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Maurice Sendak's My Brother's Book

Andrea Casals[1]

Eight months after Maurice Sendak's death, Harper Collins published an elegant edition of Sendak's posthumous book *My Brother's Book*.

Maurice Sendak is best known for *Where the Wild Things Are* (first published in 1963 and taken into the big screen in 2009). As Peter Hunt states, Sendak may be regarded as a precursor of picture books in the US: in his books "[t]he images, the design and the words all reinforce each other" (124). Sendak himself declared in an interview on the Public National Radio that he'd rather think of his work as "picture making" instead of calling himself an illustrator because illustrations on a book simply retell the story, but his stories, he said, continue in the pictures. Sendak is also known for the way in which he explored children's strong emotions, challenging earlier representations of innocent children as well as traditional portrayals of what was supposed to be a standard American child in the mid-1900s, which certainly provoked controversy with regards to the response to his books.

My Brother's Book is as beautiful as any of his previous picture books, and just like in other books, the child is taken into an imaginary world of a dream. The softness of the lines and the watery colors in the pictures contribute to conveying the dreamlike atmosphere and the allegoric tone of the book. It is an interesting coincidence that *My Brother's Book,* Sendak's posthumous book, is an elegy where Maurice seems to finally reunite with his brother who died a few years ahead of him. At some points though, it is not clear who we—the readers--are mourning, it could be Sendak himself. By means of the beautiful surrealist images, as well as the poetic narrative, the reader is invited into the dream that Maurice and his brother Jack dream together.

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The story refers to how on a winter's night—five years ago--two brothers were separated: Jack was catapulted into a continent of ice, where "[h]is poor nose froze" (10), while Guy went round and round until he fell on soft Bohemia, and into a bear's lair, making clear reference to Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. The bear hugs Guy and eats him "bite by bite" (14), after Guy kindly offers his life to him, if the bear will answer a riddle. Next, Guy dives into the bear's maw, and the readers learn by the words and through the pictures that Guy is in paradise. The reader now encounters a poetic image, both visual and written, of a boy who has become one with nature. The scene presented contrasts with the "bleak midwinter's night" (8) referred to in the first line of the story and the "sad riddle" (16) that Guy tells the bear suits him best. When Guy recognizes his brother who is "[d]eep buried in veiled blossoms", he bites his brother's nose "to be sure" (28). Instead of being woken by a kiss, as in romantic fairy tales, Jack comes back to life--or at least into a form of life that Guy can connect to--after he has been bitten by his brother, as if the spirit of life had been blown into him. Yet biting for Guy is not like insufflating life, but rather like touching was for the incredulous Apostle Saint Thomas, "to make sure" this is really happening: "Guy saw Jack's nose and rooted toes / Deep-buried in veiled blossoms / And he bit that nose—to be sure" (28). To this biting, Jack responds with a line taken from Emily Dickinson: "Just lost—when I am saved!", one of Sendak´s favorite poets. As you turn the page you encounter a picture of two boys sound asleep, resting on one and other, under a midnight sun, and the words: "Jack slept safe, / Enfolded in his brother's arms." And Guy adds, ""'you will dream of me'"" (30).

Sendak declared himself an atheist, yet, this book suggests hope for life after death. The paradise Sendak proposes is not an ethereal heaven, but a very physical place, into which Jack has been rooted and bark has grown around him, becoming one with a cherry tree. In this sense, paradise is presented as a reconnection to nature and a place to reunite with beloved ones, but it is also a recognition of our very physical needs, where biting is the sign of our existence. In this story, biting triggers the possibility of renewed community life, like picnicking together under the cherry blossoms. After biting his nose, Guy and Jack recognize each other, embrace and sleep tight, together, because, as Jack replies, they are saved.

Biting and eating to Sendak seems to have been a loving act. According to Australian writer Luke Davies, Sendak--who always answered letters from children--once sent back a card with a picture of a wild thing to a boy who had written to him. The boy's mother later replied to Sendak saying that the boy loved the picture so much that he ate it up. To Sendak, this was one of the highest compliments: the boy loved his drawing, so he ate it up. Just like in *Where the Wild Things Are*, where Max is sent to his room because he threatens his mother "I'll eat you up!", but finds a hot plate of soup when he comes back from the wild to the warmth and safety of his room, in *My Brother's Book*, the circle is closed: the bear eats up Guy, who offers his life to the bear and Jack comes back to buddy life after Guy bites Jack's frozen nose.

Word and image complement each other in this delicate book, and as Sendak says, the story goes on in the pictures. Materiality of our existence yet the subtlety of the human experience are made present both through his poetic words and paintings. And we are never too sure whose dream it is we are witnessing: it is the book of Jack and Guy dreaming together.

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