

# Shaun Tan:



## *Another World We Can All Inhabit*

There can be little doubt that, of our time, Shaun Tan is a master of visual storytelling. Each of his six picture books, published between 1997 and 2009, have freshness and stimulating originality as well as an individual shape in terms of their creative structure, media and the relationship between image, text and meaning. His books are thoughtfully crafted with measured narratives enhanced by a magical but mysterious beauty. Each is underwritten by a compelling imaginative creativity that challenges readers to become involved with images that can be read in different ways. Not only is Shaun expressing his own ideas and eclectic thoughts but he is also drawing his readers into uncharted worlds with discoveries that surprise and fascinate at the same time. Equally, he encourages a creative spark in all of us to go out and find fresh meanings in objects about us.

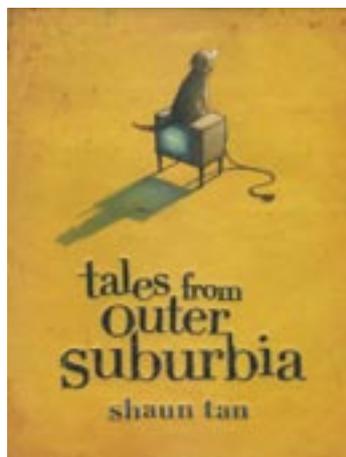
No matter how complex the illustrations appear to be, there is a link between all his images and ideas. They are all firmly rooted in reality with a keen interest and commentary upon the tensions and issues around displacement. As he said, "I am attracted to a certain tone of disquiet; neither violent nor confrontational, but simply just not quite right. Perhaps this is because such things are more provocative than something light and harmonious. In the same way you can't have drama without conflict of some sort."

Shaun grew up in the northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia, where he graduated with a joint honours degree in Fine Arts and English Literature from the University of Western Australia in 1995. There was little time given to practising or learning how to draw and paint as the main content of the course was biased towards concepts and ideas. From his teenage years he had been involved in creating artwork of science fiction themes – with a horror flavour – for small press magazines. As an author, illustrator, film maker and theatre designer, Shaun has a vast armoury of intellectual and practical skills. These all played a key role in his second book, *The Rabbits*, in 1998. For this publication he collaborated, as illustrator, with John Marsden to produce a very individual perspective on the effects of man on the environment. The visual narrative was influenced strongly by the European migration to Australia and includes Shaun's interpretation of the injustices perpetuated against the indigenous population. A more contemporary explanation could reflect the misuse of power, ignorance and the effects of environmental destruction. The immensely



powerful images evoke, at the same time, a serene but menacing beauty by presenting sweeping panoramic landscapes and plains full of unrecognisable creatures or surreal mechanical contraptions. These bring a threatening drama to the overall narrative. It has much to do with the variety of ideas from different sources producing unexpected results – "...very much like rubbing stones together for sparks and gradually working them into flames..." as Shaun animatedly stressed during our conversation. To every square inch of Shaun's double page spreads throughout *The Rabbits*, there is a fermenting creativity and passion. This was stimulated by enthusiasm and expressed through skills with oils, acrylics, collage and computer manipulations – all being used separately or together at the appropriate and meaningful time to make amazing illustrations.

Two years later Shaun wrote and illustrated *The Lost Thing*. A more playful and inviting atmosphere is created by his use of collage and the manipulation of found objects. He credits the media used as including acrylics, oils, Dad's old physics and engineering textbooks, some bottle tops and GLUE. Humour prevails in different layers as the reader focuses upon an object with many possible metaphorical and transient meanings stretching between it having an industrial or natural identity. In reality, Shaun revealed that the stimulus originated from a pebble crab. This uncertain identity is contrasted with recognisable mechanical items from his Dad's text books. Amusingly, Shaun includes logos from the Federal Departments of Economics, Censorship, Information and 'Odds and Ends' in case the reader needs to source further help. The large red object throughout the book has its own life casting shadows of menacing proportions and leading the reader into a state of bewildered fascination. This book raises many more questions than answers, but is irresistible and needs to be visited time and time again.



*The Red Tree*, published in 2001, is an expression of abstract emotions. It is remarkable by giving the reader a comfortable zone to begin with, followed later with more challenging experiences to ponder over but never losing the sense of optimism and positivity towards a brighter future.

All the books so far have texts. *The Arrival*, published in 2007, is a graphic novel. The illustrations, of all sizes, are paced like a storyboard including personal frames alongside vast panoramic landscapes. These make their own sounds by the interplay between the contrasts of light and shadow in the brilliant pastel renderings of displaced people undertaking a formidable journey. Shaun explained that the first version contained more vast landscapes but they didn't connect with the real human story. It was Raymond Briggs' intimate storytelling which inspired him. "He can show so much just by having a couple make a cup of tea."

Shaun's most recent title, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, is an anthology of fifteen short stories, each one focusing on a strange situation or a surreal local event in a suburban environment. It is Shaun at his most thought-provoking and imaginatively endearing best. He manages to make us all think about the very real issues and concerns



which affect everyone. Each story shows how ordinary folk react to life incidents and how the significance is discovered, ignored or simply misunderstood.

All Shaun's readers are captivated by his remarkable passion and involvement – best described in his own words. "Illustration is a unique form of storytelling expression that is perfect for the task, inviting the readers own imagination to draw upon their reactions in making sense, in their own way and at their own pace." Of his books, he says, "As in life we are always encountering new things

that challenge us to understand them, instances where practised imagination is actually more useful than all that laboriously acquired knowledge."

Mike Simkin

*The Viewer* Written by Gary Crew  
Thomas C Lothian Pty Ltd. ISBN: 0734406010

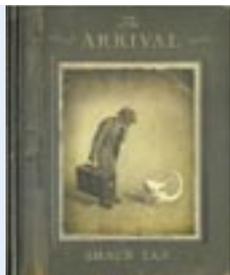
*The Rabbits* with John Marsden  
Lothian Children's Books ISBN: 978-0734410832

*The Lost Thing* Lothian Books ISBN: 0734400748

*The Red Tree* Lothian Children's Books ISBN: 978-0734401724

*The Arrival* Hodder Children's Books ISBN: 978-0340969939

*Tales From Outer Suburbia* Templar Publishing ISBN: 978-1840113136



## The Arrival and Year 6

It is always a pleasure to find a new, whole text to use with children in Literacy lessons. There are extracts but surely reading should also be about exploring a whole story.

*The Arrival* by Shaun Tan offers a myriad of ways of exploring written and spoken language, despite containing no known language.

I was really searching for a new text to inspire *Year 6 Narrative Unit 4 – Short stories with flashbacks* and as I read the pictures I realised here were flashbacks ... and so much more! Over the next few weeks the prescribed theme of flashbacks receded and we explored the intricate, challenging and moving story of a family's struggle to settle together in a new country.

Initially the children were surprised at the lack of words: "How can that tell us a story?" (Hadn't they read picture books when younger?) Then we looked more closely at the first page. What could we see? What did the images say to us? Why were those images chosen? What, did we think, the author was telling us? The children made links to the way films set up a situation, and then they began to rehearse written openings to the story.

As the story progressed, the children were very taken with the threatening snake-like tendrils hovering in the sky above the family and this inevitably led to discussions about why the father was leaving and why people emigrate; an increasingly relevant subject in a school

only now receiving children with English as a second language.

By now the class was far more confident in their reading of the pictures. Their vocabulary to describe atmosphere and emotion became far more exact and powerful. The double spread of clouds inspired some emotive poetry depicting the sorrow of the father leaving the family, but also his anticipation of his new life and the boredom of the journey. Groups went on to perform and write play scripts around the father's interrogation by the Immigration Officer, capturing the father's frustration at his inability to speak the language and the Officer's either kindly or sharp reactions. Letters were written home to the mother and daughter, and their replies sent back on origami cranes.

We did finally look at flashbacks. Groups took turns to tell, orally, the girl's experiences among the chimneys (the children drawing on their knowledge of Victorian working children – hooray!) and writing the account of the attack of the Giant Hoover-Men. And, of course, we finished telling the story.

What a valuable book *The Arrival* is! For a teacher it can catapult literacy in so many exciting directions and introduce so many other issues. But it is also a pleasure to read by yourself or to share and discuss with others the beautifully detailed illustrations and thought-provoking ideas contained within the pages.

Susanna Thomson