MEDITATION ON THE POLAR EXPRESS

Mary Galbraith

Writing The Polar Express was actually easier than other stories I’ve written. . . The Polar Express was more like a daydream that felt like a memory. I didn’t actually have to write it, I only had to recall it.

Chris Van Allsburg, Scholastic interview

If I have an unusual gift, it is not that I draw particularly better than other people—I’ve never fooled myself of that. Rather, it’s that I remember things other people don’t recall; the sounds and feelings and images — the emotional quality of particular moments in childhood.

Maurice Sendak quoted in Cech
Picture books are in a sense a stealth art form. So long as a certain decorum is observed, almost any image in them will be persistently seen as cute and non-serious, no matter how potent. A case in point: in terms of its dominant visual allusions, Chris Van Allsburg’s Caldecott-winning picture book *The Polar Express* can be summarized as “Rene Magritte journeys to Nuremberg to meet Adolf Hitler”. The sleigh bell that provides the book’s overall thematic thread recalls the mysterious sleigh bell motif found in dozens of Magritte paintings, and the 1930s black steam locomotive intruding into a suburban space evokes Magritte’s famous image in *Durée Poignardée* (Time Transfixed) (see above, right). Even more startling in a child’s picture book, the North Pole scenes in *The Polar Express* reenact Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film about Hitler, *Triumph of the Will*. Yet according to most reviews of the book since its 1985 publication, *The Polar Express* is a heartwarming and magical story of faith.

Chris Van Allsburg is an academically trained artist whose historical allusions must generally go unidentified by his readers. But it would be a mistake, in my view, to see this lack of recognition primarily in terms of child (or children’s book reviewer) naïveté versus adult sophistication. The surrealist collision of Santa and Hitler in *The Polar Express* is not merely a wink to those in the know; it is the central motif of the book. However, calling attention to this unholy union contradicts the heartwarming aura that surrounds this picture book and its Christmas theme. By adult convention, the picture book format and the Santa Claus myth are heavily defended childhood preserves of wonder and joy in the midst of adult doubt and “fallen”-ness; adults are expected to support the Adult United Front by seeing and reporting only optimistic life lessons with respect to these two cultural preserves, especially when in the hearing of children. But art finds a way to express itself using the taboos as well as the tools at hand, and Van Allsburg’s picture book does so with a jolt. Santa Claus and Hitler clearly collide in *The Polar Express*, with all the disturbance that this collision implies. But since it happens in an American picture book, this disturbance remained largely unmentioned for twenty years until the movie adaptation was released, and even then the book’s magic circle remained largely intact.

Shocking incongruity is what surrealism is best known for, and Van Allsburg (with fellow picture book auteurs Anthony Browne and Maurice
Sendak brings a frankly surrealist disturbance into the comfortable world of British and American children’s picture books. Although surrealism is known for mixing high and low adult tastes in shocking ways, picture book auteurs of the last 100 years have practiced a hidden form of surrealism, putting together unfathomable disjunctions between child and adult perceptions under the cover of picture books’ manifestly rosy worldview.

One could argue, of course, that children’s books pioneered surrealism—Joseph Stanton points out that the early surrealists were themselves inspired by *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*—but the picture book remains, in the public adult mind at least, a preserve of touching or amusing life lessons even when close inspection of actual books reveals otherwise. As a small theatre of still images that adults and children hold and look at together, picture books provide a potent space capable of revealing disturbing truths from a child’s perspective, albeit as expressed by adult artists. As in Magritte’s painting of a train piercing the wall of a domestic space, the pages of a picture book can have the quality of a frozen shriek. This still, small, quiet succession of images often shows what could not be said at a moment when a child’s world changed forever. The picture book’s revolutionary and revelatory potential is in constant tension, however, with the format’s abiding social function: to reassure small children of adult understanding, protection, and care.

How might a serious picture book artist express surreal childhood perception while observing the socially sanctioned purpose of picture books to reassure, comfort, and provide guidance? This question brings impossible juxtaposition into the very definition of picture books as an art form and, indeed, into the representation of existential childhood experiences of the adult world. I argue that in its most serious artistic manifestation, picture books inevitably show an absurd intrusion of a hugeness—the looming traces of an artist’s actual life-altering childhood experiences of adult failures—into the conventional social representation of adults and children. Sendak draws attention to these two poles of considering childhood experience—experiences of living as an actual child versus childhood as generic slate on which to write life lessons—and catches himself just as he is about to slide into the conventional adult view:

> It’s those freak moments that really excite me, and how does the
kid, the person, the animal, whatever get through that, survive. I'm not going to go on to say, as I almost did, God help me, and learn from it. No. I don't believe we can learn anything. (Sendak, “Interview”)

Several of Chris Van Allsburg’s picture books derive their surreal atmosphere from large and unusual vehicles absurdly out of place: an ocean liner obtrudes into a Venice canal (The Mysteries of Harris Burdick), a sailboat flies over a bay (The Wreck of the Zephyr), a steam locomotive looms on a quiet suburban street (The Polar Express). But The Polar Express provides a particularly jarring and even distressing example of surreal juxtaposition, not only for its Magritte-like image of a train pulling up to a suburban house to take a child away, but through its overall narrative enactment of Triumph of the Will.

Before 2004, connections between The Polar Express and Leni Riefenstahl’s work went almost unmentioned; pedagogical and literary-minded reviews sometimes referred to Van Allsburg’s edginess or darkness, but without getting specific. In his suggestively titled 1990 article “How Picture Books Mean: The Case of Chris Van Allsburg,” Peter Neumeyer commented on the “statuesque immobility” of Santa and the elves in The Polar Express, but did not connect this monumental quality specifically to Riefenstahl. A 1996 article by poet and picture book interpreter Joseph Stanton first described the specifics of this connection:

We might expect to lose the dangerous edge of surrealism in Van Allsburg’s embrace of Jolly Old Saint Nick, but when we consider the intrusion of a massive train into a quiet suburban street, the restrainedly demonic nature of Van Allsburg’s North Pole with its bizarrely vast snow-covered urban appearance, and the quietly nightmarish hugeness of the crowd of identically dressed elves turned out to hear Santa’s speech—when we consider all the elements of this late-night sojourn—we find the surrealist edge of danger subtly implicit. It might even be said that there is something about the visualization of Santa’s speech to his army of elves that is reminiscent of the famous filmed sequences of Hitler addressing his storm troopers. Although Santa is treated as an unambiguously benign being in the context of the book, there is an unsettling quality to the North Pole scene that adds an aesthetically interesting element of disorientation to the miraculous presence of the godlike Santa figure. (174-75)

As a scholar particularly concerned with the aesthetics of picture books, Stanton was not shy about discussing
the book’s references to the Third Reich, but he did not find them overly troubling. Though he characterized these echoes as “dangerous,” “nightmarish,” and “demonic,” he saw them as "subtly implicit" within the compellingly imagined dreamscape that is Van Allsburg’s book (personal communication).

That *The Polar Express* in fact alludes extensively to *Triumph of the Will* is, I think, self-evident to anyone familiar with both works. I invite readers to establish this for themselves by close observation. Film critics immediately recognized the resemblance between the 2004 movie adaptation and *Triumph of the Will* – which carries over from the book to the movie even though other aspects of the book have been altered – and seized upon it as a bizarre and confounding element of the film. The many film critics who cited the resemblance almost all pointed out that this allusion threatened the “life lesson” apparently valorized by the story — that believing is *ipso facto* wonderful. Bombarded though they might be by the amorality of popular culture (Denby), film critics were clearly taken aback by the movie’s seemingly sincere advice to children — BELIEVE — in light of its simultaneous use of fascist propaganda images and techniques. But despite this perplexity, film critics gleefully described the weird commingling of myths in phrases calculated to shock:

“Now it can be said, Santa Claus is a fascist dictator who likes to kidnap and endanger children so that they can learn the true value of Christmas.”
( Michelle Alexandria, *Eclipse Magazine*)

“Tots surely won’t recognize that Santa’s big entrance in front of the throngs of frenzied elves and awe-struck children directly evokes, however unconsciously, one of Hitler’s Nuremberg rally entrances in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will.*”
( Manohla Dargis, *New York Times*)

“Enter the titular train, which . . . ferries kids to the North Pole for an audience with Dur [sic] Fuhrer Claus in a North Pole that looks suspiciously like Nuremberg.”
( Walter Chaw, *Film Freak Central*)

When Santa emerges to be hailed by vast ranks of elves, and gives the boy a sleigh bell as his token of faith . . . it’s like a weirdly infantile update on “Triumph of the Will.”
( David Elliott, *San Diego Union Tribune*)

When they finally get to the North Pole, the movie becomes “Perry Como’s *Triumph of the*
Will“: the Santa worship, the Stasi-ish way how it turns out Santa watches all the world’s children, the Nazi-like field rally with the elves. . . If you ever have seen Triumph of the Will then you’ll probably see these things too. And really, isn’t “The Polar Express” supposed to be a propaganda movie for Santa Claus?

(Christopher Knight)

Though these comments refer to the 2004 Zemeckis film adaptation of The Polar Express, they equally apply to the original 1985 picture book. The masses in the plaza, the architecture, the Great Leader, the militaristic bearing of the reindeer, the subservient elves, the illumination of the nighttime scene, the crouching upward perspectives on the Leader, the rooftop perspective on the scene anticipating the Leader’s arrival, the special intimate moment with a chosen child, the aerial view of the Leader flying over the crowded cityscape, the repeated motif of a strip of lights across the middle of the picture (in the 1934 film these are the lights of Hitler’s hotel; in the book they are the lights of the train windows), and of course the Leader’s arm raised at the climactic moment – all these invoke Leni Riefenstahl’s film that both celebrated and fostered a cultural moment of disastrous ecstasy and belief.

The most specific and astonishing parallels between the Riefenstahl film and The Polar Express picture book concern the City of Nuremberg, which acts as the mythic setting for Triumph of the Will and is almost certainly the model for the City at the North Pole in The Polar Express. A medieval city that was the setting for Nazi Party Congresses from 1927 until 1939, Nuremberg is a potent location in German history (Brockmann). Its “truly unique
streets, houses, buildings, bridges, merlons and gables, bays and galleries” (Brockmann 218) are iconic of a mythic German past, and the city is the site of many parades and festivals, including a centuries-old annual Christmas celebration now known as Christkindlesmarkt, in which an Angel appears to children. The city is known for its manufacture of toys, and it even calls itself “The Christmas City” in its tourist materials (City of Nuremberg, Hayes, Suziebeezieland). The heart of the annual Christmas celebration is the Hauptmarkt, or main city square, which was the site of many rallies during the Reich years, when the square was known as Adolf Hitler Platz. The Hauptmarkt’s anti-Semitic past goes back considerably further than the Third Reich; the square was built on the razed Jewish section of the city after a pogrom in 1349; its beautiful church to Our Lady was built immediately afterward on the site (see Zika).

The sixth through eleventh panoramic images in The Polar Express strongly evoke the city of Nuremberg in architectural style and atmosphere. These same images also recreate particular historical sites and moments in
In the 1935 film, the triumphant parade into the city stops at Hitler’s favorite hotel, the *Deutscher Hof*. Hitler always stayed in the same room at the hotel, and in Riefenstahl’s film, the face of the hotel has been decorated with lights around the window of Hitler’s room. After his arrival, Hitler makes a bravura appearance at this window to a roar of acclaim, and in the night rally that follows, the strips of lights from the face of the hotel glitter above the crowd. In the seventh image of *The Polar Express*, the train enters a cityscape that strongly evokes not only the architectural style of Nuremberg, but the particular sensory moments of the night rally in front of Hitler’s hotel shown in *Triumph of the Will*. The lights of the elevated train in the seventh *Polar Express* image, interrupted by the gaps between cars, blaze among festive lights on the roofs of buildings and an emblem of Santa’s face appears on the face of a building. In the eighth image of *The Polar Express*, the train stops in the middle of a crowd next to a building (astride the gutter of the book) that eerily resembles Hitler’s hotel, and in the image following, Santa makes his appearance to the crowd. When Santa flies away from the city two images later, there is an aerial view of a square filled with people that evokes the *Hauptmarkt*.

The movie version of *The Polar Express* also evokes the City of Nuremberg (though after only one viewing, I’d guess it evokes Nuremberg much less specifically than the book does), and when the movie was released in 2004, critics mentioned this evocation over and over. But even as the critics interrogated the film for this and other allusions to Riefenstahl and the Third Reich, they continued to give the picture book a free ride. Peter Sobczynski, for example, commented that the movie “may well remind viewers of a certain age of certain scenes in *Triumph*
of the Will” but he goes on to describe the picture book as “a sweet and charming story about the importance of faith that is the perfect thing to read to restless kids before bed”. Because the picture book makes this connection primarily through images that are dissonant with the content and tone of the text, and because it is a beautifully executed work by a living artist⁴, and because it is a picture book beloved by many families as a touching testament of faith, critics seem to loath to explore an allusion that threatens the book’s established aura of goodness. But the collision remains. And once the unholy marriage of Christmas picture book and fascist propaganda film has been established, what do we do with it? Why is it there? What to make of it all? I am not implying that Chris Van Allsburg is a closet fascist or that his book should not be read. I am asking what I see as the questions raised by the book’s own presentation. If the book refutes itself as a simple and heartwarming tale by its governing allusion, then what is it?

One might take the Riefenstahl reference in The Polar Express as a sign of how trivialized once-monstrous images have become (see Sontag). Perhaps it is just a throwaway reference, an allusive wink that should be taken with a grain of salt. As Kenneth Kidd points out in his review of Philip Nel’s The Avant-Garde and American Post-modernity, the historical corpus of art is now raided routinely as a kind of all-purpose refrigerator of images. Or perhaps it is a parodic reference (see Beckett and Valleau), but this would make its linking to the main theme of believing even more problematic. I prefer to soldier on considering the allusion as sincere but complicating, because I see the book as asking me to do so, despite and even because of all the distracting noise working against this approach.

Picture book artists are commonly expected to stand in front of audiences
of school children and answer this most-asked question: “Where do you get your ideas?” The hard part of this isn’t that children wouldn’t understand – as Anthony Browne has observed, the only adults who think children don’t “get” the most profound implications of good picture books are those who are disconnected from actual children (see Elias). The hard part is, I am convinced, that the place such ideas come from in real artists is a place so private and vulnerable that the artist was compelled to create the book as a metaphor in order to “speak” from it at all, and that there is no public mode of adult-child discourse about this level of experience other than the picture book itself.

A further difficulty: even serious artists have a duty not to break faith with their child audience, as they may feel free to do with adult audiences. The obligation of adults to help children and not to distress them unnecessarily is not just bourgeois cliché but the most heroic of mammalian imperatives. To be an artist of integrity and simultaneously an adult shielding children from adult craziness is a tightrope too delicate for all but the brilliant few. The push for a false closure to the disturbing ideas that serious picture book artists raise is thus even more compelling than for artists with adult audiences. Still, the best
picture books manage to “show what could not be said” without traumatizing their audience or falsifying their material; they continue to fascinate readers by entering into forbidden arenas of intimate childhood experience even as they seem to stay within bounds.

*The Polar Express* picture book uses the pervasive Magritte motif of a sleigh bell as a symbol of huge and private significance — “the effusion of private feeling into the social field of communication,” as Jean Perrot puts it (129). It is a sound that only one person can truly hear. Such private symbolism — metaphors which capture moments and meanings too intricate, near, and huge for direct expression — is at the heart of what art does. One study of Magritte’s work describes the repeated motif of the sleigh bell in the following terms: “The bell makes the transition from the wonder of childhood to an anguish caused by an unknown danger” (Virtuo).5 The full freight of the bell’s resonance cannot be felt by anyone but the person who underwent the particular life-changing experience that gave it weight, but we sense its gravitas. Something deeply personal must be expressed through Magritte’s bell, and Van Allsburg draws on this symbolism to create a geological echo. Artists find the right vehicle to carry intimately significant freight, with or without awareness or understanding of this process, and readers feel it when they do, whether or not we can articulate this process, and whether or not we are currently children.

Some picture book masters among them Sendak and Raymond Briggs — have revealed personal stories that illuminate the connections between their childhood experiences in the 1930s and 40s and their picture books published in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. These artists, along with fellow surrealist Anthony Browne, have sometimes been “accused” of writing for themselves rather than for children. The implication of this charge is that artists who work from the depths of their own childhood experience cannot create works appropriate for children. While I take this charge seriously for the reason mentioned above — protecting children is a primary directive for all adults – I would counter that only artists whose primary allegiance is to their own childhood experience create masterpieces for children; this is why Sendak, Briggs, and Browne are among the most honored and respected of picture book auteurs.

Chris Van Allsburg is another auteur whose overall œuvre seems to be more the artistic expression of the
artist’s own childhood predicament than an adult approach to a child audience. But there is a difference with fundamental implications. Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen* resonate with the horror of his own relatives’ experiences as Jews during the 1930s (The Jewish Museum). World War II as evoked by Raymond Briggs’ *The Snowman* and *When the Wind Blows* resonates with his personal experience of evacuation during the Blitz and a particular “flashbulb moment” of being under the bombs (Briggs’ *Ethel and Ernest*). In both cases, understanding historical allusions in their work enriches reading of the picture book without contradicting its basic premise. But in *The Polar Express*, the allusion to Hitler aligns the fantasy with the ideological perpetrators – the side of those being seduced by faith into planning and executing a nightmare (though Nuremberg itself was made a target of Allied fire bombing at the end of the war).

If the self figure of the boy in *The Polar Express* is in the position of the chosen child in *Triumph of the Will*, he is in danger and he will become a danger to others. Ironically, given the overall project of rescuing belief, the child close-ups in Riefenstahl’s work are used to add credibility to the leader:

Riefenstahl’s depiction of the 1934 Nuremburg rally builds much of its celebratory message on children’s symbolic potential. Children figure consistently in the early crowd scenes in *Triumph of the Will*. They are lifted on shoulders and pushed to the front of crowds lining the streets to see the Führer drive by; they gaze at his passing figure with wide, excited eyes as the camera isolates their faces. (Frost 80)

Whatever the bell means to the boy in *The Polar Express*, Santa displays it publicly – in a gesture fraught with the *Heil Hitler* salute – as a symbol of group solidarity in the pursuit of unknown ends. But whereas *Triumph of the Will* “renders childhood itself as abstraction” (Frost 82), *The Polar Express* shows us the private longings of a particular child being used in The Great Leader’s close-up. As Sandor Ferenczi argues in “Confusion of Tongues” (another work of the 1930s), the language of tenderness and need in a child has been historically twisted by the language of the adults he depends on, leaving him with no language but that of the symptom — or of art. One might thus interpret the urgent necessity the boy feels to believe in Santa as a sign of his inexpressible need for real tenderness from adults closer to home, and the allusions to Riefenstahl as a warning
bell of what can happen when fantasy fills this void.

*The Polar Express* is a picture book at war with itself as a public statement, but it may perfectly capture a singular and private truth. One of Van Allsburg’s trademarks is to play peek-a-boo with the fictional and para-fictional aspects of his picture books, so as to make a teasing game out of separating the work of fictional art from its frame of actual production and existence. The most obvious case of this is *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, which presents itself in a preface, normally a “straight” part of a book, as being a found compilation of pictures left off at a publisher’s office by a mysterious man named Harris Burdick. In another Van Allsburg book, *Bad Day at River Bend*, a universe of people living inside (as we learn gradually) a child’s coloring book are horrified when greasy colors start appearing on people and animals. The first time one sees the pages, the crayon markings appear to have been added to the book by an actual child reader rather than being a surprise meta-level of the picture book’s fantasy world.

In a similar vein, an author’s note was added to the tenth anniversary edition of *The Polar Express* on parchment paper slipped in front of the title page. In (seemingly) the author’s own hand, the message begins thus:

> Dear Reader, Over the years many people have asked me how I came up with the idea for the “Polar Express” [sic]. I’ve always avoided giving an honest answer. But now, after ten years, my conscience obliges me to tell the truth – I stole the story from a little beggar child who shared the tale with me after I purchased a box of matches from him one snowy night.

There is a referential riddle at the heart of *The Polar Express*. *The Polar Express* is not, after all, “about” Adolf Hitler or Santa Claus, any more than it is about a little match seller, except as these fantasy characters resonate with the child character’s interior plot: the search for a potent and alive adult savior in a cold world. Van Allsburg wasn’t born until 1949, so the book’s many references to the 1930s (even the toy truck under the Christmas tree appears to come from that decade) cannot be based on his own memories from that time period. But metaphor is an infinite field of play. I see the book’s publicly accessible images as carrying the weight of an unknown experience from the artist’s own childhood that cannot be conventionally talked about — an event that crosses in some deeply personal way with
these historical and artistic allusions. There is something of incalculable but specific childhood weight in the picture book *The Polar Express*. It sits in the book like a locomotive on a quiet suburban street, but its content remains a conjecture: a huge childhood experience of emptiness, and the thrill of being singled out for favor by a powerful, distant, and charismatic man.

Both in text and in image, but particularly in image 7, *The Polar Express* bespeaks cut off from parents, who never appear in actual warm and close interaction with the boy (here, as in many of Van Allsburg’s books, parents are mentioned in the text but don’t appear in the pictures; they are absent from his most important experiences and they cannot hear the bell). The only picture in *The Polar Express* that shows intimate human caring is the one in which the other children console the boy for the loss of his bell. They touch the boy and look around in vain for adult help and presence as the train goes on its way. This alienation from actual adults motivates the boy’s search for a personal connection with the universe outside his beautiful but lonely home (see the first picture of him looking out the window into the snowy expanse outside), and gives rise to a surreal consciousness in both its wondrous and nightmarish guises.

Chris Van Allsburg’s picture book *The Polar Express* stages an evocative and impossible meeting of two poles of art: confidently happy public spectacle (the Santa fantasy, *Triumph of the Will* as it was originally offered, the conventional adult perception of children’s picture books) and the formalized portrayal of private anguish (the boy character’s alienated existence, the stillness of Magritte’s bell, and speculatively, something of the picture book artist’s primal self). This private anguish can lead to the surrender of self and ultimately to a catastrophe that remains frozen in public and private consciousness. By this light, *The Polar Express* takes readers far from the usual landscape of the picture book while never leaving home.

Mary Galbraith (*1947) teaches English at San Diego State University. She explores the role of authors’ childhood experiences in their works of imagination, and her notion of childhood studies takes this relationship as fundamental. She is fascinated by the life and work of Mark Twain, Jack London, James M. Barrie, Wanda Gág, Anthony Browne and Raymond Briggs.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Thank you, William J. Rapaport and Ellen Fager, for your extensive support and encouragement with this article. Thank you to Judith Plotz, Roni Natov, and Adrienne Kertzer for kindly reading and commenting on the first draft. For providing scanners and photo capture technology when I started this project, and for their professionalism and patience, I am indebted to the staff of the Faculty Computer Room and Instructional Technology Services at San Diego State University.

The pictures in this article have been reprinted with the kind permission of:
CARLSEN Verlag GmbH (Der Polarexpress)
Transit Film GmbH (Triumph of the Will)
Geoffrey Walden (Deutscher Hof Hotel)

NOTES
1 The English title of Magritte’s painting does not carry the same jolting connotation as the French title: “Durée Poignardée” is closer to “Time Stabbed,” with time meaning a dimension of lived experience rather than clock time.
2 According to Wikipedia, the train in Magritte’s painting is a Black Five 4-6-0 steam locomotive from the 1930s (“LMS Stanier Class 5 4-6-0”); the train in The Polar Express movie is said to be a Baldwin 2-8-4 S-3 class steam locomotive built in 1931. I’m not enough of a train buff to discriminate whether the train in the picture book is the same class as the one in the movie. In any case, all three trains are black steam locomotives built in the 1930s. The idea of such a train pulling up in the night to carry a child to a distant location is connected inevitably with unbearable historical experiences.
3 Another layer of the complex Nuremberg allusion: Nuremberg was devastated by the British in January 1945 in a bombing raid aimed at destroying Hitler’s beloved capital and deflating German dreams of a return to a grand past. The bombing targeted the city itself rather than any military installation. Hitler’s hotel, which was purchased by the Nazi Party in 1936, was extensively damaged by bombs during the war. The hotel, and the city as a whole, were reconstructed after 1945 (Walden). In fact, the roof of the building in The Polar Express, with its dormer windows, follows the details of the rebuilt hotel.
4 Van Allsburg credits German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) as his painterly inspiration for The Polar Express, particularly with regard to the striking brown color palette and the atmospherics of figure and landscape (see Silvey). The cover artwork of The Mysteries of Harris Burdick and The Wreck of the Zephyr appear to be homages to particular Friedrich paintings, and browns are dominant in most of Van Allsburg’s color picture books.
5 According to music critic Raymond Knapp, Mahler’s Fourth Symphony is another complexly dissonant representation of childhood that connects sleigh bells to innocent joy and adult nostalgia, but also to childhood suffering, vulnerability, and darkness. Knapp points out the aptness of fellow music critic Mark Evan Bonds’ use of the picture book The Polar Express as his framing text for discussion of Mahler’s Fourth (Knapp 233). (Knapp’s “Suffering Children: Perspectives on Innocence and Vulnerability in Mahler’s Fourth Symphony”
is a wonderful example of an expansive childhood studies approach to the concerns of the humanities, and many of its phrases have an uncanny resonance with the present discussion. Mahler’s finale, for example, is characterized as “the perversive confusion of many emblems of Christianity, and the intrusion of a nightmarish version of sleigh bells” (Knapp 234).

Elizabeth Law comments that even picture book masters have off-moments in which they condescend to their readers. She cites instances from Dr. Seuss’s *The Butter Battle Book* and Van Allsburg’s *Just a Dream*.

The text offers a retrospective first-person view of the long-ago experience, and it is much more friendly than the pictures. See Perry Nodelman’s discussion of first-person narratives and the double tracking of image and text. The text and images of *The Polar Express* are radically different in their worlds and perspectives; reference to *Triumph of the Will* is almost exclusively through images.

According to the testimony of many memoirs, the Nuremberg Congresses were rapturous, life-changing events for those children chosen to participate. An example:

   Even though he had been a member of the Jungvolk for only five months, Alfons was chosen to attend the Nuremberg Party Congress, the Reichsparteitag, the “high mass” of Nazism. For centuries Nuremberg... had been the showcase city of German history.... A huge tent city was set up, and for seven days people attended rallies praising Adolf Hitler, the power of the Nazis, and the glory of the New Germany. “Even for a 10-year-old,” recalls Alfons, “it was a near-feverish week-long high that lasted into one’s dreams.” (Ayer 23)

After the dramatic appearance of Hitler and minutes of shouting Heil Hitler in response to his speech in which “his eyes seem[ed] to stare right at me,” Alfons Heck remembers that “from the moment on, I belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul” (Ayer 24).

Works Cited


Law, Elizabeth. “‘Yes, but I’m Eleven.: An Editor’s Perspective on Condescension in Children’s Literature.” *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 17, 1, June 1993. 15-21.


