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A Conversation with Illustrator Shaun Tan

Chuan-Yao Ling

*Australian Shaun Tan is an author and the illustrator of such picture books as *The Lost Thing*, *The Red Tree*, *The Arrival*, and *The Rabbits*. His work has garnered worldwide recognition, including the 2007 World Fantasy Award for Best Artist. In the following interview, Tan discusses his work, his creative process, and the question of audiences for picture books.*

You've been drawing since a young age and freelanced in high school and college. Could you describe your creative process? How has it evolved over the years?

My thinking process has changed over the years, though my technical process has stayed pretty much the same: skills learned in high school, such as how to use perspective, anatomical proportion, how to use canvas, oil paint and pencils, etc. My painting style has gone through several phases, certainly an evolution of sorts, but sideways rather than progressive, trying out different kinds of representational painting, abstraction, conceptual art, life drawing, political cartooning, and of course story illustration, beginning with small science fiction magazines and progressively becoming more "professional" during my time at the university. Incidentally, I did not study illus-

tration formally, as I did not plan on working as an illustrator; for a long time I didn't know what I wanted to do career wise. However, I did study fine arts and English, focusing on theory and criticism rather than practice; painting and writing was something I did more or less as a hobby, almost unrelated.

However, one effect of writing so many critical essays in college is that I now approach illustration projects with a greater emphasis on research—reading widely, taking notes, and producing hundreds of sketches before progressing toward finished artwork, maintaining a filing cabinet of material. I'm also much more patient that I used to be, and generally invest far more time into preliminary conceptual work, mapping out ideas and testing alternatives rather than jumping straight into painting final images. I want

ABOVE A scene from Tan's latest book, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, a collection of illustrated short stories.

ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF SHAUN TAN

everything to be structurally sound, and critically defensible, like a good argument.

Being of Chinese, English, and Irish descent, does your cultural heritage contribute to aspects of your work, such as themes or issues you address?

Only very occasionally, I think. My father is Malaysian Chinese and came to Australia in his twenties, and that had a direct bearing on my researching of migrant experiences, leading toward the illustrated book *The Arrival* (my Dad appears as one of the faces on the endpapers). I feel that just being Australian, and living in an Australian landscape (especially that of coastal Western Australia, best represented by the writer Tim Winton), is a far greater influence on my work. I notice that a lot of my paintings depict figures in alienating landscapes, often with an undercurrent sense of a troubled identity, or at least a displaced one. I think that has a lot to do with growing up in an outer suburban environment with little historical memory, in the world's most remote capital city, in a nation that is still coming to terms with a problematic history as well as a changing contemporary landscape.

The Lost Thing will be made into a short animated film, and some of your stories are being produced for theater. How do these different art forms affect and change your stories?

For a start, they are technically more difficult, involving other media beyond words and pictures. There are more logistical production issues than is the case with producing a book: they are more expensive, always collaborative, and, with theater, more specifically tied to a place and time. Working as part of a creative team is the most important difference; it means that the work is necessarily open to new ideas from others and has no single author.

The transition to a different form affects the tone and plot of each story a great deal. In adapting books like *The Red Tree* and *The Arrival*, more dramatic action and character development—which is not something that figures strongly in the original—need to be added to those books, which are more suggestive than specific. Audiences are also more inclined to lose interest with media such as film and theater unless something is happening at a certain pace, so I find that performance is a “faster” form of storytelling than an illustrated book, which I think works much more slowly. I also create books with the intention that they will

be read a second or third time, to accumulate an understanding of details, whereas this is not possible with film and theater—it is a strongly linear, carefully choreographed medium. In a way, an audience's reaction needs to be anticipated with more precision.

The Arrival is a story told mainly with colors of a darker tone, such as sepia, while *The Red Tree*, *The Rabbits*, and many others are vibrant and louder in color. What role do colors play in your pictures and how do they affect your storytelling?

Sometimes it is conceptual, and sometimes emotional—usually both. By conceptual, I mean something like the sepia tones in *The Arrival*, where the book is meant to reference old photography and take advantage of those associations. The redness of the tree in *The Red Tree* makes it stand out against the gray background, so that it suggests something positive and radiant, without being too specific. The shifts in color within that book also signal a big shift between worlds, as dreamlike discontinuity is part of the theme of the story (if you can call it that). The world of *The Lost Thing* is very muted, because it's a place where people have essentially lost their imagination, and every aspect of life is industrialized and departmentalized.

Often I don't think in terms of color per se, so much as the quality of light, whether a scene is dark and moody, a bright midday scene, warm and inviting, or cool and distancing. It's usually a very intuitive process, relying on memory and a sense of what “feels right.” It can also be frustrating, because your work is always reproduced in print, and never entirely accurately.

Many readers view picture books as simple and artistically unimportant books for children. How do picture books fit into the realm of sophisticated art for both children and adults?

Well, they really are a problematic art form in terms of audience perception, though I don't see why this needs to be the case. Picture books are very similar to short animation, or a typical painting exhibition (with about the same number of images), or an adult short story. It just so happens that the vast majority of picture books are for young children, but I think this is just a cultural convention—it varies from country to country. Artists' books demonstrate that the form itself is open to all levels of sophistication, constrained only by two ingredients, words and pictures. Of course,

the interest in “picture books for older readers” is growing all the time, so I think the question of audience is becoming less of an issue, thankfully. Concepts such as “visual literacy” and terms such as “graphic novel” have helped a lot to frame works like mine, and that of other artists who are interested in illustrated books without necessarily being so interested in children’s literature.

In an interview with *Articulate*, you said, “The last thing I’d want to do is start repeating something just because it happens to be successful.” That is often the case with commercial fiction, in which writers attempt to produce work with a formula proven to be successful. Can a distinction be made for picture books that are commercial or artistic in nature? If so, how do they each contribute to the field of picture books?

Well, I don’t think that because something is commercially successful it is artistically compromised, or vice versa: there are too many counterexamples of work that is both marketable as well as being beautiful, complex, unexpected, and challenging. The main problem is when the projections of sales and marketing eclipse editorial decisions in an attempt to second-guess the commercial success of original work. If work is truly original, I think this is very difficult to know. Of course, publishers (and creators) need to make a profit, so it’s not a purely artistic exercise, and anyone working seriously with illustrated literature should never lose sight of that. Producing a full-color book is a far more expensive exercise compared to something like a paperback novel, so one needs to be mindful of that. The trick is finding a balance, which is certainly possible.

You’ve referenced Scott McCloud’s idea of gaps being present between panels, where action, time, and relationship are imagined. How important are these gaps to a story, and how do you work with them in your writing and illustrations?

I’ve learned to be generous to the reader, in the sense of trusting their imagination to “connect the dots” between disparate images and text. Often I will start a project by writing and drawing excessively, coming up with a large mass of stuff that is overwrought, with too much description and explanation. I then start stripping it back to find its core—a set of relatively simple, often enigmatic images or pieces of writing, without that other scaffolding. I find that what I leave out is at least as

important as what I put in. I also try to remove any details that might interfere with the universality of an idea—that is, particular references to places, people, or things, anticipating that readers will fill these “gaps” with their own personal experience, inevitably different from my own.

In your essay “Picture Books: Who Are They For?” you explained that picture books have no specific duration, and one can look at the pictures as long as one wants without the pressure of linear narrative. On the other hand, *The Arrival* contains a sequence of events in which the essence of time is inherently present and keeps the story progressing. How do you express the element of time in picture books without words? Do you find a balance between showing the linear progression of a story and allowing readers to read and enjoy picture books without the restriction of time?

I actually think *The Arrival* is the best example of this—a linear progression without the restriction of time. When the element of time is inherently present, it doesn’t have the kind of set pace or meter that you might find with written language, spoken word, theater, or film. Some readers can move quite quickly through each part of the book—as though it were a short story—while other readers seem to take several hours. It’s up to the reader to consider things such as background details and recurring visual elements and patterns. These are not essential to the story, but they add extra dimensions to those who take time to observe them.

Having worked on your own picture books as well as collaborating with others, which is a greater challenge? How are they different?

Working on my own books is probably more challenging; when collaborating, half of the problem is solved, as text so often precedes illustration, and I already have something to work with and interpret. Sometimes it is also easier for one person to bounce ideas against another creator. However, having total control over both text and image—and book design, an important third storytelling element—is the most satisfying way of working for me, because I can freely move between parts, especially at a very nuanced level, and sometimes make radical changes that another writer might find troubling, or at the very least impolite! *The Arrival*, for instance, began as a picture book with some text (in the form of short statements by an

elderly migrant reminiscing about his travels), which I could easily decide to delete completely; elsewhere, stories I have written have suggested images, which in turn suggest a radical revision of the story, at times changing the original mood and subject completely.

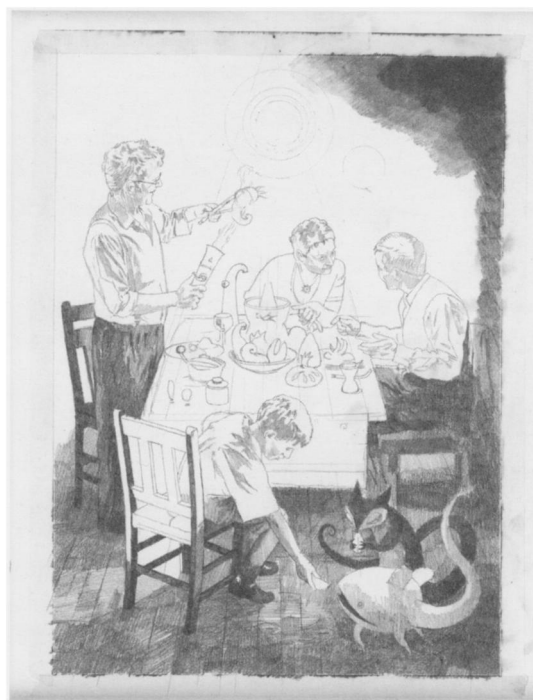
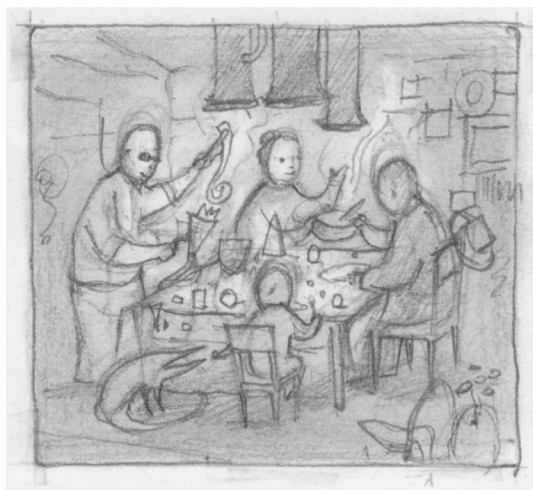
On your website, you write: "In all of my recent work, text and illustrations could operate as narratives in isolation, but happen to react in similar ways, opening new meanings from each other's context." How does the storytelling compare between novels with pictures—Roald Dahl, for instance—and picture books?

I suppose they are all points on a scale, without clear differences, like every genre or art form. It really depends on the approach of the illustrator, whether they choose to decorate the text, or to interpret it in some way, perhaps introducing content that is not described by the writer. The latter may be more difficult to do with illustrated novels. A little less physical space might be available to the illustrator, but it is not impossible. I do think the main difference between different kinds of illustration has only to do with an artist's intention to decorate or interpret, to "push" the meaning of the text into unexpected places.

What are some of your current projects?

I've recently completed a collection of short illustrated stories, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, which interestingly has a very different ratio of word and image—about equal pages of text and illustration. As with my other books, an audience is not really specified. In some ways the stories refer back to childhood and to a childlike way of looking at the world (based on my own impressions of growing up in suburbia), but they also deal with more adult concerns such as politics and marriage. In each story, something strange and unexplained happens in an otherwise very ordinary place—a visit from a tiny exchange student, a new room discovered in a family home, a water buffalo living in a vacant lot who gives unclear advice. I'm not entirely sure what each combination of image and text means entirely. As usual, I'll leave it to each reader to make up his or her own mind. □

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As the images at left illustrate, Tan's creative process involves multiple outlines and sketches. By the time one piece is complete, like the one at bottom from *The Arrival*, "a set of relatively simple, often enigmatic images or pieces of writing, without that other scaffolding," has been created.