The Kids Are (All) Right: Baby-Boomers and the Rhetoric of Childhood in the Picture Books of Chris Van Allsburg

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THE KIDS ARE (ALL) RIGHT:
BABY-BOOMERS AND THE RHETORIC OF CHILDHOOD
IN THE PICTURE BOOKS OF CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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by
Mark Edgar E. Sprinkle
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Master of Arts

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Approved, July 1993

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ABSTRACT

As a literary genre produced, marketed, bought and read aloud by adults, picture books belong and have always belonged to adult culture as much as they have belonged to that of children; but, traditionally, the way picture books are by, for, and about adults has been given even less attention than the way the books are for children and adults together. This thesis identifies a specific adult adience for the picture books of Chris Van Allsburg and seeks to discover what cultural work was and is accomplished by the reappropriation of childhood and its texts by the professional class of so-called "baby-boomers." The description of this process includes defining its essential parts—the group of adults in question, the picture book as adult text, the values located in childhood, and the use the adults make of them. Van Allsburg portrays childhood as a state of being (and way of living) that is complex and centers on alternative rules of perception and alternative perception of rules; children's ability to transgress their elders' social strictures without significant punishment makes childhood an attractive state with which a rising class and generation may identify. For the boomers in question, imaginative reconstruction of what it is to be a child draws upon memories of what it was to be a child in the late nineteen sixties, but the key issue is how this logic is applied to contemporary, real-world conflicts over authority in the political arena and cultural marketplace; and in both the economic and political realms, a rhetoric of "new rules" has marked the rise of professional boomers through successive layers of cultural power. Finally, the way Van Allsburg developed and sold his construction of the child-savant in the 1980s is seen to have paralleled his generation's negotiation of its own accession to mature political and social position—a coming to terms made easier by its crafting a coherent imaginative identity to distinguish itself from the ways and means of the pre-war generation.
THE KIDS ARE (ALL) RIGHT:
BABY-BOOMERS AND THE RHETORIC OF CHILDHOOD
IN THE PICTURE BOOKS OF CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG
I. CHILDHOOD: NOT JUST FOR CHILDREN

As cultural scholars from Phillipe Aries to Karin Calvert have argued, "childhood" in any particular age or society (and the qualities and associations that go with it) is an imaginative construct applied to the young by their elders, which often describes the latter more accurately than the former.¹ In addition, Calvert and her peers among material culture historians have demonstrated that the everyday belongings of individuals and groups within a culture can be at least as informative about their mental schemes and perspectives as can traditional documentary evidence. Following these general lines of thought, my project is to characterize the cultural concerns of a particular generation of young adults by looking at how they are projected into a set of books ostensibly about and for their children—indeed, how the "rules" of childhood depicted in these texts play out in baby-boomers' relationships with older Americans, and in their self-conception as an emergent cultural force.

Specifically, the picture books that Chris Van Allsburg published between 1979 and 1989 demonstrate his and his baby-boomer peers' attempts to resolve cultural and socio-economic anxieties through the imaginative re-appropriation of childhood. While projection of adult qualities and expectations onto children has been widely discussed, what I seek to describe here is a subtle inversion of this dynamic, a process of creative re-use in which adults locate certain values, perspectives, and modes of reasoning in childhood, then claim them for removal to and application in their own adult lives.

The complete description of the process of adult re-appropriation of childhood depends on defining its essential parts—the group of adults in question, the picture book as adult text, the values located in childhood, and the use the adults make of both books and values; this essay identifies a particular set of children's books—those of Chris Van Allsburg—as a source of illumination of the construct, while cultural "use" is the main arena of its speculation. As the first element of this argument, the social group under consideration is perhaps the easiest to suggest, if not completely and unambiguously delimit; Van Allsburg's actual and imaginative "peers" are largely defined in generational terms, as the children of the middle and late post-war boom.

School-aged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in college during the social tumult of the late 1960s and 1970s, baby-
boomers' cultural memories of those decades are an important factor in contemporary depictions of childhood, especially when coupled with their experiences as parents of their own pre- and school-aged children—presumably the audience for picture books of the 1980s. But while I focus on baby-boomers with children, who buy picture books, the conclusions drawn about them should hardly be considered limited or narrow. It is a large, influential group that I speak of, and the influence of its self-perception in relation to other generational and economic groups in- and outside the boom should not be underestimated. These are precisely the adults who drove the market for picture books in the decade of the 1980s; and the economic clout that enabled them to rule there began to put them in similar positions of power elsewhere in the culture. Importantly, an acute self-awareness in this group necessitated that it come to terms with both the rights and responsibilities of a culturally-central position.

Publisher's Weekly announced the results of Gallup and other retrospective surveys of book stores in 1986, 1987, and 1990 that indicate picture book buyers to be "disproportionately middle-aged," with fully 78% falling between the ages of 25 and 49 years of age and a still narrower concentration in their thirties. Furthermore, roughly 50% of purchases (varying from 47.1% to 49.8% to 53.3% depending on the type of bookstore) are made by parents, with
teachers accounting for the next largest group (15.3%). It is important to recognize the implications of the math involved here, since it suggests that many of the adults in question became first-time parents in their late twenties or early thirties. This "delayed" parenthood is significant in terms not only of parents' relationship to their children and to their own remembered childhoods, but in their positions in their professional and social lives. The imaginative reconstruction of what it is to be a child depends somewhat on memories of what it was to be a child in the late nineteen sixties, but its logic is "applied" to contemporary, real-world conflicts over authority in the political arena and cultural marketplace.

Another readily-apparent feature of this group of adults that helps to explain the relatively delayed onset of its parenthood is its high level of education. Again with a statistical identity more pronounced than that of the general population (or even book buyers at large), almost 60% of picture book purchasers are college-educated. Not surprisingly, higher educational attainment translates into a greater degree of professional and economic attainment: 50% of buyers have individual annual incomes of over $30,000, 71% as

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part of two-earner households. Briefly put, the market for picture books is among the highly-educated professional middle class (whether urban or suburban), many of whom waited for completion of non child-related personal goals before beginning families.

Even this somewhat rough profile of external characteristics suggests that the anxieties to which I have alluded are both generational and economic; in fact, they center on the contentious transmission of cultural and economic power from one set of adults to their own adult children--from the pre-World War II generation of political, financial, and cultural leaders to those of the post-war. But the way these issues are embedded and played out in the context of childhood are complex and problematic, since they have to do with these (yuppie) boomers' simultaneous re-assessment and re-creation of an "ideal" childhood, their own pasts, and the contemporary experiences of their children. In a sense, their symbolic strategy is the same as previous eras' attempts to claim a "usable past," but in this case the reclaimed "past" is the boomers' own, and the cultural

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3 Figures also from Wood, 112. A curious feature of the survey is that it cites the percentage of women buyers who are employed outside the home--whether full or part-time--but assumes that all men are. This may be because the surveys also show that women dominate the market, between teachers and the mothers who are most often the parent involved in purchasing these books. Nevertheless, given the historic inequity between men's and women's salaries, it is safe to assume that a majority of these household incomes exceed $60,000 per year.
authority sought there derives not from the wisdom of national fathers, but from the insights and innovations of the country's youth.

With the social group whose construction of childhood is at issue established, it makes sense to ask how the author whose work I have chosen as exemplary, Chris Van Allsburg, is related to it. In fact, his personal history fits almost too well the life of the stereotypical buyer of his books. Born in 1949 to owners of a Grand Rapids, Michigan ice-cream dairy, Van Allsburg spent his childhood in the midst of the geographic hallmark of the 1950s—a growing suburb. He graduated from the University of Michigan with a B.F.A., though he entered intending to study law. Continuing his education, he earned a M.F.A. in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1975, where he became an instructor in 1977. He took up illustration at the urging of his wife Lisa (also an art student at Michigan, and an elementary school teacher) and fellow illustrator and R.I.S.D. instructor David Macaulay.4 Two years later he published his first book, The Garden of Abdul Gasazi (1979) and began to make his substantial impact on the world of children's publishing. Since then he has diligently produced a book a year, each highly acclaimed and personally lucrative. With his artistic and financial success, he settled into (and remains in) a

lifestyle that typifies the popular conception of "yuppy" without, perhaps without some of that term's usual connotations of crass aquissitiveness: living with his wife in a renovated 1920ish Providence, R.I., cottage, collecting 1930s furnishings, with another very professionally successful illustrator (David Macaulay) as a close friend.5

While Van Allsburg's life chronology meshes nicely with the generation and class of Americans I have identified as the subject of this study, neither his educational attainments, his professional success, nor his indefinite postponement of child-raising are the central sources of his usefulness as a cultural bellwether for his peers. That he is forty-three years old in 1992 and has not had any children might, in fact, seem extremely atypical. But his wife's profession as an elementary teacher aside, however, the fact that he is so immersed in the popular culture of childhood on his own adult, non-parent terms is further evidence of the appropriateness of using his texts to get at adult concerns couched in children's contexts. It suggests that symbolic public dialogue on the place of childhood in the culture may proceed without direct relation to the experience—or indeed existence—of parenting. He is neither an "adult" author whose work has been co-opted by publishing-house editors to become children's fare, nor is

he a professional in some other child-oriented field who has taken up writing books on the side. Instead, he has built a significant second facet of his professional art career by rendering the experience of childhood as he remembers and imagines it, in a format traditionally reserved for children.

Aside from considerations of his personal identity, though, the nature of his work taken as a whole is what determines its place here. The consistency of its explicit (ostensible?) orientation towards childhood—both in content and reception—characterizes Van Allsburg’s production. His stories unfailingly feature children as the protagonists, whether the point of view is that of an omniscient narrator or an adult recalling memories from his own youth. Central conflicts of the narratives revolve around the relationship of children and their perceptions to adults and their supposed knowledge—and the prerogatives of each to act in light of these conflicts; thus the social definitions of childhood and adulthood are nearly always at stake.

By way of contrast, Van Allsburg’s compatriot David Macaulay seems to have very different narrative goals. Macaulay is of similar age and reputation as Van Allsburg and, judging from his books, he shares an appreciation of the absurd and mysterious aspects of childhood experience with his fellow R.I.S.D. instructor. He has also had a similar publication schedule since the 1970s and has recently won a second Caldecott Award, for his 1990 picture book Black and
White (Houghton-Mifflin). But with the exception of his most recent work, Macaulay's books have not been so clearly directed towards, nor obviously about children. To be sure, his early architecturally-inspired books (Cathedral (1973), City (1974), Pyramid (1975), Castle (1977), Unbuilding (1980)) could and did interest children, but they were not about children and sought to appeal to adults equally. Hence, Macaulay's honors include the earlier Caldecott Medal for Cathedral, but also an award from the American Institute of Architects. While these works' wide appeal (to children and adults) bolsters an argument that picture books are not merely children's things, Macaulay himself is not cited primarily as a children's literature figure so often as he is credited with being an important illustrator on all fronts, especially of architecturally-related material. As a whole, his work adds little to an understanding of how childhood is perceived and used by his peer adults in a broad social context.

On the other hand, Van Allsburg's books have been primarily perceived by the public (both consumers and the critical community) as "children's" books, though the undercurrent of adult use and appreciation that has always been present has lately been recognized, leading to a so-

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6The Caldecott Award is the principle prize for illustrated children's books in America, given to one book each year, with up to three named as runners-up. See footnote 10, chapter II. for a full description.
called "crossover" book project with writer Mark Helprin.\(^7\)
Within this context—indeed by almost any standard—he has been extremely successful, winning two Caldecott medals, one Caldecott honor designation, and seven times having a book chosen as one of the New York Times "Best Illustrated Books," among numerous other awards. In his entry in a biographical dictionary of children’s writers, Joyce Thomas characterizes Van Allsburg as a "phenomenon in children’s literature, given his meteoric production of so many quality works over one short decade."\(^8\) Given the popularity and reputation of his work, and with both textual and extratextual attention explicitly directed towards the subject of childhood, Van Allsburg’s oeuvre constitutes a venue in which several levels of discourse about the meaning of childhood intersect. Yet notwithstanding the commercial realization that picture book readership is complex, complexity has not marked much of the literature on Van Allsburg—or on picture books in general—to date. Before looking at how baby-boomer ideas of childhood are reflected in Van Allsburg’s work, it is helpful to look at that criticism and the dual audience it has ignored.

\(^7\) Though labelled a children’s book, the publishers of Swan Lake (Mark Helprin, Swan Lake. (Boston: Ariel Books, 1989).) were hardly shy about promoting it as appropriate for adults, and their confidence in the strength of its place in the market allowed them to advance Van Allsburg an unprecedented sum of money for his thirteen illustrations.

II. Whose Books?

Taking critical "notice" of children's picture books is nothing new; since at least the early 1960s, writers have been finding evidence of the state of childhood in their particular historical and cultural moments among picture books' bright pictures and relatively sparse texts. Usually, the reviewer's goal has been to compare or contrast contemporary depictions of childhood with those of the historical or cultural moment that immediately preceded his or her own. Perceived "change" in childhood has typically been the central issue, and the gauge of perceived change has been material in the books deemed "inappropriate" for young readers--whether it be overt or metaphorically shrouded sexual content, violence, "broken" homes, or social unrest. Tracking occurrences of taboo topics dealt with in picture books, reviewers could decry the loss of an idealized state of innocence among children, or, occasionally, claim that children had always been adept at dealing with complex issues, but that previous generations of adults had been reluctant or unable to recognize their capabilities. A third possibility, that what was "revealed" had little to do with the actual lives or essential character of children, but more to do with the way adults have constructed childhood itself, was seldom, if ever, broached.
In more recent years, since the late nineteen-seventies, many writers have asserted that something was and is happening to childhood, and the body of scholarship produced in such diverse disciplines as psychology, literary and social criticism, education, and media studies has gained popular credence for the idea that childhood in contemporary America is in danger, or, at the very least, that the qualities the culture has most recently ascribed to children are changing. Like more academic writers who have attempted to understand the varying place of childhood in different societies across history, "social critics" of contemporary culture have also recognized that societal perceptions change, but their concerns are the pace, direction, and meaning of current changes as they pertain to the social "good." Within this critical conversation, what has been seized upon as one of the clearest indicators of this changing--disappearing--childhood is literature for the children themselves, especially picture books, which are thought to be representative of the experience of an especially "childlike" age-group.9 In the

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pages of these books intended especially for the youngest readers, concerned investigators find a mirror of the lives of American children and proof that they are certainly no longer insulated, and that their welfare may no longer be an issue of chief importance to the culture at large. Whatever the individual conclusions, however, arguments based on the evidence gleaned from picture books have been consistently framed by the question, "What is appropriate for children?"

In a 1985 library-trade review of Chris Van Allsburg's *The Z Was Zapped*, however, Roger Sutton poses a different and very telling query: "Who is this book for?" Although the question itself implies that the book is not for children, and so recalls the "appropriateness" criteria still, the reviewer has allowed the emphasis of discussion to subtly shift towards the non-child readership of picture books: adults who, despite their role in the creation, distribution and consumption of the genre, are consistently taken for granted or ignored outright by its interpreters and critics. More interestingly, this simple question raises the possibility that the interests in and desires for picture books among adult readers might be different from or even at odds with those associated with

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10 Roger Sutton, Rev. of *The Z was Zapped* by Chris Van Allsburg, *Bull Cent Children's Books* Oct. 1987: 38. Appearing in *Bull Cent*, Sutton's review would be found primarily at the libraries that make up the bulk of the publication's circulation. Non-librarians certainly have access to these reviews, but such access requires a concerted effort on the part of parents or other none-trade adults.
either childhood or narrowly "parental" concerns. Though Sutton drops this fairly novel line of inquiry without further comment, adults' use of these "children's" texts provides a telling glimpse of their social construction of themselves, apart from (or even in spite of) what the books offer as indices of the lives of contemporary children.

Though I have no argument with the basic assertion that middle class children's lives are, today, considerably more complicated by previously "adult" concerns than they were, say, in the 1950s (there is a surplus of clinical evidence that American children are exposed to everything from sex to death at early ages, and that their experiences lag not far behind their knowledge), the implicit comparison between "contemporary childhood" and the presupposed idyllic youth of times past is problematic. It is only within this century, after all, that Americans have come to expect the majority of their children to survive infancy and that they should not be put to work to help support their families; and these expectations do not hold true even for all American families, nor--certainly--for families elsewhere on the globe. Even so, and notwithstanding the fact that they present a slant on children's experience different from that to which reviewers are accustomed, Van Allsburg's books in particular do depict the world of youth with its nostalgic and idyllic elements. What I must take exception to, nevertheless, is the critical habit of taking picture book content at face value and
accepting that it provides straightforward information about a clearly-defined group of young readers. It is in following this common logical course that Terry Norton's careful and methodologically "objective" analysis of Caldecott Award books,\footnote{The Caldecott Award is, itself, suggestive in the context of a discussion of adult participation in the world of "childhood" and in the use of picture books. The Caldecott Award has, since 1938, been given to the illustrator of the "best picture book published in the United States during the previous year," as judged originally by a committee of the Children's Services Division of the American Library Association, but more recently by the Association for Library Services to Children. The books are chosen by adults as especially important and appropriate examples of picture books in general, but based on "artistic" merit, rather than overtly political or interpretive concerns. Hence, the award goes to the illustrator if the work is collaborative, rather than the author of the text. The importance of Caldecott books is widely recognized by adults, whose decisions to buy or check out books may be largely based on such distinctions. Of special concern to publishers, the winning book receives a gold foil seal that makes it stand out on the store or library shelf, but several others may be designated as "Honor Books," receiving silver seals. In a 1985 article, (Diane Roback, "Wholesalers and Publishers Look at the Changing Preschool Market," Publisher's Weekly 23 Feb. 1985: 141.) Roback states that parents "want to pick out the 'right' books, but don't know what they are and tend to rely on the judgments of institutions they trust, such as the ALA's Newberry and Caldecott awards."} for instance, neglects a crucial aspect: that their audience is a complex one, composed not merely of pre- and just-literate children but of their parents, too.\footnote{Norton's 1987 dissertation The Changing Image of Childhood: A Content Analysis of Caldecott Award Books, as the title implies, examined such content features as ratios of child characters to adult characters in illustrations, textual description, and protagonist roles; the inclusion of taboo subjects; and the degree to which children depicted exhibited childlike, or "neotenic" proportions. His study sampled the entire set of Caldecott Award winners from 1938 to 1985.}

In his book on the genre, Words About Pictures, Perry
Nodelman names "young children new to the culture that adults take for granted," as the implied readers; their goal in reading is to gain an acquaintance with the rules and norms of society (including what to make of books).\textsuperscript{13} What he assumes but does not foreground, however, is the importance of the adult in that very process: they are the original source of the rules and norms, and are vital players in the co-operative act of making meaning from objects. If their presence in even the expected use of picture books (reading aloud) is overlooked, then any conclusions drawn about the culture from an analysis of them alone will most certainly be flawed. But there are other connections, too, between adults and picture books. Some of them are fairly obvious, connected to adults' roles as the buying agents for their children; some involve parents' desires to socialize their children according (or in contrast) to patterns from their own childhoods; others have to do with publishers' response to adults' desires for themselves as readers, and these are both less obvious and more helpful in examining how adults re-use childhood. Keeping these caveats about the complexity of the picture book audience in mind, however, there is still ample evidence that picture books are, indeed, intended for use by a young readership, and, in the last century especially, similarly illustrated stories have been associated with children and

\footnote{Nodelman 7.}
their early educational needs. Clearly, even the assumptions that undergird the idea of "educational needs" tie adult knowledge and skills to the training of children; but discussion of contemporary theories about the child-adult cognitive connection must wait for a look at the child-book connection itself. For the moment, the shadings between adult and children's texts are the central issue.

A cursory visual inspection supports the proposition that picture books are children's books: they are relatively big, but easily handled by small fingers; they are colorful; inside, pictures dominate the page layouts with (usually) smaller blocks of text; they are thin enough to be finished in one sitting or even read again (and again, and again...). Picture books tend to be more delicate than heavy cardboard alphabet and baby books and are almost never in cut-out shapes, implying that their audience possesses some basic knowledge of what a book is and what value is placed on it; that is, that books are to be experienced as a two-dimensional code system rather than as three-dimensional toys. On the other hand, the predominance of pictures makes them dissimilar to adult books—and even "young adult" works of the Judy Bloom vein—in which text is the entire content.

The picture that emerges, then, is that the implied

\footnote{See Nodelman’s first chapter, "Pictures and the Implied Viewer," and Norton’s second, "Literature Review," for discussions of the genealogy of picture books and illustrated texts.}
reader is of a young one who fits to a tee many of the associations the culture holds about the "child-like" state. Pre-school and, especially, early school-age children are old enough not to be babies; that is, they look like diminutive human beings—people, citizens-in-training. They walk, talk, only occasionally spit up, and in general, exhibit a rudimentary form of all the qualities that adults have, including a limited autonomy. They can express their feelings and are ready to start learning the finer codes of society. On the other hand, children of this age are not truly self-governing: they still need adults to provide the food they eat, pick them up when they fall over, and read with them. Notice, not read to them: as the process of socialization advances, children are more and more expected to participate in the process of taking meaning from books, beginning with looking at the pictures and following the story they hear in the voice of an adult.

This co-signification process (i.e., reading aloud) is the most obvious example of the adult’s connection with picture books, and it points the way to other instances. Most important is the adult’s exercise of choice over which books he or she will bring home, either from the book store or from the library. This choice is at the limits of the child’s autonomy since, though he or she can request this book or that be read, it is the parent (or the librarian) who chooses which books will make it into the pool from which the child can
select. And unlike the growing "adultness" shown by slightly older children in their increased activity in the market, preschoolers and early grade-schoolers rarely (if ever) buy their own picture books.

Even though adults take the desires expressed by their children into account, it may also be that choosing a picture book is an expression of their own desires, expectations and requirements. In point of fact, these adult expectations may be rather removed from any direct input from children whatsoever, based as they often are on the opinions of other adults who produce, sell, review, and give awards to picture books. Thus there is a consistent "adult" influence inserted into the "children's" market from start to finish. Publishers, for instance, have been quick to notice the importance of appealing to adults as well as children--and what's more, to the specific, well-defined set of adults I have already outlined. Again, the Publisher's Weekly studies have shown that the meteoric rise of the picture book market during the eighties was driven by well-educated, middle- to upper middle-class baby-boomers, and publishers have sought to appeal to them in marketing approaches and in the physical packaging of their visions of childhood.15

15 Industry sources show that the market changed dramatically as the baby-boom generation began having children of its own: from a slow growth averaging 20% every five years or so from 1955-1980, to five-year growth rates of well over 100% for 1980-1985 and 1985-1990. In dollars, this translates into an industry total of $210.8 million in 1980, $475.6 million in 1985, and sales of $991.7 million in 1990. (Diane
Though adults have always done the buying of children's texts, talk of a so-called adult "crossover market" for picture books blossomed in the publishing press in recent years, indicative of a different slant in attitudes about adults' place in the market, and the books' place in the culture. Detailing the results of a survey of bookstores, Publishers Weekly reports that,

"Booksellers find that hardcover [children's books] are greatly preferred by customers giving gifts. In addition [store owner] Barbara Theroux of Fact & Fiction in Missoula, Montana [says], 'I probably sell as many children's books to adults to give to adults as to children,' indicating that the strong crossover market for picture books is a factor here. . . . Without exception, picture books was the category most in demand in every type of store we surveyed."16

Not blind to the economic possibilities of this situation or the demographics of the primary consumer group, publishers have responded to the demand with increases in the quality of the books and in their price tags. The average price for a Caldecott Award book, for instance, during the 1970-1980 decade was $7.83; the average of the next ten years was

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16Roback, "Bookstore Survey" 37-38. One example of publishers' innovative packaging of picture books for the adult gift market is Van Allsburg's Polar Express. Its story of the "first gift of Christmas" proved to be a bonanza of seasonal sales for the several years after its initial publication in 1985; its own status as a gift was enhanced by Houghton-Mifflin's presentation of the book in a stylish packaged set that also included a silver sleigh-bell (as featured in the story) and an audio tape with no less than William Hurt and Merryl Streep reading the book aloud.
$14.82, with the biggest gain being among the most adult-looking products. Currently, Chris Van Allsburg’s books and books similarly packaged have price tags approaching $20.

While the prices of the most elaborate and costliest picture books are a measure of the lucrativeness of the market and, perhaps, of the yuppie boomers’ prominent place in it, they do not explicitly illuminate perceptions of the books as adult cultural property. While certain physical features and inclusions are no more conclusive, they are at least suggestive. For one thing, Van Allsburg’s books are packaged according to a consistent aesthetic, which seems to be of sophistication, as well as utility. Covers are all cloth-covered board, often with embossed emblems or medallions on their fronts; signatures are sewn and glued. There seems to be careful attention to such qualities as paper weight, coordination of jacket colors with illustrations, etc., and beginning with *The Stranger* (1986), Van Allsburg began including information on the paper, printing location, bindery, and type face. These features can hardly have much appeal to children, and imply a particularly bibliophilic or art-oriented group of adult readers. This inclusion is carried to a typically odd extreme in *The Z Was Zapped*, which is subtitled as a play performed by "the Caslon Players," caslon being the type face used. Though some of these

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elements certainly contribute to their resistance to children's abuse and, hence, the physical longevity of the books, they may also last because adults respond to them as their own (and pass this reverence for books as valuable possessions to their kids), making extra efforts to keep them from harm.

This combination of adult features and a non-adult format can seem to pose a perplexing contrast between a reader’s expectation--often assumption--that picture books will be "childlike" and the actual experience of holding and reading one. Nodelman discusses this same dynamic early in Words About Pictures:

Picture books are clearly recognizable as children’s books simply because they do speak to us of childlike qualities, of youthful simplicity and youthful exuberance; yet paradoxically, they do so in terms that imply a vast sophistication in regard to both visual and verbal codes. Indeed, it is part of the charm of many of the most interesting picture books that they so strangely combine the childlike and the sophisticated--that the viewer they imply is both very learned and very ingenuous.¹⁸

But the resolution of the "problem" is that where Nodelman needs to find all these qualities within one implied reader--the admittedly more grown-up child, it need not be so. Picture books have come to resemble adult books almost as much as they resemble children’s literary toys, a sign that picture books are recognized as books for adults, too.

The complex audience of picture books is suggested

¹⁸Nodelman 21.
primarily by the processes of their creation and use, secondarily by their physical structure and appearance. But even were the particularly integral place of adults not so clear, these texts would still be a useful measure of adult lives, as adults are always the definers of childhood and the makers of its material culture. Since codifying what a child is has historically necessitated either "othering" (children are untamed beasts) or emphasizing similarities (they are small-scale adults), the self-perceptions of adults have always been in evidence. In this case, however, the connection between children and adults needs considerably less archaeology because the adults in question have already excavated most of the shards they buried in the first place. The task that remains is to glue the vessels back together, look for pieces of what they held, and reconstruct the patterns of their use. When the narrative contents are examined with this adult readership in mind, the image of childhood implicit in them can be understood as not only—or even mostly—about the childhood of contemporary children, but about childhood as it itself is re-constructed by professional boomers for their own cultural and personal mythologizing.

To reiterate, then, their children’s texts are explicit locations of definition and transmission of boomers’ own conceptions of "childhood." Picture books belong and have always belonged to adult culture as much as they have belonged to that of children, even aside from the fact that they occupy
a cultural space at the intersection of the adult and child worlds animated by the near-ritual act of reading aloud. But, traditionally, the way picture books are by, for, and about adults on their own terms has been given even less attention than the way the books are for children and adults together. It is this paradox of "ownership" that, in part, makes children's books so useful a source of cultural information: adults make, use, interpret, and invest themselves in picture books, but they unfailingly cite these same texts as the repositories for the very character and substance of childhood. Moreover, the same visual format and distilled narrative style that supposedly renders meaning transparent to young readers--though recognized as not distortion-free--is readily accessible to the critical eye. When an author produces a set of very popular texts, as has Van Allsburg, in which emerges a consistent, subtly refined and reinforced view of childhood, the interpretive possibilities of picture books are only more clear.
III. The Values of Childhood Depicted

Chris Van Allsburg's ability to sell over one million books in less than a decade is directly related to his ability to capture the zeitgeist of his professional baby-boomer peers and make it available visually in his narratives. Van Allsburg's singular success and the wide dissemination of his books imply that his readers find something attractive in them—some aspect with which boomers can particularly identify, to a greater extent than is the case with books by almost any other contemporary writer-illustrator. What Van

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19 His awards and citations, beyond his three Caldecotts and having every one of his books published in the 1980s placed on the New York Times "Best Illustrated Book" list and at least two others, are too numerous to list in full here. See Ruello 160-162 for an extensive list of his early commendations alone. As for wide dissemination, Van Allsburg himself noted the "immense audience" that his first book, Garden of Abdul Gasazi had: "If 40,000 books are sold, a lot of them are going to be in elementary schools, and it's going to be seen by at least thirty kids every time its used in class" (ibid., p. 164). Public and school libraries invariably purchase critically acclaimed works such as his, and the critical and commercial success of that first book and his subsequent work guaranteed larger initial issuings and reprints, hence even larger audiences. Diane Roback reported in Publisher's Weekly that Van Allsburg passed the million-volume mark by 1988, with Polar Express accounting for 500,000 of that in its first three years (Diane Roback, "Houghton Pays $801,000 for Children's Book," Publisher's Weekly 19 Aug. 1988: 16.). Indeed, Polar Express has been available as a boxed Christmas gift set (with book, silver bell, and the William Hurt, Merry Streep cassette tape included) every year since 1985 and ever-increasing prices (now up to $28 even in metropolitan Richmond) indicate that the market for it remains strong.
Allsburg does differently than his competitors is to portray childhood as a state of being (and way of living) that is complex and centers on alternative rules of perception and alternative perception of rules.

This depiction of the meaning of childhood is different not only from those of many other contemporary authors, but also from what the pre-war generation understood to be "childlike"—a state defined largely by innocence, obedience and deference to adults. In fact, part of the appeal of Van Allsburg's depiction is exactly that it differs from the pattern of adult-child relationships stereotypically associated with the 1950s. In addition, though, boomers like Van Allsburg's books because they see the children in them as proxies for themselves. On one hand they may relate to the author's characters because they remind them of a time when--little more than children themselves--they are presumed to have challenged conservative authority by asserting new perspectives (and expanded consciousness)—by breaking rules. On the other hand, Van Allsburg's children symbolically support the more contemporary challenge the post-war generation faces in taking the reins of cultural power itself, on its own terms. In both cases the validity of traditional power relationships and cultural values are (were) at stake. While the first time around conservative authority was rejected by American youth, the arrival of that same now-grown generation at the threshold of economic and political
dominance made "appropriation" the watchword, instead.

While my aim is not to dwell on the social and financial fortunes of the professional-class baby-boomers, these issues are at the heart of my look at Van Allsburg's books; the purpose of re-viewing childhood in them is to work out problems of generational identity and character, and to reconcile the past with the present and future. As the boom generation began to flex its economic muscles, it foresaw its ascendancy in broader cultural areas and started to forge a communal identity based on both the future and its formative past political experiences. To that end, the most important features of depicted childhood seek to reconcile past and future: the subversion of traditional modes of perception and the refusal to accept equally "old fashioned" dialectics between rules and violations, violations and punishment. The first case is a metaphorical predecessor for a claim of new (and better) social vision, the second is both a method of reconciling past transgressions and future responsibilities and a foretaste of an alternative system of discipline to that of pre-war Americans. Though the emphasis of each varies, all of Van Allsburg's books deal with and develop each of these ideas.

The critical acclaim that accompanied the appearance in the market of Van Allsburg's first published work, *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*, focused on its illustrations, praising them as "something new." Even without opening the book, a reader
is alerted to the fact that Van Allsburg uses a different aesthetic than is conventional for children's picture books; instead of a busy, colored cover intended to catch the eye of a pre-schooler or his or her parent or to suggest the mood of the story within, the cover illustration of Garden is devoid of color altogether. While not all picture books sport brilliant hues, very few indeed are those that banish color altogether; color is an important (almost required) element in picture book narrative strategy that helps develop character and setting, and its rhetoric subtly clues adults into the idea of a child audience, as well.

Nodelman discusses both culture-specific and seemingly-universal "emotional" connotations of specific color families and the effect of color saturation and contrast, citing examples from the vast majority of picture books that incorporate this code system into their pictorial strategies. But while he asserts that color associations apply to adults, too, he expresses another cultural assumption when he argues that children are more attuned to and more

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20 Nodelman asserts that a central role of the cover of a picture book is to "help establish the mood that the rest of each book conveys" (50), thus they are often duplicates of pictures inside chosen as representative of the whole. This generalization holds true for the Caldecott winners of the 1970s, for instance, from which Garden seems to depart. What is important here, though, is not just that one may accurately judge these books by their covers, but that picture books of the 1970s were characterized by generally bright colors and extensive use of pattern and ornamental design.

21 Nodelman 59-68.
affected by color because they are more sensory-sensually oriented than are adults. In this respect, color in illustrations—especially in books in which the illustrations predominate the text—is itself a marker of children's property.

Rendered in delicately shaded black and grey tones of conte dust that approach the precision of a photograph, the cover of Garden attracts attention and curiosity for its visual subtlety and sophistication as much as (if not more than) for the narrative content implied by the depicted scene. Yet the relationship between the scene and the way it is drawn is central to the entire effect of the image, for the photographic quality is simultaneously bolstered and subverted by the "action" and setting. On one hand, the boy who is apparently chasing a bull terrier across the dust jacket is frozen in mid-stride, exactly as though the picture had been "taken," rather than drawn. But the space through which he runs—seemingly a formal garden populated by an imposingly monumental topiary rabbit, duck, giraffe, seal and elephant—is somehow unreal, though it is constructed of meticulously detailed shrubbery leaves and blades of grass.

Exactly this kind of dialectical tension is at the heart of all of Van Allsburg's illustrations and stories, and his depiction of childhood. The "documentary" style supports the pervasive atmosphere of surreality, including its other facets: contrasts between stasis and action, historical time...
and an evolving present, and rational knowledge and emotional belief. Underlying all of these is the tension between adults' conventions of representation and children's, children's books and adult works.\textsuperscript{22} In each of these pairs, the former is associated with adult minds and culture, the latter with those of children, but the dynamic between them is driven by insidious incursions of "pre-adult" experience into the "post-child" world. Finally, a pervasive discontinuity between causes and expected results is particularly important in terms of American culture during the 1980s and its relation to American culture in the 1960s and 1970s; transgressions of traditional social rules are as common as transgressions of logical ones in these books, and similarly, they pass without negative consequences for those "at fault."

Even with an undercurrent of symbolic cross-generational

\textsuperscript{22}Interestingly, Nodelman cites Macaulay with Van Allsburg in his discussion of the ability of black and white illustrations to subvert conventions of "documentary" and evoke the context of adult literary forms:

Van Allsburg and Macaulay both achieve a sense of reality by imitating and thus evoking our [adults'] conventional expectations of conventionally realistic depictions, photographs, or architect's sketches; but in other circumstances, black-and-white drawing is not necessarily a good medium for the representational depiction of the way the world looks. It shows us less of the visual world than our eyes do--shades, but no hues--and forces us to fill in what is not actually shown. . . . That focus also explains why black-and-white illustrations seem so much more appropriate in longer books than in picture books. Picture books emphasize showing as much as telling, . . . . [b]ut in longer books, words convey at least some of [the] details (66-67).
intrusions, the story of The Garden of Abdul Gasazi seems to follow a fairly conventional formula for children's stories—a separation and return narrative. But other features herald the development of the peculiarities of Van Allsburg's subsequent work. An issue raised here that will be a recurring theme in later works is the location and influence of adults. Parents are altogether missing in the story and the rational adult figure is, instead, Miss Hester—presumably a neighbor—who asks the central character, Alan, to watch her "bad mannered" dog, Fritz, while she pays a social call on a friend. The task, however, is not easy, because Fritz is determined to make Alan's life difficult by trying to chew on the furniture and Alan's hat, eventually escaping during his walk to lead the boy into the garden from which the book draws its name.

The garden is posted "no dogs allowed" by its owner, Abdul Gasazi, a retired magician who still has a few tricks up his sleeves. Nevertheless, Fritz charges on, heedless of possible consequences to him or to Alan, who chases after Fritz until his path leads to the imposing and monumental house of Gasazi. Gasazi appears at the door to inform him that Fritz has been captured and—like all dogs trespassing in the garden—turned into a duck. Gasazi presents a particularly feisty duck to Alan (he knows it to be Fritz because it tries to bite him) and sends him on his way, saying that the spell will wear off eventually, but that even he
knows not when, exactly. When a gust of wind carries Alan's hat into the air, Fritz snatches it and flies off, leaving poor Alan with a long walk home and the unhappy prospect of explaining to Miss Hester that her dog now has feathers, quacks, and is unlikely to come home soon, if at all.

When Alan arrives at the house and tries to explain the situation, however, Miss Hester chuckles and tells Alan that the magician had played a trick on him, since Fritz (the dog) was waiting in the front yard when she returned. After Alan, embarrassed at still believing in magic, has gone home, Fritz presents the boy's hat to Miss Hester and the reader is the only one who understands the whole "truth" of the matter. Alan has had a brush with the "impossible," and the adult figure has interpreted it as such. Despite Alan's own sense that what he experienced had been real, he defers to the presumably "wiser" voice of rationality that maintains that appearances (if they are unusual) are deceiving.

One of the central conflicts in Garden, as it is in all of Van Allsburg's books, is between children's immediate sense of the real and the attempts to "civilize" it out of them: to have their minds submit to mature ways of thought and the idea that the world is a certain place. Van Allsburg clearly disagrees with this position, however, and in Garden, Fritz is his alter ego. It is not just the furniture and Alan's hat that the bull terrier wants to sink his teeth into, it is the assurance in rational normalcy that may have already taken
root in Alan. With what seems to be a canine smirk on his face throughout, Fritz challenges Alan's belief that everything can be understood, that everything follows rules, and that if we see something miraculous, the "truth" will reveal a logical explanation for it. Since this is the recurring theme in Van Allsburg's work, the signature bull terrier appears in all of the author's other books, usually as a signal that things are about to get weird.23

Saying that it is Alan's trust in rational processes that Fritz is after is actually only half true, since Alan's "trust" is, itself, only half-formed. In fact, up until Miss Hester proposes an alternate explanation for the boy's experiences, he is fully prepared to take them at their bizarre face value. It is only at her prompting that Alan recalls his rationalist catechism and duly recites its precepts and the conclusion that he must have been fooled by Gasazi. Clearly such a mind-set is not his natural or his

23 Fritz's recurrent presence in his books is one of Van Allsburg's joys of illustration, but it also contributes to the complexity of the interaction between the author and his audience: "before even starting the thumbnail sketches, I looked 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. However, I always play fair" (Ruello 169). Like Alfred Hitchcock's cameo appearances in his films, Van Allsburg's intrusion by proxy into the story serves to disrupt the "willing suspension of disbelief" on which magical tales are supposed to depend. The Van Allsburg-familiar reader's knowledge that Fritz is lurking somewhere contributes to the dislocation of possibility that the narratives entail, but it also produces a sophisticated awareness on the part of the reader of the act of reading itself, which--especially given the allusion to Hitchcock--emphasizes an adult presence.
accustomed one, but is the not-yet-assimilated substitute provided for him by adults.

Had the story ended with Alan's acceptance of the adult interpretive mode, the lesson (if not the "moral") could be read as arguing for its superiority over that of children and as a defense of the whole process of socialization of which reading picture books is a part. But, of course, it does not end there. Even Miss Hester's finding Alan's hat is ambiguous, however, and does not allow a reading entirely repudiating the first one. She has no way of knowing that Fritz-as-a-duck had snatched the hat from mid-air, so she can not make the realization that Alan's original impression of the course of events was correct. Alan himself had already admitted defeat and gone home, so he could not assert the "truth" of the matter, either. That leaves only the reader with all the (apparent) facts necessary to make the imaginative ruling, in all likelihood favoring the perspective of the child.

There remain two sticking points in this reading, nonetheless: first, though the reader may be reassured that Alan was on the right figurative path, the books closes with him convinced of his error. He is not reassured in the least about his perceptive skills, but feels "silly," and promises not to let himself be fooled again. He has learned the "right" lesson culturally, but only the readers know that it is the wrong one in actuality. The other point involves the
logic that the reader uses to affirm Alan's view, despite having only limited, episodic knowledge of the "events." Miss Hester's discovery of the hat is the only piece of information that the reader has access to, to which Alan did not; leave out that one fact and his or her knowledge is exactly and only as complete as that of the boy—based on leaps of faith between the given images and the visual information they and the texts convey. There is no actual continuity, though there are apparent narrative connections; support for Alan's conclusions is based partially on the necessity that the reader utilize his logical method and, hence, arrive at the same results.

While logical rules undergo considerable contortion between the author, the characters in the text, and the

24 The logical method in question is not only suggested by and consistent with the picture book format, but by contemporary models of child behavioral development, too. The similarities between the kind of reasoning elicited by picture books and that described in work based on the theories of psychologist Jean Piaget are striking. What is presented to the reader in picture books is a series of still pictures with implied connections but no explicit continuity—precisely how Piaget's theory claims pre-school age children observe series of events like the pouring of milk from one beaker to another vessel of different proportions. A picture book narrative of "states" rather than continuities seems perfectly appropriate to the pre-school child audience, accustomed to perceiving experience in just this way, and significantly, ignoring the problem of "conservation" allows what is labelled a "preoperational" mind to accept seemingly impossible, mysterious, or magical images. Since their logic does not require a "realistic" process by which the depicted scenes could have come about; it is enough that they exist (or seem to exist) at the moment. (Robert Slavin, Educational Psychology: Theory into Practice, 2nd ed., (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988) 27-30.)
implied reader, they are not the only rules at issue; a more explicit form of subversion of adult, presumably-rational authority occurs in the entrance of Fritz into the garden in the first place, followed by his boy guardian. In this respect Fritz is even more Van Allsburg's (and his generation's) proxy than in his relation to perceptual difficulties, since he embodies self-indulgent rule-breaking without serious consequences. The dog does not merely have a history of "bad days," his character is defined by his refusal to accept limits on or confining responsibility for his actions. That he is a "bad-mannered dog," rather than an "evil" or even "mischievous" one suggests that the rules he so frequently ignores (do not chew on the furniture, do not enter the garden) are not moral imperatives but polite social conventions—again, manners.

Fritz seems to know, too, that he will not be punished for his transgressions. He keeps Alan busy all morning, after all, by going from one mischief to another, neither expecting nor receiving a punitive blow from a rolled-up newspaper; Alan's only recourse is to outlast him until they are both too tired to contend. This resolution suggests the futility of the rules, since it took all Alan's energy just to maintain the status quo against the canine onslaught. But both characters' experiences in the garden undermine the apparent "effectiveness" of punishment as well.

Even after Gasazi announces Fritz's fate, the dog asserts
his unchanged identity and the irrelevance of the transformation by irking Alan even more effectively than he had all day, stealing the boy's hat and flying off above the clouds. Finally, after exhibiting more freedom and hat-napping skill than he had possessed before his alleged chastizement, Fritz shows up at home in his original dog shape, none the worse (nor different at all) for the experience. As for Alan, his lapse in stewardship of the dog has no untoward effects other than the confusion outlined above, and while the lesson the boy ponders is apparently about being "fooled," the reader him or herself is given to wonder if his central mistake was to believe in Gasazi's spell or to believe that obeying adult rules is really as important as adults consistently say.

Van Allsburg's second picture book, *Jumanji*, like *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*, revolves around children left to maintain adult (parental) order while the adults are off in social situations; it also explores the consequences when they do not. Again in black and white, the illustrations show a home with all the amenities that a middle class family could want, and imply that the these physical objects are a source of pride to the adults. On their way out of the house, their Mother tells Judy and her younger brother Peter, "Now remember, your father and I are bringing some guests by after
the opera, so please keep the house neat."^25

Even though they drag out all their toys (which we may assume are usually kept somewhere neat and organized) the children become bored among the carefully maintained and plushly upholstered furniture of their home. Going outside to play in the park, the two discover a mysterious board game, Jumanji, with a cryptic note attached admonishing whoever plays it to follow its instructions. They take it home and an "aerial" view shows Peter and Judy sitting at a card table with the game spread out before them and a pull-toy that looks remarkably like Fritz standing by. Reading the directions, the children find out that "Once a game of Jumanji is started it will not be over until one player has reached the golden city."^26 In the following pages, as the dust jacket reads, the "game comes startlingly to life," and the children get far more adventure than they had intended.

The main action in Jumanji revolves around the game itself. As Peter and Judy roll dice and land their game pieces on squares of the game's board, the events written on the game become literally true: a lion chases Peter through the house until it is trapped under a bed, monkeys trash the kitchen, rhinoceroses and pythons invade the home, and monsoons and a volcano erupting in the fireplace fill the


^26 Van Allsburg, Jumanji 5.
house with a thick blanket of steam. But as the python is about to make a meal of Judy, she rolls the correct number to finish the game, shouts the magic word, "Jumanji," and all is as it was before they started. The children clean up the mess they had made on their own, return the game to the park and fall asleep until their parents return. Like Alan, they try to explain what had happened to the adults, who are only amused at the imaginative powers of the children. The story ends with an offhanded "moral" about following directions. Mrs. Budwing, a guest, remarks that her own children are not good at following directions, but that they will surely learn. Peter and Judy look out the window to see the Budwing boys hurrying off with Jumanji, and say, simultaneously, "I hope so."

Both Jumanji and The Garden of Abdul Gasazi are about literal truth and perceptual rules; they propose that things often are just the way they seem, even if they seem reasonably impossible. Van Allsburg suggests that children's propensity to take things literally may be a valid alternative to adults' endless attempts to find the way things "really are," because often the obvious facts do not fit into a rational scheme. Yet it is not an unconditioned endorsement he makes. There always remains the possibility that the fantastic happenings children in his stories witness or take part in are imaginary, as there are occasionally periods of sleep (sometimes


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27Van Allsburg, Jumanji 28.
literally) imbedded in the plots.28 Even when sleep-states are the explicit mechanism by which Van Allsburg begins his subjects' adventures, however, they are not included to make his implications easier to understand and categorize, but more difficult.

But here, too, rules in relation to consequences are debated. Following Garden's example of a two-level challenge to adult authority (Fritz and Alan), Jumanji features a nest of compliance and transgression, dependent on the differences between parents' and children's senses of order(s). On the first level, that of parental precepts, Peter and Judy are instructed to keep the house clean; the first order of business, then, is to bring out all their toys. While the children do put their playthings away in the aftermath of the rhinoceroses, volcano, etc., until then they remain strewn across the house. Even though this is only a technical violation of their instructions (they ended up with a clean house but did not "keep" it clean), it is the seed event from

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28 In addition to the post-game nap in Jumanji, four other Van Allsburg books use the possibility of dream states to undermine the characters' and the readers' sense of certainty: Ben's Dream (1982) and Just a Dream (1990) are obvious in this respect, the subject of The Polar Express (1985) wakes up in the middle of the night on Christmas eve for a trip to the North Pole, and in Wreck of the Zephyr (1983) the author substitutes unconsciousness caused by a bonk on the protagonist's head for sleep, in addition to framing the story within another tale. Of course, this trick is not Van Allsburg's invention, as sleep/dream/bonk-on-the-head entrances into alternate worlds occur often in the tradition of children's literature—in both Alice in Wonderland and The Wizard of Oz, for instance.
which the whole-house destruction emerges.

The game Jumanji itself is a combination of—as usual—literalization and exaggeration of children’s perceptions of adult admonitions and, conversely, an alternative system to those same strictures. On one hand, as the "moral" implies, it teaches children to obey the rules carefully, lest the dire consequences suggested by parental warnings actually come to pass. Though exoticized, the game plays "what would happen if..." and evokes the possibility of one’s face actually sticking like that, of poking out an eye, and of breaking one’s neck, all in one day. Like the child who wants his or her parent to promise that the facial contorsion will be permanent, Peter and Judy are at once delighted and frightened by what adults think should scare them.

On the other hand, Jumanji also posits an alternative to adult rule systems and cause-effect, crime-punishment convention. The game embodies and exaggerates the motif of making a big mess, but instead of being a violation of adult rules, the upheaval occurs as the result of carefully following an internal set of instructions—synonymous with the children’s own unrealized desires, in violation of legalistic logic. Every child’s dream, Jumanji promises that if he or she will only set about making a really, really big mess, it will clean itself up without help. Similar to the other, this reading of Jumanji turns a rhetorical parental question (Do you think this will clean itself up?) into an occasion for a
joyous affirmative answer, rather than a time for feigned penitence. In both cases, the idea that adult rules offer the best source of guidance for children is undermined.

As I have stated before, the visual interplay between apparent truth, literalism, and reasonable impossibility are what have garnered Van Allsburg's books and the artist himself considerable attention and three Caldecott awards (Medals for *Jumanji* in 1982 and *The Polar Express* in 1986, Honor Book designation for *Garden of Abdul Gasazi* in 1979). As strange and unlikely as the events pictured in the books are, the way they are rendered is eerily realistic. As a teacher of professional illustration, Van Allsburg approaches the problems of picture book illustration with an unusual technical prowess that translates into extremely believable, though stylized images. To reiterate another point, it is also highly unusual among picture books that five of his ten are in black-and-white; only with his fourth, *The Wreck of the "Zephyr"*, did he add color by switching his medium from pencil or conte crayon to pastels. Perry Nodelman describes the strange relationship the pictures create between how they are drawn and what is drawn in them:

The black-and-white pictures in both *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* and *Jumanji* evoke the feeling of black and white still photographs that have been slightly over-developed to emphasize their contrasts. They are uncompromisingly objective and detached. ... [We] commonly associate black and white with uncompromising truth, utter absence of subjective coloring: documentary. Van Allsburg's pictures have the quality of documentary, of detached observation that shows exactly what there is to see without the
frivolous intrusion of color, and they are unsettling simply because what we see so uncompromisingly is often magic and impossible.29

The environments depicted in this "documentary" style are, themselves, neither magical nor commonly associated with unusual or problematic occurrences; in fact, they are visually staid, even imposing. What evidence Van Allsburg gives of the domestic and cultural situations of his child subjects seems similarly secure: they all apparently live in affluent suburbia. It is the very contrast between the style and setting and the adventures of Alan, Judy and Peter that emphasizes the discrepancy between "mature" expectations and the "real" world as observed by the children and interpreted by Van Allsburg. It is the same discrepancy that allows the author to represent and endorse the children's alternate mental and social rules.

Van Allsburg himself embraces the uncertainty, claiming, "I like the sense of 'What's wrong with this picture?'"30 And yet, there is nothing wrong with the pictures, per se; they merely shun stylistic clues traditionally used by illustrators of children's books to indicate that what they depict is fantasy. What is "wrong" is the inconsistency between what they show and how some adults believe they should show it, and between the image of children as gullible and

29Nodelman 67.

"wisely credulous." Both in review articles and on the dust jackets of the books themselves, words like "illusion," "spell," "haunt," and "surreal" buzz in reference to Chris Van Allsburg's picture books, but more importantly, (in reviews) so do "distressing," and "disturbing." Nodelman says of Garden, that it implies "a mysterious, imaginary world where impossible things have a distressingly possible actuality," and the front leaf of the book itself begins, "Sometime that very thin line between illusion and reality is not as clearly defined as we would like it to be."

Both assume that the events in Van Allsburg's books are illusions or occur in imaginary worlds, but the texts give no such indication, and, if anything, confirm the literal truth of the pictures. Nevertheless, because the books do depict real settings, Van Allsburg's intentions can be misinterpreted; magical transformations are fairly uncommon in everyday experience, after all. In his third book, however, the author limits the possible interpretations by presenting a no-less strange experience in a format with whose mystery everyone is more acquainted--the dream.

Ben's Dream is also in black and white, but its line drawings are less "photographic" than the illustrations in either of his first two books. They still retain an objectivity that denies immediate dismissal as fantasy. The story follows Ben and, secondarily, his friend Margaret as

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31Nodelman 88.
their plans to play baseball are thwarted by a rainstorm. The retire to their separate homes to study for a geography test on great landmarks of the world. Again there is a noticeable absence of adults, made explicit by a note from his mother taped to a kitchen cabinet in Ben’s home. The note says, "Went shopping. Mom," but it is unclear whether this is a reference to a 1950s-style nuclear family in which Mom is expected to be at home, or to the two-working-parent family situation so prevalent among Van Allsburg’s buyers, in which case the reader is to take her absence for granted. Next, Ben settles down in his father’s easy chair to read and is subsequently lulled to sleep by the drumming of the rain on the window. The book takes its unusual turn at the moment Ben nods off. The text says, "But then..." and disappears until the final pages of the book, but the pictures show the house giving a violent shudder as it begins to float off through a now-flooded world. Typically, a picture of Fritz swings awkwardly from the pitching wall.

The center twenty-two pages are a waterborne world tour past the monuments the reader assumes Ben was studying. The frame house is seen with intriguingly angled shots of such landmarks as Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, the Onion-shaped domes of the Kremlin, and the Great Wall of China that make figuring out which wonder of the world is pictured something of a

guessing game. As Ben floats past the Sphinx, though, the
view is from his own porch, and beyond the monument is another
little frame house with a strangely familiar form in the
window. Finally, the head of George Washington on Mt. Rushmore says, "Ben, wake up,"33 and as he does and the reader turns the page, Margaret is at the window calling him out to play. The world is dry again, and Margaret tells Ben of the strange dream she had, in which she floated past the landmarks of the world. The book ends with the following exchange:

[Margaret says,] You'll never guess who I saw when I floated past the Sphinx."
    Ben Smiled. "Me," he said, "standing on my front porch waving."
    Margaret's jaw dropped in amazement. "Gosh, how did you know?"
    Ben got on his bike and pedaled ahead. "Because I saw you there!" he called out, and rolled down the hill.34

There is no explanation given or even implied of how the two children could have shared the same dream, or even the extent to which it was a dream; the book ends like an episode of the "Twilight Zone." There is no logical explanation for their experience, and, because this case of uncertainty takes place outside of physical objects or environments, there is no argument based on any observable fact to discount its "truth."

Even if adults were present, their interpretations could have

33 Van Allsburg, Ben's Dream 28.

34 Van Allsburg, Ben's Dream 31.
no more weight than the children's themselves. While Ben's Dream does not contain the kind of rule-violation or wish-fulfillment scenarios that Van Allsburg's first two books did (unless one counts learning landmarks for a test through the mythical, book-under-the-pillow osmosis method), it is perhaps the most irrefutable example of alternate perceptual truth.

Wreck of the Zephyr (1983) reverses the emphasis and exemplifies privilege without responsibility; it provides what is perhaps Van Allsburg's clearest example of the tension between social strictures and the youthful challenge to the expectation of punishment for wrongdoing, couched in what a Publisher's Weekly review called "a tale of hubris in the classical mold.\(^{35}\) The book represents at least two "firsts" in Van Allsburg's work: Wreck of the Zephyr was his first book illustrated in color (using Rembrandt pastels), though the velvety surrealism of the artist's earlier work is continued in this new medium. Also, Zephyr is the first book in which the narrative point of view is complex and clearly adult--with identifiable voices of the artist-storyteller and the tale's protagonist. The story is related "as told to the author" by an old sailor to explain the presence of a ship sitting on a bluff overlooking an ocean bay. The story within this multivoiced frame, however, is the one of which the reviewer spoke, and it centers on a young boy whose abilities

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as a sailor are only equalled by his enthusiasm and determination to demonstrate them.

The action of Wreck of the Zephyr begins when the unnamed boy "who could sail a ship better than any man in the harbor," and had the ability to "find a breeze over the flattest sea," puts out despite warnings from a local fisherman of an approaching storm. In the midst of the gale, the boom of the Zephyr catches the boy unawares and knocks him unconscious. When he comes to, he and his boat are stranded high and dry on an unfamiliar beach, well above the normal high-tide line. Walking for some time in search of help, he comes over a hill to witness the astonishing sight of three ships gliding gracefully through the air and into a small harbor flanked by a large village—the third ship towing his own Zephyr. Descending into town, the boy meets a sailor who explains that the island is isolated by a large reef, over which the storm must have carried him. When the sailor volunteers to escort the ship back over, the protagonist refuses to leave the island until learning how to sail above the waves, despite being told that it take years of practice and special sails to do so. Finally the sailor agrees to give him an afternoon's worth of lessons, and loans a set of the


37 As usual, the dog Fritz from The Garden of Abdul Gasazi is on the scene as events take a turn for the unusual; this time he stands on the pier beside the fisherman.
magical sails for the demonstration.

Try as he might, the boy is unable to accomplish the feat that the sailor seems to do with ease. After dinner and listening to a "concertina" about a legendary sailor who had once made the mistake of trying to sail his ship over land, the boy decides to try again, sneaking out to his ship (as yet with the magical sails on it) after the sailor and his wife had gone to bed. As a conflict between childhood "initiative" and social limits, all the elements are present at this point in the story. In most regards, the boy's extreme self-confidence and disruptive behavior has been rewarded: he not only made it through the storm, but has obtained the opportunity to learn a skill that easily surpasses finding wind over flat water. The rule he "breaks" in learning in one afternoon what adults say should take years is not the most flagrant of his infractions, but it is an important one: he has denied the principle of delayed gratification, of "paying his dues," as irrelevant to his situation. That he apparently does not give a second thought to stealing the kind sailor's sails is reminiscent of Fritz's unblinking dash into Gasazi's garden, and, in fact, they both end up sailing above the clouds.

The boy's final success, however, depends not only on his determination, but on his ability to self-impose a few limitations--first by realizing the older man's superior knowledge, second, by listening to his instructions and
abiding by his rules. The boy does well enough at this task at first, and is finally successful in coaxing the Zephyr out of the water. But despite the fact that "he tried to remember everything the sailor had told him," his "initiative" gets the better of him and he sheds all pretense of respecting the knowledge of his elders. Setting course for home so high above the clouds that he is sure even the men of the mysterious island had never sailed there, he becomes all the more convinced that he must certainly be "the greatest sailor of all." And, as the reader might expect, this overconfidence is the source of his (quite literal) downfall; despite the warning of the concertina, he pilots the Zephyr over the town to astonish the neighbors, whereupon the winds begin to change and swirl, sending the boat crashing into the tree tops on a high hill.

While this ending seems to be a repudiation of the boy's assertions of independence of adult rules, it actually develops the idea of children's autonomous rule systems; a subtle difference between the way children's experiences are regulated by "rules" in Wreck of the Zephyr and in Garden of Abdul Gasazi and Jumanji is instructive. As I have already noted, in Jumanji, Peter and Judy must exercise control over themselves if they are not to be overcome by the fantastic goings-on in their house--the literalization of a "runaway imagination." But they do so by accepting clearly-defined,  

38Van Allsburg, Wreck of the Zephyr [20].
written rules from the game itself, which is a concrete, inanimate, and external source of governance to which they may only react. Similarly, Alan can only react to the atrocities perpetrated by Fritz, the transformation Gasazi effects on the dog, and the reinterpretation provided by Miss Hester. He is learning that he (and the world) has more leeway than he had been led to believe, but he did not assert his newfound prerogative. But the young sailor has almost unlimited scope for his actions, unfettered as he seems to be by any social (not to mention familial) ties whatsoever. Not only does he not desire the approval of adults, he is apparently under no obligation to heed the first sailor's warnings about the approaching bad weather, or the instructions of any adult. The sailor on the mysterious island receives no deference, and the boy's cavalier theft of the man's sails seems to indicate that spankings are no longer part of his experience. Instead of being driven by fear or a desire for approval, the discipline that might have allowed him a lifetime of sailing among the clouds is (or should have been) a wholly internalized self-discipline. It is the boy's free agency that allows the story to be interpreted as a tale of "classic hubris" rather than a story of a naughty child.

As usual, Van Allsburg uses the device of the possible-dream (the boy's encounter with the ship's boom) to undermine the idea of narrative certainty. But in this book, the old
sailor and the clearly depicted authorial presence\textsuperscript{39} are two more frames that emphasize the tenuousness of traditional interpretive authority while embracing the alternative techniques of children. The moral of productive self-control inherent in the boy's adventure may not be challenged, but the choice of messenger certainly is.

After the crash of the \textit{Zephyr}, the story ends with a return to the author and the old man, who says that the boy's leg was broken that night, and that despite the townspeople's incredulity, he spent his life "searching for that island and a new set of sails." Finally, saying he has some sailing to do, he takes his leave of the author, who watches him as he limps toward the harbor. Even this ending, which might be thought of as the chastisement of the boy for his pride, can be seen as a disruption of consequence, since the boy was able to devote his life to searching for the island again, to pursuing his dream. Just as there were no parental fetters at the beginning of his adventure, there seem to be no familial ones at the end.

The other implications are, of course, that the old sailor was the boy grown up—\textemdash that he was telling his own story while not entirely expecting the listener to believe it. Yet the clues that Van Allsburg gives to this effect are coupled with the matter-of-fact tone of the narrator's account of

\textsuperscript{39}In both the first and last illustrations, the narrator is drawn as a subtle self-portrait of Van Allsburg, himself.
hearing it, and the surreally consistent quality of the illustrations, to create an air of authenticity, if not reality. Paradoxically, the same intermediary narrative layers that serve structurally to remove the reader from the depicted events (the two "visible" narrators) add an adult "eyewitness" authority to them—and a hint that the message is equally applicable to adults as to children.

As with Van Allsburg’s first three books, this adventure revolves around a child’s entrance into and return from a magical landscape, but the mixed adult-child narrative perspectives in Wreck of the Zephyr make questions about an adult perceptual hegemony inescapable; especially clear in this instance is a critique of the credibility gap faced by a child trying to tell any of these mysterious stories in a way that is believable to adults. Ordinarily, to do so is impossible without the presence of adult characters acting as rhetorical "sponsors." The story told by the old sailor is, after all, the same as that told by him as a boy, but because he is no longer a child, his story seems to carry more weight.

Finally, there is the matter of the old man’s particular listener. A continuation of the narrative identity of the first three books, he is a special kind of adult, "in tune" with the alternate reality of childhood, and seemingly prone to give children’s stories more than the usual degree of credence. He is also a representative voice for readers of his generation and class, not only because he listens to
children with a credulous ear but because his trust in their stories involves self-identification with the children. From Van Allsburg's earliest books to *The Polar Express* there is a discernable development of the narrator/adult's relationship to depicted children from sympathy to synonymity, with *Wreck of the Zephyr* describing the final stage of difference wherein the narrator identifies with another adult who is a "perpetual child." In *Polar Express* the child protagonist is the personalized voice of the narrator, himself, and the possibility of carrying childhood perceptual abilities into adulthood is literalized as a single silver sleigh bell.

Like *Wreck of the Zephyr, Polar Express* begins in the first person, with the narrator telling of his experiences sometime in the past; in the latter, however, the first person narrative does not give way to another's account of miraculous events, but retains its eyewitness quality. Child and adult commingle in the person of the storyteller rather than in a character within the story, and from the outset both credulity and credibility are at issue. The narrator lies awake one Christmas eve, listening for the sound of Santa's sleigh bells, believing in Santa despite the fact that another child had insisted that there was no such thing. What he hears, however, is the sound of a train stopping in his front yard, full of other children, bound for the North Pole and Santa's magical city.

After a fast and scenic journey during which the children
are served "hot cocoa as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars" and similarly idealized candy, the Polar Express arrives at the North Pole for a ceremony at which Santa chooses a child to receive the first gift of Christmas. The narrator is chosen for the honor, but instead of asking for a new toy or a bicycle, he requests only a bell from Santa’s reindeer harness. Pleased with the boy’s choice, Santa grants his wish then mounts his sleigh to begin his deliveries; the children, too, are off on their return journey to their bedrooms. Only back on the train does the boy discover the hole in the pocket of his robe, through which the bell has fallen and been lost. When the Polar Express reaches his home, he bids it farewell and goes to bed, understandably heartbroken. But the next morning, when all the presents seem to have been opened, his sister finds one last small package with the bell and a note from "Mr C." enclosed; the note says that Santa found the bell on the seat of his sleigh and suggests that the boy fix the hole in his pocket.

Though the trip to the Pole, the awarding of the First Present, and its magical return to the boy by Santa are consistent with Van Allsburg’s pattern of miraculous events beheld and believed only by children, the last two pages of Polar Express are more to the point of his implications than any others in his work. The real trick in the narrative is

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not the bell’s reappearance, but the fact that the boy’s parents are unable to hear its ring, despite his description of it as "the most beautiful sound my sister and I had ever heard."⁴¹ Here as in Wreck of the Zephyr, Van Allsburg makes a symbolic assertion of the superiority of childlike perception, similarly grounding his narrative in "physical" evidence (the boat, the bell). Nevertheless, he continues to connect a certain adult mindset with that of his idealized children, making the benefits of childhood accessible to particularly perceptive adults. While on that original Christmas morning the distinction between who could and who could not hear the bell was along strictly pre- and post-puberty lines, the author does not stop at such pre-Zephyr exactitude. The final page of the book brings the bell and its implications into the present and into the adulthood of the once-children by reframing the story as memory told in the present by an adult. In a small box at the center of the page an illustration of the single bell sits over the text:

At one time most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed it fell silent for most of them. Even Sarah found one Christmas that she could no longer hear its sweet sound. Though I’ve grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe.⁴²

This ending is an invitation and challenge to adult readers (children, after all, are assumed to "truly believe")

⁴¹Van Allsburg, Polar Express 28.
⁴²Van Allsburg, Polar Express 30.
to identify themselves with the author's perspective, either by announcing that they--like the narrator--never lost their ear for the bell, or by reclaiming the meaning of the bell as adults through the purchase of the book. Especially in regards to the gift boxes containing actual bells along with Polar Express, adults have the ability to quite literally "buy into" the cultural mythology Van Allsburg is selling, and lay claim to a shared generational identity. For professional boomers in the cultural, economic and political milieu of the past decade, there were clear advantages in identifying with this special kind of perception and with a social order in which individuals need neither significantly pay for their past transgressions nor "pay dues" and wait politely for their chance at the benefits of cultural authority and power. Thus the narrative voice in Wreck of the Zephyr, Polar Express and Van Allsburg's later books sidesteps traditional formulations of adult identity in favor of a reclaimed, remembered childhood. In this context, "once upon a time" becomes a rhetorical strategy of re-use in and of itself, tied both to traditions of telling children's stories and to the readers' own pasts, but most importantly, tied to the process of claiming cultural rights in the present.
IV. "Children" Claiming Power

The strange interplay between traditional rationality, regulative certainty, and children's experience of "magic" in Van Allsburg's work that is characteristic of boomer reappropriation of childhood has certainly not gone un-noticed by critics and reviewers of children's picture books. Indeed, reviewer Paul Heins focused on the "unsettling" tension of the pictures, questioning whether or not they are appropriate for their intended audience. He says that the "immobility" of the pictures is "mannered and bordering on the occult," concluding that The Garden of Abdul Gasazi is "decidedly not a book for young children."\(^3\) He gives no explicit reason for his conclusion, but balks at the very "real" way in which the author depicts "impossible" events, hinting that while older children have learned the meaning of fiction, younger children might be fooled by the sophistication of the imagery into the belief that weird things really do happen, or that they can be naughty and still escape, scot free. Caution is recommended lest Garden subvert the civilization of the young by presenting them with inappropriate--i.e. not reassuring--views of an adult-interpreted world, adult methods of

interpretation, and adult-mandated behavioral boundaries. While this view is somewhat typical of those who still treat picture books as strictly children's objects, a markedly different opinion is to be expected among adults who approach and respond to the books personally, as adults.

Perception, rules, and rules of perception are what "childhood" in Van Allsburg's world is all about, and adult readers' relationships to childhood in the texts (and to the texts themselves) is a matter of perspective. In the case of *Garden of Abdul Gasazi*, the reader is given just a little bit more information than is Alan, as well as an awareness of that extra knowledge, hence the reader may identify with Miss Hester and the world of "adults" (as do reviewers who find the book "ominous"), or with Alan and his shifting sense of reality, logic, and outcomes; the choice depends largely on the attitude with which the reader approaches this or any picture book. Admittedly, reviewers in *Horn Book Review* or the *School Library Journal* have specific critical goals that keep their attention directed towards the perceived needs of elementary school children; nevertheless, they miss the full possibility of the texts by reading as adults reading books for children, rather than as adults reading books for adults.4

4 There are still many who raise the question of whether the books are "appropriate" for young children or not. Indeed, a majority of reviewers who comment on Van Allsburg's books fall short of even this complexity of understanding and, in spite of the texts themselves, read the books as nothing
The extent to which boomers identify with the children is a matter of both literal and figurative points of view and narrative and visual strategies of the author/illustrator decidedly affect perspective, especially the one that adult readers take towards the children in the books; Van Allsburg's manipulation of narrative "eyewitnesses" has already been discussed, and visual point-of-view is manipulated eloquently by Van Allsburg in *Jumanji*. As with his careful chiaroscuro shading, the author is very attentive to internally consistent and weirdly logical perspectives in the illustrations. The effect is two-fold: first it reinforces the photographic quality mentioned earlier; second, it implies that the picture was "taken" by a witness (possibly a participant) in the action. The "realness" is a function of both the limited line-of-sight of the image and the care with which the author has placed lights and shadows, but, the participatory feel is enhanced by the predominantly low angle of the view, which places the reader at the elbow of the characters of the book. For the most part, the gaze of the viewer is influenced by the

more than tales of childhood imagination. Thus one review of *Ben's Dream* begins insipidly: "Of course there's no such thing as magic, or is there?" (E. R. Twichell, rev. of *Ben's Dream*, by Chris Van Allsburg, *Horn Book* Aug. 1982: 396.) The implication is that there is no magic, but that it's alright for kids to believe there is because, after all, they are just kids. A sense of nostalgia permeates the entire review, too, as if the reviewer is pining for those days before "growing out of" childhood innocence. There is no way of knowing the age of this unnamed reviewer, but had they acted upon this longing by siding with children and adopting non-linear thought habits instead of treating them so lightly, they might have been more representative of professional boomer culture.
artist to enhance the reader's association with the child characters, but as with the "aerial" view of Judy and Peter playing the game, Van Allsburg departs from this pattern periodically to reassert that the adult reader's connection to the children must be a conscious choice. Exactly such a decision is made by Van Allsburg himself and the consumers who keep his books on the charts; they choose the child as their metaphorical double and cultural ally.45

Boomers' identification with the child characters and childhood per se is a crucial factor in reading the stories in the books and the books in their culture. As perception of any object depends on the angle from which it is seen, so does a generation's perception of the child-like state depend on how adults position themselves in relation to the rhetorical child. This is especially true when the "use" in question is

45 In Van Allsburg's 1988 Two Bad Ants, perspective and transgression are apparent in their most stripped-down forms, though children (indeed any human presence) are not an obvious part of the narrative. The book is similar to Ben's Dream in its style and emphasis on exotic views, but in this case the rationale behind dramatic perspectives on normally recognizable objects is the identity of the protagonist ants, who wander in and around a human kitchen. It is unclear whether they are "bad" only because they pursue their own individual interests by playing hookey from their usual ant duties (bringing back food for the queen) or because they are trespassing on human territory in addition, but though they have several close scrapes (in a coffee cup, toaster, garbage disposal and electrical outlet, for instance) they escape unharmed to continue their adventures and eventually return to the ant colony. While reading the sugar crystals in the story (and all the ants' near-addictive reaction to it) as a psychedelic reference is unwarranted, the whole does have a certain off-balance euphoric quality and is probably the most playful of the author's books.
figurative rather than literal, and defines one group of adults' relationship to another group of adults, rather than to actual contemporary children. Put another way, the particular "boomeriness" reflected in these texts is not merely the connection between themselves and children, but the distinction between themselves and members of their parents' generation who do not or can not embrace the described childhood in the same way that boomers seem to. Only as an expression of difference from the generation before it does the boom generation's perception of and identification with childhood as an alternative realm make sense, since by most standards such a view would be singularly unproductive.

In fact, without re-identifying the parent-child, youth-adult conflict in these books as a late-1960s, early-1970s redux, the "concerned" reviews I have criticized seem eminently reasonable. What would the primary purchasers of Van Allsburg's vision have to gain by undermining their own authority with their own children, after all? Little, if anything. They are just as concerned with socializing their children and preparing them for "successful" lives as their parents were with them, and by most accounts--because of their educational and professional advancement--should be even more

"It is tempting to call it a subversive realm instead of merely an alternative one but, as we shall see, the work for which childhood is being used does not actually undermine traditional structures of power so much as rationalize their reproduction by a new generation of cultural and political leaders."
able and eager to provide the "right" financial and social base for such success than were their own parents. On the other hand, challenging their parents' cultural authority is consistent with boomers' earlier—youthful—experiences, and was especially appropriate during the 1980s as they joined the "untrustworthy over-thirty" age bracket and rechristened it "thirtysomething."\(^7\)

Speaking of these books as a "challenge" to the pre-war generation's cultural authority is actually somewhat misleading. The fact that the challenge studied here occurs in books for children, and that its language requires as much translation as it is receiving here suggest—rightly—that it lacks the vigor and the volume of its predecessor in the sixties and seventies.\(^8\) The difference is that the student rebellions and youth counterculture movements were reactions to what was perceived as the arbitrary, unthinking, and entrenched power of the older generations, to which the post-war generation had little hope of access. Nor, given the track record of those who wielded political might (Nixon, for instance), did many youths seem to desire adopting the

\(^7\)Reconsidering the question of socialization, it makes sense that professional boomers would present their children with transgressive texts in order to reassert the low opinion in which their own parents' perceived authoritarianism is held.

\(^8\)It is my general point that the political rhetoric buried here is not subversive or truly oppositional; instead, it serves to recycle dominant cultural practices for updated but essentially unchanged use.
strategies or tools of their older cultural and political opponents. The fear of being co-opted helped insure that the few who jumped the fence and joined the "establishment," were not seen as truly representative.

Yet a search—carried out in stages—for access to establishment power and prerogative is what the 1980s epitomized for the very same group. While it may be argued that economic power is intimately tied to the political kind, politics remains a central venue for establishing and acting out relationships of cultural influence, such acts being graduated in their efficacy from civil disobedience to strength as a consumer group to para-legislative lobbying power. The latter two are part and parcel of the status quo. While student activism is one form of access to political power, access to the entry level of high government office (e.g. the House of Representatives) becomes available technically only at twenty five, and in reality much later. Only upon entering its third decade could the generation as a

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49 In a culture whose national identity rests on "classlessness" (or at least the permeability of class boundaries) it is not surprising that questions of entrenched economic privilege and cultural power are translated into political terms in public debate. And considering that the definition of "boomer" given in the introduction of this essay is about levels of economic and educational attainment as much as it is about birthdates, the rhetoric of generational differentiation may similarly mask issues of economic self-interest. But if this demographic group's self-identification as a generation rather than an elite and proportionally small segment of one does serve to focus attention away from the "real" issues, it only adds another layer of complexity to the cultural work of Van Allsburg's texts.
whole begin to realize its potential in terms of establishment cultural power, whether it had explained its desire for that power to itself or to its predecessors.

This is not to suggest that an entire generation "sold out" in the blink of an eye, or even that they admitted to selling out at all. On the contrary, a large part of the impact of the boom generation on American culture comes from the single characteristic that initially defined boomers as a group and about which they could do nothing— their sheer numerical superiority to any other group. To a large extent, they could not avoid following the path of traditional-style leadership, including all of its pitfalls. But precisely the prospect of suborning cherished contrary traditions coupled with the very real appeal of assuming national leadership is what prompted the particular brand of symbolic self-assessment that occurs in the reappropriation of childhood as it is depicted in Van Allsburg's books. That is, the imaginative re-use of childhood is a strategy for generational differentiation and identification and a rationalization for the successful "will to power" that such differentiation facilitates. It is a statement that "we are different," but also an assertion that the "difference" makes a difference in what it means to hold and exercise power. It is a denial of subordination to and co-option by the "system."

More specifically, the way the cultural "challenge" is expressed in these books— as claims for a different perceptual
strategy and outlook on the violation-consequence linkage—is directly related to the apparent residual reticence of Boomers to join the establishment ranks of their parents. In the interim stage of political assimilation of the post-war generation into the world of the still-viable pre-war one (the stage in which boomers participate but can not govern completely according to their wishes), boomers confront some of the same social dictates they had already rejected once before: notably, strictures on their behavior and claims of cultural values to which they do not accede. Here at last is the specific real-world parallel for the dialogues carried out in "rules and perception" language of picture book childhood.

The large-scale entry of post-war-born candidates into races for public office, especially, and positions of cultural leadership generally was (and continues to be) marked by two notable kinds of debate: one centered on so-called "youthful indiscretions," the other on the value of new blood, new ideas, new perspectives on and in national identity. Really, though, the two overlap in a common dialogue: experiences of the boomers' youth that were acknowledged at the time to be about flaunting legal and "moral" restrictions and about gaining new perspectives on the world (especially drug use and sexual experimentation) are now addressed in similar but subtly changed ways. The term "youthful indiscretion" itself is applied by the former transgressors to themselves, indicating that they have either recognized the usefulness of
appeasing older sensibilities, or the genuine need for some self-discipline and reflection. Yet even if boomers claim that such violations were aberrations, that they hold no appeal in the present and thence should incur no punishment, there is rarely an indication that they regret the actions in the first place or question the value of the general context of rebellion. More often than not, in fact, accusations of former delinquency are answered by assertions of their irrelevance to contemporary situations— they are cited as inappropriate applications of another generation’s system of rules. In the way once-youth culture political candidates explain away their proverbial closeted skeletons is evidence of both of the principle strategies of childhood experience as depicted in Van Allsburg’s texts: the assertion of alternate, transgressional forms vision, and the skirting of consequences that seeking vision might be expected to have.  

The open, even aggressive way that precisely these subjects were dealt with in the most recent Presidential election make the subtlety and substitutive nature of cultural dialogue in terms of reappropriated childhood seem pale by comparison. Without apologies or, indeed, much in the way of explanation, Bill Clinton allowed allegations of drug use and

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50Revelations and admissions of youthful drug-use among politicians in recent years are good examples, including the slew of such "outings" in the wake of Supreme Court nominee Douglas Ginsberg’s failed confirmation hearings and the "did he inhale" debate over allegations of marijuana smoking by Bill Clinton when a student in England.
sexual indiscretion to go their merry ways, confident that his peer group would not just forgive him, but look upon his conflicts with "traditional" value systems as their own. Indeed, the election of the Democratic Party ticket seems to have been a repudiation of the effectiveness of applying old strictures to a member of a generation able and willing to defend one of its own. But while the political ascendancy of the boom generation has been frequently touted of late, and its "alternatives" and "change" platform cited as the wave of the cultural future, the symbolic language that pitted old against new and "young" in 1992 was being refined and consolidated in a less obvious venue a decade ago.

In retrospect, the way Van Allsburg developed and sold his construction of the child-savant in the 1980s paralleled his generation's negotiation of its accession to mature political and social power—a coming to terms made easier by its crafting a coherent imaginative identity to distinguish itself from the ways and means of the pre-war generation. His first books explored the boundaries of generational perspective and insight and began to identify the imagined child as a preferred symbolic representative: The Garden of

51 Not to portray this alternative vision as only a tool of the political left, it should be noted that key elements of "80s excess" against which reform candidates ran in 1992 embodied similar tactics of ethical revisionism. The mergers-and-acquisitions culture of junk bonds, corporate raiders and the like also epitomize the innovative ways young professionals sought to rewrite the rules and practices of their elders.
Abdul Gasazi, Jumanji, and Ben's Dream all focus on children's experiences and offer primary interpretations from children's perspectives. Similarly, the boomers' consolidation of group identity began with the basic fact of a few years of shared childhood, but more vitally a youth and young adulthood steeped in counterculture rhetoric of generational difference in experience and perspective wherein those over thirty were all but an alien race. This coarse logic of differentiation, however, can only be a starting point for a more complex identity which encompasses ideals of resistance and asserts a claim on the establishment's reins.

Difference from adults continued to be portrayed as children's essential quality in Wreck of the Zephyr and Polar Express, expressed both as alternative vision and immunity from the conventional transgression-punishment connection. These books, though, also codified childhood difference as something accessible and useful to enlightened adults—as both a usable past and a present self-conception. The simultaneous ability to see as a child through adult eyes—the fraught perspectival contortions of Van Allsburg's narratives—is suggestive of baby-boomers' attempts to use their social clout for progressive purposes, maintaining that the legacy of their anti-establishment past continues to be viable even in the exercise of clearly establishment-based power. The Z was Zapped and Two Bad Ants are stripped-down exercises in perspective, and it is through the same internalized grown-up
child's eyes that Van Allsburg and his readers see the subjects of his overt cultural critiques after 1989.

In *Just A Dream* (1990) and *The Wretched Stone* (1991), the presumption that his readership is attuned to his unspoken credo of the reclaimed child (or that his construction is properly attuned to theirs) enabled Van Allsburg to dispense with explicit reference to the child-adult relationship and focus on cultural, quasi-political critique. *Just A Dream* is a "green" fairy tale in which a rather wasteful and recycling-insensitive boy has a dream of ecological disaster and thereafter becomes a model of environmental responsibility, opting to plant a tree as his birthday present. *The Wretched Stone* features no children at all, but a nineteenth-century sailing ship and its crew deliver a message about the stultifying influence of television. They find and bring on board a mysterious glowing stone which mesmerizes the crew and transforms them slowly into chimpanzees. Only by casting it back into the sea are the men able to escape and return to human form.

Even before these two books, though, at the end of the 1980s when his marketability allowed a much-ballyhoo-ed collaboration with adult novelist Mark Helprin (to produce the semi-children's book *Swan Lake* (1989)), Van Allsburg was beginning to address the same kinds of social relationships he had always treated, but now directly and confidently; he could make the political content and ramifications his work had
always possessed explicit. In its marriage of the "vision" of childhood (Van Allsburg's illustrations) with the clear-eyed percipacity and savvy, real-world knowledge of adulthood (Helprin's text), Swan Lake reflects the boom generation's claim to and strategy for use of cultural power almost as much as Van Allsburg's solo works reflect the idea of a "useful" childhood as it developed as an aesthetic in that culture. Moreover, as a so-called "cross-over" book, Swan Lake tapped into the adult audience Van Allsburg had been cultivating for a decade with no apologies, confirming that picture books had "grown up" and claimed their place in the literary marketplace.

Chris Van Allsburg's pre-1990 books, then, represent a subtle preview of the logic which is now in the vanguard of boomers' generational agenda in the social realm, expressed as it was at a time when the post-war children were just beginning to realize and assert their cultural clout. Four years and a general election after Swan Lake, Van Allsburg's place, like his peers' place in American political culture, has been secured by more than a decade of imaginative explanation, translation, and justification. Van Allsburg has no need to reassert his cultural credentials and can get about exercising his hard-earned didactic rights as others of his generation exercise their rights to govern. The adult readers who found themselves in his books' pages have "arrived" as much as Van Allsburg's innovative exploitation of them as an
alternative audience has become the standard, rather than the exception; thanks at least in part to the reappropriation of childhood also evident in his picture books, they are secure not only in themselves as a generation, but in a carefully-constructed vision they offer as an alternative to the nation's traditional ideals of adult responsibility and the innocence of children.
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