

THE EXTRAVAGANT GAZE: THE ARTISTS' VISION

Stand up and keep your childishness:
Read all the pedants' screeds and strictures;
But don't believe in anything
That can't be told in coloured pictures.
G.K. Chesterton

Early in the 19th century the Romantic poets, including Novalis and Wordsworth, held that the child holds a vision of the world which is no longer available to the adult. The child is *open* to possibilities, to the visionary experience rather than the congealed impact of adulthood and regulated existence. On the other hand, as in the Brothers Grimm, the child also is open to a dark side and to malevolent forces. In the following interviews with artist/writers Maurice Sendak, Chris Van Allsburg, and Gahan Wilson, we find three very different approaches and appeals to what Novalis termed “the extravagant gaze” of childhood. Gentle whimsies, dark visions, and satiric barbs all find their expression on their drawing boards.

GRIM TALES: MAURICE SENDAK

By John C. Tibbetts

Kansas City, 16 October 1988

In 1963 Maurice Sendak (1928-) secured his place in the hearts of young and old with *Where the Wild Things Are*. He was born in Brooklyn of Polish parents. He has also illustrated the tales of the Brothers Grimm and designed sets for operas. His many awards include the Caldecott Prize and the National Medal of Arts. In 2003 he was the first recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial award for Literature.

Our interview transpired in Kansas City, Missouri on October 16, 1988. Mr. Sendak was supervising a production at the Lyric Opera of a one-act opera based on his book, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

THE INTERVIEW

JOHN C. TIBBETTS: You have illustrated the tales of the Brothers Grimm. Do you see them as primarily intended for children readers?

MAURICE SENDAK: No, not at all. Collecting the German *Maerchen* and folk tales was very popular in the early Romantic period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Poets like Novalis, Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano all issued collections of them. The tales gathered together by the Brothers Grimm were not necessarily children's stories. They are *stories*. Period. They are great German folk tales, collected by the Brothers—not to amuse children but to save them for posterity.

JCT: Were they in jeopardy of some sort?

MS: This was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The kind of horrors we're going through now were begun then. And the Brothers were philologists and philosophers and collectors, and what they were afraid of was that these peasant tales were going to get lost in the shuffle. Napoleon was rampaging through German towns. The Brothers wondered, what would be left after the Napoleonic Wars?

JCT: Yet, these tales have been always enjoyed by children.

MS: The Tales did find a readership among children, that's true. Children have naturally good taste! But when these stories came out, the Brothers were appalled at first at the response by children. They had no idea that children were going to like them and read them so much. The question is, why did they like them so much? Because they had been given a lot of homilies and pap to read previous to that; and suddenly, here were marvelous stories that were linguistically available to them and were simply told. And, too, they were about life and death and murderous impulses and sex and passion and all the things children are interested in but hadn't been allowed access to. So of course they fell in love with the tales! It was a form that everybody loved.

JCT: Should we distinguish them from the *Maerchen* tradition?

MS: The *Maerchen* were something else. Goethe and Tieck transformed simple folk tales into what they called "literary fairy tales," a form of high art. E.T.A. Hoffmann simply adapted the form for his own purposes. His "The Sandman," for example, is one of the most horrific stories ever written. And it was only natural that composers at the time, like Robert Schumann, would fasten upon them for their music and songs. Later in the 19th century you still see the fairy and folk tales popping up in writing and song. You go to Gustav Mahler, and you have his *Das Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Youth's Magic Horn") and his *Kindertotenlieder* ("Songs on the Death of Children"). I mean, *Das Knaben Wunderhorn* is a collection of poetry that is exactly the same thing as the Grimm fairy tales. Mahler wrote some of his best music in them. And his taste was impeccable. He got right back to it.

JCT: Writers like G.K. Chesterton defend folk and fairy tales in general as positive allegories for children. There may be a dragon, but there's also a knight to *slay* the dragon. Yet there are those who want to censor and ban them. Even your own *Where the Wild Things Are*—

MS: Look—the Brothers knew that going back to childhood was not some sort of "Peter Pan"-ey kind of thing. That has become our own lopsided view of what childhood is and what adulthood is. The early Romantics were more insightful than that. They saw in these Tales the natural to-and-fro between the business of being a child and being a grownup. There was naivete, yes, but there were also premonitions of terrors, too. There was nothing eccentric or cute about it. It was just a natural state of things. Now, we have corrupted the folk and fairy tales into what are called "children's books." This was not the Brothers' idea at all. They didn't see them as something specifically for children;

they were for *people*. It's hard to put ourselves back into that frame of mind, because we have so corrupted the form into idiocy, which is known as the "kiddie book."

THE MYSTERIES OF CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

by John C. Tibbetts

In Chris Van Allsburg's *The Wreck of the Zephyr* an old sailor offers some remarkable advice to a small boy: Find the "right sails," as he puts it, and you can make a boat fly. When I quote the line back to him, Chris smiles in that slow, deliberate, wry way of his. "Yeah, but the wind's got to be just right, too, and the rigging trimmed a certain way--then, it seems like it ought to happen!"

Van Allsburg (1949-) has found the "right sails" for his millions of readers, young and old, for more than a decade. He has taken us on trips and adventures into the furthest reaches of wonder and the imagination. In *Jumanji* (1981) and *Two Bad Ants* (1988) households are transformed into jungles fraught with adventures and hazards; in *Ben's Dream* (1982) a floating house circles the globe. A fabulous train chugs to the North Pole (*The Polar Express*, 1985) and a flying bed soars into the future (*Just a Dream*, 1990). "Almost everything I write is a trip, a journey of some kind," Chris says. "That's unconscious, although recently I just came to realize it."

Chris is a bearded, soft-spoken man. With his children and wife Lisa he lives in Providence, Rhode Island in a house full of stairways, sun-drenched alcoves, a gabled attic studio, and windows that look out onto trees and sky. The rooms and hallways have a rambling, storybook quality to them and you half expect to see elves peeking out at you from behind a closet door or from around the hallway.

As a sculpture and artist, he has exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art. His books are best sellers. He has won virtually every award in the so-called "children's books" field—two Caldecott Medals (for *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express*), numerous *New York Times* "Best Illustrated Children's Books" citations and many *Boston Globe* "Horn Book" awards. His works are distinguished by a lean, sculptural precision of word and image. They are lit from below, so to speak, with a peculiar "glow." Like the American master, N. C. Wyeth, whom he greatly admires, Van Allsburg has learned the uncanny knack of putting us into each scene, making us believe in the experience and enabling us to feel the textured light. Wyeth's credo applies: "Don't just paint a sleeve—become the arm!"

My two interviews with Chris Van Allsburg have transpired on different occasions. The first was on October 31, 1986 at his home in Providence, Rhode Island at the World Fantasy Convention. I had come to Providence to attend a World Fantasy Convention where Chris was Artist Guest of Honor. Almost on a whim, really, I telephoned him for an interview. He invited me out and we spent a bright October afternoon talking and sipping tea and apple cider. After several subsequent telephone conversations, I caught up with him again in August 2004, on the occasion of the release of Robert Zemeckis' film version of *The Polar Express*.

FIRST INTERVIEW

Note: Chris Van Allsburg tells me that he had no clear career goals throughout his high school years in Grand Rapids, Michigan; that his enrollment in art school at the University of Michigan was "a lark"; and that he preferred sculpture studies to drawing. Yet, there were peculiar qualities of concentration, a kind of fixed gaze he brought to pictures and words that marked him as a special child.

John C. Tibbetts: Let's begin with some of the first books that you discovered.

Van Allsburg: I remember when I checked out my first book from the library. It was a biography of Babe Ruth. I took it home, started reading it, and read it through dinner, dessert, and to bed. I just simply did not know when to stop or why. Having grown up with television, I was accustomed to watching something until it was finished. I assumed that as long as the book was there I should read it to the end. I always assumed that as long as the book was there I should read it to the end! When I was eight years old I fell in love with the exotic colored images of stamps. For three weeks I did virtually nothing but devour those stamps with my eyes. Then, when I caught the flu, in my delirium I imagined I was in one of those stamps, one that pictured the Lewis and Clark expedition. I was there, with them, standing in front of a timber fort with our Indian guides, but we never went anywhere. To this day, I read every word on the cereal box at breakfast. I'm an expert on shredded wheat!

JCT: Let's talk about your first book.

Van Allsburg: Sure. I submitted my first book, *The Garden of Abdul Gesazi*, in 1979 to Houghton-Mifflin publishers in Boston. I was surprised to find it was a success. But after I did it, I went back and started making sculpture again, because it wasn't like I'd made a career decision, or anything like that. I actually expected that I'd end up buying up all the remaindered copies of that first book and have Christmas presents to give to people for the rest of my life! But it didn't turn out that way. Rather, a long association with Houghton-Mifflin was forged and it remains one of the happiest publisher-artist collaborations you can imagine!.

JCT: Indeed. What's the book about?

Van Allsburg: Well, a boy loses his dog in the garden of a magician. You don't know if the magician truly turned the dog into a duck or not—that's the problem, whether the magician was fooling him with sleight-of-hand, the way stage magicians do, or maybe if he is a real wizard in the phenomenal sense.

After that I did *Jumanji*. It's about some kids who are bored one day and they go out and find a board game at the base of a tree in a park across the street from their house. There's a little note attached to the board which says, "Fun for some, but not for all. P.S. Read instructions carefully." It's a jungle adventure game, and as they play it, it transforms their house into a jungle. It rains, there's a monsoon season, and there's a volcano which erupts and lava pours out of the fireplace; and because there's water on the floor from the monsoon season, the house fills with steam and there's a rhinoceros charging. When the game comes to life the kids are actually frightened. They consider simply stopping and waiting for their parents to come home and resolve the dilemma of getting the lion out of the bedroom. But they remember those instructions and they decide they have to complete the game. There's the possibility of lots of terrible things

happening, but they persevere. That is its moral premise—that the kids can solve the problem themselves.

JCT: You love to write about dreams. There are actually *two* of them in *Ben's Dream*.

Van Allsburg: Yes, they intertwine, in a way. It's about a little boy and a little girl who ride home on their bicycles. It's their intention to play baseball, but it begins to rain. They decide to go to their own homes to study for the big test the next day on great landmarks of the world. So Ben begins to read about the landmarks, and the rain falls heavier and heavier, and it's a deluge—heavier than he's ever seen—and he falls asleep to the sound of the rain. When he wakes up, his house is on a tilt and he's floating off to sea because it's rained so hard. He floats past all the great landmarks, the Statue of Liberty, Big Ben, the Sphinx, and they're all almost underwater. While floating past the Sphinx, he's standing on his front porch and he sees a little house in the distance and there's someone inside it. He thinks he recognizes who is there. Anyway, after he's gone all the way around the world, he comes back home (you can tell he's back because he goes around the world counter-clockwise) and the lips of the statue of George Washington on Mount Rushmore says, "Ben, wake up!" He does and he joins the little girl outside and they play baseball, after all. The girl says to him as they pedal away, "I had a crazy dream. I went around the world. You'll never guess who I saw." And he says, "You saw *me*, because I saw you!" So, they had had the same dream!"

JCT: But it's like a riddle without any real answer.

Van Allsburg: If you say so, John! There are *real* riddles in *The Stranger*. The whole book is a riddle. There's a clue on every page about who the stranger is. Everyone knows who the stranger is. The stranger has temporarily forgotten who is because he's had an accident, a blow to the head, and he's lost his memory. So you, the reader, get little clues page by page about who the stranger is.

JCT: Speaking of riddles, maybe my own favorite example of that is *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. I think it belongs on that slim shelf of modern illustrated books that will long endure—on a par with Everett Shinn's illustrated Dickens, William Pene Dubois' *Peter Graves*, a few works by Wyeth, Joseph Clement Coll, Thomas Hart Benton, and perhaps some of the Roald Dahl/Quentin Blake collaborations.

Van Allsburg: Pleasant company, thank you very much.

JCT: When it came out in 1984 I must have stood a long time at the bookstalls, fascinated, both by its enigmatic "Introduction" and the bizarre series of fourteen black-and-white chalk drawings it contained. Your name is on the cover as the "editor," but its claimed in the Introduction that it's true author is one "Harris Burdick." Who's he?

Van Allsburg (after a pause). Oh, he's a mystery man who appeared at a publisher's office thirty years ago with these drawings and a few scraps of text. Burdick

promised he would return with the rest of the text and more drawings to complete the story. But he never did. His disappearance is complete, total.

JCT: I like to think of the book as your own *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a mystery that's forever unsolved. But do *you* think it needs finishing?

Van Allsburg: I have to play it "straight" with *Harris Burdick* because I made a commitment to myself at one point. I can only say that Burdick disappeared thirty years ago. Meanwhile, a few years back I met a man named Peter Wenders, who used to work at a children's book publisher, and he brought up the subject of Burdick's drawings. He pointed out the similarity between some of my drawings and Burdick's work. A close similarity. So he invited me to his house, which wasn't very far away (he was retired by now). There I saw the only surviving Burdick drawings and captions and was amazed by them. It was such a provocative kind of thing that I got hold of my publisher in Boston and with Peter's permission took the drawings and captions to Boston and had them turned into *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. Since it came out in 1984 I've received many letters from teachers and students who match their stories with the illustrations.

JCT: What kinds of images?

Van Allsburg: One image in particular that draws a lot of response is the one called "Mr. Linden's Library." It shows a young girl who has fallen asleep with an open book in front of her. She's lying in the little circle of light from a lamp. Growing out of the gutter of the book you see ivy, little vines trailing out; some of the vines have actually started to grow from between the pages; and a few of the tendrils touch her arm. The caption is, "He had warned her about the book. Now it was too late." So the challenge for the reader is to look at the image and figure out who Mr. Lindon is and what's going to happen to the girl. Sometimes the truth is quite violent, or, I should say, morbid."

JCT: Any news from the missing Mr. Burdick?

Van Allsburg: "At one time I thought perhaps the publication of the book might help unearth some information about Burdick. He might come and claim some royalties. It's hard to believe that he could have led a life so isolated, even thirty years ago, that there wouldn't be people around who knew or remember him or could throw some light on his life. But so far, I haven't heard anything!

JCT: That's all you're going to say about it?

Van Allsburg; I like to withhold information, which is why some of my—I mean Burdick's—drawings are not very specific, or why many of the faces are turned away a little, or figures and objects are partly cropped out of the frame. I also try to keep everything timeless. I don't try to give a specific sense of time or and place and I don't deal with subject matter that has a specific time or place. Although children read my books, I don't consciously write for them. They are not my specific audience. I was one myself, once, and I just write for me. In general, I guess I just like the idea of creating a

book which, if it did not have the copyright on the inside, a person would be hard put to say if this was done in 1930 or 1990.

JCT: I'm looking at another of the Burdick drawings, "Another Place, Another Time."

Van Allsburg: Yes, you see how you can get those ambiguous effects in all kinds of ways. Here, the perspective is provocative. It's got a single-point perspective and these people are on an unusual little rail car. It's a rail car, but it's also a toy. It's got tiny little wheels that fit right over the rails, and it's wind-powered and they're going on a kind of causeway toward a misty bank. You can see what looks like an island beyond the bank. To the extreme right is a castle-like tower, but it's at a great distance. You can't tell exactly what it is. And one of the four characters on the little wind-powered rail car is looking off toward that building. . . . The caption Burdick wrote is, "If there was an answer, he'd find it there." So, whatever the answer is, he knew he was heading in the right direction. You wait for all my books to resolve themselves at the end, but that won't happen because when you read the last sentence, then the book opens up again because you have to think about it in a different way. I like the idea of a book that doesn't end on the last page.

JCT: I suppose we've gone far enough but that it's time to talk about *The Polar Express*. Your greatest success, I suppose. It's everywhere, in Christmas gift editions. . .

Van Allsburg: I didn't intend *The Polar Express* at first as a Christmas story at all. I just had this idea of a train waiting to take a child on a trip. At first, I didn't think of the train as outside his door, the way it happens now, but in a more reasonable place, like in the woods where the boy had never seen tracks before. Then I changed it to right there in the street. The image of that giant behemoth train and the steam all over in thick clouds outside his window was striking to me. I asked myself, where is the boy going? He's going North, I guess. What does he see? Then I realized the North Pole is there. Well, if it's the North Pole, why would he go there? Wow, it's Christmas Eve! I realized. These things just fall into place. I think Santa Claus is the only truly mythic figure in our culture who is believed in by a large percentage of the population (although it's a pity that most of the believers are less than eight years old). The presentation of the Christmas myth to a child by parents, society, and culture, is an incredible gift and experience. Here we are, citizens of the late 20th century, yet we need to believe there's a guy who can fly through the sky, that he can squeeze down a chimney, that he knows if you've been naughty or nice. And that's the way—well, that's the way the Greeks interpreted their own reality, too!

JCT: Is there a particular image of the old gentleman, as interpreted by so many artists, from Nast to Rockwell, that you preferred as a boy?

Van Allsburg: I think I accepted the fact that none of these artists had ever really seen Santa Claus! Therefore, nobody would draw him the same way!

[NOTE: A DIGRESSION. While he's been talking, my gaze has strayed around the room. I spot some wonderful things. There, in the corner beside the fireplace, sits a tiny gentleman only about three feet tall. Chris follows my gaze. We interrupt our conversation for a tour of the room.

"Oh, the Old Gentleman!" he laughs. He goes over to the wizened little figure. "He's made of *papier mache*. It was a gift to me. I think it's me at the age of 80!" Chris pauses cryptically. "But I know for a fact that I won't have that much hair when I get to be that age! He's dressed in the kind of typical old codger New England outfit with the cardigan sweater. He has a cat in his arms, who is *my* cat, who won't be around, I'm afraid, when I turn 80. The man's reading a little book which is called, 'How to Stay Well.' He's a withered old guy, but he has his mouse ears on. Actually, I've got a few hats that'll fit him. He came with an old fedora, but every once in a while, I put the mouse ears on him."

My eyes are only just now getting accustomed to this place, the way you see things more clearly after standing in the dark for awhile. Curious sculptures, *objets d'art*, and other items are everywhere, suddenly beckoning for my attention. Near the little man, standing about two and a half feet high is a sculpture of an armadillo. Chris is bemused at my curiosity. Casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he tells me there is a pig that belongs on top of the armadillo. But it has gotten lost somewhere. On the table before us, where it has been sitting quietly all this time, is a carved wooden cup and saucer. The cup is dangerously tilted, the slather of coffee arrested in its spill over the brim. "That's one of my pieces," he says, handing it to me. "I tried to freeze a moment in time. This one has a big lick of walnut coffee, a brown wood, coming out of a maple cup, which is a lighter colored wood. It's larger than life, maybe 120 percent real scale."

Chris says each of his books takes four to five months to complete. He admits he never got the "sketchbook" habit and he rarely works out of doors, preferring the quiet sanctum of his studio. He works slowly and avoids unduly protracted sessions at the board. The story comes first, and then numerous thumbnail sketches. Eventually he decides on a series of 14 or 15 drawings. "The actual drawing at the board takes so long because the work can't be done for too many hours at a time," he explains. "There's not enough going on up here, around me, and it's just not physical enough. It's tough to keep your motivation after about ten drawings. Even if your energy and enthusiasm isn't waning, it's good to just get up from the board and go away for awhile."

At first glance Chris' images seem a cross between Charles Addams and Rene Magritte, but gradually they declare themselves on their own terms. The sense of space is immediately arresting. For example, the interiors, furniture, and details of books like *Jumanji* and *Two Bad Ants* all seem hyper-real, everything seen from unusual vantage points. "As I said, I like the less conventional point-of-view. If you put the point-of-view in a place where a person couldn't be—like if you put it very low to the ground (I mean, people don't go into a room and drop their heads on the sofa or the carpet and look at the room from that angle!) By setting up a drawing like that, you become a different kind of witness to the event. You're forced to look at it in a different way. It's a different kind of space, of course, from the dynamic space created by sculptures. They're two different things, actually. Drawing for me is always an illusion. You're trying to create the illusion of a three-dimensional space on a flat piece of paper. That's not what you do in

sculpture. The third dimension is a given. The magic lies in the finding of the forms, like being on an archaeological dig and coming across some odd little specimen you can't quite make out. The mystery is not that of an illusion, but of reality itself."

Chris smiles when I ask him to trade secrets about how he achieves his magical, soft-edged effects in some of his books. He picks up my copy of *Harris Burdick* again. "Now take this drawing," he says, pointing to the first one, entitled, "Archie Smith, Boy Wonder." The image is in black-and-white and depicts several fuzzy, luminous globes of light floating into a bedroom window toward a sleeping boy. "Burdick seems to have executed it in charcoal on fairly smooth paper. I can say that with certainty because I've seen the original drawing! All of them were rather large, about two feet high, I'd say. The scale suggests that Burdick's training was maybe more as a fine artist than as an illustrator. Maybe some of it was done with a finger rather than with a pencil. The drawings appear to have been very intentionally taken out of focus in certain areas. You can see Burdick was very sensitive to issues of depth-of-field, atmosphere, and perspective."

The technique varies from book to book. The images in *Ben's Dream* (where he employed a scratchboard) are hard-edged, black-and-white line drawings in the style of 19th century engravings. By contrast, *Jumanji* and *Burdick* emphasize the monumentality of a more soft-edged form and mass. The *Wreck of the Zephyr*, *The Polar Express*, and *The Stranger* present furiously vivid colored images that have a textured, almost tactile quality. "I learned how to draw with a drawing instrument first, and only later did I become interested in color as a new challenge. I use pastels, oil pastels, and crayons. You find out that things like color and composition carry their own dramatic charge quite apart from the story itself. The German master, Caspar David Friedrich, who worked on landscapes in the first half of the 19th century, was on my mind when I did *The Polar Express*. Probably because of the strange colors he used—very strange and complicated colors, like blues mixed with oranges." And Van Allsburg's use of light is also strangely distinctive. "I work for a kind of clarity that real light doesn't have," he says. "It becomes simpler, starker, a bit surreal. The tough thing about it lies in the way it changes the effect of a color. It's incredible how a color must change in various light and shadow conditions, yet remain unmistakably that color!"]

SECOND INTERVIEW

Note: It's August 2004. We're in Chris Van Allsburg's new home. Chris' studio is on the third floor. The ceiling peaks in a sharp "V" over his small drawing table. There are windows in the gable end through which the trees wave a friendly greeting. The walls are bare and the overall appearance is plain and modest. As Chris says, he's there to work, not enjoy distractions (although occasionally he will tune his radio to the local Public Radio station).

JCT: Hello again, you've moved, I see. And I see lots of toys!

Van Allsburg: Sure, I've got some of my toys up here. Because of more children we needed a larger home. When I bought it, I wanted to recreate my old house in the new, larger house. I'm about ten minutes away from the old house. My studio is on the

third floor of my house. A pretty good-sized room. Over there is a five foot tall model of a ferris wheel that I made myself out of tiny little metal parts—the German version of an erector set. About 10,000 parts. I built it up here, and now it's too big to go out the door! I had always thought of a ferris wheel as a quintessential erector set project. And when I saw this kit for sale, I thought I could build the ultimate ferris wheel. Lincoln Logs are okay, but they're not much of a challenge. My kids come up here and sometimes are curious to see what I'm working on. But it's not the first thing they want to do when they get home. People used to ask me before I had kids how could I be sure as an adult what I was doing would have any interest for kids. I'm not sure. People wonder if I "market-test" my stuff to kids. And there was this assumption that the a child's story interest was so specific that an adult could not create things for them without having a close association with them. But I wasn't writing for kids then and I don't now. I just try to write stories that hold my own interest. I may have once said I write for the child in me, but now I think there's something kind of sentimental, kind of corny in that. Maybe I have kind of an arrested development, you know.

JCT: Are the interiors we see in your drawings taken from either of the two houses?

Van Allsburg: Not necessarily. When I draw interiors, I just make them up. I don't use models, and when I draw chairs or a mantle piece, I just refer to some kind of prototype that I hold in my imagination.

JCT: A lot has happened since we first met years ago in the old house.

Van Allsburg: To say the least! Although I still teach at the Rhode Island School of Design. I've written a sequel to *Jumanji*. *Zathura* came out two years ago, in 2002, and it is actually another book which is in the late stages of development at the studio that made *Jumanji*. It doesn't have the same characters in it. All that in the movie was *their* invention. The sequel I wrote was simply derived from the last page of *Jumanji*, which shows two boys running off with the game board.

JCT: Some of your other books came out closely on the heels of our conversation years ago. Could we start with *The Wretched Stone*? Sort of a seafaring science fiction yarn!

Van Allsburg: The structure of almost everything I write is a trip, a journey of some kind. The action removes the protagonist from a certain place, or changes the environment of the protagonist. There's motion, activity at the center of the book. Then the return at the end. They're all trips. That's unconscious, although I realized that a little while ago. *The Wretched Stone* is set late in the 19th century when a ship called *The Rita Anne* sets out on a long voyage. The story is told through excerpts from the Captain's log. He says how lucky he is that he has such an outstanding crew on board, including some musicians and storytellers. One day they discover an island, which is a surprise, since it's not indicated on their maps. On the island they find a rock, about two feet across, very heavy, mostly rough and gray. But part of it is smooth and shiny and gives

off an odd light. They bring it aboard. The light lures the men below decks, and as the days go by, things seem to go downhill. The men become very bad sailors. Finally, something very preposterous and bizarre happens to them, and the Captain is left to sail the boat by himself. I used a big boat model that I have for drawing the ship's exterior. The interiors are kept simple, just a few ribs and planks. One thing about a sailboat is that you have miles and miles of ropes. If you're close enough to it, you have to draw its texture, twisting. A straight line doesn't look like a rope. It was almost a little like the *Z Was Zapped* thing—I was getting tired of drawing rope!

JCT: I don't get the reference.

Van Allsburg: Oh, in *Z Was Zapped* I had to draw a bunch of curtains 26 times! I guess every artist or writer has to do an alphabet book *some* time. So, I got the idea of doing one based on verbs. Each verb would represent some action, some act perpetrated and demonstrated by some change in each letter. Later, I discovered that have been very, very few "verb" alphabet books. It brought me back to some of the interests I had when I first got involved with art, namely, sculpture. I sculpted all the letters before I drew them. I enjoy actually being able to observe something from life. The first letter that I thought of was the letter "D"—"D Was Drowned." I don't know why, but the idea of the "D" half underwater was compelling. I like the phenomena of what happens when something is partially submerged and you can look across and see the distortion below the water line. I made the "D" and put it in a fishbowl filled with water. I set the book as a series of little dramatic scenes, all of them in front of a stage curtain. The most taxing thing about the project was drawing those curtains 26 times! You get very nervous drawing the same thing so many times. It was also difficult with the "X." There are so few "X" verbs! I ended up with "The X was X-Rayed."

JCT: Ingenious! I see on the table there a copy of *Two Bad Ants*. That's a new one on me.

Van Allsburg: Oh, well, *Two Bad Ants* came from a very mundane motivation. I saw a couple of ants in my kitchen. I'm sure I'm not the first to ponder what kind of journey they had to get there—I mean, it must be a big trip! And I was interested in how the ants might interact with human beings if the human beings and the ants were absolutely unaware of each other. The ants are there in this kitchen because they have committed a high sin in the ant world—even though their sister and brother ants have taken a sugar crystal back to the Queen (which gives them a great deal of pleasure!), these two ants decide to stay in the sugar bowl and live it up! They get mixed up with breakfast preparations and they have some close calls. They are almost crushed in the garbage disposal, roasted in the toaster, and dumped in some hot coffee (they almost get swallowed up). It's a dangerous world!

JCT: You promised me we could get an update on *The Polar Express*. Here we are, almost twenty years since *The Polar Express* was first published. And now a new edition and a movie version are on the way! You have said that you are always

disappointed in the reproductions of your drawings, that they never convey the quality of the originals.

Van Allsburg: That question is more astute than you might realize. When the publisher was contemplating how to respond to the higher level of interest in books that have been turned into films, I suggested we go back to the original art work and use the new digital technology to do new reproductions for a new edition. They said it was a good idea and asked me if I knew where the originals were. I said, No, I'm sorry, I don't. But then I remembered I had sold some of it to some galleries, and they weren't always sold to dealers who kept good records. In the end, I found all but two of the images and got them back and had them digitally photographed. They then underwent a much more advanced process of reproduction than had been available years ago. And the reproductions are much, much better. If you get a book that was printed before this year, you can tell from the jacket how different it is from the one printed this summer. It's a dramatic difference, quite striking, better contrast, sharper detail, sharper colors. When Christmas rolls around this year, the new edition will be in the stores, and it'll have a sticker identifying it as the source of the new movie.

For the movie of *Polar Express* the digital information that is in the computer is information derived from actors and from the scenery. They didn't photograph the book and then manipulate it and make it come to life; they actually built three-dimensional models of what they saw in the book and which were "built" inside of the computer. The Warner Bros. animators used the special effects facilities of Sony Image Works. I had a contract, or the option agreement when the book was originally optioned, that had a clause that said the film would be live action because the initial overtures were made by Tom Hanks, whose interest in the book drove things at the outset. He was quite sincere and committed to making a film that was faithful to the "look" and story of the book, and which would be live action. I was assured that because it was somebody like Tom Hanks, he would protect the book; his good taste and instincts would prevail at the studio. I made the agreement based on Tom's attachment to the project. However, I was warned that something unforeseen could happen in the future and Warner Bros. might make a different kind of film than the one he had envisioned. What we could guarantee, in that event, was that it would *not* be an animated film by requiring that the film rights be to a *live action* film.

There have been interests by other producers and studios over the years, but this seemed like a more bonafide and credible expression of interest. It also suggested that we could move quite quickly without the ordinary obstacles usually encountered in the development of a film. Now what we have here is not "animation" in the conventional sense, which describes the techniques that an artist can use to create the illusion of movement with a series of still images, by hand or with the computer. There's no illusion of movement in this film, because the actors actually performed in front of motion-capture devices. There are armies of digital artists, but they are not "animators" because the movement is created by the actors in performance.

JCT: Are you concerned that as this technology brings your drawings closer to photographic reality, that we will lose the sense of them as *drawings*?

Van Allsburg: I think at the very beginning, when they were looking at this technology, they were trying to find an approach that would create images that looked like pastel drawings, but pastel drawings that were animated. The basis for most early animation styles was that they looked like cartoon images that moved. And that was because the cartoon images were so simple that doing multiple drawings required to put them into motion was easier. That became standard. Of course, the standard for live action films was moving photographs, a series of photographs that because of the physiology of the human eye and the mechanism of the project gave the impression of movement. In *Polar Express*, they wanted to create with new software something that was not a moving comic and something that was not a moving photograph and something that was not a hard-edged sort of plastic reality of other computer-generated animation. They wanted to create the look of a moving pastel drawing. But they couldn't do it. The requirements to run all the descriptive data in a pastel image was just mind-boggling. It's too "dirty," too irregular. But they did find ways of using the software to create something that looks entirely from the other computer animations that have been done, like something by Pixar. It's looks softer and stranger.

JCT: Were you involved at all in the actual filming?

Van Allsburg; I visited Los Angeles and gave to the artists a little slideshow of my work and talked about the kinds of ideas that were working on me when I first wrote *The Polar Express*. I talked to Tom Hanks. I told him that I thought the narrative in the story was not elaborate enough to drive a film story. It needed some backstory and some details about the characters. And maybe that we needed some backstory about the train and where it came from; and about the conductor and where he came from. They told me that I sounded like some hack producer who was out to ruin the book! They said all they wanted to do was make the book, that they think the book was wonderful all by itself. Anyway, I also saw a lot of the artwork, and it looked fine to me. It was pretty clear they had gotten their marching orders from the director. I was looking at art on the walls, not from the computer. I'm fairly computer-illiterate myself. What they can do is place a character inside a space, and then move it around. And you can create the effect of moving a "camera" around that scene as you see fit. Now, I don't think I have as much RAM in my head as a computer, but I can envision a dimensional space and move around in it pretty easily. I guess there's something analogous there. Basically, my 15-page book was the "style guide." It's not a brightly-colored film in any way. All told, they were respectful of the aesthetic of the book.

JCT: I was startled when I saw a full-scale song-and-dance number in the preview trailer!

Van Allsburg: It's a number that is introduced when the chefs come from the dining car and present the hot cocoa to the kids. It's a fabulously choreographed scene. There are a few musical numbers in it, yes, but it's not a "Grinch"—like thing. It does no damage to the story. It's interesting to watch. I like it!

JCT: Any apprehensions about the final product?

Van Allsburg: Well, sure, I'm anxious, and I always expect the worst outcome for any undertaking. That's just my nature. I don't have any real reason to be, but that's just the way I'm wired. The book came out twenty years ago, and I was 35 and had already written *Gazazi* and *Jumanji* and had established myself as an illustrator and author. *Polar Express* made the adult best seller list before the *New York Times* ghettoized kids books. They won't put kids books on the main best seller list anymore.

JCT: Do you think the success of *The Polar Express* overshadowed some of your other books?)

Van Allsburg: I don't think so. Generally, success of one will create interest in the other titles.

JCT: How do you feel about having your book read by William Hurt?

Van Allsburg: That's part of the same set of conflicted feelings I have about the book being made into a film. It's the idea that a lot of picture-book creators like myself have an ideal about how our books will be consumed. Maybe it's a classroom, or a bedroom with a parent and children. *The Polar Express* is something that families bring to bookstores where I'm appearing. Their copies are tattered from many years of family readings at Christmas Eve. At first, I was in favor of the audio cassette, because the book descriptions of lots of sounds, and I thought it could be successful, artistically. But then, having agreed to do it, I had hoped it wouldn't displace the family reading. I disliked the thought of a family gathering around the hearth and then booting up the compact disc instead of opening up the book and reading it aloud. It's not as bad as a video cassette of a Yule log in a fireplace, but it gave me some of those concerns. Now, my concern is that when the film version comes out on DVD, which it will, that some people will decide to view the DVD on Christmas Eve instead of reading the book. And I don't think I want that to happen. I have kids. The stimulation that comes out of a television set is pretty irresistible. You have to make an effort to expose your children to the values and satisfactions of hearing words in a quiet bedroom and seeing how that special stimulation works instead.

JCT: By the way, what happens to the original drawings?

Van Allsburg: Oh, I sell quite a few of them, keep some. I sell more than I keep. In my daughter Sophie's room right now is the jacket image from *Jumanji*. Otherwise, I don't have much of my work up. I have no gallery that regularly handles my things.

JCT: Now, how about we conclude with something about your new work.

Van Allsburg: Oh, I don't know. All I can say is that these days there are images of gondoliers and Venetian canals I've been thinking about. And I've been making some doodles. Here's one: It shows an oarsman with a funny little hat on. I'm not sure yet

what it means. I am not possessed by a book. I have a much “cooler” attitude about making art. Sometimes I think that that creates limitations, that the greatest art comes from people who have the fever. I’m not sure of that. There are some pretty interesting artists who have a kind of remoteness from their work—guys like Marcel Duchamp. Nothing’s really caught me by surprise yet. I’d like it to happen.

GAHAN WILSON’S DINER

By John C. Tibbetts

Fans of Gahan Wilson’s short cartoon film, “Gahan Wilson’s Diner,” would appreciate the fact that I met him on Halloween 1986 for an interview in a modest little diner in Providence, Rhode Island, home of Wilson’s revered H.P. Lovecraft. Granted, this particular diner was considerably less horrific than the demon-infested eaterie of the cartoon. But we, er, *relished* the occasion nonetheless. The playfully grotesque humor and distinctive cartoon style of Gahan Wilson (1930-) has delighted (and horrified) readers of the *The New Yorker* and *Playboy*. His comic strip, *Nuts*, which appeared in *National Lampoon*, was a subversive take on the sort of sentimentalized childhood depicted in Charles Schulz’s *Peanut*. Wilson received the World Fantasy Convention Award in 1981 and the National Cartoonist Society’s Milton Caniff Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005. The following remarks reveal him in a more philosophical than diabolical mood.

INTERVIEW

John C. Tibbetts: I can’t think of more appropriate surrounding than this small, homey, thoroughly cozy diner in downtown Providence. I see you’re wearing an army fatigue jacket. You call it your journalist’s habit.

Gahan Wilson: It’s what they, it’s a correspondent’s jacket, as so billed. And it’s very good because it’s got millions of pockets.

JCT: I think Mel Gibson wore something like this in *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

GW: My god, I bet he probably did. I think, wherein, there's probably a theory of people dressing up in military garb, ah, when wars are imminent, sort of floating around. And I think we're into that sort of phase. I remember before I was in the Air Force, way back when, friends of mine were getting drafted, and one of them came back in his soldier's suit. And a friend of mine and me who were buddies of this guy were all thrilled and trying on his little soldier's hat in the mirror. I looked over at him and he was looking at me with this funny expression, which I did not understand until I too had a soldier's suit of my own. It wasn't kicks anymore.

JCT: I take it then that that expression returned to you in your memory in later years.

GW: Yeah, yeah. But I don't think they're going to draft me now, unless it's really one hell of an emergency. I'm kind of past draft age. I think!

JCT: Of course, the name Gahan Wilson connotes the most fabulously, wickedly funny cartoons that we have seen in the magazine *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Playboy* and other places. To me, if any one image sums up your work, your attitude; it's the one where a black-clad figure in a tall, peaked hat stands in front of a room full of new-born babies. He's waving a web-fingered hand over them. Like a dark benediction. . .

GW: Ushering a new generation into the darkness?

JCT: Something like that.

GW: You made your own caption! Life and death. Yeah. If you're alive you can be killed. Very often, when my cartoons are gruesome, I think they're misunderstood. People think that I am sort of anti-something, or down on things. It's quite the reverse. The cartoon of mine I would choose is one I cite every so often, which on first look is extremely *down*. It's a snowy, wintry day and a little boy is all bundled up—one of those absurd costumes you bundle kids up in—and he's holding his father's hand. With the other hand he's pointing at this dead bird in a snow bank with its feet sticking up in the air. It's a very, *very* dead bird. And the kid says, "Look, Daddy. It's the first robin."

JCT: I think that was one of your very first cartoons, right?

GW: Yes, so long ago. The legend says it sold for only \$7 dollars.

JCT: Is that true?

GW: Well, if you choose between the facts and the legend. . .

JCT: Oh. I see.

GW: But what I'm saying there, quite sincerely, is that robins are vulnerable, little creatures who can die, horribly. If we just think of robins as these little, fat critters on a warm lawn in the summer eating worms and having a marvelous time and chirping, that's fine. But they are also these vulnerable, little creatures, who move through terrible weather so they can be on that lawn; and will fly back and many of them will not make it. So the preciousness and the value and the beauty of the robin is very in large part because of its fragility and its irreplaceability.

JCT: It becomes a symbol that can look two ways in either direction, toward a sorrowful, almost morbid cast, or a bright promise...

GW: It should look both ways. The thing is to look both ways.

JCT: I remember a scene in Luis Bunuel's *Viridiana*, when a child's skipping rope in one scene becomes a hangman's noose in another scene. Again, one object, one symbol being used two ways.

GW: Yeah, that's one of the essentials in any creative making of a cartoon. One very important basic rule is to stick to a particular challenge—like you will sit down and say, I'll make a cartoon about a piece of rope. So, you stick with the notion of rope. And you will think of skipping rope, a hangman's noose, a clothesline, something; and you may go all over the lot but you will not leave the rope. You get to this one thing and you work this one notion, this one idea. Yeah, everything pursued far enough represents everything else. There's no exception.

JCT: I once interviewed filmmaker Terry Gilliam after the release of *Brazil* and he admitted that he thinks that he looks at the world through what he calls, "cartoonist's eyes", dramatic foreshortenings, vivid colors, that kind of thing. Is that a fair enough assessment maybe for you as well?

GW: Gilliam is brilliant. God knows *Brazil's* a brilliant movie, a very *cartoony* movie. It's actually one long political cartoon. He takes his images and presents them in a startling, humorous fashion, essentially. He's very careful to make sure that you never really relax because if you do, he'll throw in something at you, just all of a sudden, he'll stretch the lady's face into a grotesque mask—

JCT: And switch to wide-angle lenses or quick dolly shots—

GW: Yeah, or failing everything, he'll just make a large noise. There's very definitely a cartoony aspect to much of my writing. Like Gilliam, I think very much in a cinematic way. My cartoons are like movies, an odd combination of the literary and the visual. The dialogue and the pictures. If you take away the gag line and leave only the drawing, and if you take away the drawing and leave only the gag line, nine times out of ten it makes no sense whatsoever.

JCT: Now it seems like these days you are emerging more as a writer. Now, has the writing always been there, or is this something that you've been developing only just recently?

GW: It's been there for a long time. I've done short stories for a long, long stretch. They've appeared in various places, like *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Playboy*, and I think in October of last year there was a werewolf story I was particularly proud of. They've been anthologized quite widely. I love writing. But during the last couple of years my agent's been goading me, and I've been moving more and more into writing. I am presently engaged in a book, two books, really—one I'm doing now (which I'm late on), which is half writing, half drawing. The narration is advanced by the writing and also by the illustrations. Really, the illustrations are just another aspect of the narration, in a way. It's fun, but it's enormous work.

JCT: Is this the first time that you have both written and illustrated on a single project?

GW: No, I did a series of kid's books, which were very successful critically. *Publisher's Weekly* gave 'em a star, *Kirkus Reviews* was very enthusiastic, and so on and so on.

JCT: What's the series?

GW: It was called *Harry the Fat Bear Spy*. That was around 1973. And it's a darling series. It was very sweet and was reissued. There's two "Harrys" that have been printed, *Harry the Fat Bear Spy* and *Harry and the Sea Serpent*.

JCT: What age group readers are you considering?

GW: Officially, it was supposed to be from 12-up. Actually, I found that it was, had a wide range. Many adults liked 'em. I have enormous respect for kids so I in no way write down to them. They're very funny. They really are hilarious. I'd love to start Harry off again.

JCT: I'm wondering if children in this age group would appreciate a taste or a tang of your trademark diabolical humor as well.

GW: Well, yeah, see, Harry is this construct that's essentially based on the old pulp story-type heroes. Harry's a spy and there's a legitimate mystery which occurs and Harry does solve it. It takes place in Bearmania, which is inhabited entirely by bears. And for a bear in Bearmania, Harry is very bright. The other bears are astounded at his skills. But the 12-year old reader is smarter than Harry. Bears are not as smart as people, even though they're smart bears. He's very lovable and very dear, and he's very earnest, and the reader is sympathetic to Harry and rooting for him, even though he gets the clues way ahead of Harry. The spies are absurd and they have a ridiculous series of code words, and it's all terribly involved and complicated. Essentially, it's structured the same way as a *Doc Savage* pulp story, something like that. There's lots of adventures. Harry has this horrifying episode where he's in this flying machine which crashes, and he's also tied to

a sea serpent in the middle of the water, and all kinds of things go on. But of course, he survives without any trouble because the absolute rule in the Harry books is nobody really gets hurt in any sense. And the villains are not really villains, they're simply just sort of silly. And if they won't do it anymore, everybody will forgive them. I think children are extremely vulnerable, but they loved to be scared. It's very important to their process of maturation that they be scared—and they know it. What they're doing constantly is testing themselves and learning how to survive. That's basically his whole thing, it's his program. He's seeing what he can do; he's strengthening himself, he's mastering various challenges. A grown-up forgets all this, because what happens with a grown-up is he's this assemblage of devices and techniques and so on. For example, just now when we left the hotel and walked to this diner here through historic Providence, we did not consciously duck the traffic, we did not consciously watch for falling objects, we did not consciously keep an eye peeled for potentially dangerous humans. None of this. But we were doing it all the same because we have learned how to handle all of these things. We've learned how to go up steps, down steps; we've learned all these tricks. How to swallow food and how to avoid bad potatoes and all that sort of thing. But a kid though, is in the early processes of getting the techniques down. There's a Zen thing where the Zen Buddhists practice techniques in an attempt to get back to the direct experience of being alive. You don't *not* think; you get to the present moment, which is always here but it originates in thinking and not thinking. Both come out of the natural being. And the kid is in there and he's wide open.

JCT: It's as if you're saying that maybe the whole pursuit of Zen is in itself the pursuit of child-like perceptions of the world.

GW: Getting back to the world as it *is*. The world is a very surprising and wonderful place. It's an amazing place. We don't see it; grown-ups don't see it. You see a couple of grown-ups walking a child down the street—they look like zombies. I mean, they're either absorbed in conversation or they're just sort of staring at nothing, just sort of staring into space. Whereas the child looks wide-and-doe-eyed. The child is taking in everything with wonder or astonishment or fright. It's all there. The child sees a dog—ooh, look at the dog! The child sees a truck—yes! They're wonderful creatures! Most grown-ups, very sadly, lose that sense of wonder, which had been very necessary for developing the techniques and defenses of survival. Somehow or other they so bury the immediate moment that they're not really alive, which is a great shame and pity.

JCT: I think of an artist like Paul Klee, an artist who relentlessly strove to paint and write about recapturing that *first* view of things. Yet, even to write about it is a very adult activity.

GW: Well, some, some writers—I'm going back to the Zen thing—say it's anti-intellectual, which it isn't at all. The intellectual thing is a wonderful, fantastic part of our lives. But everything is filtered through or transformed into a logical situation, a problem sort of thing, an abstraction. It's dissociated from its actual root, from experience. It's dead or certainly cut off. It's like too tight a tourniquet of some kind or

other. But as I say, a kid is very, very open. It doesn't know what's dangerous and what isn't dangerous. They haven't figured that out yet. I mean, is there something under the bed? Even though there isn't anything really under the bed, the kid hasn't got that straight yet. On the other hand, there's an evil, evil gentleman who could be extremely dangerous to the child, and the child must be aware of that. But it's very difficult for the child to select what is dangerous and what isn't dangerous. They're in a constant state of risk. The point of it is, if you do anything for a kid, you've got to be very careful not to scare the kid too much. And also, you've got to be very careful not to take away the ground underneath the child; because, you can do that. You can absolutely devastate a child. You can really scare them and leave them falling, and they'll never touch ground for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, many parents will do that. There are lots of adults walking around who are falling helplessly, because the parents jerked the ground out from under them when they were little bitty kids.

JCT: I'm curious that a lot of this is coming from a Gahan Wilson who has retained enough of that child-like perspective on the world that you can just tap into it. Are you surrounded in some way in your own life by children with whom you can test these things out?

GW: Well, I had brought some kids up. You mentioned Paul Klee and Matisse. Matisse has some very good writing on the subject. He said you can't be a child. You'd be an unfortunate and tragic creature if you were a grown-up and a child. There are such beings. They're very sweet and dear, but they're helpless. Either they have loving people who go to a lot of trouble to take care of them, or they're put in institutions because they can't function. At the same time, you also mustn't kill the child. There's a sort of alchemical transformation that's got to occur, so the grown-up can function as a grown-up without losing the child. You mustn't detach yourself or cut yourself off from or restrict the experience of the present moment too. I'm talking about the glory of color of your eyes or the feel of the chair under you or the coffee in your stomach. It's all new and should be sensed and enjoyed enormously.

JT: If you don't already, I bet you would especially love and admire the work of the English man of letters, G.K. Chesterton. If anybody was able to do the things that you're talking about, I think it was he.

GW: Oh, yes, he knew about this sense of vulnerability and, well, *aliveness*. I mean, if you're alive, you're vulnerable by definition.