“The Boy of Today Loves Speed”: Sendak on Interwar Jewish Childhood in Flux

Maurice Sendak’s (1928-2012) artistic representation of childhood deepened in the late twentieth century by engaging with competing social forces of his 1930s Jewish Brooklyn childhood, as he had emotionally internalized them. This chapter sets the stage for understanding the artist’s early youth in the context of a rapidly emergent and mystifying popular culture of movies, comic books, cartoons, radio shows, and advertisements. Economic and social shifts between the 1920s and ‘30s created tensions that characterized these years as “decades of anxiety” for American Jews, to use the words of Lucy Dawidowicz.1 Commercial markets and mass media developed against stark intergenerational differences in the interwar Jewish immigrant family and exerted both regulatory and liberating influences on Jewish American children. Drawing on this history, I integrate analyses of several works of Sendak’s artistic maturity, beginning in the 1960s, which emerge from the emotions of an interwar Jewish child’s need to grasp certain individual opportunities while surviving multiple potential threats: on the one hand, a matrix of powerful public agendas to “socialize” children and immigrant families, and, on the other hand, personal relationships with difficult, but beloved parents who suffered the distresses of immigrating and enduring the Depression in an era marked by anxieties about global antisemitism. Resonating on wider levels for understanding notions of modern childhood, as well as American, Jewish, and queer subjectivities, Sendak’s art documents and explores how he sublimated intersectionally internalized feelings of endangerment as a queer interwar child of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants.2 Sendak once stated, “I only have one subject. The question I am obsessed with is, how do children survive?”3 Many of his later works, including the books he deemed his “trilogy” — *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), and *Outside Over There* (1981), as well as projects like *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993), intuitively visualize confrontations between the competing energies of private and public, particular and universal, “inside” and “outside.” His creative instincts speak to generations of children raised under simultaneous pressures to revere parental authority and inherited traditions, as well as to participate independently in a fast-evolving popular youth culture often at odds with their parents’ emotional worlds. Revitalizing his interwar childhood feelings in the late twentieth century, Sendak highlighted interior struggles still relevant to modern children: the need to preserve vitality and individuality while navigating private and public realms that alternated between stultifying and liberating.

**Jewish American Childhood in an Age of Mass Culture**

Sendak grew up in an era that saw the social progressiveness of 1920s New York City recede into economic depression and anxious conservatism.4 He came to see his childhood self as both “spoiled” and “traumatized,” claiming that he was the noisiest, crankiest, sickliest, and most demanding of the family’s children.5 His Yiddish-speaking, lower-middle-class parents, Sadie and Philip, both immigrated from Poland to New York shortly before WWI; they met at a social function over a shared love of Sholem Aleichem’s writings.6 After moving from the East Side to Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, they struggled to stay afloat financially during the ’30s, unable to afford college for either of Sendak’s older siblings, Natalie (Nettie) and Jack (Jacob).7 Often harried and exhausted, they were inconsistently available to their children, as Sendak painted it, creating a dynamic that fluctuated between emotional neglect and moments of intrusiveness.8 Sadie would startle Sendak by running into his room and shouting “Whooooot,” or by roughly tickling his feet, making him scream for her to stop. He believed, “It was her constant pain not to understand why I didn’t realize she was being affectionate.”9 The artist would later confess, “I felt certain that my mother did not like me.”10 Overall, Sendak felt, “being young was such a gross waste of time […] I was just such a miserable, miserable person.”11 He recalled a childhood of confinement on his neighborhood block, as well as a series of “dreadful” apartments, complete with bed bugs and backyard odors. To avoid rent hikes and the chaos that came when buildings were re-painted, Sadie repeatedly uprooted the family, switching the young artist between various Brooklyn schools and complicating his
ability to make lasting friendships. As Selma Lanes writes, Sendak developed an early talent for “observing and savoring, rather than actively participating in, the life around him.”

Sendak claimed that from infancy he was highly conscious of the possibilities of losing his parents, facing brutal antisemitism, or dying. The possibility that he might perish from his illnesses was a real one, indeed. Philip had experienced the death of his own little sister as a boy in Mishinitz, Poland, before the family settled back in his grandfather’s shtetl, Zambrow. When the infant Maurice suffered illnesses, his maternal grandmother, Minnie Schindler, who periodically lived with the Sendaks, made sure to dress him in white so that the angel of death might mistake him for a ghost and spare his life. The artist spent much of his early childhood indoors, both alone in his bedroom and absorbing the Yiddish-inflected “kitchen Judaism” of his mother and grandmother. Minnie and Sadie relayed memories of pogroms in their Polish shtetl, Zakroczyzm, during which “the Jew-haters would come into her little grocery store” and Minnie “would push her children down into the cellar,” including Sadie, hiding while the Cossacks ransacked their store. Bedtime stories in many Yiddish-speaking, immigrant families, like Sendak’s, reflected the need to nourish the child’s capacity to locate and heed dangerous situations. Philip’s “myselles,” as Sendak called them, also sometimes included children who lose their parents, succumbing to a fatal sleep in the snow, or failing to be recognized by their parents after a period of separation. Later, in Philip’s book In Grandpa’s House (1985), which Sendak would illustrate, the child protagonist would struggle to get his captured parents to recognize him after he frees them from their captor. Philip, likely drawing from the myths, midrashic tales, and folklore of his childhood heder and community in Zambrow, embellished otherwise truthful renderings of his youth with elements of fantasy, biblical stories, and the terrors of pogrom memories.

Some of the most pervasive influences on the young Sendak’s creative vision came from the physicality of his lower-middle-class urban Brooklyn childhood, in an era that saw a rapid increase in industrialization, a popular youth culture disconnected from that of adult parents, and the emerging reign of far-reaching and persuasive advertising companies. A wider social expectation emerged that urban American adolescents participate in an evolving set of recreational behaviors and personal styles, which transgressed immigrant parents’ traditions – as well as some of the mores of the nation’s older establishment. A child market in American advertising had only emerged around WWI. Children of the following decades were the first to consume mass culture, in the form of dime novels, pulp magazines, movies, radio, and television. A rapidly growing advertising industry spoke directly to children, ushering them into consumerism through grand spectacles and manufactured dreams. The 1939 New York World’s Fair, for example, which Sendak visited and which helped inspire his Night Kitchen, focused on creating a “better future” and published extensive exhibition guides geared toward children. Urban youth were perhaps the most exposed to the growing mass media of popular culture and its accompanying ethos of speed, individuality, and casual fun. Reflecting on the increasingly mechanical, industrialized nature of the early century, interwar critics like Malcolm Cowley bemoaned a loss of humanistic values as America’s old social establishment faded into a “grab-and-git” mentality, an “age of machines, and of persons who reacted like machines, in spastic patterns of stimulus and response.”

Even in child psychology of these decades, the school of behaviorism advocated for raising children in mechanical ways that focused on punishment and reward and resembled training a house pet. Sendak recalled 1930s school reading assemblies in which “you sat, row by row, class by class […] with your hands folded in your lap. Kids assigned by the teachers to be monitors walked up and down to see if your hands indeed were clasped tightly. […] all you thought about were your hands […] how anti-reading, how anti-life, the situation was.” The sensitive Sendak recalled preserving his emotional integrity by relating to his books carefully, as “holy objects to be caressed and snifffed and treasured.” He would lament, “I could not stand being cloistered with other children, and I was usually so embarrassed that I stammered.”

Sendak came of age in an era that applied unprecedented scientific and cultural attention to the shaping of America’s future through its children, including and perhaps especially those children born to immigrants. As dominant attitudes gradually shifted in the interwar decades from behaviorist “habit-training” to more emotionally invested, child-centered approaches aimed at promoting social adjustment and emotional independence, a conflict grew between the generations: anxious adults felt more eager to
shield and protect allegedly fragile children from the potential threats of the adult public, while children gained more emotional authority to determine and insist on their feelings during childhood and adolescence.\textsuperscript{30} Meanwhile, as suggested above, youth became increasingly independent of the family structure via technological advances, such as the expansion of the urban subway and the popularization of the automobile in the suburbs.\textsuperscript{31} In 1922, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise noted the deepening “consciousness of children that they have the unchallengeable right to live their own lives, under freedom to develop their own personalities. Revolting against the superimposition of parental personality […] they have begun to hearken to Emerson’s counsel to insist upon themselves.”\textsuperscript{32} The eagerness with which young interwar Americans emulated trends set by advertising campaigns, famous athletes, and movie stars suggested the readiness of youth to distance themselves from particular inherited traditions in the service of their American belonging as they constructed their own individualities.\textsuperscript{33} Mass media could pressure youth culture under the guise of liberation through exciting and fast-paced technologies, products, and styles.\textsuperscript{34}

The expansion of mass entertainment in the interwar decades (including film, newspapers, and comic books) characterized a zeitgeist of speed and play, and it led to greater public coverage of children and the rise of professional “child wonders” like Shirley Temple and other young entertainers. Joseph Illick argues that babies and youth, as cultural symbols, helped resolve tensions between tradition and an emerging youth culture in the ‘20s to delineate the modern child and imagine its “ideal” manifestations from the perspective of anxious parents. He writes, “young people were caricatured as a way of understanding and coming to terms with the changes that overwhelmed the old order.”\textsuperscript{35} Sendak would recall “the cheated, missed-luck look in my father’s eyes as he turned from the radiant image of Shirley Temple back to the three un-golden children he’dbegotten. Ah, the wonderful, rich, American-dream blessing of having a Shirley Temple girl and a Bobby Breen boy! I never forgave those yodeling, tap-dancing, brimming-with-glittering-life miniature monsters.”\textsuperscript{36} Entering the powerful realm of popular media, Walt Disney and other commercial producers of the interwar decades, along with childrearing manuals and periodicals, also helped normalize the notion of an ideal, wholesome, middle-class American child in mainstream culture, which naturalized ideas about race, gender, and class through that imagined child.\textsuperscript{37} Accordingly, Mickey Mouse gradually evolved in the ‘30s from a jazzy, urban, scrappy mischief-maker to a well-mannered, wide-eyed suburban sweetheart. The emerging cultural norms of modern childhood – of prioritizing an emotional education and protecting children and adolescents from social and psychological dangers – helped acculturate immigrant families by insisting that their children have a specific, emotionally “innocent” sort of childhood shielded from paid labor and the adult public.\textsuperscript{38} By the late ‘30s, Sammond writes, the U.S. was “poised between two opposing ideals of child care—older ideals of behaviorism aimed at instilling obedience, versus neo-Freudian ‘permissiveness.’”\textsuperscript{39} While behaviorism sought to train a child toward a specific outcome in a somewhat authoritarian manner, child-centered neo-Freudianism sought to uncover the child’s independent sense of self and allow children to actualize as individuals on their own terms in a culture that idealized the “American Dream” of self-made prosperity and belonging. With public anxiety about the morally vacuous, impersonal nature of the “age of machines,” as well as about the youth culture emerging overseas in 1930s Nazi Germany, critics associated behaviorism with the authoritarian production of “automatons.”\textsuperscript{40} On the other hand, implicit in the neo-Freudian expectation that modern children be permitted to overcome autocratic or “primitive” qualities of authoritarian parenting styles was the demand that they also overcome their parents’ foreign behaviors and mentalities in order to acculturate to mainstream American society as freed \textit{individuals} best suited to the public sphere and emotionally receptive to the nation’s future goals.

Accordingly, the popular child ideals of the ‘30s exacerbated parent-child tensions in some traditional Jewish American families. Yiddish children’s literature published in interwar Europe and the U.S., stemming from experiences of physical endangerment, heightened political consciousness, and emotionally tightknit families, handled difficult themes of war, violence, racism, lynching, and death.\textsuperscript{41} As Daniela Mantovan shows, Yiddish children’s literature of the late ‘30s, like Philip Sendak’s bedtime stories, reflected the harsh realities Jews faced in Eastern Europe, as well as the general atmosphere of political terror.\textsuperscript{42} Der Nister’s tales, for example, used animals to symbolize those human elements that needed to be othered, regulated, or forbidden – small, benign animals attempt and fail to participate
productively in human society, and larger, predatory animals are killed as enemies. Though Sendak did not recount reading Yiddish books as a child, he described internalizing his parents’ feelings that life was dangerously fragile and that gentiles were hostile to their kind. His father’s stories, even the happier ones, were “always on the darker side of irony,” Sendak recalled.

Though significant numbers of American Jews did achieve financial security and middle-class status and move to the suburbs by the ’20s and ’30s, families like the Sendaks remained in Yiddish-speaking, working- and lower-middle-class urban enclaves. While Philip offered his children tenderness and suspenseful, original, Yiddish-inflected bedtime stories, he was also emotionally overextended, struggling to earn a living as a tailor during the Depression. “Leading […] the macho life – of taking care of the family,” Sendak once said, Philip “repressed so much […] ingenuity”. Sendak claimed that his earliest memory of his parents was of them openly fretting over the possibility of him dying from early childhood diseases, including measles and double pneumonia at age two and scarlet fever at age five, in an era predating the use of penicillin. This early fear of his own mortality merged for the child Sendak with the media-sensationalized March 1932 kidnapping and murder of Charles and Anne Lindbergh’s infant son, who was allegedly taken through his bedroom window, by ladder. This was a baby who, the four-year-old Sendak understood, had enjoyed much greater surveillance and protection than Sendak did. The artist would describe this publicized kidnapping as “the major event of my childhood, and probably the source of my conviction that it’s impossible to shield children from frightening truths.” Following that news story, Sendak’s fearful parents, despite the economic hardship of the Depression, bought and installed new, extra tight screens in their children’s bedroom. Philip also slept on the floor of Sendak’s bedroom in his underwear “armed with a fly swatter or bat, to ward off potential kidnappers.” Never completely sure of his safety or of his parents’ ability to protect him, the artist once said, “being kidnapped was always the lingering nightmare of my life.”

On an emotional level, the artist internalized a sense of early endangerment as the son of lower-middle-class Jewish immigrants. He would recall synthesizing his perceptions of his own early illnesses and the Lindbergh scandal, making:

> the queer association that, since I was not meant to live long – I had been told that – if the Lindbergh baby is kidnapped, it can’t die, because it’s a rich, gentle baby. It has blue eyes and blonde hair. The father is Captain Marvel and the mother is the Princess of the Universe, and they live in a house in a place called Hopewell, New Jersey where there are German Shepherds, and where there are nannies, and where there are police […] how defenseless could babies be, even among the rich? I could not bear the thought that that baby was dead. […] because if that baby died, I had no chance. I was only a poor kid. […] And when the baby was found dead, I think something really fundamental died in me.

Fearing a similar fate, the child Sendak referred to the Lindbergh infant as “the mush baby,” later noting the similarity between the word “mush” and his own Yiddish name, Moishe.

Sendak was obviously not alone in making associations between concerns about socioeconomics, Jewish acculturation, and survival. And commentators on the Jewish family of the interwar decades also fretted about moral dilemmas related to financial status. Socioeconomics, warned Stephen S. Wise, held great influence on parents’ ability to give their children both substantial Jewish education and the requisite materials and emotional attention necessary for American belonging, let alone physical survival. The economically strained family, he argued, lacked the physical energy and psychological reserves for cultivating a child’s healthy emotional development by modern American standards. Sammond writes that children, as targets of social reform and customers of cinemas and city shops, became a bridge between the home and the public sphere. Such a position could be an especially stressful one when the child’s worlds lay particularly far apart from each other. Philip did not learn to read or write English until later in life; Sadie, doing seamstress work at home, never learned. Presumably, those immigrant parents who depended on their offspring for such basic tasks as translating their bills and letters from English and mediating American culture, more generally, needed their children to gain American cultural capital for their families’ survival. But it would have been particularly difficult for such disadvantaged
families to provide the relaxed, secure, and emotionally balanced environment needed to cultivate culturally American insiders.\textsuperscript{58}

The project of modernizing childhood was a class issue if work, or the emotional tone of a working-class family, impeded a child’s “proper” performance in mainstream American culture, a culture that required sufficient time and energy for social training beyond what was available to paid laborers. In 1917, Antonio Mangano estimated that ninety percent of urban adolescents of foreign-born parents worked.\textsuperscript{59} This figure included people like Sendak’s Polish mother, Sadie, who in 1911 was sent alone to New York to begin sweatshop work at age sixteen and earn money to support other family members’ subsequent immigration. Coming of age years after the Depression, Sendak experienced more financial security than his parents had as adolescents, but his 1930s childhood was colored by the family’s serious financial anxiety. Heightened by class-consciousness and social exclusions, twentieth-century Americanization and the creation of modern childhood were intertwined matters centered on securing the safety of a middle-class status and standards of American cultural “normalcy.”\textsuperscript{60} Both were facilitated in part by an emotional rift between generations, which was enacted through wider commercial appeals to a playful, spectacle-filled, erotically charged, peer-driven popular youth culture beyond the comfort zone of traditional parents raised on other continents. Socially alienated and highly invested in his parents’ feelings, Sendak resisted this rift to some extent but, as I discuss below, also yearned to explore the personal questions that an urban American individuality might allow him to indulge.\textsuperscript{61}

Inasmuch as Jews were perceived as financially insecure European immigrants, like Sendak’s parents, they were part of a publically perceived cultural threat. Inasmuch as they were accepted as middle-class Americans of the Jewish faith (as a modern religion) they could perhaps be included in the mainstream establishment. Interwar commentators concerned with American Jews’ public image in the face of nativist social trends urged Jewish parents not to give their American children too much individuality, drawing a line between necessary freedom and emotional neglect.\textsuperscript{62} For example, Conservative rabbi Jacob Kohn warned against exposing Jewish children to adult entertainment and drunkenness, which Kohn perceived as a common occurrence at the modern, urban configuration of the Bar Mitzvah ritual.\textsuperscript{63} Stephen S. Wise similarly bemoaned the “pleasure-madness of our children” in the 1920s, commenting on their hunger for crude films and sexually exciting theatrics on stage.\textsuperscript{64} Commentators saw the “breakdown of sympathy between immigrant parents and their adolescent children” as the cause of young people’s liberal attitudes toward sexuality.\textsuperscript{65} Some critics blamed urban individualism and the freedom to socialize beyond the framework of a tightknit religious community for problems like wife desertion and juvenile delinquency.\textsuperscript{66} Since the turn of the century, Yiddish newspapers like the Forverts pressured American Jews to be more present and influential in their children’s upbringing, despite their poverty and exhaustion from “backbreaking working conditions, long days in the sweatshop and low self-esteem.”\textsuperscript{67} Jewish immigrants were urged to self-regulate against perceptions of themselves as corrupting social agents in America.\textsuperscript{68} They collectively worried about meeting the standards of the emerging middle class and about protecting the public image of the Jewish community while struggling to survive financially in a difficult economy.

Where home failed to do so, peer groups and public school helped first-generation American children negotiate the sharp disparities between increasingly private middle-class households, where personal emotional worlds were shaped, and the public world in which one was expected to take a useful, collectively defined social role.\textsuperscript{69} Earlier twentieth-century Jewish immigrant writers like Mary Antin had lauded the public school system as a treasured path to American socialization and success. Deborah Dash Moore writes that some second-generation New York Jews treated the public school like an “ethnic institution,” in this regard.\textsuperscript{70} Sendak’s biography, however, offers the perspective of a social outcast estranged from both parents and peers. He would later recall, “I couldn’t play stoopball terrific, I couldn’t skate great. I stayed home and drew pictures. You know what they all thought of me: sissy Maurice Sendak.”\textsuperscript{71} For an unusually sensitive, artistic child like Sendak, school was an especially detestable site – he recounted suffering attacks on his creative character and pressure to conform to a climate of standardization and seemingly arbitrary behavioral constraints. Moreover, whenever he caused a teacher stress, he wrote, his parents always took the side of the teacher, “out of a deep respect for educated
people.” Sendak would later state, “I hate, loathe, and despise schools […] school is bad for you if you have any talent. You should be cultivating that talent in your own particular way.” Specifically, he felt that being herded by teachers in a group was impersonal and deadening, that teachers emphasized manners over content, and that they policed students’ misbehavior rather than inspiring their learning. He found most of his peers overly competitive and felt “very alone.” The present study follows Eli Lederhendler’s call to study those who, like Sendak, did not fit traditional descriptions of mainstream Jewish American acculturation, finding their American identity through more isolated, creative, or otherwise “queer” pathways. As I discuss in the following analysis, Sendak channeled the emotional flux of his own boyhood, responding to the interwar popularization of an American child ideal and its mass commodification. As already described, the artist’s early youth had been situated between competing desires as a queer, sensitive, urban child of traditional, Yiddish-speaking immigrants negotiating the extent of their own acculturation in a Depression culture saturated by mass media pressures and financial strain. Intuitively sifting through his emotional responses to these social factors, he would articulate unvoiced personal needs of overlooked, real children within an elusive matrix of competing powers.

Humanizing an Urban Jewish Childhood

As interwar social authorities maintained, urban children were more exposed to the harshness of the public than were their idealized suburban counterparts. Rabbi Jacob Kohn wrote in 1932, “the larger the city, the smaller the home for the rank and file of people who live within its boundaries. It is difficult to see how within the physical limits imposed by a two, three or four room apartment a family can be reared and flourish and can find its natural joys and daily recreations.” Irving Howe recalled that New York of the ‘30s was a “brutal, ugly, frightening, foul-smelling jungle…[…] the embodiment of that alien world which every boy raised in a Jewish immigrant home had been taught, whether he realized it or not, to look upon with suspicion.” Real estate companies and social commentators of the ‘30s painted the urban landscape, once idealized, as crowded, filthy, and dangerous. Indeed, Sendak remembered playing in the street as a young boy and seeing his friend Lloyd become airborne and die, hit by a car after chasing a ball Sendak had thrown into the street – the artist’s first real encounter with death. The children of his neighborhood were strictly confined to their block so as not to endanger themselves by crossing the trafficked urban streets. Sendak described how mothers’ heads would appear from the windows and scream “that you would die” if you crossed the street, making you “a prisoner” of the block. Another of Sendak’s friends, Freddy, lived across the street; their only interaction with each other was waving from a distance. Early twentieth century middle-class Americans gradually came to consider cities undesirable places to raise “the American child” – in part because of physical dangers, and in part because of the psychological influence of what reformers deemed to be socially “deviant” cultures that congregated in them, including Eastern European Jews, black migrants from the south, bohemians, political radicals, and queer youth fleeing intolerant families and hometowns. The American Dream painted suburbs as the optimal location for cultivating proper values and socially desirable personalities in children, away from the corrupting influences of the public sphere. In dense cities, by contrast, the public sphere was ubiquitous, and in it children collided with difficult realities.

On the other hand, not all interwar American Jews necessarily idealized the culture of the Anglophone, suburban bourgeois. Although a fully “socialized” American child might be the closest an immigrant fleeing poverty or persecution might come to achieving American belonging, such a child – so individualistic and culturally middle-class – would also be a strange creature to working-class, immigrant parents who suffered to survive as members of a persecuted ethnic minority and who enjoyed the specific cultural richness of their Yiddish-speaking urban communities. The Yiddish language and its subversive cultural attitude toward the bourgeois establishment was one route through which Eastern European Jewish immigrants imbued their children with critical perspectives and liberal politics. While generally the young Sendak spoke a mix of Yiddish and English with his family, he switched to mostly Yiddish...
during his maternal grandmother’s extended stays at their home, as she spoke no English. A “bitter and sharp” woman whom Sendak adored, she held him on her lap while she davened by the window, and she modeled an emotionally resilient stance, linking him most directly to his Eastern European heritage, “like the bridge from the old country to the new country.” Sendak also absorbed his father’s leftist ideas to some extent through Philip’s Yiddish bedtime stories, which offered messages at odds with the ruthless competition of urban capitalism and individualism. In Grandpa’s House (1985), a tale dictated to Sendak by his father, as recalled from the latter’s boyhood in Poland, would draw on Jewish folk wisdom to condemn animalistic systems in which the big eat the little, as well as materialistic greed, which turned people into monsters. Tony Kushner, Jewish American playwright and longtime friend of Sendak’s, called the book Philip’s “socialist primer.” The child Sendak also came to adore a Communist cousin whom he was “not supposed to like” but nonetheless glamorized as “our only superior relative.” She encouraged the young Sendak’s art and spoke to him directly. He would later gush, “How romantic being loved, being respected, being looked at by a Communist!”

The artist may have enjoyed channeling his subversive impulses in his illustrations for “Grandmother’s Story,” of I.B. Singer’s Zlateh the Goat collection (1966). Against omnipresent cultural motifs of Christmas, capitalist fun, and the bourgeois family, the story features a jolly, big-bellied devil who arrives by sleigh during Hannukah with a bottomless purse, joined by a gang of “goblins in red caps and green boots.” Taking cues from Singer’s text, Sendak’s dancing goblins look like tiny elves with the pointed hats of those so often depicted in Christmas folklore.

Violent, passionate, sexual, and severe, Philip’s fantastical bedtime shtetl stories would blend in Sendak’s imagination with earlier versions of the Brothers Grimm tales, which had also offered children and adults alike “that same ferocious truth,” which, despite the “clichés of fairy tale tricks,” emerged with “great poignancy and real joy…like life.” Though originally collected for adults interested in a disappearing culture of German oral folktales, Grimm stories quickly absorbed children’s emotional interest, especially in their earliest editions, prior to censorship. Sendak’s work, tapping into real childhood feelings, Philip’s shtetl stories, and European fairy tales, provides a model of childhood agency and cleverness in the face of danger. Having been a sensitive child in a decade obsessed with caring for its young against the serious threats of a tanked economy and an impending world war, it is perhaps unsurprising that middle-aged Sendak was repelled by the didactic, moralizing literature that, he felt, manipulated children and obfuscated their vision, making it difficult to heed impending dangers and leaving them crippled like Ida, the protagonist of his Outside Over There (1981). Sendak would have Ida begin an urgent quest to find her threatened infant sister by flying backwards in the night, obstructed by the folds of her mother’s oversized cloak; only the disembodied call of Ida’s father – resounding across oceans, as if from the afterlife, or from a clever insight remembered from one of Philip’s bedtime stories – turns Ida forward and saves her infant sister’s life.

Sendak’s attitudes refreshed postwar parents who had grown up spiritually alienated and disengaged from their own cultural and religious roots in the socially conformist 1950s. As is widely known, the American Jewish community of the ’60s specifically struggled with intergenerational conflicts between acculturated parents who had built suburban synagogues and institutions, and young adults seeking deeper emotional and spiritual engagement with their pre-acculturation roots. In 1969, Hillel Levine recalled his postwar childhood, speaking to the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Boards on behalf of an alienated generation of young American Jews,

you might dismiss us as children of our times, [...] but we see ourselves as children of timelessness. [...] The Holocaust made a deep impression on our young minds, as did the new-felt pride in the State
of Israel. [...] [T]he larger world was exciting, a labyrinth of mystery and challenge. The warmth of an old grandfather, the tranquility of a Sabbath at home, the moral indignation of a verse from the Prophets may have given us second thought about our Jewish identity, but on the whole we knew where the action was and where it was not. [...] We were not attracted to a Jewish life devoid of intellectual and spiritual energy. [...] We woke up from the American dream and tried to discover who we really were.  

Explicitly employing his parents’ frankness, subversive wit, political awareness, and serious energies in his creative work, Sendak delighted postwar generations with his willingness to speak more openly and truthfully about what most children, even comfortably middle-class children, feared and pondered about the world. This including the taboos of unrestrained rage, abuse, sex, and death, from which the artist may have been less shielded in the urban milieu of his 1930s childhood, despite the ideals of sheltered childhood innocence that emerged around him in the wider mainstream. Sendak claimed that while his books’ portrayals of inattentive mothers and older children’s dislike of younger siblings frightened polite American parents, for him those elements were important depictions of daily family realities, even if only on an emotional level. Beyond the sphere of socioeconomic privilege, these were sometimes even physical realities. When Sadie had to work, for example, she would hand the infant Maurice over to his sister, Natalie, who was reluctantly forced to babysit, even during her excursions with boyfriends. Sendak would subversively depict children’s awareness of the physical dangers and pleasures of which they were expected to pretend innocence, including elements of sexuality and nocturnal amusements of urban life.  

Sendak once complained, “In most children’s books in this country [...] you would never even know that children had normal bodily functions, because it’s an unmentionable kind of thing. And children must think it very peculiar that they read books and see things that don’t mention things that are so apparent to them.” Similarly, he called his Hector Protector (1965) a “vendetta book” against critics who saw his Wild Things as inappropriate for children. A serpent tangled around Hector’s sword in the shape of two coiled circles and a lunging head emphasize the protagonist’s phallic force. One young male reader even sent a letter to Sendak, asking, “When I grow up will mine be as big as Hector’s?” Describing these drawings as revenge against critics who found his work too explicit for children, Sendak admitted, “I very consciously, obviously used and played with the snake in just those ways. Those pictures are so obvious it is embarrassing.”

Sendak understood the child’s imagination as “the miraculous, freewheeling device he uses to course his way through the problems of every day,” which transcended cultural and class constructions and included matters of sexuality and mortality deemed “inappropriate” for children. He insisted, “I refuse to lie to children [...] I refuse to cater to the bullshit of innocence.” Children’s fantasies, innocent or not, he felt, were “the normal and healthy outlet for corrosive emotions such as impotent frustration and rage; the positive and appropriate channeling of overwhelming and, to the child, inappropriate feelings.” Sendak’s picture books of the late twentieth century, referencing advertising, popular news media, and mass culture, articulated a vision of childhood that spoke to youth of the 1960s and beyond. This vision, rife with strong desires, internalized social pressures, physical terror, and loneliness experienced firsthand as a sensitive interwar Jewish child, validated children’s private and socially neglected feelings, encouraging them to survive the daunting expectations of meaning-making and self-actualization in a century torn between conservative nation-building and dizzying forces of social liberation. Like the children he depicted, Sendak creatively protected those parts of his emotional world targeted by social pressures within the process of “growing up” in interwar America.
“I don’t really believe that the kid I was has grown up into me. He still exists somewhere, in the most graphic, plastic, physical way for me. I have a tremendous concern for, and interest in, him. I try to communicate with him all the time.”

At a time when Americans idealized the dream of raising children in a private home with a well-manicured yard, Sendak’s books continued to depict children in dense cities in which ubiquitous advertisements, news media, popular entertainment, and technological spectacles colored the landscape. With its ethos of empowered, youth-driven energy, the city into which Sendak was born invited one to carve out one’s independence, to experiment socially, and to try on different potential selves. He directly conveyed the emotional storms of urban children whose experiences wavered between liberation, neglect, and endangerment, applauding these children’s resourcefulness, creativity, and resilience in their direct engagement with hard realities both “inside” and “outside” as they struggled to survive, physically and emotionally. Earlier works like Very Far Away (1957) and The Sign on Rosie’s Door (1960) show children either ignored or “dumped on the sidewalk to play” in the claustrophobic but intimate atmosphere of Brooklyn, where children were captive in a single-block radius, neighbors visible to each other from the stoops of their apartment buildings. These children don disguises, run away, distract themselves with animals, play make-believe, count automobiles, and return home. With the help of Ursula Nordstrom, his editor and champion at Harper, Sendak contributed to the project of conveying the urban landscape through the eyes of an inspired child. Nordstrom wrote to the artist in ‘63, “The dreamy rural aspects of most picture books are lovely but you could do something about a little boy on a Brooklyn street, the stoops, the entry ways, the backyards, street fires, street games, little stores, slightly older children […] …the sun against some of our horrible old buildings is as lovely as lots of things in these wholesome rural backgrounds.”

In later Sendak works, fantastical, dystopian, and apocalyptic elements color narratives of children pushed from overwhelmed mothers onto ambivalent older siblings, as in Outside Over There, or of children pushed alone onto the street, as in Brundibar (2003) and We are All in the Dumps (1993). Perhaps also drawing on Philip’s socialism, We are All in the Dumps envisions an entire subculture of abandoned children surviving the urban slums, forced to band together and protect each other to avoid the looming threat of capitalist predators. These works dignify the realities of those degraded and forgotten children who, Sendak knew, had the capacity to feel so deeply and to survive with such bravery and ingenuity, even as the wider society preferred a more innocent and “wholesome,” suburban child ideal.
who, raised on insulated social privilege, would stand for the American dream. They would also speak to postwar generations struggling to find meaning in a socially liberated culture in which the youth set the cultural standards, outmoding older adults. In 1969, Sendak would describe a walk he took with his father through “the hippie universe” of Second Avenue, where “young girls and boys” were “staggering about (on drugs),” and he would confess, “I’ve become so used to it. But they are so young – it is a nightmare vision – one wants to take home half a dozen and feed them up. […] My father, of course, was horrified from one moral view – the lack of decency and self respect. I am most depressed at its lack of meaning.”108 Even comfortably middle-class American children of the postwar generations, as inexperienced and physically dependent human beings, would remain hungry for stories about how people survive states of emotional hardship and need, beyond the bland security of “Dick and Jane,” Disney, and other rose-colored depictions of their reality.

Comics Sensibilities and Children’s Liberation

Sendak’s picture books of the latter twentieth century draw explicitly from the cultural attitudes, fast-paced rhythms, and mixed aesthetics of the interwar decades. That commercialized, increasingly industrialized era potentially alienated individuals and challenged the unity of the traditional family, but it also facilitated democratic self-invention and improvisation for young adults and creative individuals. Shifting from classical and moralizing perspectives, cultural establishments of the ‘20s increasingly valued art that the public enjoyed, usually by communicating and mirroring direct, embodied experiences from the ground up.109 The aesthetic and cultural movement of Futurism fused youth, the machine, and the spectacle. The popular arts of the time, Sendak wrote, were “liberating, socially equalizing, and aesthetically avant-garde, […] in lively communication with the fine [arts], and a kind of give and take refreshed and deepened both.”110

Before studying canonical illustrators and fine artists as an adult, the younger Sendak was most invested in the popular media available to him: comic books, dime novels, movies, and cartoons. Walt Disney’s early iterations of Mickey Mouse as a playful, but degraded rodent especially spoke to the child Sendak’s identifications: this early Mickey was “more dangerous [and] did things to Minnie that were not nice.”111 At one point, as a child, Sendak lived a block from Kingsway Theatre, which he frequented. He recalled seeing every Merle Oberon and Bette Davis movie there with his sister and becoming wildly excited by the Mickey Mouse cartoons that played before and after the films. In his forties and fifties, he would accumulate 1930s toys in his studio, amassing a major collection of early Mickey Mouse paraphernalia, to help him remember the emotional tone of that era in order to depict visual cues that would recreate it.112 In his Higglety Pigglety Pop! (1967), for example, he centered the face of the protagonist, his Sealyham terrier, inside a circle to resemble the lion in the famous MGM logo. Sendak repeatedly described using a fast-paced, musical approach to his books, striving to catch readers’ attention through a jazzy flow that, like an old film or comic book, would animate a text and hurry it to a beat.113 Sendak’s use of interwar comics, film, and advertising conventions harkens to the first palpable expressions of children’s desires within American popular culture – the historical moment in which mass media began to approach the child directly as a cognizant individual with legitimate emotional needs. In some respects, the popular media of his youth inexplicitly mirrored his queer desires and rebellious spirit. The playful irreverence of cartoons like Disney’s Mickey Mouse spoke to the stifled parts of Sendak’s difference as a queer, urban, lower-middle class Jew during an increasingly socially conservative, homophobic era in which Jewish American culture also became more suburban, “white,” and bourgeois – qualities somewhat foreign to Sendak’s youth.114 In comic books, cartoons, popular films, and Manhattan store windows, the boy Sendak learned about a world of expression that transcended the laws of his constraining family life and, in some cases, subverted the mainstream social order.115
American comics, an industry that came of age alongside Sendak, drew from cultural excitement about new, fast-paced technologies, jazz music and the speed of film, automobiles, and aviation. A 1922 newspaper article noted that “the boy of today […] loves speed and […] wants to move fast […] looks forward to 300 miles an hour with confidence […] is not interested so much in parents’ old stories but in those involving modern methods of speed, of wireless, flying, even mental telepathy.”

If older children of the ‘20s and ‘30s idolized Hollywood movie stars, celebrity athletes, and comic-book superheroes, younger ones absorbed cartoons and the “Sunday funnies,” colorful shop signs, ads, and radio programs. Sendak, who cherished his childhood comic books, often recounted a memory from infancy in which he conceptualized a comic-like series of panels while watching his siblings build a snowman through the sporadic opening and closing of a window curtain, dividing the motion into sequential images.

Sendak began to develop his own skills as a narrative artist around age nine, pasting together comics strips, newspaper photographs, sketches of his family, and hand-lettering on paper and shirt cardboard, bound with tape and book covers that he decorated to illustrate his brother Jack’s stories. He believed his parents were “indifferent” to his drawing as a child but glad when the children were occupied and less of a burden on them. As a teenager during WWII, Sendak would also become directly involved in mainstream comics in his first after-school job drawing background details for All American Comics strips. Later, in a September ’69 journal entry, while working on Night Kitchen, Sendak described the book as “comic-bookish” and as a “series of moving panels.” He reminded himself in his journal that, like a comic book, the spreads “must vary in exciting fashion – like a film. Fast!”

The children of The Sign on Rosie’s Door had also imagined Rosie’s “Magic Man” as a strange variation on a superhero – a man in a mask and blue cape with wings and earmuffs. Sendak’s illustrations for the Kraken edition of Herman Melville’s Pierre (1995) would also emulate comic-book heroes and the eroticized quality of popular adolescent youth culture by placing Pierre in a red cape and a skin-tight, blue bodysuit with visibly emphasized genitalia.

Sendak’s comics sensibilities can also be understood in the context of the technological development of American children’s books, which, by the late ‘20s, became more like comic books due to improvements in color lithography and the rise of child psychology. Oversize print and exciting, often cartoonish imagery made the picture book, like the comic book, seem deceptively simple. Before the late twentieth century when graphic novels reached bestseller lists and the children’s book became a dignified art form, comics and children’s picture books shared a low cultural status.

Condescension experienced as a children’s-book artist, perhaps in solidarity with comic-book artists, fueled some of Sendak’s empathy for children themselves, whom he viewed as constant social victims of patronizing attitudes. Sendak’s Night Kitchen, widely read as a child’s nocturnal triumph, would offer explicit emotional liberation to those children made to feel unduly naïve, ignorant, and irrelevant to adults – put to bed before the important events of any given evening and denied access to knowledge about their own bodies and physical drives. Comic books had offered interwar children like Sendak similar flights into forbidden freedom and agency. A youth services representative of the American Jewish Committee, in her defense of comic books during a talk she gave at the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, would contrast the fast-paced, engaging quality of comic books with the uninspired, muted readers available to children:

Dick and Jane are fair-haired, blue-eyed, neatly dressed children. They romp on well-kept lawns and play with a pretty little dog while a young, smiling mother stands in the background near a pretty little house. How real or how interesting is this to beginning readers? Second- and third-grade books paint much the same bland and unexciting view of the world. What a difference from the action and adventure of most comic books.
Night Kitchen, like comic books and graphic novels, uses a language of simplified planes and shapes, the collapsing of time and space, a fast-paced rhythm, separated panels, speech bubbles, word-image interplay, popular cultural references, and a kind of dream logic in order to articulate a serious, self-reflexive message. Mickey’s name is, in part, a nod to the cartoonist Winsor McCay’s Little Nemo in Slumberland (1905-1911, reprinted in the ‘20s). Like Little Nemo, Night Kitchen features elongated panels to dramatize a surreal, urban dreamland. By contextualizing a book about childhood sensuality and emotional agency in a sort of comic-book form, Sendak playfully expressed that some modern human needs are only met beyond the purview of parents and inherited traditions. However, by framing Mickey’s nocturnal tryst in a domestic household scene, dedicating the book to his parents, and using their names on brand labels for the oversized kitchen products of his tactile fantasy, he also offered children a world in which individual drives might somehow manage to relate directly to a particular familial belonging.

Historians note that the comics form, developed largely by first-generation Jewish Americans in interwar New York and other cities, has always been infatuated with secret identities, social justice, multiple realities, and superheroes. Comics scholars describe the form as especially suited to expressing hybridity, duality, and ambivalence – its protagonists fly between panels and pages in order to manage the pressures of being in multiple places at once. In this regard, comics are suited to what Jack Halberstam has called “queer time,” a less stable, more emotionally-centered human relationship to time based on reactions to crisis, spontaneous bursts of energy, and present-mindedness, rather than on socially normalized schedules of daily life in the bourgeois family and its timelines of reproduction and childrearing. Night Kitchen negotiates between mainstream ideals and comics tendencies by situating the child protagonist as both a bourgeois child who cries, “Mama! Papa!,” and a hungry, urban hero who follows his own dreams, sculpts an airplane, and flies naked through the nocturnal cityscape on a sensual journey while his parents sleep. Comic-book superheroes of the ‘30s and ‘40s mirrored the psychological and emotional dilemmas of first-generation Americans torn between identities. Indeed, as I’ve argued, Sendak created his work from a place of hybrid identity, describing his childhood as:

composed of disparate elements strangely concocted, a childhood colored with the memories – never lived by me – of shettl life in Europe, vividly conveyed to me by my immigrant parents – a conglomorate fantasy life typical perhaps of many first-generation children in America. It was composed, on the one hand, of feeling as though I lived in the Old Country – the fabulous village world of my parents – and, on the other, of being bombarded with the full intoxicating gush of America in that convulsed decade called the thirties…

Like Superman and other heroes managing a dual-identity, the offspring of American Jewish immigrants negotiated conflicting spheres of belonging. Sendak would later write to a friend, “it cost me to be a Maurice on a street filled with Melvins and Alvins […] You may call me Paul anytime you please (or John, or Ted or Bill).” Children of his generation sought to prove themselves “American enough,” especially against forces of nativism and antisemitism, as well as to meet Jewish communal expectations. Accordingly, Sendak juggled feelings of reverence and embarrassment toward his relatives. He believed his mother was “always mad and in Yiddish she called me the equivalent of ‘wild thing’ and chased me all over the house. I used to hide in the street and hope she forgot before I crept up in the evening. It was all natural that your father took swipes at you that you dodged, and your mother….rough, rough, rough.” However, Sendak consistently valued aspects of his parents’ behavior and attitudes, which he saw as more frank and honest, and thus more respectful to children than were other American adults who condescended to youth, following the new conventions of modern childhood. Despite popular conceptions, children, Sendak believed, were so honest, frank, and resilient that “they will make a joke about something that’s primarily quite painful […] There’s such a fierce honesty in children, which I believe gets lost in the complicated business of growing up and being socialized and civilized.” In this respect, paradoxically, a lack of American social refinement in immigrant parents could mean a high level of solidarity and directness with their children. Sendak recalled, “My parents were immigrants, and
they didn’t know that they should clean [their] stories up for us, so we heard horrible, horrible stories, and we loved them! We absolutely loved them.”

American “Wild Things” and the Jewish Family

The Jewish family – archetypically a tight-knit, emotionally expressive, ritually-bound social unit – has been both idealized as a site of ultimate warmth and nurture, as well as criticized by individualist cultures that prioritize self-sufficiency and emotional restraint (stereotyping the Jewish family as a prototypically codependent, enmeshed, or neurotic family). Early twentieth-century social authorities struggled against Jewish parenting styles, argues Riv-Ellen Prell, to grant children the liberties of an individualist life, requesting that parents give up the collectivist notion that children’s desires should be trumped by the family unit’s economic needs or that children were links in a long, unbreakable family chain. “In the new order,” writes Prell, “children’s needs would come first. Children were to be liberated from the family.”

By the time of Sendak’s childhood, popular psychology and social commentaries urged parents to become more understanding of children’s need for differentiation. Early twentieth-century American social authorities and psychologists asked immigrant parents to hide their own distress and heartbreak as those children came to sometimes see them as culturally backward. They were asked to remain present and supportive but to lessen their emotional hold on their children. 139

1920s Jewish communal leaders like Stephen S. Wise acknowledged the necessity of such changes in the family with empathy and notes of regret:

It is not easy for the Jewish mother to surrender that sense of possession which grows out of undivided preoccupation with child or children, that sense of possession fostered as much by a child’s sense of dutifulness as by parental concern. The Jewish mother, whom the middle-aged have known and loved, found her deepest and most engrossing interest in the days and deeds of her children. It may be and it is necessary for the Jewish mother to relinquish her long-time sense of ownership, but let it not be imagined to be easy. 140

Nevertheless, speaking from his experience counseling children, Wise warned against parents’ “invasion of [the child’s] personality” by nagging, busy-bodying, and ceaseless fault-finding, which reflect the parents’ own emotional stress more than any real fault in the child. Such behavior, he wrote, was “an obtrusion of self into the life of another” that ultimately negates the child’s sense of individuality. 141

It is important to acknowledge that interwar Jewish family styles were, of course, far from uniform. Religious and cultural beliefs, for example, influenced parenting philosophies. Unlike most vocal Reform and Conservative American Jews of the ‘20s and ‘30s, who tended to emphasize the need for parents to follow the modern child’s curiosity about technological speed; recreational excitement; and various social possibilities in the wider culture, Orthodox and traditional Jews like the Sendak family focused on preserving an all-encompassing style of Jewish living that dictated a great amount of everyday social norms and behaviors. 144

144 The Sendaks would have likely eschewed those liberal American models that sought to accommodate mainstream American culture by compartmentalizing Judaism as a “religion” privatized and based in the synagogue structure, organized to suit a thoroughly “modern” American family identity. 145 Philip and Sadie’s Jewishness was, rather, a deeply embedded orientation and lifestyle, and it revolved around daily practices, ritual cleanliness, traditions, folk superstitions, and communal norms. Philip’s second-cousin, Jacob Ross, recalled hiding from Philip that he was eating on Yom Kippur, as Philip remained more observant in America than he did. Even the atheists among Philip’s extended family believed that if one was to pray, one should pray in Hebrew and according to the traditions of the Old Country. 146

Raising children to revere and practice Jewish tradition required high levels of child obedience and the instilling children’s accountability to an insular collective. 147 Traditional American Jews of the ‘30s found themselves torn between desires to give their children the opportunity to succeed, even in a
somewhat nativist American context, and to protect a minority religion and culture, often for which they had suffered great persecution in Europe to preserve. Children became the focus of Jewish communal concerns about assimilation and collective continuity – objects of ambivalence for their parents, they represented both the cherished fruit of the Jewish family and the potential shame of assimilation or loss of a threatened lineage. Sendak recalled his parents’ constant preoccupation with regulating his behavior, describing Sadie and Philip as “too anxious. Everything was hard, everything was a problem, everything was a scolding. Everything was you-did-something-wrong. You went around the block, you did something wrong. You spoke to a strange person, you did something wrong.” It is no wonder that the children of Sendak’s picture books appear burdened and world-weary. He once wrote, “People used to comment continually on the fact that the children in my books looked homely – Eastern European Jewish as opposed to the flat, oilcloth look considered normal in children’s books. They were just Brooklyn kids, old-looking before their time.” In another interview, he elaborated, “they may well look like little greenhorns just off the boat. They had – some of them, anyway – a kind of bowed look, as if the burdens of the world were on their shoulders. […] they’re all a kind of caricature of me. They look as if they’ve been hit on the head and hit so hard they weren’t ever going to grow up any more.”

The difficult emotional transition to American cities from European shtetls often meant the adjustment of priorities of collective Jewish observance and community to expectations of individual actualization and self-sufficiency in a new, democratic landscape of open consumerism, class mobility, lighthearted “fun” and emotional restraint. Clashes between the social ideals of Jewish Eastern Europe and wider New York City were evident in Jewish literature for decades before Sendak’s birth. Popular belief in some of the Eastern European communities from which people like Philip and Sadie Sendak immigrated held that America was a hedonistic, materialistic escape for rebellious or undignified Jews. Crossing over to that continent was, for those immigrants, an epic leap “outside” of their tight-knit Jewish communities. Indeed, Philip Sendak’s father, a prominent rabbi and lumber merchant in Zambrow, Poland, never forgave his handsome, prestigious son for chasing an unserious girl and becoming an American “drudge” (this young woman ultimately rejected Philip, before he met Sadie, Sendak’s mother). To some traditionally observant Jews, their American brethren were immoral wild things, enjoying illicit modern indulgences beyond the framework of Jewish law and society. On the other hand, acculturating American Jews similarly disdained their un-American counterparts as “wild,” judging their unrefined, “greenhorn” ways against American styles and standards of gentility. Sendak would absorb some of these feelings, expressing them in depictions for Where the Wild Things Are, whose grotesque, horned monsters creatively conflate the explosiveness of childhood rage with the unkempt

wildness of the greenhorn stereotype. As he repeatedly stated, Sendak intentionally based his temperamental, childish Wild Things on his own Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking relatives, who, the artist recalled, had “huge yellowed eyes and stained mouths and hairs falling out of nostrils and boils and pimples and things that disgusted us as children.” Perhaps surprisingly, Sendak claimed to have created the book not with children in mind, but as a means of exorcising “a feeling” of his own, one he described as “the terror not so much of childhood, but of being alive. It’s a terror of unknown things. It’s the anxiety
of being angry; it’s the depression of being angry; it’s the elation of being angry, it’s the joy of victory.”

When designing for the 1980 opera version of the book with Oliver Knussen, Sendak would officially name the cast of Wild Things: Tzippy, Moishe (Sendak’s own Yiddish name), Aaron, Emile, and Bernard; he would have them mutter “terrible things in Yiddish, the kind of things my parents said to me, and what you say to children, what you should never say to children.” Max was to start his wolf call—a string of exclamatory phrases—with the words “vilde chaye,” Yiddish for “wild animal.” As mentioned earlier, Sendak was sometimes frightened and irritated by the physically rough manner in which his mother attempted expressions of affection. A nightmare of Sendak’s that recurred around age four and returned in his old age implied similar confusion between play and danger in interactions with his father:

…a nightmare about being chased by a very frightening something and my heart is beating out of my chest. In the dream I’m desperate to get the cellar door open, but this thing is right behind me. And I finally turn. And it’s my father. And his face is hot on my face and his hands are out: murder. That’s all it is: he will kill me. And that went on and on and on. And then just this week, here I am seventy years later, and the dream came back, and even in the dream I was stunned to be dreaming this again! The same thing happened and—this sounds like a TV movie of the week; can’t be helped—I did something I never did before. I turned around and there he was, but I stood my ground and his face was so close to mine and his nose was pressing my nose and then I saw that he was laughing—that it was a joke. He wasn’t trying to kill me, he was playing with me.

Like his immigrant parents and relatives, the Wild Things were both dangerous monsters and familiar members of his tribe.

As Ursula Nordstrom would write, “Most books are written from the outside in. But Wild Things comes from the inside out.” It grapples with the line between pleasure and danger, familiar and foreign, made ambiguous in a culture of competing perspectives, one that imposed emotional innocence and an exaggerated wholesomeness on children while also beginning to acknowledge the intensity of the child’s unconscious mind and the dangers of controlling children to an excessive extent, as was happening in fascist European nations during the ’30s. It also represented the emotional confusion of children who love their parents, as well as fear and disdain them, sensitive to their parents’ fragilities and aware of the possibility that some external stimulus might elicit their parents’ rage, despair, or emotional undoing. This could transform parents from gentle caretakers into threatening monsters, both toward their children, as well as in the eyes of culturally biased American public judgments. Confronting the limits of what feels safe, Sendak’s children return from their journeys with a degree of internalized comfort but also a greater acceptance of their serious, burdensome position as mediators between conflicting realities.

Witnessing wider social negations of parents’ religious, linguistic, and cultural norms in the mainstream public led Jewish American children to internalize the potential limitations of identifying with their Jewish immigrant caretakers. With the immigration quotas instilled by the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act and accompanying xenophobia, ethnic minorities were increasingly pressured to adopt American social norms quickly, and the Sendaks’ traditional, Yiddish-speaking culture would become an increasingly elderly and disdained one in mainstream America; acculturating American Jews largely dissociated from these elements in order to secure their social belonging. The American-born Sendak internalized ways in which mainstream culture would have viewed his own parents and relatives. He painted a picture of insecure, ambivalent attachment with his mother, describing her as “so bewildering and strange, living “in another world.” Accordingly, Sendak saw her as awkward, distressed, and fluctuating between overbearing and removed, managing to impose herself on him without actually offering the sort of emotional availability he desired as a sensitive child, or that he felt she should exhibit by American social standards: “She was always worried. She also had a gruff, abrupt manner, because I think that any display of feeling embarrassed her.” Once, when Sendak’s friend Martin expressed confusion and concern seeing Sadie storm through the room in a fury, Sendak pretended that Sadie was a
hired housecleaner. Recalling this, he confessed, “that shame has lasted all my life. That I didn’t have the nerve to say, ‘That’s my mother; that’s how she is.’” Sendak would later conclude, “My mother was depressed and had trouble embracing us literally and figuratively. We were unkind to her as a form of revenge.”

His brother Jack, on his deathbed, would tearfully question Maurice, “Why were we so unkind to Mama?” To which Sendak could only answer: “We were kids, we didn’t understand. We didn’t know she was crazy.”

The emotionally vacant, absent, harried, or otherwise obstructed parent would be a staple of Sendak’s creative work in the latter twentieth century, as would be the solitary, flying child whose fluid freedom comes with its own dangers. Sendak’s illustrations for Randall Jarrell’s *The Animal Family* (1965) and *Fly By Night* (1976) would interpret Jarrell’s words as expressing “a great hunger pain—[…] a looking-for-mama pain…[...] my pain,” the latter book featuring a nude, blonde American boy soaring past his lost mother—a carefully rendered Sadie Sendak holding the infant Maurice on her lap, as well as an image of a younger Sadie tending a flock of sheep in what may be an imagined Old World pasture.

Sendak’s Intersubjective Individuality

As mainstream interwar culture idealized talented, bright, independent, and emotionally lighthearted children, Sendak spent his childhood serious, timid, repeatedly ill, and psychologically intertwined with his parents’ burdens. As the artist put it, “when you live with immigrant parents, you’re always an immigrant. You grow up inside a ghetto, self-imposed by parents, in America.”

A physically frail, highly sensitive, and closeted gay adolescent in the 1930s and ’40s, Sendak lacked the social scaffolding of a separate American identity of his own until 1951, upon illustrating his first real children’s book at age twenty-three, which, he believed, finally made him “an official person” and drove him to further view his work as the source of his personal redemption. The late Eugene Glynn—child psychiatrist, art critic, and partner of fifty years to Sendak—likely had Maurice in mind when writing about the prototypically anxious psychology of the artist: “He suffers from, benefits by, a weakness if his sense of self…. Creativity is the response to unbearable pains of loss and separation threatening to break into consciousness. Fusions and externalizations—the art work—repeople the world and recreate the self. […] The artist is parent to his work, his work is himself, and, more deeply, the work is parent to him.”

Using metaphors of eating and devouring, Sendak’s art would dramatize the emotional and physical
mergers that most small children feel with their intimate caretakers, as well as the sometimes comical anxiety that accompanies the idea that this merger might lead to one party consuming the other, or the terror that an act of overstepping might terminate the precious relationship, leaving the other endangered. Raised to fear kidnapping and to mourn the traumatic losses of his relatives, nothing could be more comforting than a fantasy of fusing with loved ones. As Max exclaims to his mother in a moment of psychologically disorganizing rage: “I’ll eat you up!” As the Wild Things proclaim to Max when faced with the possibility of losing him, “Oh, please don’t go—we’ll eat you up—we love you so!” Additional work of Sendak’s, such as his illustrations for I Saw Esau (1992) and his Fantasy Sketches (1970), a series of free-association drawings done to classical music, would also depict infants, parents, and animals devouring and regurgitating each other.

The psychological salience for Sendak of his emotionally overextended family – his parents’ losses and memories, as well as the passionate closeness he felt with his siblings – looms large in his most mature artistic works. His understanding of childhood as a difficult and confusing time of survival surely drew from experiencing the emotional inconsistency of parents who both sought to cultivate his American success and made their own suffering and alienation known to him, mixing it in with their expressions of love. As he put it, “They came from little shtetls and they were living in America, which was the oddest thing of all. How do you get along with people? You don’t speak English, you haven’t been to school. Your kids are being drawn away from you by society. Their lives were unspeakable” (my emphasis).169 He once said that his relatives “showed us love in ways that were very heavy – when I learned their history, it broke my heart.”170 The emotional mismatch that first-generation American children like Sendak felt with their foreign-born parents may have caused all the more reason to feel guilt-ridden attachments to them, as parents’ suffering and perceived social oddness in mainstream culture led their children to view them as vulnerable and in need of protection. Despite his lifelong frustration with his parents, the artist held tight to them, participating in a tender emotional entanglement, which both overwhelmed him and offered him an early sense of self and meaning, fused with theirs.

Illustrating Zlateh the Goat (1966) by I.B. Singer, a Yiddish writer and contemporary, was especially therapeutic for Sendak, as he struggled to understand the boundaries between his parents’ emotions and his own.171 His illustrations include faces drawn from photographs of his parents’ Polish relatives, murdered in the Holocaust. As the artist explained, “I went through the album and picked some of my mother’s relatives and some of my father’s and drew them very acutely. And they cried. And I cried.”172 Zlateh delivered Yiddish folklore to mainstream American readers, and Sendak called it “Jewish stories but for everybody.”173 The artist later exclaimed that “the only joy” his father ever had in Sendak’s career was “that I illustrated a book for Isaac Bashevis Singer.”174 Two years later, following his mother’s death in August 1968, Sendak wrote to Singer in despair. The artist complained of a “fear that the loss of my mother and the impending loss of my father had demolished something precious inside of me. […] There is no order to my life just now and perhaps everything I have said reflects this inner chaos.”175 To another friend, he wrote, “The energy to work – the compulsion to work – is gone […] I have the strange feeling of not existing. It is as tho[ugh] I too have died – for a while – so I can be as close to my mother as possible. The full realization will come soon enough and then, heaven help me, I hope I can pour all my feelings into a book” (my emphasis).176

As he hoped, Sendak published this book, In the Night Kitchen, in 1970. While working on it in ‘69, Philip had become very ill and moved into Sendak’s studio. As pangs of gay rights activism erupted in his West Village neighborhood, Sendak worked on Night Kitchen and cared for his ailing father, also transcribing and translating the Yiddish tales of Philip’s childhood.177 In June 1969, the month of the Stonewall riots, occurring within steps of Sendak’s apartment and credited as the primary catalyst of the gay liberation movement, the artist was busy arranging to have his mother’s grave unveiled, expediting the date to ensure that Philip, “so quietly fading away,” would be present for it.178 The following year,
Philip passed away, and Harper published *Night Kitchen*. Sendak seems to have been conflicted in these years about how to honor his dual reality as a gay West Village artist living with a non-Jewish partner, Eugene Glynn, as well as a dutiful son to emotionally and physically fragile Jewish immigrant parents. Years after Glynn’s death in 2007, Sendak would admit, “I dream of him constantly. I’m always feeling guilty that I didn’t do enough for him. I had my success, which was a distraction and disturbance for him. […] I wish I had been more demonstrative, but it’s not a thing I do very well. Being gay in the old days was hard, being gay later was weird. I very much wished not to be. I came from a regular depressing family. I was brainwashed.”

Sendak dedicated *Night Kitchen* to both of his parents but also infused it with feelings around his own suppressed sexuality and liberation from some of his childhood shame and early notions of endangerment. Nordstrom supported Sendak’s decision to draw the protagonist, Mickey, in full-frontal nudity, because “the hero of a story about forbidden pleasures and the awakening sense of self needed to be naked.” Critics would deem *Night Kitchen* an “inappropriate” urban fantasy of a naked boy mixing batter and spilling milk in the moonlight among men while his parents slept at home in ignorance. As one book review stated, “Something very sexy is going on in ‘In the Night Kitchen’ […] It celebrates eating and staying up late, and the child’s voracious desire to participate in those grown-up activities.” Nordstrom would distribute a press release on June 9, 1972, which comprised 425 signatures of professors, librarians, artists, authors, and publishers, condemning librarians’ censoring of Mickey’s genitalia as artistic “mutilation,” as it unfairly altered public engagement with the artist’s original work. To one mutilating party, she would personally write in Sendak’s defense: “Should not those of us who stand between the creative artist and the child be very careful not to sift our reactions to such books through our own adult prejudices and neuroses? […] I think young children […] will react creatively and wholesomely. It is only adults who ever feel threatened by Sendak’s work.” (Nordstrom’s emphases)

*Night Kitchen* was, Sendak wrote, a goodbye to “a large part of childhood […] to New York, a good-bye to my parents.” It was also “a victory over death.” Pointing to the emotional seriousness of very young people as well as the external social forces that children perceive, the book explodes traditional assumptions and expectations of modern American childhood and invites readers to take note of the processes by which society misjudges and acts upon the uninitiated and the powerless, as well as the creative vitality with which the latter might resist its advances and proclaim its worth. It emphasizes a growing commercial and child-centered ethos with its giant brand-name products, like the baby food containers and “Mickey oven,” the enormous milk bottle, and the console model radio set – the greatest household spring of 1930s advertisements. Mickey is a unique, determined, and seemingly audacious child for defying his bedtime curfew and taking control over the adult prescriptions imposed on his body. The bakers howl, “MILK! MILK! MILK FOR THE MORNING CAKE!” Mickey responds, “WHAT’S ALL THE FUSS? I’M MICKEY THE PILOT! I GET MILK THE MICKEY WAY!” He proceeds to fashion an airplane from dough and to fly it over the Milky Way, into a milk bottle that is also a skyscraper. He asserts power by pouring milk down from the sky like a self-appointed god of dairy.

Mickey battles forces that threaten to consume him, including the three dazed bakers who all resemble Oliver Hardy. Sporting Hitler moustaches, they almost bake him into their cake on its way into the oven. But it is a “Mickey Oven,” and Mickey takes charge of the narrative, ultimately towering above these men and distributing the precious milk they require. Warding off threatening reminders of mortality after his mother’s death, Sendak moves Mickey, a stand-in for the artist himself, from the endangered position of the kidnapped Lindbergh infant to the powerful position of the parents, Charles and Anne Lindbergh, celebrated aviators, authors, and inventors who fly high, create, and survive. Accordingly, Sendak claimed in 1973 that his Zionist acquaintances loved *Night Kitchen* and thanked him for what it “did for the Jewish people,” presumably for its representation of an endangered subject escaping death, building and flying his own airplane, and gaining a new level of confidence. *Night Kitchen* channels childhood
sensitivities as a Jewish boy emotionally entwined with Yiddish-speaking immigrant parents in an era of intensified American immigration quotas, nativism, and news of Nazi Germany situated within a hypnotically captivating, speedy mass media culture and social pressures that separated children from their immigrant parents. It also uses “queer time” – beginning, rather than ending, at bedtime, and propelled by unruly bursts of spontaneous energy, like a comic book – to negotiate Sendak’s ambivalence as an adult gay man in the West Village in the late 60s, in a time of historic, personally significant liberation movements out of sync with beloved family traditions. The year after Night Kitchen’s publication, while his sister stayed with him during her husband’s operation, Sendak would write to his friend Coleman Dowell, “I can’t bear here any more. So Gene and I are truly getting ready to move – to the country […] it must be soon. Phone and family will do me in otherwise.”

If Night Kitchen bids farewell to New York and the artist’s mother and unleashes reserves of individual power, We Are All in the Dumps lovingly remembers and celebrates his Jewish immigrant mother, synthesizing her values with the struggles of other queer outsiders. The hero of Dumps is a boundary-crossing, micro-managing moon, a stereotypical mother, as Sendak experienced his own. He described this sort of anxious, hovering mother as one who “watches and watches. It knows it shouldn’t
come to earth and knows it’s a moon and can’t do anything, but the kids are so dumb in not solving the problem that it comes down and grabs them and says, ‘You shmegegies, come with me.’ So it does break the cosmic law. But then mothers—my mother anyway—always broke the law.” The artist recalled his worried mother watching him play on the street from the window of their second-floor apartment building: “If I turned the corner, she’d run to the window on the other side of the building. Her head darted out of three windows, like a cartoon. I remember wherever I looked, her head was. […] I knew it was a worried, Jewish moon […] a nudgy moon.”

Fiercely caring but also removed, the moon is the silent hero of Sendak’s book, becoming a giant cat who destroys the capitalist rats of “Trumped Tower” and carries Jack and Guy to St. Paul’s Bakery and Orphanage, where they are able to save a bruised, dark-skinned child and offer him a braided loaf of bread, a sort of challah. Sendak’s late twentieth-century rendering, reconfigures the idealized suburban capitalist family to empathize with the boundary-breaking closeness and caring of unconventional families rooted in empathy and social justice. Amidst the mayhem of corruption, disaster, and filth, Jack and Guy, whose queer unity suggests that of a same-sex couple, fight socioeconomic injustice in their community under the cosmic sanction of a Jewish maternal moon, adopting a lost orphan and declaring: “LET’S BUY HIM SOME BREAD / YOU BUY ONE LOAF / AND I’LL BUY TWO / AND WE’LL BRING HIM UP / AS OTHER FOLK DO.” Though the impoverished Jack and Guy physically cling to each other and, visually, almost lose their individual boundaries (see below image), they also demand admiration as resilient, serious, and generous life-givers, especially in contrast to the
giant rats, whose imposing robes and mammoth deck of cards suggest reckless competition and accountability for perpetuating the crises headlined in the newspaper fragments worn by the destitute children: “AIDS,” “WAR,” “SHOOTING,” “HOMELESS,” “MEANER TIMES, “CHAOS IN SHELTERS,” “FAMINE,” “BABIES STARVING,” “LAYOFF!”

Conclusion

The creative vision Sendak expressed as his career matured in the latter twentieth century drew from an emotional internalization of personal, familial, and social forces at work during his interwar childhood. Having struggled to carve out a genuine place of social belonging as a sensitive, queer, and introverted son of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants in a culture of mass media and looming political forces beyond his understanding, the adult Sendak remained invested in locating and expressing the emotional predicaments and triumphs of the excluded and the disenfranchised. He expressed himself surreptitiously, from within the “lowly” cracks of children’s literature, and between conflicting emotional perspectives and social realms. His work from the 1960s onward most seriously conveys his internalization of 1930s New York, as experienced by a devoted but self-conscious queer American son of Yiddish-speaking, Jewish Eastern European immigrants.

Against a wider social ethos of technological speed and the blending of “high” and “low” art forms, youth culture of the interwar decades urged the separation of first-generation American children from traditional constraints of their immigrant parents, offering them liberating, creative opportunities but also imposing new social expectations through popularized styles and codes of conduct. As interwar child psychology shifted from rigid behaviorism toward a more emotions-based individualism, American social commentators and middle-class parents fretted over the consequences of liberating children via more “permissive” parenting styles in a culturally diversifying nation, especially in urban, immigrant, and working-class enclaves. With the help of mass media, regulatory American social institutions helped naturalize a middle-class image of an American child ideal rooted in the gender-rigid, conservative family model and in the emotional restraint of Anglo-Saxon culture. In some respects, standards of modern childhood sought to loosen immigrants’ children from the influence of foreign parents and to subject them to greater influence by the nation, the public, and the state. For adults, childhood was a battleground for negotiating private and collective futures; for children, Sendak’s work declares, it was a battleground for self-preservation between liberating opportunities and socializing forces, between caretakers who were both beloved and feared or disdained, as well as public social realms that were both exciting and alienating. Forqueers, Jewseastern European immigrants, the impoverished, and ethnically-othered people more broadly, surviving childhood required negotiation between preserving emotional vitality and personal loyalties and achieving some level of belonging in a public social matrix that idealized and enforced conformity to heterosexual, bourgeois styles rooted in Protestant Anglo-Saxon culture.

Emotionally alienated from his immigrant parents as an American boy, yet deeply sensitive to their anxieties as Jewish immigrants in an era of social conservatism, Sendak experienced childhood as a “grappling in the dark,” amidst widespread social pressures to acculturate to specific ideals. Children’s relationship to the public sphere was increasingly regulated through specific media channels, enforcing a dominant vision of their emotional development. As notions of modern childhood solidified in the latter interwar years, painting it as a time of frivolous, rose-colored, angelic innocence cultivated in the service of middle-class Americanization, Sendak felt his reality misrepresented, complicating his ability to survive as a serious social misfit and creative thinker with limited resources. He felt the fear and confusion of a sensitive, queer, Eastern European Jewish boy at odds with important aspects of the social order and unjustly obstructed from the tools that might help him ward off its unwelcome advances. Adult realities, he felt, were important, pressing parts of a child’s life, especially when that child, like Sendak, struggled to exist socially or belonged to minority groups that lacked favor in the adult world – such a child especially needed to understand the obstacles, anticipate dangers, and survive.
Thus, Sendak worked against dichotomizing ideas about childhood, insisting that children were not as different from adults as modern conceptions suggested. Children too experienced alienation, outrage, sensual excitement, and serious ambivalence. Children too struggled to endure a rapidly changing culture with limited understanding offered to them from their superiors. Sendak’s work in the 1960s and beyond – breaking out of the socially conformist era in which he came of age and began his career, and generated from an intersectionally marginal childhood subjectivity – insisted on children as bewildered, but resilient, dignified people torn between the pulls of familial belonging, personal desires, national-social pressures, and the human instinct to survive. The dynamic urban landscape of New York offered an inspiring canvas on which to project his own personal negotiations of boundaries between “inside” and “outside,” fantasizing his way through early feelings of pleasure, familiarity, danger, and pain to better understand their concrete meanings for himself in a culture that was so often uncomfortable with Old World pasts and queer difference but that celebrated vibrant, self-made individuals.

1 Lucy S. Dawidowicz, On Equal Terms: Jews in America, 1881-1981 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982). As significant numbers of Jews moved to the suburbs and became wealthier in those decades, anti-Jewish feelings increased: new policies excluded Jews from residential areas, country clubs, and resorts; Henry S. Cahn, “Jewish Reform: A History from 1870 to 1940” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1940). As significant numbers of Jews moved to the suburbs and became wealthier in those decades, anti-Jewish feelings increased: new policies excluded Jews from residential areas, country clubs, and resorts; Henry S. Cahn, “Jewish Reform: A History from 1870 to 1940” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1940). As significant numbers of Jews moved to the suburbs and became wealthier in those decades, anti-Jewish feelings increased: new policies excluded Jews from residential areas, country clubs, and resorts; Henry S. Cahn, “Jewish Reform: A History from 1870 to 1940” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1940). As significant numbers of Jews moved to the suburbs and became wealthier in those decades, anti-Jewish feelings increased: new policies excluded Jews from residential areas, country clubs, and resorts; Henry S. Cahn, “Jewish Reform: A History from 1870 to 1940” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1940). As significant numbers of Jews moved to the suburbs and became wealthier in those decades, anti-Jewish feelings increased: new policies excluded Jews from residential areas, country clubs, and resorts; Henry S. Cahn, “Jewish Reform: A History from 1870 to 1940” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1940).

2 Sendak “came out” to the public as “gay” in 2008 at age eighty but was aware of his same-sex attractions by his teenage years, having his first sexual encounter at age nineteen. As discussed in the previous chapter, his pre-adolescent boyhood was “queer” in terms of his physical frailness in relation to masculinity standards, his flamboyant behavioral style, as well as in the same-sex “crushes” he harbored. I use “queer” as an umbrella term to describe non-normative experiences and expressions of gender and sexuality (i.e. male femininity, female masculinity, pansexuality, etc.), but with awareness of the term’s wider implication of stigmatized difference, which applied also to other aspects of identity in mainstream midcentury American society, including Yiddish culture and post-traumatic mentalities. Patricia Cohen, “Concerns Beyond Just Where the Wild Things Are,” New York Times, Sept. 9, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/09/10/arts/design/10sendak.html?mcubz=3; Tim Teeman, “Maurice Sendak: I’m ready to die,” The Times, September 24, 2011, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/maurice-sendak-im-ready-to-die-f6zrhynh6pk.


4 Sadie and Philip, both children of rabbis. Sadie’s father was a rabbi who died at age forty. Sadie blamed her young father’s death on her own mother, who, according to Sendak, sent her to America to silence her, growing tired of her accusations. Sendak described: “A sixteen-year-old girl, alone. She was told that there would be a pushcart dealer and his wife who would rent her a room and she would have someone to talk to. But shortly after she arrived, he was killed in an automobile accident. I don’t know how she survived. I mean, of course she went nuts. They were all nuts.” Sixteen-year-old Sadie was expected to earn enough money to afford the rest of the family’s passage to join her there. Eventually she was joined by her mother and remaining siblings, except for her brother Aaron, who likely perished in the Holocaust. Sadie and Philip met at a Lower East Side fundraiser for friends suffering from tuberculosis. Sadie was involved in a reading of Sholem Aleichem, an author Philip also enjoyed. Philip started his American career as a successful shirtwaist tailor, making blouses and pleating skirts and dresses, but the Wall Street crash impoverished him. Interview transcript, Selma Lanes, 1989, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Records; Emma Brockes, “I Refuse to Cater to the Bullshit of Innocence,” The Believer, November/December 2012, Accessed 22 April, 2016, http://www.believermag.com/issues/201211/?read=interview_sendak.

writes Chinn. This helped produce "the

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self. Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds.,

using presents to help children overcome fears, quiet their difficult emotions, and offer reinforcing extensions of

business." Cited in Jenki

you really know your child?" the article asked, "the corner store [… ] is just about putting the average parent out of

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companies banked on targeting the young and pressured parents not to deprive their children of the indivi

1960

2002), 121.

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New Yorker, January 15, 1966.

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Lanes (1980), 16. Though Sendak did become close with a girl named Pearl Karchawer during one of his family’s two-week summer stays at Charlie’s Hotel in the Catskills, Pearl died suddenly the following year during back surgery. This direct experience of a friend’s death left a mark on Sendak and would lead him to dedicate his

Sign on Rosie’s Door (1960) to Pearl. Ibid, 12.

10

Brockes, 2012.

11


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17 (“Myselles” Yiddish for “little stories”) Harris in Kunze, 41.

18 Typescript for In Grandpa’s House, Maurice Sendak Collection, The Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

19 Sendak most recalled one story about a game Philip played as a small boy with his friends – they would dig sticks into the ground of a graveyard at night. One night, while doing this, they heard a scream. The next morning one of the boys was found dead by a coronary, because, having pierced the stick through his own garment on its way down, lodging himself to the earth, he thought the dead were seizing him. Interview transcript, Selma Lanes, 1989, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Records. In another story, which Sendak later almost illustrated, a child is separated from his parents and gets lost in the snow, sobbing in terror under a tree. He dies, taken up by the biblical Abraham and Sarah. Nat Hentoff, “Among the Wild Things,” New Yorker, January 15, 1966.


22 Nicholas Sammond, Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 6. Cognizant of these emerging cultural trends, advertising companies banked on targeting the young and pressured parents not to deprive their children of the individual emotional fulfillment that social scientists painted as crucial to healthy child development. Child psychology offered new emotional pressure points for advertising to the new child market. Henry Jenkins, ed., The Children’s Culture Reader (NY: New York University Press, 1998), 458. If parents were to get the outcomes they desired in their children’s development, the article argued, they needed to keep up with the rhythms and techniques of advertising, which so mesmerized their children. Child experts in the social sciences and widely circulated parenting manuals warned against the harms of sentimental, Victorian, and otherwise “backward” or “un-American” styles of parenting, advocating instead a cooler, capitalist approach that spotlighted consumerism and openness to future change, against the emotional burdens of nostalgia. Advice manuals and magazines encouraged parents to mimic the coercive powers of consumerism in order to keep up with their children’s desires and needs. One article in 1928, the year of Sendak’s birth, entreated parents to use advertising and sales techniques to enforce desired behaviors: “Do you really know your child?” the article asked, “the corner store […] is just about putting the average parent out of business.” Cited in Jenkins, 463-4. Parents used market goods in behaviorist-influenced stimulus-reward training, using presents to help children overcome fears, quiet their difficult emotions, and offer reinforcing extensions of self. Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds., An Emotional History of the United States (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 396-401.


24 Chinn, 20. Differentiating childhood from adulthood in this way created the category of “adolescent,” writes Chinn. This helped produce “the discourse of the separation between parents and children,” which served as
“a vehicle by which the adolescent children of immigrants could construct a new identity for themselves that drew on both their own communities and a larger sense of ‘America’ for its raw material.” The category of modern adolescence in the mainstream solidified in the 1920s but was an issue of concern since the peak immigration years, beginning in the 1880s. Ibid, 78, 80.


27 Harris in Kunze, 38.


29 Applying the scientific method in a context of rapid industrialization and foreign immigration, American turn-of-the-century researchers had begun a rigorous, empirical study of the child through an organized network of direct clinical research that would help authorities keep tabs on the nation’s future through cultivating “desirable” American children. Delineations of such specialized fields as pediatrics and child psychology led to the creation of “child experts” to which journalists and social critics increasingly turned for support. Behavioral psychologist John B. Watson advocated for a rigid, mechanical “habit training” and warned against coddling and sentimentality. New mainstream attention to childhood development was reflected in the growth of children’s literature designed to address such developmental needs directly. Sammond (2005), 6, 14.


31 In 1932, Conservative rabbi Jacob Kohn called the automobile the most characteristic symbol of “our machine-made civilization with its incessant hunger for speed.” Kohn, 87-88. An Ogden Nash poem illustrated by Sendak in 1953 – “Posies from a Second Childhood or Hark How Gaffer do Chaffer” – would comment humorously on the tendency of liberated youth to spend outside of the home: “The healthy human child will keep / Away from home, except to sleep. / Were it not for the common cold, / Our young we never would behold.” Ogden Nash and Maurice Sendak (illustrator), You Can’t Get There from Here (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1953), 170. The Broadway Musical Bye Bye Birdie (1960) would later dramatize the 1950s generational clash between suburban parents and their increasingly mobile, emotionally casual, and independent children. It features a flamboyantly suffering Jewish mother who threatens to put her head in the oven as a means of controlling her adult son, as well as songs with lyrics like “Kids! I don’t know what’s wrong with these kids today! […] Laughing, singing, dancing, grinning, morons! […] Kids! They are just impossible to control!” Lyrics by Lee Adams.

32 Stephen S. Wise, Child Versus Parent: Some Chapters On The Irrepressible Conflict in the Home (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), 143. Wise writes that a child “cannot be fettered to an autocratic regime within the home and at the same time be a free and effective partner in the working out of the processes of democracy.” Wise considered that “it may be that the revolt of the Jewish child seems more serious than it is because of the filial habit of obedience in the life of the Jewish home.” Ibid, 89-90, 101.

33 Advertisers tapped into resulting peer pressures to sell their products and perpetuate a public, visible display of popular youth-led fashions. See Evalyn Grumbine McNally, Reaching Juvenile Markets: How to Advertise, Sell, and Merchandise Through Boys and Girls (NY & London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1938), rpt. in Jenkins, 460. Contrast this capitalist approach with the romantic culture of Poland, from which the Sendaks immigrated. Agnieszka Bedingfield writes that Poland, under partition for all of the nineteenth century and through WWI, longed for the past glory of the Polish State. The Polish concept of “Tęsknota” (described as “nostalgia for home […] as the site of family life and as the country of origin”) did not easily translate to American culture. Agnieszka Bedingfield, “Trans-Memory and Diaspora: Memories of Europe and Asia in American Immigrant Narratives,” in Sites of Ethnicity: Europe and the Americas, eds. William Boelhower et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004), 336. Polish-American Jewish Holocaust survivor Eva Hoffman recalled the “Polish nostalgic temperament” as embodied in a Cracow concert of Chopin by Arthur Rubinstein, describing it as “an outbreak of high excitement, patriotism, nostalgia, and pure sentiment.” Bedingfield contrasts “pragmatic Americans” with “romantic Poles” in Hoffman’s descriptions, noting that “North America of the second part of the twentieth century has little patience for [...] old-world attachments.” Ibid, 337.

34 Though a social misfit, the young Sendak participated somewhat in this culture of early mass child consumerism; he would be named “yo-yo champ of Brooklyn” in the early ‘40s, even getting to perform on stage at
a movie matinee and winning a tommy-gun, a badge, and a Mickey Mouse wrist watch. Letter, Maurice Sendak to Laurie Deval, June 13, 1969, box 2, LMC 2286, Manuscripts Dept., Indiana University Lilly Library.

Illick, 110-111. Thus, as Sendak claimed in several interviews, the ‘30s became a “decade of babies,” including such notable portrayals as Fanny Brice’s “Baby Snooks,” Eddie Cantor’s performance as a baby, as well as the prevalent cultural symbols of high chairs and rattles. Sound recording, Maurice Sendak, February 8, 1989, Public Education Program Sound Recordings. Winsor McCay’s comic strips Sammy Sneeze and Hungry Henrietta humorously drew upon this unprecedented attention to children and adults’ anxieties about handling children properly. A reasoned, playful, flexible, and casual emotional style, behaviorists argued, was more adaptive to the growing consumerist culture than was Old World “smothering” or the Victorian style of carefully defined, but profoundly passionate emotions reserved for friends and family in the privacy of confined spaces. Stearns and Lewis, 174, 405; Illick, 108. See also Peter N. Stearns, Anxious Parents (NY and London: NYU Press, 2003).

Disney’s success was specifically in its channeling the entertainment value of popular media, which social reformers feared carried only corrupt and foreign mentalities, into films that taught children “proper” American values. Popular media was a subject of controversy and debate in the interwar decades, as many of its first producers were working-class immigrants. Disney gradually came to speak to interests of the white American Protestant middle class, which imagined itself as the “backbone” of American culture and a distinct group, and which had found its influence undercut by a wildly popular alternative media culture in early twentieth century work produced by urban immigrants. Sammond (2005), 6-10, 18. For a discussion of the Motion Picture Production Code (“Hays Code”), a censorship campaign instated in 1930 to protect the impressionable minds of children, see Nicholas Sammond, “Dumbo, Disney, and Difference: Walt Disney Productions and Film as Children’s Literature,” in The Oxford Handbook of Children’s Literature, eds. Lynne Vallone and Julia Mickenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 149-150 and Mariana Cook, “Postscript: Wild Things,” The New Yorker, May 21, 2012, rpt. from 2009 interview, 58.

In No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), Lee Edelman describes the self-serving, exploitative rhetoric used by adults who treat childhood as a symbolic device for manipulating social values, dictating a specific future in the name of protecting “the children.”


Sammond in Vallone and Mickenberg, 151.

For example, tapping into American racial issues, a Kinder Zhurnal story from May 1933 depicts the injustice of a public lynching of an African American person in Georgia. Naomi Prawer Kadar, Raising Secular Jews: Yiddish Schools and Their Periodicals for American Children, 1917-1950 (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 222. Leon Elbe’s “Dos yingele mitn ringele” (The little boy with the little ring), a story that appeared in monthly installments in the Kinder Zhurnal, a Yiddish children’s magazine, beginning in April 1920, follows a small child who survives kidnappings, ominous forests, and other external threats with the help of a magic ring that represents his psychological internalization of his parents’ strength and support, as well as what Naomi Prawer Kadar calls “a link in di goldene keyt, the golden chain that symbolically connects generations of Jews and Yiddish culture.” Naomi Prawer Kadar compares this series to Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are, in which Max returns home to his mother’s warm meal after venturing out into a dangerous, wild world. She writes that Elbe’s appeal to the universal insecurities of childhood and parenting reflect the Sholem Aleichem schools’ “broad progressive goals of educating the whole child,” while striving to keep children connected to their Yiddish cultural roots against the overwhelming influence of American culture. Kadar, 183-186.

Der Nister’s 1934 Dray mayselekh (Three little tales) and his 1939 Zeks mayselekh (Six little tales), published in Kharkov and Kiev, respectively, handle cannibalism and death, human beings being killed without hearing or trial. Daniela Mantovan, “Reading Soviet-Yiddish Poetry for Children: Der Nister’s Mayselekh in ferzn 1917-39,” in Children and Yiddish Literature: From Early Modernity to Post-Modernity, ed. Gennady Estraihk et al. (Cambridge, England, & NY: Legenda, 2016), 104. Mikhail Krutikov writes that the harsh themes of this literature might have served the function of warning children against brutality or of-readying them for it as a natural component of human life. Mikhail Krutikov, “An End to Fairy Tales: The 1930s in the mayselekh of Der Nister and Leyb Kvitko,” in Estraihk et al., 114-115.
claims that early Disney fi
Pinocchio
of modern Yiddish literature and folklore. Olga Litvak,
fears around kidnappings and forced conscription of Jewish boys into the tsarist army, a matter that pervaded works
Sendak's work, may derive both from urban dangers and from anxieties in
traumatic situation of forced separation between parents and children in a dangerous world, which resounds in

Driven by desires to secure their social inclusion in the nation and to afford Jewish education for their children, large portions of Jewish American immigrants invested in rising beyond working-class lifestyles; great numbers of them achieved this dream in the 1920s, relocating from cities to suburbs. Middle-class acculturation could be achieved through the proper cultivation of self-sufficient, emotionally restrained, gender-normative, light-hearted American offspring who knew how to “have fun” by the standards of popular youth culture, which demanded technology, speed, style, and excitement. However, historians like Beth Wenger emphasize the importance of remembering the majority of American Jews who had not becoming comfortably middle-class before the onset of the Depression. Beth S. Wenger, New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 18.

Writers Talk: Maurice Sendak with Paul Vaughan, video, 1985, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, Roland Collection of Films and Videos on Art. As the growing middle class and those seeking entry into it gradually came to regard parenting as more a matter of emotions and intuition than of discipline and law, shifts occurred in popular conceptions of middle-class American fatherhood and motherhood, sometimes in highly gendered ways that demonized mothers and advocated for paternal power. In 1932, Jacob Kohn wrote, “We have left the patriarchal family so far behind […] that the influence of the father in the direction of his family has shrunk to comparative insignificance and is in danger of disappearing altogether. In America, and in Jewish circles in America particularly, there are signs of a new matriarchy”. Kohn, 119. Irving Howe wrote that Jewish fathers’ loss of authority as immigrants in America increased mothers’ power in the household. Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 253. Critiques of middle-class mothers in the 1930s-50s, such as that of Philip Wylie’s best-selling Generation of Vipers (1942), which inspired the term “Momism,” accused them of being controlling, materialistic, and manipulative parents who objectified their children, treating them as extensions of their own selves, rather than giving them the skills to become emotionally independent, functional individuals. Jewish mothers were particularly targeted in postwar years for being too possessive and for clinging too tightly to their children, especially sons, as later dramatized in Philip Roth’s Portnoy’s Complaint (1969) – which Sendak read the year he created Night Kitchen – and Woody Allen’s short film Oedipus Wrecks (1989). Joyce Antler, You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother (Oxford & New York: Oxford U. Press, 2007), 73-74.

Interview transcript, Selma Lanes, 1989, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Records. Charles Lindbergh was an American aviator, inventor, and military officer, among other things. He achieved the first nonstop solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. Anne Spencer Lindbergh was also an aviator and an author.

Sara Evans, “The Wild World of Maurice Sendak: A Visit with the Most Celebrated Children’s Author of Our Time,” Parents, November 1992, Box 6, Folder 67, Phillip Applebaum Collection, American Jewish Historical Society, Center for Jewish History. As a child Sendak had even glimpsed the morning issue of the Daily News’s front-page story, “Lindbergh Baby Found Dead,” with a huge black arrow pointing to the baby’s corpse in the woods – a spectacle that caused Colonel Lindbergh to sue the newspaper and have those newspapers pulled off the stands, replaced with a more discrete version without the photograph. Sound cassette, Maurice Sendak, February 8, 1989, Unit 00360, Book of the Month Club: Worlds of Childhood: The Art and Craft of Writing for Children, 1989, Public Education Program Sound Recordings, New York Public Library.

Inauguration of the Zena Sutherland Lectureship, “Sources of Inspiration,” Maurice Sendak, 20 May 1983, Box 7, Folder 4, Zena Bailey Sutherland Papers, U. of Chicago Graduate School Special Collections, 10.


Maurice Sendak, “Enamored of the Mystery,” in Innocence and Experience: Essays & Conversations on Children’s Literature, ed. Gregory Maguire (New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1987), 363, 362-374. The traumatic situation of forced separation between parents and children in a dangerous world, which resounds in Sendak’s work, may derive both from urban dangers and from anxieties inherited from Eastern European Jewish fears around kidnappings and forced conscription of Jewish boys into the tsarist army, a matter that pervaded works of modern Yiddish literature and folklore. Olga Litvak, Conspiration and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). Sendak cites Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Pinocchio (1940), and Fantasia (1940) as three of the early inspirations of his creative vision. Nicholas Sammond claims that early Disney films “played upon separation anxiety in both parent and child. The standard narrative
schema for a Disney film had its youthful protagonist separated from her/his parent or parents, made to face perils and challenges with the help of friends (though largely on her/his own), and then, having grown older and wiser, reunited with his/her family and community as a more independent and self-sufficient individual.” Cited in Sammond in Vallone and Mickenberg, 150.


55 Under chronic financial anxiety, the working-class family might remain a site of education and labor, deprived of the middle-class family’s freedom to cultivate children’s emotional development, overworked parents depleted of emotional energy. Illick, 108. Wise implied in 1922 that families in which “the whole problem of life revolves around bread-winning” fail to instill Jewish values, direction, and discipline in their children. Wise, 17-18. Newly wealthy parents, on the other hand, might focus excessively on material goods and not enough on the family’s emotional wellbeing. Wise placed some of the blame for children’s disrespect of their parents on “fathers who care solely for the things of this world, success however achieved, money however gained and used, power whatever its roots and purposes,” as well as on materialistic mothers who enabled such behavior by caring most about “the lesser and the least things of life.” Ibid, 47. Works of midcentury Jewish American literature and popular culture, such as Herman Wouk’s novel Marjorie Morningstar (1955), would later exemplify the figure of the financially successful and emotionally removed middle-class Jewish American father.

56 Psychotherapist Alice Miller’s 1981 study illuminates connections between parental stress and children’s chameleon-like, shape-shifting talents in immigrant families. She described how some children of immigrants felt a threatened sense of autonomy if the parent, as cultural outsider, placed excessive expectations on the child, as cultural insider, to redeem the family’s social disenfranchisement via special abilities, good looks, or accomplishments. Alice Miller, Drama of the Gifted Child (NY: Basic Books, 1981), 35. Sendak would spend his life trying to answer the question of how children survive from within the cracks of a society that excludes or neglects them – how creative fantasy might save a lost human being from obliteration by synthesizing the emotional with the social.

57 Eli Lederhendler highlights the centrality of lost parental authority in the formation of subjectivity for those Americans raised by Jewish immigrants. Lederhendler (2009). As Chinn suggests, Americanized children had reasons to use their cultural authority over their immigrant parents to their own advantages. Chinn, 81; Interview transcript, Selma Lanes, 1989, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Records. Irving Howe writes that immigrant parents staking all future success on their sons – via education and Americanization – twisted the Jewish family into new shapes. Comparing Jews of the Lower East Side to those of Russia, Hutchins Hapgood wrote in 1902, “The father is in this country less able to make an economic place for himself than is the son.” Howe, 253. But such shifts came at emotional costs, creating great tensions between parents and children, as well as shame and embarrassment around parents’ loss of authority in some cases.

58 Irving Howe has described the sometimes guilt-ridden, tentative ways the children of traditional Jewish immigrants embraced America’s styles of playful, physically liberated youth. Howe writes, “Suspicion of the physical, fear of hurt, anxiety over the sheer ‘pointlessness’ of play: all this went deep into the recesses of the Jewish psyche. [...] Decades would have to go by before the sons and daughters of the immigrants could shake off – if they ever could! – this heritage of discomfort before the uses and pleasures of the body.” Howe, 182.

59 Cited in Chinn, 84. Indeed, rapid advances in industrialization brought a high demand for cheap labor, which ushered unprecedented numbers of foreign migrants into the nation through the ‘20s. Jacobson (1998), Chapter Two.

60 Modern childhood, enabled largely by the outlawing of child labor and the rise of public education and popular children’s markets – may have begun as part of a project to acculturize the urban working class and immigrants, the majority of American child laborers having been from southern, eastern, and central Europe. Chinn, 39. Sammond stresses how from its earliest manifestations, the “dominant presence of members of the white, Protestant, progressive middle class in the study of childhood ensured that certain fundamental assumptions about the inherent nature of the child and its environment (based on observations of their own children) would find their way into baseline descriptions of normal childhood.” He connects this process with a larger program of assimilating the working class and immigrants through their “exposure to and involvement in naturalized middle-class habits.” The standard by which all American children were to be measured, thus, was conceived in middle-class, white, Protestant culture. Sammond (2005), 7. Accordingly, the mainstream cultural establishment began to more aggressively censor “deviant” identities. See Stearns (2003), 179. In his history of gay New York, George Chauncey recounts that “As the onset of the Depression dashed the confidence of the 1920s, gay men and lesbians began to
Child-centered psychology sought to empower new, American-born personalities against immigrant parents’ influence, if under the condition that children yield to public influence, as curated through specific channels of media and education. “In a clientist liberal state such as the United States of America,” writes Sammond, “the child is the ultimate client; its requirements are generally defined according to its condition of becoming, and unlike the adult it will become, its status as citizen-in-the-making means that it can be invoked without immediate recompense.” Sammond claims that making an argument for “the children” as collective future “is to invoke a constituency not yet arrived, the common good of which cannot be questioned,” because “children straddle the line between the particular and the universal, occupying a unique position in which they are simultaneously the creatures of their parents and of the state, but not yet individuals unto themselves.” Sammond (2005), 4. According to American media scholar Henry Jenkins, behaviorists like John B. Watson had even celebrated the growing divorce rates and decreasing childbirth rates as a blessing in disguise: the weakening of the traditional family might liberate the child from the smothering influence of sentimental parents. Jenkins (1998), 469.

Wise saw acculturated Jewish parents as harmfully disengaged from their children’s emotional worlds, commenting on the summer “camp-craze” as reflecting parents’ desire for an easy way out of the “harassing difficulty” of living “in normal, intimate contact with their children” during the summer. He believed that “parents are so little accustomed to living with their children that when the summer months force the child into constant contact with parents, the latter grow embarrassed by the necessity for such contact,” and “some of these parents are the very ones who will later wonder that ‘our children have grown away from us.’” Wise, 31-33.

Kohn calls the Bar Mitzvah a site of “tragic spiritual ineptitude,” in which lavish treyf meals are served to a crowd of the father’s business associates, and the child is given strong alcohol and made to feel obscenely indulged rather than reverent toward of his Jewish maturation. Kohn, 31.

Chinn, 102; So striking was the tension between generations around sexuality during Sendak’s upbringing – as perplexed parents fretted over young adults’ increasingly liberated and sexualized individualism – that in 1929 E.B. White (who would later write for children) satirized the phenomenon with his co-author James Thurber: “I have talked with hundreds of children about the problem of educating their parents along sex lines. […] parents usually grew flushed and red and would reply, ‘Nice people don’t talk about such things.’” James Thurber and E.B. White, Is Sex Necessary (Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1944, originally printed by Harper & Brothers, 1929), 113, 131-132. See also Kathy Peiss, Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986).

A section of The Forverts called “A Gallery of Missing Husbands” published photographs of Jewish husbands who abandoned their wives for financial independence, other women, or the pleasures of bachelorhood in the New World, shaming those men who took advantage of the American social freedoms that enabled anonymity and the ability to reinvent oneself. The ability to enter a diverse, fast-evolving world beyond the watchful eye of a tight-knit, coercive kehillah and nuclear family enabled rebellious men to enjoy an extended bachelorhood if they so chose – an option especially essential to the beginnings of modern gay culture. See Chauncey (1994).

In an article from September 8, 1908, titled “Yunge yidishe ferbrekher” (Young Jewish Criminals), Abraham Cahan urged fathers to take greater pains to bolster their own self-esteem and paternal authority in order to better discipline their children and thus prevent New York’s Jewish boys’ involvement in petty crime. As Ellen Kellman notes, Cahan also reinforced traditional patriarchal gender order by maintaining that children were influenced less by mothers, of whom they were not afraid. Ellen Kellman, “Aiding Immigrant Readers of Entertaining Them?: The Jewish Daily Forward and Its ‘Gallery of Missing Husbands’ (ca. 1909),” in New York and the American Jewish Communal Experience, eds. Fruma Mohrer and Ette Golderwass, based on the Milstein Conference on New York and the American Jewish Experience (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2013), 6.

As Matthew Frye Jacobson writes, some journalists and social agitators of the early twentieth century characterized the Jewish “race” as having contempt for law and a lust for the forbidden fruit of sex with gentiles. Journalists sometimes characterized Jews as having bulging satyr eyes, sensual full lips, and an animalistic jaw. Jacobson (1998), Chapter Two. On the other hand, Deborah Dash Moore claims that American-born New York Jews of the interwar era successfully created a “moral community” that was transitional, not marginal, belonging in both mainstream and traditional Jewish cultures. Moore, 9-11.

Illick, 108-110.

Moore, 14, 89.
truths as a child, directly from his parents as they learned of their own relatives’ endangerment and deaths in Europe.

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Language is Like a Garden’: Shloyme Davidman and the Yiddish Communist School Movement in the United

chauvinism of the Boy Scouts, and condemned the “American dream” as a capitalist fantasy. Jennifer Young, ‘‘A

America,” the JPFO disapproved of the ethnic segregation and religiousness of

the largest division of the International Workers Order (est. 1930). In its hope to build a revolutionary “Soviet

Collections of the YIVO Library, New York,” in

“melting pot” i

writer Itche Goldberg, who served as education director of the pro

1993, Public Education Program Sound Recordings, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The

Kohn, 86. Raising families in small apartments and in an urban landscape with delights like “the theatre

and later the moving picture palace,” early twentieth-century commentators “feared that the home would cease
altogether to be the center of social life and that the coming generation would find its pleasures and recreation
completely outside its walls.” On the other hand, Kohn consoled worried parents, reminding them that

automobile, which had been perceived as “one of the dire threats to family life, and one of the most potent forces
making for the disintegration of the home” by offering “an easy means for young people to escape parental
influence,” had not yet ended family life, even though cars could indeed “whisk one in a trice to entrancing regions
distant from the family fireside.” Ibid, 87-88.

Cited in Moore, 86.

Illick, 106. The very words “urban” and “urbanization,” argues Chinn, were used as code words for

“immigrant.” Chinn, 17.

Teeman, 2011

Sound cassette (2 sound files), Maurice Sendak, September 14, 1993, Unit DA00228, September 14, 1993, Public Education Program Sound Recordings, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The NY Public Library.

The latter mentality held true especially for communist and leftist thinkers like Yiddishist and children’s
writer Itche Goldberg, who served as education director of the pro-communist Jewish People’s Fraternal Order
(JPFO); Goldberg empathized with parents alienated from their Americanized children when he argued that the

“melting pot” idea was a tactic of the ruling class to maintain social control by suppressing the values of certain
ethnic minorities. Lyudmila Sholokhova, “Soviet Propaganda in Illustrated Yiddish Children’s Books: From the
Collections of the YIVO Library, New York,” in Estraikh et al., 168. With 50,000 members in 1947, the JPFO was
the largest division of the International Workers Order (est. 1930). In its hope to build a revolutionary “Soviet
America,” the JPFO disapproved of the ethnic segregation and religiousness of yeshivas, decried the militaristic
chauvinism of the Boy Scouts, and condemned the “American dream” as a capitalist fantasy. Jennifer Young, “A
Language is Like a Garden”: Shloyme Davidman and the Yiddish Communist School Movement in the United
States,” in Estraikh et al., 158-159.

During the years of Sendak’s childhood, Yiddish was not only a particularity of Jewish difference and of
the Old World past; in Yiddish proletarian cultural production it functioned as an international “weapon to fight the
bourgeois influence within the Jewish masses, to awaken their class consciousness.” By July of 1935, however, the
international Communist movement officially shifted its priority to combatting fascism, which required working
together with bourgeois segments of society, moving the focus to distinctions between childhood and adulthood,
rather than between proletariat and bourgeois. A. Bergman “Yiddish oder Yiddishkayt,” quoted in Young, in
Estraikh et al., 160n21; Young, in Estraikh et al., 161. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, some Yiddish
schools and publications in America, such as the Kinder Zhurnal, would continue through WWII to expose children
to the gruesome realities of the adult world and of the results of antisemitism. Sendak was exposed to such harsh
truths as a child, directly from his parents as they learned of their own relatives’ endangerment and deaths in Europe.
In a typescript draft of *In Grandpa's House*, Philip has David, the boy protagonist, ponder the blurry line between animal and human. After playing with a lion cub and his friends in the forest, hunters strike and kill some of the animals. The hunters are then killed by other animals. “The little animals ran over and danced around the bodies. David told the little ones to stop, but a big tiger said, ‘Never mind! They are to eat the people!’ David said the little ones would get wild if they drank blood. The big animals wanted their cubs to get wild. Then David realized that the animals were no better than people. They were wild and ate flesh, just like human beings. So he didn’t say anything more.” Typescript for *In Grandpa's House*, page 49, Maurice Sendak Collection, The Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

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86 Brockes, 2012.
87 In a typescript draft of *In Grandpa’s House*, Philip has David, the boy protagonist, ponder the blurry line between animal and human. After playing with a lion cub and his friends in the forest, hunters strike and kill some of the animals. The hunters are then killed by other animals. “The little animals ran over and danced around the bodies. David told the little ones to stop, but a big tiger said, ‘Never mind! They are to eat the people!’ David said the little ones would get wild if they drank blood. The big animals wanted their cubs to get wild. Then David realized that the animals were no better than people. They were wild and ate flesh, just like human beings. So he didn’t say anything more.” Typescript for *In Grandpa's House*, page 49, Maurice Sendak Collection, The Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia.
88 Kushner, 161.
89 Brockes, 2012.
91 Even at this point in his life, Sendak felt a degree of alienation in a society rooted in Anglo-Saxon culture; the same year as *Zlateh’s* publication, Harper editor Ursula Nordstrom found the need to ease Sendak’s anxiety with humor, writing in December before one of the artist’s trips to England, “I have always thought the Royal family is Jewish too so I am sure some suitable gala can be arranged while you are in London. But of course even the gentiles do you honor. So how can you miss?” Marcus (1998), 231.
92 Youth like Sendak were attracted to their elders’ shtetl tales of demons, infanticide, and other matters that dramatized real-life fears. “To me the Grimm tales were an extension of the stories my father told me,” Sendak remembered, “they are very like his stories, in which people got hacked and eaten and brutalized. And the bad people were really tortured to death, and that was such a great satisfaction.” Marion Long, “Maurice Sendak: A Western Canon, Jr.,” *HomeArts*, Archive.org Internet Archive, Accessed October 10, 2016; Jeffrey Jon Smith, “A Conversation with Maurice Sendak,” article based on transcript of phone conversation with Sendak, Aug. 27, 1974.
95 Lanes (1980), 183. Sendak later wrote, “To deny children’s sexuality is a crime which we in this country are very guilty of.” Patrick Rodgers, “Selected Sendak: Interviews by the Rosenbach,” *Rosenbach Museum Archives*, 2007-2008, rpt. in Kunze, 165. *Night Kitchen* was partially inspired by memories of the 1939 World’s Fair in New York, where Sendak’s older sister lost track of him in front of the Sunshine Bakers building. Ibid, 175. Though delighted by the aroma and by the tiny bakers waving from the balcony, Sendak remembered cringing at the company’s tagline: “We Bake While You Sleep!,” which frustrated the young Sendak excluded from the action and fun of urban nightlife and its promises of adult knowledge. *There’s a Mystery There: Sendak on Sendak*, Rosenbach Museum and Library, retrospective of Sendak Interviews, 2008, DVD; Lanes (1980), 174.
96 Sound recording, Edna Edwards interviews Maurice Sendak, 1973, Edna Edwards Interviews with Children’s Authors and Illustrators.
98 Brockes, 2012.
99 Cited in Commire, 187.
100 Drawing from the liberal ideas of role models like Ruth Krauss, discussed in the previous chapter, Sendak’s work in these decades mirrors some of the critical perspectives of contemporary intellectuals and popular artists on the “inner child” and playful cultural subversion. Cech, 25; Jean Perrot, “Maurice Sendak’s Ritual Cooking of the Child in Three Tableaux: The Moon, Mother, and Music,” *Children’s Literature* 18 (1990), 70-73.
101 Kathryn Bond Stockton uses the term “growing sideways” to describe the process of creatively resisting the social order’s threatening advances on the child’s early self. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
102 Lanes (1980), 27.
103 Seth Lerer argues that Sendak’s contribution to modern children’s literature was turning away from the Puritan, pastoral simplicity of the rural country and toward the dangerous city landscape – the site of modernist art – embracing it as a means to explore the wilderness of the interior self. Lecture, Seth Lerer, “Wild Thing: Maurice Sendak and the Worlds of Children’s Literature,” Contemporary Jewish Museum, uploaded Sep 29, 2009 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lducj5nUkrI.

104 Sendak’s concern with the child’s need to survive the boredom of the empty Brooklyn street also reflects a growing social concern in the decades of his youth around child’s play. Peter Stearns traces to the 1920s the social expectation that parents entertain their children. Stearns (2003), 188.

105 Marcus (1998), 163.


109 Jonathan Crary defines the notion of the “spectacle,” epitomized by advertising, comic books, and amusement parks, as “a technology of separation [through] the management of attention [that helped shape Americans into] docile subjects, even within a world in which mobility and circulation are ubiquitous.” Op de Beeck, 121. Fine art of the interwar years celebrated mechanical innovations and industry, contrasting the sentimental and morally didactic trends of earlier decades. Generated in part by the disillusionment of WWI and the Great Depression, the popular culture of Sendak’s adolescence favored capitalist dreams, superhero fantasies, and social realism over the earlier emphases on classical idealism and heavy-handed moralizing.

110 Sendak saw the 1920s as “a happy time, before commercial art became a term of opprobrium, and the myth flourished that achievement of any popular success in the arts exiled one from the realm of the serious.” Maurice Sendak, Introduction to The Maxfield Parrish Poster Book (New York: Harmony Books, 1974), 5.


113 Sonheim, 78, 110.


115 Chauncey notes that Laurel and Hardy films of the 1930s “destabilized gender categories and implied that any man might sexually desire another man” by regularly depicting “one of the duo goosing the other, pulling down his pants, or engaging in obscene poses,” such as in the film Their First Mistake (1932), in which Laurel sucks a baby’s bottle from Hardy’s hands before Hardy strokes the bottle “so hard that milk spurts out of it.” Chauncey, 325. It is not surprising, then, that Sendak, who was four years old at the time of the film’s release, would later choose to feature Oliver Hardy lookalikes as bakers in his book about childhood sexuality – in which the triumphant, sensually awakened boy protagonist floats naked through the air and pours milk down to those bakers. Considering his ambivalent feelings about his queer sexuality as a source of danger and isolation, it is also not surprising that those flamboyant bakers pour Mickey in cake batter and literally almost destroy him. Sendak told Steven Heller in 1986 that Night Kitchen contained “everything I loved: New York, immigrants, Jews, Laurel and Hardy, Mickey Mouse, King Kong, movies.” Steven Heller, ed. Innovations of American Illustration (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986), 70-81, rpt. in Kunze, 104.


117 The motion and activity of a comic strip evolve through the empty “gutter” spaces between panels, which invite the viewer to engage in the process of visually connecting the dots and imaginatively filling in the...

118 Quoted in Cott, 1976; Sound recording (2 sound files), Maurice Sendak, September 14, 1993, Public Education Program Sound Recordings.

119 Lanes (1980), 175.


121 As Sendak saw it, Melville’s work “is full of men like […] superman, heroes. He loved male imagery like that. It’s very peculiar.” Cited in Kunze, 88. Thus, Sendak indirectly linked his own use of comics conventions with respectable nineteenth-century literature.

122 By the late 1920s, artists like William Nicholson moved away from illustrating wordy or didactic stories to focus instead on what became the children’s book as we know it today: a horizontal layout with individual frames that paid more attention to the fusion of text and image; including more entertaining, meaningful pictures and a running text that was more fluid, spare, and suspenseful. Op de Beeck, 1-2.


124 Moreover, Sendak’s figurative drawing style also lacked favor by the interwar decades, as new standards of technology, design, and abstraction displaced earlier, more sentimental styles. Even by the 1940s and ‘50s, during the height of abstract expressionism when, as Leonard Marcus writes, “America’s post-war art establishment defied Jackson Pollock,” figurative artists like Sendak remained unfashionable in high society, confined to “the cultural shallows of advertising, cartooning, graphic design, and illustration, or the so-called ‘applied’ arts […] with children’s book illustration consigned to a position at or near the bottom of the pecking order.” Leonard S. Marcus, “The Artist and His Work,” in Marcus (2013), 15.

125 Part of what made the wider culture take comics and picture books seriously as art were the innovations of figures like Sendak and Art Spiegelman, who pushed aesthetic limits and infused those overlooked forms with serious, human questions. With his controversial use of nudity, terror, and visual tropes from the “low” art of comic books, movies, Mickey Mouse cartoons, and advertisements, Leonard Marcus writes, “Sendak’s Mickey, in a certain sense, pointed to the way Art Spiegelman’s Maus, to the rise of the mongrel art form of the graphic novel in which the once-fixed categories of ‘high,’ ‘low,’ ‘adult,’ and ‘child-appropriate’ art would all turn richly and provocatively fluid.” Marcus, “The Artist and His Work,” in Marcus (2013), 24.

126 Memorandum, Anne G. Wolfe of the American Jewish Committee to the members of the Committee on Comics, April 11, 1960, box 48, folder 29, Comics Project, Social Welfare History Archives, Elmer Andersen Library, University of Minnesota Libraries.

127 Art Spiegelman once said that Sendak approached his books with “a comics inflection […] with the bounce, movement, and even the language—including balloons and panels—that evolves from a deep affection for comics.” Sasha Weid, “Art Spiegelman Discusses Maurice Sendak” New Yorker, May 9, 2012. Sendak’s pictures for A Very Special House (1953), Hector Protector (1965), and Lullabies and Night Songs (1965) also drew from comics conventions, using word bubbles, sound effects written out in capitalized letters, wild pacing, separated panels, and flat color planes.


129 For example, the cream container lists two addresses from Sendak’s Brooklyn childhood, a carton labeled “Eugene’s” refers to his partner, Eugene Glynn, and his parents receive mention in the labels “Philip’s best tomatoes” and “Sadie's best.” Lanes (1980), 182-3.


131 Halberstam writes that mainstream society values “long periods of stability” and demonizes those who live “in rapid bursts (drug addicts, for example)” as “immature and even dangerous.” Judith Halberstam, “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies,” in In a Queer Time and Place (New York: New York University Press,
of the Sendaks' Bensonhurst neighborhood declared, but they also struggled to keep children
and to suppress his individuality. I know of nothing that can poison the relation between parents and child more
with tears or by questioning the child's love. "A young person soon realizes, if such tactics are repeated, that the
resultant "understanding of togetherness," as well as the love and "reverence of the Jewish child for parents" even
American individualism.

However, it is also important to note that comparing immigrants or other minority groups to children has
historically operated as a means to exclude them from civil rights. Karen Sanchez-Eppler, Dependent States: The


Riv-Ellen Prell, "Family Economy/Family Relations," in National Variations in Jewish Identity, eds. Steven M. Cohen and Gabriel Horenczcyk (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 185. The contrast between the Eastern European family and the American family continued to surprise Jewish immigrants to America for decades after the era of mass immigration, especially in contrast to the tightknit relational styles required of some European families facing persecution during WWII and needing to function as a codependent unit, interchanging family roles when necessary to maintain collective safety. Eva Hoffman, for example, immigrating to the U.S. as a teenager after surviving the Holocaust in hiding, wrote, "[F]amilial bonds seem so dangerously loose here." Bedingfield, 341; See also Lenore Weitzman, "Resistance in Everyday Life: Family Strategies, Role Reversals, and Role Sharing in the Holocaust" and Dalia Ofer, "Parenthood in the Shadow of the Holocaust," in Jewish Families in Europe, 1939-Present, ed. Joanna Beata Michlic, (Waltham, MA: UPNE/Brandeis University Press, 2017).

Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise believed that the intergenerational conflict so prevalent in the late 1910s and early 1920s was due to the "unfitness of the elders" to parent by heightened standards of modern childrearing. Wise, 22. By the early 1920s, Reform Jews stressed the importance of children's psychological independence above their observance of parents' traditions. Wise, for example, encouraged Jewish parents to minimize their influence on their own children. He wrote, "As children near adulthood, they desire to be autonomous persons rather than things or possessions. [...] The 'owned' child is not unlikely with the years to become and to remain a poor, miserable dependent intellectually and spiritually, once its parents are gone." Ibid, 111-112, 116.

Nevertheless, even while advocating for understanding and acculturation to middle-class parenting styles, Wise cautioned American Jews that the Jewish home was under serious threat in a culture of American individualism. Ibid, 138. Wise believed that the "grace and glory" of the traditional Jewish home, exaggerated by the effects of anti-Jewish hostility in the external world, was rooted in parents' selflessness and the resultant "understanding of togetherness," as well as the love and "reverence of the Jewish child for parents" even after their passing. Ibid, 131.

In 1932, Conservative rabbi Jacob Kohn also beseeched parents not to guilt their children with tears or by questioning the child's love. "A young person soon realizes, if such tactics are repeated, that the very love felt for parents—something quite taken for granted—is being used against him to throttle his personality and to suppress his individuality. I know of nothing that can poison the relation between parents and child more effectively than this discovery." Kohn, 42.

American Reform Jews in the interwar years were largely established, middle-class families who had immigrated from the cities of Western and Central Europe, many having acculturated in the previous century. Eager to embrace mainstream American cultural and gender norms, they integrated popular child-centered approaches more readily than did traditional congregations established by Eastern European shtetl immigrants like the Sendaks, but they also struggled to keep children rooted in Jewish and family values. In 1928, Max Reichler, a Reform Rabbi of the Sendaks' Bensonhurst neighborhood declared, the "American environment works its influence in the direction

143 Conservative rabbi Jacob Kohn, for example, took an empathetic approach to Jewish children who rebelled against parents’ traditions, warning Jewish parents to understand the disillusionment and rebelliousness of adolescent youth who came of age in the aftermath of WWI, betrayed by “many of the cherished illusions of civilization in the horrible tragedy of a world conflict.” Kohn, 36-37. Kohn warned against creating an excessively insular, austere home in which children were not free to ask the wider human and social questions that mattered to them. He wrote that adolescents’ “discoveries of the possibilities of life and sex, so gloriously new to them” were too often met with parental replies of, “I’m tired; talk to me about that some other time,” or “Get to bed; you mustn’t keep us up all night.” Kohn encouraged late-night, boundary Pushing, open conversations between parents and children as a means for the generations to grow closer. He also advised parents not to censor “dangerous” or corrupting information from their adolescent offspring, as it only intensified their interest in that information: “To live dangerously is one of the ideals and one of the prerogatives of youth. It is we who long for the safety and the security of the accustomed armchair. They, for the most part, are willing to test the dangers of a plane navigating the air or of an idea soaring above the level of conventional prejudice.” Ibid, 49-50, 44.

144 Sadie was the eldest daughter of a poor talmudic scholar who had run a grocery and dry-goods store in Zakroczym, Poland. Lanes (1980), 10. The Sendaks associated with Jewish immigrants originating from the Polish shtetls of their own origins: Zakroczym for Sadie and Zambrow for Philip. When Maurice was a young child, his father created a tailoring company, Lucky Stitching, with two landsmen friends. Interview transcript, Selma Lanes, 1989. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Records. Sadie would bring the young Sendak from Brooklyn on trips back to the dense, traditional streets of the Jewish Lower East Side; he would later reminisce about “poking the sour pickles and breathing in the heavenly odor of brine.” Letter, Maurice Sendak to Mrs. Kane, Oct. 29, 1962, Kane Family Letters, Maurice Sendak Collection, The Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Mrs. Sendak dutifully maintained a kosher home, Shabbat restrictions, and family purity laws, even though the family only attended synagogue on rare occasions. The children were taken to the library on Fridays to choose books to occupy them for Shabbat, as they were not allowed to write or engage in other activities. The Hearst Corporation, “Maurice Sendak: Childhood Books I remember,” 1995. Benjamin Hirsch and Associates, Inc. Records. Georgia Tech Library Archives. Sendak would relay in a later add that the Jewish laws of his upbringing “made no sense to me. It made no sense to me what was happening. So nothing of it means anything to me. Nothing. Except these few little trivial things that are related to being Jewish.” “‘Fresh Air’ Remembers Author Maurice Sendak,” NPR.org, May 8, 2012. Accessed May 11, 2016, http://www.npr.org/2012/05/08/152248901/fresh-air-remembers-author-maurice-sendak


146 Jacob’s grandson, Ben Ross, confirmed that the Sendaks would not have attended a Reform synagogue. Ben Ross (grandson of Jacob Ross [Rzodkiewicz], Philip Sendak’s second cousin), in discussion with the author, July 9, 2014.

147 Congregations like that of Bensonhurst’s Sons of Israel, an Orthodox synagogue and Talmud Torah that stood about a mile from the Sendaks’ Bensonhurst apartment, held to the dictum that “practically every action of the Jew is governed by our religion, because Judaism is a system of guidance which calls for observance of its rules and regulations in order that the human being’s life may be regulated properly – that a real Utopia may be established on earth.” Congregation Sons of Israel Yearbook, 1947, “The Daily Routine,” American Jewish Historical Society, Center for Jewish History.

148 Indeed, as Naomi Prawer Kadar writes of early twentieth-century literature by Jewish immigrants who wrote for educational Yiddish magazines, “The initial narratives that feature a child as a hero reflected the older generation’s tenuous acceptance of America and its abundant treasures as well as their fervent desire to transmit their progressive and Jewish legacies.” Kadar, 178.

149 Brookes, 2012.


152 Satirizing the Jewish disengagement among American youth, Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), a popular Yiddish author whom Sendak’s parents adored, had written an American parody of the four questions traditionally

153 Philip was the son of a fairly wealthy rabbi who worked in lumber. Sendak claimed, Philip “had prestige and was extremely handsome and [devil-may-care]. He came here and became a drudge. His family was sitting shiva for him back in the old country because he had done this terrible thing: chasing a girl, when your father is a rabbi, and schlepping all the way to New York.” Philip’s father never forgave him for leaving Poland – he would only send letters or presents via other relatives, avoiding direct contact with Philip. Brockes, 2012.

154 Sendak continued, “when the relatives came over, and these lumbering fat faces loomed over us, pinched us, mauled us, kissed us and said, ‘We could eat you up if we love you so,’ we thought, ‘Hey, if Mama doesn’t cook dinner fast, they’ll eat anything.” Mark Swed, “‘Wild Things’ in Operaland: Maurice Sendak moves from children’s books to stage designer and librettist,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1990.

155 Sound recording, Edna Edwards interviews Maurice Sendak, 1973, box 2, folders 8-9, Edna Edwards Interviews with Children’s Authors and Illustrators, Loyola Marymount University Archives & Special Collections.

156 Spike Jonze and Lance Bangs (directors), *Tell Them Anything You Want: A Portrait of Maurice Sendak,* Maurice Sendak, Lynn Caponera, Catherine Keener, Oscilloscope Laboratories, 2010, DVD.


159 Deborah Dash Moore claims, for example, that public school, charged with unifying children into a common belief system, was a potential arena of conflict between gentile teachers and Jewish students, teachers denigrating Yiddish as lower-class and un-American. Children internalized that they needed to judge their parents’ poor English and follow their teachers’ lead in order to achieve social mobility. Moore, 90-91, 105, 111.

160 Until its amendment in 1952, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 enforced the strictest American barring of Eastern and Southern European immigrants by instating quotas based on country-of-origin that allowed entry to only two percent of each national population as reflected in the American census of 1890. Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2004), 215; see also Jacobson (1998).

161 Brockes, 2012.


163 Teeman, 2011.

164 Brockes, 2012. It was perhaps to relieve guilt from this particular memory that, in Sendak’s *Very Far Away* (1957), Sendak reverses the power dynamic, depicting a boy named Martin who sulks when ignored by his mother, too distracted caring for the baby to answer his questions.

165 Cited in Anne Commire, “Maurice Sendak,” *Something About the Author: Facts and Pictures about Authors and Illustrators of Books for Young People* 27 (1982), 198.


168 This is Phyllis Greenacre’s conception of the artist’s psyche, as described by Glynn. Eugene Glynn, *Desperate Necessity: Writings on Art and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jonathan Weinberg (Pittsburgh: Periscope, 2008), 15.


171 In December 1968, Sendak wrote to Singer, “My father was touched to tears by your inscribed copy of *The Séance […]* I.B. Singer is a family hero – and his astonishment and pleasure on receiving the book made me very happy.” Letter, Maurice Sendak to I.B. Singer, Dec. 23, 1968, series 2, Isaac Bashevis Singer Papers.

172 Brockes, 2012.


174 The month following his mother’s death in 1968, Sendak wrote to Singer, “My mother often asked after you – she took such joy from your stories and novels – and she was so proud her son worked with I.B. Singer. Her
son is proud too.” Letter, Maurice Sendak to I.B. Singer, Sept. 4, 1968, Isaac Bashevis Singer Papers. Separate from 
Zlateh, Sendak illustrated a Singer story published in the Saturday Evening Post on May 4, 1968: “Yash the 
Chimney-Sweep.” He included a drawing of his father and mother, her eyes hidden under a draped headdress. She 
was then dying. Sendak lost Singer’s friendship by refusing to sell the writer this drawing, infuriating him. Institute 
of Contemporary Arts, London, video, Writers Talk: Maurice Sendak with Paul Vaughan, 1985, Roland Collection 
of Films and Videos on Art; Justin G. Schiller, “Recollections for an Exhibition,” in Maurice Sendak: A Celebration 
of the Artist and His Work, ed. Leonard S. Marcus, curated by Justin G. Schiller and Dennis M. V. David (NY: 

176 Letter, Maurice Sendak to Minnie Kane, September 3, 1968, Kane Family Letters, Maurice Sendak 
177 These Yiddish transcriptions would later offer the basis of the picture book In Grandpa’s House (1985).

Patrick Rodgers (Sendak curator at the Rosenbach Museum & Library), email to author, July 9, 2014.
178 Letter, Maurice Sendak to Coleman Dowell, May 13, 1969, box 1.3, folder 3, Coleman Dowell Papers, 
NYU Fales Library. The Stonewall Riots of June 28, 1969 involved the violent resistance of patrons against a police 
raid at the Stonewall Inn, a popular Greenwich Village refuge for queer people in a time preceding acceptance of 
LGBTQ identities in the public sphere. Ann Bausum, Stonewall: Breaking Out in the Fight for Gay Rights (NY: 
Penguin, 2016). Sendak’s apartment on West 9th Street was a mere 0.3 miles from the Stonewall Inn – about a six-
minute walk.

179 Teeman, 2011.
example, in Elementary English saw Night Kitchen as striking “a literary blow for the Kid Lib movement” in its 
invitation to “vicariously wallow nude in cake dough and skinny dip in milk.” Cited in Sonheim, 14. Another critic 
warned “Sendak […] will doubtless offend those who are unprepared to acknowledge [a child’s sexual] feelings.” 
Lanes (1980), 185.
181 Sendak included his partner Eugene Glynn’s first name on one of the buildings. On that same page, 
writes Ellen Handler Spitz, “Mickey pounds the dough into a propeller, which very much resembles a penis.” Ellen 
Handler Spitz, “Maurice Sendak’s Sexuality,” New Republic, February 21, 2013, Accessed April 20, 2016, 
182 Walter Clemons, “Sendak’s Enchanted Land,” Newsweek, May 18, 1981, 102, box 1, folder 21, Series 3, 
Blaine Pennington Papers, University of Missouri-Kansas City Special Collections.
185 Lanes (1980), 182. The radio, by which Sendak’s mother sat at her kitchen table, would have also been 
the main source of news about European fascism and the nascent world war. Later she would sit by the radio to hear 
news pertaining to Sendak’s older brother, Jack, who had been drafted to serve in the 1945 Pacific invasion of 
186 As suggested by the enormous size of the milk bottle in Night Kitchen, milk was a “wonder food” in the 
thrifty Depression years, perceived as necessary for children in high doses, due to its comprising so many nutritional 
components – protein, calcium, fat, and others – in a single food product. Jane Ziegelman and Andrew Coe, A 
188 Letter, Maurice Sendak to Coleman Dowell, Feb 12, 1971, Coleman Dowell Papers.
189 Maurice Sendak, Wye Allanbrook, and Stephen Greenblatt, “Mozart, Shakespeare and the Art of 
Maurice Sendak,” Changelings: Children’s Stories Lost and Found, ed. Christina M. Gillis (Berkeley, CA: Doreen 