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# Frightened into Being an Artist

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**Maurice Sendak** talking informally.

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I have been thinking lately about the monsters - or fantasies or whatever - that frightened me as a child, and that probably frightened me into being an artist. I can only come up with a few. My parents, of course. The vacuum cleaner, which still frightens me. My sister. A very few ordinary horrors from movies, books, the radio. The Lindbergh kidnapping. And, finally, school, for which I had a desperate loathing.

Aside from my parents - those occasional, and unwitting, monsters - the things that frightened me were mostly unpredictable, which goes to show that those people (myself included) who are determined to know what it is that scares children don't know at all. I think even a child psychologist would agree with that.

What interests me is what children do at a particular moment in their lives when there are no rules, no laws, when emotionally they don't know what is expected of them. In **Where the Wild Things Are**, Max gets mad. What do you do with getting mad?

Well, you're mean to your mother, and then you regret it, and then all becomes peaceful. It will happen again tomorrow, probably, but the problem for children, with their primitive logic and lack of experience, is passing from one critical moment to the next.

In my book **In the Night Kitchen**, Mickey's problem is: How do I stay up all night and see what grownups do, and have the fun that is denied me as a child? The fact that there was such an explosion when the book came out, that it could only appear in some libraries after someone painted diapers on the naked Mickey, seems to me grim testimony to our puritanical attitudes. Apparently, a little boy without his pajamas on was more terrifying to some people than any monster I ever invented.

**Outside Over There** is the most personal of my books, and my favorite. Much of it is based on what scared me when I was little. I remember as a very small child seeing a book about a little girl who is caught in a rainstorm. She's wearing a huge yellow slicker and boots, and the rain comes down harder and harder, and begins to rise and spill into her boots, and that's when I would always stop looking at the book. It scared me too much. I never found out what happened to the little girl.

So **Outside Over There** is partly about that fear. It's also about Mozart, because I love Mozart and also because I was working on my first opera designs - for **The Magic Flute** - when I conceived this book. I set it in Mozart's time, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, the decade he died. So I was thinking of **The Magic Flute**, thinking of a little girl in a raincoat and boots, thinking of the end of the eighteenth century. And I was also thinking of my sister, Natalie, who

is nine years older than I am and who had to care for me. Today she's a very nice lady who lives in New Jersey and has no memory at all of the outrageous behavior that occurred between us. But I, alas, remember everything. It's one of the curses of my profession. I remember her demonic rages. I remember her losing me at the New York World's Fair of 1939. I also remember that she loved me very much. But my parents were both working hard and didn't have enough time, and so I was dumped on her. And that is the situation in **Outside Over There**: a baby is taken care of by an older child named Ida, who both loves and hates the newcomer.

There was a peculiar kind of baby boom in the early thirties. You had the Dionne quintuplets, you had Eddie Cantor dressing like a baby, and Baby Snooks, and, most important, you had the Lindbergh case. That is a memory all middle-aged Americans share, one of the most traumatic experiences of our lives. I remember it. I remember the headlines in the newspaper. I remember the anxiety. Lindbergh was the Prince Charles of his day, and his wife the Princess Di, and their baby a royal prince, a beautiful, blond, charming baby. At that time I was a very sickly child, and very worried about it, mainly because my parents were indiscreet enough to bewail my sickliness and carry on about how long I'd be around.

I learned early on that it was a very chancy business, being alive. Then this disaster occurred: an immaculate, rich baby, living on an estate, surrounded by warriors, you would think - German shepherds, guards, all the rest - on an ordinary evening, on an ordinary March day, this precious baby is taken away. I lived in terror and dread of what might happen to him. I remember Gabriel Heatter, the famous news commentator, reading the baby's formula over the radio, because the baby had a cold and Mrs Lindbergh was worried about his being cared for.

Well, there I am, four years old, sick in bed and somehow confusing myself with this baby. I had the superstitious feeling that if he came back I'd be okay, too. Sadly, we all know the baby didn't come back. It left a peculiar mark on the mind.

All children - whether or not they grew up with the Lindbergh case - worry. Will Mama and Papa go away and never come back? Will I die? We don't like to think of kids worrying about such things, but of course they do. They have no choice, if they're intelligent and sensitive and alive to what's happening in the world.

In fairy tale and fantasy we reconstruct and defuse dreadful moments of childhood. **Outside Over There** became my exorcism of the Lindbergh case. In it, I am the Lindbergh baby and my sister saves me. It's Charlie Lindbergh brought back to life. And there is a reconciliation between Ida and her mother.

Ida's mother is not a monster. She is not indifferent to her children. She happens to miss her husband, and for one brief moment she leaves the baby. Even loving mamas turn away sometimes. You have to vacuum the floor, answer the telephone, go to your job, and just then kids are caught in a crisis - a very quiet crisis. You don't hear a scream, you don't hear a fall, but something occurs; and in the case of Ida, she has to make a quick decision. She is resentful about being stuck with the baby and flies into a rage, has a fantasy - a Lindbergh fantasy. But, finally, Ida restores everything to its natural order because, being a healthy child, she has to, she wants to. She loves the baby. She hates it only occasionally. In the end, the book is really a tribute to my sister, who is Ida, very brave, very strong, very frightening, taking care of me. Baby.

I do care about children a lot. And when I say I don't write for them, it doesn't mean I don't care for them. I project into all my favorite music and pictures an intense nostalgia for childhood, a passionate affiliation with childhood. It's the same with literature - from Melville to James, I always seem to find a sub-text that involves children. Those are the reverberations that get to me and enter into my work.

I think some of the most touching moments in **The Magic Flute** have to do with children. Much of the opera focuses on the confusion of an adolescent girl. Is her mother crazy? Is the man she loves crazy? Has the solemn Sarastro saved her or kidnapped her? Isn't this very much what life is like for many young people? Very arbitrary, no rhyme, no reason, no logic. And then, when Pamina is about to commit suicide, she is stopped by the three genies - as Mozart notes in the score, *drei Knaben*, three little boys. When she has lost all trust in all the adults in the opera, these three kids say: 'Don't

do it, life is all right. He does love you. Come with us and we'll show you.' And they all break into an incredible, happy quartet. The fact that Mozart would give these boys the simple truth to deliver reinforces my convictions about children and their relationship to adults and the world.

Children are entirely at the mercy of adults - their parents, their siblings, and their teachers. I suppose there are the same kinds of dreadful people around in schools today as there were when I was a child. I had the bad luck to have several indifferent and unfeeling teachers. But then I was a very difficult child. I hated school. Even when I was encouraged to do what they thought I wanted to do - write and paint pictures - I had no pleasure, because I was doing it in a schoolroom. So there was nothing that could be done for me. My poor parents had to make countless trips to the school principal's office, and there were great mullings and puzzlings over how an apparently intelligent child could be so stupid all the time and so indifferent to what he ought to be learning.

The problem, so far as I was concerned, was to live until I was seventeen, so I could get out of school. It was just a matter of counting the years until then, when by law you could be free. The idea of college was anathema to me. The suggestion that you might choose to go on - total madness. So I didn't.

Our vacuum cleaner was surely the most eccentric of my childhood terrors. My mother would innocently bring it out - an old Hoover, the kind you plugged into the wall to make the bag swell up. So did I, apparently. They tell me I would start screaming uncontrollably at the sight of the vacuum, so I was allowed to go to the neighbors' apartment across the hall until the ordeal was over. I wonder why my mother never bought a quiet, compact model. Maybe it was too effective a weapon.

I used this fear when **Where the Wild Things Are** was turned into an opera some years ago. It's a book of only 385 words and it had to become an opera at least three-quarters of an hour long. So I amplified the opening scenes when Max gets mad at his mother. And to give this episode dramatic point, I had the mother enter with her vacuum cleaner, which drives Max bananas and which he then attacks with his sword. So this vacuum-cleaner phobia is now, to my astonishment, a significant moment in an opera.

At an early age I was taken to the movies every Friday night. If I'd been a Renaissance child and had lived in Rome, I could have gone down the block and seen Michelangelo working on the Sistine Chapel, and I would have been a much more enlightened and tasteful human being. But since I was a Brooklyn kid, there was only the Kingsway Theater, and you made shift.

Occasionally, this looked-for pleasure scared me out of my wits. The offending movie, paradoxically, might be anything from Chaplin to Disney, and on one unforgettable evening we went to see **The Invisible Man**. Whenever it's on late-night television, I still try to watch it, without much success, because when Claude Rains unbandages his head and there's nothing there, it's Valium time for me.

These days I go to the movies once in a while. I was curious to see **Rambo** and took a young friend. Not only was I frightened, I was upset. I was surrounded by hysterically laughing children. I thought they were all crazy. But I finally realized that I was on a different wavelength completely, and what was very frightening to me didn't seem to frighten them at all. I've never heard so many chuckles and yucks every time somebody got blown up.

Maybe those old movies that scared me touched fears much closer to home. Children are always asking me where I got the idea for the Wild Things. I don't really know where they came from, but you have to tell children something. When I began drawing the pictures, I went the conventional route of griffins and other creatures from medieval iconography, which was very unsatisfying. Suddenly these characters began to appear and they were, surprisingly, people I knew.

I think it was the recollection of dreadful Sundays in Brooklyn when my sister, my brother, and I had to get dressed up for our aunts and uncles, none of whom I cared for particularly. I was an ungracious and ungenerous child, because what I really resented was that they were coming to eat our food. I never agreed for an instant that they should eat our food, or that we should share it. And I hated the fact that my mother was a very slow cooker, which meant that we had to spend what seemed like hours in the living room with people we detested.

We were, in other words, children. And the only relief from sitting and listening to the noxious 'how big you've gotten' stuff was to examine those relatives critically and make note of every mole, every bloodshot eye, every hair curling out of every nostril, every blackened tooth. I lived in apprehension that, if my mother cooked too slowly and they were getting very hungry, they would lean over, pinch my cheek, and say, 'You look so good, we could eat you up.' And in fact we had no doubt they would. They ate anything in sight. And so, in the end, it seems that the Wild Things are those same aunts and uncles. May they rest in peace.

Despite the fact that I don't write with children in mind, I long ago discovered that they make the best audience. They certainly make the best critics. They are more candid and to the point than professional critics. Of course, almost anybody is. But when children love your book, it's 'I love your book, thank you, I want to marry you when I grow up.' Or it's 'Dear Mr Sendak: I hate your book. Hope you die soon. Cordially.'

This edited extract is reprinted from Caldecott and Co., a collection of 'notes on books and pictures' written by Maurice Sendak over the last 25 years. In the book this piece from *The New York Times Book Review* (1987) is entitled 'An Informal Talk'; it was originally given in Philadelphia in 1985 under the sponsorship of the Rosenbach Museum and Library.

**Caldecott and Co.**, Maurice Sendak, Reinhardt Books in association with Viking, 187106106 7, £13.95

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**Where the Wild Things Are**, 0 370 00772 7, 18.95; 0 14 050.031 6, 12.95 pbk y

**In the Night Kitchen**, 0 370 01549 5, 16.95; 0 14 050.075 8, 11.95 pbk

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