

Teaching and Learning with

# The Polar Express

by Chris Van Allsburg

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Pat Gramling has been a teacher for over 35 years with experience ranging from preschool programs through university level education classes. Her focus is literature-based instruction and she has a personal collection of over 8000 children's picture books. She has given presentations and workshops on state, regional, and national levels demonstrating strategies for developing integrated curriculum and authentic assessments. She is currently teaching an extended-day kindergarten. Her husband and son own and restore vintage steam locomotives to operating condition. Their Vulcan 0-4-0T Flagg Coal Company # 75 is currently operating at the Steam Railroading Institute in Owosso, Michigan, and traveling to other museums and tourist railroads for special activities.



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Established in 1972, the Whitewater Valley Railroad is a non profit railroad history organization. It is an operating railroad museum dedicated to the preservation of a historic branch line railroad, the restoration of railroad equipment, and to the conduct of railroad educational programs. The railroad is operated by volunteers and all proceeds from train operations and special events will be used to further the organization's mission.

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Thank you to Katie,  
who keeps pushing me forward and then  
tidies up my writing after me. PMG

# The Polar Express

## **Background on the Book**

*When a doubting young boy takes an extraordinary train ride to the North Pole, he embarks on a journey of self-discovery that shows him that the wonder of life never fades for those who believe.*

## **From School Library Journal**

“Grade 1-3 Given a talented and aggressive imagination, even the challenge of as cliché-worn a subject as Santa Claus can be met effectively. Van Allsburg's Polar Express is an old-fashioned steam train that takes children to the North Pole on Christmas Eve to meet the red-suited gentleman and to see him off on his annual sleigh ride. This is a personal retelling of the adult storyteller's adventures as a youngster on that train. The telling is straight, thoughtfully clean-cut and all the more mysterious for its naive directness; the message is only a bit less direct: belief keeps us young at heart. The full-page images are theatrically lit. Colors are muted, edges of forms are fuzzy, scenes are set sparsely, leaving the details to the imagination. The light comes only from windows of buildings and the train or from a moon that's never depicted. Shadows create darkling spaces and model the naturalistic figures of children, wolves, trees, old-fashioned furniture and buildings. Santa Claus and his reindeer seem like so many of the icons bought by parents to decorate yards and rooftops: static, posed with stereotypic gestures. These are scenes from a memory of long ago, a dreamy reconstruction of a symbolic experience, a pleasant remembrance rebuilt to fulfill a current wish: if only you believe, you too will hear the ringing of the silver bell that Santa gave him and taste rich hot chocolate in your ride through the wolf-infested forests of reality. Van Allsburg's express train is one in which many of us wish to believe.”

*Kenneth Marantz, Art Education Department, Ohio State University, Columbus  
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Visit the Polar Express site <http://www.polarexpress.com> and click on *Teachers/Librarians* for in-depth lesson plans on The Polar Express and all of Chris Van Allsburg's books.

Booklists, reading resources and more information and materials on **The Polar Express Reading Challenge** can be found at <http://www.polarexpressmovie.com>

All aboard! Click the links for downloadable activity and coloring sheets, Polar Express Party instructions, recipes, and more!  
<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/thepolarexpress/fungames.shtml>

# Chris Van Allsburg

Chris Van Allsburg describes the setting of his 1950s childhood in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as idyllic and comfortable. "The houses weren't big. They were nice, small houses for families of four or maybe five. There were still places nearby where I could catch tadpoles, there were places to go sledding, there were fields where you could play baseball—not someplace surrounded by a fence, just open fields. And I rode my bike to school."

Van Allsburg loved drawing as a child, but remembers "certain peer pressures encouraged little fingers to learn how to hold a football instead of a crayon." It was not until he entered the University of Michigan and took a freshman course in drawing that he re-discovered his love of art. He majored in fine arts and after graduation went on to earn an advanced degree in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

Though Van Allsburg began his artistic life as a sculptor, even his early pieces show his emergence as a storyteller. Many of his sculptures possess a strong sense of narrative and action, and they show the humorous and slightly dark qualities seen in many of his picture books. He was sculpting full time but began drawing in the evenings at home because his studio was so far away.

While he was still at RISD, Van Allsburg's wife Lisa, who produced a local television show, invited one of the show's guests home to dinner. The author and artist David Macaulay looked at Van Allsburg's drawings and confirmed Lisa Van Allsburg's feeling that they had tremendous picture-book potential. Macaulay encouraged Van Allsburg to send his drawings to editors, and as a result he developed a relationship with David Macaulay's editor, Walter Lorraine, at Houghton Mifflin Company.

Walter Lorraine remembers receiving a series of pictures of Van Allsburg's work. One piece in particular interested him. It was the image titled "Under the Rug" which later made its way into **The Mysteries of Harris Burdick**. Lorraine was struck by the narrative potential in Van Allsburg's work. He felt Van Allsburg had an exceptional artistic talent and, more rarely, an understanding of how to tell a story through pictures. They met and discussed a book Van Allsburg wanted to do about topiary gardens. The idea evolved into **The Garden of Abdul Gasazi**, his first picture book, which Walter Lorraine published and which was chosen as a Caldecott Honor Book.

That was 1979. Since then Walter Lorraine has published a new picture book by Chris Van Allsburg almost every year. Van Allsburg has won two Caldecott Medals and has achieved status as one of the greatest children's book illustrators of our time.

*From <http://www.eduplace.com/author/vanallsburg/biography.html>*

Bio and personal interview are also available at  
<http://www.kidsreads.com/authors/au-van-allsburg-chris.asp>

# Author Study

Check out Chris Van Allsburg's site <http://www.chrisvanallsburg.com> for great ideas and materials including fun interactive elements.

Another excellent resource for this author study is the Chris Van Allsburg Teacher Resource File from the **Internet School Library Media Center (ISLMC)** <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/allsburg.htm>

Integrating the Literature of Chris Van Allsburg in the Classroom  
by Thomas J. Palumbo, illustrated by Vanessa Filkins , 1992. Good Apple ISBN 0-86653-658-2

*The Polar Express, Jumanji, The Wreck of the Zephyr along with seven of his other books are included. An 11-step format for developing the educational benefits of literature used in the classroom is presented, ideal for integrated instruction. For grades 2-7.*

## Activities with the books of Chris Van Allsburg

Excellent ideas and activities for working with Chris Van Allsburg's books can be found at <http://www.eduplace.com/author/vanallsburg/activities.html>

Polar Express Lesson Plan Links can be found at [http://www.communityschool.net/topics%20of%20study/polar\\_express.htm](http://www.communityschool.net/topics%20of%20study/polar_express.htm)

Use a book as a springboard for discussion such as Just a Dream and thinking about pollution or The Wretched Stone to stimulate conversation about television viewing habits.

Have students try their hand at making an illustration for the beginning letter of their name after reading The Z Was Zapped.

Ask students to write their own conclusions for situations such as in Jumanji or The Garden of Abdul Gasazi.

Compare the illustrations of Van Allsburg's Caldecott winning books. Discuss how the pictures complement and extend the story. Choose a favorite character, setting, or illustration and recreate it, using different techniques, colors, or interpretation.

The text of Chris Van Allsburg's acceptance speech for the Caldecott Medal for The Polar Express can be found at <http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/authors/vanallsburg/calpolar.shtml>

# Curriculum Activities

*Note: No attempt has been made to develop the ideas presented into complete lessons. They are presented to help leaders and learners start thinking and planning activities that will fit their specific needs. No grade levels or age requirements are given since the leader is the best judge of the value and appropriateness of the materials for their own learners.*

## **Book Review**

Ask students to write their own reviews of The Polar Express or other books they are reading related to this unit. If equipment is available, have students do their own "Reading Rainbow-style" reviews on tape. We play selected book reviews over our in-house broadcasting system once a week when available.

## **First Gifts**

The first gift of Christmas was very special. Talk and write about what might be considered a special gift. Books to read might include:

The Clown of God an old story told and illustrated by Tomie dePaola  
Claude the Dog A Christmas Story by Dick Gackenbach  
The Little Drummer Boy by Ezra Jack Keats  
The Trees of the Dancing Goats by Patricia Polacco  
Silver Packages An Appalachian Christmas Story by Cynthia Rylant  
Grandfather's Christmas Tree by Keith Strand  
The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey by Susan Wojciechowski

## **Santa Claus**

Different countries and cultures have a variety of characters who figure prominently in believing, holiday gift giving, and the celebration of Christmas. Compare and contrast the behaviors of some of these characters with the Santa Claus we know.

The Legend of Old Befana by Tomie dePaola  
Santa Who? by Gail Gibbons  
Welcome Comfort by Patricia Polacco  
Baboushka and the Three Kings by Ruth Robbins

## **The Bell**

Use a large single sleigh bell, preferably silver, and tie a piece of leather or cord through the opening so it can be held and shaken. Use as decorations and/or tree ornaments or give as special gifts

Use rhythm band jingle bells to accompany singing of Christmas carols. Make your own jingle bell bracelets to use with Christmas music. Use a set of hand bells to play simple tunes. Listen to different sizes and kinds of bells, cow bells, church bells, harness bells, carillons. Read different versions of the classic story "Why the Chimes Rang".

# Curriculum Activites

## **The Train**

*What would it be like to travel on a train?*

*Discover the specialized vocabulary of railroading; terms, hobo graffiti, hand and lantern signs, and signal lights*

*How could one really travel to the North Pole? (Here an investigation of the real North Pole could begin—more science and social studies.)*

*What are the differences between steam and diesel locomotives?*

Talk and write about a trip taken on a train. If students have not ridden on a train, ask them to use their imagination and the information they have discovered in their reading to write about a trip they would like to take. Picture books that might help:

[The Train to Timbuctoo](#) by Margaret Wise Brown

[The Owl Who Became the Moon](#) by Jonathan London

[The Train](#) written & illustrated by David McPhail

[Night Train](#) by Caroline Stutson

[Window Music](#) by Anastasia Suen

An excellent resource for a Polar Express teacher's guide with additional classroom activities, writing exercises, and informational links can be found at

<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/thepolarexpress/educators.shtml>

## **Additional Resources**

[A Guide for Using \*The Polar Express\* in the Classroom](#)

by Susan Kilpatrick      **ISBN: 1557345430**

Teacher Created Materials; (May 1, 1996)

*This resource is directly related to its literature equivalent and filled with a variety of cross-curricular lessons to do before, during, and after reading the book. This reproducible book includes sample plans, author information, vocabulary building ideas, and cross-curriculum activities.*

Thomas the Tank Engine & Friends <http://www.randomhouse.com/kids/thomas/>

Thomas and Friends <http://www.hitentertainment.com/thomasthetankengine/>

# Websites for Railroading Information

The Michigan State Trust for Railway Preservation, Inc. <http://www.mstrp.com/>  
*The Michigan State Trust for Railway Preservation, Inc. served as a consultant to **The Polar Express** which uses the Pere Marquette 1225 as the image of the locomotive in the movie.*

Steam Locomotive Information <http://www.steamlocomotive.info/>  
*Excellent source of data on and photographs of steam locomotives*

Amtrak <http://www.amtrak.com/>  
*The name Amtrak is the blending of the words "American" and "Track". The railroad's official name is the National Railroad Passenger Corporation.*

CSX Corporation <http://www.csx.com/>  
*CSX Transportation operates the largest rail network in the eastern United States.*

National Railway Historical Society <http://www.nrhs.com/>

Steamtown National Historical Site, Pennsylvania <http://www.nps.gov/stea/>  
*Provides an excellent opportunity to discover the history and impact of steam railroading in America, administered by the National Park Service*

Great Smoky Mountain Railroad, North Carolina *A truly spectacular ride with 53 miles of track, two tunnels and 25 bridges.* <http://www.gsmr.com>

Illinois Railway Museum, American's Largest Railway Museum  
<http://www.irm.org/index.html>

National Railroad Museum, Green Bay, Wisconsin  
<http://www.nationalrrmuseum.org/>

North Carolina Transportation Museum <http://www.ci.salisbury.nc.us/nctrans/>  
*Excellent educational materials*

Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania <http://www.rrmuseumpa.org/>  
*A World-Class Museum of Railroad History, at Strasburg, Lancaster County, PA*

Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum, Chattanooga, TN  
*Largest operating railroad museum in the South* <http://www.tvrail.com/>