

Chris Van Allsburg

JUMANI Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

This speech was given at the meeting of the American Library Association in Philadelphia on July 22, 1982. The Caldecott medal for "the most distinguished American picture book for children" was awarded to Chris Van Allsburg for Jumanji.

I prepared for this speech by reading speeches of other Caldecott medalists. It seems there are certain traditions, such as describing where you were and what you were doing when the Caldecott Committee chairman called with the news. I was in my bed, and I was sleeping. Disbelief and sleepiness combined to inspire the following reaction to Gail Sage's hone call: "Uh... gee." Throughout the conversation Gail must have wondered if she'd dialed the right number. How could someone who spoke only in monosyllables write a book? Afterward, as I lay in bed, a terrible thought came to me. What if the ALA had a secret clause, a clause that allowed the Caldecott Committee to reverse its decision if the recipient was found to be torpid, unresponsive, and dull-witted? If only I'd taped the conversation, I could prove to friends that I had been, for a little while, the Caldecott medalist. But no call followed telling me there had been a mistake. When I saw the announcement in the newspaper, I knew I was safe.

Other speech traditions are descriptions of one's childhood involvement with books and art. In my elementary school we had art twice a week. I loved those days. Children often use a slight fever as an excuse to stay home from school, drink ginger ale, and eat ice cream in bed. Once, in the second grade, I felt feverish at breakfast but concealed it from my mother because it was an art day. Midway through in the morning art class, my teacher noticed that I looked a little green. Ordinarily it wouldn't be unusual, but paint was not being used that day. She took me out into the hall where we children left our coats and boots and asked if I felt O.K. I said I felt fine and then threw up into Billy Marcus' boots. I was profoundly embarrassed. The teacher was very comforting. She took me to the nurse's office, and my mother was summoned. I went home, drank ginger ale, and ate ice-cream in bed.

There was another occasion when my physical health and my passion for art collided. When I was eight, my friend Russel

and I became voracious stamp collectors. I loved those tiny little pictures. We wanted all our relatives to take a vacation in the Ukraine and write us lots of letters. After three weeks of looking at nothing but stamps, I got a fever – the flu, again. In my delirium, all I could see was a stamp picturing the Lewis and Clark expedition. I was there, too, with Lewis and Clark, standing in front of a timber fort with our Indian guides, but we never went anywhere. When I pulled out of the fever, I gave all my stamps to Russell. To this day I'm a terrible letter-writer, no doubt because of my lasting aversion to stamps.

There was a great deal of peer recognition to be gained in elementary school by being able to draw well. One girl could draw horses so well, she was looked upon as a kind of sorceress. (Everyone else's horses looked like water buffalo.) Being able to draw cartoon characters was a good trick, too. Pluto and Mickey always impressed friends. I specialized in Dagwood Bumstead, a little too sophisticated, perhaps, to be widely appreciated.

But the status gained by these skills wanes as one gets older. Certain peer pressures encourage little fingers to learn how to hold a football instead of a crayon. Rumors circulate around the schoolyard: Kids who draw or wear white socks and bring violins to school on Wednesdays might have cooties. I confess to having yielded to these pressures. Sixth grade was the last time I took art in public school. My interests went elsewhere.

Then, in college I enrolled in art classes as a lark. At that time I was quite naive about the study of art. As a freshman I received a form that listed the courses I would have, their times and places and the necessary materials. One course, described simply as "Fgdrw," met at eight o'clock in the morning. I did not know what Fgdrw meant, but the materials required were newsprint and charcoal. I went to the appointed room and was surprised to see an older woman wearing a terry-cloth robe and slippers. I

thought, "What? Does she live here or something?" Maybe we're here too early, and she hasn't had time to dress," then she took of her bathrobe, and I deduced the meaning of Fgdrw.

During that year the art classes I took as a lark became more important and involving than any of my other classes. In fact, it took me five years to get my undergraduate degree because I never let liberal arts courses get in the way of making art. Going to classes like philosophy and French upset my rhythm, my pace. So I just skipped them, which upset my credit requirements (and my parents, too). It was clear I had a fever again. The fever to make art

Actually, fever may be a misleading description of my own rather deliberate approach, but there is a constant urge to create. I am fascinated by the act of making something real that at one point is only an idea. It is challenging and beguiling to sense something inside, put it on paper (or carve it in stone), and then step back and see how much has got lost in the process. The inevitability of losing some of the idea in trying to bring it to life is what keeps me working. I am always certain that next time, I'll lose less.

Ideas themselves have varied origins. In writing and illustrating *Jumanji*, the inspiration was my recollection of vague disappointment in playing board games as a child. Even when I owned Park Place with three hotels, I never felt truly rich, and not being able to interrogate Colonel Mustard personally was always a letdown. Another motivating element for *Jumanji* was a fascination I have with seeing things where they don't belong. The pictures in newspapers of cars that have run amok and crashed into people's living rooms always get my attention. There's the room, almost normal; sofa, TV, amused home-owner, end tables, and the front end of an Oldsmobile. It occurred to me that if an Oldsmobile in the living room looked that good, a herd of rhinoceros could have real possibilities.

I am surprised now that my fairly recent discovery of the illustrated book as a way of expressing ideas did not happen earlier. It is a unique medium that allows an artist-author to deal with the passage of time, the unfold-

ing of events, in the same way film does. The opportunity to create a small world between two pieces of cardboard, where time exists yet stands still, where people talk and I tell them what to say, is exciting and rewarding.

It is also rewarding to receive mail from people who appreciate your work. The first letter I received as a result of having a book published came from a man in Cleveland. I don't remember his name, so I'll use a pseudonym. His letter was written with the red Magic Marker on tissue paper. "Dear Mr. Van Allsburg," he wrote, "I love your work. Do you think life as we know it will exist in the year 2000? Yours truly, Frank Selmer." More recently, I received a letter from Alexandra Prinstein (her real name) from Delaware. "Dear Mr. Van Allsburg. I love the books you write. I am so glad your books are so weird because I am very weird. I think you are weird but great. I wish a volcano and flood would be in my room when I am bored. I am happy I am only five because I have lots more years to enjoy magical gardens and crazy games in books by you. Love Alexandra. P.S. I have younger brother Peter too."

Other rewards of writing and illustrating are meeting and working with people like Walter Lorraine, my editor at Houghton Mifflin, and Anita Silvey, Houghton's publicity person. I would like to thank them for their support and guidance.

While I'm thanking people, I would also like to thank Jan Vermeer, for the way he used light; Edgar Degas, for the way he composed; Max Klinger, for the way he told a story; Federico Fellini, for making films that look the way they do; Andre' Kertesz, for the photos he took; Winsor McKay, for little Nemo; H. C. Westermann, for the things he made; Gustav Stickley, for the way he built a chair; and Harlold, for his purple crayon. I'm indebted to them all; I aspire to the excellence of their achievement.

And thank you to Alexandra and all the other children who have written to me, and to the children who come up to me at book signings to tell me how much they like Abugazi and Pajami. Some people may contend that there is no image more charming than a child holding a puppy or kitten. But for me that's a distant second. When I see a child clutching a book, especially my

book, to his or her tiny bosom, I'm moved. Children can possess a book in a way they can never possess a video game, a TV show, or a Darth Vader doll. A book comes alive when they read it. They give it life themselves by understanding it.

Finally, I would like to thank the ALA and the Caldecott Committee for bestowing this great honor on me. Some of the artists claim praise is irrelevant in measuring the success of art, but I think it's quite relevant. Besides, it makes me feel great.