putti

if that’s naughty. Why? Why are we all so screwed up, including me? But at least creatively I try to convey the memory of a time in life when it was a pleasure.

“I don’t understand the destructive aspect. In my little cartoon, the baby eats the mother—on the surface, what could be more destructive? But in fact the child doesn’t think of it as a destructive act, it’s the most natural thing to him: if you have that much of the mother, have more!” “Well,” I interject, “someone could look at it another way: mother destroys child/child destroys mother.”

“That’s just mental maneuvering to me,” Maurice

replies. “I take from the image as much as it’s necessary for me to use creatively. I’m not going to analyze it. Now I’m not against psychology or analysis on principle. I’m sure that the things I draw—little boys flying and falling—reveal something. In one sense it seems very obviously Freudian, as if coming out of my own analysis. People fear that analysis will castrate and dry up artists, but it’s just the contrary, in my opinion: it gives wonderful clues and cues as to what you’re doing. I don’t think of what I’m creating in strict Freudian terms, but surely it’s a result of the fact that a large part of my 20s was spent on the analyst’s couch. And it enriched and deepened me and gave me confidence to express much that I might not have without it.”

“Coming back to the fantasy sketch: the bird is in there because birds were my father’s favorite fairy tale symbol. He used to tell stories of birds taking children away. And I think that they enter into a lot of my things because it’s an image of his that has always appealed to my heart.”

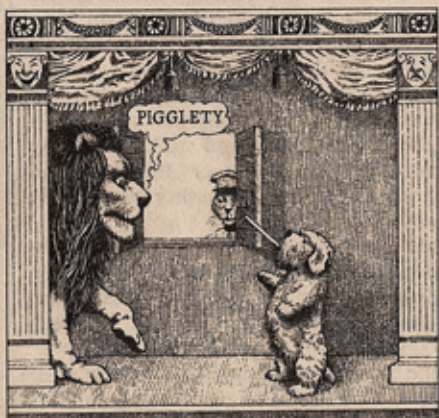
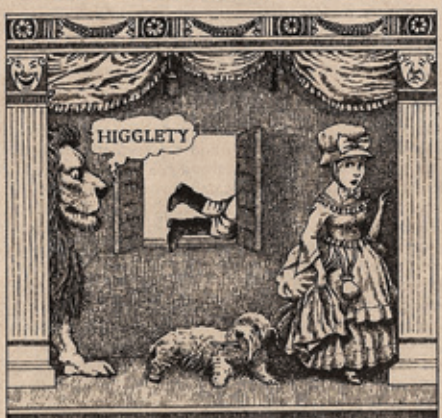
“Incidentally, I did another and earlier version of this sketch in the Fifties, and in that version the baby comes out of the fish, the mother is there—furious that the baby’s been lost—turns the baby over on her knee and spansks him. And he, in his rage, this tiny baby in his little diaper, pulls away from her, pulls out a gun and shoots her dead.”

“That sketch, shall we say, was *unsynthesized*. Whatever it was, it certainly was blatant, and I think that this later one is much better. The earlier version was done while my mother was living, and this one after she died. So, obviously, I’ve thought and rethought a lot about her during that interval.”

“I was reading recently,” I say, “that certain librarians were covering up Mickey’s little penis in copies of *Night Kitchen* and that others had suggested that you draw in a little diaper on Mickey in later editions of the book. But take a look at these illustrations I brought up to show you from Jacques Stella’s 17th-century *Games and Pastimes of Childhood*—all of them depicting naked little putti capering and frolicking.”

“It’s an amazing coincidence,” Maurice exclaims. “I was given this book again recently because my new work is in part concerned with babies doing odd things, and I’ve been looking at the book for weeks. The illustrations are beautiful . . . and strange. There’s an hallucinatory quality about them: they’re just children playing games, but why are they all naked? Yet we often make a mistake of reading heavy, tedious, psychological overtones into things that in the 17th and 18th centuries weren’t considered that way at all. I couldn’t do that book today, I’d be thrown out of the country. But *that* book is a classic. Adults will take their kids to museums to see a lot of peckers in a row on Roman statues and say: That’s art, dearie, and then come home and burn *In the Night Kitchen*. Where’s the logic in that? Art in people’s minds is desexualized, and that would make the great artists sick.”

“In the illustrations I just completed for Randall Jarrell’s *Fly by Night*—the last book he wrote for children before he died—I have an eight-year-old boy flying naked in a dream. I tried to draw the boy first with pajamas—he looked too much like Wee Willie Winkie. Then I tried him in underwear, and it looked like an ad for Fruit of the Loom. I tried him wrapped in sheets and blankets, but it looked too baroque. He had to be naked. But I know they’re going to say it’s typically me, arbitrarily making somebody nude. I had a picture showing a girl





with her vagina in full view in *The Light Princess*, and nobody made a fuss about that, which makes me think that the whole world is male chauvinist—vaginas don't count."

"What's *Fly by Night* about?" I ask Maurice.

"It's a dream: the boy David dreams. Every night he dreams he floats. During the daytime he tries to remember that he can float at night, but he can't. When he wakes up he can't remember. And the entire story is about what happens to him in this one dream. He floats out of his house, over certain animals, and each of the animals has a little poem written by Jarrell—they're delicious poems—and yet they're much deeper, with a kind of funny, starved feeling in them.

"David meets the owl, floats into her nest, and she sings David and her baby a song about getting a little sister and being taken care of by a mother. For me, that's what the whole book is about—it may or may not have been for Randall. It's about being starved for a mother or for safety or protection or for some place where you can nest or land or be.

"It has a happy ending. David comes home, floats back into his bed, and when he wakes up, there's his mother who's made breakfast for him. He looks at her, she looks familiar—someone looks just like her. Of course it's the owl, he's losing all memory of his dream.

"I drew myself as a baby in it—you can see me in my mother's arms in the book's only double-spread picture. And I may have taken a very lopsided and fanciful view of the story, but what I read into it was a great hunger pain—that longing I once felt in Jarrell's *The Animal Family*—and I interpreted it as a looking-for-mama pain. . . . Maybe it's my pain.

"Come back next week," Maurice says to me, "and I'll tell you the rest."

Sendak drew himself as a baby in this illustration of Jarrell's 'Fly by Night'

MOZART AND THE MAN IN THE MOON

MAURICE HAS THREE DOGS: Agamemnon, a male shepherd; Erda, a female shepherd; and Io, a female retriever. "Zeus had a fling with Io," Maurice says, "and jealous Hera transformed her into a bull calf who was bitten by a gadfly throughout eternity. The minute I saw Io, she looked like a victim—blond and beautiful."

Aggie and Erda are forever immortalized in the dream sequence of Sendak's latest cartoon book, *Some Swell Pup*, or *Are You Sure You Want a Dog?* Written in collaboration with Matthew Margolis, director of the National Institute of Dog Training, the book is an *echt* Sendak burlesque, telling a cautionary tale of two kids and how they learn to train and love their rambunctious new puppy—which ironically takes on the role of the stereotypical unruly child—with the guidance of a caftanned canine saint.

"I love this book," I say to Maurice the following week, having read *Some Swell Pup* in the interval. "How did it come about?"

"Matthew suggested the ideas about puppy rearing, and I found a group of scenes for them and refashioned his language. The rules had to be simplified and humorized because we wanted kids to enjoy it.

"I was looking for real crazy kids who could act out these little scenes, and so I chose the two I had first used some years back in a sequence of drawings for *Family Circle* magazine and who later appeared as the players of *King Grisly-Beard*. Matthew and I realized that these two would be perfect. She's an aggressive and hysterical yenta, and he's a passive and selfish kid. Their secret

names, by the way, are Vernon and Shirley. She's really a Shirley, and he's a real *vaserdiker gornisht* type."

"It's certainly the wittiest tale about how to get gently and humanely socialized that I've ever read," I say. "Just compare it to the typical late-Georgian English stories for children whose 'message,' as the critic Gillian Avery once put it, was: 'Be punctual and diligent, obedient and dutiful, do not lie or thief or blow up your sister, beware of mad dogs and gaming, and you will live to be a successful sugar planter and give your rivals a handsome funeral.' But *Some Swell Pup* is all about true human nature and relationships and patience and acceptance and love and light and . . ."

"... and orifices," Maurice adds.

"It's probably your most complete work."

"Jesus, I hope not," Maurice replies. "In terms of orifices it is. One reviewer said: 'There's all this fuss about whether the puppy is a girl or a boy, but we don't even see the anatomical truth.' The reviewer thought I'd gotten coy. But, I mean, how do you show a puppy's sex organ? You'd have to have a microscope to see it at that stage."

"I just saw another review, Maurice, in which the writer spends most of her time commenting on puppy poop."

"Naturally. What does she say?"

I read: "Sendak is up front about dog droppings, liberally sprinkling in piles and puddles and deliberately risking a flap similar to the one over frontal nudity in *Night Kitchen*."

"Here we go again," he sighs with resigned good humor.

MAURICE INVITES ME TO DRIVE with him to the veterinarian's to pick up Aggie. To cheer him up, I quote what I think is an appropriate little vignette that appears in Gustav Janouch's *Conversations with Kafka*. Janouch writes:

"Out of a house in the Jakobsgasse, where we had arrived in the course of our discussion, ran a small dog looking like a ball of wool, which crossed our path and disappeared round the corner of the Tempelgasse."

"A pretty little dog," I said.

"A dog?" asked Kafka suspiciously, and slowly began to move again.

"A small, young dog. Didn't you see it?"

"I saw. But was it a dog?"

"It was a little poodle."

"A poodle? It could be a dog, but it could also be a sign. We Jews often make tragic mistakes."

Maurice laughs so hard he almost has to stop driving. "It could be a dog, but it could also be a sign. What book is that?"

"Janouch was a teenager when he met Kafka. Kafka befriended him, and Janouch later wrote down and published their conversations, which are filled with wonderful statements such as: 'Art like prayer is a hand outstretched in the darkness, seeking for some touch of grace which will transform it into a hand that bestows gifts. Prayer means casting oneself into the miraculous rainbow that stretches between becoming and dying, to be utterly consumed in it, in order to bring its infinite radiance to bed in the frail little cradle of one's own existence. . . . Life is as infinitely great and profound as the immensity of the stars above us. One can only look at it through the narrow keyhole of one's own personal existence. But through it one perceives more than one can see. So above all one must keep the keyhole clean.'"

"That's too much," Maurice says. "It's so wonderful it's like getting drunk. Whistle-clean keyholes . . . every metaphor describes his own work. You didn't know this, but one of my fantasy projects has always been to illustrate Kafka. For years I've been thinking about it, wondering whether I was old enough to do it—just as I waited until I thought I was old enough to do *The Juniper Tree*. He's one of the few writers who could express the act of creating so beautifully. I feel so close to him. The only difference is that he's a genius."

"I've noticed," I mention to Maurice, "that a lot of the theatrical performances that take place in your books—*Higglety Pigglety Pop!* and *King Grisly-Beard* especially—share certain characteristics with the Nature Theater of Oklahoma as Kafka describes it in *Amerika*."

"To put it mildly," Maurice responds. "Where do you think I got it from? From there and from Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*—characters and an impresario looking for a performance. I love opera, theater, pantomime, ballet, and I've tried to express this love and appreciation in my books."



AT THE VET'S, AGGIE SEEMS TO be feeling better, and when we arrive back at Maurice's, he happily greets Erda and Io, and off they go running around the grounds. Maurice keeps a watchful eye on them as we sit under the trees, and I ask him about the new picture book he's just started.

"This will be the last part of my trilogy that began with *Wild Things* and *Night Kitchen*. And of the three, this one will be the strangest. *Wild Things* now seems to

Sendak's pups: Maurice with his dogs; (right) the kids' dreams from 'Some Swell Pup'; a scene from 'The Juniper Tree'



me to be a very simple book—its simplicity is probably what made it successful, but I could never be that simple again. *Night Kitchen* I much prefer—it reverberates on double levels. But this third book will reverberate on triple levels. It's so dense already . . . I don't know what it means and I can't get beyond the first seven lines.

"But I'll get there, I feel it in me—like a woman having a baby, all that life churning on inside me. I feel it every day: it moves, stretches, yawns . . . it's getting ready to get born. It knows exactly what it is, only I don't know with my conscious mind, but every day I get a little clue: listen, dum dum, here's a word for you, see what you can make of it. So it throws it out and I catch it: oh, a word, fantastic! And then I do without for three days, and the unconscious says: this man's too much to believe, he walks, he thinks, sits, he doesn't do anything, he's a bore, throw him another word, otherwise he'll sit there forever and have a coronary. . . . And one by one it throws me words.

"Is it the right time for a book? It's like getting pregnant when you've just gone crazy and you've found out your house has burned down. Externally I'm in turmoil, I didn't want to get pregnant now. When I write the book, it may be an abortion, but let's hope not. I'm definitely with life, as they say, sitting like a mother on a stump, thinking: Thank you, God, thank you."

"D.H. Lawrence," I interject, "used to describe the pregnant mother as feeling at one with the world."

"The maven on how women felt!" Maurice replies. "What does that mean? It sounds like being glued to something. I don't feel at one with the world, I never have. The only thing that's miraculous is the creative act, and I call it miraculous because I don't understand it. I don't understand, for example, how Mozart could write semitrivial but deliciously funny letters to Daddy at the very moment he was composing his sublime works. And when Daddy says: 'Look, Wolfgang, I don't want you messing around in Munich, you're there to get a job, I don't like your going out dancing every night—your mother's written to me all about it. Pull yourself



THE SHAPE OF MUSIC

together. You're not the type to do this kind of thing. Your loving father." But Daddy, Daddy, Mozart writes back, "I just went out with Fraulein so-and-so, she's a nice girl, I had two dances, came home at eleven o'clock, I've been good, haven't been drinking wine, and on top of that I just wrote the horn concerto, two violin concertos and the famous *Sinfonia Concertante*. Isn't that enough for this week, Daddy? I'll try and be better."

"Now of course I made that up, but that's the sound of it, and Mozart wrote those pieces that same week he was thinking those nothing thoughts and trying to get his boring father off his back. And while he was doing this, he was creating something that was completely beyond his father, beyond anyone's father, and beyond any of us 200 years later. That's the miracle."

"I've always loved Mozart. I read Alfred Einstein's wonderful book on him, and I've read a dozen books since then, although not one of them is up to that. But best of all is Mozart's letters. I'm only up to age 22, but it doesn't matter. Every letter is beautiful, no matter how trivial it is. And they're very scatological—not only Wolfgang's but sober Frau Mozart's as well: 'When you go to bed, shit well till it busts,' she writes to her husband. Now you know she's not a maniac. And Wolfgang writes something like: 'My darling, my quintessential sister, I kiss you, stuff your arse in your mouth tonight and bite with all your heart. Then shit and let it bust good.' It's so strange! What does it mean? Very conceivably one might think that Mozart was an anal retentive, that he never got past the toilet-training stage. . . . But it was the 18th century. And there's also that very Germanic quality of every day being based on the quality of the bowel movement."

"I seem to remember," I add, "that in one of his letters he writes: 'Do we live to shit, or shit to live?' That's very advanced existential humor."

"It's that combination of gravity and grace that I love so much in Mozart," Maurice says. "He's the ideal, and God knows I'm not like him. I'm not good-humored and I don't juggle the problems of life well."

"Recently I've been reading about Beethoven and his relationship with his nephew, Karl. When Karl said he wanted to go out, Beethoven suffered terribly: the child didn't want him all the time, unlike the music that was so compliant. Beethoven could be who he was, do what he did, and then try to apply the same grandiose, creative rules of art to everyday life. The dummy just couldn't accept the fact that it wasn't possible to force a little boy to love him the way he could force the *Hammerklavier* to appear on paper. Beethoven's special kind of love—'I-hypnotize-you-into-total-love'—overlooked what did come from the child: affection, pleasure in having an extraordinary man named Beethoven as his uncle. But it wasn't enough for him."

"And yes, I do identify with Beethoven—it's like the Achilles' heel of the artist who lives on a grandiose plane, conjuring his art up, but failing in real life because his inflated ego can't be satisfied. I don't like Beethoven the man, but I have tremendous sympathy for him."

"I hope," Maurice says suddenly, "that you don't think of me as some kind of *shlump*."

"As you've been talking," I say to him, "I've been thinking of that early 19th-century Mother Goose illustration you praised so highly in one of your essays. It's an illustration that juxtaposes the curmudgeonly Man in the South slopping porridge over his head and the mysterious, ambiguous and graceful Man in the Moon floating through the mist and clouds. This seems to be the Beethoven-Mozart split in your being, this one image suggesting the unity of personality. You've been talking about two composers, but you really seem to be talking about reality and imagination, heaviness and lightness."

"Music," Maurice replies, "is a metaphor for everything."

IT IS POSSIBLE TO SEE SENDAK'S books as falling into either the major or the minor key—in the musical sense. The major works consist of the color picture and cartoon books like *Night Kitchen*, *Hector Protector* or *Some Swell Pup*, which feature simple, broad, outlined drawings, often done with a Magic Marker. The minor works—his haunting illustrations for *The Juniper Tree*, *Higglety Pigglety Pop!*, *Fly by Night*, MacDonald's *The Golden Key* and *The Light Princess*—are distinguished by their elaborate pen-and-ink crosshatched style.

Sendak continually talks about the illustrator's task

in musical terms. "To conceive musically for me means to quicken the life of the illustrated book," he wrote in his essay, "The Shape of Music." And he speaks of his favorite illustrators as if they were musicians.

The pictures of the Victorian artist Randolph Caldecott, Sendak writes, "abound in musical imagery; his characters are forever dancing and singing and playing instruments. More to the point is his refinement of a graphic counterpart to the musical form of theme and variations, his delightful compounding of a simple visual theme into a fantastically various interplay of images. In one of his greatest and most beautiful pictures—'And the Dish ran away with the Spoon' from *Hey Diddle Diddle*



Diddle—you see a cat playing his violin for objects in the kitchen (a flask, dishes, bowls) and, in the foreground, the dish running away with the spoon. You can almost hear the music coming from the back room as you observe the couple fleeing, obviously in love."

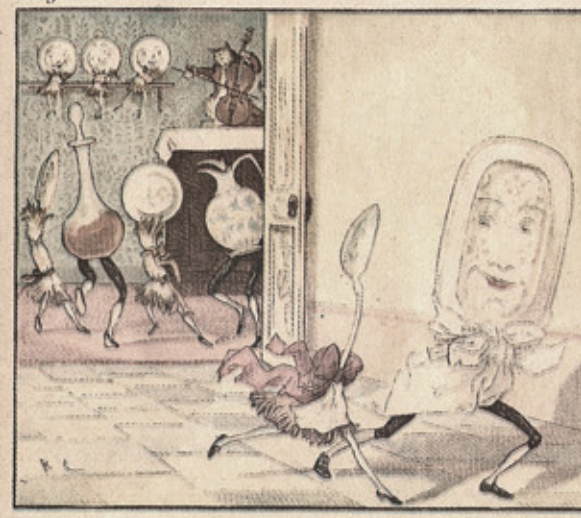
About the illustrations for La Fontaine's fable "The Wolf and the Lamb" by the late-19th-century artist M. Boutet de Monvel, Sendak writes: "The lamb performs, before meeting an unjust fate, a sequence of linear arabesques, a superb dance of death that painfully conveys and dramatically enlarges the fable's grim meaning. The eye follows from picture to picture the swift development of the story—the fatalistic 'folding up,' the quiet inevitability of the lamb's movements, ending in a dying-swan gesture of hopeless resignation. And then the limp, no longer living form hanging from the raging wolf's mouth. I think of these fine, softly colored and economically conceived drawings as a musical accompaniment to the La Fontaine fable, harmonic inventions that color and give fresh meaning in much the same way that a Hugo Wolf setting illuminates a Goethe poem."

Sendak admires the "tremendous vitality" of Wilhelm Busch ("Mickey in *Night Kitchen* gets baked, just like Max and Moritz"), the clarity and simplicity of the French artists Felix Vallotton (especially his illustrations for *Poils de Carotte*) and Bonnard ("their simple lines, strokes, washes of color—it's that Mozart quality I don't have, my things are so heavy . . . like latkes and mashed potatoes"), and, most of all, the "terse, blocked images" of the English artist Arthur Hughes—"so graphically precise and unearthly. Hughes is one of the most important influences in my life, especially his illustrations for the fairy tales of George MacDonald."

"I love immaculate, rigid, antiquated forms where every bit of fat is cut off, so tight and perfect you couldn't stick a pin in it, but within which you can be as free as you want. And I'm not an innovator—that's not my talent. I've just taken what's there and tried to show what else you could do with it. Like the picture-book form, which requires an extraordinary condensation of feeling and words. It should last just a few minutes for the child, since most children have very short spans of interest. But I personally love the art of



Opposite: *The Man in the Moon*; George MacDonald's *Light Princess*. This page: de Monvel's "The Wolf and the Lamb" and Randolph Caldecott's "And the Dish ran away with the Spoon" from *Hey Diddle Diddle*



condensation, squeezing something big into its pure essence.

"I'm an artist who does books that are apparently more appropriate for children than for anyone else, for some odd reason. I never set out to do books for children—I do books for children, but I don't know why. And, to me, the greatest writers—like the greatest illustrators—for children are those who draw upon their child sources, their dream sources—they don't forget them. There's William Blake, George MacDonald, Dickens . . . that peculiar charm of being in a room in a Dickens novel, where the furniture is alive, the fire is alive, where saucepans are alive, where chairs move, where every inanimate object has a personality."

"There's Henry James, whom I would call a children's book writer, why not? He would have dropped dead if you had said that to him, but his all-absorbing interest in children and their relationships to adults creates some of his greatest stories. Just the way he allows children to stay up and see what the grown-ups are really doing. In *What Maisie Knew*, children are constantly mixing in the most deranged adult society, and they're permitted

to view and morally judge their elders. It's like a fantasy come true. It's like Mickey not wanting to go to sleep in order to see what goes on in the Night Kitchen. James' children stay up at night, too. Maisie hardly says anything, but we all know what she knows, and we see her know it."

"Finally, there's Herman Melville. I wanted to write something that had the same title as a book by Melville, but I couldn't call it *Moby Dick* or *The Confidence Man* or *Typee*. It had to be something a little vaguer. Finally I hit on *Pierre*. I needed a rhyme for the name, and that's how I came up with *Pierre's* favorite line: 'I don't care.'"

"It's the two levels of writing—one visible, one invisible—that fascinate me most about Melville. As far down as the whale goes in the water is as deep as Herman writes—even in his early works like *Redburn*, which is one of my favorite books. The young man coming to England for the first time . . . I swear, I'll never forget that walk he takes in the English countryside. There's a mystery there, a clue, a nut, a bolt, and if I put it together, I find me."

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE: THE MEADOW

HERE'S A THEME THAT APPEARS in much of your work," I say to Maurice on my last visit to Connecticut, "and I can only hint at it because it's difficult to formulate or describe. It has something to do with the lines: 'As I went over the water/The water went over me' [from *As I Went over the Water*] or 'I'm in the milk and the milk's in me' [from *Night Kitchen*]."

"Obviously I have one theme, and it's even in the book I'm working on right now. It's not that I have such original ideas, just that I'm good at doing variations on the same idea over and over again. You can't imagine how relieved I was to find out that Henry James admitted he had only a couple of themes and that all of his books were based on them. That's all we need as artists—one power-driven fantasy or obsession, then to be clever enough to do variations . . . like a series of variations by Mozart. They're so good that you forget they're based on one theme. The same things draw me, the same images. . . ."

"What is this one obsession?"

"I'm not about to tell you—not because it's a secret, but because I can't verbalize it."

"There's a line by Bob Dylan in 'Just like a Woman' which talks about being 'inside the rain.'"

"Inside the rain?"

"When it's raining outside," I explain, "I often feel inside myself, as if I were inside the rain . . . as if the rain were my self. That's the sense I get from Dylan's image and from your books as well."

"It's strange you say that," Maurice answers, "because rain has become one of the most potent images of my new book. It sort of scares me that you mentioned that line. Maybe that's what rain means. It's such an important ingredient in this new work, and I've never understood what it meant. There was a thing about me and rain when I was a child: if I could summon it up in one sentence, I'd be happy to. It's such connected tissue. . . ."

The connecting tissue in the work of Maurice Sendak is the continually experienced awareness of the deepest child-self. "I don't believe, in a way, that the kid I was grew up into me," he once told Nat Hentoff. "He still exists somewhere, in the most graphic, plastic, physical way. . . . I communicate with him—or try to—all the time. One of my worst fears is losing contact with

him. I don't want this to sound coy or schizophrenic, but at least once a day I feel I have to make contact. The pleasures I get as an adult are heightened by the fact that I experience them as a child at the same time. Like, when autumn comes, as an adult I welcome the departure of the heat, and simultaneously, as a child would, I start anticipating the snow and the first day it will be possible to use a sled. This dual perception does break down occasionally. That usually happens when my work is going badly. I get a sour feeling about books in general and my own in particular. The next stage is annoyance at my dependence on this dual perception, and I reject it. Then I become depressed. When excitement about what I'm working on returns, so does the child. We're on happy terms again."

A little boy once wrote Maurice a letter that read: "How much does it cost to get to where the wild things are? If it is not too expensive my sister and I want to spend the summer there. Please answer soon."

The "wild things" are, of course, the feelings within us, and if we lose contact with them and with our childhood being we become defenders of the Social Lie and the forces of death, as we mouth platitudes about "reverence for life." But life demands us to defend not denatured human beings but rather transformed and transforming boys and girls, men and women. The psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich knew this when he wrote his great visionary oration in *Cosmic Superimposition*:

"Outside on the meadow, two children in deep embrace would not astonish or shock anyone. Inside on the stage, it would immediately invoke police action. Outside, a child is a child, an infant is an infant, and a mother is a mother, no matter whether in the form of a deer, or a bear, or a human being. Inside, an infant is not an infant if its mother cannot show a marriage certificate. Outside, to know the stars is to know God, and to meditate about God is to meditate about the heavens. Inside, somehow, if you believe in God, you do not understand or you refuse to understand the stars. Outside, if you search in the heavens, you refuse, and rightly so, to believe in the sinfulness of the natural embrace. Outside, you feel your blood surging and you do not doubt that something is moving in you, a thing you call your emotion, with its location undoubtedly in the middle of your body and close to your heart."

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