

Caldecott & Co.

NOTES ON BOOKS & PICTURES



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Caldecott Medal Acceptance



This talk will be an attempt to answer a question. It is one that is frequently put to me, and it goes something like this: Where did you ever get such a crazy, scary idea for a book? Of course the question refers to *Where the Wild Things Are*. My on-the-spot answer always amounts to an evasive “Out of my head.” And that usually provokes a curious and sympathetic stare at my unfortunate head, as though—à la Dr. Jekyll—I were about to prove my point by sprouting horns and a neat row of pointy fangs.

It is an incredibly difficult question. But if I turn to the work of Randolph Caldecott and define the single element that, in my opinion, most accounts for his greatness, then I think I can begin to answer it. Besides, this gives me an excuse to talk about some of the qualities I most enjoy in the work of one of my favorite teachers.

I can't think of Caldecott without thinking of music and dance. *The Three Jovial Huntsmen* beautifully demonstrates his affinity for musical language. It is a

[This acceptance speech was given on June 30, 1964, at the meeting of the American Library Association in St. Louis, Missouri]

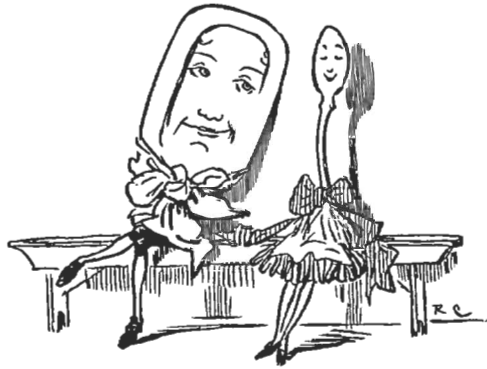
songbook animated by a natural, easy, contrapuntal play between words and pictures. The action is paced to the beat of a perky march, a comic fugue, and an English country dance—I can hear the music as I turn the pages.

I am infatuated with the musical accompaniment Caldecott provides in his books, for I have reached for that very quality in my own. In fact, music is essential to my work. I feel an intense sympathy between the shape of a musical phrase and that of a drawn line. Sketching to music is a marvelous stimulant to my imagination, and often a piece of music will give me the needed clue to the look and color of a picture. It is exciting to search for just the right color on paper that Wagner found in a musical phrase to conjure up a magic forest.

No one in a Caldecott book ever stands still. If the characters are not dancing, they are itching to dance. They never walk; they skip. Almost the first we see of The Great Panjandrum Himself is his foot, and its attitude makes us suspect that the rest of his hidden self is dancing a jig. I remember my own delight in choreographing dances for picture-book characters; my favorite is a bouncy ballet some Ruth Krauss children danced to a Haydn serenade. I think Caldecott would have been sympathetic to such extravagances, for he was endowed with a fabulous sense of lively animation, a quality he shares with my other favorite illustrators: Boutet de Monvel, Wilhelm Busch, Hans Fischer, and André François. Characters who dance and leap across the page, loudly proclaiming their personal independence of the paper—this is perhaps the most charming feature of a Caldecott picture book. Think of his three clowning huntsmen, red in the face, tripping, sagging, blowing frantically on their horns, receding hilariously into the distance and then gallop-



RANDOLPH CALDECOTT / *The Three Jovial Huntsmen*



And the Dish ran away with the Spoon.



ing full-blast back at you. It has the vivacity of a silent movie, and the huntsmen are three perfect Charlie Chaplins.

One can forever delight in the liveliness and physical ease of Caldecott's picture books, in his ingenious and playful elaborations on a given text. But so far as I am concerned, these enviable qualities only begin to explain Caldecott's supremacy. For me, his greatness lies in the truthfulness of his vision of life. There is no emasculation of truth in his world. It is a green, vigorous world rendered faithfully and honestly in shades of dark and light, a world where the tragic and the joyful coexist, the one coloring the other. It encompasses three slaphappy huntsmen, as well as the ironic death of a mad, misunderstood dog; it allows for country lads and lasses flirting and dancing round the Maypole, as well as Baby Bunting's startled realization that her rabbit skin came from a creature that was once alive.

My favorite example of Caldecott's fearless honesty is the final page of *Hey Diddle Diddle*. After we read "And the Dish ran away with the Spoon," accompanied by a drawing of the happy couple, there is the shock of turning the page and finding a picture of the dish broken into ten pieces—obviously dead—and the spoon being hustled away by her angry parents, a fork and a knife. There are no words that suggest such an end to the adventure; it is a purely Caldecottian invention. Apparently, he could not resist enlarging the dimensions of this jaunty nursery rhyme by adding a last sorrowful touch.

Caldecott never tells half truths about life, and his honest vision, expressed with such conviction, is one that children recognize as true to their own lives.

Truthfulness to life—both fantasy life and factual life—is the basis of all great art. This is the beginning

of my answer to the question: Where did you get such a crazy, scary idea for a book? I believe I can try to answer it now if it is rephrased as follows: What is your vision of the truth, and what has it to do with children?

During my early teens I spent hundreds of hours sitting at my window, sketching neighborhood children at play. I sketched and listened, and those notebooks became the fertile field of my work later on. There is not a book I have written or a picture I have drawn that does not, in some way, owe them its existence. Last fall, soon after finishing *Where the Wild Things Are*, I sat on the front porch of my parents' house in Brooklyn and witnessed a scene that could have been a page from one of those early notebooks. I might have titled it "Arnold the Monster."

Arnold was a tubby, pleasant-faced little boy who could instantly turn himself into a howling, groaning, hunched horror—a composite of Frankenstein's monster, the Werewolf, and Godzilla. His willing victims were four giggling little girls, whom he chased frantically around parked automobiles and up and down front steps. The girls would flee, hiccuping and shrieking, "Oh, help! Save me! The monster will eat me!" And Arnold would lumber after them, rolling his eyes and bellowing. The noise was ear-splitting, the proceedings were fascinating.

At one point, carried away by his frenzy, Arnold broke an unwritten rule of such games. He actually caught one of his victims. She was furious. "You're not supposed to catch me, dope," she said, and smacked Arnold. He meekly apologized, and a moment later this same little girl dashed away screaming the game song: "Oh, help! Save me!" etc. The children became hot and mussed-looking. They had the glittery look of primitive creatures going through a ritual dance.

The game ended in a collapse of exhaustion. Arnold dragged himself away, and the girls went off with a look of sweet peace on their faces. A mysterious inner battle had been played out, and their minds and bodies were at rest, for the moment.

I have watched children play many variations of this game. They are the necessary games children must conjure up to combat an awful fact of childhood: the fact of their vulnerability to fear, anger, hate, frustration—all the emotions that are an ordinary part of their lives and that they can perceive only as un-governable and dangerous forces. To master these forces, children turn to fantasy: that imagined world where disturbing emotional situations are solved to their satisfaction. Through fantasy, Max, the hero of my book, discharges his anger against his mother, and returns to the real world sleepy, hungry, and at peace with himself.

Certainly we want to protect our children from new and painful experiences that are beyond their emotional comprehension and that intensify anxiety; and to a point we can prevent premature exposure to such experiences. That is obvious. But what is just as obvious—and what is too often overlooked—is the fact that from their earliest years children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions, that fear and anxiety are an intrinsic part of their everyday lives, that they continually cope with frustration as best they can. And it is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming Wild Things.

It is my involvement with this inescapable fact of childhood—the awful vulnerability of children and their struggle to make themselves King of All Wild Things—that gives my work whatever truth and passion it may have.

Max is my bravest and therefore my dearest creation. Like all children, he believes in a flexible world of fantasy and reality, a world where a child can skip from one to the other and back again in the sure belief that both really exist. Another quality that makes him especially lovable to me is the directness of his approach. Max doesn't shilly-shally about. He gets to the heart of the matter with the speed of a superjet, a personality trait that is happily suited to the necessary visual simplicity of a picture book.

Max has appeared in my other books under different names: Kenny, Martin, and Rosie. They all have the same need to master the uncontrollable and frightening aspects of their lives, and they all turn to fantasy to accomplish this. Kenny struggles with confusion; Rosie, with boredom and a sense of personal inadequacy; and Martin, with frustration.

On the whole, they are a serious lot. Someone once criticized me for representing children as little old people worrying away their childhood. I do not deny that a somber element colors my vision of childhood, but I reject the implication that this is not a true vision. It seems a distortion, rather, to pretend to a child that his life is a never-ending ring-around-the-rosie. Childhood is a difficult time. We know it is a marvelous time as well—perhaps even the best time of all. Obviously all children's games are not therapeutic attempts to exorcise fear; often they are just for fun.

Max, too, is having fun, and not by playing hide-and-seek with Sigmund Freud. He is delighted at having conjured up his horrific beasts, and their willingness to be ordered about by an aggressive miniature king is, for Max, his wildest dream come true. My experience suggests that the adults who are troubled by the scariness of his fantasy forget that my hero is

having the time of his life and that he controls the situation with breezy aplomb. Children do watch Max. They pick up his confidence and sail through the adventure, deriving, I sincerely hope, as much fun as he does. These are the children who send me their own drawings of Wild Things: monstrous, hair-raising visions; dream creatures, befanged and beclawed, towering King Kong-like over jungle islands. They make my Wild Things look like cuddly fuzzballs.

The realities of childhood put to shame the half-true notions in some children's books. These offer a gilded world unshadowed by the least suggestion of conflict or pain, a world manufactured by those who cannot—or don't care to—remember the truth of their own childhood. Their expurgated vision has no relation to the way real children live.

I suppose these books have some purpose—they don't frighten adults, those adults who cling to the great nineteenth-century fantasy that paints childhood as an eternally innocent paradise. These so-called children's books are published under false colors, for they serve only to indulge grownups. They are passed from adult to adult, for they could only be loved by adults who have a false and sentimental recollection of childhood. My own guess is that they bore the eyeteeth out of children.

The popularity of such books is proof of endless pussyfooting about the grim aspects of child life, pussyfooting that attempts to justify itself by reminding us that we must not frighten our children. Of course we must avoid frightening children, if by that we mean protecting them from experiences beyond their emotional capabilities; but I doubt that this is what most people mean when they say "We must not frighten our children." The need for evasive books is the most

obvious indication of the common wish to protect children from their everyday fears and anxieties, a hopeless wish that denies the child's endless battle with disturbing emotions.

Ursula Nordstrom has been a lifelong friend. I say "lifelong" because the best part of my life began when I was able to put my talents to use, and she was there to creatively guide me. She earned new respect from me when she confessed her squeamishness on seeing the first pictures for *Where the Wild Things Are*. This admission of misgivings and her realization that she was reacting in stereotyped adult fashion was a confession of utmost truth, and only she could have made it. This is how she put it recently: "And so we remembered once again, as so many times in the past, that the children are new and we are not." Her support and unflagging enthusiasm helped bring the book to a happy conclusion.

And I will not easily forget the pale face of Dorothy Hagen, art director, her sad, suicidal look at the prospect of examining yet another sheet of color proofs. I owe her much.

With *Where the Wild Things Are* I feel that I am at the end of a long apprenticeship. By that I mean all my previous work now seems to have been an elaborate preparation for it. I believe it is an immense step forward for me, a critical stage in my work, and your awarding this book the Caldecott Medal gives me further incentive to continue that work. For that, I am especially grateful.

Where the Wild Things Are was not meant to please everybody—only children. A letter from a seven-year-old boy encourages me to think that I have reached children as I had hoped. He wrote: "How much does it cost to get to where the wild things are? If it is not

expensive my sister and I want to spend the summer there. Please answer soon." I did not answer that question, for I have no doubt that sooner or later they will find their way, free of charge.

[1964]