

The Artist and the Library Brand: Maurice Sendak's Reflections on the Meaning of the Murals of Max and the Wild Things at Richland Library

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It was Christmastime of 2011, a few months before he would pass away on May 8, 2012, that I received a call from Maurice Sendak, beloved artist and children's author. Sendak granted me permission to interview him regarding the depiction of Max and the Wild Things from *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), in murals located in the children's room of Richland Library Main in Columbia, South Carolina. The murals are scaled-up paintings derived from selected illustrations in the book. At the time of the interview, I was engaged in research on the use of branding to promote the public library, and I wanted to understand how the images in the murals expressed the brand, or generally speaking, how the murals might create an emotional bond between children and the library. Some of the insights Sendak offered when I spoke to him that day can be found in other interviews and scholarly sources. However, his comments regarding the murals, as well as his thoughts on the Wild Things and Max, may be useful towards enlarging our understanding of the function of the images in this context, and increasing our general knowledge of *Where the Wild Things Are*. As far as I am able to determine, this would be Sendak's last formal interview¹ and the last time he would publically delve into the meaning of *Where the Wild Things Are*, one of the most celebrated works in children's literature.

Sendak's place in the pantheon of international children's literature was secured when he received the first Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1970 and the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for children's literature in 2003. *Where the Wild Things Are* has sold millions of copies and has been translated into numerous languages. It is possible that the Wild Things are among the most recognized characters in children's literature around the world.

With Sendak's cooperation, the illustrations, upon which the murals are based, were chosen from *Where the Wild Things Are* by interior designer Don Palmer, a member of the architectural team that developed and built Richland Library Main. The Chief Architect was Eugene Aubry. The painting and installation of the murals was done at Sendak's direction by Michael Hagen and his associate. Both Palmer and Hagen were interviewed for this paper.

As the interview shows, Sendak was deeply concerned about the integrity of the public image of his work and did his best to monitor the Sendak "brand." In fact, early in his career he had even considered working in advertising.

Branding is being used in libraries throughout the United States and Europe because of the economic challenges of the times; librarians, library staff, trustees, and administrators are attempting to advocate more effectively for library services in a climate of reduced resources and budget cuts (Hariff & Rowley, 2011). Yet, branding is an elusive concept. Supporters of the library are trying to better articulate its brand in an age in which both words and images are necessary to persuade the public that there is still a need for this institution. However, marketing is not foremost in the mind of the average librarian, who is busy helping patrons and has little time and resources to dedicate to publicity.

Branding

Branding is a technique derived from the business world, where it is commonly employed for strategic purposes in advertising, public relations, and marketing. It is a way of creating positive associations with the “product,” which is branded, often through visual imagery. Branding is usually done through the development of messages and images that produce and reinforce favorable feelings and is closely related to storytelling. Branding is put forward here as another way of understanding what the various architects, designers, librarians, and artists were attempting to accomplish at Richland Library in terms of the reactions to and perceptions of the library they wanted to inspire.² Branding literature sometimes describes the desired user-product relationship in terms of feelings, such as that of love (Ahuvia, Batra, & Bagozzi, 2008, p. 342). In libraries, branding is essentially about building a relationship with patrons.

The murals of Max and the Wild Things have been part of the brand of Richland Library Main since its opening on Valentine’s Day, February 14, 1993, when they were first unveiled to the public. That day was purposely selected because of its reference to the brand of the library, which was then symbolized by the image of the heart and depicted in promotional materials and media as rooted in love (Hinshaw, 2003). For example, children who visited libraries in the system were given promotional items, such as stickers, with the phrase “I ♥ My Library” on them.

Branding is closely tied to visual culture, “[s]ince culture can often be divided along linguistic lines, the visual language of logos, icons, brand images and visual media like television, the Internet, and film has become the new global language” (Armstrong, para. 4). Brands are created for products and services to signify “what they are and what they do” by those who fashion the brand, using the system of words and images, which make up that language (Hariff & Rowley, 2011, p. 346).

In 1950, the American Marketing Association (“AMA”) defined a brand as a “name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competition” (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 368). And so branding is about developing ways of more effectively communicating benefits. In a 1998 review of the literature on branding, de Cheratony and Dall’Olmo Riley, leading marketing scholars, found that a brand could be understood as a (1) a logo, (2) a legal instrument, (3) a company, (4) shorthand (a concentrated way of representing the product), (5) a risk reducer (from a performance, financial, time, social, and psychological perspective), (6) a positioner (something which insures recognition), (7) a personality (such as celebrity or the type of people who use the product), (8) a cluster of values, (9) a vision in the minds of those who manage the brand, (10) a value adder, (11) an identity, (12) an image, (13) a relationship, and (14) something which is evolving. The public library is much more than just another business enterprise; it has a rich history and many important cultural aspects and so needs a simple, clear, and yet nuanced brand, reflecting it’s unique social dimensions, mission, and values. Furthermore, it needs to attract parents as well as children in order to successfully accomplish that mission.

The Richland murals exist because of the combined efforts of several people, especially its visionary former director C. David Warren (Crumbo, 1995). However, as the interview shows, it was Maurice Sendak’s friendships with two Columbia, South Carolina librarians, Augusta Baker³ and Ginger Shuler,⁴ which are the main reasons they are located at the Main library in the first place. Shuler, who had known Sendak for a number of years, came up with the idea of using the Wild Things in a mural.

The murals are collectively comprised of large-scale mock-ups of two two-page panels from *Where the Wild Things Are*. Sendak was protective of his creative works. Nonetheless, at various times he used the Wild Things to brand and market a number of products, including games, toys, and various other items (Schiller and David, 2013, p. 179). Yet he resisted utilizing them in “mass-media advertising, including television” for many years until the Bell Atlantic campaign of the late 90s, which featured the Wild Things helping people navigate the wilds of telephony (1997, para. 5). Sendak was sensitive about commercializing the images of the Wild Things for various reasons including that they were inspired, in part, by his childhood experiences of his “Jewish relatives,” who had escaped the anti-Semitism of pre-World War II Europe, before much of the rest of his father’s family perished there in the Holocaust, which is briefly alluded to in the interview.

The Library

The Main Library, where the murals are located, is the architectural gem of the city of Columbia. Its central atrium rises four stories above a below-ground, “garden level” where the children’s room is located. Palmetto and ficus trees are planted on this level, on the interior sides of two of the library’s massive walls, which are almost entirely comprised of transparent green glass. These same glass walls make up the northern and eastern boundaries of the building. The floors of the library are stacked in such a way as to create a large space above the children’s room that reaches to the top of the building; this space is broader at the bottom but narrower at the top, so that patrons can look down into the children’s room from balconies that overhang it. Some of the trees along the eastern side of the parallelogram-shaped building are strategically placed in front of the largest of the three murals, which, because it is showing the characters of the Wild Things and Max in a jungle, gives the mural a three-dimensional effect.

The experience of riding down the escalator to the entrance area of the children’s room subtly evokes the feeling of entering another world. At the bottom are located two stand-alone murals, each displaying one half of the same scene or panel from the book *Where the Wild Things Are*. “Pylons” was the word originally used by the architect Palmer to refer to these paired murals; however the term “gateway murals” is used here to avoid confusion with “a tower for supporting either end of usually a number of wires over a long span” (the common British definition).⁵ The two gateway murals are spaced sufficiently far apart to form a kind of entrance or portal to the children’s room.



Fig. 1. Entrance to Children’s Room. Image Courtesy of Richland Library

The group on the left gateway mural depicts two drowsy Wild Things, while the group on the right gateway mural shows a pensive and lonely Max, sitting in front of his tent, wearing his wolf suit and crown; next to him is the Minotaur-like Wild Thing Bernard. As Don Palmer observed, the purpose of the gateway murals is to signal to children that they will soon be entering the children’s room and that this is their “space.” Furthermore, according to Palmer,

Sendak said that because the gateway murals have both a front and back, it was necessary for him to draw the backs of the Wild Things, which was the first time that he had done so. In the process of drawing the backs, Sendak discovered that one of the Wild Things was female. Sendak also authorized the painting of a column between the gateway murals to look like the end-papers of the book, which shows the vegetation on the island of the Wild Things. The physical layout of the characters mirrors the sequence in which they appear in Sendak's book – resting or drowsy Wild Things are encountered first at the entrance, followed by rumpusing Wild Things inside. And so the gateway mural scenes appear to be located where they are in order to inspire curiosity and reduce the anxiety of young visitors. In a sense, by stepping through the entrance, the child enters into the story of the Wild Things.

The images of the drowsy Wild Things and Max at the entrance of the children's room are in marked contrast to the rumpusing Wild Things and Max shown in the 45' long "main" mural on the far wall, in which the Wild Things and Max hang from the branches of the trees on the island. This mural is denominated herein as the "main mural" because of its size and centrality and to simplify references to it for the reader. The main mural is opposite the entrance and consists of a complete panel, not split in two like the gateway murals. The library's collection of children's books and other library-related items are located between the main mural and the gateway murals.



Fig. 2. Image of Main Mural Courtesy of Richland Library

The main mural of the Wild Things is displayed in an environment, which possesses a park-like feel because of the trees, as well as a set of benches and couches for patrons, placed in front of it. Perhaps this slightly diminishes the wildness of the Wild Things but fits well with the rows and rows of orderly bookshelves, standing before the main mural. Sendak liked the park-like atmosphere of the children's room, a difference from the isolated island on which the Wild Things were originally shown to live. And certainly, the Wild Things are in a different scenario here than in the book. At Richland Library Main, Mickey is not seen chasing his dog, invoking the wrath of his mother, being sent to bed without his supper, or returning from his exploits with the Wild Things to find his supper still "hot" (Sendak, two page panel 18).

The Interview

Where the Wild Things Are (1963) contains some of the earliest attempts in children's literature to represent the intrapsychic challenges of the lives of children. Anger, frustration, and the complexities of parent-child relationships, can be found throughout its pages. At Richland Library, Sendak allowed the story to be retold in a different way. In contrast to the original version, instead of an island jungle, books and other library materials are on the proverbial "center stage" of this "set" or story. Thus, there is also a new purpose here, though the characters are essentially the same. One of Sendak's closest associates, the set designer Michael Hagen, confirmed that the library itself is the most important part of the design of the children's room, and that Sendak wanted the library experience of the children who visited the children's room to be enhanced by the murals.

When asked how the main mural, featuring the scene of Max and the Wild Things hanging from the branches of trees, might "work," the interior designer Don Palmer, observed that the images of Max and the Wild Things "charm children... they just charm them because they are intriguing little figures" and no one knows how or why this happens or whether they might lead children to read books; rather it is a "mystery." Palmer believes this "charming" phenomenon occurs because Sendak had a rare ability to understand children. The murals work because, as Palmer noted, he [Sendak] "thinks like a child." Sendak seems to allude to this phenomenon, which may even touch upon children's darkest fears, and which may be at the core of what is so appealing about the story of the Wild Things, when he notes in the interview that "[t]here is something about animals that is totally fascinating, and what they do is for a reason that has to be done." Sendak's comments may reveal his consciousness of death, most notably in his remarks about lions, which could have been symbols of transformation in keeping with the theme of oral incorporation found throughout his oeuvre.⁶

In *The Art of Maurice Sendak; 1980 to the Present* (2003), the playwright Tony Kushner, a close, personal friend of Sendak, offered an interpretation of the scene presented in the main mural, which may illuminate the effect behind the images of Max and the Wild Things on the viewer:

One of the central images from *Where the Wild Things Are*, arguably the most famous illustration in all of Sendak's oeuvre, is a case in point. Max and the Wild Things are shown swinging through the trees. In fact, they're actually hanging like breadfruit from those Typee palms, ripe and pendant and perpendicular to the ground. In his more casual sketches there are wonderful instances of the successful creation of the illusion of movement.... The illustrator supplies an image for what the text describes or implies, but the illustration does not supplant the reader's imagination, which remains the only force capable of animating the characters, the landscapes, the sky. The illustration does not animate. It provides, in a sense, another inanimate text, in need of a viewer/reader to fill its sails and to set it moving (p.97).

Thus, it could be expected that the characters in the murals at Richland Library also await the infusion of the imaginative power of the library's young patrons to animate them. At Richland Library, the images of Max and the Wild Things are no less in need of that "quickener," which brings characters in books to life, which Sendak described in his work on the art of illustration, *Caldecott & Co.*, as an "essential quality in pictures for children's books" (p. 3). It would seem that Sendak wanted to attract the children who encounter the images and draw them more deeply into the story (or, in this case, the library). Perhaps some light may be shown on how he does this through Tony Kushner's analysis of Sendak's design(s) for the theater and stage, concerning which Kushner provided the following statement:

The animated stage before you ceaselessly retranslates itself into the pages of a book . . . Returned to their creator's natural habitat, the page, his sets become what the works of most stage designers could never be: spectacular illustration . . . his drawing's desire to return to the pages of books, or perhaps to satisfy the bibliohunger of his devoted bookish fans." (2003, p. 98)

Thus, Sendak's set designs refer back to the pages from which they came. Perhaps in a similar manner, the young patrons of the library are led away from the images of Max and the Wild Things in the murals to the books and stories found in the children's room.

The chief objective of this interview was to find out, as much as possible, what Sendak wanted the murals to mean to children and what brand or

connections and feelings he wanted to engender through those images. As indicated in Ginger's Shuler's description of the history of the murals in *Maurice Sendak: A Celebration of the Artist and His Work*, during the first presentation of the architectural models of the murals to Sendak by the representatives of the library, he remarked that they "define the space," which is, incidentally, the classic goal of branding (p. 207). In the case of Richland Library the murals of the Wild Things not only serve to create a themed environment, which can be appreciated by children, but they also subtly encourage the child to explore the magical experience that reading brings.

Generally speaking, in Sendak's work the children he depicts must escape from the difficult situations in which they find themselves in order "to master the uncontrollable and frightening aspects of their lives" (Sendak, 1988, p. 152). In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max rebels but then leaves the island of the Wild Things because he is hungry and lonely and really has no other choice; he is like so many other children who have no better place to go than the transitory realms of dreams and fantasy. Max was Sendak's "dearest creation" and a hero to him (Sendak, 1988, p. 152). Once a very sickly boy himself, Sendak did not feel safe when he was a child. Max is the brave boy Sendak yearned to be, who is energized by his confrontation with the dangers of the jungle. Max's origin can be found in Sendak's early life experiences, including his memories of his brother, and even in popular fictional characters, such as Mickey Mouse. It could be said that the murals are Sendak's way of inviting children to come and play in the library with Max and learn more about him. It appears to have been Sendak's hope that the children who encountered Max would love him as much as he did and that they too would fall in love with the library.

As noted in Sendak's May 8, 2012, obituary from the New York Times, he was "[w]idely considered the most important children's book artist of the 20th century, who wrenched the picture book out of the safe, sanitized world of the nursery and plunged it into the dark, terrifying and hauntingly beautiful recesses of the human." He was one of those rare artists in history, whose work functioned as a vehicle for socio-cultural innovation, ushering in new approaches, paradigms, and ways of thinking.⁷ Sendak somewhat curiously claimed that he did not write for children, but through the images he created, we learned to value and think more deeply about their dreams, fantasies, and imagination, even when those thoughts are "scary." His images also mean that what is frightening to us cannot only be conquered, but can also be both a source of love and be loved. In the human psyche, love can neutralize, as well as transform, what is fearful. This is the power of love over fear; in this interpretation of the story, Max knows the truth about the Wild Things - that they would never really hurt but only love him; as Sendak suggests in the interview when asked what the Wild Things

represent: "...they represent the kind of decent strength: we love you so, we can eat you up, but we're not really going to eat you up; we're just going to love you."

Conclusion

Maurice Sendak wanted to be known for more than his "Wild Things"; he still yearned to say something meaningful through his art in a time in his life when he suffered much because of the loss of so many close to him. He cared deeply for the children and adults who loved his work, despite his "old codger" reputation, which he seemed to nurture with some delight. And he obviously cared about the public library.⁸ Through the Richland Library murals, he allowed a place to be set aside where children could re-encounter his most cherished characters in a way that also showed them the value of an institution which is necessary for a good and decent society. And so it is possible that other approaches to understanding both his most celebrated work, as well as how public institutions can build relationships with children, may be found here. Each subsequent adaptation of Sendak's original story, whether it be in film, on the stage, in print, or other media, has been an invitation to meet Max and the Wild Things again, and yet Sendak always made sure that his brand said something honest and worthwhile and true about the experiences of children. In this retelling, the Wild Things are, as Sendak said, "what they are and where they are. And anything more would be too much." The message of the Wild Things and Max therefore simply has to do with love, affection, and the pleasure of freedom, which is what the rumpus in the library is all about.

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Endnotes

¹ Gary Groth recorded a telephone conversation with Sendak for The Comics Journal #302 in 2012, published on February 13, 2013.

²There have been many brands associated with the library over the years, including, but not limited to, "RCPL spells," "myRCPL," "A(ugusta) Baker's Dozen," "1431 at RCPL," "Growing Readers," "The Wild Place," "Books to You: Homebound Service," "Friends of RCPL," "The Link at Ballentine," "The Literary Vine," and "@ your library," which is the ubiquitous library brand promoted by the *Campaign for America's libraries*. According to the ALA Web site, the *Campaign for America's libraries* is "[t]he American Library Association's public awareness campaign that promotes the value of libraries and librarians" (para.1). It should be noted that Richland Library was formerly known as Richland County Public Library, a name change which occurred as part of its rebranding a few years ago. And so the library is referenced using the former name or its initials (RCPL) in the interview.

³ Augusta Baker was a prominent African American storyteller, who encouraged Sendak as a young author, including having him speak to the children at the public library in Harlem, where she worked as a children's librarian. She was also one of the first black administrative librarians in New York, and was appointed as the Storyteller-in-Residence at the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS), University of South Carolina, from which she retired in 1994. Baker and Sendak's friendship led him to agree to give Richland Library (RCPL) and SLIS permission to use the chef character(s) from *In the Night Kitchen* (1970) to brand the storytelling festival held annually in Columbia, S.C. known as "A Baker's Dozen," honoring her.

⁴ Ginger Shuler retired from Richland Library (RCPL) in 2011 after 35 years of service.

⁵ Pylon. 2015. In *Merriam-Webster.com* Retrieved from <http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pylon>

⁶Examples might be the lions in *Pierre* (1956) and *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* (1967). In *The Art of Maurice Sendak* (1984), biographer Selma Lanes wrote “the persistence of lions in the artist’s work may well bear some dim relation to the number of MGM movies he saw from the age of six. Sendak himself says he was afraid of dogs as a small boy and the lion may well represent that fear. Lions of course have been known to eat people and are classic symbols of aggression” (p. 3).

⁷ An example of another artist, whose work was a vehicle for social or cultural innovation, might be the Northern Renaissance painter Jan van Eyck (1390-1441), who helped moved the focus of art away from religious themes to those of the ordinary life of the merchant class.

⁸ Sendak was an autodidact, who learned his craft to a great extent on his own, as well as through other artists and the resources of the public library. Toward the end of his life, as part of the Campaign for the Ridgefield Library, the public library in his hometown, he provided the following quote, courtesy of Ridgefield Library Assistant Director Mary Rindfleisch: *“It was in a library, the soul of society, that my imagination and my life were colored and forever changed. As a child, I felt that books were holy objects, to be caressed, rapturously sniffed, and devotedly provided for. I gave my life to them. I still do. I continue to do what I did as a child; dream of books, make books and collect books.”* Maurice Sendak, Honorary Chair Campaign for the New Ridgefield Library, Spring 2010.