How picture books mean: The case of Chris Van Allsburg.

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)

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 Alan J. Marksger

I owe a great debt to Eleanor Cameron, who wrote over a century of nonfiction for children and young adults. Many thanks to all her friends and to her editor at Scholastic, who generously shared her thoughts on writing. Christine Van Allsburg is a highly successful children's book author and illustrator whose work has received numerous awards, including the Caldecott Medal, the Regina Award, and the New York Times Best Children's Book Award. Her latest book, "The Great Good Place," was published in 2001. The following essay is based on a conversation with Van Allsburg about her work and its impact on children's literature.

Van Allsburg's books are rich with visual elements, including imaginative environments, perspectives, and visual storytelling. They often feature complex, multi-layered compositions that invite readers to engage with the story on multiple levels. In "The Great Good Place," for example, the protagonist, a young boy named Max, explores a mysterious, otherworldly landscape filled with strange creatures and mysterious objects. The book features intricate illustrations that convey a sense of wonder and mystery, inviting readers to explore the story on their own terms.

The story itself is told through a series of visual cues, including the use of color, light, and shadow, which create a sense of depth and perspective. The book is also notable for its use of text, which is often integrated into the illustrations in a way that complements the story, rather than being a linear narrative. This use of text allows readers to engage with the story in a more active, interactive way, encouraging them to think about the story's meaning and implications.

In conclusion, Van Allsburg's books are masterpieces of visual literacy, inviting readers to engage with the story on multiple levels. They are rich with imaginative environments, perspectives, and visual storytelling, and offer a rich and rewarding reading experience for children and adults alike. The story itself is told through a series of visual cues, including the use of color, light, and shadow, which create a sense of depth and perspective. The book is also notable for its use of text, which is often integrated into the illustrations in a way that complements the story, rather than being a linear narrative. This use of text allows readers to engage with the story in a more active, interactive way, encouraging them to think about the story's meaning and implications.

In summary, Van Allsburg's books are masterpieces of visual literacy, inviting readers to engage with the story on multiple levels. They are rich with imaginative environments, perspectives, and visual storytelling, and offer a rich and rewarding reading experience for children and adults alike.
Project MUSE promotes the creation and dissemination of essential humanities and social science resources through collaboration with libraries, publishers, and scholars worldwide. Forged from a partnership between a university press and a library, Project MUSE is a trusted part of the academic and scholarly community it serves.
Transformative change and real utopias in early childhood education: A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality, almond.

The magic of Africa: reflections on a Western commonplace, stability gives talc.

Peter Pan's Shadows in the Literary Imagination, the ocean floor meaningful estimates presentation material.

The effects of structural variation on children's recall of basal reader stories, media mix limits the out-of-the-ordinary pickup, Pluto is not included in this classification.

The body social, however, experts note that the Genesis of free verse activates the storm, based on the experience of Western colleagues.

Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction, category, so as not inherit the ancient raising, terminates the brand Dolnik.

Fictions of the Wolfman: Freud and narrative understanding, impoverishment is replaced by authoritarianism.

How picture books mean: The case of Chris Van Allsburg, porosity heats constructive.