

Interview with Maurice Sendak

by Patrick Roughen, North Carolina Central University

The following interview with Maurice Sendak occurred during Christmastime of 2011. The purpose of the interview was to explore the meaning of the murals of Max and the Wild Things, located in the children's room in Richland Library Main, in Columbia, South Carolina. The murals are scaled-up paintings derived from selected illustrations in *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sendak's most famous work. The murals are the only instance where Sendak gave permission for the images of Max and the Wild Things to be used in public art. Before beginning the formal part of the interview, transcribed below, Sendak asked that his greetings be conveyed to a friend, who lived in South Carolina, where the interviewer was also located. Sendak was recovering from pneumonia at the time, but his mind seemed undiminished by age or illness. It would be a few short months before he would pass away on May 8, 2012. As part of its rebranding, in 2012, the Richland County library system changed its name from Richland County Public Library (its acronym was "RCPL") to Richland Library and so the previous name and acronym are used here.



Image courtesy of Richland Library

Patrick Roughen: Okay. The environment that the characters are in, in the children's room at RCPL - the murals - is different from where they were originally placed in books, in the format of books. And my understanding is that when you created the book that the paper was important, the spaces on the side, everything about the images and pages is important. And you're welcome to correct me if you want to.

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Maurice Sendak: Yeah, go ahead.

Roughen: But we have a completely new set here.¹ I know you've had operas of the Wild Things... What are your thoughts in general about the Wild Things [and] particularly, vis-à-vis this library, in the children's room of RCPL? What do you think of them in general, and in particular that they have become an identifying icon² of the children's section?

Sendak: Well, mixed feelings. Mixed feelings. I'm glad that they still work for kids, and they still work for even grown up people. The fact that I can't really check on everything that's happening with them, I can't. When the film came out, I was avid in being able to choose a director because I did not want a Disney version of *Where the Wild Things Are*. So, you work out, checking things out as best you can, but they eventually get too hard. It gets too hard. And I don't have an assistant so I have to do that by myself. I, I feel like I'm falling behind. I know that [I] have friends like Ginger³ who will always make sure that things are right, but it worries me that she's retired because who is doing it now? And, I see things happening in the publishing world that are very, very depressing for me. And I think, "is it because I'm an old man or is it because things are tasteless and rude and hard to live with these days?" And I think, frankly, that is the answer.

Roughen: Mr. Sendak, what's a proper environment for the Wild Things?

Sendak: A proper environment?

Roughen: Yes, as opposed to being on a plastic [money] card.⁴ Is the library where they have them set up [in] murals on the wall [with] the two on each side as you go in, ... there's the sleepy Wild Things as you go in, but the child can see in the back of the library, the mural of the Wild Things... swinging through the trees?

Sendak: Well I mean pictorially that's what I want them to see. I don't necessarily want them on cards. I don't necessarily want them on any other as you would put it environmental place other than swinging freely on walls and in the book. They don't belong anywhere else. There would be no murals there at all if not for Ginger and her enthusiasm and Ms. Baker,⁵ who is no longer in existence. But my little time in that town and the affection that I was greeted with made it environmentally a happy place for the Wild Things to live. And I like when pictures come from children, when they draw these incredibly funny pictures of Wild Things and Max. They belong to the kids, and that's all great. What more can a person ask? I would like anything that is unexploitative that has nothing to do with money, that has nothing to do with cashing in, and has nothing to do with making money off the Wild Things. I could have had a more successful film if I'd let them do what they wanted to-- hold on for a second please... [Sendak pauses to speak to someone]

Sendak: Sorry.

Roughen: That's okay. Would you like them to be experienced differently in the library, in the children's library, than they are in the book?

Sendak: No, I'd like them just to be what they are and where they are. And anything more would be too much. The film⁶ had no songs in it and no chipmunks in it, and Disney would have had a fit, and I would have had a fit if Disney had done it. But I make sure that as best I can that the artists involved in any wild thing-ish thing are people who really love them and don't love them because they can benefit financially from them. That's all I can do.

Roughen: For the child who has never been exposed to the creatures, the things, when a little child comes into that library and sees the group of sleeping Wild Things on either side of the entrance⁷ and when he looks up and he sees in the distance the ... Wild Things, swinging through the trees, what experience would you hope in your heart that that child would have?

Sendak: The pleasure of freedom.

Roughen: "The pleasure of freedom."

Sendak: The pleasure of freedom. Because the Wild Things are having a hell of a good time. And that's really as little and as much as one could hope from life is to be ethical and enjoy things for themselves and not because they cost that much or this much or because they will bring money to anybody. The Wild Things have really never sold themselves down the river, nor have I. And thus it must be. If that changes you put your talent into jeopardy, and I still hope to do some more books before I die, but if I shouldn't and can't it will still be work that is done from the heart and not for the wallet.

Roughen: One other thing I'm curious about the Wild Things - in a sense people identify the children's room where they live in Columbia and the library with that library. They make a special place in their heart for the Wild Things there. And I'm asking about identity now, the sort of the deeper, the essence, the meaning that everyone who lives here who has been exposed to them and falls in love with that library, do you have any thoughts about them as an identifying icon so to speak?

Sendak: Well I would hope that they love them for all the right reasons and they do represent freedom and pleasure and affection. That's all they are out there for. That's all they are out there for.

Roughen: So when I read ...psychoanalytic interpretations⁸ of the story, that's not necessarily there?

Sendak: It just means those people don't have anything better to do.

Roughen: Than write this...

Sendak: Yes, they're so boring. Not because I didn't bother trying to understand them. What was there to understand? It was an emotion, it was a feeling. I was a young artist. No, too much has been said about them. That is all tiresome and not to the point.

Roughen: I think that the library here has been very respectful in the use of their images, and I just wanted to mention that. Like I said though, one can't help but encounter them from time to time in the public place. You can't help from encountering them. Are they the only places that you have allowed...

Sendak: Yes.

Roughen: ...them to be used as public art?

Sendak: Yes. Can you imagine how tempting it is to rip them off?

Roughen: Well, for somebody who is in that position.

Sendak: Yeah.

Roughen: Uh-hum.

Sendak: Yeah. I mean there was somebody who called and wanted to use them in a restaurant, and one of my lawyers said "You can't use them in a restaurant." And the person said "Of course I can, he's been dead for at least ten years." And I thought it's easy to check up on me whether I'm alive or dead and know that you can't do anything, you can't do anything, whether I am alive or dead. But there are people out there who are merciless, they want something. I can't stop them. I'm not interested in following each and every case. I want to work. I want to read, I want to be alive.

Roughen: The character of Max, I wanted to ask you, is that a composite of you and your brother as children?

Sendak: In a way. It's not as self-conscious as that, it's not as pointed as that. It's just the way things were. I miss him very much and as though he just went around the corner to buy something and hasn't come back. I've never known a person like him, and I was terrifically lucky to be in that family with a brother and a sister who were so loving and giving and everything. I will never stop missing them.

Patrick Roughen: I can understand that, very much so. When you wrote the original book, my understanding was part of it [came from] some of your relatives [who] are used to craft some of the images, some of your memories.

Sendak: Yes.

Roughen: Would you say there's actually a scary component to that?

Sendak: Of course, of course. Isn't there a scary component to just being alive every day?

Roughen: Yeah, surviving.

Sendak: Just hearing about... reading the paper this morning, and reading about the man who was so busy texting while he was driving that he caused the death of two children.

Roughen: I'm sorry to hear that.

Sendak: But you know that's what the world is all about. Insane people doing things that are terribly risky.

Roughen: But Mr. Sendak, it's also about truth and beauty and love as well.

Sendak: Yes... but it puts everybody in danger that's what worries me. It puts everybody in danger.

Roughen: So the Wild Things are the dangers that a child could encounter in the world?

Sendak: Yes. And they love him so much they would eat him up.

Roughen: Right.

Sendak: That's what love is. I remember my parents and people in my family say "Oh we could just eat you up!" And ... all adults say that. Children are so literal-minded, and it's such a funny conception that they could take that seriously, but they do.

Roughen: Did you have a lot of fear when you heard them say that?

Sendak: No, I knew I could punch them out.

Roughen: Okay. <laughs>

Sendak: No, I knew that in the end they would wait for my mother's dinner.

Roughen: They would wait around. They wouldn't eat you. <laughs>

Sendak: <laughs> No they would not eat me.

Roughen: But it caused you some fear at some point?

Sendak: Well, I didn't know whether it was real or not? How do we know?

Mostly the books and most books for children avoid those issues, the misunderstanding and the confusion of language and what it means to children and those children who take it too seriously. But see we don't do that in our books about children. We don't investigate them. [Inaudible] characters, mostly they are commercial characters. I find the profession very, very disagreeable now. I find books commercial, mostly driven by the sale of books to parents and grandparents. Kids don't have money...we all know that. And so they are totally dependent on the tastes of older people, and people's taste is not great.

Roughen: Yeah. I'm curious - the issue of conquering fear. Where did the idea of looking into the eyes come from? Just spontaneous that that's how you master fear is to look it in the eye?

Sendak: Yeah. Yeah, it's something we were told as children. Like stare down what frightens you. It's a very innocuous weapon I'm afraid but then short of having no weapons at all then you might as well have innocuous ones. So there was that business of staring. There was a lot of staring in joke books and comic books and stuff that we read, and it was a funny idea.

Roughen: And a child who goes into RCPL's children's section, initially, will see the Wild Things on either side are sleeping, they are resting, why is that? Why are they resting? Do you remember how right when you first go in the entrance there's two sort of standup free-standing murals of the Wild Things, and they are sleeping a little bit and they are very, very non-aggressive looking.⁹

Sendak: Well, my favorite [animal in] all the world, [is] the lion. I only watch animal shows on TV. I don't watch people shows. And, something was said about that, that amused me very much, was about how lazy a male lion is. The female does the hunting. The female does the chasing and then when she has accomplished the need of killing an animal for food, then the male gets up and stretches and comes over and eats. He doesn't do a bloody thing. And there's something so amusing about this great big, gorgeous animal lying down with a thud and sleeping through a chase whereas the poor wife or girlfriend or whatever, does all the work. I've always, and I've always loved that lion quality of being able to sleep anywhere, everywhere. You just drop. Who's going to hurt you if you're a lion? I think it came from my love of lions.

Roughen: ...[A]re they resting after they have eaten so to speak?

Sendak: Well I wouldn't get that close to the subject. I don't know. <laughing>. You can make them do whatever you like.

Roughen: Do you remember *Wild Kingdom* by Marlin Perkins?

Sendak: Of course.

Roughen: Oh, I wish he was still on.

Sendak: He was a white-haired gentleman.

Roughen: Yeah.

Sendak: Yes, I remember him very well.

Roughen: There was something always very calming to me about that show.

Sendak: Well the shows they have now are not calming at all, but they are about animals, and I prefer what animals do to what people do. There are some things that are incredibly cruel like male lions killing the cubs that a previous male had produced on his female so that they can have their own cubs and yet from their point of view, it's a serious matter. They have to get rid of those cubs. There is something about animals that is totally fascinating, and what they do is for a reason that has to be done. There is no false reason. There is no lying. There is no cheating. There is no bullshit like we have in this country and every country.

Roughen: Yes.

Sendak: With freedom comes a clear conscience.

Roughen: Right.

Sendak: What will be done that's cruel, will be done. It will never be done just for the - there is no pleasure in cruelty.

Roughen: Are the Wild Things going to help protect us, do you think?

Sendak: We have to do the job of the Wild Things.

Roughen: We do the job for them.

Sendak: We have to.

Roughen: But they represent some kind of power don't they?

Sendak: Yes, 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. It's a quiet strength. It's a moral strength, which we seem to, as human beings, seem to have lost. And as I watch these animal movies there are some things that really bother me a lot and hurt to look at. But I know that they do it because they must. There is no killing for pleasure. There is no cheating for pleasure. There is no backhanding or nonsense. Life is tough for Wild Things and for ordinary folks like us.

Roughen: For all of the things that you've created, are all of them basically good do you think, your characters?

Sendak: I have to believe they are. I have to. I believe in goodness even when I'm reading terrible news. I have to. Don't you?

Roughen: Right. What do we learn from the Wild Things about how you should treat people? What does a child learn?

Sendak: Well to control your most savage impulses. We love you so we can eat you up, but they don't eat him up.

Roughen: And he knows that, right?

Sendak: And he knows that.

Roughen: Okay.

References Cited

- Holt, D. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press.
- Sendak, M. (1970). *In the night kitchen*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Sendak, M. (1963). *Where the Wild Things are*. New York: Harper & Row

Endnotes

¹ *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) has been adapted to various formats, including those associated with stage, screen, and even electronic media, such as computer animation; in fact, one of the early experiments in CGI involved the efforts of now well know director John Lasseter, then a young animator at the Walt Disney Company, and the 3D animation of the character of Max. While Sendak provided original material for the Richland murals in the form of sketches of the backs or reverse sides of some of the Wild Things, there are only two known and documented murals in Sendak's hand (1) the Chertoff mural, originally painted on an apartment wall in New York City, but recently moved intact to the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia, where it is preserved, and (2) a mural featuring cherubs in the bathroom of a home where Sendak once stayed in the town of Brewster on Cape Cod. Neither of these two murals included depictions of the Wild Things. Sendak produced the second mural, which has since been painted over, in the 1950s, and the Chertoff mural was created in 1962. The Chertoff mural was made for the children of the family of the same name; this mural was painstakingly moved from the wall of their former apartment, overlooking Central Park, and it included images of children, a bear, and a lion, and Sendak's beloved Sealyham Terrier, Jennie, who appeared in much of his early work. Murals of the Wild Things were once also located at the Sony Metreon, a large entertainment complex built in San Francisco, and in the Please Touch Museum, in Philadelphia; these murals appear to have been destroyed. In 1995, the Rosenbach presented a joint Sendak exhibition with the Please Touch Museum, in which case the images were graphically enlarged through a technical process. These images depicted some settings and characters from *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). The Metreon murals were also fabricated in a more industrial way than the Richland murals. The preceding information on other murals associated with Sendak courtesy of Patrick

Rodgers of the Rosenbach Museum & Library; see also “Brewster Couple Seeks Assistance in Preserving Rare Sendak Murals,” *Cape Codder*, 28 Feb. 89: 4-5.

² This interview was part of the research on branding I was doing as a Ph.D. student. The term “identifying icon” is not my own but was suggested by Dr. Patricia Feehan of the University of South Carolina. With respect to the use of the term, some brands may be invested with “iconic” meaning; as Douglas Holt noted in *How Brands Become Icons*:

The iconic brand is a historical identity whose desirability comes from myths that address the most important social tensions of the nation. For identity brands, success depends on how well the brand’s myth adjusts to historical exigencies, not by its consistency in the face of historical change. (Holt, 2004, p. 38)

The Wild Things tapped into the concerns of the nation’s children by openly addressing in a picture book, for the first time, issues related to anger and their deepest anxieties, which also suggests why they might still work for children and be appealing to them.

³ Ginger Shuler retired from Richland Library (RCPL) in 2011 after 35 years of service.

⁴ The reference here is to a money card the interviewer saw in a bookstore, which he shared with Sendak. Sendak explicitly granted permission to the Richland Library to incorporate the Wild Things on its library card as part of his legal agreement regarding the use of the images. Patrons can still select a library card with the Wild Things on it, but other choices are now available.

⁵ 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. The friendship between Baker and Sendak led him to agree to give Richland Library and SLIS permission to use the chef character(s) from *In the Night Kitchen* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) to brand the storytelling festival held annually in Columbia, S.C. known as “A Baker’s Dozen,” thereby honoring her.

⁶ The reference here is to the film adaptation of *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) directed by Spike Jonze and released in 2009.

⁷ On either side of the entrance to the children’s room are located two stand-alone murals, each displaying one half of the same scene or panel from the book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). In this “split” scene we see drowsy wild things and a lonely Max sitting outside of his tent after a night of rumpusing. This split scene forms an entrance of the children’s room and is in marked contrast to the rumpusing wild things and Max shown in the 45’ long “main” mural on the far wall of the children’s room, in which the Wild Things and Max hang from the branches of the trees on the island.

⁸ The author does not believe that Sendak was disputing the validity of alternative interpretations of his work or saying that multiple levels of meaning to his stories do not exist. In fact, as Sendak himself remarked in an interview in 2007 entitled “Sendak on Sendak” for the Rosenbach Library & Museum, “when you hide another story in a story, that’s the story I am telling the children.” Sendak briefly discussed his experience with psychoanalysis at a later point with the author. Sendak’s comment probably had more to do with protecting the brand and the Wild Things than anything else.