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January 24th, 2013

Sendak Sale: Where the Wild Things Were

by Jeanne Schinto

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Swann Galleries, New York City

Photos courtesy Swann

When *Where the Wild Things Are*, a children's book written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak (1928-2012), was published in 1963, some adults publicly worried that the story and its pictures of clawed monsters would frighten children. To judge by the letter of a seven-year-old boy, those parents and librarians should have saved their worry time for real dangers. "How much does it cost to get to where the wild things are?" he asked. "If it is not too expensive my sister and I want to spend the summer there."

On January 24, Swann Galleries in New York City offered 60 lots from the Sendak collection of rare-book dealer Reed Orenstein, who died in 2010. They were the first ones up in a new venture for Swann, the auction house's inaugural 20th-century illustration sale, which offered 280 lots total.

A first edition of *Where the Wild Things Are*, a title that has now sold approximately 19 million copies worldwide, was the top lot of the Sendak section, which also included two items that weren't from Orenstein's estate. Its half-title page was signed to Orenstein and inscribed by Sendak along with a drawing of a wild thing smiling its sharp-toothed smile.

"Dear Reed," Sendak wrote, "This certainly looks like a first Edition—it has all the wrong colors in the right places!" He was referring to the off-register ink shades that were corrected in subsequent printings. With its first-issue dust jacket, this most beloved book of the author-illustrator's large oeuvre sold to a phone bidder for \$18,000 (including buyer's premium). The bidder was identified by Swann as a dealer.

Adding to its value, this copy did not have a sticker designating the title as the 1964 winner of the Caldecott Medal, which is "awarded to the artist of the most distinguished American Picture Book for Children published in the United States during the preceding year"—only one of many awards the book has won. Accepting the Caldecott, Sendak, an outspoken defender of his artistic rights, did not miss the opportunity to reply to his critics. In an interview with Nat Hentoff for *The New Yorker* magazine in January 1966, Sendak's acceptance speech is quoted on the subject of how authors of conventional children's books pre-sent "a gilded world unshadowed by the least suggestion of conflict or pain, a world manufactured by those who cannot—or don't care to—remember the truth of their own childhood. Their expurgated vision has no relation to the way real children live. I suppose these books have some purpose—they don't frighten adults...."

Some auction lots were books that Sendak illustrated but did not write. One was *What Can You Do with a Shoe?* by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers, published in 1955. The first edition, inscribed to fellow children's book author and illustrator Irene Haas and signed "Maurice," included a full-page ink drawing of the fictional children from the story with Sendak's real-life Sealyham terrier, Jennie. Part of this same lot was another book illustrated by Sendak, Jan Wahl's *Pleasant Fieldmouse*, published in 1964. Sendak signed that first edition to Haas and her husband, Phil, with a blue pen sketch of the title character. The books sold to an absentee bidder for \$3120 (est. \$1000/1500).

Several other books in the sale included Sendak inscriptions with drawings. A first edition of *Some Swell Pup or, Are You Sure You Want a Dog?* (1976) was signed and inscribed by Sendak with a watercolor and ink sketch of a boy and canine. A bubble over the dog reads, "For Deborah, Ho-Ho!" The boy's thought is less cheery as he steps into a pile of the pup's poo. "Oye! Some Swell Mess!" his bubble says. The book sold in the room for \$1920 (est. \$800/1200) to rare-book dealer Justin G. Schiller of New York City and Kingston, New York, who said he bought a total of half a dozen items for himself and clients.

One of Schiller's purchases was not a book. It was a complete set of six action figures depicting characters from *Where the Wild Things Are*. Each original "as new" box was signed by Sendak and the toys' designer, Todd MacFarlane. "We bought the toys for ourselves," said Schiller, whose life and work partner is Dennis M. V. David. "I wanted to get them at the time they were issued, but they were literally sold out almost as soon as they were available." Indeed, as the catalog notes, when they debuted at famed New York City toy store F.A.O. Schwarz on October 12, 2000, the entire run went in that single day. The original price stickers remained on the boxes. Schiller paid \$1320 for the set. "And I'd like to say I thought they should have had more 'action.'" He laughed. "We bought them below our estimate." Swann's estimate was \$400/600.

A specialist in rare children's books and a personal friend of Sendak from 1967 onward, Schiller was surprised that, with rare exceptions, prices for this material weren't stronger. "The auction was very well-publicized, but there is a general malaise in the business," he said. "There hasn't yet been a new generation of collectors developing. There were very good bargains, if one wanted to call them that." Another problem specific to this sale, he said, was Sendak's remoteness toward the end of his life, because of illness. As a result, there was little new material to keep existing collectors stimulated.

Sendak himself was a collector of books, artworks, and even collectibles. In the 1966 *New Yorker* interview cited above, it was mentioned that he already had close to 200 first editions, including works by Henry James and an extensive collection of classic children's books of 19th-century England, Germany, Switzerland, and France. Later, he collected 19th- and 20th-century prints, watercolors, and works by William Blake, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson.

An audiophile, Sendak also had a large record collection of works by Mahler, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, and Verdi, and in that light, it's not surprising that he was the costume and set designer for a 1980 production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and for the opera adaptation of his own *Where the Wild Things Are*. He also illustrated a 1984 edition of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Nutcracker*, and at this sale, a copy of a signed, first limited edition of that title, numbered 209 of 250 by Sendak, sold to an absentee bidder for \$1200 (est. \$600/900). The lot included an original hand-pulled lithograph of a Nutcracker subject printed on chine applique.

In the *New Yorker* interview, Sendak talked more about his love of objects, revealing that books to him "seemed alive," as did many other inanimate objects he was fond of. "All children have these intense feelings about certain dolls or other toys," he told his interviewer, Nat Hentoff. Those feelings happened to stay with him just as, one could argue, they stay with collectors of all kinds. Sendak's *Kenny's Window* portrays a boy who certainly engages with his toys as if they were alive. He speaks to them quite seriously, and the first book that Sendak both wrote and illustrated—sold to a phone bidder for \$510 (est. \$300/400).

In another interview (with Hank Nuwer in 1981), Sendak discussed his basic philosophy of collecting. "I'm not a collector who collects just for collecting," he said. "Things have to refer back or give me some turn-on in my work. For instance, all the Mickey Mouse things started in the late sixties when I was doing *In the Night Kitchen*. I needed things from my childhood, and the Mickey Mouse things were my favorite," he continued. "They helped me kind of taste that time again. The whole collection was really a means of turning me on to my book. All my collections, including my book collection, are always things that I can use in some way. They give me back something...like talismans. I don't collect them to invest or just collect. I have too much junk in my life anyway. Even the lucky things—that's all they are—wonderful junk."

At this sale, a first edition of *In the Night Kitchen*, published in 1970, sold to an absentee bidder for \$1080 (est. \$800/1200). The first Finnish edition of the same title, signed by Sendak with an ink drawing of a grinning Mickey, went to an Internet bidder for \$584 (est. \$300/500). The book tells the story of a boy who, asleep in his bed, is awakened by noise downstairs. When he goes to investigate, he enters the surreal world of a nighttime bakery where he falls into a cake batter being prepared by three fat, cheery bakers.

It sounds innocent enough, but as did *Wild Things*, the book met with controversy when it first appeared. In fact, as recently as the first decade of the 21st century, it was still turning up on lists of banned or challenged books compiled by the American Library Association. The perceived problem is that the boy, who loses his pajamas early on in the story, frolics naked for the rest of the book and is portrayed as anatomically correct. Some librarians resorted to putting tiny pieces of tape over the boy's genitalia; others just took the book off their shelves.

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The 85th anniversary of Sendak's birth on June 10 will be celebrated with, among other things, an exhibition at the Society of Illustrators in New York City. *Maurice Sendak: A Celebration of the Artist and His Work* will run from June 11 through August 17. (For more information, see [www.societyofillustrators.org].) This is also the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Where the Wild Things Are*, providing another reason to celebrate Sendak in 2013.

In 1968, Sendak chose the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia to be the repository of his archives. He soon began to deposit original drawings and other remnants of his creative process, as well as all of his first editions, et cetera. Over the years, those holdings have grown to more than 10,000 items. The Rosenbach's Web site (www.rosenbach.org) tells why Sendak chose to house everything there.

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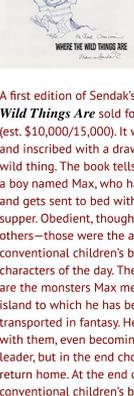
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Swann's 20th-century illustration sale as a whole achieved \$435,643. Top lots included works by James Thurber, Dr. Seuss, Al Hirschfeld, Ludwig Bemmelmanns, Charles Addams, and Garth Williams, who illustrated E.B. White's books *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, which were published in 1952 and 1945 respectively. It bears noting that the E.B. White titles, like Sendak's, were edited by Harper & Row's Ursula Nordstrom. Two of White's classic children's books have also spent time on banned or challenged books lists, *Charlotte's Web* because animals talk and *Stuart Little* because a human being gives birth to a child who has the physical features and "pleasant, shy manner" of a mouse.

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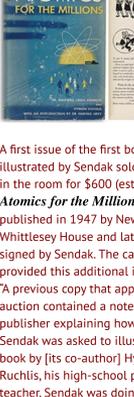
Originally published in the May 2013 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*. © 2013 Maine Antique Digest



A first edition of Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* sold for \$18,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000). It was signed and inscribed with a drawing of a wild thing. The book tells the tale of a boy named Max, who has a tantrum and gets sent to bed without his supper. Obedient, thoughtful, kind to others—those were the attributes of conventional children's book characters of the day. The wild things are the monsters Max meets on an island to which he has been transported in fantasy. He cavorts with them, even becoming their leader, but in the end chooses to return home. At the end of a conventional children's book of the period, Max might have got comeuppance or at least a moral lesson. Instead, his supper and a loving family are waiting for him when he gets home.



A 25th-anniversary edition of *Where the Wild Things Are* sold to a bidder in the room for \$4560 (est. \$5000/7500). It was signed and dated October 1988 by Sendak and came with a separate, original ink drawing of a wild thing. There's an often repeated anecdote about another original wild thing drawing. It's told in Sendak's own words this way: "Once a little boy sent me a charming card with a little drawing on it. I loved it. I answer all my children's letters—sometimes very hastily—but this one I lingered over. I sent him a card and I drew a picture of a wild thing on it. I wrote, 'Dear Jim: I loved your card. Then I got a letter back from his mother, and she said, 'Jim loved your card so much he ate it.' That to me was one of the highest compliments I've ever received. He didn't care that it was an original Maurice Sendak drawing or anything. He saw it, he loved it, he ate it."



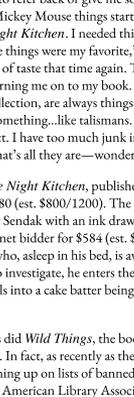
A signed first edition of *In the Night Kitchen*, published by Harper & Row in 1970, brought \$1080 (est. \$800/1200).



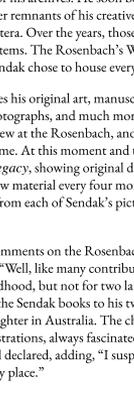
A first issue of the first book illustrated by Sendak sold to a bidder in the room for \$600 (est. \$500/750). *Atomics for the Millions* was published in 1947 by New York's Whittlesey House and later was signed by Sendak. The catalog provided this additional information: "A previous copy that appeared at auction contained a note from the publisher explaining how the young Sendak was asked to illustrate the book by [its co-author] Hyman Ruchlis, his high-school physics teacher. Sendak was doing poorly in his class and this was his way of helping improve his grade." A blogger named Peter D. Sieruta (1958-2012) once asserted that Sendak "agreed to do the artwork in exchange for \$100 and—now here's a kid after my own heart—a passing grade in class." Perhaps Sendak's eventual biographer will be able to find a primary source that verifies the story.



In the 1950's Sendak illustrated books for the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education. The titles are scarce. A signed first edition of *Happy Hanukkah Everybody*, written by Hyman and Alice Chanover, sold to a phone bidder for \$1440 (est. \$300/500). The same bidder paid \$1920 (est. \$600/900) for a copy without dustjacket of the first (and only) edition of *Good Shabbos, Everybody* by Robert Garvey.



A complete set of six action figures from *Where the Wild Things Are* sold to Justin Schiller for \$1320 (est. \$400/600). Each is approximately 8" tall and came in its own "as new" original box signed by Sendak and the toys' designer, Todd MacFarlane. Reed Orenstein bought the set on their release date in 2000 at F.A.O. Schwarz, the New York City toy store that in 1948 had turned down toy designs that 20-year-old Maurice Sendak had designed with his older brother, Jack. That same year, Sendak got a job building window displays for the store, and in 1950, through its children's book buyer Frances Chrystle, he was introduced to Ursula Nordstrom, a distinguished editor at Harper & Row, his eventual publisher. Nordstrom, unmarried and childless, was once challenged to say what qualified her to be a children's book editor. "Well, I am a former child," she replied, "and I haven't forgotten a thing."



A first edition, first issue, of *The Tale of Gockel, Hinkel & Gackeliah*, written by Clemens Brentano and illustrated by Sendak, sold to a phone bidder for \$840 (est. \$600/900). Published by Random House in 1961, the book was signed and inscribed by Sendak "For Karet Best wishes!! Mack" with an ink drawing of Sendak's terrier Jennie, sitting up on her two hind legs. The drawing was also signed by Eugene David Glynn (1926-2007), a psychiatrist and art critic. He was also Sendak's life partner of 50 years, but Sendak did not come out until he was 80, believing a gay man who was a children's book author would not be acceptable to large portions of the public, particularly early in his career.



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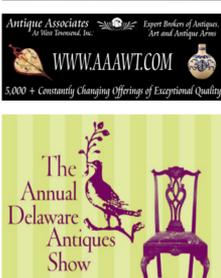
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