

## MAGICAL JOURNEYS

## Before you see the film

Look at the images on the poster and use the questions below to discuss what might happen in the film *The Polar Express*.

## Questions

- What do you think the film is about?
- Where do you think the film will be set?
- Who do you think the main characters will be?
- What do you think will happen to the boy?
- What time of year do you think it is? How do you know?
- Had you heard of *The Polar Express* before you found out about the film? If so, what do you know about the story?



## ACTIVITY

Pretend you are the boy in the poster and imagine *The Polar Express* has come to collect you. Write an account of your journey on the train, thinking about what might happen to you and what you might see.

## After you have seen the film

How close were your predictions? Compare your predictions of *The Polar Express* to the actual film.

## THE POLAR EXPRESS

The Polar Express tells the story of a young boy's amazing Christmas Eve adventure on the steam engine the Polar Express. This extraordinary train ride takes the boy to the North Pole to meet a very special person. His journey continues at the North Pole as the young boy and his new friends find themselves lost in the city and have to make their way back to the centre before midnight. The boy's friends listen for the sound of magical sleigh bells to guide their way. Although the magical journey is very exciting for the young boy and his companions, it is also a voyage of self-discovery and making friends.



## ACTIVITY

Watch the trailer for *The Polar Express* at [www.warnerbros.co.uk/movies/polarexpress/](http://www.warnerbros.co.uk/movies/polarexpress/).  
What happens in the trailer to show the boy has a 'mysterious and exciting adventure' on the Polar Express?

## After you have seen the film

Which was your favourite part of the film? Think about the images and events that happened in that section. Create a storyboard to re-tell the events.

## BELIEVING IN CHRISTMAS

On Christmas Eve a young boy sits up waiting for the sound of sleigh bells. When he hears a tinkling sound he goes to investigate only to find that it is just his father and sister making the noise. Feeling disappointed, the boy looks through his Christmas pictures from past years and reads about the North Pole in his encyclopaedia. The boy feels that he needs more proof before he can believe in Christmas and Santa. When the Polar Express arrives at his door, the boy's curiosity about Santa builds: maybe Santa is real after all?

At the North Pole the boy tries to catch a glimpse of Santa but can only see him when he decides to believe. The young boy is chosen to receive the first gift of Christmas, any gift he likes. He chooses a little silver bell from Santa's sleigh, perfect proof that Santa does exist.



## ACTIVITY

Although the boy realises that he can choose any gift he could possibly want, he chooses a gift from Santa that holds meaning for him. If you were given the chance to choose a 'meaningful' gift, what would you choose and why?

**After you have seen the film**

Why does the boy believe in Christmas? What were his reasons for choosing his unique gift?  
Write an excerpt from the boy's diary about receiving his very special present.

## BELIEVING IN YOURSELF

When the young boy boards The Polar Express he finds that he is not the only child about to embark on an exciting journey. The Polar Express has already collected children from all over the country. The young boy sits next to a young girl who is very welcoming and friendly. A talkative boy sits near him who begins to bombard him with bits of knowledge. Before they can leave the town and make their way to the North Pole they make one last stop in the poor section of the town. A very quiet and shy boy looks at the train but refuses to get on. As the train pulls away he changes his mind and sits in a carriage all by himself. Like the young boy, these children are also about to make a journey of self-discovery:

## Hero girl

A strong and capable young girl. Hero girl is a born leader who is unaware of her natural talents.



## Lonely boy

A sad young boy with an unhappy home life. Lonely boy is wary of kindness and attention of others and finds it difficult to make friends.



## Know-it-all boy

An annoying and bossy boy. Know-it-all boy thinks that he knows everything and will not listen to others.



## ACTIVITY

How do you think the children's actions and personalities will change during their journey?  
What do you think will happen to them to bring about these changes?

## After you have seen the film

The children have words punched into their tickets by the conductor at the end of their journey.  
Why do you think he did this and what do you think the words mean to the children?

## ON THE WAY TO THE NORTH POLE

On their journey to the North Pole, the young boy and his companions travel through many different places. They thunder through thick, dark forests and steam their way across the Great Polar Ice Cap. The engine climbs steep, snowy mountains before crawling into the crowded streets of the North Pole.



## ACTIVITY

Look at the stills from the film showing some different settings that the train travels through on its way to the North Pole. Choose two of the settings from the film and compare them.

**After you have seen the film**

Can you think of any other settings that the Polar Express travelled through?  
Using the Internet, research what the North Pole is actually like. Compare the real North Pole to the North Pole in the film. How similar or different are they?



## MOVING ILLUSTRATIONS

*The Polar Express* combines classic storytelling with cutting-edge filmmaking. The film was created by CG (computer generated) animation using Sony Pictures Imageworks' new motion capture process called Performance Capture. This technique involves the film's actors performing the scenes from the film and using this footage to drive the movements of the digital characters.

Each of the actors wore form-fitting motion capture suits resembling divers' wetsuits that had 60 reflective jewels on the surface. The actors also had 150 reflective jewels on their faces and scalps which took two hours to apply. The jewels were affixed to eyelids, eyebrows, lips, chin line and cheeks to capture all the facial expressions and mouth movement. The jewels or markers enable digital cameras to capture and record body and facial movement.

The cameras are able to capture full 360 degree coverage of the actors, creating 3-D images for the animators to use. The animators use the jewels to digitally map the actors' movements and add the surface detail to the characters. They then place the characters into computer generated sets and locations. The animators used Chris Van Allsburg's illustrations as a starting point when creating the digital world of *The Polar Express*.



## ACTIVITY

Imagine you are travelling to the North Pole. Think about the places you will pass through and the things you will see. Create an illustration to tell the story of your journey.

**After you have seen the film**

Compare the animated footage to the illustrations in the book of *The Polar Express*.  
How have the animators used the illustrations to create their animated images?

## BOOKS AND FILMS

The film of *The Polar Express* is based on a book by Chris Van Allsburg. The film brings the story to life using animated images and magical sounds, whereas the book version tells the story with still images and words. Van Allsburg's style of writing helps us use our imaginations to create our own amazing North Pole adventure. The book contains very descriptive language, often using similes and metaphors to help bring us into the story and help to create a mental image. Some examples of Van Allsburg's descriptive text include:

*'wrapped in an apron of steam'*

*'candies with nougat centres as white as snow'*

*'hot cocoa as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars'*

*'rolling over peaks and through valleys like a car on a roller coaster'*

*'mountains so high it seemed as if we would scrape the moon'*

*'lights of a strange ocean liner sailing on a frozen sea'*

*'a magical sound, like nothing I'd ever heard'*

## ACTIVITY

Imagine you are an animator working on *The Polar Express*. Think about how you would transform these descriptions into moving images. Using the lines above, write descriptions of what we would see on the screen for these parts of your film.

## After you have seen the film

How similar was the film of *The Polar Express* to the story told in the book version?

Extracts taken from *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg  
(Published by Andersen Press Ltd, London. ©Chris Van Allsburg 1985)

## CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG

The Polar Express was originally a book written by the children's author and illustrator Chris Van Allsburg. Chris is an American author who has written over 15 children's books. He originally trained as a sculptor but when his friends and family saw his drawings they suggested that the pictures would translate well into illustrations for books. In 1979, Chris had his first book published, The Garden of Abdul Gasazi.

The book version of The Polar Express is relatively short compared to the film. This meant that the screenwriters had to think about other events that could be added to the boy's journey to the North Pole to make the story longer. The screenwriters (people who re-write books for films) used the book for inspiration and made sure that the film started with the first line of the original book and ended with the final line.

The Polar Express is not the first book by Chris Van Allsburg which has been made into a film. Chris Van Allsburg's book Jumanji was used as the inspiration for the feature film of the same name in 1995. There are also two films being made at the moment using more of his books.

## ACTIVITY

Why do you think that The Polar Express has been made into a film? Make a list of the reasons why The Polar Express will make an interesting and exciting film to watch.

## After you have seen the film

Identify the parts of the book that were brought to life by the film. Were the events in the film the same as the events in the book?

For more information on Chris Van Allsburg's books and other work go to  
[www.chrisvanallsburg.com](http://www.chrisvanallsburg.com)

Film Education is the unique link between education and the UK film industry. It facilitates the study and use of film and cinema across the curriculum, creating, developing and sustaining a literate audience through the understanding and enjoyment of film.

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