

Chris Van Allsburg

CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG By David Macaulay

In 1982 when Chris Van Allsburg won his first Caldecott Medal for *Jumanji* (Houghton), David Macaulay composed the following biographical sketch. Not only is Chris's art consistent, so is his life. Since his success has changed so little of that life, we are reprinting the biography, with one or two factual changes for those who have not had a chance to see it. The illustrations throughout are of Chris's sculptures.

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When Chris won the Caldecott Medal, I heard about it first from his wife, Lisa. That wasn't surprising. As long as we've been friends, Chris has never actually announced any of his triumphs. The information either seeps out inadvertently during a conversation, or it comes directly, with great pride and enthusiasm, from Lisa. Chris's modesty is genuine, and it should not be confused with a lack of confidence. He knows he's good; we've all told him he's good; and more important, he knows *why* he's good. But there is an inevitable distrust of praise, especially when it comes so quickly.

There are certain mundane requirements of every biographical sketch, including age, place of birth, siblings, and amusing quirks. I will dispose of these as quickly as possible. They are: between thirty-four and thirty-seven, Michigan, on (female)—and a reluctance to fly. The last is bad news for Houghton Mifflin's promotional programs but good news for me because most people will never meet Chris and therefore will have little choice but to believe what I tell them.

Looking back over *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*, *Jumanji*, and *Ben's Dream* (all Houghton), I think it is clear that houses big and small have been the main sets around and inside of which Chris's dramas unfold. Just as these houses are essential to his tales, so the Van Allsburg house is essential to mine. 114 is not an imposing edifice. At first glance it might even appear normal. Architecturally, it is just another American interpretation of a slightly Scandinavian-possibly-Bavarian woodman's cottage built just before 1920 by a neo-Victorian. In short, it is Carl Larsson's house bronzed.

Only gradually does one become aware of the house's true character and, more important, of the true characters of its inhabitants. There is a well-maintained 4-H sign by the front door. As far as I know, it is the only 4-H sign displayed so prominently on a house in Providence. This isn't surprising, considering the size of the city's farming population. At the other side of the front door is a bell which has been out of order

for so long that even the most recent hand-written "knock" sign has abandoned the aging Scotch Tape for better things. This is an uncharacteristic detail, given Chris's concern for order, but it does display a sort of reassuring fallibility.

Inside the house a large stuffed raven and a smaller stuffed crow perch atop the glass-doored bookcase which houses the seldom warm television. The glassy-eyed *corvus corax* often sports a miniature Red Sox batting helmet indicative of Chris's interest in athletics and concern for the welfare of animals. On the mantel are two carved giraffes, a lithograph of a lion, and a bust of Dante. These are indicative of Chris's love of classical literature and admiration for exotic wild animals. Cecil, a Siamese cat of almost human persuasion, is the only living exotic animal residing at 114. Other shelves proudly display the growing collection of cast-metal Statues of Liberty and bulldogs indicative of Chris's patriotism and curious interest in pugnacious domestic animals.

Also on display are four pieces of Chris's sculpture. The first is a coffee cup falling off a cylindrical cabinet, as if nudged by some unseen elbow. The contents of the cup pour permanently over the rim because the cup, the coffee, and the cabinet are all made meticulously out of wood. In the dining room are three bronze cones. Each is caught at a particular moment of impact with an invisible missile, and each rests on a turned oak base inset with a marble top. The description of the impact is so convincing, you can almost hear it, not to mention feel the rush of the wind.



The largest room in the house is the recently completed absolutely-from-scratch-no-old-materials-used-authentic-late-1930s kitchen—complete with red-and-white

checkered tile band above the counter and a raised four-seater booth. Second only to his fear of flying is Chris's fear that the first thing any new owner of the house would do is modernize the kitchen.

The second largest room in the house is upstairs, and it is the studio. It is the modest sky-lit space roughly seven by thirty feet in



which Alan P. Mitz, Abdul G., Judy, Peter, and Ben, and—over Cecil's objections—Fritz first appeared on paper. The calm of the studio is gently reinforced either by the mellow sounds of 103 or the more classical sound of 89.5 on Chris's FM dial.

It is here on most days that Chris and Cecil can be found—Chris hunched over the drawing board, Cecil hanging by his front paws from a door frame. Occasionally, Cecil joins Chris at the drawing board. Although he rarely gives his impressions of a drawing, he has been known to leave his impressions on a drawing. In those instances the serenity of studio life is shattered. Cecil, having been temporarily and unexpectedly airborne, continues to watch from a distance, as his master and trainer attempts to remove, or at least blend, a combination of paw print and claw mark into the fragile surface of the drawing.

In no time all is forgotten and forgiven. Once again, particles of graphite or pastel ride the currents dancing in the beams of light which find their way past the shades on the skylights. After a particularly demanding and gratifying stretch of drawing, the sounds of the radio are often replaced by the sounds of live music. Chris is a self-taught musician of little promise who owns, among other instruments, a tenor and an alto recorder. In order to play both the lead line and the accompanying harmony he has learned to play the instruments simultaneously with his nose. It is an unusual and slightly unsettling sight. When he's not in his studio, Chris is probably at school or asleep. Professor Van Allsburg teaches a number of classes in the illustration department at the Rhode Island School of Design. In addition to his

rigorous drawing courses with their emphasis on careful observation and technical proficiency, he also offers a class called "Design Your Own Country." Students are required to produce a number of visual documents, including posters and postage stamps, which illustrate and in effect prove the existence of their own imagined countries. What the sneaky devil has done in the guise of play is introduce students to the two main elements of illustration—elements so clearly visible in his own work. The first is the use of imagination—these countries must not only be created but also understood in some depth by their creators. The second is the development of technical skills without which the students would not be able to communicate and support their inventions.

Chris is a demanding teacher and is respected for it. The standards he sets for his students are high—but not as high as those he sets for himself. If Chris has a competitive streak, it is evident only in his determination to make each of his drawings better than the one that preceded it. It is perhaps his abhorrence of mediocrity that stands out above all his other virtues and quirks. His refusal to accept anything of inferior quality or of tainted integrity is as evident in his work as it is in all other aspects of his life, even including how much cheese one should expect when one orders a double cheeseburger. For Chris no detail is insignificant, no technical problem insurmountable, no challenge to the imagination too great. And no biographical sketch is entirely accurate.

