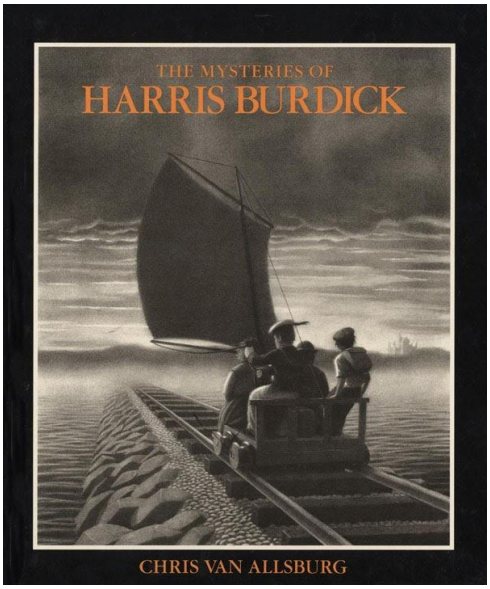
Every picture tells a story

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick

Rob Sanderson, Wigan Schools' Library Service

Sometimes picture books are just the start of the story. The text itself can be sparse, but engaging all the same, hinting at the stories that might be. This is one such rare instance. In fact, the true magic of this picture book lies in the stories that are only just hinted at, through a scattering of picture titles and brief suggestions of what the story that accompanies the pictures might actually be. In fact, think of the book we consider here as kindling for the imagination, a literary briquette for a veritable feast of story-telling. Welcome to the mysterious - and surprising - world of Mr. Burdick.

Time for something a little different in this issue, or perhaps I should say, something familiar... is a truly magical book by Chris Van Allsburg. Many of you will already know of this book, some of you will have already used it in your classrooms and then there are those of you for whom this will be a first meeting.



Whether the book is known to you or not, I hope to help you see a new way to use it to ignite the imaginations of the children in your class. After all, every good story should 'ignite the imagination'; it's the first rule of being a good storyteller. So, new friends and old, are you sitting comfortably? Then I shall begin...

Oh, and remember, you'll need to suspend disbelief and go with the story to really let your imagination take flight. It's a bit like the magic of Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy. Pop the adult world on hold for this one.

Introductions...

This is a picture book with very few words, but with a whole imagination worth of stories to tell. So without further ado, I present to you *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.*

In truth, this book is a series of beautifully detailed black and white illustrations and it comes complete with its own back-story. We are told that the pictures were first seen in the home of a man called Peter Wenders. Mr. Wenders was a children's book publisher and many years ago Harris Burdick visited his office. Mr. Burdick told Mr. Wenders that he had written fourteen stories and that for each story he had created a range of pictures. He had brought one picture from each story with him. Mr. Wenders loved the pictures and Mr. Burdick promised to return the next day with the stories that accompanied them. Mr. Burdick never made that return visit and was never heard from again. His stories remain untold.

Over the years, Mr. Wenders' children and their friends made their own stories based on the pictures. A fifteenth picture, the drawing of the 'young magician' was discovered behind an old mirror. This mirror hung, it is thought, in a library of a grand, though rundown, Victorian house in Bangor, Maine. If you read the full introduction to the book you'll see how this information has only added to the mysteries of Harris Burdick and his stories.

The pictures

Each picture carries the title of the story it was originally intended to accompany, along with a brief description of the story behind the picture. So, in no particular order, here we go:

There's a picture of a man, with a chair raised over his head, looking at a lump under the rug, a lump that appears to be alive – from the story *Under the Rug*.

Then there's the young magician; she from behind the mirror and this time she's gone too far – from the story *Missing in Venice*.

Next we see a boy lying in bed, with two small, bright balls of light hovering over his bed and a small voice asking, 'Is he the one?' – from the story *Archie Smith, Boy Wonder*.

A boy and a girl are skimming stones by the side of glistening water, but the third stone keeps skipping back – from the story *A Strange Day in July*.

The next illustration shows a cruise liner being pulled further and further into a Venetian canal, toppling buildings despite the fact her mighty engines are in reverse – from the story *Missing in* Venice (the only story from which there are two pictures).

Two children and their parents (perhaps?) are on a trailer, running on tracks and powered by the wind. They head over the water and into the mist seeking an answer – from the story *Another Place, Another Time*.

At the foot of the basement stairs is a small door and the man descending the stairs is sure he's just seen the doorknob on that tiny door turn – from the story *Uninvited Guests*.

A small boy and his dog, entering a forest glen, see a harp standing on a rock on the other side of the river and he knows it's really true – from the story *The Harp*.

The young girl asleep with an open book has been warned, but as vines grow from the book, it's too late – from the story *Mr. Linden's Library*.

A nun levitates on a chair in a cathedral in France; it's the fifth of seven chairs, we are told – from the story *The Seven Chairs*.

Wallpaper with a repeating pattern of birds is the setting for the next picture; the window's been left open, one bird's already missing and a second is just coming to life – from the story *The Third Floor Bedroom*.

She lowers the knife and the pumpkin just grows brighter – from the story *Just Desert*.

As the Captain swings his lantern three times on the quayside, the schooner slowly appears from the mist – from the story *Captain Tory*.

She's outside and knows it's time to send the caterpillars back, as they spell 'goodbye' in her hand – from the story *Oscar and Alphonse*.

And finally, the house on Maple Street has a perfect lift off. And someone must be home; there's a light on upstairs – from the story *The House on Maple Street.*

The detail

Hopefully you're already thinking about what secrets and clues the pictures might hold. Can we assume that the glowing pumpkin is evil (just deserts, anyone?), what is the truth about the harp (is it one from Jack and the Beanstalk fame, perhaps) and how is a young magician linked to the cruise liner (is it magic that draws the liner ever deeper into the canal)?

There are so many untold stories that I have decided to think about how just one of them might be used with a class of children. And the story I've selected is *The Seven Chairs*. Here's the story that I think might accompany the picture we have...

Once there were seven chairs. The chairs were made by a magical carpenter many, many centuries ago. I guess today, we'd call them antique. Each of those chairs had a magical property. We don't know what happened to all of them; legend tells us that only six chairs ever revealed their secret... but more of that later.

The fifth chair, so we are told, ended up in a cathedral in France. It wasn't until an elderly nun came to sit upon it, that its magical secret was revealed. The nun, whose bones were tired and ached so at the start of the morning and the close of the day, sat upon the chair and wished a wish. 'How I wish movement could be easy for me once again.' With that, the chair rose straight up and the elderly nun, not believing what was happening, scowled. Surely this was some trick, a prank involving wires?

But the chair's magic had barely begun. It rose ever higher, until the elderly nun could touch the very roof itself. This was no trickery. No, this was magic at work. And then, as slowly as it had risen up, the chair began to descend. But that elderly nun did not. She stayed there, floating far above the marble floor. And you know what? She found she could float through the air, swim through the atmosphere and fly with the birds. From that day forth, her wish was granted.

I know of one other chair that revealed its secret and that happened some centuries earlier. It was the third chair, which had found its way to Germany. A young man had been away to war. He had returned victorious, only the find that the love of his life had left him. What he didn't know was that she had been imprisoned by an evil witch against her will. He was in a tavern when he came to sit upon the magic chair. He also wished aloud - wished that he could find his long-lost love.

Suddenly, the chair's legs began to stretch themselves. They flexed their wooden muscles – for I'm sure that they must have had muscles at that time – and like a noble steed, they carried him off, out of the tavern. Before long, the chair and our young soldier were journeying through a dark wood. Eventually, the chair stopped by a lake. As the soldier stood up from the chair he noticed a waterfall. The waterfall parted – by magic, since that's what it was – and he could see his long-lost love imprisoned there. But how to reach her?

What made him try it, no one knows, but he stepped onto the lake. It was the warmest of days, but the lake's surface froze solid in an instant and he was able to rescue her. They married the very next day and thanks to the chair's magic, that young soldier was able to walk anywhere he wanted, whenever he wanted.

And do you know what? I know where the seventh chair is. It's here in our classroom...

And that's where the magic really can begin. Bring an old chair into your classroom, and let the children

imagine what secrets it might hold. What would their magical wish be? Could they write the story of their magical wish? Perhaps you could have a competition to vote for the best story, and when you get to the top three, read them out to another class in the school, for them to cast the deciding vote (X-Factor style).

You could even make a short play based on the winning story and ask the children in your class to add other illustrations to complete the 'new' story about the seventh chair. You could, of course, also ask the children to draw other pictures to complete the original story. Maybe they know what happened to one of the other chairs?

Igniting the imagination

I suppose that's the true power of these illustrations; they help children to learn how to use their imagination, how to complete a story from the hints included in just one or two detailed drawings. And this is a skill you could develop even further through a bit of careful imagination of your own.

How about cutting some illustrations out of holiday brochures, showing beaches, mountains, lakes and towns and villages? Set each table in your class an activity to create a postcard home based on a selection of the pictures. Who is on holiday? Where have they gone? What have they done there and where have they stayed? Perhaps they are fairytale characters (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs on a beach holiday?), or someone from a TV show maybe (Ben 10 skiing in the Alps?).

There are of course all the other illustrations included in the book. As well as creating stories for each of them, how many of the pictures can the children in your class combine into one story? Perhaps you could also encourage your class to consider what type of music might best accompany each picture, or investigate more about the time or place in which the picture appears to be set. Another good activity is to ask your class to think about what the pictures don't show. For example, is there a wizard watching the two children in *A Strange Day in July*? Or maybe there's a UFO floating in the sky above *The House on Maple Street*.

I hope that I have helped to ignite your imaginations and that you will find the ideas here useful in helping to bring a little magic to your own classroom. *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* is a perfect stepping stone for exploring stories, and in particular, the oral storytelling tradition. You can read stories that others have written at www.hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/davidc/6c_files/documents/mysteries/divmysteries.htm.

If you are interested in an excellent story for helping children to really see the magic of oral storytelling, please visit our website at www.le.ac.uk/engassoc/publications/41142RS.html for a tried and tested story with actions and a repeating refrain.

Children's books

Van Allsburg, C. (1997) *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* Portfolio Edition. Houghton Mifflin. ISBN 9780395827840.