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## How Picture Books Mean: The Case of Chris Van Allsburg

Peter F. Neumeyer

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### How Picture Books Mean: The Case of Chris Van Allsburg

*Peter F. Neumeyer (bio)*

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Chris Van Allsburg is a distinguished sculptor who obtained his degree in

that art from the Rhode Island School of Design, Thus it is not surprising that Chris Van Allsburg's first children's book has on its cover extraordinary and magically three-dimensional topiary sculptures in the shape of rabbit, duck, seal, and elephant. The 1979 publication of *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* marked the debut of a new star among children's book illustrators. Appropriately, the book won recognition as a "Caldecott Honor" book. In the subsequent seven years, Van Allsburg won the Caldecott Medal itself twice, for *Jumanji* in 1981, and for *The Polar Express* in 1987.

The outstanding illustrator, David Macauley, has written an eloquent testimonial for Van Allsburg. But it does not take an expert to recognize Van Allsburg's distinction. The nine illustrated children's books he has published have won almost unqualified acclaim and have fascinated adults as much as they have the children. They clearly stand out against the humdrum ephemera that clutter children's bookstores seasonally, and that disappear almost as quickly as they are published. Van Allsburg's books are art works in the shape of books, art works accompanied by mysterious and thought-provoking stories. To examine them carefully is to give oneself a lesson in how picture books work.

I'd like to look at all nine of Van Allsburg's books ostensibly for children, exploring what these books mean, and how they achieve that "meaning." We shall have to look at them with extreme care—to look at all aspects of the books, for in the case of a very good picture book—and Van Allsburg's certainly fall into that category—every part of the book works harmoniously with every other part to create a singleness of effect, to create a "meaning." The prose, the illustration, and the physical appearance of all nine of his books are related.

Six of them appear to make virtually identical statements; three make statements that are closely connected. Six of Van Allsburg's books declare that Imagination is "real," that the world in the mind, including the child's world of fantasy, is actual, true, even tangible. That may be a difficult concept for a child, but one of the remarkable aspects of Van Allsburg's work is precisely this desire to translate a metaphysical

concept into verbal and pictorial shape so that it may be comprehended—at some level—by a child.

In order to clarify the statement of the six very similar books, we shall first isolate the statement each makes in the narrative itself. Secondly, we shall look at the illustrations—the manner in which what happens or what is meant is depicted visually. Thirdly, we shall note the language of each statement. And finally, we shall look at aspects of book design, as those aspects, too, help to communicate the meaning.

## The Story

In three of the books, children fall asleep, have extraordinary adventures, and return from whatever world they inhabited during their sleep, only to find, on their return, some incontestable and objective proof that the land they were in during their sleep was truly and objectively there.

In *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* (1979) young Alan Mitz is dogsitting for Miss Hester; he falls asleep on the couch, putting his hat under his shirt for safe-keeping. Alan dreams that Fritz, the dog, runs into the garden of the magician, Abdul Gasazi. Alan chases the dog, whom the magician, however, has transformed into a duck. As Alan carries the dog-duck home, his hat flies off his head and is caught and carried off by the dog-duck. When Miss Hester comes home, Alan wakes and tells his story as the dog sits watching. Alan is hatless. Miss Hester assures Alan that Fritz had been sitting in the front yard, waiting for her. Alan, feeling foolish, tells himself he won't be duped again, and he goes home. When he has departed, Miss Hester calls Fritz, who trots up to her and drops at her feet the hat Alan had...

## special section: visual literacy

### How Picture Books Mean: the Case of Chris Van Allsburg

by Peter F. MacGregor

I owe a great debt to Eleanor Cameron, who went over a version of my manuscript generously, patiently, and with a damn good eye. Letters that may contain subtle symptoms of eccentricity please be addressed to my post.

Chris Van Allsburg is a thirty-year-old sculptor who obtained his degree in that art from the Rhode Island School of Design. Then it is not surprising that Chris Van Allsburg's first children's book (not on its cover) extraordinary and regally three-dimensional toy-like sculptures in the shape of rabbit, duck, sea, and sphinx. The 1979 publication of *The Garden of Abdul Gassem* marked the debut of a new star among children's book illustrators. Appropriately, the book was recognized as a "Caldecott Honor" book. In the subsequent seven years, Van Allsburg won the Caldecott Medal itself twice, for *Journeys* in 1981, and for *The Polar Express* in 1987.

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Six of them appear to make virtually identical statements, three make statements that are closely connected. Six of Van Allsburg's books declare that imagination is "real," that the world in the mind, including the child's world of fantasy, is actual, true, even tangible. That may be a difficult concept for a child, but one of the remarkable aspects of Van Allsburg's work is precisely this desire to translate a metaphysical concept into verbal and pictorial shape so that it may be comprehended—at some level—by a child.

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#### The Story

In three of the books, children fall asleep, have extraordinary adventures, and return from whatever world they inhabited during their sleep, only to find, on their return, some incontrovertible and objective proof that the land they were in during their sleep was truly and objectively there.

In *The Garden of Abdul Gassem* (1979) young Alan Mitt is dog-sitting for Miss Hester, he falls asleep on the couch, putting his hat under his chair for safe-keeping. Alan dreams that Fritz, the dog, runs into the garden of the magician, Abdul Gassem. Alan catches the dog, whom the magician, however, has transformed into a duck. As Alan carries the dog-duck home, his hat flies off his head and is caught and carried off by the dog-duck. When Miss Hester comes home, Alan wakes and tells his story as the dog sits watching. Alan is hilarious. Miss Hester assures Alan that Fritz had been sitting in the front yard, waiting for her. Alan, feeling foolish, tells himself he may be duped again, and he goes home. When he has departed, Miss Hester calls Fritz, who trots up to her and drops at her feet the hat Alan had put under his chair when he fell asleep. Here is empirical evidence of the "reality" of the world of Alan's dream. There's no conclusion possible except that Fritz must, indeed, have been the "duck" that is, Alan's dream. Few will wish to cot.

In *Ben's Dream* (1982), the reader/viewer takes the role of the objective observer who finds the reality of the dream world corroborated by two independent witnesses who cannot be making up a story, since the reader observes the "reality" himself. Ben and Margaret pedal their bikes home to study their Geography textbooks—presumably the section on famous monuments of the world. As Ben sits home alone, studying, the rain begins, and as it rains harder, Ben is jolted asleep. Soon, the rain becomes a large body of water outside the window. As various great monuments—the leaning tower of Pisa, the Great Wall of China, and others—pass by, we are constantly aware that we are seeing them from Ben's perspective. Also, in each picture, we see a bit of Ben's house, and in some we see parts of Ben. At the end, we learn that Margaret had seen exactly the same monuments, that they had been floating, half under water, for her, just as they had for Ben.

Margaret says to Ben that he would never guess what the sea was floating by. But he does know: it was Ben, himself, whom Margaret had seen. Now, how could Ben know that? Simple. He saw her too, just as they were floating by the Sphinx. But obviously, Ben could be fibbing, couldn't he? But he wasn't fibbing, not at all. We can prove it to ourselves merely by turning back to the page with the Sphinx, half submerged. There we see Margaret looking out of her house, and there, too, in the foreground, is Ben's arm stretched out, waving at



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