

Free Minds on the Walls and in the Air: Two Works by Ruth Krauss

In the 1940s and 50s, American children's book author Ruth Krauss made presenting and respecting children's expressions of personhood central to her artistic project and in so doing, created a body of work organized around a simple, powerful tenet: a free mind is a potent force. But how do we know a free mind when we see it? And how do artists represent free minds?

In this presentation, I consider Krauss' poems and picture book narratives as helping readers imagine a type of personal agency that does not depend on social or material hierarchies or matrices, in other words as helping readers see minds which interact with people and objects, but which are not bent to their wills or forms. In this way, I situate Krauss' work as commenting on its technological and historical context— in particular the role of industrialization and global conflict in shaping human minds.

Either within her verbal text or in images, through her collaboration with illustrators like Marc Simont and Maurice Sendak, Krauss offers unaltered or lightly altered expressions of childhood being — children's verbal mannerisms and songs, as well as their drawings— as liberating forces. Describing the structures of technological determinism in children's literature and Krauss' representations of children's voices and drawings, I interpret verbal and visual aspects of two of Krauss' mid-twentieth-century works: *The Big World and the Little House* (1949) illustrated by Marc Simont and *A Very Special House* (1953) illustrated by Maurice Sendak. I conclude with an argument about how these types of words and images influence mid-to-late 20th century children's literature.