SOFTWARE & TECH

The Author Of Where The Wild Things Are

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Introduction: The Man Behind the Monsters

Few children's books have captured the collective imagination quite like *Where the Wild Things Are*. Its iconic monsters, at once terrifying and tender, have become a cornerstone of childhood literacy and a touchstone of modern fantasy. But behind the tangled fur, golden crowns, and wild rumpus stands a singular creative force: the author of *Where the Wild Things Are*, **Maurice Sendak**. More than just a writer and illustrator, Sendak was a cultural revolutionary who redefined what a picture book could be—and what childhood could contain. To understand the book is to understand the man: his influences, his struggles, and his profound empathy for the emotional lives of children.

Who Was Maurice Sendak? A Brief Biography

Early Life and Jewish Heritage

Maurice Bernard Sendak was born on June 10, 1928, in Brooklyn, New York, to Polish Jewish immigrant parents. His family's history was shadowed by the Holocaust—many relatives perished in Europe—and this sense of loss and displacement haunted Sendak's work. As a sickly child, he spent long hours indoors, drawing and daydreaming. His earliest artistic inspirations came not from picture books but from the fantastical worlds of Disney films and the comic strips of Winsor McCay. Sendak later recalled that his father's storytelling, often dark and fanciful, deeply shaped his narrative voice.

From Window Displays to Children's Books

Sendak's formal art training was limited. He studied at the Art Students League of New York but found his true classroom in the children's book department at FAO Schwarz, where he designed window displays. His big break came in 1951 when he was hired to illustrate *The Wonderful Farm* by Marcel Aymé. Over the next decade, Sendak illustrated dozens of books for other authors, including Ruth Krauss's *A Hole Is to Dig* (1952). Yet he yearned to tell his own stories. His first solo authored book, *Kenny's Window*(1956), revealed his signature blend of fantasy and psychological depth, but it was his eighth book that would change everything.

The Creation of a Classic: Where the Wild Things Are

A Daring Idea Rejected by Publishers

The concept for *Where the Wild Things Are* was initially met with resistance. Sendak had originally planned a story called *Where the Wild Horses Are*—but he realized he could not draw convincing horses. Instead, he invented monsters based on the overwhelming, morphing faces of his aunts and uncles. His editor, Ursula Nordstrom, championed the book at Harper & Row despite concerns from others that the monsters might

frighten children. Sendak's response was characteristically wise: he believed that children understood fear and needed art to explore it safely.

The Man Behind the Monsters

The wild things themselves are not mere caricatures. Each one borrows features from real people in Sendak's life—especially his relatives, whose hairy faces and intimidating presence he remembered from childhood dinners. Max, the protagonist, is a direct expression of Sendak's own turbulent inner child: angry, imaginative, and ultimately seeking connection. The famous line, "Let the wild rumpus start," became a mantra for creative liberation.

Visual Storytelling and Innovation

Sendak's artistic technique in the book was revolutionary. The illustrations grow in size across the pages as Max's imagination expands, dominating the layout until the text disappears altogether during the rumpus. This visual crescendo was unprecedented in picture books. He used cross-hatching, muted watercolors, and a controlled palette to create an atmosphere that felt both dreamlike and grounded. The pacing of the book mirrors the rhythm of a child's emotional journey: anger, escape, adventure, and the quiet return to love.

Impact on Children's Literature and Culture

Controversy and Censorship

Upon its publication in 1963, *Where the Wild Things Are* sparked heated debate. Some librarians and educators condemned it as too dark, fearing it would encourage misbehavior. The book was banned in some communities. But children flocked to it, and critics soon recognized its genius. It went on to win the 1964 Caldecott Medal for the most distinguished American picture book for children. Over the decades, the conversation shifted: rather than asking whether the book was too frightening, readers began to appreciate its honest portrayal of anger and reconciliation.

Influence on Subsequent Authors and Artists

Sendak's willingness to engage with the darker emotions of childhood paved the way for a generation of writers and illustrators. Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, and later creators such as Jon Klassen and Shaun Tan all stand on Sendak's shoulders. He proved that a picture book could be artistically ambitious, psychologically rich, and commercially successful simultaneously. The phrase "wild rumpus" entered the lexicon as shorthand for joyful, chaotic play.

Beyond the Wild Things: Sendak's Broader Legacy

A Diverse Body of Work

While the author of *Where the Wild Things Are* will always be most famous for that book, Sendak created many other classics. *In the Night Kitchen* (1970) was frequently challenged for its depiction of a naked boy, but it remains a celebration of childhood sensory wonder. *Outside Over There* (1981) explored sibling jealousy and kidnapping, forming what Sendak called a "trilogy" with the two earlier books. He also illustrated works for other authors, including the posthumously published *Brundibar* (2003), an adaptation of a Czech opera performed by children in the Terezín concentration camp. This project returned him to themes of loss and resilience rooted in his Jewish identity.

Opera, Film, and Stage Adaptations

Sendak's creative reach extended far beyond children's books. He designed sets and costumes for operas, including Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. He collaborated on the television adaptation of *Where the Wild Things Are* with a short animated film in 1973, and later on the 2009 live-action

feature film directed by Spike Jonze. Although Sendak had reservations about the film, he ultimately approved of its emotional depth. He also saw his work adapted for the stage, including an acclaimed opera version of *Where the Wild Things Are* composed by Oliver Knussen.

The Maurice Sendak Foundation and Posthumous Recognition

After his death in 2012 at age 83, Sendak's legacy was preserved through the Maurice Sendak Foundation, which promotes literacy, the arts, and the appreciation of children's literature. Exhibitions of his original artwork continue to draw crowds globally. His home in Ridgefield, Connecticut, filled with antique toys and his beloved dog, has become a pilgrimage site for fans. In 2023, a new biographical documentary brought his life story to a new generation, highlighting his role as the author of *Where the Wild Things Are* and his ongoing relevance in an era of renewed debates about children's emotional well-being.

Understanding Sendak's Philosophy of Childhood

Children Deserve Honesty

One of the most enduring aspects of Sendak's work is his insistence that children can handle complex emotions. He famously said, "I refuse to lie to children." In an age of sanitized entertainment, Sendak's monsters are not merely frightening; they are also sad, lonely, and needy. Max asserts power over them, but ultimately he leaves them because he craves the unconditional love of his mother (symbolized by the supper waiting for him). This honest dualism—anger and love, fear and comfort—resonates deeply with readers of all ages.

The Wildness Within and Outside

Sendak understood that every child (and every adult) contains a "wild thing" inside—a chaotic, instinctual part that society asks us to tame. The book offers a safe space to explore that wildness, then return. It validates the emotional storms of childhood without moralizing. This may be why the book remains in print in dozens of languages and has sold over 20 million copies worldwide.

Conclusion: The Enduring Roar of a Master

The author of *Where the Wild Things Are* gave the world a gift far more profound than a mere story. Maurice Sendak offered a permission slip to feel deeply, to imagine boldly, and to return from the wilderness of anger with the knowledge that we are still loved. His monsters have forever changed the landscape of children's literature, proving that the wildest places in our minds can be the most human. As long as there are children who rage against bedtime, who roar at the moon, and who need to know that someone will leave a warm dinner waiting, the legacy of Maurice Sendak and his wild things will never fade.

- Maurice Sendak – the creative genius behind the book
- Caldecott Medal – the award that cemented his place in history
- Wild things – the iconic monsters inspired by his relatives
- Max – the boy who sails to the land where the wild things are
- Legacy – still influencing artists and readers today

Sendak once said, "I have nothing but contempt for people who think children are incapable of feeling." His life's work proved that children are not only capable—they are already wild, wise, and wonderfully brave.

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