

THE CHANGING POLITICS OF FANTASY:
FROM MORRIS AND SCHREINER TO THE PRESENT

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In 1987, Maurice Sendak, American author of stories about night terrors and imaginary journeys, produced a brief account of the origins and purposes of his writings. "Where the Wild Things Began," with its title an allusion to his best-known book *Where the Wild Things Are*, locates the germ of the fantastic in the individual psyche. That psyche is affected to some degree by events in the greater world, but shaped far more by early observations of family dynamics and domestic circumstances:

I have been thinking lately about the monsters--or fantasies or whatever--that frightened me as a child, and that probably frightened me into being an artist. I can only come up with a few. My parents, of course. The vacuum cleaner, which still frightens me. My sister. A very few ordinary horrors from movies, books, the radio. The Lindbergh Kidnapping. And, finally, school, for which I had a passionate loathing.

Aside from my parents--those occasional, and certainly unwitting, monsters--the things that frightened me were most unpredictable....

In fairy tale and fantasy we reconstruct and defuse dreadful moments of childhood. (Sendak, 1)

Sendak reiterates a common late-twentieth-century, post-Freudian explanation that situates the source of the fantastic in the unconscious. According to this view, the inventiveness of horror-writing is rooted in early traumas and draws upon the imprinted memories of those anxiety-provoking episodes. Thus, the imagery that the fantastic generates will often be quirky and untranslatable to others' experiences, in keeping with the fact that random and arbitrary stimuli – vacuum cleaners, for instance--have provoked its emergence (although the linkage here of sisters and of domestic appliances also suggests a wider, gender-based hostility toward things associated with the feminine sphere of the home). Just as the origin of fantasy is personal, so is the purpose behind it: to provide catharsis and relief for the individual artist, still burdened with infancy's terrors. And despite Sendak's use