Chris Van Allsburg

TeachingBooks.net Original In-depth Author Interview

Chris Van Allsburg interviewed April 27, 2011 in his home in Providence, Rhode Island.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You grew up near Grand Rapids, Michigan. What was your childhood like?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I guess I had a conventional 1950s childhood in a place that was neither exurban nor suburban. It was sort of in between at that point. The little bungalows and ranch houses were all quite new. I remember sometimes poking around half-built houses in the neighborhood with my friends.

I was left pretty much to my own devices. I was able to walk to school, and after school I'd get together with one or two friends, and we'd jump on our bikes and just cruise around the neighborhood. We'd go to these ponds and scoop up minnows and put them in jars and bike through fields.

I can remember making little bag lunches and feeling so adventurous. We'd make a peanut butter sandwich and pour some milk in a mason jar, which always tasted terrible by the middle of the warm day. But it was the idea of going off on your own and then taking a chow break. It was a satisfying childhood.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What were your interests as a child?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I may have drawn a little bit more or looked forward to art days a little more than the average student, but I think my real interest or talent was model building. I was actually quite gifted at it; being very particular about the construction and trying to make each model a really finely crafted thing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What kind of models did you build?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Everything. I built some full-rig boats. I remember when I was probably around nine years old, my parents offered to send me to overnight camp. I was kind of a homebody kid, so I said they could send me to overnight camp, or they could buy me this gigantic, three-foot model of a clipper ship.

Today's parents probably would have been worried about their child being properly socialized. But they bought the model and let their kid spend the summer in the

basement rigging a clipper ship when he could have been outdoors playing. I did a pretty good job on it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What were your friends like?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I had some good friends in my neighborhood. There were many more girls in my neighborhood than boys, so a lot of my friends were girls. That didn't prevent us from doing what we would have done if we were all boys; we still played baseball and stuff like that.

I had a relatively friend-filled childhood. But my willingness at nine to crawl into the basement and build the model ship suggests, at a somewhat early age, an inclination toward the isolation and solitude of art making. It was part of my nature. It never struck me as the downside of being an artist. I was perfectly comfortable with being by myself all day long, even at the age of nine.

I didn't take art as an elective in high school because my interests were more along the lines of science and math. I excelled at them, and everyone thought I'd probably choose a career path in the sciences.

TEACHINGBOOKS: But your imagination was spinning wherever you were.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: It's true. I think one of the things that gives my art a recognizable quality is that it blends a kind of rationality (part of my nature because of my interest in science and math) with fantasy. My art, though it's fantastic, is really quite rational.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Could you share an example of your art being fantastical yet rational?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Probably the most obvious is a fantasy like *Jumanji*, which proposes that a game board can come to life. The rationality of that comes from the illustrations where I attempt to show that even though this is a bizarre idea, it could happen and this is exactly what it would look like.

I'm not trying to make my illustrations photographic. I'm simply trying to make them persuasive. There's an aesthetic rationale that gives the books a compelling quality. If *Jumanji* had been illustrated in antic, cartoonish images, it would not have resonated and seemed like a real, probable thing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Nor *Polar Express*.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: That's right. That kind of rational side of myself is probably most evident in my determination to illustrate things that seem impossible in ways that make them seem possible—that they can happen.

I believe as a fantasist that once you latch onto a single, slightly bizarre premise, whether it's a game board that can come to life or a train that can miraculously power itself northward, you still get just one bizarre idea per story. When I write a fantasy, I only give myself one wildcard to pull out, and the rest has to be recognizable reality.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some other wildcards?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: *Zathura* is essentially a sequel to *Jumanji*, and the wildcard is another game board that comes to life. In *The Stranger*, the wildcard is that a mythic character like Jack Frost could suffer amnesia.

Ben's Dream is a giant wildcard. It asks what would happen if the dream a child had had two components: a torrential rainstorm and the remembered images from a book that the child was reading while they fell asleep. You have a combined subconscious reality—which are the great landmarks—and a torrential deluge. It adds up to a single dream theme. The wildcard for that book is not simply the dream theme, but also the idea that if two people had the exact, same experience, would they encounter each other in the same dream world?

TEACHINGBOOKS: This is a great insight. What really makes your fantasy books work is one wildcard—not five, not ten, just one—and the rest has to be grounded in reality.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Often these books are wall-to-wall fantasies, where so many bizarre and strange things can happen that they no longer surprise. I've always thought it's great to keep the world as real as you can and just play that one wildcard, and then see what happens to the recognizable world that surrounds you.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There seems to be a three-dimensional element in your two-dimensional pictures. Do you see this? What is behind this effect?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I don't sense it in my own artistic process. But the only things that I used to draw before I drew pictures were images of sculptures that I was going to make. I would attempt to draw these things fairly accurately because I wanted to have a relatively clear map of what I was going to do before I started modeling. This led me to drawing in a kind of proto-solid way. It's not inconceivable that when I began drawing pictures for their own sake that some of that technique carried over.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You didn't study art in high school, yet you have a BFA from University of Michigan and got your graduate degree from the Rhode Island School of Design.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I kind of conned my way into architecture and design school at U of M. I hadn't really decided what I wanted to study in college. When a U of M admissions officer came to my high school, I met with him. I had been taking some AP physics and AP math, but I did not feel then that I was destined to do that. So I asked the admissions officer, "What's this A and D college here on the form?" He said that it was architecture and design, and I said, "Well, that sounds kind of interesting." He looked at my transcript and saw that I hadn't studied art. I told him that I studied privately because my skill level was beyond what I would be able to benefit from in the classroom, which was a complete fabrication. He admitted me into the art school.

That was a little fork in the road that was taken without any consideration whatsoever. I didn't even flip a coin. I just said, "Why not?"

Once I was in college, I discovered that everybody had actually studied privately for a long time or gone to an arts high school. When I saw the drawing skills around me, I thought the ability to draw well was innate, and that I did not innately possess it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you handle this reaction?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I was very good with my hands, and I was a good craftsman, so I was drawn into the sculpture department where modeling and doing intricate work with wood or stone or metal finishing were right up my alley.

Through the seven years that I studied sculpture, I really avoided drawing, except for the drawing I did in preparation to make something. I didn't study painting; I didn't really study drawing. For the most part, I avoided two-dimensional art making. It was all sculpture, all the time.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you teach at the Rhode Island School of Design?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Yes. I taught at RISD for about 12 years. It was a pleasure being in a room with 20 young people who were interested in art and to be able to share my enthusiasm and see if I could light some fires in them. I enjoyed teaching, but there was only so much time I wanted to give up from my work in my studio. When I became a parent of a couple of beautiful daughters, they were what took me out of my studio rather than my teaching commitments.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What kind of approach do you take to creating your art?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: There's quite a difference in temperaments that lead people into a studio. As I already suggested, one of them can simply be an appreciation of or a

desire for solitude. But I always saw a division between artists who were process-oriented and those who were product-oriented.

Even as a sculptor, I didn't pick up a hunk of clay and see where it would lead me by noodling around with it for a day. I had a distinct product that I took from idea to completion. I imagined what it was I was going to make, then I would draw the thing that I saw in my imagination. And then I would build the thing in my drawing using clay, wood, or another material. Of course, there would be variations in my design because I would discover things as I worked along, and I got some pleasure from the process.

But the motivating carrot for me was this idea of a product that at one point would be complete, that I would have made a permanent, physical representation of hours of my life. It wouldn't vanish.

I was attracted to the idea of the product being a representation not simply of my ideas but of literally hours of my life captured. No matter what the outcome of the work—whether it was a book or a piece of sculpture or a drawing—I captured a little part of my life in a bell jar. That product was important to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share a time when this sort of motivation became especially important?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Sometimes the process can be tedious. There are times when I think it would be great to have the old renaissance model where I would have three apprentices, and I could delegate some of the more tedious work.

For *Zathura*, I decided the house should have wallpaper on the walls. That's an enormous time commitment to draw wallpaper that's correct in its perspective and its foreshortening. I've often thought, "Gee, it would be great if I just had a wallpaper person here. I could layout the drawing and then hand it to my apprentice and say, 'Now put the wallpaper in there.'"

I work through the tedium by saying to myself, "When I finish drawing this wall of wallpaper, and I draw the figures in the room, I will have a drawing that will be handsome and compelling to look at—a thing of refinement—and it will be a record of how I spent the 40–50 hours it took to create it." It's a physical record.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your *Harris Burdick* book, where each page is its own entity, and describe a little bit about what the mystery of *Harris Burdick* is all about.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Well, the mystery of *Harris Burdick* is described as my introduction to Peter Wenders, who was a retired book editor. Wenders invited me to his home to see something that he thought would be of great interest to me.

I didn't go into detail how I met Wenders at a library signing, but nonetheless, that's where our encounter happened. He took me to his home and shared with me these drawings that he'd gotten in a most unusual fashion. In 1952 or 1953, I forget exactly when, he'd had a visitor at his editorial offices in Boston. The visitor had not

made an appointment but had brought along a portfolio and wanted to share the contents with Wenders. He introduced himself as Harris Burdick.

So Harris Burdick had this portfolio of drawings, which he shared with Peter Wenders. Burdick brought 14 pictures from 14 separate stories of his. He brought these individual pictures because he wanted to give a kind of a broad sample of what he'd been working on for who knows how many decades.

He told Wenders that for each of those 14 books he had many other drawings, and had written a story for each one. Wenders was amazed by the pictures that he saw and excitedly asked Burdick if he would return the next day. Wenders had a sense that Burdick was an outsider artist who toiled for many years, but for some reason, at this point in his life, he had mustered up the courage to finally share a lifetime of work. Wenders felt so fortunate that Burdick chose him to share his work with, and could not wait for the next day for Burdick's return.

Burdick never returned to Wenders's offices. Eventually Wenders retired and took the 14 pictures with him.

On the illustrations, Burdick had written the title from the book that each picture came from. He'd also written a caption from a moment in the story that the picture illustrated. Wenders showed these to me—these large charcoal drawings with a title at the top and a little caption at the bottom.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What happened next?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I persuaded Peter Wenders that the provocation of these drawings was too much to resist. It was almost impossible to look at these pictures with their title and caption and not begin to wonder what Burdick's stories might have been like.

Wenders agreed, and brought out a dusty old box filled with dozens of stories that he and his children had written over the years inspired by the Burdick drawings.

It was at this point that I persuaded Wenders to make those drawings available to Houghton Mifflin Company and allow them to produce the pictures along with their titles and captions. The expectation would be that teachers would use them in the classroom, and other children would be inspired to write Harris Burdick stories.

Over the last 15 to 20 years, I've gotten a load of those stories in the mail. They're great. Burdick left something behind that was pretty potent for story prompts.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The Harris Burdick website is a great medium for Burdick's writing prompts as well. It's also a great place for people to share their stories.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: In the portfolio version of *Harris Burdick* there is a description of the discovery of the 15th drawing of Harris Burdick, which was actually discovered in the antiquarian bookshop in New Jersey, hidden behind a mirror. That picture bears the same title as another picture in the original collection.

So for one Burdick story there are two images—which a conscientious Burdick storywriter will have to somehow contend with. One image shows an ocean liner squeezing down a Venetian canal that is far too narrow for the ocean liner. The other shows a young magician who is evidently in some trouble with her mentor.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Now there is a book that features Harris Burdick stories from some incredible and well-known writers.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: It is an accomplished crew, that's for sure. Houghton Mifflin approached a group of authors—many of whom were familiar with the book already. Steven King and his wife, Tabitha, had already used the book with their family, for example. Houghton Mifflin invited other eminent authors and Newbury winners, and they got to choose the picture to write from. I wrote about the picture that was left after all others were selected: Oscar and Alphonse.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book *The Queen of the Falls* is about a real person.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Yes. I first read about Annie Taylor over 40 years ago in a *Sports Illustrated* magazine about daredevils of Niagara. It was a fascinating article because there are a lot of very eccentric people drawn to the Falls.

The thing that was most remarkable to me was that the first person to go over the Falls in a barrel was a 62-year-old woman. That just seemed like too wacky and bold and strange a piece of American history not to write about.

Long after I had become a writer and illustrator, I was reflecting on the pleasure I got from reading biographies when I was a young kid. I think the first non-picture book I read was the biography of Babe Ruth. I liked the idea of learning about America by learning about eccentric or accomplished Americans.

I was just idly wondering who would be a good subject for a biography about Americans that would tell us something about America during their lifetimes. From deep in my memory came this recollection of a 62-year-old charm school teacher who had gone over Niagara Falls in a barrel. I looked online and saw that she had not been the subject of a mainstream publication or a picture book.

I thought that she would be a subject that younger kids would really be intrigued by because they don't see many heroes that fit her description. The whole idea of climbing into a barrel and going over the Falls—there's something kind of compelling about that. It's something that you can sort of imagine but not quite imagine. I anticipated before even laying out the book that I would be able to draw a couple of pictures of Annie actually inside the barrel.

One of the great things about doing a picture book that's about an adventure is to try to take the reader along on the adventure to make them feel like they'd experienced it as well. I tried to stage it and dramatize it in my illustrations so that the reader could feel the approaching climax of her trip. I designed and built a narrative around that giant plunge.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You sometimes use models to create appropriate facial expressions for your illustrations.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Expression on characters' faces is an extraordinarily valuable tool for a picture book maker because you want to lay as much weight on the pictures as you can. Human expression can convey so much about the psychological state of the individual—feelings about what's about to happen or what has happened. Expressions on the faces of the characters really bring a story to life and tell so much of the story without having to write it down.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you give a few examples of that?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: In *Probuditi*, there are all sorts of expressions that I felt went a long way toward telling the story. In the opening pages, we see Trudy's look of victimization because her brother has tossed a rubber spider in her bed and the self-satisfied, almost mocking expression on her brother's face.

I could write all that out, saying Trudy was hurt and felt like her brother had done these terrible things to her. I could write two paragraphs on her emotional state, or I could just try to get my model to hold that expression and then actually try to get it down in an illustration.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you take photographs of the models, or do you work off them live?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I do a lot of sketching. Photography distorts in ways that are amazing. People do not realize the difference between the way the camera lens records reality and the way the human eye does. I can almost always tell when an illustrator has used a photograph to help create an illustration. So, I do use a camera, but I also sketch a lot because I want to keep the proportions and the foreshortening like the human eye rather than the camera eye.

So I sketch, I photograph, and I also use a mirror. If I haven't gotten my model to get exactly the expression I want, I can intensify the expression a little bit by putting a mirror in front of myself and then seeing where the wrinkles fall, where the eyebrow dips, how the lips curl, that sort of thing—and then adding those to the illustration. There is a kind of universality in human expression. That's why they're legible. People have remarked when they see me that my characters look a lot like me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you find your models?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I run into kids. If they look like they might fit the child I imagine, I ask. They've come from my kids' schools, for example.

The model for Annie Edson Taylor was my daughter's algebra instructor. I was looking for someone who had a kind of a 19th Century bearing and appearance. I walked into a teacher-parent conference with my younger daughter's algebra teacher, and there she was. She was wearing wire-rimmed glasses, had her hair up, had Annie's physical proportions, and just seemed to have this 19th Century quality. And she was the right age. So I asked her if she'd be interested in modeling, and—more importantly—if she'd be interested in wearing a corset because this was a period piece.

I did a fair amount of research on clothing. I called a friend who is a costumer for theatrical productions. She got a bunch of late-19th Century and early 20th Century clothes at some rental places and brought them to the house.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Three of your books have been made into major motion pictures, making *Jumanji, Zathura,* and *Polar Express* quite popular in schools. Please share your impetus for these stories.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: People ask where my ideas come from. *The Polar Express* is kind of unique in the stories I've written. It always felt more like a memory that I was recalling than a story I was inventing.

A central image of a train came to my mind. I envisioned it as very short, with only four or five cars, but having a mammoth engine. It was standing perfectly still in an isolated forest in winter. There was snow on the ground, and because of the cold air, the engine was covering the ground with steam and vapor. I saw what you might call a cinematic image.

Then, I imagined that I heard footsteps crunching through the slightly icy snow as someone approached this train. There wasn't anyone visible in the train—maybe a face or a head or two—but I imagined footsteps approaching it. As I pulled back in my mind's eye, I could see that the figure approaching was a child in a bathrobe and slippers.

He was about to get onto the train, and that image triggered in me something more like a memory than my other stories. Those seemed like efforts of imagination and I was always wondering what happens next.

Once I imagined that this train had stopped for the boy—ultimately, I reimagined it in front of the boy's house—*The Polar Express* felt more to me like a "recovered memory."

I wrote it very quickly. Often, an author will get to a point in a story where they go back to the beginning and build things into it so they can take advantage of them in the end. But when I got to the point in *The Polar Express* where the boy asks for the bell, I had already asserted on the very first page of the book, without knowing where the story was going, that the bell was the thing that the boy longed to hear.

So when I got to the point in the story where the boy—where I—was on Santa's sleigh, there was no question that the boy could only ask for one thing, and that was the bell. In the sense of an author reaching for an action a character would take that would

fortify the script or underline the character's motivation, there was no need for me to do that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The artistic style you used in *The Polar Express* seems different from your other books, too.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I was heavily into the art of Caspar David Friedrich, who is a German romantic painter. I was swayed by his images of small things in large landscapes. In my case, I placed a small train in a vast landscape. There is something about his composition and colors that appeals to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your impetus for *Jumanji*?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: When you play a board game like Monopoly or Life, you can really get engaged with it and feel great when you bankrupt somebody with your hotels or cash in your life insurance policy. But when somebody reaches the last square or has all the money, the game is over, and you realize it was just a game. The idea for *Jumanji* came out of the question, "What if there was a game where, at least for the duration of the game, everything was real?"

Because I wanted the things to be real and risky, I decided that it would be a jungle adventure game because that would allow me to propose all sorts of things that would happen that are perfectly commonplace if you watch a jungle adventure movie, but they aren't commonplace if you play a jungle adventure game, and they genuinely happen in your living room.

I thought that was a sound narrative idea, and I thought that the resulting picture making would create interesting images because I would be combining things that don't ordinarily appear in the same image. People have seen rhinos. They've maybe even seen a rhino stampede. People have seen dining rooms. But how many times do you see a rhino stampede in a dining room?

I saw that as a sound premise for picture making, and I thought the cognitive dissonance of the pictures along with the story, with its ascending levels of peril and chaos, would work. Readers wonder if these children—powerless as they are—can resolve this. Then the children discover how to resolve it by a careful reading of the game's instructions.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where did the titles for *Jumanji* and *Zathura* come from?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I made them up. For *Jumanji*, I was looking for a word that suggested the word jungle, and I was just trying to create something exotic. A couple of years after the book came out, a woman contacted me wanting to know what Jumanji meant. I said, "To my knowledge, it means nothing. I just made it up. It's the name of the

game." I asked her why, and she said, "I'm pregnant, and my husband and I are looking for a name that would be very original for our child." I don't know if they used it or not.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Seeing your books come to life in film was probably an incredible experience and challenging in some ways, too.

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I believe moviemaking is a fabulous storytelling medium. In film, you have the constant ability to move the viewer around. You can use close-ups to establish the emotional condition of the protagonist or the characters, and you can do so much with music and sound.

However, I'm disinclined to compare films to books because books are so intimate, and they actually come to life inside your head. Films come to life on the screen. The psychological process involved in letting a book come to life inside you is so peculiar and special that I don't compare them.

In each of the three films that have been made from my books, I feel the filmmakers were trying to do justice to the book and trying to create something like the feelings in the book. They were all very well-budgeted and cast. And they had the full support of the studios to make genuine pieces of satisfying and quality (commercial) entertainment.

You have to make peace with the reality that the filmmaker is making their version of something that was inspired by your book and give up the idea that it's going to be your book come to life on the movie screen.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is it true that there's a dog in every one of your books?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Well, in *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi,* I wanted the dog to be a bull terrier, but I needed a model and did not know anyone who had that dog.

My brother-in-law was about to purchase a pet at that time, and he was going to buy a golden retriever. I told him he needed a more interesting dog, and I said he should look into bull terriers. He took my advice, and he went to a breeder and found a bull terrier. Winston joined my brother-in-law's family just in time for me to start drawing him as a model for Fritz, the dog which appears in *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi.* Not long after the publication of that book, Winston got run over by a UPS truck.

So I decided I would pay homage to him because of his contribution to my first book, and I would include him in every subsequent title. So, it's true that there is at least some part of the little white terrier in each book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are the recipient of two Caldecott Medals and one Caldecott Honor. What are your thoughts on these recognitions or any other you have received?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I'm proud to say that I've racked up a number of children-bestowed awards as well, though I don't think of children as my audience when I'm doing my initial writing. I'm just trying to write a good story and tell it lucidly.

The time in my process when I am thinking about kids is usually when I'm going over my third or fourth or fifth draft of a story. At this point, I want to make sure that the story is not condescending in any way but if readers hit a word that's a little taxing, they can figure it out by the context or the illustration.

I'm mindful of my audience when I'm doing my final drafts, but when I'm initially conceiving of something, I'm not thinking about it for kids or for adults. I'm just trying to tell a good tale and have some pictures that make it more exciting and more engaging.

Often the books that kids come in contact with are not chosen by them. The librarians and parents and grandparents are in between them and the body of books that are published. I have a great deal of respect and admiration for those adults, because I think they have terrific instincts about what kids will react to.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: If I get stuck on something, I'll do something else. I've got a sketchbook of a bunch of sculptures that will probably never be made. There are always letters to write. There is always something else to do.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's a typical day like for you?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: The productivity is dependent on my stability and routine in my life. I recently bought a new house, so right now there is no typical day. I'm almost as nutty and fussy about home décor as I was the rigging on the model ship I built as a kid. It has created a gigantic disruption in my schedule, and I don't like it. My ideal schedule is having nothing to do except the project that's on my drawing table.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have gotten to talk to a lot of students over the years. What do you like to talk with them about?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I don't do school visits, but when I do talk to students it is to a fairly wide age range. To the younger kids, I try to communicate with them what it's like to be an artist. They may have an understanding of what it is like to go to work: they don't see their parents all day, and it doesn't seem like much fun. I try to describe to them that when I go to work, I just go upstairs to a room in my house, and it's filled with pencil and paper and stuff like that. I sit in a chair and draw pictures and write stories all day. I try to get them to understand that I am lucky to be able to live a life like that.

I'm not trying to persuade all of them to pursue a life in art, but I want them to understand that their futures will take them in different directions. If they can find

something to do that they like as much as just sitting down with a pencil and a paper and drawing pictures, then they'll be lucky kids.

Then we talk about where ideas come from and how to draw pictures and how do you make stuff look real and ordinary stuff like that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers and librarians when you talk to them?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: Sometimes I'll talk more specifically about the creative process with older students or educators. I tell them that once you start out with a story idea, the most common question to ask is, "What happens next?"

Sometimes when you've answered "what happens next," and you think of something interesting, you can say to yourself, "Who does it happen to?" If you answer with someone interesting for the "who," then the "what" can become more interesting, too.

You're constantly interrogating yourself on who, what, when, where, and how. I talk about asking myself what I can change about a character. What would happen if this happened later? Should this happen? Should this be the first thing that happens?

Sometimes I talk about the story beginning and the story ending. They're so far apart; how can one possibly bridge them? Sometimes just trying to travel that path between the beginning and the end you end up going to places that you would not normally have gone to if you hadn't book-ended it initially.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is there anything else you would like to share?

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG: I encourage children to ask their parents for a little set of bookshelves. On those shelves, they can create their own personal library. There's nothing greater to have in your room than your own little library of books.

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