



Sendak's Schoolbook

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Maurice Sendak talks to **Chris Powling** about **I SAW ESAU**.

Maurice Sendak talks to **Chris Powling** about **I SAW ESAU: The Schoolchild's Pocket Book**, which he describes as 'a major movement in my life'

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Maurice Sendak is the first to emphasise how much his new book **I SAW ESAU** is a credit to others - Iona and Peter Opie, for instance, the compilers of these playground rhymes, riddles, tongue-twisters and teasers; or Amelia Edwards, its designer, who produced 'a book that's good enough to eat'; or Sebastian Walker himself, 'a kind of Prospero', who flew to New York with the sole surviving copy of the Opie's original 1947 edition hoping to persuade the world's most celebrated illustrator to take on his first project for more than 20 years involving someone else's text.

Luckily, as a life-long admirer of the Opie's scholarship Maurice Sendak didn't need much persuading. 'It was like a dream come true. What turned the dream into a nightmare was that Sebastian was dying... and everything had to be speeded up. I had to *fly* through this book. I don't normally work quickly but I had to here because I wanted him to see the pictures before he died - to feel justified for all the grand efforts he had made. And he did see them. And I knew he liked them. That was wonderful.'

So are the pictures. Vibrant, idiosyncratic, endlessly inventive they're like a return to a younger, freer Sendak yet with an accumulated richness and skill only years of experience can bring. 'What happened with this book - and it sounds grandiose but it's simply the truth - is that a fierce inspiration took over. My own schooldays, you see, were a complete disaster that probably stemmed originally from a troubled childhood. Separation from parents was a big thing for me - nothing to do with school. But when I got there I found no sympathy at all for the child who was frightened. Here we're talking about the Thirties, a hopelessly uncivilised time in school when no child was differentiated. You were either "smart" or "stupid". Shyness, backwardness, any of those shades and colours of personality were treated simply as *dumb*. In fact I was only being selective about what excited me - I gave no signals, so nobody stopped to talk to me, nobody stopped to find out.'

His difficulties in the role of pupil were compounded with two further handicaps. The first was 'an extremely bookish, vastly intelligent elder brother and elder sister who both created expectations about me that were hopeless, dooming'. The second was that he was *left-handed*. This, in those days, was a punishable offence. 'It confirmed dullness and stupidity, that something was wrong with you. My left hand was strapped to my back... if ever I got my hand out of the strap to use a pencil, say, the teacher would thwack me. A note was sent home to my parents to tell them to hit me if I transgressed - and they did. They were warm, loving parents but they were Europeans who hardly spoke the language, who felt the American school system was the last word in correctness. So they did exactly as the teacher told them to do. Home became a torture, too... which affected my speech-patterns so I became a hopeless stammerer who struggled to write right-handed and had other children laugh at me when I tried to talk.' 50 years later, he's still ambidextrous, still

has difficulty telling his right hand from his left, still stutters occasionally on the telephone.

As a child he was devastated. 'By the time I was in junior high-school, round about 12 years old, I'd developed a whole repertoire of physical ills. I became a projectile thrower-upper - I was dangerous, like a walking Scud missile. If anybody frightened me, or tortured me, or just looked at me in the wrong way, I'd vomit. Very few teachers then had the inspiration or talent or courage to go to a singular child, a helpless child and make a special case.' He recalls just one exception: Grace Warshaw. 'We were reading **Macbeth** and I was having a terrible time till she said, "Instead of reading **Macbeth**, why don't you draw pictures for us - the scene where Banquo's ghost appears... or where Lady Macbeth assaults her husband for his cowardice?" She picked scenes which tantalised me and I did a series of watercolours. She lured and seduced me into the play because in order to do the drawings I had to read the play - just like a good illustrator. I loved it.' Years later, when his old English teacher attended an opera Maurice designed in New York, she told him she still had that complete set of watercolours. Lucky lady.

Grace Warshaw aside, alas, the schooling of Maurice Sendak was only too apt a preparation for a pocket book which Iona Opie describes in her introduction as a child's '*vade-mecum* and armoury'. In Maurice Sendak's pictures, she points out, 'the child always wins' so that the book is 'more than ever a declaration of a child's brave defiance in the face of daunting odds'.

From the start of the project he found that his 'creative juices flowed' whether employing his right hand 'which has all the facility, correct drawing and careful cross-hatching' or his left hand 'which I use for loose watercolouring because it has all the freedom and sparkle'. Certainly critics have been quick to welcome the two-handedness of **I SAW ESAU** as in some sense an artistic summation of his career - a little too quick in his judgement. 'This is an easy thing to say. It has a superficial resemblance to early things I've done but there's no book like this in my repertoire. There's an exhilaration, a freedom that's never happened before and may never happen again.' What is true, he readily agrees, is that the book is a perfect expression of his work *thematically*. '**I SAW ESAU** is a child's defence... children are hopelessly vulnerable. They can't buy books, they can't go uptown, they can't choose their own food. Yes, of course, most of them - God willing, let's imagine, are loved and protected by their parents but lots of them are not. They're thrown out of windows and cooked in microwaves - ghastly things happen to children. This book is like a magic talisman, it's like a little Maoist handbook they can raise up to ward off Dracula.'

Which, then, are his own favourite images from the book? The composite pictures, perhaps, wittily bringing different verses together? 'Well, they certainly force you to think - like a very complicated puzzle. They're fun because I like being an illustrator - I really like it - yet some of these poems by themselves don't need a picture at all... but a composite you can make into a picture.' Characteristically, though, it's movement he finally opts for. "'Rain, rain, go away" frightened me because it's the most common verse of all so how do you do an uncommon picture to it? Well, let the mother who's protecting her baby become the tree in which the baby is secure during the rainstorm and then is carried away... with a little coda to the snow which she can't quite manage. You can pull these images out of yourself. I choreograph in a way - like "Nobody Loves Me" which is one of the most incredibly funny verses. I saw this straightaway as a ballet, a parody of a classical ballet. Everything is seen in terms of music with me. My first wish, if I'd been given the gift, was to be a musician.'

About his own gifts as an illustrator he's disarmingly clear-eyed. Grinning, he points out what he *can't* draw: a car. 'Just look at it. It's a Barney Google car - just a cartoon car. If I set out to draw a real automobile I'm sunk, I'm done for. But it's a funny poem so I can get away with it. I have severe weaknesses in my drawing and I have to be very adroit in disguising them. I have to choose very carefully... so does any illustrator. You can do so much. You have to learn, and be realistic, and get the geography of your talent so that as you get older you can push the borders out as gently as possible without making a fool of yourself. There's always a limitation to what you can do but as soon as you know it - oh my God! - how you can *hone* that limitation! The **ESAU** drawings just poured out of my hands and I knew they were good - I'm not a jerk, I knew how good they were. This book has been a turning point for me. It made me realise a certain kind of book is probably over. Work like **Outside Over There** and **Dear Mili** which were so important to me creatively... well, I think that bit of excavation is done. **I SAW ESAU** says I'm in another part of the garden now - a bit

sunnier, a bit warmer than I've been for a long time. What's come out of **ESAU** is the most incredible blossoming.'

What next, then? Those Mother Goose verses he abandoned nearly 30 years ago? The pictures for Herman Melville's **Pierre** for which he's never felt ready?

After **ESAU** anything seems possible. 'I'm on a roll,' he laughs. 'For more reasons than I'm smart enough to know, this book has been a major movement in my life. I'm in one of my funny trucks and I'm going to keep on going till I roll right off the face of the earth. What more could anyone ask?'

I SAW ESAU: The Schoolchild's Pocket Book, edited by Iona and Peter Opie, illustrated by Maurice Sendak, is published by Walker Books (0 7445 2151 3, £9.99).

Other books mentioned:

Outside Over There, Bodley Head, 0 370 30403 9, £7.99

Dear Mill, Viking, 0 670 80168 2, £10.99; Picture Puffin, 014 050938 0, £5.99 pbk

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