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:

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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...
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by Alan M. Marcus

I owe a great debt to客场Xon, a woman over a century of my mothering generosity, patiently and with a calm smile, to help me get back to the true nature of what I was trying to do.

Chris Van Allsburg is a young and rising sculptor who created his first book from the study of the human body. This is a great book for children, especially for the young, who tend to be fascinated by the shape of things. The book is illustrated in a style that is both simple and yet complex, making it a perfect introduction to the world of sculpture.

The book opens with a picture of a young boy, the focal point of the story. He is standing in front of a wall, looking at a picture. He is wearing a black shirt and has a determined look on his face. The scene is set in a room with simple furniture, and the walls are painted white. The boy appears to be deep in thought, and his expression conveys a sense of concentration and determination.

The narrative then follows the boy as he explores different aspects of the picture. He examines the details of the scene, looking for clues and connections. As he does so, the boy's expression changes, reflecting his growing understanding and interest in the story.

At the end of the book, the boy is shown standing in front of a blank wall, having completed his exploration and understanding of the picture. The scene is similar to the beginning, with the boy still looking at the picture and his expression unchanged. The book ends on a note of wonder and curiosity, leaving the reader to ponder the meaning of the picture and the story it tells.

This book is a wonderful introduction to the world of sculpture and the importance of observation and exploration. It is a beautiful story that will inspire young readers to look beyond the surface of things and see the world in a new way.
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