

THE MYSTERIES OF CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG—FIRST INTERVIEW

by John C. Tibbetts

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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 it's 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!"]

