

Where the wild things are

Richard Gottlieb analyses Maurice Sendak's fascinating 1963 picture book, on the eve of its cinematic release

'I only have one subject. The question I am obsessed with is How do children survive?' Maurice Sendak (Marcus, 2002, pp.170-171).

According to the writer Francis Spufford, *Where the Wild Things Are* is 'one of the very few picture books to make an entirely deliberate, and beautiful, use of the psychoanalytic story of anger' (Spufford, 2003, p.60). For me, this book and Maurice Sendak's other works are fascinating studies of intense emotions – disappointment, fury, even cannibalistic rage – and their transformation through creative activity.

The book

Maurice Sendak's works have enormous popular appeal and have been purchased and read by tens of millions of adults to their children over the years. Published in 1963, *Where the Wild Things Are* is the first and best-known part of what Sendak described as a trilogy. Although just 10 sentences long, it has become acknowledged as a masterpiece of children's literature, inspiring operas, ballets, songs and film adaptations (the most recent of which is released this month). Barack Obama recently told a White House crowd that *Where the Wild Things Are* is one of his favourite books. It inspired some to suggest that 'it is perhaps time to separate [Sendak] from the word 'children's' and deal with his work as an explorative art, purely and only seemingly simple' (Braun, 1970, p.52).

As the lavishly illustrated book opens, we meet the main protagonist, Max, a young boy armed with a very large hammer. He is wearing his wolf-suit and making mischief about the house. This includes chasing the dog about with a fork. His mother, never seen in the story, is unsympathetic and shouts at Max that he is a 'WILD THING!' Max responds by shouting back, 'I'LL EAT YOU UP!' Because of this, he is sent to bed 'without eating anything'. In his bedroom, Max's rage continues, but soon trees begin to grow from the floor and the walls begin to disappear. His room becomes one with a surrounding forest. Max walks through the forest, coming soon upon a 'private boat' that he takes across the ocean to 'where the wild things are'. Wild things appear from the jungle, bearing sharp, pointed teeth and menacing claws. Max's Wild Things are threatening, too, but he confronts and dominates them and becomes their king, commanding them to commence a wild, orgiastic

romp in which he joins them. He commands them to stop the 'wild rumpus', sends them off to bed without their supper, and begins to feel lonely, wanting 'to be where someone loved him best of all'. He smells 'good things to eat' from 'far away across the world', and journeys home, leaving the wild things, 'into the night of his very own room, where he found his supper waiting for him, and it was still hot'.

Unspeakable concerns

Sendak's art addresses our deepest, frequently repressed, often unspeakable concerns about ourselves and our loved ones. Often it speaks to children and to the adults who read to them from a place of anguished inner struggle, struggle that had rarely been directly addressed in children's literature prior to Sendak. In straightforward, undisguised fashion, Sendak's work has addressed problems as monumental for children as being in a rage at mother, relating to a depressed or emotionally unavailable mother, or coming to terms with a mother who



Sendak's art addresses our deepest, frequently repressed, often unspeakable concerns

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cannot or will not recognise her child's concerns or state of mind. He manages nonetheless to maintain the optimistic view that all of these troubles can be tamed, even if not fully overcome, through imagination. The ultimate magic of his work resides in his presentations of imagination, dream, fantasy and – ultimately – art itself as sources of resilience, of the strength to soldier on.

Sendak's work in *Where the Wild Things Are* is of particular interest to psychologists due to his strikingly unusual abilities to gain access to, and to represent in words and pictures, fantasies that accompany childish rage states. It is this capacity, I believe, that contributes to the appeal of his work to children who are unable or unwilling to articulate these states, and to adults who have forgotten them or do not wish to know about them. The other two books in the set show similar insights.

In a pair of interviews with Leonard Marcus (Marcus, 2002; the interviews were in 1988 and 1993), Sendak said, 'I call those three books – *Wild Things*, *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), and *Outside Over There* – a trilogy. They're all about one minute's worth of distraction. One noise in the kitchen had Mickey doing a weird thing. One temper tantrum, one wrong word, causes all of the wild things to happen; one minute's dreamy distraction allows the kidnapping in *Outside Over There* to occur' (pp.170–171).

But there is much more that binds these three works. Each begins with a child in a rage (in two of the books it is clear the rage is at his mother); the rage is characterised in part by destructive, orally configured fantasies; the child's rage triggers a poetic function in the child, resulting in an altered state of consciousness in which occurs a dream, fantasy, or act of artistic creation; the poetic process serves to modify and transform the initial rage and conflict over it, bringing about a reconciliation within the enraging person and restoring the child's capacity to continue the relationship. Ultimately, all three books are about the transformative power of poetic function in children and adults, including, apparently, Sendak himself.

So let's run through *Where the Wild Things Are*, stressing the oral imagery, the rage that initiates Max's creative process, and his reconciliation – again expressed as warm food – with his mother. Sendak has explained that Max's mother was not in a good 'mood'. That is why she

'screamed' at Max instead of responding to his shenanigans empathically. In a better mood, Sendak suggests, she might instead have said, 'Darling, you're hilarious. Come give Mamma a hug.' It is mother's emotional unavailability, a recurrent Sendak theme, that triggers Max's rage and sets the narrative in motion. We also cannot fail to observe that Max is clothed as a predator, a wolf, a familiar cannibalistic image, and that he chases his dog about with a fork. The idea of intimates treating one another as food

"Sendak's art addresses our deepest, frequently repressed, often unspeakable concerns"

organises much of the story. When mother calls Max 'Wild Thing!', he responds that he will eat her up. To this cannibal threat

she retaliates by depriving him of both mother and his supper. In his bedroom, Max enters an altered state. Whether it is a dream, daydream, or fantasy cannot be determined with certainty, but what is clear is that he imagines a world of devouring monsters replete with flesh-tearing 'terrible claws' and sharp, gnashing teeth. These 'wild things' are transparent representations of Max's enraged intention to 'eat up' his mother. Max then masters his inner demons, in what Joseph Campbell has called 'one of the greatest moments in literature'.

As Moyers (2004) remarks, '[t]hat is a great moment because it's only when a man tames his own demons that he becomes the king of himself if not of the world'.

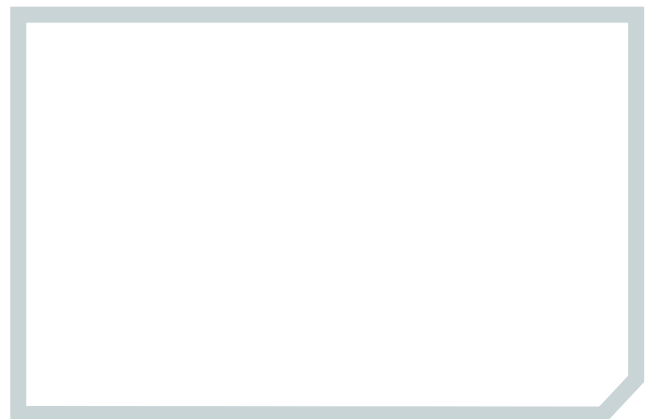
Having done so, Max is drawn by the smell of food – representing maternal bounty – to return home. There he finds that his mother still loves him, having left his dinner in his room. The final demonstration of her love is that his dinner 'was still hot'.

I doubt that there are many readers of this story who would question that Max's struggle is about losing and winning his mother's love, cast in the imagery, feel, and smells of food – in other words, a story of breast lost and breast found again. But, to set to rest any lingering doubts about these propositions and about the author's intentions, I present as the clincher a preliminary drawing for the book's final scene that I found in the Rosenbach Library (see above). In this preliminary drawing, Sendak clearly let himself go!

Mother, who is present only as a voice in the published volume, is here in the flesh. She is undressed to the waist, her generous and large-nippled breasts gloriously and deliciously drawn exposed. For Sendak, surely this sketch must have been an act of whimsy, never intended for publication. But it makes clear as nothing else could the bodily fantasy that informs the story of what Max lost, became concerned he would destroy with his teeth, and in the end regained.

The child and the man

Art was Sendak's means of 'recovery' from his own childhood; his published works represent his gift to all children. By his own accounts, Maurice Sendak's childhood was filled with misery. Born in Brooklyn in 1928, he was the youngest of three children. His parents, Phillip and Sadie, had emigrated from *shtetls* in Poland before the First World War. The families they left behind, although never known firsthand by young Maurice, had a great influence on the emotional tone of his childhood. 'My father's entire family was destroyed in the Holocaust. I grew up in a house that was in a constant state of mourning,' he said in an interview with Leonard Marcus (Marcus, 2002, p.172). He has described his mother as 'disturbed' and 'depressed' and has alluded frequently to her lack of emotional availability, her



Preliminary drawing for *Where the Wild Things Are*. Pencil on tracing paper. © 1963 Maurice Sendak. All rights reserved. Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia.

preoccupation, and her chronic sadness. Death was a constant presence, if not as a fact then as a fantasy, worry, or deep concern. Maurice himself was a sickly child. He suffered from scarlet fever, and his parents worried about his dying from that disease or another. Their sense that he was physically fragile, alive by the

grace of God but endangered, was an enduring influence on his development.

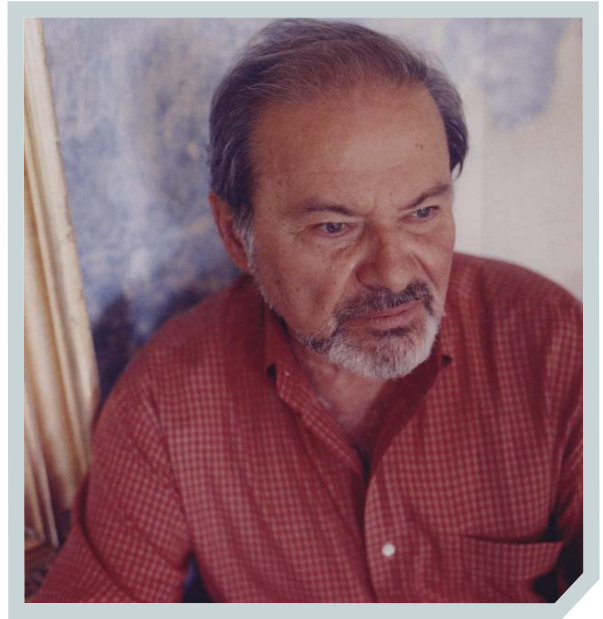
The year Maurice was born, his father suffered a severe financial reversal and 'lost every cent he had' (Braun, 1970, p.42). The morning of Maurice's bar mitzvah, his father received news that his family had been wiped out by the Nazis. Phillip collapsed in grief and had to be propped up by Maurice's mother and brother during the ceremony. Maurice recalls having been enraged 'by these dead Jews who constantly infiltrated our lives and made us miserable' (Marcus, 2002, pp.172-173). Sendak has said that his models for drawing the Wild Things were his Jewish relatives who used to visit his family weekly when he was a child. They terrified him, and he dreaded their visits, because it always seemed to him that they might eat everything the family had. They also threatened him directly, he recalled, when they would pinch his cheek and tell him they would eat him up.

Sendak and psychoanalysis

For our purposes, it is especially noteworthy that Sendak was in psychoanalysis for a period during his

early adulthood. He certainly counted psychoanalysts among his closest friends. His partner of 50 years, who died in 2007, was a psychoanalyst. Rumour has it that the wolf suit that Max wears in *Where the Wild Things Are*, was modelled on a pair of pyjamas that belonged to the young son of a close psychoanalyst friend.

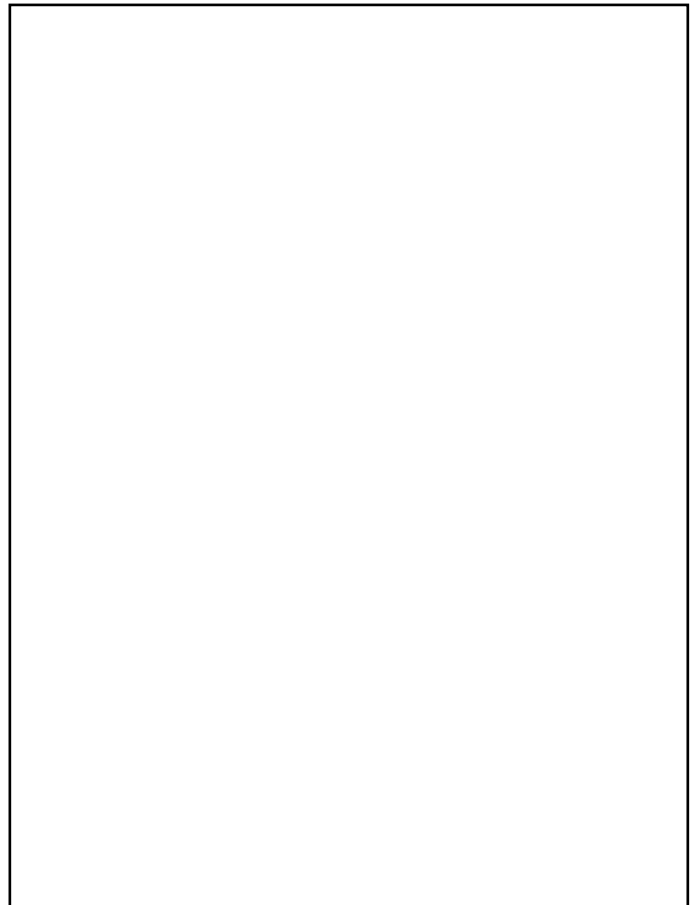
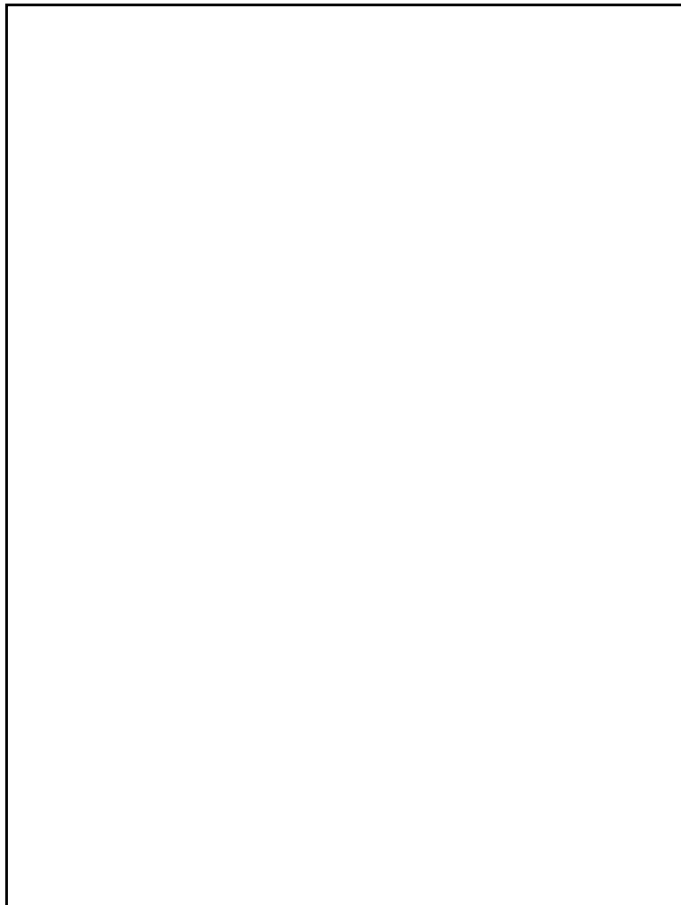
Lanes (1980) reported that, when he was 27, Sendak was 'undergoing' psychoanalysis. I would speculate that he sought this treatment because of a depressed mood; possibly he felt isolated, as well, and his sexual orientation may have been problematic at the time. But one must remain uncertain about all these matters, as they never come up in published accounts of his life or in any of his myriad interviews. I also discern some suggestion that he was aware of an inhibition that at the time prevented him from producing a work entirely his own – both the words



Maurice Sendak

and pictures. *Kenny's Window*, entirely his own work, was produced after he had begun therapy and was partly dedicated to his analyst.

Sendak's interest in psychoanalytic techniques also allows us an additional insight into the mind that created *Where*



the Wild Things Are. Beginning around 1952 (he was 24-years-old), Sendak created what he called, variously, 'fantasy sketches', 'stream-of-consciousness doodles', and 'dream pictures' while listening to classical music. His aim was not unlike that of a patient in psychoanalysis, consisting, he wrote, of 'letting whatever came into my mind come out on the paper, and my only conscious intention was to complete a whole "story" on one page... beginning and ending, if possible, with the music itself.' He said that some of these were 'purely fantastic meanderings that seem to roam carelessly through the unconscious' (Sendak, 1970, Introduction). Clearly he viewed these sketches as free associations, and they provide a kind of raw access to aspects of Sendak's fantasy life that is present but less readily apparent in his finished work. To the psychoanalyst, a patient's free associations are the silt from which we laboriously pan for our gold, that gold being knowledge of our subjects' unconscious imaginings and the configurations of their minds.

Examining these sketches, as I did in Gottlieb (2008), we again find reflections of Bertram Lewin's ideas about oral psychology (Lewin, 1952, 1953, 1954) – the wishes to eat, to be eaten, and to sleep. Cannibalistic fantasies again feature prominently, with themes of devouring and regurgitation. We also find pleasurable and painful moods, the former expressed by ideas of floating and flight.

How do children survive?

There is a remarkable thematic coherence to much of Sendak's work, and this coherence links creative efforts that are decades apart and, additionally, links these works to what is known about his early life and formative years. Sendak himself has commented on his single-minded focus, saying, 'I only have one subject. The question I am obsessed with is How do children survive?' But it is more than mere survival that Sendak aspires to, for his children and for himself. He asks the question of resilience: How do children surmount and transform in order to prosper and create? It is tempting to imagine that Sendak conceives of the trajectory of his own life and art as a model for the way he has handled these questions in his works.

In each of the three books of the trilogy, Sendak explores the child's problem of an unavailable or inaccessible parent. The most traumatic circumstances – according to Sendak – are the rages children feel toward the very persons whom they love and depend upon, rages

that threaten to disorganise themselves and disrupt vital sustaining relationships. In two of the books, this happens because that parent is possessed by a mood state, and in the third it happens because she (and he) are otherwise engaged – most likely with each other. Parent and child (and the relationship between them) are threatened with destruction, in two books by clearly cannibalistic means, in the third by becoming frozen, lifeless, inanimate. Sendak has a remarkable close and conscious acquaintanceship with a wide variety of oral-cannibalistic fantasies, including modes of devouring and being devoured that are not available to most of us.

These disappointments, losses and, most important, destructive rages are some of what children need to 'survive'. In Sendak's books, survival results uniformly from fantasy, imagination and creative activity carried on in such altered states of consciousness as dream and

daydream. The stories have happy endings, at least for now, in which it is clear that positively toned relationships can continue. How wonderful it must feel to a child once alienated from a parent to return home to find that his dinner is waiting for him and it is still hot!

So, 'How do children survive?' It would seem that Sendak's answer must include the power of art (including fantasy, dream and daydream). The child transforms otherwise crippling traumatic circumstances into his (or her) very means of survival, growth, and positive maturation. They go to where the wild things are. They conquer them, and then they return.

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On space, time and wild things

and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are.

'In and out of weeks and almost over a year'. On the hundreds of occasions I have read *Where the Wild Things Are*, that turn of phrase has got me every time. It seems so strange, suitably dreamlike yet so apt: as if Sendak has truly nailed a human universal that we are somehow relatively unaware of. Recent psychological research gives us some insight into what this might be.

On an intuitive level, it makes sense that our mental representations of space and time are linked. We see time 'mapped' out in front of and behind us; we talk about rearranged events being moved from one day to another, as if through space. And psychological research seems to confirm that the two models are heavily linked, to the point where modifying one has a knock-on effect on the other. For example, Frassinetti et al. (2009) found that people wearing prism glasses that shift everything to the right overestimate the passage of time, while people wearing left-shift glasses underestimate it.

Sendak makes these links more explicit, with Max sailing 'through', 'in and out of' and 'over' time. But even more intriguingly,

Sendak appears to have chanced on an even more specific relationship. When Max gets in his boat, he is angry. New research from David Hauser and colleagues (2009) has showed that people with an angrier temperament are more likely to think of themselves as moving through time, than to think of time as moving towards them! You can test this on yourself by considering which day of the week a meeting has changed to, if it was originally planned for Wednesday but has been moved forward two days. If you think it's now changed to Friday, then you're someone who thinks of themselves as moving through time, whilst if you think the meeting is now on Monday, then you're more passive, and you think about time passing you by.

Hauser et al. (2009) also found that provoking anger makes people more likely to see themselves as moving through time. Conversely, thinking about moving through time can induce anger. Perhaps it is not surprising that by the time Max reached the end of his journey, he was face to face with his wild things!

Now of course it is unlikely that Sendak was consciously aware of these types of psychological relationship when he penned those words. But it is another indication that Sendak's mind is well-tuned to such matters, and that his work is of particular interest and relevance to psychologists.

Jon Sutton (Editor, The Psychologist)