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The Polar Express Turns Thirty

By BOB VICKREY
Special to the Palisades News

(Editor's note: Bob Vickrey is a longtime Palisadian. He is a writer whose columns appear in several Southwestern newspapers. He is a member of the Board of Contributors for the Waco Tribune-Herald and a regular contributor to the Boryana Books website.)

When I was a young boy growing up in the suburbs of southeast Houston, every Christmas Eve I would sneak out onto our screened front porch and stare into the night sky as I tried to spot Santa's sleigh as it arrived from the North Pole.

In our community of Galena Park, the bright lights of the refineries that lined the banks of the Houston Ship Channel lit the sky each night, so it did not require much imagination for a restless boy to envision Santa's sparkling red sleigh and reindeer moving swiftly across the horizon amid all those flickering lights.

Many years later as an adult, I worked in the book business for the venerable Boston firm Houghton Mifflin, which published Chris Van Allsburg's landmark Christmas classic, *The Polar Express*.

Thirty years have now passed since the meeting at our Boston headquarters when our sales and marketing group first laid eyes on the early proofs of the book that would eventually rival "The Night before Christmas" as America's book of choice for the holiday season.

There were audible oohs and aahs heard around the meeting table as we first perused the pages of this vibrant and original Christmas story that would go on to win the Caldecott Medal, which is awarded



annually to the best illustrated children's book.

The story is about a young boy's fantastical train ride to the North Pole, where he is chosen by Santa to receive the first gift of Christmas. The boy chooses a bell from the harness of the reindeer, only to become disheartened on the train trip home when he discovers it missing after falling through a hole in the pocket of his pajamas.

However, on Christmas morning, the boy and his sister find a small package under the tree delivered by Santa Claus, who had left a note explaining that the bell was found on the seat of his sleigh. The children were both overjoyed as they listened to the beautiful ring of the bell, but sadly, their parents were unable to hear its

sound, and concluded that it must have been broken.

Van Allsburg's books often revealed a dream-like quality, and offered a curious perspective from a child's eye view. Children connected with his unique artwork and his mysterious stories. His earlier books had already made a formidable impact on the children's book market, including *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* and *Jumanji*, which had been his first Caldecott Medal winner four years earlier.

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick featured a series of seemingly unrelated images, including only a title and one-line description that almost invited children to make up their own stories about the mystery behind each picture.

The Polar Express was indeed one of those special books that offered all the right ingredients of great storytelling that fired

the imagination of children and inspired future generations of young readers.

I have fond memories of accompanying Chris during his many Southern California book tours, but I particularly remember his bookstore signings for *The Polar Express* that very first year the book was released. I watched the long lines of children as they excitedly approached the author who would be signing their copy of the book. Their impatience and eagerness at being given the chance of meeting him was quite evident.

But what I also noticed during those signings were the children's parents, many of whom demonstrated that same anticipation as they neared the author's table. The last few lines in the story might well have offered an explanation.

"At one time, most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. Even Sarah found one Christmas that she could no longer hear its sweet sound. Though I've grown old, the bell still rings for me, as it does for all who truly believe."

For many of us whose hair has now turned grey, the faint sound of the bell is no longer detectable, but each Christmas season as I re-read *The Polar Express*, I find myself listening closely in hopes of hearing its sweet ring just one more time.

(Editor's note: Vickrey's Palisadian friend Don Burgess was the award-winning cinematographer for the 2004 hit movie *The Polar Express*. Another Palisadian, Tom Hanks, narrated the film. When the movie arrived in theaters across the country, the massive promotion launched by Warner Bros. Pictures and by Houghton Mifflin, vaulted the book to the top of best-seller lists during the holiday season and contributed to a record-breaking year for the company.)



Illustrations from *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg.

Children's Books Supply Holiday Tradition

By SUE PASCOE
Editor

From the time my children were little, our Christmas tradition included reading one new book in front of the fireplace on Christmas evening. Although my children are now young adults, we continued to purchase books well into their teens. Some of the family favorites (which also included *The Polar Express*) are below.

Olive, the Other Reindeer
By J. Otto Seibold and Vivian Walsh

When Olive the dog hears the lyric, "All



of the other reindeer," she interprets it to be "Olive the other reindeer," and decides she must be a reindeer. After taking two buses, she arrives at the North Pole to report for duty. Using skills that only a dog could employ, she helps Santa on his Christmas Eve flight.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas!

By Dr. Seuss

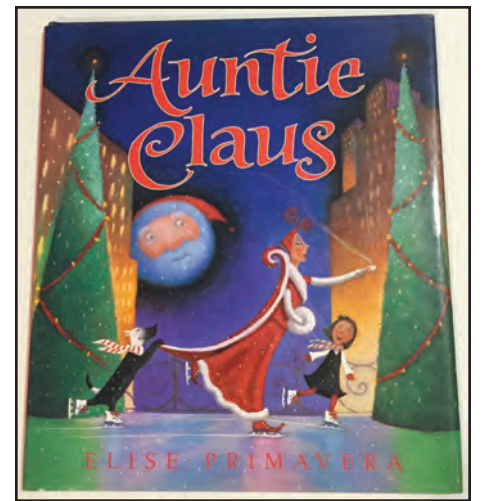
This classic tale about a Grinch, whose heart is two sizes too small, can be read every year. The main character hates everything about the Christmas celebration, including the food, the noise and the toys, and plots to do away with it all. With the

help of a small dog named Max, the Grinch descends on Who-ville and takes every last vestige of Christmas from the Whos.

The Littlest Angel

By Charles Tazewell

The littlest Angel comes to heaven when he was four years old and has a tough time adapting. He can't keep his halo on; he has trouble flying because he forgets to use his wings, he sings off key in the heavenly choir and is always late to prayers. Finally, he is called in front of the Understanding Angel,

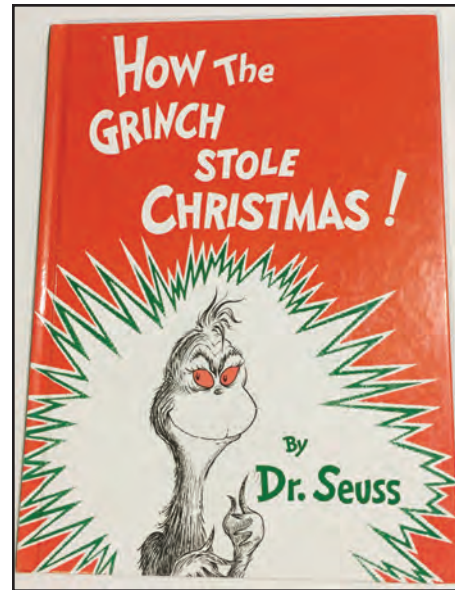


who helps him retrieve a box of treasures the boy kept under his bed on earth—and there is a magical tie-in to Christmas. The book, written in 1939, has sold nearly five million copies.


Auntie Claus

By Elise Primavera

A little girl living in New York City finds herself working as an elf before Christmas. During her employment, she learns rules such as, "An elf's work is never done, but hard work never hurt anyone," and finds out about the B-B-and-G list (short for Bad-Boys-and-Girls). When
(Continued on Page 5)



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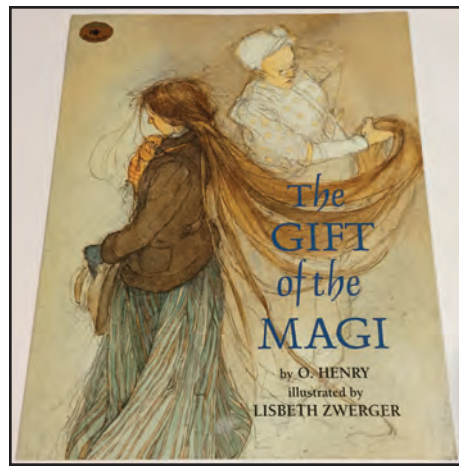
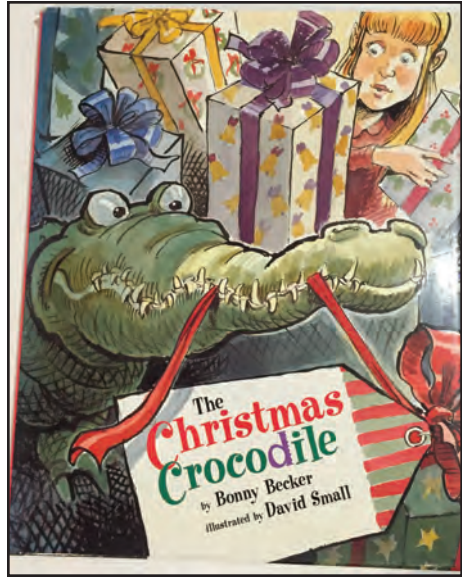
Books

(Continued from Page 4)

she volunteers to go down to the coal mines to pick up the coal for the children who have misbehaved, she makes a striking discovery. This leads her to learn the final elf rule, "It is far better to give than it is to receive."

The Christmas Crocodile By Bonny Becker

A funny tale of a crocodile delivered to a family as a Christmas present. The crocodile, who doesn't mean to be bad, manages to eat many of the Christmas food,



presents and decorations. The family initially bans him to the basement, but then feel sorry about letting this poor creature spend the night alone. This book is sort of unusual for a children's tale, because there is not only a surprise ending, but a twist to the story as well.

The Gift of the Magi

By O. Henry

Another classic about gift giving and the power of love. An impoverished couple, who are madly in love, sacrifice their greatest treasures so they can give a present to each other. The book concludes, "The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving . . . let it be said that of all who give gifts these two [the couple] were the wisest."

Christmas Carol Presented December 20, 21 and 22

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, adapted by Pacific Palisades resident Pam Sommer, will be presented at 8 p.m. on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, December 20, 21 and 22 at the Pierson Playhouse, 941 Temescal Canyon Rd. Tickets are \$10.

Directing *A Christmas Carol* is Erik Photenhauer, who won Emmy awards in

2014 and 2015 for his work as a producer on *Entertainment Tonight*. The play will feature members of the Lighthouse Players, and starring in the role of Scrooge will be Ralph Bowen.

For reservations call (310) 528-7672 or email Cherylleone@gmail.com.

Donated Goods Sought for Adams Homeless Lunch

Donations are sought for the 31st Annual Mimi Adams Holiday Party in Santa Monica. The memorial luncheon for those in need will be held on Thursday, December 24, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at St. Augustine-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, 1227 Fourth St.

Longtime Palisadian Ken Adams and his children, Julie Eamer and John Adams, are carrying on this traditional event in honor of the late Mimi Adams, a community activist and co-founder of a nonprofit for feeding the homeless.

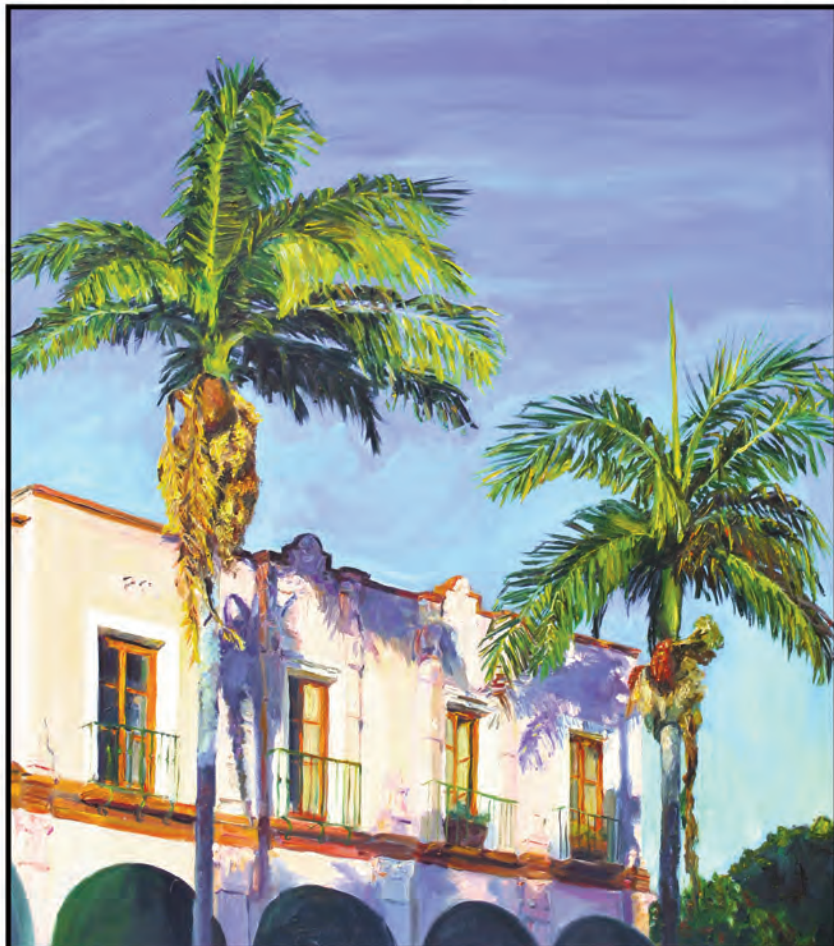
"We are seeking donated items in good condition, new or near-new," Adams said.

"These include sleeping bags, backpacks, blankets, jackets, sweatshirts, sweatpants, warm sweaters, new socks (white cotton preferred), towels, hats, knit gloves, toys and toiletries."

Donated items may be dropped off at St. Augustine. Please call Roger Scadron at (310) 420-0350 to coordinate with the church. Tax-deductible donations may be sent to St. Augustine's (zip code 90401), noting on the memo line: Mimi Adams Holiday Luncheon.

This luncheon, sponsored by the church, serves 300 to 400 homeless individuals and provides them with important personal items in the midst of winter.

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Realtor Carolers Give Back

By LAUREL BUSBY
Staff Writer

When Anne Russell came to town, the holidays in Pacific Palisades got a little merrier.

Russell, a former opera singer, brought caroling to town last year with a group of her fellow Coldwell Banker realtors and other friends who were professional singers.

"It was not easy to get my agents to want to sing," said Russell. "They say they can't sing, but they sing very well and are having a good time."

Last year, the carolers, named the CB Singers, took to the streets for the first time. They visited Huntington Palisades, the Alphabet Streets, Via de la Paz and the Highlands.

"We would pick a street and knock on doors," Russell said. Inevitably, the residents who answered the knocks were delighted to see them. "They brought us into their homes, served us hot chocolate, gave us candy, kept trying to give us money, but we wouldn't take any." She noted, "the emotional gratification of having people so happy to see us and hear us is so special, so much more rewarding than we even expected it to be. We are thrilled to be back this year."

The carolers have since expanded their



The C.B. Carolers include (left to right) Robin Howard, Aryana Eshraghi, Carroll McEachern, Inne Chung, Stephanie Spencer Tellefsen, Anne Russell, Mike Craig and Blanca Chavoya.

endeavor to the El Medio bluffs. They were also invited to sing at Bergamot Station and at the Holiday Ho!Ho!Ho! celebration. This September, they began practicing and have learned 29 songs, including pieces for both

Chanukah and Christmas. When they reach a home, the residents can glance through the repertoire and request their favorites.

For Russell, the desire to carol in the Palisades stemmed from her childhood in

Nyack, New York. "I used to do it as a child. We would go caroling all the time," Russell said, but when she moved to California in

1981, caroling was not in evidence. "It did-

(Continued on Page 9)

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Carolers

(Continued from Page 8)

n't seem to be the tradition here. I really missed it."

Last year, she decided to change that. Russell had previously operated her own realty company, but Coldwell Banker wooed her and she joined them as the branch manager in April of 2014.

Although she enjoys living in the Hollywood Hills, she has loved coming each workday to Pacific Palisades, in part because it reminds her of her hometown.

Nyack "was a lovely small-town environment, just like the Palisades," Russell said. "That's why I thought something as old-fashioned as caroling would be appreciated here."

For Russell, the caroling is also a way to mix her love of singing and real estate. She volunteers as a lecturer with LA Opera and is on the board of its opera league, which is one reason why she continues to live in the Hollywood Hills, where downtown is just a 15-minute drive away.

Her son, Sean, also inherited a love of music and opera. He is an opera singer, a baritone living in NYC. "The apple didn't fall far from the tree," she said.

Russell worked as an opera singer in New York too. She was in the chorus at the N.Y. Metropolitan Opera. She traveled in Europe and sang in Vienna and Munich. Eventually, she also did off-Broadway musicals and



Swarthmore In 2017?

Palisades News photographer writes: "My friend, Gidget (Kathy Zuckerman) and I went to the Grove at Third and Fairfax to see the Christmas decorations, eat lunch and shop. Maybe Rick Caruso (of Caruso Affiliated) will turn the Palisades into a mini wonderland."

Photo: Wendy Anderson

crossover roles like *The Threepenny Opera*.

Now, she enjoys bringing that love of music to Palisadians with the CB Singers. "We want to wish everyone in the Palisades a happy, happy holiday season. We are so pleased and blessed to be a part of this wonderful community . . . I'm so happy that I do this job and am here in the Palisades every day."



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THE SURYA-TISHBI FAMILY

Rainbow Mittens Kept Him Warm

By SUE PASCOE
Editor

When I was 21, I loaded up a suitcase with all my worldly possessions, two hundred dollars, and took a Greyhound bus from South Dakota to New York City. I was too naïve to realize the folly of what I was doing. I had no job and no place to stay. My parents opposed my decision, but I was 21.

When I arrived it was September. The colors in Central Park were exquisite. I got lucky immediately and found a job at Scribner's Book Store, a mecca of books housed in a glass-and-wood architectural dream.

A woman, with brilliantly dyed red hair, askew glasses, a thick New York accent, whose hobby was betting on the ponies, was letting an apartment in a building on 181st Street. She decided I was a "very nice girl" and should rent it. I told her I couldn't afford it, so she lined me up with a roommate, also a "very nice girl," so we could share the rent. The apartment had a bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen and two broken refrigerators in the entry—my new home.

Struggling financially to pay rent and pay for subway tokens to get to and from work, I had no money for luxuries. New clothes were not an option. I continued to wear what I had packed in my suitcase, including my best polyester pants suit and the one pair of shoes I had. As the weather started to turn icy, I layered more clothes because I didn't have a winter coat.

My parents begged for me to come home, but like being involved with a man that you know is bad for you and you should break it off, instead I dived deeper into my love affair with New York City, and stayed. I never asked my parents for money. I knew they wouldn't send it. They had made it clear that when I came to my senses, they would send me a ticket home.

In December, the city streets turned magical with lights and anticipation. I took all the money I had managed to save and bought Christmas presents.

A warm, furry cap for my dad, a beautiful photo book of Wyeth's paintings for my



The Scribner Building in New York City. The 102-year-old building, once home to a famous bookstore, now hosts a Sephora store.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

mom, a cookbook for my grandma, a giant gingerbread house that needed to be assembled from Macy's for my little sister, and a croquet set for my other siblings. My pride was intact. I knew they would think I was doing well to send presents.

In reality, I was strapped for cash. My shoes were falling apart, rotten from the rain and slush of New York. I had a ragged pair of beige mittens that I had purchased on the street corner for a dollar.

Two weeks before Christmas, I was behind the cash register in the book store. Customer after customer came up to the cash register. By the end of the day, I rarely looked up to see the face. Out of the blue, the most marvelous gloves I had ever seen were resting on the counter—rainbows on hands.

I looked up at the man, and told him they were marvelous. He had wonderful, kind eyes. He looked at me a minute and then offered to give them to me.

At first I was thrilled, then I remembered, I only had ugly, dirty beige mittens to give him in exchange.

you." I wanted those gloves, but I couldn't send the man out into the cold with bare hands.

"Thank you," I told him, "but I can't." He finished paying in cash, and then left with his wife and his little boy, neither one of whom was tall enough to peer over the store's nearly-five-foot-high counter.

The noise returned to the store. One of the clerks rushed up to me. "What were you talking about?!"

I told her, "Mittens."

"What did he say?!!!" I was taken aback that she was so excited. She looked closer at me. "Did you know you were talking to John Lennon?"

On Christmas Eve, the store stayed open late for the last-minute shoppers. The cash registers wouldn't balance and we didn't leave until late.

By the time the A train got me to my stop it was after eleven. I came out on the street, cold and tired.

The clerk had told me I was stupid, that I should've taken his gloves and that I could've sold them for a lot of money. I thought about it, but only briefly. I'm glad he didn't have cold hands.

Now, years later as I look back at my first Christmas away from home, I think about regrets and loneliness. I was terribly lonely and I was alone, but regrets? ... I have none.

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For \$120, a goat can go to an area such as Rwanda. A dairy goat can provide up to a gallon of milk each day and help people like the Belize family who "were fighting to survive on barely more than 50 cents a day and were never able to save money to improve their situation." After training from the Heifer program and hard work,

they now own 10 goats and the manure from the animals, used as fertilizer, has increased the family's harvest.

Other animals that can be purchased include llamas (\$150), sheep (\$120) and water buffalo (\$250). For those who can't afford the entire animal cost, Heifer International offers eight stocking stuffers: share of a goat (\$10), flock of ducks (\$20), flock of chicks (\$20), flock of geese (\$20), honeybees (\$30), trio of rabbits (\$60), share of a heifer (\$50) and tree seedlings (\$60).

Visit: heifer.org/catalog or call (855) 848-6437. To learn more about Pacific Palisades Rotary, visit: clubrunner.ca/pacificpalisades/.




Give a needy family a gift of a goat.

Photo courtesy of Heifer International

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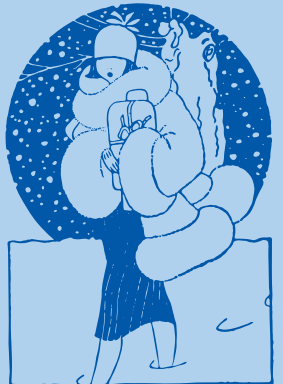
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