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## Chris Van Allsburg Draws *Just a Dream*

Chris Van Allsburg has an interesting artistic style. Whether it's real people in a fantasy world, as in *The Polar Express*, or exotic animals in an ordinary world, as in *Jumanji*, his drawings usually look realistic. Even the pictures in *Just a Dream*, although less photo-realistic than some of his other books, are still defined as *representational*. Chris Van Allsburg's pictures are fascinating because they present magnificent fantasies in a way that makes them seem real.

Before we get started, though, flip through *Just a Dream*. Take some time and enjoy it. That's the most important part!

### Shadows and Light

Although these are drawings, not photographs, they definitely feel like a real world. Why? Two of the main reasons are **shadows** and **light**. In real life, everything casts a shadow, but it's easy to forget them when you draw. If you remember them, they make all the difference.

Look at the first page of the story, which begins, "As usual, Walter stopped at the bakery..." The shadows aren't dramatic, but they're certainly there: on the bushes, the fire hydrant, even the crumpled wrapper.

On the next page, as Rose waters her tree, the shadows are stark. Yet the light is so bright! The grass and the top of Rose's head *shine*. Why? Because of the shadows! Without the darkness of the hedge and the back of her head, the lights wouldn't be so bright at all. Light and shadows need each other.

Don't believe me? The lightest color on the whole page is the blank white where there's nothing. But you don't notice it, do you? It has no shadow.

### The Fantasy of the Flying Bed

Van Allsburg loves fantasy. Walter shoots around the world—on his bed. His bed teeters in all kinds of crazy places, from the rim of a smokestack to the edge of the Grand Canyon. That's fantasy! It must have been fun to draw.

### Big and Small, Near and Far

But Walter doesn't find fun, just trouble. The smoke chokes him; the Grand Canyon is smothered in smog. One way Van Allsburg quietly makes us feel what Walter goes through is **size**. Sometimes, as in the picture of "Hotel Everest," he draws Walter and his bed to seem very large. We know Walter hasn't grown into a giant, so he must be *close* to us. It's as if we're next to him, looking up at the hotel.

Other times, such as when Walter is stranded on the ultimate highway, his bed is very small and far away. Why? Maybe Van Allsburg wants us to imagine *feeling* that small, surrounded by the swarm of traffic. Amazing what you can do by changing the size of someone, isn't it?

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## **Exercise A: Review the Reading**

1. What important step are you asked to take before reading about Van Allsburg's art?
2. What is Van Allsburg's style, according to the article?
3. Explain how shadows and light need each other, using the example from *Just a Dream*.
4. What is the lightest color on the page of that example? Why do or don't you notice it?
5. How does Van Allsburg seem to use the size of Walter and his bed to make you feel what he's feeling?

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## Exercise B: Van Allsburg, Light, and Shadows

*Just a Dream* plays with light and shadows on almost every page. It would be quite another book if he'd decided to draw only lines, like a comic strip. The light and shadows don't only make the pictures look more real, they help tell us what's going on. Are we inside or outside? Is it midday, when the sun is high and shadows are short? Or is it morning or afternoon, sunrise or sunset, when the sun is low and shadows are long?

The use of light and shadows sets the mood. Think about the picture where Walter's watching TV. There he sits, at the far end of an empty room. The TV light creeps along the floor between the chairs, and shadows fill the space on either side. Doesn't it make you feel lonely?

You might even say the shadows tell you about the characters. On the page where Rose is watering her tree, she's in the light on the sunny side of the hedge. But Walter, who just littered, is frowning in the shadow.

Let's look at some more pictures, and try to figure out why Van Allsburg used light and shadows the way he did. There aren't necessarily "right" or "wrong" answers for these questions. Simply find the picture described, and write whatever the light and shadows seem to say to you.

1. Walter's at the top of the tree, looking down at the lumberjacks.
2. Walter looks at the Grand Canyon.
3. The man pushes the mower under the huge trees that Walter and Rose planted.

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## Exercise C: Draw Like Chris Van Allsburg

If you keep drawing, you'll find you have your own style. But just as you learned to talk from people who knew how, you can learn about drawing from artists. Try to draw a picture like Chris Van Allsburg. It won't look *exactly* like one of his, of course, and it doesn't have to. Just have fun with some of his techniques.

First, pick a scene. You can think of a scene you've heard about or seen before, or you can else make one up. What kind of scene might Van Allsburg pick? Think about these questions, and jot your ideas. When you're done, get drawing!

1. Who is the main character? What does this character look like? Van Allsburg's heroes are often ordinary children.
2. What's the scene about? What is the character trying to do? Or is something happening *to* the character, like his bed flying through a flock of ducks? Why not decide on something **fantastic**? Van Allsburg certainly seems to like drawing fantasy.
3. Where is the scene happening? (This is called the **setting**.) Since this is a fantasy, it could be anywhere, from the top of a smokestack to the bottom of an old submarine.
4. How can you use light and shadow to enhance this picture?

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## Answer Key

### Exercise A: Review the Reading

1. Flip through the book and enjoy it.
2. Representational (as opposed to abstract).
3. As Rose waters her tree, the grass and the top of her head shine, because of the darkness of the hedge and the back of her head. Without those shadows, the lights would be flat.
4. The blank whiteness of the page. You don't notice it because it has no shadow.
5. He draws Walter big and near when he wants you to look with Walter at what's happening, and small and far away when he wants you to feel lost and alone, like Walter.

### Exercise B: Van Allsburg, Light, and Shadows

Answers will vary; here are some points I noticed.

1. Somewhat long shadows, the sun is somewhat low in the sky. Walter is shadowed under the canopy of the tree, but the lumberjacks and the stumps are in full sunlight. There may not be many trees left between them and the horizon.
2. Longer shadows, the sun is low in the sky. While Walter and everything at the edge of the gorge have shadows, the Grand Canyon itself has none. That's how smoggy it is, the sun can't even get in to make a few shadows.
3. The sun seems directly overhead, it's about noon. Here, the shade seems to be a good thing, the cool, comforting protection of the trees from the noonday sun.

### Exercise C: Draw Like Chris Van Allsburg

Pictures vary.