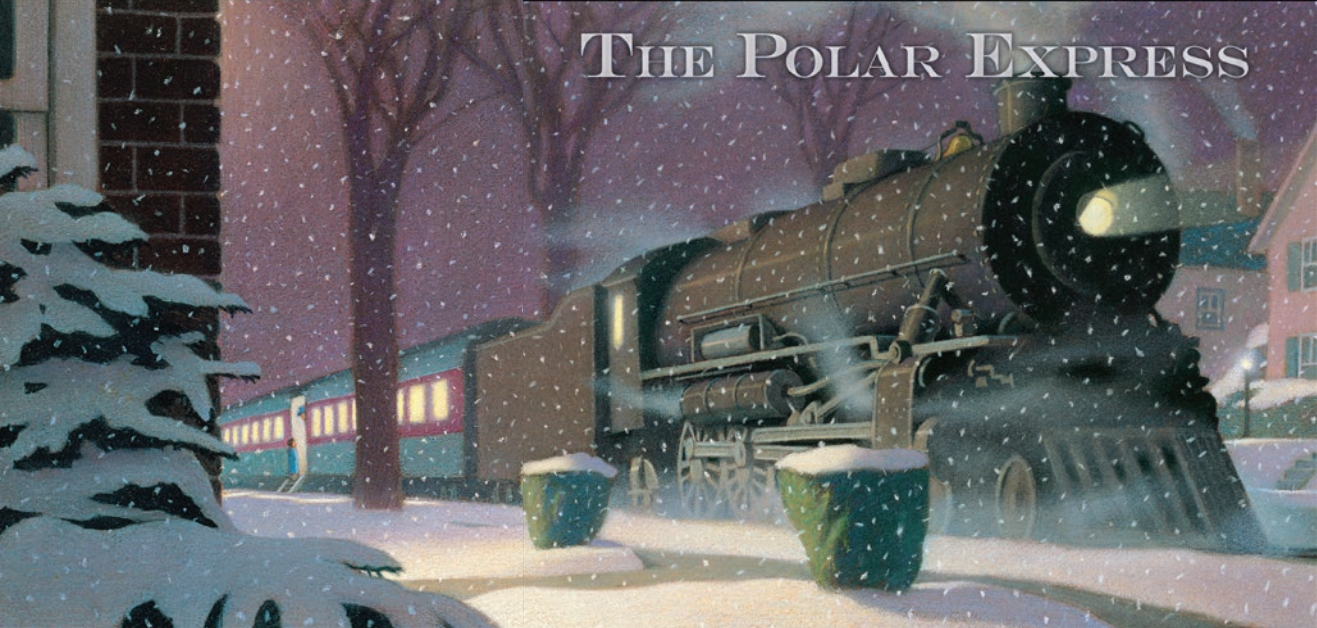


THE POLAR EXPRESS



THE POLAR EXPRESS

Written and Illustrated by
CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
BOSTON NEW YORK

To Karen

THE POLAR EXPRESS

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Van Allsburg, Chris.
The Polar Express.

Summary: A magical train ride on Christmas Eve takes a boy
to the North Pole to receive a special gift from Santa Claus.

[1. North Pole—Fiction. 2. Santa Claus—Fiction.

3. Christmas—Fiction.] I. Title.

P27.V266Po 1985 [E] 85-10907

ISBN 978-0-544-58014-5

Copyright © 1985 by Chris Van Allsburg

All rights reserved. For information about permission to reproduce selections
from this book, write to trade.permissions@hmhco.com or to Permissions,
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 5 Park Avenue, 19th Floor,
New York, New York 10016.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 85-10907

eISBN 978-0-547-77128-1

eISBN 978-0-547-62692-5 read-aloud



On Christmas Eve, many years ago, I lay quietly in my bed. I did not rustle the sheets. I breathed slowly and silently. I was listening for a sound—a sound a friend had told me I'd never hear—the ringing bells of Santa's sleigh.

"There is no Santa," my friend had insisted, but I knew he was wrong.

Late that night I did hear sounds, though not of ringing bells. From outside came the sounds of hissing steam and squeaking metal. I looked through my window and saw a train standing perfectly still in front of my house.

It was wrapped in an apron of steam. Snowflakes fell lightly around it. A conductor stood at the open door of one of the cars. He took a large pocket watch from his vest, then looked up at my window. I put on my slippers and robe. I tiptoed downstairs and out the door.

"All aboard," the conductor cried out. I ran up to him.

"Well," he said, "are you coming?"

"Where?" I asked.

"Why, to the North Pole of course," was his answer. "This is the Polar Express." I took his outstretched hand and he pulled me aboard.





The train was filled with other children, all in their pajamas and nightgowns. We sang Christmas carols and ate candies with nougat centers as white as snow. We drank hot cocoa as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars. Outside, the lights of towns and villages flickered in the distance as the Polar Express raced northward.

Soon there were no more lights to be seen. We traveled through cold, dark forests, where lean wolves roamed and white-tailed rabbits hid from our train as it thundered through the quiet wilderness.



We climbed mountains so high it seemed as if we would scrape the moon. But the Polar Express never slowed down. Faster and faster we ran along, rolling over peaks and through valleys like a car on a roller coaster.



The mountains turned into hills, the hills to snow-covered plains. We crossed a barren desert of ice—the Great Polar Ice Cap. Lights appeared in the distance. They looked like the lights of a strange ocean liner sailing on a frozen sea. “There,” said the conductor, “is the North Pole.”





The North Pole. It was a huge city standing alone at the top of the world, filled with factories where every Christmas toy was made.

At first we saw no elves.

"They are gathering at the center of the city," the conductor told us. "That is where Santa will give the first gift of Christmas."

"Who receives the first gift?" we all asked.

The conductor answered, "He will choose one of you."



"Look," shouted one of the children, "the elves." Outside we saw hundreds of elves. As our train drew closer to the center of the North Pole, we slowed to a crawl, so crowded were the streets with Santa's helpers. When the Polar Express could go no farther, we stopped and the conductor led us outside.

We pressed through the crowd to the edge of a large, open circle. In front of us stood Santa's sleigh. The reindeer were excited. They pranced and paced, ringing the silver sleigh bells that hung from their harnesses. It was a magical sound, like nothing I'd ever heard. Across the circle, the elves moved apart and Santa Claus appeared. The elves cheered wildly.

He marched over to us and, pointing to me, said, "Let's have this fellow here." He jumped into his sleigh. The conductor handed me up. I sat on Santa's knee and he asked, "Now, what would you like for Christmas?"



I knew that I could have any gift I could imagine. But the thing I wanted most for Christmas was not inside Santa's giant bag. What I wanted more than anything was one silver bell from Santa's sleigh. When I asked, Santa smiled. Then he gave me a hug and told an elf to cut a bell from a reindeer's harness. The elf tossed it up to Santa. He stood, holding the bell high above him, and called out, "The first gift of Christmas!"





A clock struck midnight as the elves roared their approval. Santa handed the bell to me, and I put it in my bathrobe pocket. The conductor helped me down from the sleigh. Santa shouted out the reindeer's names and cracked his whip. His team charged forward and climbed into the air. Santa circled once above us, then disappeared in the cold, dark polar sky.



As soon as we were back inside the Polar Express, the other children asked to see the bell. I reached into my pocket, but the only thing I felt was a hole. I had lost the silver bell from Santa Claus's sleigh. "Let's hurry outside and look for it," one of the children said. But the train gave a sudden lurch and started moving. We were on our way home.

It broke my heart to lose the bell. When the train reached my house, I sadly left the other children. I stood at my doorway and waved good-bye. The conductor said something from the moving train, but I couldn't hear him. "What?" I yelled out.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. "MERRY CHRISTMAS," he shouted. The Polar Express let out a loud blast from its whistle and sped away.



On Christmas morning my little sister Sarah and I opened our presents. When it looked as if everything had been unwrapped, Sarah found one last small box behind the tree. It had my name on it. Inside was the silver bell! There was a note: "Found this on the seat of my sleigh. Fix that hole in your pocket." Signed, "Mr. C."

I shook the bell. It made the most beautiful sound my sister and I had ever heard.

But my mother said, "Oh, that's too bad."

"Yes," said my father, "it's broken."

When I'd shaken the bell, my parents had not heard a sound.





At one time most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed, it fell silent for all 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.

A Note from Chris Van Allsburg

AS CHILDREN WE DID NOT GROW UP STEADILY, one day at a time. Occasionally we would leap forward. Getting separated from our mother in the supermarket and—holding panic at bay—finding her on our own could make us instantly feel a year older. It is the same way we felt when we rode off alone on a bicycle for the first time.

While most of these experiences left me exhilarated, there was one leap forward that produced less welcome emotions. When I was eight years old I began to consider the possibility that Santa Claus was not real. Embracing this suspicion made me feel grown up, very suddenly and also very unhappily. Leaving behind a belief in Santa meant I would never again experience the enchantment that accompanied the days leading up to Christmas. The exquisite, almost unbearable anticipation of a fairy tale coming to life, a fairy tale that included me, would be gone forever.

This didn't feel like growing up. This felt like losing something—like being thrown out of the land of miracles and hearing the gates close behind me.

I wanted back in. Fortunately, the Polar Express pulled up to my house that Christmas, taking me on a trip that did lead me back. There is a seat on the train for you.

All aboard,