

It's all **GREEK** to me:

Finding the
Humanities
in Children's
Literature

by
Michael Sartisky, Ph.D.

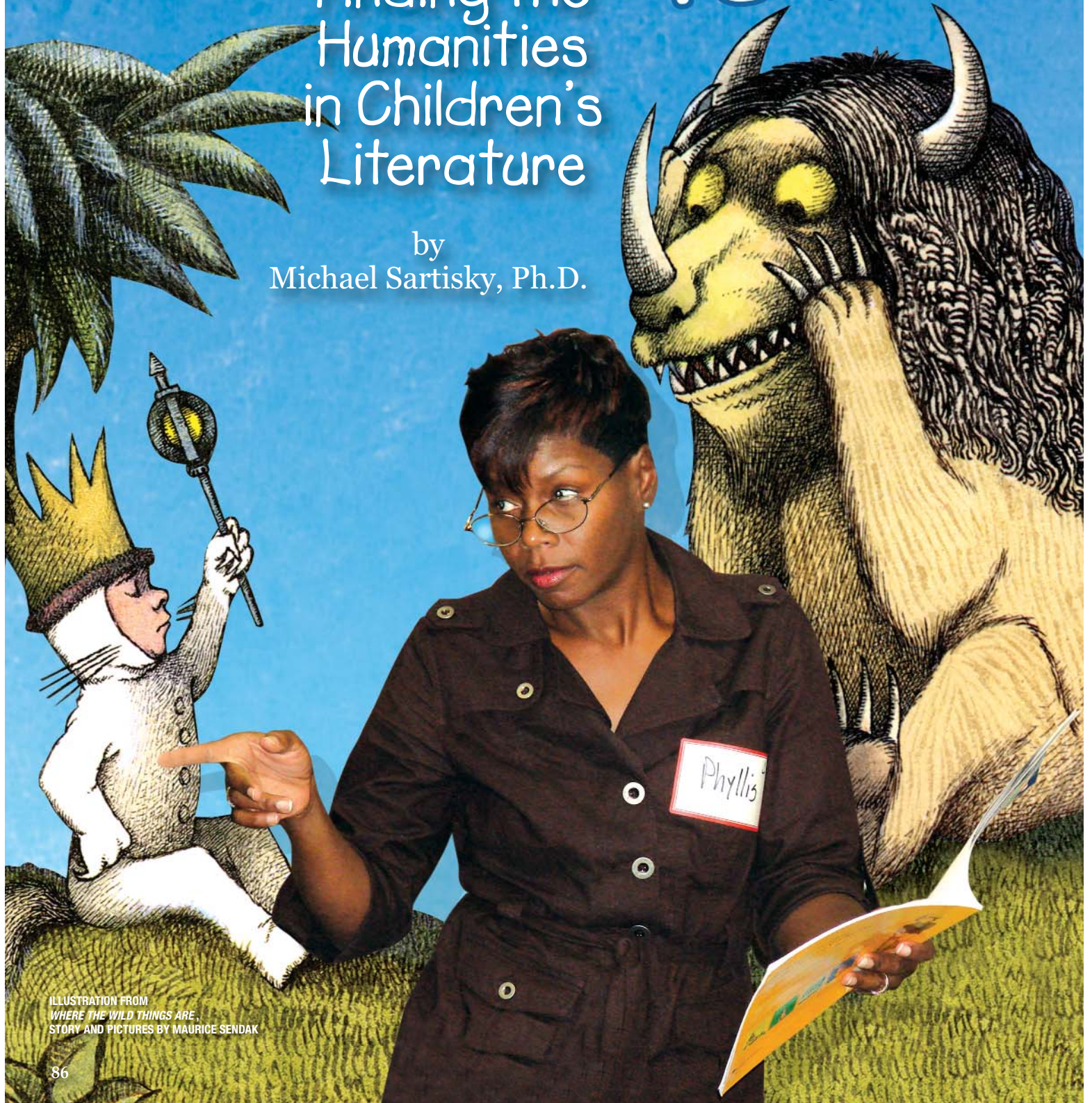


ILLUSTRATION FROM
WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE,
STORY AND PICTURES BY MAURICE SENDAK

To a literate person, the actual life situation of an illiterate parent is almost incomprehensible, however profound our sympathy or sincere our commitment to the idea of a literate citizenry. Those adept at reading and writing — especially if their parents and their parents before them were similarly literate — take reading and writing as much for granted as fish do water, birds do the very air, or the sighted take their vision. We read with and to our children in the company of books secure in the naturalness of the bond we have between us, and comfortable in our ability to encourage and enlighten our children if they falter.

But imagine your quandary and your helplessness were your children studying Russian or Chinese and they came to ask your assistance with their homework. Imagine the opaqueness of the Cyrillic alphabet or the impenetrability of the Chinese ideograms — and your absolute inability to order any of those symbols into coherent words, let alone phrases or sentences which will assist your children's comprehension. Add to that your chagrin if you knew you were *expected* to have this knowledge. Yet this is a fair analogy for the situation confronting thousands upon thousands of our fellow citizens each evening following every school day.

In Louisiana alone, nearly 1.6 million of our citizens — more than one of three — are estimated to be functionally illiterate. And while the child of literate parents almost never becomes illiterate, except in the rare instances of a true learning disability, there is an overwhelming likelihood that the child of illiterate parents will inherit their inability to read or write, almost as if it were a genetic trait or a tragic gypsy's curse.

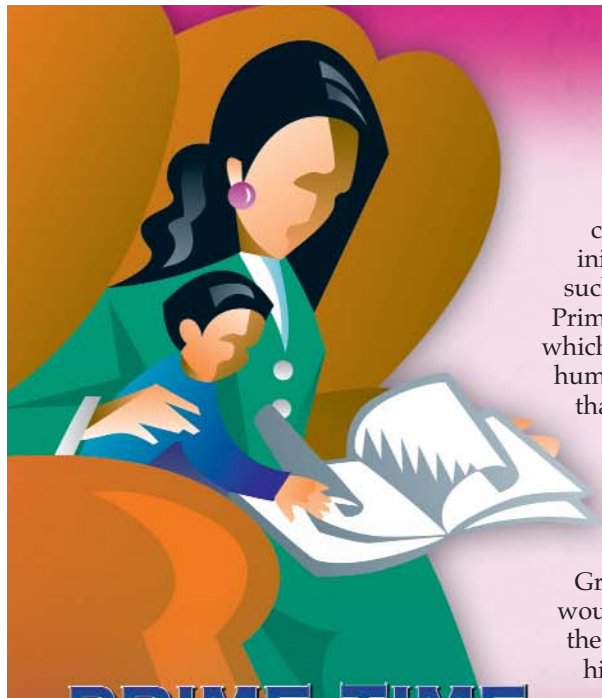


A literacy and a humanities program

Here in Louisiana, we are fortunate in having a family literacy program that considers families — not schools, not government — as the true solution to the problem. Prime Time Family Reading Time, an outreach program of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, focuses on bonding families around the act of reading and discovering the public library as a resource to be enjoyed and thoroughly exploited. The primary target audience is low-income and low-literacy families with at-risk children. Our field experience has shown that parents are willing to do for their children what they had been unwilling to do for themselves. After graduating from the program, most families make the



ILLUSTRATION FROM
WHY MOSQUITOES BUZZ
IN PEOPLE'S EARS
BY VERA AARDEMA,
PICTURES BY LEO AND DIANE DILLON



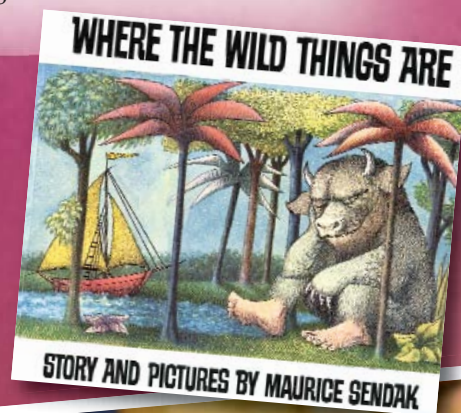
PRIME TIME FAMILY READING TIME

transition from not even owning a library card to borrowing on average a book a week per person. As Bertney Langley, one of our storytellers from Elton put it, "It is remarkable to see parents and children who clearly do not feel comfortable in the library setting initially, come 'out of their shells' enough to join in discussions about such topics as magic, fairness, greed, and death." The reading list for Prime Time is carefully culled from our research into children's literature which is exemplary in literary skill and which addresses important humanities themes and topics. This content is also what makes Prime Time that most rare of creations: both a literacy *and* a humanities program.

Let's talk a bit about these themes that comprise the humanities content of Prime Time because the kinds of themes and issues which we find in the children's literature we have selected are as profound as those in Homer, in Sophocles, in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Melville, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker, or Ernest Gaines. Are we a Greek king sacrificing a daughter to appease the gods so the winds would blow fair for an expedition against Troy? I think not. But consider the boy in *Where the Wild Things Are*, brooding in his room, like Achilles in his tent, then freeing his mind to sail beyond the confines of the mundane into

The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities developed Prime Time Family Reading Time in response to Louisiana's illiteracy crisis and to reach people not served by humanities programs.

Prime Time is a unique intergenerational six- to eight-week literacy program composed of readings, discussions and story-telling. Since 1995, more than 16,000 Louisiana residents have participated in 379 programs in 60 of Louisiana's 64 parishes. Led by a scholar and a storyteller, this family-based literacy program features award-winning children's books that stimulate discussion around themes and problems faced in everyday life.





a world where HE indeed is king: the wildest of the wild, the fiercest of the fierce, the master of his domain. And then he returns, like Odysseus after his wanderings, to his room to find the dinner his mother has left him: and still warm.

Am I making too much of this? I think not. To a boy, imagination is freedom, dreams are freedom, and fantasies are freedom — just as our Prime Time families will find that *reading* is freedom. Is his quest as noble or eternal as Agamemnon or Achilles or Odysseus? I think so, because in our democratic society, we do not necessarily look to kings to model our lives, we see the promise in Everyman and Everywoman. Our literature has evolved as our society has evolved and we see the promise of the oak in every acorn. Like Willie Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, we care about ordinary people, in their dreams, their illusions, even in their failures. We figure ourselves in those characters and are set free from the confinement of our circumstances. Our heroes are boys and girls: Anglo, Latina, African, Native American, Chinese, men and women of all races and nationalities, sometimes even animals.

The truth is Agamemnon wasn't a particular pleasant fellow to begin with; just ask his wife, who exacted her own revenge with a less than loving embrace upon his return. Let's look the family history from her point

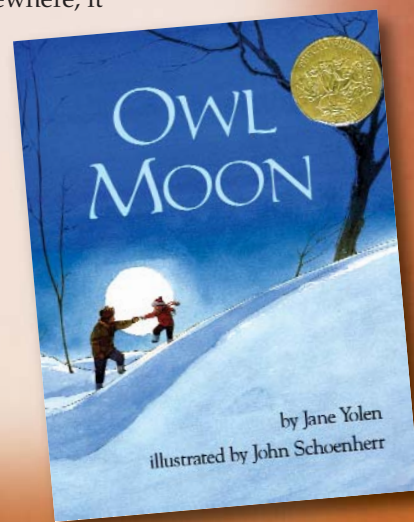
of view: kill your daughter, sally off to war for ten years, engage in a ferocious quarrel with Achilles over sexual rights to girl captive, generally rape, murder, and pillage, and then ... "Honey I'm home!" ... What exactly did he expect? I'd take the warm dinner over her sword any day.

Things which matter in life itself

What our Prime Time selections provide us is an opportunity to discuss the things which matter in life itself: fairness, honor, love, dreams, courage, and community. Is the content lying there on the ground for us to pluck like a spring flower, or an apple from a tree — consider the trouble that simple act can get you into — no, sometimes we have to work at it. I loved it when my colleague Bob Becker in his own essay about Prime Time, "Agamemnon Among the Bunnies," was pondering one of our books, *Ira Sleeps Over*, in preparation for teaching it and said, "if there was significant humanities content lurking in there somewhere, it was ... doing a damn fine job of keeping itself hidden from me."

So that's where we all come in, all of us: the

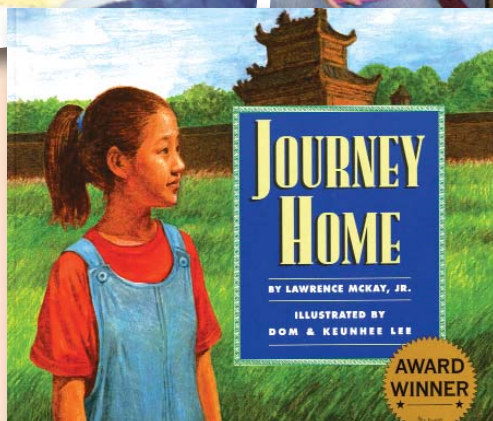
Imagine the opaqueness of the Cyrillic alphabet or the impenetrability of the Chinese ideograms — and your absolute inability to to order any of those symbols into coherent words ...





librarian setting the stage, the community organizer facilitating involving the families, and especially the scholar and the storyteller. But let me emphasize that our objective is to stay centered on the *book* and the ideas contained within. While we want to let the discussion follow the participant's ideas, we defeat ourselves if we lose the connection to what the book actually says and we become like a bunch of guys chewing the rag at the barbershop or gossip in the grocery line. We shouldn't blindly subscribe to what the book says: we should feel free to challenge it, hold its ideas upside down and shake them until they rattle, but we should approach the dialogue in good faith with the author and make sure our families understand that the book is where the ideas are centered and where attention should be rooted.

One thing that is encouraging is that adults, no matter how modest their educational level, are capable of engaging with incredibly complex ideas. I've seen this very thing take place at our Prime Time session at Wilson Elementary,

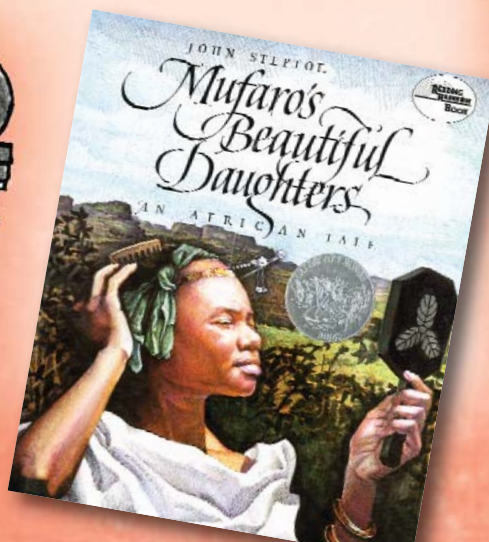


accompanied by Louisiana State Representative Jalila Jefferson-Bullock. When the presenters failed to raise the bar of the discussion sufficiently, focusing on engaging the children in conversation with overly simple questions, one dad chimed right in and reeled off a whole series of the themes he thought he observed in the book in question, in this case *Where the Wild Things*

Are. He put us right back on track at the proper humanities level of discussion.

One could be right and still wrong

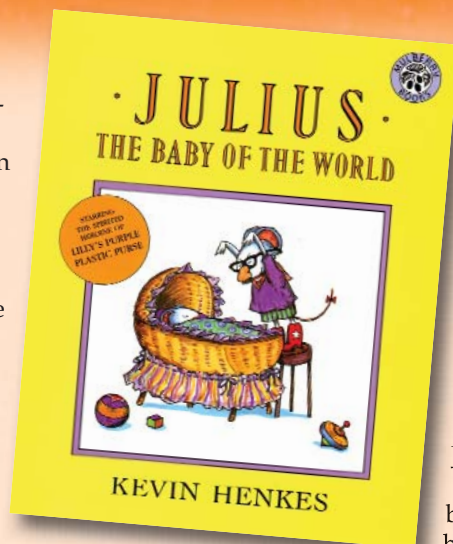
On another occasion, one of our storytellers told a magnificently engaging West-African folktale in which the devil walks through a village in a splendidly crafted suit, one side of which was red and the other black. Two lifelong friends became embroiled in an escalating dispute over the color of the suit, one insisting it was red and the other equally positive it was black. Eventually — as was the devil's plan, their words, disputatious words, dissolved into physical violence and rolling around in the dust to assert the correctness of their position. The moral of the tale was of course, that it is possible to be completely right from one's own perspective. And still be wrong. I'll never forget how one member of the audience blurted out in amazement



that all his life he had never understood that truth — that one could be right and still wrong in a larger context — until that very moment. I remember this so vividly, well ... because it was I.

Here's an example of how we can make sure that our families see what they might otherwise miss. Take Verna Aardema's *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*. An African tale with universal implications and applications, the book is a virtual feast of humanities issues: it is just crammed with issues such as causality, responsibility, and fairness. Who set the action in motion that lead to the death of the owlet and the sun refusing to rise? Was it intentional? Was anyone responsible? How might the events have been handled differently? Why was the mosquito blamed? Does every jungle have a lion to dispense justice? This is one of the truly great children's books.

But here's a humanities question that stays focused on the book: why did the author use animal as characters instead of people? You see, it's so obvious most people won't see it. But as readers, as book people, as scholars, storytellers, and librarians, we know to push such issues



forward for discussion. How it can be easier to address a troubling issue by using symbols or surrogates — in this case animals — instead of real people, so no one feels they are being blamed. Imagine if instead of using animals, the author had used nationalities or ethnic groups, imagine how different the audience response might be, and how much emotionally charged the story would have become had the author foolishly named Croats, Serbs, Tutsis, Hutus, Chinese, Irish, Palestinians, Jews, Christians, or Muslims.

Believe me, the possibilities of humanities-based discussion are endless and these books, these sessions, will prove to be endlessly fascinating and engaging. Why?

Because books matter and the sharing of books is one of the richest and most rewarding experiences we can have, whether with our own children, or with the families who join us to have what we call: A real Prime Time experience. **LCV**

Michael Sartisky, Ph.D., is President and Executive Director of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. This essay has been presented as part of the national training sessions for new Prime Time team members: scholars, storytellers, librarians, and community organizers.

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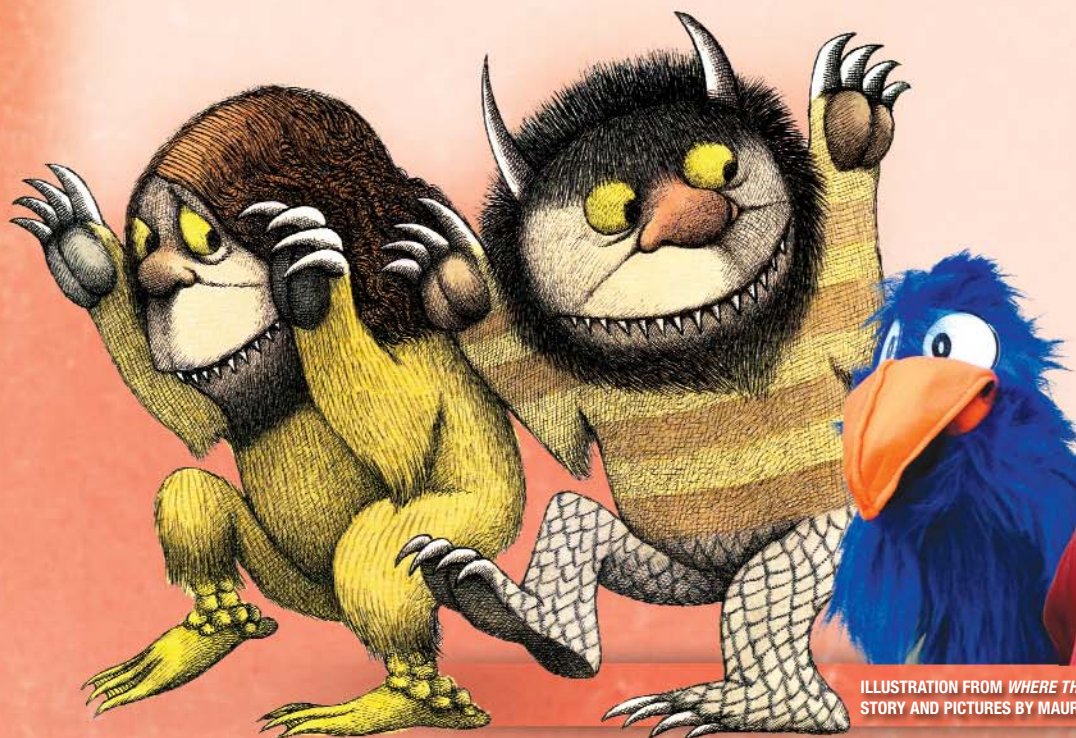


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