Introduction

Maurice Sendak (1928–2012) was an American writer and illustrator, best known for his book Where the Wild Things Are. His works cover fairy and folk tales, controversial titles about politics, opera scenery, adventure tales, and more.

However, beyond his identity as a creator, Sendak’s work expresses his own Jewish identity. His works, in many ways, can be read as a specific example of a modern Jewish literary identity and the way that it uses a history and breadth of resources.

Jewish Literature

Jewish-American literature is as diverse as it’s people. Some of the most common forms follow the separate and often distinct waves of immigration of the Jewish people to the United States:

- Spanish–Portuguese (1654-1830)
- German (1830-1880)
- East European (1880-1924)
- post-Holocaust (1940 to the present)

Sendak’s position as the child of Eastern European Jews gives him a distinct perspective. Growing up in a Jewish–Polish neighborhood—inusual and not unlike a shelt—Sendak’s work often draws on resources we expect from Eastern European Jewish literature.

The arrival of his family members fleeing the Holocaust colors Sendak’s work. Tony Kushner describes Sendak as “shadowed always by the Holocaust.” He draws often on these memories, using them as an inspiration to depict the stress and suffering that occurred in the Holocaust. Throughout images of family members lost by Sendak, the images of Sendak and his family during the Holocaust can be seen making their way through the garden of Heaven.

Betrayed by Chicken Soup with Rice

In her article, “Betrayed by Chicken Soup: Judaism, Gender and Performance in Maurice Sendak’s Really Rosie,” Leslie Tannenbaum argues that chicken soup and rice—a reoccurring food in Sendak’s writing—represents the blend of Jewish and non-Jewish influences on Sendak’s works. She argues this blend is a move away from Jewish identity, into a more American identity.

While Sendak often cited influences like Mickey Mouse, pulp movies, and other strongholds of American culture, as well as gentile influences like Shakespeare and Mozart, he also cites Jewish storytelling, especially the stories told to him by his father and grandfather.

Rather than reading this hybrid of influences as a move away from an ethnically Jewish identity, it instead could be a move towards a more authentically real Jewish American viewpoint which may be less identifiable to a non-Jewish reader.

“Sendak’s Jewish community extends beyond the boundaries of Europe and Nazi occupation. It has much to do with an American childhood in New York City”—Jill P. May, “Envisioning the Jewish Community in Children’s Literature”

In Dear MS, a book written by William Steig, MS is illustrated and edited by Sendak. Sendak likes a Christian fairy tale which has important implications about the sins and suffering that occurred in the Holocaust. Throughout the images of family members lost by Sendak, it is clear that Sendak’s family is moved by the images of his family during the Holocaust, and it is seen making their way through the garden of Heaven.

The Re-appropriation of Anti-Semitic Imagery

Medieval Anti-Semitism

Often the figures Sendak gives starring roles in his illustrations have Semitic features pulled straight from medieval and Elizabethan art. These features include:

- Large noses
- Thick lips
- Sunken eyes
- Protruding chins
- Low, “brutish” brows

Where Medieval and Elizabethan art used these features to mark someone as “other” or “dangerous,” Sendak uses these features to make his protagonists easily recognizable not only as Jews, but as the hero of the story.

The image above comes from We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy, which features characters Sendak admires by being on himself and his brother.

Maurice Sendak and the art of the Third Reich

Sendak uses the more immediate anti-Semitic imagery of Nazi Germany not to indicate the protagonist, but rather to introduce readers to the work’s antagonist.

For example, the wild things becomes less of a friendly Jewish stereotype and more of the monstrous Jew of Nazi propaganda when Max attempts to sail home against their wishes.

In Brundibár, based on an opera performed in the Terezin concentration camp, Hitler is the villain, and he is often made larger than other characters, or even larger than life, becoming a nightmarish Übermensch. Jewish iconography is used to indicate safety.

Conclusion

Maurice Sendak’s work is indicative of Jewish literature after the Holocaust. The Jewish identity presented in the works of Sendak is one of compromise, of combining Jewish and gentile sources, of taking the images of oppression to create an easily recognizable visual vocabulary.

What we see in Sendak’s work is the Jewish people taking a variety of resources to create an identity after the destruction of a culture.

Bibliography


Art (left to right), Happy Hanukkah Everybody by Havnes, Hyman; illustrations by Maurice Sendak; One Was Johnny by Mili Seakes; Outside Over There by Maurice Sendak


While Mickey escapes, Sendak makes it clear across his body of work that escape from violence is not always possible. And this discussion about the Holocaust is often lost by readers’ shock at seeing a naked child. By banning books, we remove marginalized identities from our shelves.

Happy Hanukkah Everybody by Havnes, Hyman; illustrations by Maurice Sendak; One Was Johnny by Mili Seakes; Outside Over There by Maurice Sendak

Billy makes into a terrifying caricature in Brundibá, and is defeated with the Jewish community rallying around “Never again! Never again!”

Although the story promises that this same type of violence will return if the good people of the world do not work towards justice.