

# Polar Express

by Chris Van Allsburg

## Classroom Favorites



Teacher's Guide by Jennifer Lee Richards

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### Synopsis

One Christmas Eve a little boy takes a magical train ride on the Polar Express to the North Pole. There he meets Santa Claus and his hundreds of elves.

The boy is chosen to receive the first gift of Christmas. Although he knows he can ask for anything in the world, what he wants most is one of Santa's silver sleigh bells. As the reindeer were pacing their harness bells had made the most beautiful sound. The boy's wish comes true as Santa gives him a hug and hands him a silver bell.

Once the children are all back on the train the boy realizes he has lost the bell by putting it in his robe pocket that had a hole in it. The boy's heart is broken.

In the morning when all the gifts have been opened, the boy's sister finds one small box behind the tree. Inside it is the silver bell with a note from, "Mr. C." The boy and his sister hear the beautiful music the bell makes when they shake it, but their parents do not.

In time the boy realizes that the bell only rings for those who truly believe in Santa Claus.

### Biographical Sketch

Chris Van Allsburg was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on June 18, 1949. He is the son of a dairy farmer and is married to Lisa Morrison. He received his B.F.A. from University of Michigan in 1972 and M.F.A. in 1975 from Rhode Island School of Design. He is Jewish and lives at 114 Lorimer Avenue, Providence, Rhode Island 02906. His office address is: Houghton-Mifflin, 2 Park St., Boston, Massachusetts 02107.

Van Allsburg is an artist, a sculptor, an author and illustrator of children's books. He has been a teacher of illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design since 1977. He has exhibited his work at several museums.

Van Allsburg "liked to do normal kid things like playing baseball and building model cars, trucks and planes." He "also liked to drive a go-cart on public streets, which was illegal." He "lived in a growing suburb with half-built houses, great to spook around in. We were not supposed to do this, obviously our parents were afraid we would hurt ourselves."

The first book he read was a "Dick, Jane and Spot" story. "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 that Spot got a bath," he said. "Not exactly an exciting revelation. Especially since you had already seen Spot getting his

bath in the picture at the top of the page."

The first book he checked out from the library was about Babe Ruth. Van Allsburg said about it, "I started reading it at school and continued reading it at home. I read till dinner and opened the book again after dessert, finally taking it to bed with me. Having grown up with television, I was accustomed to watching something until it was finished." He assumed you read books in the same manner.

Van Allsburg's favorite subject was art. "Once in the second grade (he) felt feverish at breakfast but concealed it from (his) mother because it was art day." Later that day young Van Allsburg threw up in a classmate's boot and was sent home!

Van Allsburg said, "there was a great deal of peer recognition to be gained in elementary school by being able to draw well. I drew cartoon figures." Dagwood Bumstead was his speciality.

In the fourth grade Van Allsburg abandoned being an artist because of sports. He had never thought of growing up to be an artist. He had once thought of becoming a lawyer.

"By a bureaucratic oversight (he) was accepted to the art school of University of Michigan. At first it was just a lark (he) thought. (He) thought it would be a great way to earn a college degree by goofing around for four years."

"(He) drew only to pass required courses, spending all (his) time learning how to cast bronze, carve wood and work in ceramics."

"Later (he) started drawing in the evening as a hobby, considering sculpture (his) real job."

It was a friend and his wife, an elementary teacher, who convinced Van Allsburg to try illustrating books. It was his wife who took his first story around to publishers.

Van Allsburg says, "a book is a four-and-a-half month commitment. There are fourteen to fifteen drawings in a conventionally laid out book and by the tenth drawing (he is) ready to start another project."

"I've got a 'sketchbook' in my head," he said, "with thousands of of sculpture and enough descriptions for ten books."

Van Allsburg says his "ability to conjecture color is dependent on (his) continuing to work from life." He said, "Unless I learn the principles of light on color I cannot apply them to things I imagine. I go out to see what the grass looks like in a shadow and then in light."

About correspondence to readers he commented, "I answered the first hundred letters. But then my volume of mail became so great

that it would take me four or five days a month to keep up with it.”

When Van Allsburg “is not drawing (he) enjoys taking walks and going to museums. (He) plays tennis, sails, and reads quite a lot.”

### Critic's Corner

Van Allsburg's first book, *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* was one of *New York Times* Best Illustrated Children's Books in 1979. It also was a Caldecott Honor Book, won a *Boston Globe-Horn Book* award, earned the Irma Simonton Black Award from Bank Street College of Education, and was one of the International Board on Books honor books.

*The Polar Express* earned the Caldecott Medal in 1986. It earned the *Boston Globe-Horn Book* award in 1985 and *Boston-Globe-Horn Book* honor book in 1986. *The Polar Express* received the Parents' Choice Award for Illustration from the Parents' Choice Award Foundation, the Kentucky Bluegrass Award from Northern Kentucky University, was chosen as one of New York Public Library's Children's Books, was one of *Redbook's* Ten Best Picture Books for Children and was one of Child Study Association's Children's Books of the Year.

*The Polar Express* has been made into a cassette recording also.

About *The Polar Express* Van Allsburg claims, “when I started *The Polar Express* I thought I was writing about a train trip, but the story was actually about faith and the desire to believe in something.”

“One of Van Allsburg's signature elements is the small dog included in most of his books.” Van Allsburg said, “I look(ed) forward to placing the dog. It's a little game with me. I look forward to concealing him more and more, so that you might have to spend four or five hours looking for him.” He says the hardest book to find the dog in is the *The Stranger*.

Van Allsburg calls himself, “a gentle surrealist.” “I'm pleased when my own drawings are mysterious to me,” he said. “I like the idea of withholding something, both in drawings and writing. I don't like to be too specific in a drawing. I like turning a face away a little bit, or cropping the drawing with a part of a figure in the frame. I also like leaving something out of the story. There must be something to ponder at the end. My stories neither begin by posing nor end by solving a question. The reader has to resolve the book after he has read it. The book itself is merely chapter one.”

### Objectives

1. To analyze the value and variety of gifts
2. To learn about Santa Claus and discuss belief in him
3. To understand the power of descriptive language

### Comprehension/Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the descriptive words, “It was wrapped in an apron of steam.” What pictures do the students get in their heads?
2. When reading about the conductor asking the boy if he is coming aboard the train, stop. Ask how many of your students would or would not go. Why?
3. Notice the delicious words Van Allsburg uses to describe the foods the children ate on the train. Take them out of the sentences, does the meaning change?
4. Ask the students which of their pairs of pajamas would they like to have been wearing on the trip and why.

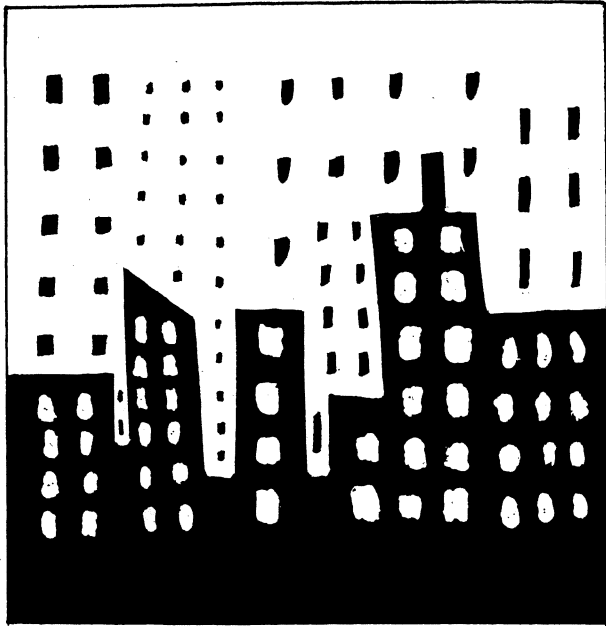
5. Talk about roller coaster rides. How do they make the students feel? (Go on one, if possible!)
6. When the conductor states, “He will choose one of you.” Ask the students to whom they think Santa will give the first gift of Christmas. Did they predict correctly?
7. Discuss crowded places the students have been in before. Example: a mall, an amusement park, leaving a sporting event. Do they like the experience? Why or why not? Share related stories. How would they have felt being in the crowd in the city at the North Pole?
8. Discuss visits students have made to see Santa. Were they ever scared?
9. In the story when Santa asks the boy what he wants for Christmas, stop reading and ask students what they think he will ask for. What would they ask for? Why?
10. Discuss the significance of the clock striking midnight as the boy receives his gift. (It has just become Christmas day, making his gift truly “the first” gift of Christmas.)
11. Discuss in what other story a clock striking midnight is important. (Cinderella)
12. Discuss how the boy felt when he found out the bell was missing. Have the students ever lost anything? How did they feel then? Share experiences.
13. Before finishing the book, have students brainstorm places the bell could have gone. Where would they look for it?
14. Examine the toys the two children received. (A toy truck, a dollhouse, and a clown doll.) Are these still common toys? What is? Do the toys seem to represent another time period? Research the toy car type to identify its model year.
15. Discuss family traditions concerning the opening of presents and stocking gifts. Are they all opened Christmas morning? Some or all Christmas Eve? (For instance, my family opens the smallest present Christmas Eve, presents Christmas day, and stockings Christmas night.)
16. Before reading the last page, ask the students why they think the children's parents cannot hear the silver bell.
17. Discuss why the students think the other people stopped being able to hear the bell and yet the boy could even after he had grown up.
18. Discuss the illustrations. What medium does Van Allsburg use?

### Student Activities

1. Read the book aloud or along with your teacher.
2. Find Van Allsburg's “signature,” the dog.
3. Read other books by Chris Van Allsburg.
4. Research the Caldecott Medal.
5. Read books about Christmas, trains, the North Pole, or Santa Claus.
6. Look at a pocket watch. How many students have ever seen one?

7. Make and/or eat some candies with nougat centers.
8. Drink rich cocoa made from scratch.
9. Sing Christmas carols.
10. Have a p.j. party. (Day or night)
11. Learn the name of and identification of the directions north, south, east, west on a globe or map.
12. Show the North Pole on the globe or maps.
13. Ride a train.
14. Bring in toy train sets and share about them.
15. Tour a train station or railroad museum.
16. Visit a traveling toy train show. (They are at shopping malls often.)
17. Using a paper doll type pattern make passenger train cars out of paper. Attach these to a cut out engine and caboose. Have students draw a picture of themselves looking out one of the windows. Display the train.
18. Use the same paper doll type pattern to record titles of books students have read during S.S.R. (Silent Sustained Reading). Have the engine show a picture of them as the engineer. Pin these to a bulletin board and when they have read a book release a passenger car from behind the engine car. Write their goal or reward on the caboose so that when they reach it they will know.
19. Research wolves and white-tailed rabbits.
20. Research the history of the story of Santa Claus. He has many names and has been told about in various countries. Find the different countries on the map and study their different holiday traditions.
21. Pass out jingle bells and sing "Jingle Bells" using the bells to compliment the song.
22. Bring in various jingling bells and choose a class favorite. Tell where each bell came from. Did they find one that they think sounds like Santa's sleigh bells?
23. If possible, go for a sleigh ride.
24. Research reindeer.
25. Go see some reindeer at the zoo.
26. Research about mountain ranges. Which ranges might the Polar Express have traveled through? (Rockies?)
27. Discuss the expression, "We climbed mountains so high it seemed as if we would scrape the moon." Research the moon and how far away it is from the earth.
28. Research the term, "The Great Polar Ice Cap."
29. Research the North Pole. Ask the students if there is such a city like the one described in the book.
30. Have the students name the different toy factories there would be at the North Pole. Have them categorize types of toys in order to come up with generalized factories. Examples: a doll factory, board games factory, or robot factory.
31. Make a wall mural showing these different factories and the city of the North Pole. Use decorated milk cartons stapled to a bulletin board for a 3-D effect.
32. Discuss what the class knows about elves. Illustrate different costumes elves could wear. Make a paper doll string of elves so that the students could each decorate one.
33. Make a "to do" list the elves and Santa would have to get done before Christmas Eve night.
34. The children saw "hundreds" of elves. Count to one hundred. Try to count the elves on the pages.
35. Examine the expression, "(the train) slowed to a crawl." Act out the movement of the train with the rest of the class.
36. Use expressive improvisation to act out what the elves might have cheered when Santa appeared. Example: "Hooray for Santa!" (Arms raised over head.) "It's Kris Kringle at last!" (Clapping hands.)
37. Use a cloth drawstring laundry bag for Santa's giant bag. Put items inside it and have students guess what they are. You could use this for an advent calendar activity, having a student pick an item out each day before the class goes on vacation. The items could be related to Christmas, *The Polar Express*, or even be toys.
38. Notice the tower clock that is showing the time to be midnight. Count to twelve. Bring in a clock that chimes the hour or tape record a grandfather clock ringing twelve o'clock and listen to it. Practice telling time.
39. Learn how to mend a torn item of clothing.
40. Get a whip for students to see. Or show a portion of a western or "Indiana Jones" movie to see how a whip is "cracked."
41. Learn the names of Santa's reindeer and how they are traditionally called in order. ("On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer, and Vixen. Comet and Cupid, and Donner and Blitzen. But, do you recall, the most famous reindeer of all? Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer...")
42. Act out what your comment would have been to the boy once he found out he had lost the bell.
43. Tell about your family's Christmas tree. If it is decorated similarly each year, bring in a picture. Tally up the results of which families use colored or white lights. Other colors? Which ones use blinking lights? Do any of them hang strung popcorn or tinsel? Make a bar graph of the results.
44. Have students cup their hands around their mouths and shout, "Merry Christmas!" as the conductor did. See who can call the loudest. (You may want to go outside for this activity.)
45. Get a tape recording or sound effects record with a train whistle on it to listen to.
46. Use large boxes to create train cars. Cut out the top and bottom of the boxes and have students "wear" them. Have students walk as the connected train to gym or art. Or come dressed as a train in order to share the book *The Polar Express* with another class.

47. Make a drawing of your own town.
48. Make night/day city scenes. Use one piece of black and one piece of white small construction paper. With the black piece, cut joining buildings as in a panorama. Starting the buildings at about the half of the page makes it easier to work with. Holes can be cut in the back buildings to represent windows. Glue the black cut out half page on top of the white piece aligning the bottoms. There's your nighttime city. Turn it over and draw black squares on the white buildings to represent windows. There's your daytime city. You may want to add signs or other city features. Make the city the North Pole and label the different toy factories, if you like.

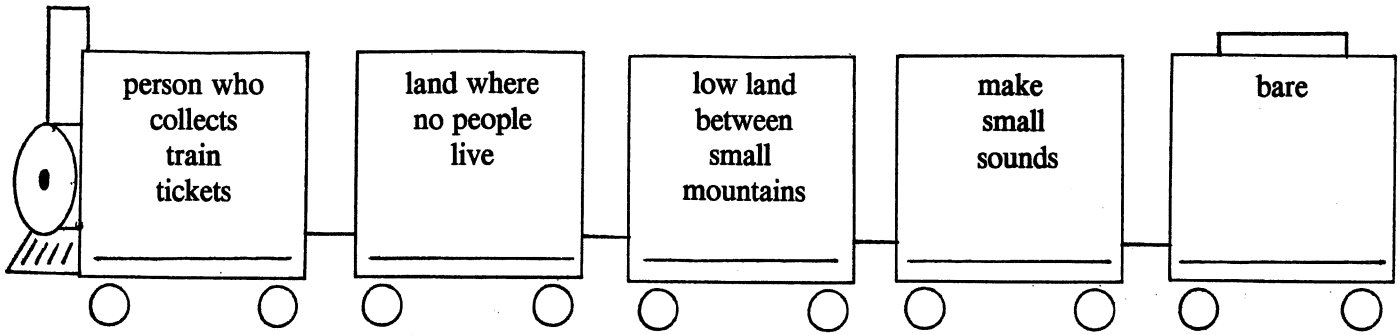


### **Bibliography**

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## VOCABULARY TEST

Write the correct word within the train car with the matching definition.



|           |            |
|-----------|------------|
| plains    | rustle     |
| valley    | thundered  |
| barren    | scrape     |
| conductor | wilderness |

## COMPREHENSION TEST

Circle the correct answer for each of the questions below.

1. On Christmas Eve the little boy was laying quietly in his bed listening for
  - A. the Polar Express
  - B. Santa's sleigh bells
  - C. the reindeer's hoofs.
  
2. On the Polar Express the children
  - A. sang Christmas carols
  - B. told ghost stories
  - C. ate chocolate ice cream.
  
3. The train climbed mountains so high it seemed as if it would
  - A. sail into the clouds
  - B. scrape the moon
  - C. melt from the sunlight.
  
4. The factories in the North Pole made
  - A. candies and cakes
  - B. Christmas ornaments
  - C. Christmas toys.
  
5. Santa's helpers are called
  - A. good girls and boys
  - B. clowns
  - C. elves.

## ANSWER KEY

### VOCABULARY TEST

Train car words in order:

conductor      wilderness      valley      rustle      barren.

### COMPREHENSION TEST

1. B      2. A      3. B      4. C      5. C

**TEACHER'S NOTES**



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