Abstract: The Christmas genre of literature and film produced for children is an important, albeit under-researched, site for the production of cultural values and norms. This paper analyses Chris Van Allsburg's 1985 picture book The Polar Express, the 2004 Warner Brothers feature film of the same title, the film's official website, and resources for teachers distributed online by Houghton Mifflin, considering how these texts construct childhood subjectivities in economic terms. The argument made is that nostalgic depictions of ordered, middle-class lifestyles, the representation of social class inequalities as immutable structural norms, and signifiers of corporate capitalism, together locate childhood and child subjectivities as inexorably tethered to socioeconomic circumstance and experience.
"Depend On, Rely On, Count On": Economic subjectivities aboard The Polar Express

Abstract

The Christmas genre of literature and film produced for children is an important, albeit under-researched, site for the production of cultural values and norms. This paper analyses Chris Van Allsburg’s 1985 picture book *The Polar Express*, the 2004 Warner Brothers feature film of the same title, the film’s official website, and resources for teachers distributed online by Houghton Mifflin, considering how these texts construct childhood subjectivities in economic terms. The argument made is that nostalgic depictions of ordered, middle-class lifestyles, the representation of social class inequalities as immutable structural norms, and signifiers of corporate capitalism, together locate childhood and child subjectivities as inexorably tethered to socio-economic circumstance and experience.

Keywords: economic subjectivities, social class, consumption, childhood, Christmas

Introduction

Christmas occupies an important place in literature and films produced for children, with thematic concerns often centred on notions of childhood innocence and wonder, and the importance of belief in magical realms and mythical characters. Like other children’s texts associated with the celebration of cultural and religious festivals, Christmas texts play a significant role in the cyclical reiteration of social practices, values and norms (Scutter, 2000). Elsewhere I have argued that children’s Christmas texts are a significant site for the production of childhood as an economic category (Saltmarsh, 2007), showing how Christmas texts have shifted, over time, from earlier depictions of childhood as vulnerable to prevailing economic circumstances of the day, toward childhood being reconfigured as central to the spaces of capitalist production. Here, however, I analyse Chris van Van Allsburg’s picture book *The Polar Express* (1985) and the Warner Brothers film of the same name (directed by Bob Zemeckis, 2004), exploring how Van Allsburg’s book and its associated texts construct childhood subjectivities within socio-economic class relations depicted as stable and enduring.

*The Polar Express* is a story about a young boy whose belief in Santa is reconfirmed when he is transported to the North Pole on a magical train one snowy Christmas Eve. *The Polar Express* has enjoyed widespread acclaim since its publication in 1985. It was awarded the 1986 Caldecott Medal, and in 2004 was turned into a feature film using new Performance Capture techniques for computer-generated image technology by Castlerock Entertainment for Warner Brothers. The film enjoyed considerable box-office success, grossing more than $300 million worldwide, and receiving a string of award nominations the following year, including those for Grammy, Academy, and British Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), besides winning a 2005 American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) Award in the category of Top Box Office Films (The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)). In addition to its popular success, the story has had broad appeal among educators, most notably in the USA, where it has been nominated by National Association of Educators (NAE) teachers for the Teachers’ Top 100 Books lists. It is also the subject of a considerable array of supplementary curricular resources and cultural products, such as *A Teacher’s Guide*.

The literary, curricular and commercial success of The Polar Express in its various formats calls our attention to the significance attached to some Christmas stories by both producers and consumers. The popularity of such texts, their cyclical repetition over successive years, and their intertextual circulation across a range of social sites give them particular potency in the cultural imagination. As Kerry Mallan observes, such texts “invariably provide information about the self and the social (‘I’ and the world) and mediate the passage from what the child knows to what she does not know” (2002, p. 32). Children’s texts are also an important means by which adult readerships and audiences are addressed. This is especially the case with picture books, where adults often mediate children’s experience through the practice of reading aloud prior to children’s mastery of literacy skills (Stephens, 1992). Adults also act as significant gatekeepers in the selection, validation and interpretation of children’s texts (Shavit, 1999; Saltmarsh, 2007b). These roles undertaken by adults suggest that they, too, are positioned by and in relation to the ideological dimensions of children’s texts, and similar observations have been made with respect to film audiences:

…implicit and explicit ideologies in children’s animated film are likely to inform both adult and child audiences, promoting certain beliefs and assumptions and shoring up idealized goals and expectations. There is also a sense in which explicit and embedded ideologies are being knowingly transferred from one generation to the next. In this way, children’s film can provide a sense of continuity and of clarification, performing a pedagogic function with regard to a myriad of issues (Hinkins, 2007, p. 43).

In the case of Christmas texts, there is often particular emphasis placed on the transmission of cultural norms seen as integral to maintaining the prevailing and/or desirable moral, social and economic order. Adult readers of Christmas texts may see themselves as implicitly invested with responsibility for the successful transmission of cultural values to future generations, or, alternatively, feel themselves invited to recall and, possibly, reinterpret their own childhood experience in the light of present circumstances or imagined futures.

The potency of such thematic concerns addressed to both child and adult audiences makes Christmas texts a particularly interesting site for considering questions of cultural reproduction, “since to grasp what children’s texts propose about values, politics and social practices is to see what they envisage as desirable possibilities for the world” (Bradford et al., 2008, p. 6). However, unlike other types of utopian text, which tend to offer readers and viewers a means of interrogating discursive norms, many Christmas texts are instead preoccupied with valorising and “sacralizing” (Belk, 2000, p. 12) those traditions and power relations that serve to maintain the prevailing social order. In the following sections, then, pictorial and textual elements of The Polar Express are reconsidered in terms of how they construct particular notions of childhood subjectivity, despite the overwhelming recourse in these texts to notions of nostalgic memory and magical belief upon which desirable futures are seen to rest.
**Consumption, Order and Nostalgia: The economic subject of middle-class childhoods**

The popular appeal of *The Polar Express*, according to the production notes, lies in its capacity to generate nostalgic childhood memories upon which imagined futures presumably rest:

Beloved by children, *The Polar Express* holds a special appeal for adults as well, who see themselves in the character of the young boy and remember their own childhood excitement and anticipation on that one most important night of the year. Perhaps they also remember the moment when the first shadowy doubts crept into their own young hearts and they realized that growing up might mean losing something precious and intangible forever, something they couldn’t quite define but they could certainly feel. *The Polar Express* is about that moment, that crucial juncture of innocence and maturity where a child can choose one path that will close his heart forever or another, where he learns that faith has no age, no rules and no limits. (Warner Brothers, 2004)

What stands out in the above narrative is the extent to which categories of childhood and adulthood are subjugated to binaries of innocence/maturity, faith/doubt and past/future. According to Susan Honeyman, the success of such appeals can be attributed to the imposition of an infantilising adult nostalgia upon what is otherwise understood as the absence of secure futures for contemporary childhoods:

We expect child readers to accept this unrealistic, uncomplicated, and over-secure image of the world they live in to make ourselves more comfortable with the lack of it. Perhaps the acute awareness of this lack explains why we push for unquestioning belief in magic so much in texts where we indulge it. (2005, p. 145)

I am sympathetic to such an interpretation (and it is worth noting that Honeyman’s comments pertain specifically to *The Polar Express*). Of particular interest is not merely how appeals to nostalgia function in constructing imagined futures in these particular texts, but also the extent to which such appeals rely upon consumption as a primary means by which childhood memories are stirred. Indeed, the pages of *The Polar Express* movie website are replete with reminders about the movie as commodity, a product that one can purchase and own in a variety of formats, with numerous hyperlinks to the Warner Brothers DVD Shop from which the movie, tickets to view the movie in IMAX 3-D, and a host of other products can be purchased online. The initial aesthetic appeal of music and image may invoke nostalgia, but one’s successful accomplishment of the subjective dialogue between childhood memory and imagined future that the movie claims to engender depends upon the capacity to access, purchase and own the film as a tangible product. For example, exclamatory statements are prominently displayed on each page of *The Polar Express Movie Website*, suggesting “YOU COULD OWN IT ON DVD, HD DVD AND BLU-RAY TODAY!” In this way, implied readers are addressed as potential consumers of the multimedia product, rather than, for example, fans who have already seen the film and wish to know more about it. The juxtaposition of fantasy images and commercial items for sale—together with explicit directives to purchase them—thus functions as a
metafictive device that re-directs the attention of presumed nostalgic viewers to the
decidedly unimaginary Warner Brothers Movie Shop web page, where products are
itemized with descriptive details, ready to be placed in virtual shopping carts, and
purchased by credit card transaction.

It could be argued that the commercial concerns of the Hollywood film industry
necessitate the packaging and promotion of the film in ways that are not reflected in
Van Allsburg’s original text. However, an important dimension of this particular
picture book’s nostalgic force is its appeal to an idealized white, middle-class
suburban audience. In the original picture book, for example, illustrations of the boy’s
neighbourhood depict softly illuminated, orderly streetscapes with footpaths, formal
yards, hedges, streetlamps and multi-storey homes. Images of the interior of the boy’s
home show a similar sense of order and material comfort—the boy sleeps in a bed and
a room of his own, and furniture throughout the house is neatly arranged in rooms
with curtained windows, framed paintings and portraits on the walls; lastly, there is a
large decorated Christmas tree under which wrapped presents for the children have
been placed in anticipation of Christmas Day.

Even representations of the natural world are carefully ordered, most notably on the
title page and the fourth double-page spread. On the former, a wolf (whose
image is repeated in the double-page spread) is poised as if running, yet the
undisturbed snow at the wolf’s feet, and the absence of footprints or other signifiers of
movement around its image impose a stillness on this scene. The train in the
background similarly appears still, with the entire scene framed by a crisp, narrow
black border surrounded by a wide white textbox which, in turn, is framed within
another crisp, narrow black border. Nature is thus allowed no messy intrusion upon
the ordered narrative of past or future, nor is it allowed to disrupt the serenity of the
neatly encapsulated spaces of middle-class comfort and security signified by the train
in its passage between the civilized spaces of suburban home and industrial city.

In the fourth spread this containment of nature is repeated as three wolves—one of
whom peers off the page while the other two look toward the moving train—are
observed in a snowy, undisturbed foreground. Between wolves and train are tall,
straight rows of trees through which the symmetry of the train’s exterior is
emphasised. The arrangement of elements on all of the book’s pages thus contributes
to the depiction of natural and social order, with each double-page spread surrounded
by a neat black border separating image, text, and white background into neatly
compartmentalized frames, from which neither image nor text is allowed to spill over.

This order is replicated in the film, which developed new ‘performance capture’
techniques for creating animated characters using data from recorded images of live
acting performances, and digital scanning techniques for creating virtual on-screen
environments. These techniques “allowed Zemeckis to literally create custom shots
during the editing process” (Warner Brothers, 2004), thereby offering greater
representational versatility, as well as predictability and stability, in the production
process. In this way, the production team was able to create the necessary elements in
virtual, hence limitlessly manipulable, digital form. As Zemeckis explains it:

  The only limit now is the filmmaker’s imagination, because you can literally
create any image. I can do a spectacular shot with a little kid on top of a
roaring train in the snow at night and I don’t have to worry about how I’m
go ing to do it. I don’t have to worry about the kid falling off the train, or the
camera frosting over or whether the train will hit its mark. I now have
complete control over those elements. It’s the closest thing we have to typing a
story into a computer and having a film come out the other side. (Warner
Brothers, 2004)

The control available to the film’s director is not merely technological, then, for both
narrative and dialogic interaction between viewer and text are also manipulated by the
representation of affluence and order as integral elements of social class stability.

Poverty, Patriarchy and Belief: The subject from the ‘other side of the tracks’

Representations that depict childhood experience as being shaped by social class
location are made more overt in the film’s retelling of Van Allsburg’s story, which
extends the original narrative by introducing new characters and more detailed
storylines. In The Polar Express picture book, the child narrator’s middle-class
location is natural and inevitable, reinforced through images of home, neighbourhood
and nature as ordered and unremarkable. In the film, the socio-economic order is
initially problematised through the introduction of two additional child characters, one
of whom is a Black girl, identified in the production notes as Hero Girl, and a smaller
white boy named Billy, who is picked up last by the Polar Express in front of his
home ‘on the other side of the tracks’ (Zemeckis). The storylines created in the film’s
retelling call to mind the observation by John Stephens and Robyn McCallum that:

The relationships between a retelling and its pre-text(s) are, in the main,
dominated by metanarratives which are androcentric, ethnocentric, and class-
centric, so the purposes of inducting audiences into the social, ethical, and
aesthetic values of the producing culture are colored by those particular
alignments. (Stephens and McCallum, 1998, p. 9)

So, in the film, the spatial ordering of the social world in the picture book is extended
to broader frames of reference through the metaphor (here made literal) of ‘the other
side of the tracks’, where Billy’s home is located. Unlike the neatly arranged rows of
houses in manicured suburban neighbourhoods where the other children have boarded
the train, Billy’s house appears run-down and isolated, on the edge of a darkened,
industrial wasteland. Billy leaves—and eventually returns to a home in which no
others, children or adults, appear to be present. Poverty is thus depicted as lonely and
desolate, devoid not only of material luxuries, but also of the implied security and
companionship afforded by others.

The difference in social class is emphasised spatially as Billy boards the train and
takes a seat in a carriage separate from the others. While it could be argued that two of
the other children, Hero Boy and Hero Girl, attempt to disrupt the hierarchical order
by ensuring that Billy gets on the train, and by endeavouring to include him in their
activities, it is also important to note that Billy’s provisional inclusion is only
made possible by the intervention of those who occupy superior discursive positions.
Despite the other children’s enthusiastic and sentimental accounts of their Christmas
experiences, Billy’s resistance is cast in terms of a materially, and hence, it is implied, a spiritually deprived childhood. Take, for example, the lyrics from the duet sung by Billy and Hero Girl:

Billy: I'm wishing on a star
And trying to believe,
That even though it's far
You'll find me Christmas Eve.
I guess that Santa's busy,
'Cause he's never come around.
I think of him when Christmas comes to town.
Hero Girl: The best time of the year
When everyone comes home,
With all this Christmas cheer
It's hard to be alone.
Putting up the Christmas tree
With friends who come around,
It's so much fun when Christmas comes to town.
Presents for the children, wrapped in red and green,
Billy: All the things I've heard about, but never really seen,
Hero Girl: No one will be sleeping on the night of Christmas Eve,
Both: Hoping Santa's on his way. (Zemeckis, 2004)

The lyric establishes a stark contrast between the experiences of these two significant characters in the film. While Hero Girl sings lovingly of presents, Christmas trees, and the presence of friends and family, Billy sings longingly of their absence. As a patriarchal figure, Santa’s absence in Billy’s experience of Christmas echoes the absence of visible family members in Billy’s household. Such absences underscore the asymmetry of a patriarchal social order in which economic wealth signifies happiness, optimism and ontological security, while poverty signifies the lack thereof.

Given the emphasis that The Polar Express places on the desirability—indeed the necessity—of belief in the metaphysical, the appeal to sentimentality in the song’s lyric functions as a powerful ideological tool. The encouragement to readers to nurture belief without evidence as a precondition of desirable adulthood (in which one can look back nostalgically, even mystically, on events and continue to experience their effects) is, as Susan Honeyman sees it, “yet another infantilizing extension of romantic innocence/ignorance” (Honeyman, 2005, p. 145-46). Both race and gender, in this instance, are subordinated to what is constructed as a desirable middle-class location. There is no attempt to engage with racial diversity, despite Hero Girl being the only Black child on the train, and the gendered representation of her interaction with Billy shows her occupying a stereotypically mothering role. The meanings attributed to Christmas through the lyric sung by Hero Girl are linked primarily to her experience of affluence, so that what this particular text asks of readers is not merely that they indulge in romantic or nostalgic fantasies about childhood innocence, but also that they collude in its appeals to gendered and racialised fantasies of morally ascendant middle-class suburban lifestyles. In particular, appeals to sentimentality underscore the presumed importance of material well-being, familial ties, and patriarchal order in securing childhood belief and consolidating adult nostalgia. As Clare Bradford points out:
…the sentimental is not simply a matter of discourse which may be seen as
cloying or excessive in its encoding of emotion; more fundamentally, it is
embodied in the interactions between implied author or narrator and implied
reader or narratee, and particularly in narrative strategies which seek to
manipulate subjectivity. (Bradford, 1997, p. 17)

Appeals to sentimentality in *The Polar Express* texts are not only devices for securing
readers’ commitment to the story’s ideology, but also to its material products. In each
case, narrative success—whether in terms of participation in the nostalgic fantasy or
in terms of consumer purchasing—presupposes the middle class location (or
aspiration) of readers.

The socio-economic order through which such sentimentalizing discourses are
normatively reproduced is reinscribed further by two other aspects of the film’s
narrative. The first of these involves the ghostly figure of the tramp who is
encountered by the film’s main focaliser, Hero Boy, as he searches for a lost ticket
that has been blown from the train carriage. Having climbed onto the train’s snowy,
wind-blown roof, Hero Boy meets a tramp who claims to travel regularly to and from
the North Pole. The tramp’s disappearances and reappearances function as a metaphor
for Hero Boy’s emerging confidence in terms of both metaphysical belief and self-
efficacy. However, as the embodiment of poverty, the tramp’s intermittent
interventions in the boy’s experience can also be seen as signifying the
unpredictability of encounters between the poor and middle classes. It could be
argued that the tramp’s benevolence toward Hero Boy, displayed through the tramp’s
recovery of the lost ticket and his role in securing the boy’s safety at perilous
moments, offers a potential counterpoint to the social hierarchy inscribed in the film.
Yet the tramp’s activities operate entirely outside the cosiness of the train’s interior
and away from the view of other characters. Thus poverty remains a largely invisible,
albeit very real, ghostly presence.

The second narrative feature that secures the social order pertains to closure, and the
extent to which narrative resolution is employed to reinforce the social class structure.
Of particular interest in considering the ways in which socio-economic subjectivities
are constructed in these texts, is the issue of choice, which is given particular
prominence toward the end of the story. In both picture book and film, choice is
utilised as a device for valorising the narrator’s transition from doubt to belief, and for
legitimating patriarchal privilege through which the narrator’s belief is ultimately
secured, rewarded and maintained. As the Polar Express carries the children into the
city at the North Pole, the children wonder where the elves are:

“They are gathering at the centre of the city,” the guard told us. “That is where
Santa will give the first gift of Christmas.”
“Who receives the first gift?” we all asked.
The guard answered, “He will choose one of you.” (Van Allsburg, 1985,
unpaginated)
As Santa subsequently greets the Polar Express passengers there, the children’s belief in patriarchal myth is reinforced. The picture book recounts the moment at which the boy narrator is chosen by Santa:

[Santa Claus] marched over to us and, pointing to me, said, “Let’s have this fellow here.” He jumped into his sleigh. The guard helped me up. I sat on Santa’s knee and he asked, “Now, what would you like for Christmas?” I knew that I could have any gift I could imagine. But the thing I wanted most for Christmas was not inside Santa’s giant bag. What I wanted more than anything was one silver bell from Santa’s sleigh. When I asked, Santa smiled. Then he gave me a hug and told an elf to cut a bell from a reindeer’s harness. The elf tossed it up to Santa. He stood, holding the bell high above him, and called out, “The first gift of Christmas!”

A clock struck midnight as the elves roared their approval. Santa handed the bell to me, and I put it in my dressing gown pocket. The guard helped me down from the sleigh. (Van Allsburg, 1985, unpaginated)

Here the conjunction of choice and patriarchal privilege is crucial in securing and ultimately restoring faith in the mythical experience through which the nostalgically rendered socio-economic order is secured. The patriarchal figure of Santa chooses the story’s male narrator to be the recipient of the first gift of Christmas—a gift that the boy must in turn choose. His choice is validated through Santa’s smile and hug, as well as by the cheering of the elves, thus marking the white, middle-class, patriarchal order as the site upon which belief is both secured and rewarded.

In the film this choice is even more striking, given the juxtaposition of Hero Boy’s privileged choosing with the storylines and subordinate subject positions of the other children. It is especially pointed as this scene is immediately preceded by another that depicts Billy’s desperate and unsuccessful attempt to cling to a wrapped present with his name on it. While Hero Boy is chosen to take up a place of privilege, the boy ‘from the other side of the tracks’ must relinquish his only (perhaps first) Christmas gift, being required to leave it behind in Santa’s sack and trust that it will eventually be delivered to him. In its positioning of Billy—for whom even limited agency can only be effected through acceptance and resignation—the film underscores the seeming immutability of the social order. While Hero Boy marvels at his good fortune in receiving his chosen, material gift, Billy is reminded by Santa that “friendship is the greatest gift of all,” before leaving the North Pole empty-handed. Even though Billy has made friends with other children on his journey, he is soon returned to his isolated home on the edge of a desolate industrial landscape.

The poor child, in other words, is offered only a brief reprieve from his bleak life ‘on the other side of the tracks’. As is the case with Billy’s adult counterpart, the tramp, poverty is consigned to a place outside the normative order of middle-class affluence and the material and spiritual comforts it is depicted as offering. The seemingly immutable nature of Billy’s class positioning is powerfully reinforced when the conductor punches a special message in each of the children’s tickets as they board the magical train for their return journey. The message on Billy’s ticket reads, “Depend on, rely on, count on,” suggesting that what Billy needs to remember from his trip is to accept and be resigned to his lot in society. Billy’s restored sense of
belief refers not to any existential faith or imagined future, but rather to the necessity of knowing and appreciating his place as the recipient of whatever middle-class society deigns to offer.

**Consuming Texts and Constructing Alignment: The socio-economic subject in the classroom**

The popular success of *The Polar Express* has seen its promotion as a teaching resource, providing an example of the intersection of consumer texts with pedagogic activities. As noted in the introduction, supplementary teaching products such as *The Polar Express Teacher’s Guide* and the *Polar Express Pajama Party* kit are distributed free online by the picture book’s publisher, Houghton Mifflin. The ready availability of cost-free resources renders such items particularly appealing for educators, thereby increasing the likelihood of their widespread use in schools and classrooms. The incorporation of popular cultural texts into educational settings is the subject of considerable debate, as educators and researchers grapple with the perceived possibilities and pitfalls associated with the use of commercial materials for teaching and learning purposes (Kenway and Bullen, 2001; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2004; Marsh, 2005; Martens, 2005). In the case of the resources associated with *The Polar Express*, which is constructed in educational discourse as a ‘quality’ text, it is important to consider how the resources might operate in conjunction with other educational and social practices to produce subject positions particularly conducive to the prevailing socio-economic order.

The teacher’s guide is effusive in its praise of *The Polar Express* book, urging adult readers to recognise the appeal of its artistic qualities. For example:

> The arrival of a steam engine—the Polar Express—on the boy’s quiet street is startling and wonderful enough to make readers gasp out loud. This book in particular captures the magic of childhood with sensitivity and grace. The warm and vivid color pastels create expressive characters and scenes that are very much alive (Houghton Mifflin Books, n. d., p. 1).

Such descriptions call readers’ attention to the book’s potential for engaging children through visual imagery that invokes the “magic of childhood,” which can in turn be interpreted as an appeal to the nostalgic yearnings of adult readers. Imaginary readers will be made to “gasp out loud,” as the text constructs fantasy images of idealised childhood experience. Adults, in turn, are charged with reiterating the text’s implied cultural values—both through re-presenting the story to children on a cyclic basis, and by internalising the text’s underlying themes. For example, the teacher’s guide goes on to say:

> The artwork, combined with Chris Van Allsburg’s vivid prose, creates a journey that resonates on many levels for readers of all ages. This is a book to return to year after year. (Houghton Mifflin Books, n.d.)

As in the film’s website, the metaphor of the journey signifies a transition from a desirable childhood to an appropriate adulthood mediated by the notion of belief. According to the teacher’s guide:
... *The Polar Express* describes a journey (both literal and symbolic) that brings about transformation for the characters and the reader as well … Van Allsburg chooses an object to represent an idea: the silver bell symbolizes not only a belief in magic, but a kind of joyful openheartedness that many children have—and that many grown people have forgotten. *The Polar Express* reminds children and adults alike that the world is full of wonder—all one must do is look for it, and listen, and believe. (Houghton Mifflin, n. d., p. 1)

Described in this way, the metaphor depicts the ideological function of reading to children from picture books, and the personal transformation this is seen as potentially effecting. The implied engendering of belief takes place via a dialogic interaction between adult and child readers, with whom the text is said to resonate. As Carol Scott (1999, p. 101) expresses it, the picture books offers “a unique opportunity for … a collaborative relationship between children and adults.” In this instance, the potential for adult-child collaboration is exploited, making adult readers responsible for the ongoing alignment of the text’s ideological presuppositions. In so doing, the teacher’s guide positions adults as both consumers and disseminators of the cultural product via a pedagogic experience.

This ideological work is emphasised throughout the examples provided in the teacher’s guide for reiterating cultural practices associated with storytelling, interpretation and dramatization. Suggestions in the teacher’s guide include hosting a reading celebration organized around a Polar Express theme; inviting children and their families to attend school in their pajamas, and exhorting teachers to do likewise; holding celebrations with instant hot chocolate and cookies in the shape of trains; arranging seating in the classroom in two rows, to resemble a train, then distributing and collecting tickets. The enactment of scenes from the book—which resonate with scenes from the film—invites children to align themselves, through embodied experience, with the experiences of the children depicted in both book and film. As the teacher’s guide points out, “This kind of dramatization invites young readers into the magic of the story in an accessible, tangible way” (Houghton Mifflin, n. d., p. 2).

The party kit provides additional classroom resources. Templates for letters to Santa, for example, include an image from the book, links to the Houghton Mifflin website, and a forwarding address that symbolically relocates the North Pole to “456 Christmas Lane, North Pole, USA 12345” (Houghton Mifflin, 2004, p. 11). Meanwhile, corporate logos of the various entertainment and promotions companies associated with the film are depicted on many of the pages to be reproduced for text-based activities in the “reading celebration,” reiterating alliances between literacy activities, consumer culture and the socio-economic order.

**Conclusion**

Both the book and the film of Chris Van Allsburg’s *The Polar Express* attend to questions of belief in both the past and the future, drawing on nostalgic scenes and fantasy representations of childhood Christmases. Through a magical Christmas Eve journey, the subjects aboard The Polar Express must restore their belief in this patriarchal myth, through which the progression from idealized middle-class childhood to appropriate adulthood is secured. While neither the book nor the film is seen as overtly concerned with issues of consumerism or economic participation *per*
se, both nonetheless help to construct childhood experience within the prevailing discursive norms of a patriarchal social class order. The significance of *The Polar Express* as a consumer product is reinforced through supplementary resources made available for educators in the form of a teacher’s guide and party kit and the ideological function of the embodied activities they suggest for children. The view taken here is that popular Christmas texts such as this one play an important role in the reproduction of cultural understandings about our subjectivities as economically situated beings. Occupying a significant place amongst the Christmas texts produced for children, *The Polar Express* and its supporting publications construct idealized childhood experiences, whose symbolic and material futures rely on middle-class lifestyles and a socio-economic order that is stable and enduring.
References


