

# The Polar Express

## • Storytime •

by | Rob Reid

Chris Van Allsburg's picture book *The Polar Express* became an instant classic upon its publication in 1985, a status that was ensured when the book won the coveted Caldecott Award the following year. Readers of all generations enjoy the story of the young narrator who climbs aboard a train that appears in his front yard and takes him through woods and up mountains before depositing him and other children at the North Pole. The book is a testament to all who believe in the meaning of Christmas.

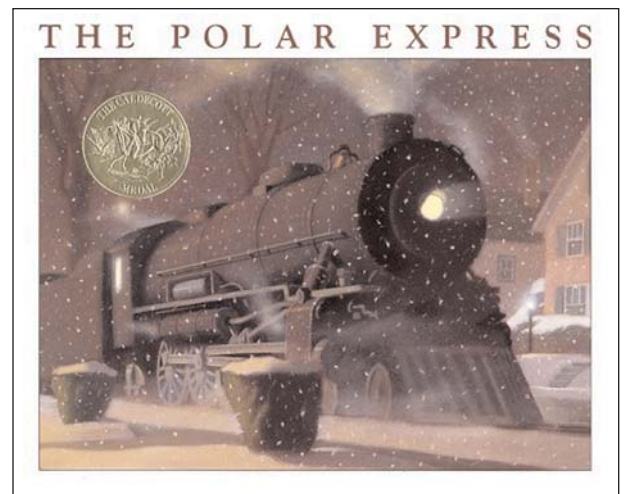
Celebrate the arrival of the major motion picture *The Polar Express* or the twentieth anniversary of the book's publication in 2005 with a theme party in your library or classroom. A read-aloud presentation of *The Polar Express* is the centerpiece of the program with related Christmas stories, songs and activities. The following format can be used to showcase books about other seasonal holidays, such as Hanukkah or Kwanzaa.

### Sample Lesson Plan

Start off with a reading of the picture book *Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story* by Cynthia Rylant. Like *The Polar Express*, this story features a special holiday appearance of a train. Each year, a wealthy man delivers packages from the back of a train. A poor boy, who is one of the yearly recipients of these gifts, grows up to become a doctor. While not a fantasy book like *The Polar Express*, Rylant's story maintains the same tone—the awe of the Christmas spirit.

Follow this story by playing a recording of “Old Toy Trains” written by Roger Miller and sung by children's recording artist Raffi. After the audience hears it one time, play it again and they'll join in singing the simple, catchy verse that begins, “Old toy trains, little toy tracks / Little toy drums coming from a sack.”

Next read the following poem that first appeared in *St. Nicholas Magazine* in 1897 and was reprinted in *The Family Read-Aloud Christmas Treasury*.



**M** for the Music, merry and clear;  
**E** for the Eve, the crown of the year;  
**R** for the Romping of bright girls and boys;  
**R** for the Reindeer that bring them the toys;  
**Y** for the Yule log softly aglow.

**C** for the Cold of the sky and the snow;  
**H** for the Hearth where they hang up the hose;  
**R** for the Reel which the old folks propose;  
**I** for the Icicles seen through the pane;  
**S** for the Sleigh Bells, with tinkling refrain;  
**T** for the Tree with gifts all abloom;  
**M** for the Mistletoe hung in the room;  
**A** for the Anthems we all love to hear;  
**S** for St. Nicholas—joy of the year!

In that same spirit, you may want the audience to help make a group acrostic poem featuring the words “Polar Express.” Write the words vertically on a large sheet of paper or dry-erase board and

ask for input. Here is an example I put together with the help of some students:

**P** eppermint candy canes,  
**O** ranges and apples fill stockings.  
**L** ights on the trees,  
**A** ll kinds of gifts,  
**R** ed ribbons and bows.

**E** veryone is full of  
 e **X** citement.

**P** rancing  
**R** eindeer  
**E** njoy  
**S** wirling snowflakes  
**S** urrounding Santa.

At this point in the program, read *The Polar Express*. Celebrate the words and the tone of the book with your voice; animated and full of wonderment. Be careful not to rush. Pause briefly before each page turn so that everyone can view Van Allsburg's unique illustrations. Everything else in the program has led up to this point, so let your enjoyment of the book come across through the power of your voice.

*The Polar Express* features a bell. Once you have finished the story, distribute jingle bells. These can be found at most craft supply stores. Lead everyone in a chorus of the popular carol "Jingle Bells."

Dashing through the snow  
 In a one-horse open sleigh,  
 Through the fields we go  
 Laughing all the way.  
 Bells on bob-tail wings  
 Making spirits bright,  
 What fun it is to ride and sing  
 A sleighing song tonight.

Jingle bells, jingle bells  
 Jingle all the way,  
 Oh what fun it is to ride  
 In a one-horse open sleigh, O  
 Jingle bells, jingle bells  
 Jingle all the way,  
 Oh what fun it is to ride  
 In a one-horse open sleigh.

The audience may enjoy learning that "Jingle Bells" was originally titled "One Horse Open Sleigh" and written for a church Thanksgiving service by James S. Pierpont. The song was such a hit that the church choir performed it again at the Christmas service. Many church visitors took the song back to their own communities. Because they first heard it during the Christmas holiday, they always associated the song with that time of year. The entire story of the song, as well as the full set of lyrics, can be found in *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* by Ace Collins.

Serve food and drinks such as those mentioned in *The Polar Express*—hot cocoa and "candies with nougat centers as white as snow"—as well as fruit, cookies and other seasonal treats.

Before the audience files out of the program area, ask them to ring their bells one last time as you re-read the last line from *The Polar Express*. "Though I've grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe."

## Bibliography

- *The Family Read-Aloud Christmas Treasury* edited by Alice Low, illustrated by Marc Brown. Little, Brown and Company, 1989.
- "Old Toy Trains" written by Roger Miller. Sung by Raffi. *Raffi's Christmas Album*. Rounder, 2002.
- *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg. Houghton Mifflin, 1985.
- *Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story* by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by Chris Soentpiet. Scholastic, 1997.

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