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—al a 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 Little Huntsmen beautifully demonstrates his affinity for musical language. It is a
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 Punjandrum 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 Kraus 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: Beatrix 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-
And the Dish ran away with the Spoon.
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 these 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 glitter 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 rest, for the moment.

I have watched children play many variations of this game. They are the necessary games children must engage in 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 unpreventable 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 this fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming Wild Things.

It is my involvement with this inseparable 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.

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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 ap-
proach. 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 frighten-
ing 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 inade-
quacy; 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 will-
ingness to be ordered about by an aggressive miniature
king is, for Max, his wildest dream come true. My ex-
perience 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 ad-
venture, deriving, I sincerely hope, as much fun as
I do. These are the children who send me their
own drawings of Wild Things: monstrous, hair-raising
visions; dream creatures, beloved and beclawed,
towering King Kong-like over jungle islands. They
make my Wild Things look like easily forgettable
realities. Childhood is so much fun; 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 rela-
tion 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 chil-
dren’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 child-
hood. 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 adult life, pussy-
footing 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 emo-
tional 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 utter 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 unfailing 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