

## Reading Picture Books in the Closet

In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, a cadre of gay male author-illustrators—Maurice Sendak, Arnold Lobel, James Marshall, and Edward Gorey—made significant contributions to children’s literature, including advocating for the status of picture books as high art. Despite their fame and reputation, the men were not immune to the reigning homophobia of the period, when queerness was viewed by the dominant culture as aberrant and dangerous, especially to children. Sendak, Lobel, Marshall, and Gorey were socially out of the closet and participated in gay cosmopolitan culture, but in interviews and profiles, in speeches and classroom visits, they were “bachelors” publically silent about their partners and identities. My paper considers how the necessity of the closet affected their literary production, reception, and reputation. Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, I argue that the closet structured not only their public authorial personas but their literary production, which discloses, even declares, the identity they were required to suppress. The closet is therefore a structuring methodology but one that, for the dominant audience, must be invisible or deniable. I read contemporary reviews of these authors to show how the closet distorted mainstream critics’ abilities to analyze and evaluate queer children’s literature, and I connect these misreadings to continued difficulties reckoning with the legacy of this revolutionary quartet.