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Arctic Airlift

Richard Ross
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Children are as certain of magic as they are of reality, and they crave to be heard and taken seriously. Many adults, in turn, crave to recapture that youthful, confident belief in magic. Both these cravings are fulfilled in this understated, reassuring tale of a boy who acts on his faith in the unexplained, and his faith in the adults in his life.

Independent, thoughtful young Robert is fascinated by his short-wave radio. Listening intently a few days before Christmas, he hears an airship captain report to the weather station base that the North Pole is being flooded because of cracks in the Polar Ice Pack. Robert worries about the safety of a certain legendary North Pole resident, and wonders how he might help.

Without revealing the specifics of his concern, he asks his dad for advice. Dad wisely counsels Robert to help if he can, and doesn't pry further. Back on his two-way radio, Robert contacts the airship captain, and persuades him to fly back over the North Pole, just to double-check that there's really no one living there, no toy workshop in danger from the flood. Captain McCain will be in danger, too, if he disobeys the base commander's order to stay on course.

The author/illustrator is an Associate Professor of Design at Buffalo State, and has exhibited artwork at the Society of Illustrators and in *Print*, *Graphis*, and *American Illustration*. The art in this book, done in pastel, is reminiscent of carved woodblock prints, and suggests a calm, '50s-style family, and evokes the mystery and magic of a child's mind at Christmas. The airships (commonly known as dirigibles, or blimps) are rendered enchantingly, sparklingly light, yet seriously substantial. The individual appearances of the men around the globe whom Robert speaks with via his radio—the competent, open-minded Captain McCain; the curmudgeonly Base Commander Spivey, viewed only from behind; the sympathetic, salty lighthouse keeper in his mackintosh—reflect their distinct characters.

Trying to convince the reluctant commander to allow Captain McCain to check on the North Pole, Robert attempts to understand grownup logic, looking for a way to help Spivey realize the human necessity of faith in the unseen. Inspired by a picture of a radio tower, Robert asks, "Commander, have you ever seen radio waves?" Commander Spivey admits that he hasn't, but he just knows they're real, and eventually gives a surprising order. Robert's ingenuity and persistence pay off in a satisfying way.

The art and story of *Arctic Airlift* are reminiscent of the Christmas classic *Polar Express*. The deep-blue-themed illustrations have just enough darkness to allow for enchantment, and just enough realism to make the story credible. Despite the occasional flatness of the dialogue, adults will find the book satisfying for its confident magic, and children will enjoy the way the adults in Robert's life have confidence in him.
KAREN MCCARTHY (August 18, 2009)

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