



MAURICE SENDAK

Sendak's streets

Remembering Maurice Sendak's fiction on homelessness, including "We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy," his picture book inspired by seeing homeless children in Los Angeles. 20 years on, the issues raised in the book persist today.

BY NOELLE SWAN
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Maurice Sendak was being driven through Los Angeles in the early 1990s. It was the kind of journey into darkness found in his children's books, only more real and scarier.

The nation was struggling to emerge from the recession that had followed a worldwide stock market crash in 1987. Big banks reported record profits while major corporations announced massive layoffs.

As Sendak's car pulled up to a stop sign, he looked out the window and noticed a cardboard box on the sidewalk. Soon, he saw wiggling feet sticking out from under the box. Looking closer, he noticed the face of a child.

Arrested by the stark contrast of invisible children living in boxes at the feet of excessive wealth, Sendak suddenly found meaning in the line of a nursery rhyme that he had been grappling with for years. "And the houses are built without walls."

The rest of that verse, coupled with another obscure rhyme from Mother Goose, became the cryptic scaffolding for one of the first picture books addressing child homelessness. Thus was born perhaps his darkest and most strangely hopeful book, "We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy."

Famous for his depiction of a journey through the rage, fear and loneliness of a child's tantrum in "Where the Wild Things Are," Sendak was acutely aware that not all children had such a cozy home in which to tangle with the often overwhelming emotions of childhood.

The dark and surreal plot of the book follows two street-tough kids, Jack and Guy, through a cardboard shantytown filled with children in rags. The pair of ruffians loses a

litter of kittens and a bald "little kid" to giant, sinister rats in a card game. The rats haul the kittens and the little kid off to St. Paul's Bakery and Orphanage.

The moon takes pity and carries Jack and Guy to the fields of rye outside St. Paul's where they find the little boy. Guy stops Jack from hitting the little kid and suggests they feed him instead. The moon transforms into a cat and leads Jack and Guy into St. Paul's to rescue the kittens.

Jack and Guy return to their cardboard village where they vow to raise the little boy, "as other folk do."

The rich two-page illustrations are layered with social commentary. Many of the street children are clad in newspapers, others use them as blankets.

On one page of the book the papers advertise expensive real estate, and on the next, headlines read, "Chaos in Shelters," "Famine in the World," and "Leaner Times, Meaner Times."

"While most of his books weren't overtly political, I think by the time he arrived at 'We Are All in the Dumps' he just let it go and said whatever he wanted to say," says longtime friend John Cech, an English professor at the University of Florida and the director of the Center for the Study of Children's Literature and Culture.

Cech first met Sendak while studying children's literature at the University of Connecticut when Sendak came to speak to one of his masters' classes. The two became friends, keeping in touch over 40 years.

Cech says that Sendak spoke of the period when he wrote "We Are All in the Dumps" as a difficult time. "Friends of his were dying all over the place."

As a gay man active in the homosexual community, Sendak had many friends touched by the AIDS epidemic. One of the newspaper headlines featured in the book reads, "Jim Goes Home," referring to the AIDS-related death of his good friend James Marshall, author of the award-winning

"George and Martha" books.

Some, including Cech, have speculated that the bald little boy in "We Are All in the Dumps" is a child suffering from AIDS-related complications.

While some may be uncomfortable introducing such

themes to young children, Sendak never shirked an opportunity to show the grittier side of life.

"Tell them anything you want, but tell them the truth," Sendak once told an HBO film crew.

As a child, Sendak was confronted with many harsh truths. A gay, Jewish kid growing up in Brooklyn during the Great Depression is bound to hit some bumps in the road.

Cech recalls Sendak telling him of tragic childhood memories that went beyond the typical struggles for pecking order and penny candy.

A young Sendak was playing ball with a friend, when he bounced the ball out of the friend's reach. His friend chased after the

ball and into the street where he was struck by a car and killed.

Many of Sendak's family members were killed in the Holocaust while he was a young child. Tragedy was just as much a facet of life for young Sendak as any adult. Cech says that children see tragedy every day.

"Kids know that their classmates are abused; they see the bruises. They know who is on food stamps. Kids know what happens to other kids. Kids see those things, they endure those things, but they don't talk about them because they are simply a part of life," he said.

Books such as "We Are All in the Dumps" give children the space and permission to talk about such issues.

"We Are All in the Dumps is a call to look around, to care, and to see," says Daryl Mark, coordinator of children's services at the Cambridge Public Library.

Despite the disturbing imagery depicting hunger, poverty, and homelessness throughout the book, Mark sees hope and kindness in the story.

In the end of the tale, Jack and Guy take in the little kid and care for him. The final image of the three children sleeping on the street, the little kid curled up in Jack's arms, is at once heartwarming and heartbreaking.

"To me, what's hopeful is the sense of kindness even though there's not a resolution to the poverty, the hunger, the homelessness or the vulnerability," Mark says.

While "We Are All in the Dumps" is nearly 20 years old, the issues raised in the book persist today.

Perhaps we are all in the dumps with Jack and Guy, after all.

www.street-papers.org / Spare Change News, Boston, Mass.