

# SPECIAL FEATURE

## Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*



Shaun Tan did not slip into the world of children's literature unnoticed. Success was foreshadowed in 1992 when he won the International Illustrators of the Future Contest, the first Australian to achieve this award. Shaun has been illustrating young adult fiction and picture books since 1996, initially making his mark by interpreting the work of well-known authors in the *After Dark* series of short fiction. His first picture book,

*The Viewer*, a collaboration with Gary Crew, won him the Crichton Award in 1998 – the Children's Book Council of Australia's honour reserved for new illustrators. Since then, the former West Australian's distinctive style has won him international reputation as an illustrator of rare talent. Now living in Melbourne, Shaun Tan has produced perhaps his most ambitious work yet – conceived in 2001 and more than five years in the making. A mere glance at *The Arrival* is enough to understand why it has taken so long to be realised; but time spent lingering over its many illustrations confirms

that this is a creation of enduring significance – not just for young adults, not just for Australians, but for humanity. Pam Buselich, of Iona Presentation College, spent time late last year workshopping *The Arrival* with students. Pam's review, along with comments from students and thoughts from Claire Jones, then a member of the Iona teaching staff, follow. Claire is now teaching at All Saints College in Perth.



**TAN, Shaun. *The Arrival*.** Melbourne : Lothian, 2006. 122 p.

ISBN 978 0 7344 0694 1 hbk \$39.95

**SCIS No:** 1288145

Graphic Novel. Age 10+ Shaun Tan's long-awaited, graphic novel, *The Arrival*, promises a visual feast. This is a beautifully wrought work of art, complex and subtle, immensely tactile due to the quality of paper and reproduction and at the same time delivering a multilayered narrative that will resonate long after you've put the book aside.

Essentially, *The Arrival* is the universal story of those who journey to a foreign land. It depicts the pain of departure, the confusion of arrival, the overwhelming sense of dislocation and finally glimmerings of hope.

Tan has created a text with accessibility and appeal to all ages – indeed a remarkable achievement. Young readers will enjoy the graphic

narrative, the intriguing curiosities, the drama and occasional flashes of whimsical humour. Older readers will plumb its depths – recognising visual codes, appreciating the intertextuality and making historical and social connections to world history, immigration stories and multiculturalism. Art students will be inspired by Tan's superb portraiture, storyboarding techniques, complex landscapes and the immense range of effects that

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can be elicited from a deliberately limited palette of sepia and grey.

For me, this is an exemplary visual text, with all the attributes of a fine picture book. Its metafictional aspects are arresting: its external appearance as a mildewing, leather-spined photo album contrasts with the glossy illustration of the central character on the front cover, suitcase in hand, encountering the creature that will be his companion and comfort. The portraits on the end papers are compelling, while the dual title pages are dense in detail.

The narrative is driven by storyboarding and montage and pulled back into reflective mode through large scale landscape scenes. It is such a clever use of montage: for example, the opening pages depict items that coalesce into the emotionally heart-breaking scene where husband and wife prepare for his departure. Later, the montage achieves the cinematic effect of zooming out from the family photo, through the porthole to the departing ship. On his arrival the physical effects of dislocation and confusion are written on the arrival's face, in juxtaposition to the mechanical and faceless actions of the immigration officials. Fans of Shaun Tan will enjoy the intertextuality and turn to *The Rabbits* and *The Lost Thing* with fresh eyes. The haunting scenes of huddled migrants on a ship's deck will send you searching for Tom Roberts's *Going South*.

For students and teachers *The Arrival* offers a treasure trove of experiences. It demands a slow reading and lingering over pages. More importantly it invites multiple readings, enabling new meanings to emerge and opportunities to reflect. It incorporates several narratives as the arrival encounters others with horrific stories of conflict and dangerous escapes. It reveals much about the status of the immigrant and the refugee, particularly the relentless quest for shelter, food and employment.

Perhaps the best recommendations for *The Arrival* are those from the students. Here's a selection of comments from a Year 9 Creative Writing class:

- This story takes the reader on a journey that many people of our generation do not understand, but we are intrigued and in awe

of the wild and wacky imagination of this author. (Alyce)

- The use of mythical creatures and odd spiralling building shapes gives the book the feeling that the main character has dropped in to not only a foreign land but a foreign world. (Madeleine)
- This is a magnificently illustrated book about a man who leaves his home and travels by ship to a new land. Everything is strange there, and not of this world. Of course, if the inhabitants of that country also came here, they would find our ways very peculiar also. This book is a brilliant work of art and many of the pictures deserve to be in an art museum rather than on a bookshelf. (Emily)

*The Arrival* has enormous potential for learning experiences across the curriculum. Consider the comments, below, of teacher Claire Jones, and the benefits she perceives in engaging upper school students with this text.

*Pam Buselich, Iona Presentation College*

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*The Arrival*, by Shaun Tan, is a timely publication for English teachers. Not only is it a beautifully produced narrative that explores a variety of rich ideas, it is an entirely visual medium — the graphic novel. Tan's work is the perfect text to explore the Viewing Outcome in either lower school English programmes or the new English Courses.

As a teacher I have considered using this book for a variety of classes. I introduced the text first to Year 9 Creative Writing. The class had been studying the genre of the picture book in the previous term and students were already fans of Tan from his other works. They were so excited to receive this beautiful production on their desk and treated the book as if it were made of crystal. An entire period passed and not a word was spoken by any student in the room. The girls were transfixed, studying the frames of each page and the intricacies of the larger images. Students immediately identified motifs of Tan — stylised scientific instruments, industrialised landscapes, and so on. However, it was the narrative that they could not be drawn away from, despite the bell ringing.

I am fortunate to have this collection of Year 9 girls who love literature. However, it is the higher year levels that could benefit most from this work. Often when searching for visual texts for study in upper school we turn to feature film and documentary. Though these are visual depictions of narratives, most are not entirely visual and rely on audio and written codes to communicate with the viewer. The value of Tan's book is that it is a study of visual and symbolic codes in isolation that is able to communicate a complex narrative with meaningful and resonating themes, while also engaging with important Australian discourses such as immigration, multiculturalism and acceptance.

While the standard exploration of narrative structure, suspense, symbolism and characterisation would be extremely interesting and worthwhile for students, it is the use of visual codes that makes this text a valuable teaching resource. The combination of storyboards and full page images on facing pages gives the illusion of constructed scenes and montages. Angles are used to create tension, emotion and a sense of individual viewpoints, amongst a third person narrative. The film-like construction of particular moments in the narrative also contributes to themes of isolation through a 'zoom-like' storyboard and belonging is established through focus. Rarely would we have the chance with moving images to analyse visual codes and conventions so thoroughly; and let's be honest, English teachers are not always that good with the pause and slow motion buttons on the latest DVD the school has acquired!

This opportunity to deconstruct a visual text could be further enhanced by exploring ideas of intertextuality. References to icons of immigration (Tom Roberts's *Going South*), and the character's destination resembling Ellis Island, would make interesting points of departure for investigations, even across learning areas. However, the greatest challenge would be for students to study *The Arrival* alongside Tan's other works. To open students to the discourses on immigration, multiculturalism and identity, while also considering cultural memory and post-colonialism in texts such as *The Rabbits* and *Memorial*, would certainly be a challenging and enjoyable experience for higher level students and their teachers.

*The Arrival* is a valuable resource for teachers of all levels of English. Whether it is used to exemplify visual codes and conventions or to interrogate Australian identity and political directions, Tan's book is an absolute joy for students and teachers alike.

Claire Jones, Iona Presentation College

## SHAUN TAN AND *THE ARRIVAL*: FURTHER READING

1. Atkinson, Frances. (2007). 'Drawn to the Image.' *The Age*. 27 January. p. 26 (Section A2). This article is currently also available online at:

[www.theage.com.au/news/books/drawn-to-the-image/2007/01/26/1169594478896.html](http://www.theage.com.au/news/books/drawn-to-the-image/2007/01/26/1169594478896.html)



2. Eaton, Anthony. (2006). 'The Arrival : Anthony Eaton Talks to Shaun Tan about The Arrival.' *Magpies*. 21. (5) (November). pp. 4-6.
3. 'The Journey of The Arrival.' (2006). *Centre for Youth Literature Newsletter*. No. 2, pp. 12-13.
4. Tan, Shaun. (2006). 'Picture Books: Who are They for?' Marrickville, NSW : Primary English Teaching Association. (Occasional paper; 2.)
5. Tan, Shaun. (2006). 'Strangers in Strange Lands.' *Viewpoint*. 14. (4). (Summer). pp. 4-7.

## PICTURE BOOKS ILLUSTRATED BY SHAUN TAN

*The Viewer*, written by Gary Crew, 1997  
Winner, Crichton Award, 1998  
Notable Book, CBCA Picture Book of the Year, 1998

*The Rabbits*, written by John Marsden, 1998  
Aurealis Conveners' Award for Excellence, 1999  
Winner, CBCA Picture Book of the Year, 1999  
Spectrum Gold Award for Book Illustration, 1999

*Memorial*, written by Gary Crew, 1999  
Honour Book, CBCA Picture Book of the Year, 2000

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## PICTURE BOOKS WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY SHAUN TAN

### ***The Lost Thing***, 1999

Honour Book, CBCA Picture Book of the Year, 2000

Shortlisted, Young Adult, WA Premier's Book Awards, 1999

### ***The Red Tree***, 2001

Winner, Patricia Wrightson Award, NSW Premier's Literary Awards

Honour Book, CBCA Picture Book of the Year, 2002

Shortlisted, Children's Books, WA Premier's Book Awards, 2001

### ***The Arrival***, 2006

Winner, Golden Aurealis Award for Best Short Story, 2006

Winner, Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Short Story, 2006

## ADAPTATIONS OF TAN'S WORKS

- ***The Red Tree***, a play based on Tan's book of the same name, was commissioned for the Out of the Box Festival of Early Childhood in 2004.
- ***The Lost Thing*** has been adapted as an animated short film by Passion Pictures (UK).
- Sydney band Lo-Tel was inspired by the artwork from ***The Lost Thing*** to record an album of the same name, incorporating the art into the cover design.
- ***The Lost Thing*** has also been adapted as a play by the Jigsaw Theatre Company, in Canberra as the main event for the National Gallery of Australia's Children Festival in 2004. It also inspired the theme for Chookahs! Kids Festival in Melbourne in 2006, where it was performed, and during the festival children participated in

many different activities based on concepts from the book.

- ***The Arrival*** was adapted by WA's Spare Parts Puppet Theatre in July 2006, using digital animation, puppetry and acting.

Shaun Tan's website is at:  
**www.shauntan.net**



### TIP

Use the CMIS Resource Bank at  
**http://amlib.eddept.wa.edu.au** to:



- Read reviews of Shaun Tan's work
- Find complementary resources such as other graphic novels; wordless texts or refugee fiction to support study of ***The Arrival***.

The Resource Bank is a relational database which means that key fields in the record are hyperlinked to similar resources.



This article will be available as a pdf on the CMIS Focus on Fiction site at:

**www.det.wa.edu.au/education/cmiseval/fiction/authors/at20.htm#tan**

