

INTRODUCTION

FROM LIMBO TO CHILDHOOD

“I DON’T LIKE ALL KIDS,” the late Maurice Sendak (1928–2012) once infamously declared. “Some of them are as awful as their parents.”¹ Very young people, he believed, are not categorically alike. Sendak rejected the Enlightenment-based notion that children are “blank slates,” shapeable matter born to serve an enfranchised status quo by playing the socially desired role—in the case of modern childhood, that role was usually “the innocent.” Ideals of childhood innocence, he felt, reflected adults’ demands that children not *know* or *feel*, but instead primarily *behave*, submitting to dictation from an exclusionary society. Children, the artist asserted, were tragically socialized out of the fierce honesty and emotional transparency with which they are born and which few adults manage to maintain.² He believed in children’s inherent capacity to differ from each other, to question, to know, to preserve endangered parts of the self, and to resist sanctioned injustices. In the artist’s own words, his work explores “how a child deals with revolutionary, tumultuous feelings that have no place in a given setting, like the classroom or his mother’s apartment.”³ Situated in broader cultural and historical contexts, the present study shines new light on Sendak’s own displaced “revolutionary, tumultuous feelings” as they drove his sensitive inner life and his work.

During his own early years, Sendak was markedly “different” from other children. He occupied an ethereal, self-constituted realm between his Yiddish-speaking immigrant parents’ Old World memories, wild fantasies inspired by the American popular arts, and the laws of an establishment culture he perceived as vapid, assimilatory, and even dangerous. Disillusioned by school and social surroundings in the 1930s through the 1950s, he thrived instead on the gruesome and sensual thrills of folklore and mass culture and on Romantic sensibilities that envisioned young people as primal vessels of nature, rather than pliable citizens-in-the-making. Like a Renaissance-era artist, he favored models of apprenticeship and practical immersion over formal schooling. The latter, he felt, subdued one’s greatest passions.⁴ Many refer to Sendak as the Picasso of children’s literature. This likely stems from his alignment with Picasso’s famous adage that every child is an artist but most do not remain so in adulthood. An autodidact and voracious reader, Sendak admired writers such as Charles Dickens, William Blake, George MacDonald, and Henry James, noting that underneath their sophisticated social and political depictions was the intensity of an observant child who survives and suffers within the artist’s adult self, peering out at the world and taking it all to heart.⁵ In their sensitivity to emotional possibilities forgotten or ignored, Sendak’s protagonists blur the line between childhood and adulthood, perceiving harmonies and connections that surprise, comfort, and challenge. Like artists, they follow emotional and physiological rhythms that expose the limits of socially constructed boundaries and modes of being.

Sendak struggled to maintain access to the feelings of his own childhood as the root of his art. Childhood, for him, was a time of navigating terror, sensual awakening, and solitary emotional fogs while clarifying perceptions of self and surroundings. It was as a child that he’d grappled most directly with the problem of creating and socializing himself while surviving urban dangers and the normalizing coercion of teachers, peers, and media. As he repeatedly stated, he believed that the success of his work depended “almost entirely on an uninhibited intercourse with this primitive, uncensored self.” Sendak claimed that he experienced his life as being in a constant state of emotional “limbo” as

a professional “diver,” in and out of deep memory. As he understood it, the chaos of his internal limbo state denoted childhood, and childhood thereby became the framework underlying his career.⁶ He once shared that the reason he preferred creating books for younger children was their appreciation of the playful possibility of moving between worlds, of traversing the thin line between reality and fantasy.⁷

But Sendak wrote *through* the child more than he wrote *for* the child, and this is significant to why children love his work—it tackles constructions of childhood, rather than reinforcing them. As he told one interviewer in 1973, “Children were never consciously in my mind. I never think of them as an audience.”⁸ Although he knew that his largest and most responsive readership was below the age of eight, he resisted the label of children’s book artist, as well as the notion that children’s books existed as any coherent genre or category. Rather, he felt that his books addressed questions and ideas that interested sensitive individuals engrossed in particular concerns, and that most of those such individuals happened to be children. His Harper editor, Ursula Nordstrom, supported this mentality, stating plainly that the best children’s book creators made their work not for children, but for *themselves*.⁹ Sendak pointedly distinguished between what he termed “child view” and “creative view,” tempering his fresh, child-like emotional honesty and ingenuity with his mature aesthetic restraint and erudition.¹⁰ His sensitive, passionate, and socially liminal position was one to which most children happen to relate, along with other insider-outsiders, regardless of age. *Outside Over There* (1981), for example, featured in both children’s and adult catalogs, and some critics wrote that the book was suited more to adults interested in their own “inner child” than it was to actual children.¹¹ Three years after its publication, a *Los Angeles Times* book review noted that a third of Sendak’s sales were to “childless people in their 20s and 30s.”¹² As a creative, then, Sendak honed his memory of childhood feelings into a mature sensibility all his own.

Ultimately, Sendak worked for the concerns of his own childhood feelings—his need to make meaning of an existence positioned between conflicting realities and multiple forms of endangerment. He was open about the inherently narcissistic nature of his work, claiming, “You also

have to be interested in yourself to write. . . . [T]he business of being an artist is indulging oneself. My work points in no direction other than to me.”¹³ His art functioned, in part, to offer care for his earlier self, who had felt forbidden and unable to grow up without becoming “someone else.” He claimed to have created *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), for example, 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.”¹⁴ As he saw it, his child self was cut off, awaiting rescue through the adult’s art. Indeed, the artist claimed, “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.”¹⁵ He would convey this feeling of a split self through various mechanisms, perhaps most blatantly in *Outside Over There*, depicting an infant replaced with a changeling ice baby with which he identified. He sublimated this childhood dissociation, allowing the wild, queer boy that he was to play and experiment in his picture books. In doing so, Sendak offered alienated readers a sensitive and bold commentary on the nature of modern social reality and modeled how to survive its emotional tribulations. His depictions of childhood’s universal queerness—its wild, sensual, and irreverent oddness—resonates with those adults who most remember, or continue to experience, feelings of emotional marginalization and a yearning for liberation.

As an embodied testament to a complex historical and cultural experience, his work opens fascinating opportunities for social historians and cultural theorists alike. This book seizes some of these opportunities, taking queer Jewish Sendak by the hand, so to speak, to concentrate on the feelings that propelled his inner life and creative output in dialogue with the histories, memories, and surrounding cultural shifts that marked his inner depths. Offering historical empathy, I situate Sendak’s emotional world within broader cultural narratives, drawing on insights from Jewish, American, and queer studies. Ultimately, I demonstrate how Sendak made foundational contributions from his emotional “limbo” as a queer “Old World” American Jew and as a nonconformist artist responding to a life that spanned the Depression, World War II,

and the AIDS epidemic. Sendak cultivated his ability to play, suffer, and create within his culturally fraught fantasy realms, engaging in make-believe in written correspondences, retreating to the colorful beach towns of Fire Island, and drawing in a stream-of-consciousness style to classical music. His decidedly introspective and sophisticated use of “child’s play” and fantasy—sometimes so sensual, homoerotic, or grotesque in content as to elicit public controversy—sat in tension in the late twentieth century with misguided characterizations of social outsiders, as well as with the public’s willful ignorance about his sexuality.

Where Is Sendak Within Children’s Literature?

In the early twentieth century, a culture of children’s reading emerged in the United States with increases in library funding and an optimistic new generation of editors. Previously, libraries had warded off children with the policy of “No dogs or children allowed.”¹⁶ But American children’s reading expanded with the establishment of children’s rooms in public libraries, the creation in 1922 of the American Library Association’s John Newbery Medal for best children’s book, and in 1938 the Caldecott Medal for best illustration.¹⁷ In 1924 in Boston, *The Horn Book Magazine* became the nation’s first periodical review of children’s literature. Growing demand for quality children’s books also led publishers to create children’s book departments and to hire specialist editors; Harper’s children’s department originated, for example, in 1926.¹⁸ Two years later, Sendak was born, and Wanda Gág authored the first American picture book to fully integrate text and image: *Millions of Cats*, published by G. P. Putnam’s Sons.¹⁹ Nine years later, in 1937, Dr. Seuss published his first picture book: *And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry Street*.²⁰ Unlike Seuss, who based his work on the quirky recollections of adolescence, Sendak would draw his greatest inspiration from early childhood.²¹

Though children’s reading expanded in these decades, the quality of available picture books suffered from widespread conservatism through the 1950s, which policed the category of childhood and limited the aesthetic representations available to children. In 1939, Simon & Schuster published Ludwig Bemelmans’s first *Madeline* book, following

its rejection by Viking Press, which perceived the heroine as “a tad *too* naughty.”²² Jewish Anglophone literature for children similarly suffered from didacticism and simplification in these years. Though standards rose somewhat after the publication of Sadie Rose Weilerstein’s *The Adventures of K’tonton* (1935), a Jewish “Tom Thumb” story, Jewish picture books in English generally remained instruments of social acculturation or religious education.²³ The creation in 1954 of the Comics Magazine Association of America and its code of criteria—which forbade profanity; obscenity; ridicule of police, parents, racial, and religious groups; and exaggerations of the female anatomy—further mitigated American youths’ exposure to concerns of the wider world. Dr. Fredric Wertham, a German Jewish American psychiatrist and author of *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), argued that comic books blunted conscience, made children less susceptible to art and education, and obscured children’s understanding of relations between the sexes, causing homosexuality and juvenile delinquency. Although comic strips, cartoons, and films of the previous decades had already acknowledged some of the darker, frightening aspects of childhood, “[t]he American assumption” at mid-century was, as David Michaelis writes, that children were always happy, that childhood was a “golden time.”²⁴ American adults were eager to see children as symbols of their personal and collective futures, even at the expense of recognizing actual children’s feelings.

Combined with uninspired books that failed to engage children, censorship and attendant discourses of childhood innocence prevented minority children from seeing themselves in the world. Most starkly, minutes from the 1950 White House Conference on Children condemned popular media forms and warned about the possibility of “the standards of the lowest class” infecting “the boys and girls of other social groups” through the intermixing of children. Historian Joseph Illick reads in such words a race-infused antagonism against “the spread of lower-class culture.”²⁵ Speaking to the Jewish community, Jacob Golub of the *Jewish Book Annual* complained that same year, “We are neglecting our children. . . . [A]most as many books go out of print every year as are added. Thus we are barely holding our own in a land and at a time when we are supposed to become the cultural leaders of world

Jewry. It must become someone's duty to see to it that . . . our children's literature expands."²⁶ Golub's call for books of quality for Jewish children was especially relevant given that, until the second half of the twentieth century, mainstream American children's books generally excluded Jewish and other minority youth, conveying a world centered almost exclusively on angelic, Anglo-Saxon Protestant children. Boys were boys, girls were girls, and the occasional depictions of Jewish and other ethnically or racial minority children were highly curated and sanitized for general audiences.

The content and tone of children's media began to shift with playful realists such as Charles Schulz (1922–2000), whose *Peanuts* comic strip began in 1950 to humanize childhood by coloring it with the dissatisfaction, existential gloom, philosophical musing, and complexity of adulthood.²⁷ More playfulness and critical thinking emerged in children's books by Ruth Krauss, William Steig, Tomi Ungerer, and others. But Sendak broke new ground by channeling an even deeper sensitivity to children's private, painful, and darker moments, also setting much of his work within the perilous landscape of the city. By presenting children in danger and obstructed from their most basic needs and desires, he awakened perhaps the most meaningful depictions of courage and creative transformation through fantasy. Expanding on Schulz's existentially frustrated but well-mannered caricatures and Dr. Seuss's zany, whimsical cartoons, Sendak reached into the universal and highly untidy dramas of infancy—the nonverbal rage, sensuality, and animal drives of forming subjects who loudly negotiate their self-worth and survival. Sendak believed that children needed stories not only for optimism but also for self-preservation, in order to “confront the incomprehensible in their lives—bullies, school, and the vagaries of the adult world.”²⁸

Why Focus on Jewishness?

Sendak related to multiple forms of Jewish difference in America vis-à-vis the “Old World,” the Holocaust and its belated mainstream memorialization, late twentieth-century “ethnic revival,” and perennial Jewish concerns around particularism and universalism. Properly situating Sendak as, in part, an “Old World” Jew helps add nuance to the

often generalized narrative of American Jewish assimilation and complacency. Sendak carved a markedly solitary path, insisting on a vision of himself as an ethnically “other,” atheist, Old World Jew. Despite his atheism, he identified strongly with Jewish ethnicity, shared his adult life with a secular Jewish partner, surrounded himself with Jewish confidantes, and connected his Orthodox upbringing with a lingering drive to constantly make life “purposeful.”²⁹ His conception of childhood draws generously from a heritage located beyond dominant Protestant American norms. While much of the interwar Jewish American establishment had arrived before 1880 and identified with acculturated Central and Western European Reform Judaism, most Yiddish-speaking immigrants, including the Sendaks, arrived later, often fleeing poverty or antisemitism; they stood closer to histories of traditional Jewish community and physical endangerment as Jews. Even in the immediate postwar decades, generally characterized by Jewish acculturation, affluence, and migration to the suburbs, the Sendaks remained urban, Yiddish-speaking, and lower-middle class. Children like Sendak internalized their parents’ feelings of endangerment, learning to focus on survival and in-group loyalty, even as their parents pushed them to achieve American success. As Sendak’s work conveys, the domestic space of the home—with its special foods, songs, and rituals—remained a site for cultivating particular cultural values and emotional investments for families like his, even as the household uneasily balanced Old World traditions and contemporary American bourgeois expectations.³⁰ Not least among these negotiations of the Jewish American home was the reconceptualization of childhood as a pathway into modernity and the middle class.

Yiddish-speaking Jews like the Sendaks participated in a culture that resisted fetishistic idealizations of childhood. Generations of their family were raised in Yiddish-speaking communities and educated in the *kheyder* system, which, according to Gennady Estraiikh, did not view children as essentially different from adults.³¹ As Estraiikh notes, Yiddish writer Shmuel Charney described the traditional conception of a Jewish child in 1935 through the words of Mendele Moykher-Sforim’s *Dos vintshfingerl* (the wishing ring) of 1865: this child was “a miniature adult:

distracted, depressed, with a careworn face and all the mannerism of the adult Jew with a family to support. All he needed was the beard.”³² This conception of the Jewish child as prematurely aged corresponded with a societal reality for certain Jewish populations, especially in parts of Eastern Europe—the difficulties of being poor and persecuted left little freedom for indulging in the protected, cherished pastimes and mentalities associated with modern childhood and the cultivation of children’s optimal physical health. Traditional practices like early marriage and the *kest* system (in which young newlyweds lived with or were otherwise financially supported by the bride’s parents) had lent to the latter image of Jews as prematurely aged, stunted adults. As Jews gained civil rights in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, intellectuals of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) advocated for cultural reforms that would reshape Jewish families, gender roles, and childhood in ways that better suited secular-Christian bourgeois ideals.³³ As David Biale writes, the *Haskalah* sought to relocate social power from the hands of pragmatic, traditional parents to those of their children, who were to look to their own individual emotions and physiological desires for guidance, rather than to their parents or religious leaders.³⁴ Such approaches to Jewish youth, though empowering for those who desired to acculturate within secular-Christian modernity, worked explicitly to “queer” Jewish traditions and to “normalize” future generations of young people by gentile standards rooted in emotional individuality. Sendak’s complex relationship with this cultural legacy would, however, insist on a childhood emotional reality that was decidedly queer and that straddled both the freedoms of a secular majority culture and his parents’ traditional worlds and memories.

At least since the dawn of the twentieth century, certain Jewish individuals set precedents for complicating the normalizing efforts of the *Haskalah* by applying painstaking scientific research and unyielding sensitivity to the emotional and bodily truths of queer outliers. For example, the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, a German Jewish physician, pioneered the gay rights movement and fought for positive recognition for queer and trans people. He also wrote on the complexity of queer childhood in his 1907 preface to *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren*

(*Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years*), a trans Jewish memoir by Karl M. Baer—director of Berlin's B'nai B'rith through 1938 and among the first documented individuals to undergo sexual reassignment surgery. Like Sendak, Hirschfeld was gay and stemmed from an Eastern European Jewish family. In his preface to Baer's memoir, Hirschfeld noted that “far-reaching conflicts may occur already in the souls of children. . . . For far too long, adults have underestimated not only the importance of childhood for life, but also of children and their significance as human beings.”³⁵ Sendak grew to share Hirschfeld's investment in the seriousness of childhood feelings and the dignity of queer children. Like his Yiddish literary forebears, the artist would depict burdened, resilient children struggling to survive, as well as infants with strained, adult countenances. He described babies as “enormous kvetches” who were also so “vulnerable, poignant and lovable.”³⁶ His Jewish roots, in other words, deeply informed the alternative depictions of childhood that he would offer the world.

Why Focus on Queerness?

A biographical study of Sendak cannot be separated from the effects of internalized social stigma and cultural homophobia that characterize most of the twentieth century. As Ellen Handler Spitz declares, “When an artist's sexuality, or indeed any other core aspect of his identity, is denied public acceptance and affirmation, that denial cannot but find its way into his work.”³⁷ Critiques of a 2017 book-length study of Sendak, Jonathan Cott's *There's a Mystery There*, foreground a missed opportunity to examine the artist's sexuality in greater depth.³⁸ While a handful of scholars have briefly considered Sendak's experience as a queer artist, there has not been a sustained, extended study until now.³⁹ Sendak was a prolific gay man who spent most of his life in a century that pathologized, criminalized, and neglected LGBTQ people. Beyond the necessity of processing this assertion, a study of Sendak's queerness also contributes to the little-known, actively denied history of queer innovation in the field and canon of classic children's literature. While LGBTQ media have long noted that Sendak and other “gay writers” were at the forefront of children's literature, it is only in the last several years that this subject

has entered mainstream discourse.⁴⁰ In 2011, literary scholar Philip Nel noted that in the field of children's literature a silenced queer history still awaited discovery.⁴¹ Eight years later, *The New York Times* published its surprising "Gay History of America's Classic Children's Books."⁴²

Despite wider cultural discomfort around recognizing queer or gay children, some of the most profound shapers of children's books have been queer, whether discreetly or avowedly so. Ursula Nordstrom, the lesbian editor-in-chief of juvenile books at Harper & Row from 1940 to 1973, discovered Sendak and almost single-handedly championed his career. Margaret Wise Brown (1910–1952), a bisexual woman, helped establish picture books as an art form through such Harper publications as *Goodnight Moon* (1947).⁴³ Brown got her start at the Bank Street School, from which Krauss would also collect children's notecards for *A Hole Is To Dig* (1952), which Sendak illustrated as a young man.⁴⁴ Clement Hurd, the illustrator for *Goodnight Moon*, was also involved in a gay artistic circle in Manhattan whose members photographed and painted male nudes.⁴⁵ Arnold Lobel, creator of the *Frog and Toad* series, first published by Harper & Row from 1970 through 1979, was raised by his German Jewish immigrant grandparents and lived most of his life as a closeted gay man married to a woman before dying of AIDS in 1987. His daughter Adrienne Lobel told a journalist in 2016 that she believed *Frog and Toad* was the beginning of his coming out.⁴⁶ Nordstrom also published other "confirmed bachelors" such as Edward Gorey, a friend of Sendak's who dressed flamboyantly in furs and drew gothic, subversive illustrations of domestic scenes.⁴⁷ And then, of course, there was Sendak himself, who became Nordstrom's most renowned prodigy at Harper.

What creator of children's books has been more iconic as a queer curmudgeon and social recluse than Mr. Sendak? "I think the whole world stinks," he barked in one of his final interviews. "[T]he lack of culture depresses me. . . . I don't want to be part of anything."⁴⁸ The artist was, throughout his life, an antimodernist who hated school, condemned capitalist greed, and privileged the bravery of engaging one's spontaneous eruptions of emotion. "Queer" in many respects, Sendak came of age as a Romantic nonconformist in an age of mechanical reason and restraint. A physically frail man attracted to other men but

critical of hegemonic American masculinity, he also described himself as queerly haunted by family memories. He used pregnancy and birthing metaphors to describe his own processes of artistic inspiration and production and, in his later years, depicted himself as a female baby in works such as *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* and *Outside Over There*.⁴⁹ Recalling his childhood, he would admit, “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.”⁵⁰ Things were not much better within his family, in this regard. He claimed, “I had to hide every feeling I had from my parents, and every normal feeling was condemned by *me* as abnormal and inappropriate. . . . [Y]ou’re riddled with lies and questions that never got answered about yourself—your body, your mind, your penis, whatever.”⁵¹

Regardless of the extent to which Sendak was aware of being gay as a child, he was aware of being socially queer—a sickly boy whom others called “sissy” and a dramatic storyteller who struggled to make friends and spent much of his time with his family indoors. He was, in his own words, “a terrified child, growing into a withdrawn, stammering boy who became an isolated, untrusting young man.”⁵² Coming of age in the homophobic 1940s and 1950s, Sendak, like most gay men of his generation, learned to be contextually discreet and cultivated an ability to “pass” in order to avoid persecution. Aware of his same-sex attractions by his teenage years, he was exuberantly “out” to his friends and colleagues throughout his adult life, but he would not come out as gay to the mainstream press until 2008 at the ripe age of eighty.⁵³ He felt pressure to participate in the wider society’s desire *not* to see this truth about their favorite children’s book artist. Warding off the potential discomfort of readers who would prefer not to know about Sendak’s sexuality or about the shared life he built with another man, countless articles and books refer to Sendak as a lifelong bachelor and to his male partner as his “friend,” a euphemism Sendak admittedly also used at times, protecting his career.⁵⁴

The artistic form of the picture book enabled Sendak to powerfully articulate his liminal subjectivity. Children’s literature, like comic books and other “low art” forms, offered a way to hide “in plain sight,”

a place from which to be loud and passionate and emotionally honest, even when the adult public deemed the contents of one's imagination "queer" or excessive. In a later interview, he reflected on why he worked in the picture-book form. He concluded that he "picked a modest form" that allowed him to "explode emotionally" in the freest way possible: "I didn't have much confidence in myself—never—and so I hid inside . . . this modest form called the children's book and expressed myself *entirely*. . . . I'm like a guerrilla warfarer in my best books" (Sendak's emphasis).⁵⁵ Children's literature, as a realm of historically minimal interest to political watchdogs, has long operated as a sort of hidden, alternative universe, perceived as safer for queer or dissident expression, somewhat beyond the radar of broader societal concerns.⁵⁶ Mikhail Krutikov, for example, describes how in the context of the Soviet regime controversial writers such as Kornei Chukovskii found children's literature an oasis that offered more creative freedom within Soviet cultural politics.⁵⁷ Left-wing Yiddish organizations sometimes turned to children as a means to link generations and transmit messages below the radar of political censorship.⁵⁸ For example, Daniela Mantovan argues that writers like Der Nister "smuggled" disguised protests of the Soviet regime and political barbarism into their symbolist children's stories in the 1930s.⁵⁹ Genady Estraiikh understands children's literature to have benefited from its marginalized position, becoming the most vigorous and international branch of Yiddish cultural production in the interwar years, which saw both the wider political denigration of Yiddish culture and the "golden age" of Yiddish children's literature.⁶⁰ Thus, in some cases, the lack of respect or attention paid to children's literature has allowed the field to subvert restrictive political movements from a place of limited visibility. Perhaps precisely for the reason that children's literature was not seriously considered by social authorities in the interwar and immediate postwar decades, it became an outlet and refuge for political outcasts and dissenters. In the 1930s, for example, writers in Nazi Germany such as Rudolf Wilhelm Friedrich Ditzen, who used the pseudonym "Hans Fallada," and Erich Kästner, who disagreed with Hitler's politics, turned to the genres of "light literature" (*unterhaltungsliteratur*) and children's books in order to express frustrations and alternative dreams. These

less-studied genres could serve as an outlet for a creative phenomenon described as “inner emigration,” a tactic of psychological survival by detaching oneself from the sociopolitical context of the dominant rhetoric, disassociating from one’s surroundings.⁶¹ Sendak practiced his own form of inner emigration by cultivating a hermetic, queer world beyond the masculinized surveillance of the public sphere.

Children’s publishing, as a field, was “queer” in the midcentury public’s imagination, which perceived it as a feminine, marginal realm of peculiarities not worthy of serious attention. As Sendak recalled, children’s books were the bottom of the cultural totem pole in the 1940s and 1950s.⁶² Despite appreciating the liberties of the field’s liminality, the artist would also resent the diminutive and disrespectful attitudes expressed toward children’s publishing. He once exclaimed, “What is a children’s-book artist? A moron! Some ugly fat pipsqueak of a person who can’t be bothered to grow up. That’s the way we’re treated in the adult world of publishing.”⁶³ Even when he won the Caldecott award for *Where the Wild Things Are*, his father, Philip, joked, “Well, now, maybe they’ll give you a grown-up book to do.” Sendak was, consequentially, a warrior for the cause of dignifying children’s literature. Critical writings almost always fell short of his expectations. In 1966 he complained to the Library Services Coordinator of Highline Public Schools in Seattle, for example, about the lack of seriousness surrounding the field of children’s books, which too many critics and editors treated condescendingly and exploited as a money-making enterprise. Sendak yearned to have respect and academic status granted to the field. Critics, he felt, needed to recognize that the best books for children were full of wisdom and created by highly dedicated and talented writers and artists.⁶⁴ He longed to see the end of critics’ sentimental, uninformed approaches.⁶⁵ Considering the inherently queer nature of childhood against the adult public sphere, his drive to dignify children’s literature was, however indirectly, a drive to earn respect in the public sphere for queer perspectives, as naturalized in the universality of childhood queerness vis-à-vis the adult world. Like the field of queer studies, Sendak’s best work explores how subjects occupy alternate realms of affect, embodiment, and social formations, states of “limbo”

beyond hegemonic or coercive structures. The Sendakian child uses fantasy realms as a means to survive a turbulent and unjust society, refusing emotional erasure by the rules of that society.

As Kathryn Bond Stockton has theorized, queer children who grow up in cultures that will not recognize them tend to claim their queerness only through the ghostly retrospect of adulthood—as grownups who may belatedly assert, “I was a queer child.”⁶⁶ Literary and cultural studies scholars have recently employed queer theory to understand childhood itself as a “queer” realm, inherently estranged from adult social norms and perspectives.⁶⁷ Children, as human subjects varyingly excluded from mainstream, public society, fluctuate between embracing the boundless possibilities of play and wanting to “grow up” to gain inclusion within the rules of the wider culture. Thus, even beyond the categories of gender and sexuality, children’s literature has a history of beckoning to “queer” adults whose social identities are forbidden from manifesting in the culture—adults whose endangered emotional worlds propel them toward intimate familiarity with “the void,” so to speak, and toward languages that approximate what it means to exist beyond, between, or prior to the laws of society. Born of tormented beginnings, painful exclusions, and belated self-actualizations, the field of modern children’s literature conveys an urgency and emotional vitality that speaks to the queerness and cherished peculiarity of *all* children vis-à-vis the adult public sphere. The present study contributes to a wider project of uncovering a growing history of queer understandings of childhood in general, and dignified representations of queer childhood specifically.

Why Focus on Feelings?

Sendak knew that for young children the world brims with possibility and anxiety. What obsessed him about his own childhood, he claimed, were “the sounds and feelings and images . . . of particular moments.”⁶⁸ His talent was, as he put it, the ability to remember “the emotional quality of childhood. Not the specific, visual scenes, but the qualities, the feelings.”⁶⁹ As a child who developed in contexts that failed to see him, he had learned to grapple intently in the dark. His talent for grasping onto an interesting or personally meaningful feeling before even

understanding the intellectual or symbolic meanings associated with it may reflect the particular psychology cultivated in states of hermeneutical marginalization, a phrase used by Miranda Fricker to describe the experience of “growing up in a fog,” separated from the processes of meaning-making and removed from the systems necessary for earning political credibility and social status.⁷⁰ Though not talented at stoopball or making friends, as Sendak often recalled, he was well exercised at navigating important sensory data and pieces of information that he did not fully understand, creatively organizing fragments of elusive meaning, and responding with emotion and intuition. He described his artistic quest as an exorcism of certain childhood-based feelings in himself, conducted to help him survive and function in the world.

The artist’s movement between visual styles facilitated his aesthetic handling of elusive sensations and feelings. Playing with time and space through alternating temporal and spatial languages supported his struggle to remain “himself” against the limits of those social identities available to him in his time. Sentimental Victorian crosshatching conveyed the equally melancholic and nostalgic recollections evoked for him in Minarik’s *Little Bear* series; a flatly colored, heavily contoured comic-book style best captured the fantasies of his own interwar childhood in *In the Night Kitchen* (1970) and *Hector Protector* (1965); a playful mixture of vibrant crayon and paint animated the operatic exuberance of *Brundibar* (2003) and *Bumble-Ardy* (2011), setting their horrific backstories in ironic relief; and a masterfully executed German Romanticist watercolor style for *Outside Over There* and *Dear Mili* (1988) articulated the transcendental feeling of examining his own life within the vastness of literature and history.⁷¹ By repeatedly shifting styles, Sendak also spoke to the timeless quality of early childhood, a life stage rooted in emotion and physiology, and preceding one’s initiation into collective schedules and systems. He sublimated his socially marginalized childhood feelings of emotional “excess,” personal confusion and terror, irreverent *Yiddishkeit*, and queer shame by channeling them into his art. Alongside Sendak’s poetic depiction and exorcism of his stifled feelings, his partner of half a century, the psychiatrist and art critic Eugene Glynn (1926–2007), published writing on the psychology

of artists, their ability to evacuate the mature ego for the child's fluid and meaningfully fraught ways of thinking and feeling.⁷² Spending the greater portion of their lives in an era that painted LGBTQ people as pathological and criminal, Sendak and Glynn studied and conveyed the undeniable humanity of misunderstood and neglected people's minds and hearts—an investment that surely colored their relationship. As Jonathan Weinberg notes, “Gene never wrote directly about Maurice’s art, but, in a sense, he was always writing about it as he tried to come to terms with the origins of the creative act.”⁷³ The present study thus considers insights from Glynn’s writing in dialogue with the artist’s feelings, as Sendak articulated them.

Picture books, as tools of emotional education and objects of sublimation, present an ideal context in which to examine questions raised by the “emotional” or “affective turn” in history.⁷⁴ Midcentury picture books, for example, reflect a coterminous popularization of psychoanalysis in everyday life. Sendak recalled, “[M]ost of us were baptized into adulthood and psychoanalysis and everywhere was an exciting and revived interest in children—their language—the state of their minds and hearts.”⁷⁵ The artist made direct use of psychoanalytic concepts in his work, balancing drives of id and superego and working through the inflated, fragile narcissism that characterizes early childhood. Especially by the early 1960s, the Sendak child battled dangers of entrapment, suppression, boredom, and insignificance, and sang songs of wild triumph, of sensual awakenings and powers tasted for the first time. The artist invited both controversy and admiration for his radical departure from a Victorian-influenced, American children’s book tradition of depicting Anglo-Saxon children in a rose-colored world of adult norms. His ethnic-looking children were among the first in children’s literature to exhibit rage and emotional excess, as well as to demand love.⁷⁶ Ursula Nordstrom called Sendak’s *Wild Things* “the first picture book to recognize the fact that children have *powerful* emotions, anger and love and hate and only after all that passion, the wanting to be ‘where someone loved him best of all.’”⁷⁷

Theorists such as Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Ann Cvetkovitch have drawn attention to ways in which feelings have an impact on and reflect broader societal forces and expectations, such as governmental

power, historical trauma, tensions between public and familial memory, rhythms and rules of the domestic sphere, various forms of intimacy, and the sociopolitical dimensions of everyday life.⁷⁸ Sendak's obsession with the feelings of his own frustrated childhood and transcendent fantasies fueled his work. His emotional creations reveal and push against positions infused by intergenerational struggles, cultural intersections, and recent historical ruptures.⁷⁹ His tendency to choose *child* protagonists draws attention to the universality of social dangers—we all begin “at risk,” as children. His tendency to depict *awkward*, *queer*, and *ethnically marginal* children signals the humanity of social outsiders—even the most neglected or “othered” among us deserve love and safety and may become heroic archetypes in demanding those basic needs.

One of the artist's primary cultural contributions has been a subversive valuation of expressive fantasy, despite what William Reddy has termed the dominant “emotional regimes,” the constellation of normalized emotions, as well as their inculcation and coercion through official rituals and practices—“emotives”—that underpin most political structures.⁸⁰ In the American context, as John Cech evaluates it, such regimes traditionally privilege “masculine logos, the law-giving, reality-accepting, reason-seeking aspects” against “creative, feminine, feeling aspects of the psyche.”⁸¹ Perry Nodelman wrote that fantasy is even perceived as “an un-American activity, an indulgence in impractical foolishness that interferes with the serious business of getting ahead by means of hard work and discipline.”⁸² In the first few decades of the twentieth century, these emotional regimes reared their heads in the so-called “fairy-tale wars.” This episode comprised disagreements between traditionalist librarians like Anne Carroll Moore who valued fantasy and those championed by Lucy Sprague Mitchell of New York's Bank Street School who saw fairy tales as harmful to children's development.⁸³ By the time Sendak began his career, popular “child experts” such as pediatrician Dr. Spock had warned the midcentury American mother not to “overfill” her child “with stories,” lest they both “live for hours in fairyland.”⁸⁴ While the neo-Freudian value of releasing and mastering difficult feelings did help to defend the place of fantasy in children's lives, the modern American context remained skeptical of the

European Romantic, which it deemed “hysterical” or beyond “reason.” As late as the 1990s, impassioned and aggressive opponents of fantasy pressured teachers, librarians, editors, and media to extract from library shelves and curricula any work that promoted imagination or fantasy, including the works of Sendak.⁸⁵ Against such conservative ideas about children’s socialization, Sendak insisted on the necessity of fantasy as a means for surviving impossible social positions and maintaining personal vitality. Against an emotional regime of restrained pragmatism that stifled folk wisdom, passionate expression, and embodied self-discovery, the protagonists of Sendak’s picture books exhibit theatrical bouts of uninhibited feeling through fantasy. In his own life, the artist also continuously harnessed the creative potential of modern childhood, making meaning from the sidelines of mainstream culture and its social norms by excavating transcendental feelings.

Sendak’s greatest books have become modern fairy tales for at least two reasons relating to affect. First, they offer contemporary but timeless examples of projecting and resolving universal psychic challenges within the uncanny realm of the magic tale. These are the central characteristics of the fairy tale in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), an influential treatise by Bruno Bettelheim, the Austrian-born American psychologist who survived Dachau and Buchenwald and became known for his treatment of emotionally disturbed children and his application of the fairy-tale genre to theories of child development.⁸⁶ Kenneth Kidd understands Bettelheim’s study of the fairy tale to reflect affective connections made between at least two different sorts of traumatized but resilient children—those victimized in the Holocaust and those autistic “wolf-children” of Bettelheim’s clinical research. United by the universal trope of the “feral” tale, the figure of the unruly child marks the places where nature and culture intersect or diverge. Sendak’s Max, in his archetypal wolf suit among the Wild Things, most effectively introduces this symbolic child stand-in to the realm of modern children’s literature.⁸⁷ In a Sendak book, as in fairy tales for Bettelheim, those seemingly impossible feelings that tend to surround or obstruct developmental growth, early socialization, and spiritual reckoning take fantastical or extreme forms and invite momentous quests of resolution.

The artist works through a complex inner life through metaphor, hybridity, transformation, and other tools of the fairy-tale form.

Second, Sendak studied master illustrators of centuries past and placed them in direct dialogue with the images and feelings of his own life in the present. His emotional quests skillfully collapse conventional notions of time by interweaving the influences of German Romantic painting, Victorian picture books, black-and-white *shtetl* photographs of his murdered relatives in Poland, Walt Disney's early animation, popular comic-book art, and more. By successfully integrating the visual languages of his own twentieth-century childhood with those of classical art, folklore, and family memory, he accomplished the feat of processing his own life as a fairy tale—a feat that has vicariously entranced and empowered readers and artists of all ages. In other words, Sendak stands out among his contemporaries for having elevated picture books to serious works of art through a blend of personal and art historical excavation—his work plumbs the depths of a contemporary artist's development and situates itself within visual traditions, even as it rebels against restrictive conventions.

Layout

Sendak offers a rich example of self-searching through creative work and interpretation; describing the illustrator's occupation, he once stated, "The fun is in finding out something about yourself as you do it. It's a form of miraculous self-indulgence: in everything you do you are looking for yourself. What better way of spending your life?"⁸⁸ To study an artist's creative vision in dialogue with a search for self within and against wider historical and cultural forces requires a multiplicity of analysis. Inherent to this project is the notion that literature, art, history, and critical theory are interwoven matters—that art and life are strands in a single thread, informing and altering each other in complex, uneven ways. The circumstances of Sendak's life affected his art, and making art repeatedly interacted with his life, as well as with wider social conceptions about childhood, ethnic minorities, and queer people.

Each chapter of this book is thematic with loose chronological parameters, applying historical analyses, critical theory, and original

readings of Sendak's work to illuminate a central and contextualized motif or set of tensions tackled by the artist. In some places I read Sendak's art and writings through the flux and structure of his subjectivity within his particular biographical and sociohistorical contexts. In other sections I analyze his life and surrounding contexts through literary and aesthetic considerations of his creative output. I contextualize the analysis of Sendak's life and work in Jewish American social and cultural history, as well as in changing conceptions of childhood and queerness, and in the critical reception of children's book journals and librarians. I ask how the artist's multiple perspectives as a queer, Holocaust-conscious, American-born son of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants informed his life and work and interacted with the wider culture of his time.

Chapter 1 situates Sendak's artistic vision within intertwined histories of immigrant acculturation and the emergence of modern childhood during his earliest years. Early twentieth-century immigrants' children were in some ways socialized out of their own families of origin in order to join American society. Sendak was born into a zeitgeist of speed and mobility in a culture that celebrated mechanical innovation, the fresh power of youth, capitalist dreams, and superhero fantasies. Mass culture exploded in unprecedented ways alongside the solidification of child psychology, the growth of global antisemitism, and rising anxieties about fascism. As notions of modern childhood evolved in the latter interwar years, children's relationships to the public sphere were increasingly regulated through specific media channels, enforcing a dominant vision of their emotional development. Sensitive to his parents' anxieties as Jews and immigrants but also mesmerized by the wild energy of popular film and comics, Sendak felt his reality misrepresented by conceptions of childhood as a rose-colored time of angelic innocence cultivated in the service of embourgeoisement. Gritty "adult" realities, he felt, were important, pressing parts of a child's life, especially when that child struggled to exist socially and to maintain belonging within a minority group that lacked favor in the adult world—such a child especially needed to understand social obstacles, anticipate dangers, and learn how to survive. His emerging take on early childhood

Brooklyn community looked to the past, mourning murdered families and the destroyed communities of Europe; and his own new beginning as a gay man in Manhattan offered personally liberating, if sometimes dangerous, realms of discreet exploration. I examine how the artist related to his budding sexuality as a gay man in a homophobic context and how aligning with queerness, even if reluctantly at times, preserved his sense of self apart from a mainstream culture that devalued ethnically and sexually atypical people. This personal stance primed him to relate to children's literature as a space of potential freedom and expression that, at midcentury, remained beyond the surveillance of dominant social powers. Sendak's beginnings as an illustrator and picture-book artist reflect an unassimilable subjectivity that separated him from dominant social meanings and encouraged his investment in excavating his early childhood self. With the help of queer and Jewish mentors, including picture-book author Ruth Krauss and a gay Jewish therapist named Bertram Slaff, Sendak's creative vision solidified and began to incorporate queer and ethnically marginal elements, even in a society that had preferred a more "wholesome" child ideal to stand in for the American dream.

Focusing on the social liberation era of the 1960s and 1970s, Chapter 4 connects Sendak's flamboyant and fantasy-oriented use of child's play to the challenges and triumphs of socially excluded and stigmatized outsiders of the late twentieth century. Children, as beings evacuated of all sensuality and deviance by the puritanism of the wider culture, were the natural allies of a stigmatized artist. Sendak participated in a long tradition employed by endangered insider-outsider minorities in hegemonic conformist cultures, including Jews and queer people throughout history, whose difference could be selectively hidden in order "to pass" in the mainstream. This chapter studies Sendak's relationship to costume, to the dramatic arts, and to spaces of social liberation, including *Fire Island*, as well as his use of child's play, theatricality, and "Camp" sensibilities in his personal correspondences and in picture books such as *The Sign on Rosie's Door* (1960) and *Bumble-Ardy* to work through feelings of queer shame and social incoherence. I read his creative process in dialogue with sociological writing on the creativity of stigmatized individuals, queer theories of time and space,

and psychoanalytic writings on the “creative personality” by Sendak’s late therapist and by Glynn. Sendak harnessed a stigmatized subjectivity to create messages that spoke universally to the wider culture, which by the 1960s and 1970s increasingly rejected the homogenous, middle-class ideals of midcentury America.

Chapter 5 focuses on Sendak’s life and work in the years following his move to Ridgefield, Connecticut, in 1972, examining specifically how notions of “inside” and “outside” intensified within his creative vision. As late twentieth-century Jews became, generally speaking, more enfranchised in middle-class America and were increasingly essentialized as complacent beneficiaries of “White privilege,” anxiety about the need to preserve Jewish distinctiveness increased; meanwhile, America institutionalized Holocaust memory and became more comfortable with Old World nostalgia. Mainstream culture by the 1980s also retreated from social liberation movements, empowering intensified homophobia and social conservatism. Considering these contextual shifts, I examine the aging Sendak’s creative handling of boundary violations and “unnatural,” death-infused relations, including his visual mergers of the Holocaust with the AIDS crisis. I ask how the artist reconciled a political calling he felt during that crisis, which took many of his loved ones, with an impulse to turn inward and follow emotional intuition in private.

A Word on Sources

Sendak’s will instructed his Foundation to destroy his personal letters, journals, and diaries immediately upon his death. The present study examines a representative selection of his picture books, as well as those original materials that survive in other archives, including artwork and select notes, book typescripts and dummies, correspondences, speeches, interviews, researcher notes, and other writings.⁸⁹ Among those archives surveyed were the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, the Rosenbach Museum & Library, the New York Public Library, the Elmer L. Andersen Library of Minneapolis, the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, the Smithsonian Libraries and National Portrait Gallery Library, the NYU Fales Library, and the Library of Congress. I also draw from personal conversations and correspondences with Sendak’s past colleague

Christopher Mattaliano; with Jonathan Weinberg, who was a dear family friend of Sendak's and Glynn's and now serves as Curator and Director of Research at the Sendak Foundation; with Eric Pederson, who was Sendak's personal assistant for over seven years through Harper; with Judith Goldman, a writer and curator and distant cousin of Eugene Glynn's, who as editor of *The Print Collector's Newsletter* and *Artnews* commissioned essays and reviews from him; with a niece and a nephew of Glynn's; with Glenn Dickson, who collaborated with Sendak on *Pincus and the Pig* (2004); with Loring Vogel, Amos Vogel's son, whose parents socialized often with Sendak and Glynn during Loring's childhood; with children's literature scholar Philip Nel, who corresponded directly with Sendak; with Deborah Belford de Furia, whose family purchased the Seaview home in which Sendak vacationed on Fire Island; and with Benjamin Ross, a grandson of Philip Sendak's second cousin who recalled family stories and a childhood visit by the artist.