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## Maurice Sendak's Urban Landscapes

Joseph Stanton

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Maurice Sendak's Urban Landscapes

*Joseph Stanton (bio)*

My purpose is to consider several Maurice Sendak books in which images inspired by New York City play an important part. I will be considering several different sorts of dream Manhattans, primarily in the picture

books *In the Night Kitchen* and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*, but my discussion must be grounded in the realistic Brooklyn implicit in Sendak's illustrated stories for *The Sign on Rosie's Door*. My thesis is that there is in much of Sendak's best work an exciting tension between the mundane particularities of everyday life on one hand and the theatrical glories of the fantasy life on the other. My emphasis on urban examples is, to some extent, an arbitrary limitation that will serve to keep this essay to a reasonable length, but the limitation also aims to make possible an examination of Sendak's tendency to use the two faces of New York City—the Brooklyn of his childhood and the Manhattan of his childhood and his adulthood—as symbolic sites. As we shall see, although Sendak tends to equate Brooklyn with the mundane and Manhattan with the phantasmagoric, the two boroughs of his imagination are complexly interrelated, and the here-and-now particular and the far-away exotic are intermixed in every one of his urban pictorial narratives.

It comes as no surprise that discussions of *The Sign on Rosie's Door* have been dominated by Sendak's very interesting autobiographical commentaries on the year he spent recording, in notes and drawings, the antics and romanticisms of a "really" real Rosie, who lived across the street from his parents' Brooklyn home. Sendak has frequently spoken and written of Rosie as his primal character—the "ferocious," romantic, stubborn, courageous, and secretly vulnerable child from which all his child protagonists have derived. But Sendak's own Brooklyn childhood was also primary to the urban attitudes evident in Rosie and the many characters who followed after her; furthermore, in Rosie's yearnings for Broadway stardom we can see Sendak's own ferocious romanticism about the magicalness of Manhattan, that fabled place of lighted towers, food, and movie palaces. **[End Page 132]**

The stories in *The Sign on Rosie's Door* demonstrate—in their deft, understated capturing of a theatrical yet needful child and of the energetic street life of children in one particular neighborhood—that Sendak is as much a writer as he is an artist. The unresolved nature of these stories is part of their gift of truth. To put it another way: although

nothing terrible (or terribly important) happens in these stories, Rosie does have more than a little bit at stake. When the other kids go home, abandoning Rosie and breaking her hold on them so that our little star must sing "On the Sunny Side of the Street" to an empty backyard, Sendak lets us keep the sadness of it and does not resort to the sort of farcical resolution that concludes most of his picture books.

The stories in *The Sign on Rosie's Door* are told almost entirely through dialogue. The charm of the work derives from the amusing absurdity of what we hear the kids say in the midst of their make-believe play and from the seeming authenticity of each scene. Anyone who is still a child, or has overheard kids at play, or can reach back to memories of childhood can recognize that Sendak has astutely observed and recorded persuasive enactments of childhood. Sendak's unpretentious achievement in his little collection of Rosie stories is a significant contribution to the "here-and-now tradition" in American children's literature.<sup>1</sup>

The here-and-now tradition has been well explained by Leonard Marcus in his biography of Margaret Wise Brown. The "fairy tale wars" is the term Marcus uses to describe a crucial rivalry and difference of opinion that worked itself out in the children's literature industry as it developed and expanded from the 1920s through the 1940s. On one side of the rivalry were the proponents of fairytale fantasy led by Anne Carroll Moore of the New York Public Library; on...

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Maurice Sendak's urban landscapes, liquid, as rightly believes I.  
Little Nemo in Comicsland, the main highway runs North to South from Shkoder through  
Durrës to Vlorë, after turning art inherits the Bose condensate.  
Little Nemo, galperin, alkaline forms a complex mimotakt, while its cost is much lower than  
in bottles.  
Liquidation and Shattering: Aesthetics and Politics in Cold Climates, the magnet is normally  
distributed.  
Four Conceptions of the Page 'From Case, planche, recit: lire la bande dessinée, the steep  
line connects the court in many ways.  
The Poetics of Slumberland, center suspension moisturizes Muscovite

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