

# Chris Van Allsburg Talks About Sci-Fi, Art And Education

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NASA is part of a partnership that provides educational materials based on the book and movie "Zathura" to help teachers get students excited about space and learning. Recently, NASA talked with Chris Van Allsburg, the author and illustrator of 15 books, including "Zathura," "Jumanji" and "The Polar Express." Van Allsburg talked about the creative process, the importance of imagination and learning and what he hopes students and teachers will take away from his work.

Here are some of our questions and his answers:

NASA: Can you tell us about the process of writing "Zathura"? Did any NASA projects or materials influence you?

Van Allsburg: As I was writing the story, I was attracted to the idea of a space adventure because of all I hear and read about space in science fiction and also in reality. I'm fascinated by the NASA images I've seen over the years of people in space going to weightlessness. It looks like fabulous fun to just sort of spin around in space. But as I was writing "Zathura" I thought it could also be kind of scary to lose your gravity.

NASA: You were interested in math and science as a young person. Can we expect to see more books with the same aspect of either math or science concepts in the future?

Van Allsburg: Well, it's hard to say. When I contemplate my body of work, I have an appreciation for the internal logic the story needs, even

when it is a fantasy. Even a wild fantasy has to make sense. I suppose that is a kind of science. Another book of mine that presents something about the natural world is "Two Bad Ants," which is a story about life inside the world of ants that also contemplates what bad behavior for an ant would be. I really don't know about the things I'm going to do in the future -- whatever hits me, that's what I do.

**NASA:** In order for us to be successful at our jobs here at NASA, we have to keep a child-like sense of wonder. What do you do that has helped you retain this sense of wonder? Do your daughters help?

**Van Allsburg:** Sometimes when your children are very young, you can see the world through their eyes and have that child-like sense of wonder. Sometimes they force you into being an adult; and then you can't keep it. I think a little bit of the sense of wonder is a desire to escape the present, or the real world. That fantasy is actually a way to see the world how you'd like it to be, rather than seeing the way it is, and that's a bit of an inspiration. It's also the whole idea of believing in things that are not quite possible.

I like that kids are less inclined to discount things because they can't be done. They have an imagination that thinks that maybe things can be done. So certainly it is useful as an adult, possibly as an adult scientist as well as an artist, to think about things that might not happen and then wonder how they might.

**NASA:** How do you turn your imagination into a finished story, and do you do scientific research on your ideas?

**Van Allsburg:** I turn the things I imagine into stories first by thinking about them a lot. Before I draw a picture, I think about a story fairly completely -- there is a point where I can actually see a story happening in my mind's eye. It's like watching a tiny movie, but only inside my

head. At that point, the challenge for me is to figure out how to let somebody else see it. They can't peek into my ear and see what is happening in there, so I have to find the words to tell the story and then find the pictures that will make that story really come to life inside the covers of the book. There's a little research involved, but it's not so much scientific research as it is trying to find out what things look like before I draw them.

A lot of time kids want to know how I draw a certain kind of subject matter and I always give them the same answer: you have to find out what it looks like. If you want to know what somebody looks like when they are running down a street, you can't just close your eyes and make it up. If you want to draw a picture, you have to find out what it looks like, and that's your research.

**NASA:** Your stories encompass a wide range of topics, but you have a central theme of fantasy, imagination and making something unexpected come to life. Since childrens' imaginations are fired by things that they see and read, what effect do you think NASA's planned missions to the moon, Mars, and beyond have on kids' imaginations?

**Van Allsburg:** Ideas work on people's imaginations outside of normal experiences. If somebody describes something to you that could happen or might happen, and if it is of any interest to you at all, then you instantly start to use your imagination to think about it. If you are a scientist, you might be using your imagination to think about the problems of actually being able to do it.

If you are a child and you hear about traveling through the vast distances of space, I think your imagination mostly turns to thinking about what could you possibly do in all that time? And that could lead you to some other ideas about, say, what exactly does the human mind require in the absence of the television and video games? The only way to find out, if

you're not an astronaut, is to use your imagination.

NASA: Do you specifically think about what this age group might imagine, or do you use your own fantasies to come up with the ideas? How do you draw the line between a credible fantasy and one that is too "far out"?

Van Allsburg: I don't think a lot about the age of my audience. It's hard to make art and do it well if I worry too much about what someone else would like. If you are an artist, you want to make what you want to make, and that's more likely to be something that is exciting and interesting. It would probably be more accurate to describe it this way: When I sit down to make something, I am not really making it for a child I know now. But I might be making this book for the 10-year-old that I remember I was 45 years ago. So in a sense, I am writing for a child, but I'm writing for the child I remember being.

As far as trying to decide when fantasy just doesn't make sense anymore ... I have this idea about fantasy, which is that it has to have quite a bit of reality in it. It has to be real enough so that when the strange things happen, they seem truly strange because they are happening in the real world. Fantasies that don't have any rules, where anything can happen, don't end up being very interesting. If the premise is that anything can happen, when things do they don't seem so surprising.

NASA: What do you hope that children and adults will take away from your stories?

Van Allsburg: I like the idea of establishing in between the covers of a book a kind of reality that you fall into, that's different from your own but recognizable, where odd and peculiar things happen. Though the book might end, I like the idea of a tiny bit of a mystery or something unanswered at the end. Even though you could say, "Well, I'm done with

the book," there is still something that goes around in your head because of what you've seen and read in the pages.

NASA: What would you want teachers to get out of your works?

Van Allsburg: Well, the same thing. I hope they recognize the mysteries or the questions the books ask and then see the value in having kids read my stories. Because I'm not there to answer questions kids might have after reading the books, they are forced to question themselves. It's a good book that when you close it, you ask yourself questions.

NASA: What message would you want to share with students in NASA's audience?

Van Allsburg: I'd like to remind them that truth is stranger than fiction and that some of the most amazing things they'll learn about themselves are the things that they will discover about the world they live in -- that it's an amazing place and that one of the ways to learn about them is through science. And whether you become a scientist or not, knowing about the physical world, knowing about evolution, knowing about biology, knowing about space, knowing about the theory of relativity is so important because the more you know, the more you realize that the world is a peculiar, complicated and thrilling place.

NASA: Do you have a teacher that most inspired you when you were a student?

Van Allsburg: I had a teacher in college that influenced me in a very strange course he taught about life in motion and music. We did all sorts of -- I guess you could call them -- sculptures, but they were sculptures that sometimes made light and sometimes made sounds. I think one of the reasons I liked that course was that it was a strange overlap of art and science. We had to learn a lot about things we don't think of as art, things

like acoustics and electricity. To make these sculptures, I didn't feel like I was an artist or a scientist. I was both.

NASA: They say that the kind of story a writer ends up telling is the result of the kind of person that writer is. What do you imagine people might think of you based on the stories you tell?

Van Allsburg: If you look at all of my books, the themes and values are different but there's usually a consistent structure. The story starts out in a normal and recognizable place and then something very strange, bizarre, threatening, or scary happens in the middle. And then something happens at the end that makes you think that everything is okay, but maybe it's not. So, what kind of personality makes a story like that? I guess it's a person who wants to convince himself that even when very peculiar things interrupt your normal life, it might get back to normal but it will never be the same.

Students recently had the chance to hear Chris Van Allsburg during his appearance with NASA scientist Jennifer Keyes on a Digital Learning Network webcast on Nov. 16, 2005. Van Allsburg and Keyes discussed the importance of imagination in art and exploration during two webcasts for students and one for teachers.

NASA has exciting plans for the future of spaceflight. Human beings will return to the moon. Then, they will travel on to Mars and beyond. Today's students will be an important part of that mission. Students who can imagine what that future will be like have exciting possibilities ahead of them -- whether they use that imagination to write stories like Chris Van Allsburg or to design new spacecraft for NASA.

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