

CHRIS VAN ALLSLBURG--SECOND INTERVIEW

By John C. Tibbetts

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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 there 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* ghetto-ized 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.