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A Final and Lovely Collaboration
by Maria Popova

"Krauss books can be bridges between the poor dull insensitive adult and the fresh, imaginative, brand-new child."

Beloved children's author Ruth Krauss (July 25, 1901–July 10, 1993) penned more than thirty books for little ones over the course of her forty-year career, but remains best-known as half of one of the most celebrated author-illustrator duos of all time, the other half being none other than Maurice Sendak. Their eight-year partnership, masterminded by the great Ursula Nordstrom who also nursed Sendak into genius, produced such soul-stirring, heart-warming delights as the hopelessly wonderful ode to friendship I'll Be You and You Be Me. But Krauss's eighth and final* collaboration with Sendak, Open House for Butterflies (public library), was arguably their loveliest. Originally published in 1960 and thankfully, unlike what happens to a tragic many out-of-print gems, reprinted in 2001, this tiny treasure is a timeless smile-inducer for children and grown-ups alike.

Open House for Butterflies is absolutely wonderful in its entirety, an epitome of the Krauss-Sendak magic that nurtured generations of children to blossom into creative, thoughtful, just-the-right-amount-of-irreverent adults.

But no one captured the spirit of the Krauss kid more wonderfully than Nordstrom herself: In a letter from January 29, 1952, found in the altogether fantastic Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom (public library), Nordstrom writes to her author months before the first Krauss-Sendak book was released:

"Last week-end I saw a television program (yes, I have a tv set and the other children's book editors think I'm horrible to have one but I just toss my lovely head and act defiant) and on it was the most attractive 4 year old boy I've ever seen. very close, manly hair cut, and a darling face with dimples. The repulsive master of ceremonies said to him: "Tell me, Craig, when did you get those dimples?" and the m.c. grinned a baby-talk sort of grin, and the audience of adults giggled lovingly. And the kid looked at him and said: "When I got my face." His tone of voice was reasonable and courteous and trying not to indicate what a silly question that one was. . . . Doesn't look so wonderful written down, but it was wonderful. A Krauss Kid, I thought happily to myself."

In another letter from February of 1954, Nordstrom tells one of Harper & Row's West Coast representatives:

"Krauss books can be bridges between the poor dull insensitive adult and the fresh, imaginative, brand-new child. But of course that only will work if the dull adult isn't too dull to admit he doesn't know the answer to everything. Krauss books will not charm those sinful adults who sift their reactions to children's books through their own messy adult maladjustments. That is a sin and I meet it all the time. But there are some adults who don't sift their reactions to children's books through their own messy adult maladjustments and I guess those are the ones who will love and buy Krauss."