In a Nutshell: The Worlds of Maurice Sendak

Curriculum Guide
5th – 8th Grades

In a Nutshell: the Worlds of Maurice Sendak is on display
jan 4 - feb 24, 2012 • main library • 301 york street

In a Nutshell: The Worlds of Maurice Sendak was organized by the Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia, and developed by Nextbook, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting Jewish literature, culture, and ideas, and the American Library Association Public Programs Office. The national tour of the exhibit has been made possible by grants from the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Righteous Persons Foundation, the David Berg Foundation, and an anonymous donor, with additional support from Tablet Magazine: A New Read on Jewish Life.
Maurice Sendak comes from Brooklyn, New York. He was born in 1928, the youngest of three children.

His parents were poor Polish immigrants who came to the United States before World War I. Many of the family’s relatives in Poland died in the Holocaust during World War II. His family suffered greatly over their lost family members. To add to their concerns, Maurice himself was sickly as a child. His mother worried constantly about his health and safety. You will see that most of his books have a moon somewhere in the picture watching over the scene. The moon is his mother peeking out the window at him when he was a child to be sure that he was alright!

Maurice Sendak loved to have his father read aloud to him at night before bedtime. He didn’t like school much and wasn’t good at sports, but he loved to read and often asked his sister to get him books from the library. His sister gave him his first book, Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper*. He loved that book and still has it today.

As a young adult, he liked great super--duper adventure stories by authors such as Herman Melville and his books, *Typee* and *Moby Dick*. He began his work as an illustrator while he was still in high school. He helped in drawing the pictures from the comic strip, *Mutt and Jeff* into comic books. He went to art school at the Art Students’ League to continue his education. He co-authored his very first book, *Atomics for the Millions* that was published in 1947. He was just nineteen years old! Since then he has given us many, many wonderful books.

Maurice Sendak is a man of many talents. He designed wooden toys with his brother. He did the lyrics for an animated film for television called *Really Rosie*, which is from his books, the *Nutshell Library*. He has written the words (called libretto) for an opera, *Where the Wild Things Are*, based on his Caldecott winning children’s book. He greatly enjoys designing sets and costumes for operas as well.

from KidsRead.com
Tell students to list the ways in which the book mimics a comic strip (or cartoon). How does Sendak arrange his pages and his text so they resemble the comic strip format? Once they have identified some of the tools used by Sendak, have them examine other comic books or cartoons to increase the artistic tools used to create these sorts of art works. Instruct your students develop their own short comic strip, using their own nighttime adventures as their theme.

- Comic Life on Underground computers
- Comic drawing books/graphic novels/manga
- Comic strip templates and colored pencils
  http://donnayoung.org/art/comics.htm
  http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/comic/
  http://www2.beatbullying.org/pdfs/comic%20strip%20template.pdf

Imagine that, like Max, you have an island that’s all your own. What would you find there?
Follow the steps below to see your island take shape.

What you need:
- “Island Map” template
- Colored pencils, markers, or other art supplies

What You Do:

1. Think of a name for your island. Write it on the map on the following page.

2. Look at the box labeled “Map Key.” Choose which of these features you’d like to add to your island. Draw their symbols on your map.

3. If there are other features you want to add to your island, write them in the key and create symbols for them. Then draw the symbols on your map.

4. Draw some of the plants and animals that live on your island.

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They could also make their own toilet paper roll monster and write a story about him/her!

Play Doh Monsters – Make your own monster out of play doh!
To begin, discuss students’ knowledge of the basic facts of the Holocaust and then focus students’ thoughts on how Nazi rule affected the lives of European Jews. Discussion questions:

• What was it like to be a Jewish person living in Europe during the Holocaust?

• Under the Nazis, what rules were applied specifically to Jews?

Share with students the discriminatory decrees against the Jews provided by the Teacher’s Guide to the Holocaust website resources: http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/document/DocDec.htm

Explain that many of the Sendaks’ Jewish relatives died during the Holocaust and that young Maurice was very affected by news of their deaths and events in Europe. Browse through the “Jewish culture” gallery as a class either online or as a handout and discuss how Jewish culture and the Holocaust are often important parts of Sendak’s work (http://sendakscrapbook.pbworks.com/f/Sendak_%26_Jewish_Culture.pdf). As you look at the gallery’s last two images, explain that Sendak also deals with his feelings about the persecution of Jews in his work and have students speculate how these images reflect those feelings.

Ask students to consider The Diary of Anne Frank as a primary source and consider reading aloud passages that illustrate how it contributes to our historical understanding of the Holocaust. Discuss Anne Frank’s motives for writing the diary and how she recorded history as it unfolded without knowing its outcome. Contrast this with creators of secondary sources, who know history’s outcome and often have different motives. Explain that secondary sources are not just history books, but sometimes an artist’s retelling or interpretation of a historical event. Present students with Dear Mili by Wilhelm Grimm and share its origins as a Grimm tale that Sendak illustrated as what he calls a “Holocaust story.”

Extension: Consider bringing in other works from the curriculum that similarly interpret or act as a source concerning the Holocaust or other historical events. Potential titles include, but are not limited to The Book Thief (Markus Zusak), The Boy in the Striped Pajamas (John Boyne), Night (Elie Wiesel), The Devil’s Arithmetic (Jane Yolen), Number the Stars (Lois Lowry), and Farewell to Manzinar (Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston).

Read “Where the Wild Things Are” to class.

Discussion Questions:

• Do you like this book? Why or why not?

• What the themes and messages?

• Do you think preschoolers and young elementary students (presumably the target readership) “get” these messages? Does it matter?

• Why do you think adults consider this a classic children’s book?

• When have you ever told a teacher a book was “boring” What did you mean? How do you think school reading lists are created?

Read the essay “Where the Wild Things Weren’t” by Bruce Handy (on next page) to the class.

Handy reflects on his experience as a young reader who didn’t care for “Where the Wild Things Are”. As you read the article to the class, direct students to write their reactions to the article in the margins. Tell them to mark passages that resonate with them, lines that surprise them, or parts they disagree with. Invite students to share some of their reactions aloud.

Introduce students to the term “literary canon” and talk briefly about who decides what is on readings lists and why the canon might be slow to change. What “revered” or “classic” books assigned in school didn’t you connect with? (Teachers can give personal examples here as well!)

Lead a brainstorming session with individual students defending their reactions and record the titles and some of the student’s points on the board.
Where the Wild Things Weren’t

By Bruce Handy


MY 10-year-old son, Isaac, and I were at some kid movie enduring the antic coming attractions, when a trailer came on for Spike Jonze’s soon-to-be-released adaptation of Maurice Sendak’s “Where the Wild Things Are.” On screen, a boy in a white wolf suit romped through a forest alongside monsters played by actors in old-fashioned Godzilla-style rubber suits but with computer-animated faces and, in one case, Tony Soprano’s voice; there was also a bittersweet indie rock soundtrack, as if this were a Zooey Deschanel movie for grade schoolers.

“What do you think?” I asked Isaac. “Should we see it?”


Me, I thought it looked pretty cool, or at least tasteful: the trailer promised a quieter and more pensive film than, say, “Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs,” and I liked the way Jonze has recapitulated the Dürer-meets-Mad-magazine quality of Sendak’s illustrations. But as for the second part of Isaac’s critique - and I’m a little anxious stating this publicly - I didn’t think the book was any good either.

Or let me qualify that. Actually, I think it’s brilliant. The wit and richness of Sendak’s drawings, the poetic concision of his story, its empathy and dreamlike lilt, can move me near to tears. If you don’t know or remember it: Max, a young boy in a wolf costume, makes mischief of one kind and another, is called “wild thing” by his unseen mother, and is sent to bed without supper. As he stews, his room transforms into a jungle. He finds a boat and sets sail across the sea to discover a land full of real wild things - big monsters with “terrible teeth” and “terrible roars.” Max tames them, plays with them, sends them to bed without their suppers and then returns home, where he finds dinner waiting for him. “And it was still hot,” the book concludes - a lovely and reassuring grace note.

What an empowering, psychologically astute parable about a child learning that his anger, while sometimes overwhelming and scary, can be safely expressed and eventually conquered, I thought, when I had occasion to reread the book in my 30s. But as a child myself, without benefit of personal insights subsequently gleaned from more than a decade of talk therapy, I had been left cold by “Where the Wild Things Are.” I don’t really remember why. Maybe I was too literal-minded to be transported by Sendak’s dream logic. Not that I didn’t like make-believe, but I also liked rules. Old-school fairy tales, with their clear villains and bloody, well-deserved vengeance: that’s what worked for me.

Still, when I was a kid, “Where the Wild Things Are” was something to be reckoned with, like the mumps. I was 4 when it was published in 1963. I was cognizant that teachers and librarians thought it was a “good” book, proved by the shiny Caldecott Medal on its cover. (A budding critic, I had a premature and probably unhealthy interest in consensus.) I don’t think my family had a copy, but I remember seeing it in what I now realize were the more cosmopolitan homes on my Northern California cul-de-sac - the book resides in my possibly exaggerated-for-effect memory as an early ’60s progressive totem alongside Danish modern furniture, African art and the sticky, stale-sweet smell of pipe tobacco. I was certainly aware of “Where the Wild Things Are” as something I should like, the way I have more recently felt I ought to like Tom Waits and “30 Rock.”

But once I finally got it - a convert! - I was eager to read “Where the Wild Things Are” to my own kids. Yet neither Isaac, as you know, nor his older sister, Zoe, much cared for it. I read it to them once or twice; they shrugged; the book got permanently shelved while the bindings cracked on “Go, Dog. Go!” and “The Rainbow Fish.” I’ve wondered if another reason I didn’t properly love “Where the Wild Things Are” as a kid was that anger hadn’t been freely expressed in
my button-down home; perhaps I had found Sendak’s parable less liberating than off-putting or even frightening. (The latter was a common concern when the book was first published.) Conversely, yelling at one another is almost a hobby in my present home, so maybe that’s why my own kids found the book - this is all I could get out of them “boring.” Perhaps they agreed with Publishers Weekly, which, back in 1963, dismissed Sendak’s story as “pointless and confusing.”

Obviously, many millions of children have loved “Where the Wild Things Are” - there are more than 19 million copies in print around the world - but I was struck, while conducting an extremely informal survey of a couple of dozen friends and a few professionals in the field of children’s literature, by how many said Sendak’s work had eluded their younger selves and/or their own offspring. Which kids’ books, I had wanted to know, are appreciated more in theory, or by adults, than by actual kids? I never heard a knock against Beverly Cleary and only one against Dr. Seuss. But probably half my sample group had shrugged at “Where the Wild Things Are.” “Impenetrable,” one educator and critic said. In her view, while the book was written from a child’s perspective, it had the processed feel of “something arrived at years later as a construct to understand the writer’s own anger.” Actually, I think that’s what I now like about the book, that sense of self-aware struggle - and whiff of psychoanalysis. Sendak hinted at this in a 1966 interview with the New Yorker: “It’s only after the act of writing the book that, as an adult, I can see what has happened, and talk about fantasy as catharsis, about Max acting out his anger as he fights to grow. . . . For me, the book was a personal exorcism. It went deeper into my own childhood than anything I’ve done before.”

Max shouldn’t feel bad about the snubs - divided audiences are a good thing. And he’s in fine company. Other revered works flagged by people I spoke to were the “Alice in Wonderland” books (too druggy, too much knotty wordplay; Alice herself is a drip), “Winnie-the-Pooh” (too twee) and “Eloise” (girls love the idea of Eloise, but has anyone ever made it to the end of Kay Thompson’s long, bossy, punishingly fabulous text?). And then there is “The Wind in the Willows,” a lovely pastoral perfumed with adult longings (and I don’t mean sex) that has recently been republished in two separate annotated editions. (The swarm of scholarly dementors alone ought to make children wary.)

Having now cheerfully dumped on a bunch of classics, I feel better. It remains to be seen whether adapting Sendak’s 338-word, 37-page picture book into a full-length feature was really necessary or even advisable - does Max’s acting-out demand motivation? do the wild things want back stories? - but I do hope Jonze’s movie draws readers, young and old, to the original, and I hope the original doesn’t feel puny and undernourished next to its pumped-up Hollywood cousin (not to mention the 300-page novelization, titled “The Wild Things,” by Dave Eggers, who wrote the screenplay with Jonze). More to the point, I hope readers can hear the music Isaac, Zoe and I didn’t. What if, to borrow from another tale, the emperor really did have dazzling new clothes and it was only the kid on the sidewalk who missed out?

Bruce Handy, a frequent contributor to the Book Review, is a writer and deputy editor at Vanity Fair.
In this lesson students will examine a classic Sendak text, Where the Wild Things Are, as an introduction to his work. After reading the text as a class, they will reflect on the meaning of the story and their view of the Wild Things in particular. The teacher will present to students an original Wild Things sketch and prompt students to consider how it changes their view of the creatures in the book. This lesson should introduce students to the layers of meaning within Sendak’s stories and texts.

**Resources:** Copy of *Where the Wild Things Are*, photocopy or projection of Sendak’s Wild Thing sketch, located at the bottom of this page.

Present students with Sendak’s sketch of the devilish Wild Thing either as a handout or an overhead projection. Ask students to share their observations and feelings towards the sketch. Questions for discussion include:

- Does this image surprise you in any way?
- How does the image compare with the Wild Things in the book?
- If this image were an illustration in *Where the Wild Things Are*, would it change your understanding of the story?
In which panel is this picture located? _____

Why do you think this boy is smiling? Has your answer changed from what you guessed before you came to see the exhibit?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Name another thing found on this panel:

________________________________________________________________________

In which panel is this picture located? _____

What is Max doing in this picture? Has your answer changed from what you guessed before you came to see the exhibit?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

In which panel is this picture located? _____

What are these three characters doing according to the title at the top of the panel? Did you guess correctly before you came?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Name two other things found on this panel:

________________________________________________________________________
In which panel is this picture located? _____

Who are the people in this picture? Why is this picture important to Sendak’s art?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

In which panel is this picture located? _____

What address does the caption say this might be? Whose house would that have been near?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

In which panel is this picture located? _____

What is the name of this character that is based on a little girl that lived on Maurice Sendak’s street?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Have you ever experienced anything similar to what is happening? What do you do when you see friends being bullied?

In which panel is this picture located?____

Who is the baby in the picture?

In which panel is this picture located?____

What is the “Old World” described in this panel?
When you first look at this picture you might think it is of pretty flowers and little girls. What else do you see when you look more closely?

Where does the caption, to the left of this picture, tell us that these children lived?

According to the panel, which two historical figures (people) inspired the bully in this drawing from the book *Brundibar*?

What is the name of this Wild Thing?
Maurice Sendak Bibliography

Author & Illustrator


Alligators All Around: An Alphabet

Chicken Soup with Rice: A Book of Months

One Was Johnny: A Counting Book

Pierre: A Cautionary Tale


Maurice Sendak’s Christmas Mystery 1995.


Illustrator


Becoming Maurice Sendak: A Children’s Author Grows Up by Shannon Firth, 3-25-11

Maurice Sendak Biography and Timeline – Rosenbach Museum and Library
BIO & TIMELINE: http://www.rosenbach.org/maurice-sendak-biography-and-timeline

On the Phone with Maurice Sendak by Pamela Paul- NY Times – 9-16-2011
INTERVIEW

This pig wants to party – Maurice Sendak’s Latest Book-NPR Podcast–Fresh Air-9-20-11
THIS PIG WANTS TO PARTY

Wild Thing: The Art of Maurice Sendak
ART
http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/5aa/5aa307.htm

The Jewish Experience in Picture Books: a Mini Documentary by Hilary Jacqmin
VIMEO
http://vimeo.com/23273311

A Slideshow of some of Sendak’s most Influential Prints National Gallery of Australia’s Kenneth Tyler Printmaking Collection
SLIDESHOW

Lesson Plans: Wild Things Art for Kids
WILD THING ART

LESSON PLANS
http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/activity/Intermed.htm

Jewish American Heritage Month
FAMOUS JEWISH AMERICANS
http://www.jewishamericanheritagemonth.us/index.aspx

Jews in America – Timeline and Cultural History
JEWS IN AMERICA
http://www.jewsinamerica.org/

Judiasm for Kids – Information on the Jewish religion
JEWISH RELIGION

Jewish Food and Recipes
JEWISH FOOD
http://www.jewfaq.org/food.htm