

## cover story

## ‘I’m ready to die. I’ve been ready to die since childhood’

It has been 30 years since Maurice Sendak, the visionary creator of *Where the Wild Things Are*, wrote and illustrated a book. He tells **Tim Teeman** about coming out, growing old and his unruly new porcine hero

**O**n the country road outside his Connecticut home, his cherished German shepherd Herman (named after the novelist Herman Melville) on a lead, Maurice Sendak professes surprise at the number of calls that he has been getting. In his gruff, wry whisper, he says: “They’re amazed: one, I’m living, and two, I’m doing a book.” The children’s author and illustrator, most famously of *Where the Wild Things Are* — which has sold nearly 20 million copies worldwide — is 83 and walks with a stick (“It’s for hitting people”). He looks frail, but the barbs and piercing openness — he will talk about his homosexuality, depression, a desire to commit suicide, even a “ghost” daughter — suggest a working, waspish mind. Sendak has not published a book that he has written and illustrated in 30 years, since *Outside Over There* in 1981. “Isn’t that incredible?” he says. “People think I’m an antiquated sleeping beauty. But I’ve been illustrating other people’s books and designing opera sets, but I haven’t wanted to do a book until now.”

The spell has been broken by *Bumble-Ardy*, the story of a pig whose parents are dead who wants to have a ninth birthday party. As with other Sendak stories, serious themes thrum beneath the whimsical drawings. “I wanted Bumble-Ardy to do whatever he wanted, without blame or shame,” Sendak says. The party scenes are suitably orgiastic. When Bumble-Ardy promises his aunt that “I’ll never be 10”, Sendak tells me: “That’s me. I’d give up life that easily.” On the last page, Bumble-Ardy’s aunt asks: “Do you love me like I love you?” Bumble-Ardy replies: “You bet.” Sendak rolls his eyes. “That’s hardly reassuring. He’s like: ‘Hold your horses lady, I’m not giving myself to anybody.’ That’s me too.”

On the sun-dappled road, Sendak’s mood is far from bucolic. “I think the whole world stinks: everything is decaying, the lack of culture depresses me most. I’m happy that my career is over and I can do



OLD FRIENDS Sendak, with his dog Herman, at home in Connecticut last week

what I like. I don’t want to be part of anything. I like where I live, what I read; I’m still doing my books, people are still purchasing them.” Is he happy? “Who’s happy? What does that mean? Of course I’m not, I’ve nothing to be happy about. I can’t complain about my life, I’m just a little bit nervous about how it’s going to end.” Does he think about dying? “Constantly, constantly. It’s time to go, it’s time to get the f\*\*\* out — it really is — but look how pretty it is here.”

His family and friends have died (only his sister Natalie lived beyond 83). “I’m old enough to die. I despise religion in all forms, so I have no hope of an afterlife. If I saw my mother and father again, I think I’d kill myself.” We both laugh at the idea of killing yourself when you’re dead. “I will be nothing and nowhere, and that will be such a relief. To be something and somewhere is very tiring: the good times are so few.” However, Sendak has found depression “an awful waste of time” and alleviated it by reading, walking and listening to music (Mozart, Haydn and Gluck are favourites).

Sendak’s partner of 50 years, Eugene Glynn, a psychoanalyst, died of “good old cancer” in 2007. “I dream of him constantly. I’m always feeling guilty that I didn’t do enough for him. I had my success, which

mother was depressed and had trouble embracing us literally and figuratively. We were unkind to her as a form of revenge.”

She was a bad cook, Sendak recalls. “At supper she would say ‘The children in Europe are starving’ and we would say, ‘Pack it up, Momma, and send it to them; they’ll eat anything’. She should have hated us. She may have hated us.” His father was a “very handsome man, dashing but weak. I don’t know why he married her. We used to say they’d f\*\*\*ed three times to have us, the first cool September night — we were all born around the same time.” When Jack was dying he said to Maurice: “We were always so bad to Momma.” Sendak told him: “We didn’t know better.”

For Sendak, childhood “was always a suffering time”. Children in the 1930s “always almost died. There was no control of diseases. I got scarlet fever, pneumonia ...” When he was old enough to understand, he was “very much affected” by the kidnapping and death of the aviator Charles Lindbergh’s baby, Charles, in 1932. “We were the same age. His being rich and Gentle and everything a poor Jewish boy could not be, yet still be taken away and found dead, was unnerving. The fear of death has been with me ever since.” His father slept on his sons’ floor, armed with a fly swatter or bat, to ward off potential kidnappers. When he was playing with a neighbour, he threw a ball over the boy’s head, the boy ran into the street to fetch it and was hit by a car and killed. “I didn’t see the body and his mother didn’t blame me, which was such a relief.”

He and Jack collaborated on stories. “We intended our lives to be entwined like those of the Grimm brothers. He was probably gay but he married, and his wife hated me because I was more famous than him.” Did Sendak tell his parents that he was gay? “Never. I lied to them constantly. They couldn’t have dealt with it.” He had his first sexual encounter, aged “19 or 20”, with a man, in FAO Schwarz, the New York toy store where he created window displays, “in a giant doll’s house on the second floor”. He tried relationships with women. “I was engaged, I impregnated her, but she lost the baby. I blame myself. We had a fight. I pushed her after she pushed me and she fell. I assumed it killed the baby.” Ever since he has had a recurring dream of this ghost child, reconfigured as a living teenager: he is on a train pulling into Saint-Lzair station in France. “My eyes are looking for my daughter. I know she is waiting for me. I get off the train. I see her, she is pretty, I don’t talk to her. The dream fizzles out.”

He had “a terrible time” accepting his homosexuality. “I went to a therapist. I wanted him to hammer me straight, but of course that failed.” (The therapist was gay and in the closet.) Was New York an exciting place at that time? “Sure, though gay

**‘People call me, amazed: one, I’m living, and two, I’m doing a book’**

was a distraction and disturbance for him. I’d see people meet him and look away indifferently and I’d hate them. I never betrayed him. I wish I had been more demonstrative, but it’s not a thing I do very well.” He pauses. “Being gay in the old days was hard, being gay later was weird. I very much wished not to be. I came from a regular depressing family. I was brainwashed.”

Growing up poor in Brooklyn, Jack, his older brother, and Natalie “were marvelous”. Indeed, he loved Jack, who passed away seven years ago, “with a passion”. The two boys slept in the same bed growing up: “He used to hold me close; we never did anything, but it was the happiest time I remember.” However, he says, if their Jewish immigrant parents — Philip, a dressmaker, and Sarah — had “had to take the test asking ‘Should you or should you not have children?’ they should have chosen the answer ‘not’ and underlined it twice. They weren’t bad, they were like all parents. My



bars were tiresome... It’s amazing, just dumb luck, that I didn’t die of Aids. Some of my very dearest friends died.”

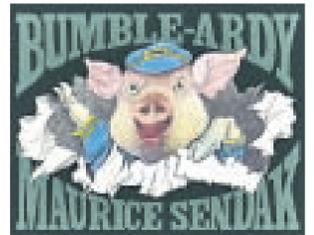
We walk past a house where Sendak tutors summer students. “I don’t know how to tell them the truth, it’s a waste of time. Publishing is vulgar and cheap and they won’t make a living.” Herman suddenly yanks hard on his lead. “If I fall, I will die,” says Sendak, gasping. I hold him by his arm. We walk on. “Depression suffocated my mother and saddened my sister. What made my life bearable was my work being recognised early by marvellous strong people.” He illustrated books in the 1950s and doesn’t think that he could have “sur-

vived” without his “tough but uncondescending” first editor, Ursula Nordstrom.

His parents were a “little disappointed” by Sendak’s career, though when he illustrated Isaac Bashevis Singer’s book *Zlateh the Goat* “it made tears roll down my mother’s cheeks”. He and his publisher “swooned” over the title *Where the Wild Things Are*, “but to our mutual horror we realised that I couldn’t draw horses”. Sendak was told to “think of something else wild” and his “awful” Eastern European relatives proved inspiring. He told Spike Jonze, who adapted the book, first published in 1963, into a film to “do it good and do it deep. I liked its non-bullshit. It

was a failure commercially, which didn’t bother either of us.” Sendak’s next significant book, *In the Night Kitchen*, was published in 1970. He bristles at how his work has been classified: “I don’t see them as children’s books.”

Did he suffer from block or depression in the 30-year absence from writing? “No, I enjoyed the opera design, but just being alive is troublesome. That’s why I’m ready to die. I think a good deal of suicide. I once asked a doctor to give me a pill and he was horrified. I’ve been ready to die since childhood.” During one illness he slept beneath his portrait of his dead grandfather. Sendak’s mother, fearing that death was stalk-



**PIG DEAL** Bumble-Ardy, left and above, is the first book that Sendak has both written and illustrated in 30 years. Below, *In the Night Kitchen* (1970)

ing her son, took the picture down and he later found it ripped into pieces. He had the picture restored. “Will he come for me now finally?” he says. “It would be wonderful if he did.” He looks at Herman. “I’m so frightened he’ll die before me. I would probably kill myself if he did.”

Is he lonely? No, he says, but he longs for somebody to make love to. “My body so much wants that comfort, but as you get older and older you realise that it’s not acceptable. You learn to live with it.” Of the future, he says: “I’ll just keep working till my hand falls loose.” The plan after his death is to keep his house as a site for visitors; his fortune will go to his beloved assistant Lynn Caponera: “She’s a miracle. How would I manage without her?”

At the house Sendak shows me his workroom (and now bedroom as he can’t climb the stairs). There is a drawing desk with coloured pencils, a bed and sofa scattered with customised *Where the Wild Things Are* cushions given to Sendak by Jonze. A picture of Sendak, aged 29, on a New York street has a matinee-idol air. He reveals his next illustrated book, about two devoted brothers, inspired by Jack. It is dreamily, innocently homoerotic. “Do I seem to you to be a very old man?” he asks. No, I say, a wry, contrary one. He looks balefully at my recorder. “You’re not going to put everything in we’ve talked about,” he says, then shrugs: “I don’t know why I care now.” Oddy, I haven’t. It feels right that our day should keep some of its secrets.

**Bumble-Ardy will be published by HarperCollins on Thursday at £12.99. To buy it for £10.39 inc p&pv visit [thetimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thetimes.co.uk/bookshop)**



READY FOR A RUMPUS Above, Max in a detail from *Where the Wild Things Are*. Below, costumed guests arrive at Bumble-Ardy’s party



BOOK NOW  
**LEONARDO  
DA VINCI** PAINTER AT  
THE COURT  
OF MILAN

OPENS 9 NOVEMBER 2011

THE  
NATIONAL  
GALLERY

Call 0844 248 5097  
[www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk)

Sponsored by

CREDIT SUISSE

Media Partner  
THE TIMES

Partner of the National Gallery

Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (The Lady with an Ermine) (detail), about 1488-90. Property of the Czartoryski Foundation in Cracow on Deposit at the National Museum in Cracow © Prince Czartoryski Foundation