Sleep deprivation can lead people to do funny things, like propose a paper about the relationship between the Gospel of John and *The Polar Express*. Allow me to explain. Around this time last year my wife and I were about five weeks removed from having welcomed our second child into the world. Needless to say that when I attended last year’s annual meeting of the SBL, one of the things I was most looking forward to was at least one four-hour block of blissful, uninterrupted sleep. I did get that, but with all of the excitement that the annual meeting brings—riveting papers, networking, etc.—I returned home more exhausted than when I left.

But exhaustion after an academic conference can be quite productive if channeled properly. I’m sure that many of us here share the experience of making that post-conference list of new projects that we want to pursue, new rabbit holes that we want to jump into. Such lists are frequently composed at the start of the journey home, or soon after one has returned to work. The key to making a good list is that you have to do it before you have a chance to rest, while you are too tired to question whether the ideas you are generating have any merit whatsoever. And if we are being honest with ourselves, many of the items that make it on to such lists aren’t actually worth much, but every now and again you find one that makes you think, “There could be something to that.”

The initial idea for this paper came the night I returned from San Diego last year, as I was putting my eldest daughter to bed. While I was gone the box of holiday stuff had come out, and with it, her (at that time) favorite Christmas book, *The Polar Express*. So naturally, this is what she wanted me to read her before bed. As I read I found myself reflecting on how the author of this short text frames the relationship between sensate data—hearing and seeing in particular—and belief, and how this relationship differs from what we find in the Gospel of John. I thought about the connection for a few
days and then did what any self-respecting academic would do: I tweeted it.¹ One retweet and two favorites later and I knew that I was on to something. So here we are.

Methodological Presuppositions

Before I address these texts, I'd like to offer a few short remarks on my methodological presuppositions. For those of us who study texts—and the “literature” indicator in our guild organization’s title would imply that a fair number of us do, at least in theory—many of the items on those post-conference lists of ours, including the subject matter of the current paper, will be what postmodern literary critics dub “intertextual.” In the years since its inception in 1967, the term “intertextuality” was adopted in some circles as a sexier and more sophisticated way of speaking about literary allusion and/or source criticism. But for those who have ears to hear, it implies something quite different.

Properly understood, intertextuality occurs when readers form connections between texts, and in so doing, they contribute actively to the determination of what those texts mean. This can occur on the level of themes, characters, words, etc., and can happen unconsciously or consciously. Strictly speaking, then, intertextuality is more a phenomenon than a methodology, a claim that this is simply how reading works, and that it works this way regardless of whether you think it does. One of the things that makes some scholars of ancient literature nervous about intertextual methodology as an avenue of scholarly inquiry is the fact that this construal of meaning in the reader’s mind can happen entirely apart from any consideration of what meaning a text’s author intended to convey. To be sure, from the perspective of a “pure” intertextual methodology, the question of authorial intention is of little relevance, if any.

In this paper I adopt a reader-centric approach, and brazenly so. My aim is not to suggest that the author of The Polar Express had the Fourth Gospel in mind when he was writing, or that his goal was to subvert any portion of it. For my purposes it doesn’t really matter if the author of The Polar Express is

¹ Vanden Eykel, Eric (@evandeneykel). “Someone should do a study of The Polar Express in light of the
even aware that the Fourth Gospel exists. What matters is that the connections posed here, however tenuous, are possible from a reader’s perspective. The approach is admittedly playful, though not without an eye toward some sort of telos. My primary aim is not the interpretation of these texts per se, but an exploration of the reader’s role in the process of interpretation. Related to the theme of the current session, “The Medium is the Message,” I might phrase my primary aim in terms of a question: “To what degree is the reader, as a sort of medium in which stories combine and resonate with one another, actually part of the message?”

Belief and Sensate Data in the Gospel of John

The interrelationship of seeing, hearing, believing, and knowing appears throughout the Fourth Gospel. It manifests itself frequently as a pattern of testimony from someone who has seen or heard something, and their testimony is supposed to culminate in some sort of knowledge or, more frequently, belief. We catch our first glimpse of it in the Prologue, when the narrator introduces John the Baptist. All of these elements, in fact—seeing, hearing, believing, and knowing—converge in John’s character in a particular way. The narrator describes him as one who “came as a witness to testify (ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ) to the light, so that all might believe through him (ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι’ αὐτοῦ)” (John 1:8). The language of “witnessing” here clearly implies a speech function, as John clarifies a bit later when he describes himself in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “I am the voice of one crying out...” (LXX Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23).

The role of seeing as it pertains to knowledge and believing appears in the way that John describes his commissioning and mission. When he sees Jesus approaching, he proclaims him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He follows this quickly with an acknowledgment: “I myself did not know him” (John 1:33). He explains, however, that he knew who and what he was looking for because of something he had heard: “The one who sent me ... said to me, ‘He on whom you see the spirit descend,’” etc. (John 1:34). You find this relationship affirmed again at the end
of the first chapter, when Jesus remarks to Nathaniel, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these” (John 1:51). This implies that whatever belief Nathaniel has currently rests on what he has heard, and that this belief will only increase as he sees new things. At the outset of this gospel, then, a relationship between seeing, hearing, believing, and knowing is made fairly explicit in the character of John the Baptist and in the words Jesus speaks to those he calls: people believe and know things on the basis of what they see and hear.

One of the clearest ways that we find this relationship reaffirmed throughout the Fourth Gospel is in the signs that Jesus does, most of which involve belief as a result of seeing something miraculous. After Jesus turns water to wine at Cana, for example, the narrator comments that “[he] … revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11). Moreover, after he heals the royal official’s son, “[the royal official] believed, along with his whole household” (John 4:53). Similar results are had after the feeding of the multitude (John 6:5-14), the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-7), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45). In each case, it is the narrator who clues the reader in to what has happened: people believe because they see Jesus do something. And it is the narrator who clarifies this one final time near the end of the so-called Signs Source, this time in negative terms: “Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him” (John 12:37).

One could argue that the signs in John are relatively low-hanging fruit. Other, subtler examples are also instructive. In the Nicodemus episode, Jesus speaks of what one must do in order to see (ἰδεῖν) the kingdom of God, namely, be born ἄνωθεν (i.e., either “again” or “from above”). How Jesus chastises Nicodemus for his failure to understand this concept illustrates well the seeing, hearing, believing, and knowing complex: “We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen (ὅ οἴδαμεν λαλοῦμεν καὶ ὃ ἔδωκαμεν μαρτυροῦμεν), yet you do not receive (λαμβάνετε) our testimony” (John 3:11). In the case of Nicodemus, the testimony offered is not received, but in the next chapter we encounter a more

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2 See also John 6:5-14 (Feeding the 5,000), 9:1-7 (Healing of the Man Born Blind), and 11:1-45 (Raising of Lazarus).

3 Later in this same chapter the narrator restates the point: “The one who comes down from heaven ... testifies to what he has seen and heard” (3:31-32).
cooperative character, the Samaritan woman. When she and Jesus finish their conversation at the well, she runs back to her village and beckons, “Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done” (John 4:29). The narrator follows this with the comment: “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). Finally, in the bread of life discourse, those gathered around Jesus ask him, “What sign are you going to give us ..., so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” (John 6:30). They reference the manna tradition, and Jesus picks up their analogy and positions himself as the “true bread from heaven,” thereby implying that he himself is what they must see in order to believe (6:31-35). Or, as he says, “This is ... the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life” (6:40).

Events surrounding the death of Jesus and its aftermath in John are also relevant. After blood and water come spilling out of Jesus’ side from a post-mortem spear wound, the narrator comments the significance of what they are reading: “He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe” (John 19:35). Here you see another clear confluence of seeing, hearing, believing, and knowing. The relationship appears again in the wake of the resurrection. After Peter and “the other disciple” reach the empty tomb, the other disciple “saw and believed” (John 20:8). And when Jesus appears in bodily form to the disciples after this, they rejoice together when they hear his voice and see his wounds (John 20:19-20).

The post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples leads to an interesting wrinkle in the dynamic that I’ve been speaking about up to this point. You know this wrinkle as Doubting Thomas, the disciple who wasn’t there when Jesus appeared to the others. And he is skeptical of their message (“We have seen the Lord”), refusing to believe without proof: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). Notably, Thomas requests nothing more than the others had already received, and by the rules the narrator has established, he isn’t necessarily wrong to do so: as numerous examples from the Fourth Gospel make clear, seeing something miraculous is, in fact, a legitimate way of coming to believe that something is the case.
What the Doubting Thomas pericope does in the context of the Fourth Gospel is remind readers of the other means by which persons come to believe, namely, hearing. When Jesus finally appears to Thomas and offers his body for examination, Thomas does believe, but then Jesus comments, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29). That is to say that seeing something can produce belief, but the belief born from hearing one’s testimony is ultimately the more impressive thing.

This is perhaps the clearest affirmation of the primacy of hearing to seeing, but it is certainly not the first. Earlier in Chapter 10, Jesus responds to a crowd’s demand: “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (John 10:24). He says, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:26-27). That is to say that the ability to understand the significance of what you see rests on whether you are a member of the flock. And one’s membership in the flock is predicated on one’s ability to hear the voice of the shepherd, not see what he does.

**Belief and Sensate Data in The Polar Express**

*The Polar Express* is a book by Chris Van Allsburg, a prolific children’s author/illustrator whose works include recognizable titles like *Jumanji* (1981), *The Widow’s Broom* (1992), and *Zathura* (2002). A year after its publication in 1985, this book won Van Allsburg the Caldecott Medal, a prestigious award that recognizes the previous year’s “artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children.” In 2004 it was adapted into an animated film starring Tom Hanks (in five separate roles). The film was met with mixed reviews. Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* described it as “a failed and lifeless experiment in which everything goes wrong,” and Joe Morgenstern of the Wall Street Journal labeled it

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4 [http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottmedal](http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottmedal)
“a train wreck of mind-numbing proportions.” What follows focuses exclusively on the book, which received a more favorable reception and is a recognizable classic in many houses.

The book begins on Christmas Eve, in the bedroom of an unnamed young boy. He sits silently, listening for a sound that he has never heard but that he wants to hear: the ringing of the bells on Santa’s sleigh. The boy recalls that a friend of his had recently claimed that Santa did not exist. “But I knew he was wrong,” he says (1). At the start of this book the hearing, seeing, believing, and knowing complex is present, though in strikingly different terms than what we find in the Fourth Gospel. The boy believes in something—Santa, in this case—but not on the basis of anything that he has ever seen or heard. In fact, he believes despite what he has been told, namely, that Santa does not exist. And he frames his own belief to the contrary not as a matter of faith but as a matter of fact: “I knew he was wrong.”

Later that night the boy does hear something outside his window, but instead of bells, it is the sound of a mysterious train, “The Polar Express,” that has come to take him to the North Pole (3). Once aboard, he finds himself in the company of other children (5). They sing Christmas carols as the train rockets through forests and over the Polar Ice Cap, eventually reaching its destination, which is described as “a huge city standing alone at the top of the world, filled with factories where every Christmas toy was made” (14).

No commentary is offered regarding why these children were chosen for the journey, so the reader is left to assume that they share with the boy an apparently unassailable faith in the reality of Santa. And all that they see and hear in the course of their journey is therefore understood as consequence of their belief, not a precursor to it. Suspense builds when the children are told that the elves are gathering to witness Santa’s ceremonial giving of the first Christmas gift, and that one of

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5 Travers, “The Polar Express,” Rolling Stone, Nov 18, 2004  
http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB110021548200722007 (accessed 11/21/15). One of my colleagues on Twitter called the film (accurately) “a totalitarian fantasy where Tom Hanks is all in all” (Bolin, Thomas [@bolin67] 28 Nov 2014, 7:12 am).
them will be its recipient (14). They disembark and make their way to Santa and the sleigh.

Immediately, Santa walks over to the boy, our protagonist, invites him up and asks him what he wants for Christmas (17). At this point the readers are thrown back to the start of the book as the boy makes a simple request: a bell from the sleigh (19).

Santa complies happily, and the boy puts the bell into his pocket. Santa flies off to be about his Christmas business, and the boy and the other children return to The Polar Express (22, 24). When they are back on the train the children ask to see the bell, and when the boy reaches for it he discovers that it has slipped through a hole in his pocket. Before they have a chance to go look for it, the train lurches forward, and before long the boy is standing in the doorway of his own home, waving to the train as it pulls away, and lamenting the loss of the bell (25).

The bell that the boy desires, receives, and then loses is in many ways the crux of the narrative. And it is the bell that draws the reader’s attention not only to how seeing, hearing, believing, and knowing are related in this text, but how this relationship is thoroughly different from what we find in the Fourth Gospel. At the start of the book, you will remember, the boy listens for the sound of the bell because he more or less expects to hear it. He doesn’t listen for it in order that he might come to believe something, but because he already does believe something.

His desire to hear and then later to possess the bell stands in sharp contrast to what we find in so-called Doubting Thomas. Whereas Thomas is not able to believe what he hears (We have seen the Lord) without seeing and touching something (the body/wounds of Jesus), the boy is only able to hear, see, and touch something (the bell) because of what he already holds to be the case (Santa is real). In The Polar Express, the boy’s belief is a precondition of his ability to see and hear the things that he does, whereas for Thomas the situation is the exact opposite: he will not believe what he hears unless he sees it for himself.

When the boy loses the bell through the hole in his pocket, The Polar Express comes close to affirning the central theme of the Doubting Thomas pericope and, one could argue, the Fourth Gospel as a whole, namely, that true belief is not contingent upon materiality or sight. And while the bell is missing, the reader is faced with the question of how the loss of this tangible object will affect his belief.
Will it fade? The tension is resolved almost immediately, however, when after everyone finishes opening their presents the next morning, the boy finds a small box under the tree with his name on it. Inside he finds the bell and a short note: “Found this on the seat of my sleigh. Fix that hole in your pocket” (27).

The boy and his sister, Sarah, sit and marvel at the beautiful sound of the bell, but their parents can’t hear it ringing and believe it to be broken (27). This strange phenomenon is explained on the book’s final page: “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” (29).

Concluding Remarks

The Polar Express and the Fourth Gospel cover remarkably different ground in the course of their respective narratives. Yet when they are placed in conversation with one another it is clear that both texts are toying with similar questions regarding belief, knowledge, and their ultimate causes. While the narrative of the Fourth Gospel includes numerous examples of persons coming to believe because of what they see Jesus do, one of the central affirmations that will emerge by the end is that the belief that comes from hearing is ultimately the more challenging thing. Those who read this gospel cannot see Jesus, of course, so what they have are the stories, which the author affirms at the end are for the purpose of engendering belief: “These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

The central message of The Polar Express is certainly distinct from the Fourth Gospel, but is in many ways complementary. While belief is presented throughout the narrative as a precondition of one’s ability to see and hear, the boy’s description of the bell and its function at the end of the book is telling, and surfaces at least two connections with the Fourth Gospel. First, His belief is ultimately what fuels his ability to hear its sound, and as such, it allows him to maintain a connection with his youth: “Though I’ve grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe” (29). In this way, then, his belief is understood as life-giving, echoing the Fourth Gospel’s “through believing you may
have life in his name” (John 20:31). Perhaps more importantly, though, the boy’s ability to hear locates him within the confines of a distinct community, namely, “those who truly believe.” And what makes this community distinct is not simply their belief, but the ability to hear, which stems from this belief. And this recalls Jesus’ words in the Fourth Gospel to those who would question him: “You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:26-27).

We thus come full circle to the question of What, if anything, do these texts have to do with one another? As disparate narratives about a first-century Jewish teacher and a magical train that whisks children away to the North Pole, the answer must be “Not much.” But as narratives that question the nature of causes of belief, the answer may end up being slightly more complicated.