

# THE MYSTERIES OF HARRIS BURDICK

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



## Book Summary

*The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* is a fascinating and unusual book. It is prefaced with an introductory letter from Chris Van Allsburg himself, explaining the book's origins. "I first saw the drawings in this book a year ago, in the home of a man named Peter Wenders," Van Allsburg begins. He goes on to explain that many years earlier, a man called Harris Burdick stopped by the office of Peter Wenders, who then worked for a publisher of children's books choosing stories and pictures to be made into books. Burdick brought one drawing from each of fourteen stories he had written as a sample for Mr. Wenders. Fascinated by the drawings, Wenders told Burdick he wanted to see the rest of his work as soon as possible. Promising to bring the stories in the next day, Burdick left— never to be seen again. The fourteen pictures he left behind—and their accompanying captions—remained in Wenders's possession until Mr. Van Allsburg himself saw them (and the stories that Wenders's children and their friends had long ago been inspired to write by looking at them). The mysterious pictures, writes Van Allsburg, are reproduced for the first time in the hope that they will inspire many other children to write stories as well.

Following the letter, fourteen mysterious and haunting images are reproduced, each with a title and a suggestive caption. Next to a drawing of a boy fast asleep in his bedroom with five small, round lights hovering in the air above him are the title *Archie Smith, Boy Wonder* and the caption "A tiny voice asked, 'Is he the one?'" An image of a huge ocean liner pushing into a narrow canal is titled *Missing In Venice* and captioned "Even with her mighty engines in reverse, the ocean liner was pulled further and further into the canal." The picture from *The Third-Floor Bedroom*, accompanied by the words "It all began when someone left the window open," shows a room that looks completely normal but for the wallpaper bird that seems to be coming to life and flying off the wall!

Each picture-and-caption pair is more mysterious and suggestive than the next and will provide children and adults alike with hours of entertainment.

## Special Features

Each page of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* functions almost like a writing lesson in and of itself—the pictures are designed with the express purpose of sparking the imagination, and indeed they do. One cannot help but begin piecing together stories as one pores over the illustrations and their mysterious captions.

We are immediately drawn into the mystery of this book by Van Allsburg's introductory letter, which sets up the premise in such a realistic way as to make even the savviest adult readers step back and ask, "Now wait a minute, is this for real?" Not only does each illustration present us with a mystery, but we are left at the end with the ultimate mystery: where is the talented Mr. Burdick? Why did he never return to Peter Wenders's office? Where are the stories he wrote?

The drawings in *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* are exquisite. Particularly striking are the contrasts Van Allsburg creates between light and dark—the sparks shooting out from the bottom of a house launching out into space; the round, glowing spots hovering over the sleeping boy's bed; the tiny lights shining over the harbor as the ghostly schooner appears; the pumpkin that glows ever brighter as the woman lowers her knife toward it. We are left to determine the exact mood of each picture on our own, however. Is the pumpkin glowing with malevolence or with a gentler power? Does a dark force or a positive one hurl the stone that comes skipping back into the boy's hand from the sparkling lake? The great power in this book is that so many of these decisions are left up to readers themselves.

## Find Fritz:

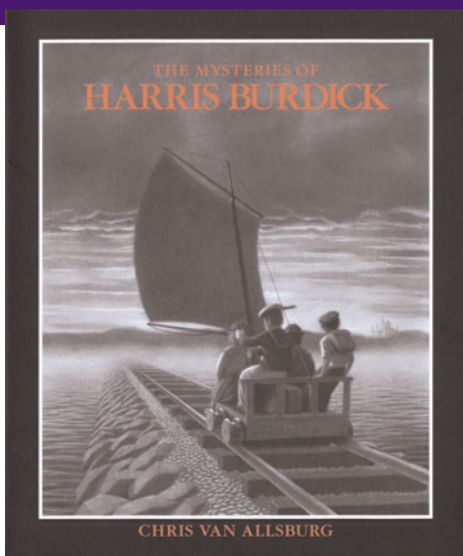
Fritz is the little dog accompanying the boy who finds a harp in the forest.



## Summary of Teaching Ideas

This book makes inventing lessons easy on teachers because it was clearly designed by the author to stimulate children's imaginations. The book is a wellspring of stimulating creative writing "starters." The most obvious way we can use this book is to suggest that students do as Peter Wenders's children did (as described in Van Allsburg's introductory letter) and simply use the pictures and captions to write or tell their own stories. There are endless variations on this theme: children could be asked to choose one picture and write about it in one way, and then to write a completely different story based on the same picture. Each child could choose a different picture to write about and then they could read to one another and ask the listeners to link the stories with the pictures that inspired

them. Much younger children who are not yet experienced writers would have a wonderful time sitting in a circle and creating a story about one of the pictures together out loud, with each child adding on to the next. Teachers can record the stories that younger children invent about these pictures and read them out loud later. Children of all ages will enjoy acting out the stories they invent to go along with the pictures. More experienced writers will be up for a discussion about why exactly it is that these images and ideas are so stimulating to readers. What interests us about the scenarios Van Allsburg sets up? How can we as writers bring the same kind of intrigue into our own stories? We can discuss with our students how *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* is set up rather like a list of exciting writing ideas. This provides us with the opportunity to tell students that real writers actually *do* this—keep a notebook full of ideas for stories, poems, or books. In addition to encouraging children to write stories inspired by Van Allsburg's writing, we can encourage them to be inspired by an aspect of his process as well: we can teach students to invent their own list of intriguing writing ideas, with pictures to go along, if they like. The options are endless—children can trade lists and write stories based on one another's ideas, or they can choose one of their own ideas to develop into a story. A fun way to bring older and younger students together might be for a class of older students to collaborate on creating a "mysteries" book of their own, and then to present it to a lower-grade class and ask for help inventing stories to go along with the scenarios.



relatively quickly, it is possible to present this lesson to your students without having introduced them to the book on a previous occasion. However, because the book presents so many opportunities for rich discussion, you may want to spend some time in conversation about the book (using the guiding questions above as a place to start, if you wish) before presenting the lesson. While the lesson works best when presented in the context of a fiction-writing unit, it can be presented independently as well.

### Introduction:

After reading the book *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* to your students, engage them in a brief discussion of the book's context. Draw their attention to the fact that the book is meant to function almost as a

sourcebook for writing ideas. Tell them that many writers create their own lists of ideas to help them begin stories. Sometimes writers carry notebooks around and write down ideas when they come to them, so that when they sit down to write, they have many ideas to choose from. Tell your students that in addition to using *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* to inspire stories they write, they can use the concept the book presents to create lists of their own writing ideas. They will be using either the tiny notebooks you provide, or loose-leaf paper.

### Teaching:

In *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, Chris Van Allsburg creates an exciting list of story ideas that make it almost impossible for us to not want to finish the stories on our own. He probably did not sit down and come up with all those ideas at once. He may have kept a list of ideas that grew gradually. Perhaps he even carried a notebook with him to write down ideas when they occurred to him. (The idea for Van Allsburg's book *The Polar Express* began as an image he had in his mind of a train pulling up in front of a boy's house!) Tell your students that they will be beginning their own lists of ideas in the small notebooks you provide.

Model for your students either on the overhead or on chart paper how you might go about beginning a list of story ideas. "I might ask myself, 'What ideas have been bouncing around in my head lately that I haven't had a chance to write?'" you may say – thinking aloud so your students can observe the process you are going through. Write a couple of ideas, modeling how you don't necessarily need to write complete sentences when you are making notes to yourself. "A boy finds magic shoes in his grandmother's attic—they make it so he can jump over trees." "A little girl's collection of plastic farm animals comes to life after midnight." Use your own story-starter ideas to inspire your students to think creatively when recording their own ideas.

Tell your students that although they will be able to carry their little notebooks around with them so that they can record ideas when they occur to them, today's writing time will focus on getting a good list started. They will be expected to write as many story ideas as they can during writing time. If they get stuck, they can always take a look at *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* to inspire them. Tell your students that a follow-up lesson will focus on how they can use their lists of ideas to start their own stories.

### Writing Time:

During writing time, your students will be writing lists instead of stories, so they may appear to be less focused than usual. You may

## Guiding Questions for a *Mysteries of Harris Burdick* Read-Aloud

- How does the letter Chris Van Allsburg writes to readers affect the way we read the book? How would our experience of reading the book be different if we skipped reading the letter?
- Each of the pages creates an evocative mood, but we might all interpret the moods differently because not everything is spelled out for us. Some of us might think, for example, that the picture of the man and the lump under the rug is frightening, and some of us might think it is funny. What do you think? Why?
- Chris Van Allsburg often writes stories in which unusual things happen in very normal-seeming situations—like the ocean liner pushing through the Venice canal. Can you think of other books, either by Van Allsburg or by other authors, in which unusual things happen in everyday places?

## Creating Our Own Source of Writing Ideas

*An upper-grade writing lesson*

### What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- If possible, one small spiral-bound notebook for each child (otherwise loose-leaf paper works fine)

### Background Knowledge:

Because the book doesn't contain much text and can be read aloud

want to remind them that *thinking* is a big part of this process, so they do not necessarily need to be writing the entire time—but keeping the room quiet will help them all to focus on getting a good start on their ideas. As they write, confer with students individually.

### Share:

Share the work of several students who have made headway in listing ideas they will use for stories later on. Choose students who have really stretched their imaginations—the more unique and creative ideas students are exposed to, the easier it will be for them to stretch their own minds as well.

### Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Instead of having each student use an individual notebook, create a class list of ideas on chart paper to which students can refer. Instead of asking them to write stories based on ideas the class comes up with, you may want to have very young children tell the stories out loud. You can take dictation, and the students can illustrate their stories—or you could simply leave them as oral storytelling experiences.

### Expanding This Lesson:

- Have the children use ideas they have written in their notebooks to write stories of their own. When they are finished, ask them to illustrate what they have written.
- Ask your students to carry the notebooks around with them for a week and write down ideas when they feel inspired. Have them share their ideas with one another. Discuss how it felt to catch an idea right away—did they find that they began having more ideas? Or remembering more ideas?
- Sometimes dreams contain excellent story ideas. Invite your students to record ideas in their notebooks that are presented by their dreams.

## Collective Storytelling Inspired by *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*

*A lower-grade lesson*

### What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*
- Chart paper and markers
- A space where all of your students can sit comfortably in a circle
- A “talking stick” or some other object for students to hold when it is their turn to speak

### Background Knowledge:

It is helpful if students have previously read and discussed *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. It is also helpful if they have had experience telling stories as a class before, although this is not necessary. Sitting in a circle and telling stories in which each child builds on what the last says is an excellent way to develop sequenc-



ing skills as well as story sense. In addition to being an altogether enjoyable process, group storytelling is an invaluable way to encourage speaking in front of groups and to develop listening skills as well.

### Introduction:

As a class, choose a page from Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* to “story-tell.” Look hard at the picture together and ask the children to notice as many details as possible. For purposes of explanation, I will use *Archie Smith, Boy Wonder* here.

Organize your students into a circle. Make certain that each student can see all the other students. Explain that you will be starting the story off, and that each child will be adding on to the story, one after another around the circle. Explain to your students that only the person who is holding

the magic “talking stick” (this can be simply a small stick or any other object you choose to indicate the speaker) is able to speak. The rest of the class should be listening hard so that when their turns come, they know what has happened so far in the story and will be able to add on a piece that makes sense.

### Teaching:

This activity works best when the story is started in a clear, strong way, so it is usually a good idea for you to do this work yourself. Sit in the circle with your students and hold your “talking stick.” You may begin with something like, “Once upon a time there was a boy named Archie Smith. He seemed like a regular boy on the outside, but after his seventh birthday, strange things started to happen to him.” Then, pass the “talking stick” to the child next to you and ask him or her to continue the story. The tendency of small children is to make wild leaps; we want to encourage the wild leaps of imagination, but at the same time, it is important to teach students how to fit their thinking onto the previous idea.

You may want to intervene at some points if children add a thought to the story that is totally unrelated to what you've been talking about. This is to be expected. Simply remind students of what was said previously and then encourage them to add on only the next step. You may want to stop two or three times and recount what has happened so far; this not only models retelling but will strengthen their sense of the story as it builds and make it easier for them to add on something that makes sense. You will also need to be in control of the tendency many young children have to end stories as soon as possible—it is tricky to slow down and go step by step! Remind them often that only the last person can end the story so that every student's voice is heard. If they try to end it—“And then he woke up, the end!”—you will want to encourage them to think again and add a detail that stretches the story even further.



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