Born to be Wild

Children’s illustrator and storyteller Maurice Sendak’s writing is on the wall.

September 1, 1999 Interview by David Drake

When the elevator doors open on the fifth floor of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) 12-story building in downtown Manhattan, the unmistakable *Where the Wild Things Are* images that greet you—Max steering his ship, a sleepy half-moon strung with stars and, of course, a beast or two—immediately make you forget the long, hot summer on the 11 other floors of this troubled AIDS organization. Since 1951, Maurice Sendak’s cherished drawings have led us to a place in our collective imaginations where, well…the wild things are. Now they also guide us into the Child Life Program room, where Sendak, a longtime GMHC donor who has produced more than 80 books, has created a wall-sized mural of his most celebrated scenario, plus a three-dimensional floor-to-ceiling tree under which dozens of kids meet daily to eat lunch, play games, draw, watch TV or just let loose and, as Sendak’s story goes—do some wild rumpus-ing! Some of the kids have HIV, others have parents who are GMHC clients. All have been affected by the epidemic, which is why GMHC asked Sendak to contribute his most feisty imagery. The result is a visual triumph: an environment that energizes its inhabitants to deal with the difficult realities of their lives.

David Drake: *Where the Wild Things Are*—one of the top-10 bestselling children’s books of all time—was a source of controversy when it was first published in 1963. Several psychologists saw it as too “dangerous” for young minds—Max being so defiant with his mother.

Maurice Sendak: I’ve been a carbuncle in the children’s book world since I began, practically. Now, at 70, everyone rushes to me and says, “Oh! Your books are classic! Classic!” America is so vile. Just live long enough in this country and you turn into Helen Hayes…or Charlton Heston.

God forbid.
I think I’ll choose Helen.

Good choice.
So now I’m a “classic.” In other words, now I can get away with murder ’cause they don’t know what to do with me. Like a tick on a dog’s ass, they can’t get rid of me until the dog dies!

I understand that the first book you owned as a child was *The Prince and the Pauper*,

and that you loved it so much that you chewed the cover and slept with it at night. GMHC volunteers told me a similar story about the kids and your mural—that they sometimes attack it! Did you construct it so they could attack it?
Attack it, lick it, grope it, suck it, whatever they want.

You've been accused of writing about inappropriate topics, such as sensuality and morbidity, in your children's stories.
I don't think anything is inappropriate to children, except for things that arbitrarily frighten them, or describing the sex act to a child who doesn't know what sex is yet. But largely, there is nothing inappropriate, because kids are confronted every day with inappropriate things. Television is an inappropriate thing. You have to watch about babies being thrown out of windows and horrible stories about the president and his sexuality. And nobody stops to explain that! So to accuse me of frightening children is ridiculous—when I introduce any such subject, I carefully craft it so children are not frightened. *I* don't like to be frightened. So why the hell would I frighten anybody else?

One of the most frightening realities for kids at GMHC is dealing with HIV. Over the years what have you learned about kids and the subject of death?
Children hide their curiosity about death because they know how much it frightens their parents when they ask questions about it. Probably the first vivid thought in any child's mind is, "What do I do if Momma or Poppa dies? Who's gonna take care of me?"

Do you think parents with AIDS should talk to their kids about these things?
No question.

Regularly?
Of course. To explain what's happening to them.

That probably takes place in the room you created.
I hope so.

And how might parents with HIV talk to their children about it?
Be as fervently honest with them as one possibly can. If you're dying, tell them you're dying. Explain it as best you can. We don't understand it any better than children do—we're as frightened of it as they are. It's our responsibility to make children comfortable with it so that afterward they remember—in their bitterness or unhappiness—that the dead parent made every effort to comfort them and be honest with them. I think *that* is essentially it—to allow them to express their mixed emotions.

It must be unbearable for a dying parent to put up with a child's rage, like, "I hate you for dying. I hate you for being sick." But you have to live through that and tolerate that, and still embrace the child and allow that this outbreak of anxiety and rage is normal. Even though you're suffering at the end of your life, you must give yourself to the child. You must allow for their outrageous behavior. Not indulge it, but *allow* for it.

In creating the room, did you consciously use imagery that allowed them to let go of those emotions?
I hope so. But I can't be certain I've achieved that. How could I know? My creative abilities are all crunched together from childhood. I can only recollect from my own childhood, where I had to hide every feeling I had from my parents, and every normal feeling was condemned by *me* as abnormal and inappropriate. Children pick up signals from their parents. It's like blind, deaf and dumb people—they communicate: a look, a hand raised, the shoulder stiffening. And children know: "Uh-oh…"

"Something's going to happen."
Yeah. And that's all stuffed and mushed together. Then you grow up and sort of half-assed remember these painful things, and you're riddled with lies and questions that never got answered about yourself—your body, your mind, your penis, whatever.

But I'm not out to teach; I'm really out to entertain children. Yet in doing so, to say, "Have spirit and spunk and dare to defy your mother," like Max [in *Where the Wild Things Are*]. *Dare*. If she doesn't love you, she won't leave that meal for you. If she loves you, she will. But it's a risk. That is the deep subtext of that book: You've got to take a risk. You've got to hate her—it's normal. You've got to find out if she hates you! A *real* relationship is "she hates you"—yes, she does—for about five minutes. And then…she loves you and gets dinner for you.

Dare to take the risk.
That's life. You mustn't lose confidence in her basic love. Children have to challenge that all the time. They need to be reassured endlessly. And that book is about reassurance.

Just as these kids need to be reassured about the strength of their life.
Of course. I've lived through the whole epidemic, which as we all know continues apace. And with the circumstances at GMHC—children whose lives are shortchanged—there's no time to waste. So for me—having lived through World War II, being Jewish, having my parents' families wiped out in the Holocaust, and then another holocaust later in my life—it's a hideous century. There's no question that this is about the worst century on record. But what do you do? Put your head in the sand? Clog your ears? It's just something you've *got* to do.

All my books are haunted by holocaust, and now my later books will be haunted by AIDS. And it isn't because of morbidity—ironically, it's because of the need to keep it alive. To keep it up front and to stop it. And do whatever we can. I, as an artist, only have a limited means to express it in my work.

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