



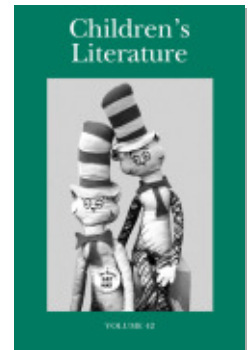
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Elizabeth N. Goodenough

Angels and Wild Things: The Archetypal Poetics of Maurice Sendak, by John Cech. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

Although the 1890s are often seen as a period of nostalgic escape, during which the cult of the child reached a pinnacle of sentiment, childhood in the 1990s has become a last frontier, as brutal and bucolic as mythologies of the American West. Neil Postman and other social critics lamented the disappearance of childhood in the 1980s, but the exploitation of the child as a cultural motif underscores today how eagerly adults seek their wholeness through this liminal figure. As our sense of endangered nature becomes acute, children embody freedom, possibility, and primitivism; they provide perspective on what Gaston Bachelard calls “antecedence of being.” Shortly after the Academy Awards celebrated the trusting heroism of Forrest Gump, who never forgot what his mama told him, the full horror of the Oklahoma bombing was telescoped for Americans by the limp body of a bloody infant pulled from the inferno. In the televised aftermath of this tragedy, adult mourners clutched teddy bears and recalled Janet Reno’s ironic rationale for the raid of Waco—“to save the children.” As we slouch toward the year 2000, futuristic fantasies of the mid-century (now veering toward ecological apocalypse) are less empowering than travels taken inside and backward to that time before time of fairy tales—like Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (1990) and Clarissa Pinkola Estes’s *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1992)—or to an elusive and enigmatic private beginning like David Mamet’s off-Broadway “Cryptogram,” which dramatizes the emotional abuse of a ten-year-old from his own perspective.

An important prototype for such journeys is the astonishing and extended “confrontation with the unconscious” recorded by Carl Jung at age eighty-one in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961). Although Harvard researcher Richard Noll, in a recent *New York Times* article, called the Swiss psychologist “the most influential liar of the 20th century,” accusing him of falsifying data in order to advance

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his belief in the collective unconscious, Jung's 1941 essay "The Psychology of the Child Archetype" is useful in explaining the urgency of the "wounded child" and the suspense of "earth in the balance" to New Age spirituality. His insights, as John Cech's *Angels and Wild Things* demonstrates, are also remarkably helpful in accounting for the career of Maurice Sendak, the world-renowned children's illustrator, author, creative designer for opera, ballet, theatre, and film, and the founder of the national Night Kitchen Theatre for children. Having remapped the "emotional and visionary terrain of childhood" (7), Sendak has, like his "masters" William Blake and George MacDonald, expanded the boundaries of children's books and recast the child as a symbol of transformative energy.

Centering his engaging study on Sendak's literary children—Rosie, Pierre, Max, Mickey, Ida, Mili, Jack, and Guy, "children of the streets and of the clouds"—Cech situates this illustrator of more than eighty books and winner of both the Caldecott and the Hans Christian Andersen Medals within the cultural climate of the past four decades. He indicates how the sudden changes that distinguish Sendak's work grew out of "a mosaic of influences" that range from Mozart to Mickey Mouse and include the English illustrators, the "crappy toys" and "tinsel movies" of his youth, advertising slogans, brand names, and the social and political upheavals of the post-World War II era. Thus one finds in Sendak's various styles and juxtapositions a fusion of "the refined and the commercial, the polite and the populist, the stuff of comics and glitzy movies and the black and white, pen-and-inklines of the serenely classical" (3).

Cech's book as a whole focuses on the "eight essential works" over which the artist exercised complete control and locates the genesis of these projects in Sendak's self-described obsession and "great curiosity about childhood as a state of being": "how all children manage to get through childhood from one day to the next, how they defeat boredom, fear, pain, and anxiety and find joy. It is a constant miracle to me that children manage to grow up" (19). *Angels and Wild Things* shows how the four features Jung identified with the child archetype—abandonment, invincibility, hermaphroditic qualities, and the child as beginning and end—permeate Sendak's books as they deal with such once-taboo subjects as "explosive anger, frustration, the polymorphous realm of dream and psychosexual fantasy, intense sibling rivalry, existential angst, death" (7).

Cech's book builds on the growing body of academic criticism as

well as on Sendak's collected writings on children's books and popular culture, *Caldecott & Co.* (1988), to move beyond Selma Lanes's reverential retrospective, *The Art of Maurice Sendak* (1980), and Amy Sonheim's Twayne survey, *Maurice Sendak* (1991). Cech aims to define the "complex ecology" of Sendak's imagination, to get at the "unique energy" or "soul" of his art. Its synthesizing, multifaceted approach is well-attuned to an illustrator who composes his sketches to music. Linking inner and outer realities, it animates the artist's former studio in Greenwich Village, his current one in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and the multilayered world in which he grew up in the 1930s and 1940s as the son of Polish Jews in the "melting pot neighborhoods" of Brooklyn. Then in a wide-ranging narrative, which often demonstrates a "Proustian unfolding" like the instances from the past it opens to view, it traces the familial thread that Sendak draws between Ida and Mili to connect all the fictional infants and children into an Ur-story of the author himself. Cech uses Rosie's evolution into a public performer, for example, to mirror Sendak's own "steady rise to stardom" (43). Sketchbook drawings of this Dead End Kid (1948) and the bleak realism of early drafts of *The Sign on Rosie's Door*, along with unpublished notes from the 1950s, provide striking contrast to Rosie's appearance in the book, which was finally published in 1960. And comparing these earlier incarnations with the increasingly confident, open, take-charge Rosie of the 1975 animated film (initiated after the creator had earned international recognition) and the 1982 Broadway musical "Really Rosie" illuminates how this artistic career germinated from inside. Sendak's undiminished popularity, the critical interest he attracts in his sixth decade, and the fresh directions his work is now taking are thus integrated with the survival, even the flourishing, of the Brooklyn child fantasist/artist/shaman within. Asked about his qualifications to direct a new production of *Peter Pan* at Sundance Institute, Sendak joked: "I still have an unruly and tire-some 4-year-old in me" (25).

The rounded perceptions and dynamic balance Cech lends his subject are especially apparent in chapter 4, a tour de force on "Max, Wild Things, and the Shadows of Childhood," which rightfully occupies the heart of the book. Arguing that the prophetic energy embodied in Max was for picture books the "aesthetic equivalent" of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which revolutionized modern music in 1913, Cech sketches a moment when "the spirit of the times and the creative spirit of the artist were in complete harmony" and

together produced “a work that challenged its readers and other creators of picture books to fundamentally change” (110). Quoting Jean Cocteau, Ursula Le Guin, and Anthony Storr, he compares Max’s “wild rumpus” to films and rock songs of the 1960s and 1970s, Jim Henson’s Muppets, and contemporary works by Ezra Jack Keats and Dr. Seuss. Formulating the status of *Where the Wild Things Are* on mythic grounds, he casts the book as a “living mythology” that did not invent the monster fantasy—now a subgenre of picture books—but reconnected juvenile literature with its roots in the American literary tradition of the good bad boy, the feral child in Rudyard Kipling and Edgar Rice Burroughs, and such ancient myths as Romulus and Remus. Tracing the fantasy sketch “Where the Wild Horses Are” (1955) to the “outrageous rage” that led Sendak into psychoanalysis and memories of his Brooklyn aunts and uncles (“for the monsters *are* our relatives”) and to the rituals and “necessary games” that children perform, this chapter effectively celebrates fantasy as healing and the spirit of the child as a guide to the unconscious.

As persuasive as the argument is that the Sendakian Child is father to the Man, those resistant to the idea that myths are universal and precultural will question whether Sendak’s characters—variously described as European, ugly, “little greenhorns just off the boat,” “hurdy-gurdy, fantasy plagued kids”—draw on an archetypal child that gives “a universal shape” to their concerns (93). In returning to his own childhood, does Sendak “inevitably” take “adults back to theirs” or make it “possible for children to fully claim their own”? In a country this diverse, does he “help give American culture, from the mid-1960s on, a way to perceive its early childhood” (6) or touch everyone with his “universal reach” (5)? Sendak himself allows for the child who hates his book and throws it in the trash. Like the overused term *archetypal* (by which Jung refers to “essentially unconscious” phenomena that elude rational analysis), such claims seem at odds with the subtle texture of this learned book, with its sensitivity to etymological roots and verbal precision.

Cech’s taste for language and psychological nuance is finally what makes this book rich and satisfying to read. Consistently well written, it is packed with arresting allusions and vignettes that cause us to rethink our cultural assumptions about childhood. Cech effectively guides the reader through the last half century of American juvenile literature, theories of child development, and the influence of ancient mythologies on Western art, science and religion. His digres-

sions on such topics as the Wild Boy of Aveyron and the child artist Hermes, the emergent tradition of fantasy in American culture, and the ancestral roots of the nineteenth-century chapbook and miniature are detailed yet concise. The index and extensive bibliography make such unassuming erudition readily accessible for the student and researcher.

Beyond getting permission to reprint illustrations, obvious problems arise when a writer tries to capture a celebrated contemporary in print. As Sendak told an interviewer in 1970, "You'll find me quite verbal but I lie a lot." Although a darker side of Sendak and his wily, quirky genius come through in the objects he has collected and in moments when he speaks for himself, this complex man is portrayed at times as a mythic character who slips easily behind the mask of the romantic artist. One is left wondering about his isolated life, his insomnia, his early heart attack, and his self-description as "a notoriously unhappy young man." Yet Cech's readiness to take on a subject who is still in the process of becoming may account for the powerful appeal the idea of the child generates throughout this volume, dropping, as George MacDonald put it, "out of the everywhere, into the here" (20).

Even if a work like *Hector Protector* leaves one cold, this study makes it possible to revisit the entire Sendak corpus and to appreciate its unusual resonance and coherence. The airborne Mickey of *In the Night Kitchen*, like his female counterpart in MacDonald's *The Light Princess*, may seem distantly related to the less buoyant vision of childhood offered in *Outside Over There* and *Dear Mili*. Yet Cech's Blakean focus on how art makes "instants hold eternities" and his attention to "timeless conditions in the lives of children" provide a unifying context for this discussion of the "baby-crazed decade" of the 1930s and the Lindbergh case, angelic putti of Renaissance and Romantic imagery, the changeling child of folktales, attitudes toward toddler nudity in Europe and America, and the representation of infant waifs with AIDS or malnutrition.

Jung stated that the appearance of the child in myth or dream prefigures future developments; in an individual's or a society's consciousness. This archetype, he noted, is "a personification of vital forces quite outside the limited range of our conscious mind. . . . It represents the strongest, the most ineluctable urge in every being, namely the urge to realize itself." John Cech first encountered Sendak in Francelia Butler's class at the University of Connecticut, where,

as a young graduate student and recent father, he found a spirit entirely different from his graduate seminars (5). The brief inclusion of Cech's own identity theme effectively evokes the late 1960s, when *Where the Wild Things Are* was new and, "with *In the Night Kitchen* ready to make its appearance, anticipation was in the air, the same kind that crackled whenever the Beatles were about to release a new album" (5). Cech's fascination with an irreverent and hilarious children's writer adds yeast to the unusual mix that makes *Angels and Wild Things* a testimony to how an artist's work takes on a life of its own and, as Jung says, "outgrows him, like a child its mother" (20).

Finally one has to appreciate the style and immense care with which this book has been put together. Images ranging from an eighteenth-century view of alchemists stirring in their kitchen to King Nebuchadnezzar as a fifteenth-century wild man and a Winsor McCay comic strip complement ten color plates by Sendak and scores of his figures. The inclusion of so many unpublished drawings and preliminary designs along with an explanatory text provides a virtual exhibition catalog for the Sendak holdings at the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. Illustrations, large and small, at chapter openings and endings, are, like the well-chosen epigraphs for each chapter, wonderfully congruent with narrative. Together they reflect a passion worthy of Sendak's for the physical properties and visual possibilities of the book as artifact.

Works Cited

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