



Night Kitchen Magic

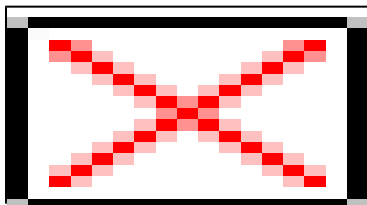
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An extract from **Bookworm: A Memoir of Childhood Reading** by **Lucy Mangan**

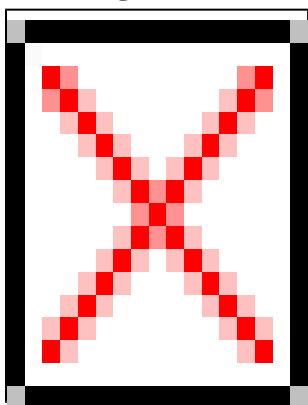


*Lucy Mangan has vivid memories of the books she read and loved as a child, and which still shape her life. In this extract from her new book [Bookworm: A Memoir of Childhood Reading](#) [3], she describes the impact of Maurice Sendak's extraordinary classic **In the Night Kitchen**.*

From the moment Dad first put it into my hands I loved **In the Night Kitchen** without reservation. The story of Mickey's adventures as he falls out of bed, through the starry sky into the mad, nocturnal world of some friendly but committed bakers bent on making him into a Mickey cake until he escapes in a cake plane and goes for a swim in a massive bottle of milk before returning safely home to bed, fascinated me more deeply and in a different way from any book before, and quite possibly since. With its impressionistic style and dreamlike logic it was the first that spoke to my non-rational mind, and the nameless power it held over me almost frightened me. It was elusive, slippery? I knew the story didn't make 'proper' sense and yet, and yet, and yet . . . despite this (I thought then), and because of this (I think now), it was endlessly compelling.

Until **In the Night Kitchen** I had been a purely, almost pathologically rational child (and my mother was always vigilant for signs of whimsy amongst her young) but Mickey opened up another part of my mind, where things could make sense despite not depending on causes, resulting in foreseeable consequences or being wholly resolvable into words. I used to long to visit the night kitchen so much that I wondered whether the force of my desire might one day cause the comic-book-style panels to burst their bounds, swell up around me like the cake batter did around Mickey, and swallow me whole. The thought made me ecstatic and anxious. I wanted to go, but not to leave my family behind. Luckily it never happened. The panels held firm, time and space remained as they should, and I was never forced to make a difficult choice.

In the Night Kitchen was born out of the moment Sendak looked at the rhymes he had selected for a Mother Goose



collection he wanted to illustrate and realised that they were all, one way or another, about

food. Then he remembered an advertising slogan for the Sunshine Bakers that had annoyed him in childhood; 'We bake while you sleep!' it said. The young Sendak 'who remained easily and richly infuriated all his life' thought this was 'the most sadistic thing in the world, because all I wanted to do was stay up and watch!' **In the Night Kitchen**, he once noted with satisfaction, 'was a sort of vendetta book'.

Not that there is any trace of hostility or mean-spiritedness in the book. It is a glorious experience, the book in which you can most feel the truth and effect of what Sendak called his 'dual apperception' 'the way in which all his adult life events were often heightened by the fact that he experienced them simultaneously as the child he had been would too' ('He still exists somewhere [in me] in the most graphic, plastic, physical way?'). Into the kitchen are poured all Sendak's memories of the 1930s films that weren't **King Kong** (everything from Busby Berkeley extravaganzas to screwball comedies can be felt in the New York skyline composed of bags of flour, bottles, shakers, cartons of shortening and in the madcap joy that suffuses everything 'plus, of course, there is that indefatigable trio of Laurel and Hardy-esque cooks, who were animals until Sendak happened across a rerun of the duo's old films while he was working), of visiting the 1939 New York World's Fair (New York itself, he said, was always a magical land forever glittering on the far side of the bridge from his home in Brooklyn), his love of comic books (whose layout, flat colours and bold contrasts **Night Kitchen** mirrors) and the happier elements of his childhood. Instead of mutated relatives, there are authentic, homely period details like the Bakelite radio console (the 'Jennie' written on it is another memorial to his beloved late dog), the fringed curtains and the almost tangible warmth of the kitchen and weirdly cosy domesticity of that reimagined skyline

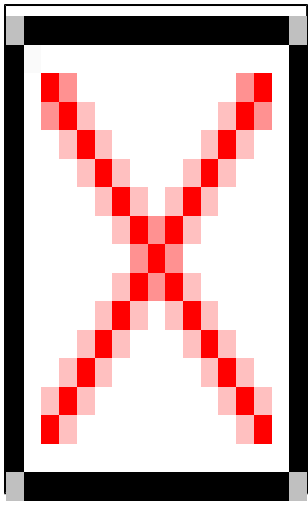
Nothing perhaps illustrates the quintessence of Sendak more than the fact that, although he loved it ('I'm mad for it,' he wrote in a letter to a friend, 'and it's mad?'), he found the book that was most informed by happiness the most painful to produce. 'It comes from the direct middle of me,' he wrote in the same letter, 'and it hurt like hell extracting it . . . birth-delivery type pains.'

As with **Wild Things**, some critics poked their noses into the crib and recoiled at what they found there. One New York reviewer was perturbed by the sensuousness of Mickey's naked wallowing in dough and milk. 'Some', he said, 'might interpret [it] as a masturbatory fantasy.' Hmm. Okay. I guess ... some might.

A German critic wondered whether the dough suit Mickey wears had connections, conscious or subconscious, to 'doughboys' 'as US soldiers and Marines were commonly nicknamed during Sendak's youth, before 'GI' became the popular term during the Second World War' and whether the oven was a reference to concentration camps. Others were simply concerned that, as one put it, 'being baked in a cake is more disturbing than any wild creature?', or with the mere fact of Mickey's nudity (which resulted in several librarians adding hand-drawn nappies to our hero in their institutions' copies). 'Yet parents take their children to museums where they see Roman statues with their dicks broken off,' Sendak once mused. 'You'd think that would frighten them more.'

Like a lot of criticism, this all tended to reveal more about the critic than the subject supposedly under scrutiny. And of course the book sloughed off detractors and has done pretty well in the half-century since. It has sold millions of copies and allowed who knows how many young readers access to a different part of their brains. It has sent them the message that their dream worlds count too and that not everything needs to make sense right now. What a tremendous gift to give a child.

My own child won't give it the time of day. But I read it to him every month or so regardless. Not only is it a Caldecott book, it's Mummy's favourite. He should like it. And by God, we will continue until he does.



This extract is taken from [Bookworm: A Memoir of Childhood Reading](#) [3] by Lucy

Mangan, Square Peg, 978-0-2240-9885-4, £14.99 hbk

Page Number:

18

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