

Sendak's *In The Night Kitchen*: Unusual History of Censorship

By Laura Cattrysse

Every child has their favorite fantasy book that mom and dad read every night five times before they can actually fall asleep. Maurice Sendak's book *In The Night Kitchen* is a fantastical story that parents actually enjoy reading because of Sendak's clever rhymes and other-worldly, yet relatable illustrations. The story is about a boy who falls asleep until he hears a noise that jolts him awake. He falls out of bed, out of his pajamas, and in to the Night Kitchen. There he meets three bakers who stir him in to cake batter, thinking he is milk. He tells them that he is not milk, but he can get some milk for their batter! He jumps out of the cake, covered in batter, and in to bread dough which he kneads in to the shape of an airplane. He uses the airplane to get in to the extremely large milk bottle sitting in the Night Kitchen. Once in the bottle, he loses his batter coating, grabs a pitcher of milk for the batter and brings it down to the bakers, where they bake their cake. The story ends, "And that's why, thanks to Mickey we have cake every morning" (Sendak, 40). I will discuss the publication history of *In The Night Kitchen* and why it has been widely banned, and then I will offer a two-part lesson plan informed by the book focused on discussing both graphic novel terminology and censorship.

To begin with, *In The Night Kitchen* was published in 1970 by Harper and Row. It was written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak, who claims in interviews he doesn't write for children, even though all of his works are approachable for young readers. More people are familiar with his book, *Where The Wild Things Are*, which he both wrote and illustrated. *In The Night Kitchen* has won multiple awards, including the 1971 Caldecott Medal,

Outstanding Children's Book of 1970, and Best Book of 1970 ("Maurice Sendak"). According to the ALA, it ranks 25th on the top 100 most challenged books of the 1990s. There have been censorship cases against the book in Illinois, New Jersey, Texas, and Minnesota ("Maurice Sendak"). There are instances where it has even been burned, and it is still banned in numerous libraries ("Case Study"). *In The Night Kitchen* has been so historically controversial, comedian and television personality Stephen Colbert interviewed Sendak, and Colbert produced a copy of *In The Night Kitchen* with numerous circles cut out wherever Mickey's genitals or buttocks were illustrated (Harvey). The banning and censorship of *In The Night Kitchen* ultimately occurred because some adults reading the book believe the nudity of the main character, Mickey, lacks a purpose in the story ("Case Study"). It is not surprising, then, that the main reason the book is challenged is because of Mickey's nudity. Other readers of the story see the milk bottle as "phallic," which offends them because of the author's openly homosexual lifestyle (Velez).

In The Night Kitchen also presents a more unusual form of censorship, more hands-on than state censorship. People take it upon themselves to censor the book to their liking. Sendak's publisher, Ursula Nordstrom, states it aptly, "At first the thought of librarians painting diapers or pants on the naked hero of Sendak's book might seem amusing, merely a harmless eccentricity on the part of a prim few. On reconsideration, however, this behavior should be recognized for what it is: *an act of censorship by mutilation rather than by obvious suppression*," ("Case Study," emphasis added). The questions that are raised because of the vandalizing (private censorship?) of copies of *In The Night Kitchen* - where drawn on or pasted on pants or diapers are added to illustrations of Mickey in the nude - include the overall value and worth of the book as a whole following the mutilation, and

what it takes away from the straightforward, factual approach to physical features Sendak uses in his illustrations.

I designed a two-part lesson plan to accompany *In The Night Kitchen*. The book is recommended for ages five and up, but because the lesson plan I designed focuses on graphic novels and censorship, I envision teaching this to a second grade to a fourth grade level. The lesson begins with the teacher reading the book aloud to the class. After reading them the book (freely showing the illustrations), ask the class if they noticed anything interesting or different about the book than other books. The answer the teacher is looking for is the page layouts look like comic book pages (not Mickey's lack of pajamas). Using one of the paneled double page spreads, discuss basic graphic novel terminology as a class - including panel, gutter, splash page, double-page spread, and bleed frames. Use another double page spread - from a comic book like *Superman* or even the *Sunday Funnies* to really help the students visualize the similar qualities of comics and graphic novels. After the discussion, have the students each create their own four-panel comic strip. Pair them up and have them identify terms on their partner's strip, then ask them to try to combine the strips (or at least collaborate) to make an 8-panel strip. A visual, hands-on activity like this will get the kids interested in the lesson and it will introduce them to graphic novels as a way to begin to approach reading a full novel. Beginning with graphic novel terminology instead of a censorship discussion also takes the focus off of Mickey's nudity, which makes this lesson plan a little more feasible than it would be if it focused on his lack of clothing in parts of the story.

The second part of the lesson plan does focus on censorship, but in a more broad way. The teacher facilitates a class discussion about what the students believe a

"challenged" book is versus a "banned" book. After discussing and seeing what they think, the teacher should supply the definitions. A challenged book is one that is restricted, where a student needs a parent's permission or even their actual parent to check out the book; a banned book is completely banned from existing in the library of that K-12 establishment. Explain that these definitions are examples of state censorship because books are restricted or banned by winning a legal case through the government. This method was used to eliminate *In The Night Kitchen* across the country in numerous states; however, when state censorship did not work, individuals would take it upon themselves to "correct" their copy of Sendak's book. Some individuals (librarians, students, teachers, who knows) drew or painted pants or a diaper on Mickey because his nudity made them feel uncomfortable (Harvey). This type of censorship is important to examine because it is not recorded by the government but it reflects some individuals' feelings about the piece of literature that was censored. Discuss with the class that censorship means changing any aspect of a book or other piece of literature-the government does not have to get involved for an act of censorship to occur. Show the class some of the altered "Mickey" illustrations that have been found in libraries nationwide to visually demonstrate what this alteration looks like. Then, ask the students if they noticed that Mickey was naked in parts of the story before the discussion of his nudity as a class. Ask them to think about how they feel about librarians, teachers, or students altering a book they want to read before they read it. Does that bother them, or is it okay? Ask the students to reflect on their answers to these questions in a one-to-two-paragraph short writing exercise.

To conclude, Maurice Sendak's *In The Night Kitchen* is a wonderful fantasy story that is quite relatable for children who have vivid dreams. Not to mention ,every child can relate

to wanting cake for breakfast! This book has won multiple awards and nominations, but it has been hotly contested since its publication in 1970 because of Mickey's nudity throughout the story. *In The Night Kitchen* is a book worthy of being available or taught in elementary school because of the way the story captivates its young audience. It offers an interesting censorship history because its audience censored the book in some cases, but so did states - outright banning the book's presence in numerous libraries nationwide. The different kinds of censorship this piece of literature has endured so far make it a great way to teach children about censorship and all of the different ways something can be considered "censored." On the other hand, *In The Night Kitchen* is an interestingly illustrated and written book which allows for its interpretation as a graphic novel. Teaching the book as a graphic novel takes away from its controversy and places more focus on the literary merit of the book based on its story, rhymes and illustrations. Children could experience a great fantasy story and learn a great deal from this amazing book...as long as it is available to them in their school's library!

Works Cited

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