



Children's Laureate Anthony Browne on appreciating picture books

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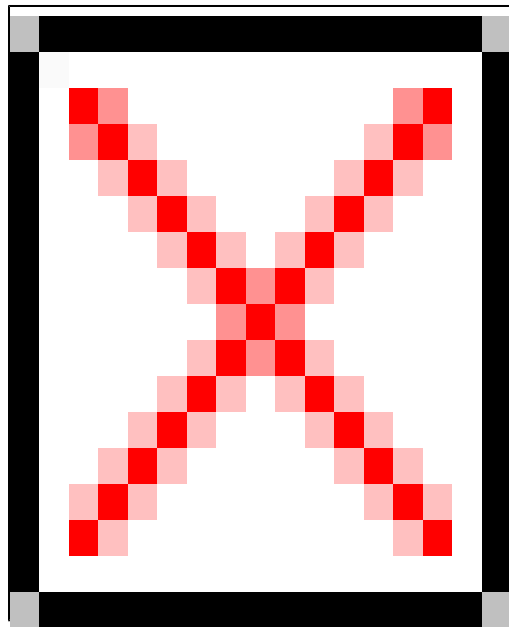
182 [2]

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Anthony Browne discusses Chris Van Allsburg's **The Mysteries of Harris Burdick**.



In his second article on aspects of the creation of the picture book **Anthony Browne** discusses a unique title that is 'free from the limitations of a traditional narrative'.

Chris Van Allsburg's **The Mysteries of Harris Burdick** is a unique picture book with a brilliant premise. The fictional introduction 'the only piece of text longer than two sentences' explains that the pictures in the book are the articles of an unsolved mystery. Thirty years ago a man called Harris Burdick approached a children's book publisher, explaining that he had written fourteen stories. Rather than burden the publisher with his entire body of work, he brought just one picture from each story, under each of which he had written the title and a brief caption for the illustration. The publisher was fascinated by the pictures and told Burdick that he would like to see the stories in their entirety as soon as possible. Burdick agreed to bring them to him the next day. But he didn't show up. For years, the publisher tried desperately to track him down without success. Harris Burdick had mysteriously disappeared and all that was left of him were the fourteen mesmerising pictures.

The rest of the book shows us the strange black and white pencil illustrations with their titles and captions. Each one is a superb, imaginative work of art. Having set himself up with the inspired introduction, Van Allsburg was then at liberty to produce a series of drawings entirely from his imagination, free from the limitations of a traditional narrative. The result is a series of implied narratives that are as enthralling as the child's imagination chooses them to be. I often talk about the importance of leaving gaps between the pictures and the text for children to fill in with their own imaginations. In the case of **The Mysteries of Harris Burdick**, the gaps are cavernous.

The title of this story is 'Under the Rug' and the caption reads 'Two weeks passed and it happened again'. Van Allsburg's matter-of-fact style works brilliantly in this book. There's something quite ordinary about his technique which particularly enhances the extraordinary happenings. This is the perfect book for stimulating children's creative writing.

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick is OP in hardback but the US paperback edition (Houghton Mifflin Junior Books) is available from Amazon.

Anthony Browne is the sixth Children's Laureate. The Children's Laureateship is administered by the reading charity Booktrust. See www.childrenslaureate.org.uk [3]

Page Number:

8

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