1992

Introducing A New Feature: Children's Book Illustrators

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"I was born sometime in the middle of the twentieth century—I like to be mysterious about my age." That is the way Chris Van Allsburg introduced himself in an interview with Catherine Ruello for *Something About the Author*. He is the author we chose to introduce as we add a new feature on children’s book illustrators to each issue of our publication for 1992-1993. Van Allsburg was actually born June 18, 1949, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the son of a dairy owner. He was educated at the University of Michigan and at the Rhode Island School of Design and is married to Lisa Morrison. The Van Allsburg’s make their home in Providence, Rhode Island. He teaches illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design, has exhibited his art work at museums in N.Y.C., Michigan and Port Washington, New York. And, of course, we know him as an illustrator of children’s books.

Those of you who grew up on Dick and Jane, and Spot will be sympathetic with Chris Van Allsburg’s response to the plot structure in the first books that he remembers. He comments that "actually the lives of this trio were not all that interesting. A young reader’s reward for struggling through those syllables at the bottom of the page was to discover Spot got a bath. Not exactly an exciting revelation. Especially since you’d already seen Spot getting his bath in the pictures at the top of the page." *Horn Book, July/August, 1986.*

His favorite subject in elementary school was art, and whether he was sick or not, he made it to school on those days when art was taught. He specialized in the cartoon character Dagwood Bumstead, noting that horses or Disney characters gained more "peer recognition" than Dagwood did (Lee Kingman, editor, *Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books*, 1976-1985, *Horn Book*, July/August, 1986). His preoccupation with art faded as he grew older until he was accidentally admitted to art school at the university and decided with the blythe innocence of youth that it "would be a lark to earn a college degree by goofing around for four years" (*Something About the Author*, Vol. 53, p. 164). The first art form he decided to focus on was sculpture. If you’ve ever heard him talk about some of his sculpture projects, you know that he has a whimsical and creative sense of humor in his art that is refreshing and funny. His career as an illustrator began when a friend saw some of his drawings and encouraged him to consider illustrating books. The first one was *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* in 1979. Van Allsburg was surprised at how well the book sold, and realized with pleasure that selling 40,000 books (many to schools) meant reaching an

Van Allsburg’s drawings seem to have a mysterious, almost surrealistic look about them, (particularly in two of the books we are featuring, *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* and *The Z Was Zapped*). Van Allsburg explains a little of how that effect is created. "Once I’ve created space, I have to create light. Light made up has a clarity that real light may not have. It has to do with things like atmosphere and perspective. In a real space, light bounces off walls and is overall more diffuse. When you invent, you can’t anticipate the subtle things that result within the space. Consequently, the light becomes a little simpler and a little starker and gives the space a kind of surrealistic quality." (Something About the Author, Vol. 53, p. 167)

For the other book we feature, *Ben’s Dream,* he explains that he "used scratchboard, drawing white lines into black, giving the suggestion of an engraving." (Something About the Author, Vol. 53, p. 166). I knew I liked the engraving-like quality, but I was fascinated with the way that effect was created. With this knowledge in mind, look at *Ben’s Dream* and your fingers will itch to
try drawing white lines on black scratchboard. What a marvelously effective media for this particular book. Van Allsburg’s defense of his drawing style also made strong logical sense.

If you’re trying to describe something with black lines, or trying to create value with black lines, it doesn’t make sense to use the black line to describe a spherical or cylindrical shape, and then put straight crosshatch lines on it. The lines should bend around the cylindrical form to show that there’s a cylinder. *(Something About the Author, Vol. 53, p. 166).*

Notice the use of black lines showing the cylindrical shapes on the Leaning Tower of Pisa, or the trees and sloping yard (in the illustrations reproduced in this issue).

Van Allsburg evidently enjoys creating the feeling of fantasy as much as his readers enjoy viewing a world in which "strange things can happen." For he says he’s pleased when his own drawings "are a little mysterious to me." *(Something About the Author, Vol. 53, p. 172)* He also purposely leaves things "up in the air so the reader has to think a bit. Even after a child closes a book, it’s not really over." *(Interview by Sandy Graham for USA Weekend, Oct 5-7 1990, p.12)* Readers of *Jumanji* or any of Van Allsburg’s books will agree with that statement.

Another of Van Allsburg’s trademarks is the small dog included in most of his books. I checked and you can find the dog in the three books from which we have reproduced illustrations—*The Mysteries of Harris Burdick, Ben’s...*
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*Dream,* and *The Z Was Zapped.* They’re not in the illustrations we’ve reproduced; that would make it too easy. Find it yourself, or ask the children in your life, or in your classroom, to find the dog. Then look for it in other Van Allsburg books. He says the most difficult one to find is in *The Stranger.*

We hope that getting better acquainted with Chris Van Allsburg and his illustrations will help you share his enthusiasm for books. He says "For me books are very compelling. I instantly get into their world, visualizing the place, the room, the people. I don’t have to read too many lines to imagine a character’s face." (*Something About the Author,* Vol. 53, p. 172) We hope, too, that this brief introduction to a talented artist will help you get into Van Allsburg’s books for the first time or return to them with a deeper understanding of his art and gift for storytelling. What he says is true - if you don’t want children to become "illiterate TV zombies, get kids involved with books. Take them to libraries and bookstores. Once a child gets his nose in a good book, he doesn’t usually take it out to play a video game." (*Interview by Sandy Graham for USA Weekend,* October 5-7, 1990, p. 12).

![Image of a young girl holding a bird](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr/vol13/iss1/3)

Taken from *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.*