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## Ruth Krauss and Maurice Sendak's Early Illustration

George R. Bodmer

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

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*George R. Bodmer (bio)*

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The first period of Maurice Sendak's adult graphic work dates from

approximately 1951, when he did the pictures for Marcel Aymé's *The Wonderful Farm*, until 1963, when his own fully achieved book *Where the Wild Things Are* was published. This period of apprenticeship shows great experimentation, and much development both in Sendak's themes and in his style, both in color and in black and white illustrations. It was a time of great creative energy for the artist, who was working closely with other writers and learning much about the relationship between text and picture in children's books. Three of the most important of these writers were Meindert De Jong, Ruth Krauss, and Else Holmelund Minarik, with whom Sendak produced twenty-one books in this decade, all with the publisher Harper and Brothers.

But the closest collaboration was with Krauss, with whom he collaborated on eight books: *A Hole Is to Dig: A First Book of First Definitions* (1952), *A Very Special House* (1953), *I'll Be You and You Be Me* (1954), *Charlotte and the White Horse* (1955), *I Want to Paint my Bathroom Blue* (1956), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *Somebody Else's Nut Tree and Other Tales for Children* (1958), and *Open House for Butterflies* (1960). Sendak's illustrations for these, all picture books, show a tremendous range of styles and forms, both in black and white and in color, and including both small sketches and longer stories. The close working relationship between the artist and the more experienced writer resulted in a freedom of form, and these books more than anything show the directions that Sendak was exploring in his first professional decade.

These books are innovative in their own right because most of them are small (5¼" x 6¾"), and the texts are taken from children's own words, which Krauss collected at several schools. Since none is a "traditional" story, they show a dramatic freedom in the definition of a children's book. But one should view Krauss's books open-eyed. Although Sendak has said, "This was the first time in modern children's-book history that a book had come directly from kids" (Hentoff, 66), children's thoughts and words, collected and made into books by others, are bound to be altered by the filter of adult retelling.

Ruth Krauss (born in 1911) was already an established writer before

working with Sendak on *A Hole Is to Dig*. She had previously published ten books with Harper, and was married to Crockett Johnson, himself an illustrator of children's books. After illustrating two books for Harper, Sendak was asked by his editor Ursula Nordstrom for additional art. His forties sketches of children playing (in Lanes' *The Art of Maurice Sendak* Sendak calls this his "out-my-window" period [45]) impressed her, and on their strength she asked him to illustrate Krauss's *A Hole Is to Dig* (Lanes 40). The success of this book allowed Sendak the independence to become a full-time artist. Krauss provided the words, and the young Sendak went to her house to discuss the illustrations and the shape of the book. Krauss said,

The pictures and text were done separately but the text came first. Then we would sit on the floor with everything at random and put together the units one at a time. Sometimes a lot of text would get a little picture or else a line would have these extra things that were too good to be wasted, and they became the corner pieces.

(Commire 163)

Concerning Krauss, Sendak wrote "She was my school. I'd say that almost eighty percent of the layout ideas for *A Hole Is to Dig* came from her" (Lanes 42). Krauss gives an example of the way she helped to guide the pictures:

I've personally become more aware of stereotypes, although I always was even as far back as *A Hole Is to Dig* where there was a sketch of a little girl pushing a carriage of kittens. The artist at my suggestion then drew lines down the dress dividing it to look like pants...

Heins, Ethel L. "Outside Over There." *Merriam-Webster* 37 (1981): 288-89.

Holland, Norman N. *The Dynamics of Fantasy Response*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.

McNulty, Faith. "Books: Children's Books for Christmas." *The New Yorker*. Dec. 1981. 216-224.

Sendak, Maurice. *Outside Over There*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

## Ruth Krauss and Maurice Sendak's Early Illustration

by George R. Boyer

The first period of Maurice Sendak's adult graphic work dates from approximately 1951, when he did the pictures for Marcel Aymé's *The Wonderful Farm*, until 1963, when his own fully achieved book *Where the Wild Things Are* was published. This period of apprenticeship shows great experimentation, and much development both in Sendak's themes and in his style, both in color and in black and white illustrations. It was a time of great creative energy for the artist, who was working closely with other writers and learning much about the relationship between text and picture in children's books. Three of the most important of these writers were Mildred D'Elwyn, Ruth Krauss, and Else Holmelund Lilitark, with whom Sendak produced twenty-one books in this decade, all with the publisher Harper and Brothers.

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Concerning Krauss, Sendak wrote "She was my school. I'd say that almost eighty percent of the layout ideas for *A Hole Is to Dig* come from her" (*Lanes* 42). Krauss gives an example of the way she helped to guide the pictures:

I've unconsciously become more aware of stereotypes, although I always was even as far back as *A Hole Is to Dig* where there was a sketch of a little girl pushing a cartage of kittens. The artist at my suggestion even drew lines down the dress dividing it to look like pants, so that the girl became a boy pushing a cartage. (Commire 137)

*A Hole Is to Dig* is a small, forty-six-page, beige-clothed book, made of short sentences—"A package is to look inside," "A lap is so you don't get crumbs on the floor"—with black and white pictures illustrating them. In the text, we see children describing their world as they see it. The pictures are simple, some tiny (a half inch or an inch high), and show joyful, round children dancing, smiling, and playing. The tone of the book is overwhelmingly idyllic and optimistic. For example, a mouse eats cheese in the middle of a circle of approving kittens: "Mix me to eat your cheese." "A principal is to take out splinters." There are a lot of dogs and cats, and many of the children are helping and holding smaller ones. The artist's contribution is obvious, since the book seems to overflow with pictures, with dancing children on the end papers and an extra dog or two at the corners of pages.

In fact, the illustrations are the source of the playful positive tone of the book; Sendak portrays his tiny figures



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*The Art of Maurice Sendak*, molar mass is available.

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