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Up Front/Commentary: Realism can be a little much in children's lit

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By Kathy Hedberg of the Tribune |

Maurice Sendak, the renowned children's author who died last week, has been credited with creating stories that became famous because of the realistic way they painted childhood.

Oh great. Realism, again.

"I like interesting people, and kids are really interesting people," Sendak told The Associated Press in 2011. "And if you didn't paint them in little blue, pink and yellow, it's even more interesting."

I'm a parent who read "Where the Wild Things Are" to my children without having read the critics' reviews first. Afterwards, I spent countless sleepless nights wondering if I'd introduced ideas into my children's lives that would cause them to become sociopathic.

So far there's been no sign of that. Although there were a few years around the time of high school graduation and the first semesters of college when I was convinced my children had gone the way of the wild things and might never return.

When you stop to think about it, children's literature historically has not really depicted life as Disneyesque. I don't know what Sendak was talking about when he said children were painted in "little blue, pink and yellow," but my recollection is that children's stories were often dark purple, blood red and bruised blue.

Let's talk about Peter Rabbit, for instance, where children are taught that if they disobey their mother they are likely to get speared with a pitchfork by the likes of Farmer McGregor. Or Snow White, Hansel and Gretel and Cinderella, whose wicked stepmothers (stepmothers were always wicked in children's fairy tales) hunt them down and try to kill them.

One of the stories that sticks in my mind is about a billy goat who has to cross a bridge under which a psychopathic troll lives. And "Alice in Wonderland?" There's no question we were dealing with heavy drug abuse in that story.

And we wonder why we had trouble sleeping at night when we were children.

I don't know why I believed that children's tales were comforting and reassuring - especially after I was traumatized by them when I was a child. It just didn't occur to me until I started reading those stories to my own children that a lot of literature aimed at the very young deals with a darker side of life that I had hoped I might protect my own children from.

And then Sendak comes along and makes it trendy.

Actually, I thought the Wild Things was truly creative but it didn't even come close to being a favorite book. I'm more of a "Charlotte's Web" fan. And I'm a little more circumspect now as I look for books for my grandchildren.

No point in sugar coating life, since even sugar can lead to diabetes. But fantasy doesn't have to be vulgar, weird or depressing. If I want

to shock my grandchildren with a dose of reality I'll read them to sleep with "True Detective."

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