

Research in Context

Analyse the work of illustrators and, particularly, author illustrators who tackle difficult, sensitive and sometimes shocking themes.

Student Number: 2204604

Course: BA(Hons) Illustration

Tutor: Delyth Lloyd-Evans

Word Count: 2,380

Feeling sad is a normal reaction to experiences that are stressful or upsetting. However, when these feelings go on for a long time, interfere with your life or make you feel unlike your usual self, you might have depression.

(RCPSYCH, 2022).

Depression is a serious mental health concern that impacts all aspects of an individual's life, including their sleeping pattern, social life and many other areas. Although preventable, when depression is not treated or supported appropriately, it may even result in death (UNICEF, n.d.). It can affect anyone at any stage of their life. Being one of the most common mental illnesses, it affects approximately 2.1% of five to nineteen year-olds (RCPSYCH, 2022). Providing support and understanding to a child who is suffering is vital in the recovery process; this can be done by listening and empathising with them. The picture book provides an incredible tool for parents or guardians to explore and validate a child's feelings. "Picture books can provide a safe space in which children can explore emotional relationships, including some of the big issues of life" (Salisbury and Styles, 2012, p. 86). This safe space opens the conversation for serious or taboo subjects, helping children to indulge their curiosity and develop their understanding. "Like other categories of books, picture storybooks are valuable because they allow children... to empathize with a character who shares a common problem" (Stewing, 1995, p. 14). For this reason, many illustrators have created picture books to tackle these taboo subjects and help break down stigmas; Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* (2001) is one of these books. This essay will explore how Tan approaches discussing this difficult and sensitive subject, investigating what techniques he applies and how these might communicate to the audience.

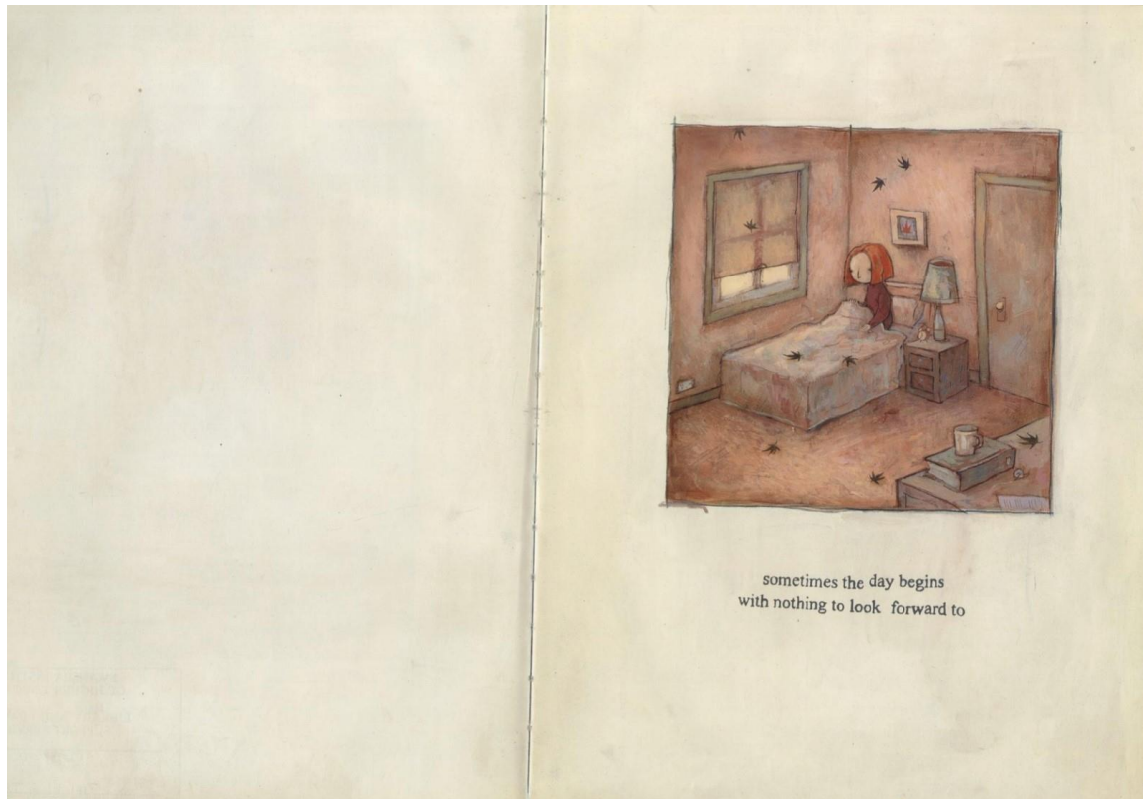


Figure 1: *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2001)

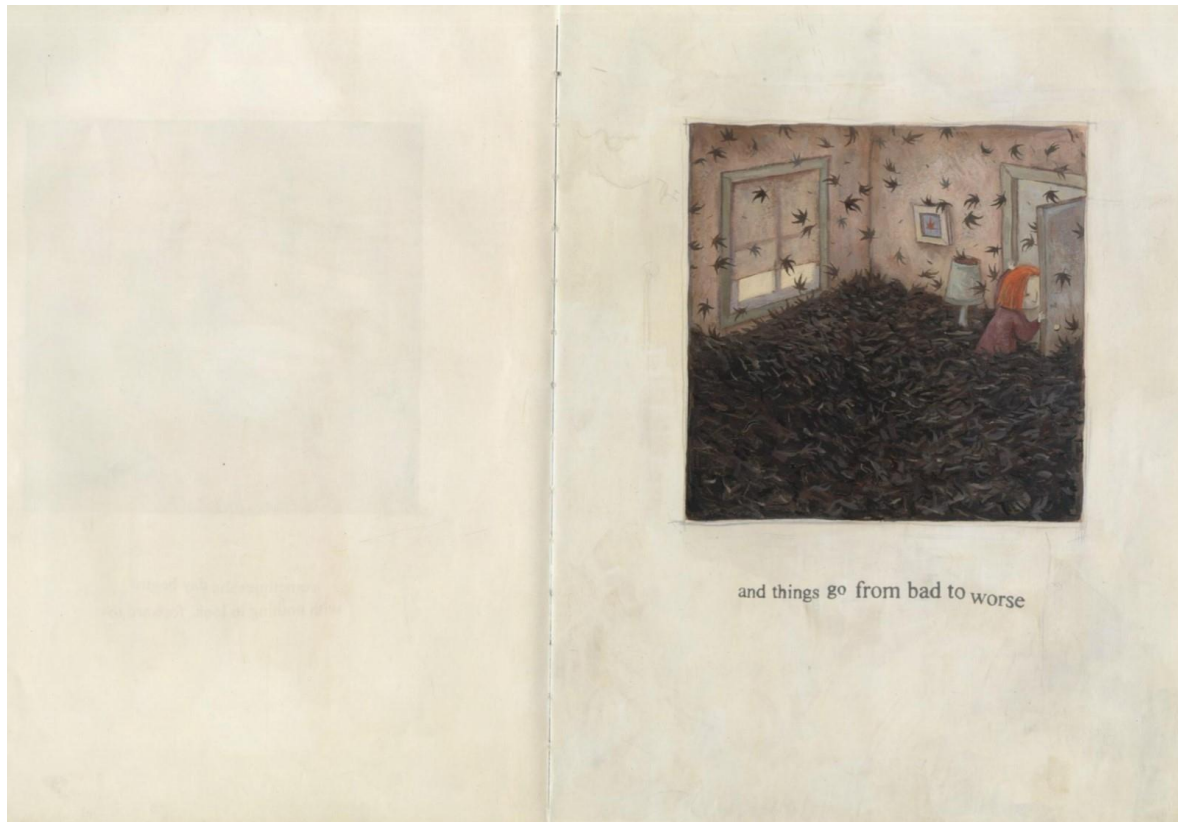


Figure 2: *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2001)

The first two pages of the book introduce the audience to the main character, a nameless and mouthless young girl. She is a rather gentle looking person, made up of a desaturated skin tone, muted orange hair and a circular head. In figure 1 she wakes up in her bedroom, and immediately leaves begin to fall around her, quickly surrounding her and piling up to her waist level in figure 2. These leaves follow the character throughout the book, a symbol of her negative thoughts. Although gentle and small, the leaves gather, overwhelming her and her space. Jonauskaite et al (2020) found that most people associate black with fear, hate, disappointment and sadness. "As a result of our inability to see in the dark, black often symbolises the unknown, and all our fears associated with the unknown" (Bang, 2000, p. 68).

Thus, Tan communicates clearly the intention of the leaves as a symbol. In figure 2 they create build into a mass that the character must push through to move, suggesting her struggle with the symptoms of tiredness and aches and pains (UNICEF). However, despite the leaves symbolising her negative emotions, they also serve the opposite purpose. Within each page there is a red leaf, a colour found by Jonauskaite et al (2020) to suggest love and pleasure to most. Tan states that this symbol works as a suggestion that “hope can take all sorts of forms and starts with a recognition that something exists in the first place. Both the sadness and the possibility of happiness” (Tan, 2020). Furthermore, this symbol of hope brings a layer of joy to the reading experience, allowing children to spot the carefully hidden red leaf. This creates a less sad or serious environment, physically bringing some light to the topic, breaking the ice for parents or guardians who are making an attempt to approach a serious topic.

The font used throughout the book is a rather basic typeface, however, there are elements within it that contribute to the narrative. It has been placed slightly crooked, rather than conventionally straight and clean, this helps to communicate the nervousness of the character and her instability. Additionally, Tan has used all lowercase and a rather small font size. This complements the character’s shy and gentle nature, as it implies that the text is read quietly. Employing these techniques allows the text to serve a purpose, becoming a part of the illustration and narrative.



Figure 3: *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2001)



Figure 4: *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2001)

Although the story is quite grounded and realistic, there are elements of fantasy or imagination found in the illustrations.

Words may be "realistic" while images suggest fantasy... While the verbal story is often told from a child's point of view, presenting the events as "true", the details in pictures suggest that the story takes place only in the child's imagination

(Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006, p. 24).

Figure 3 is a wonderful example of this, portraying the protagonist sitting inside a glass bottle, wearing a diving helmet. The text does relate to the illustration stating that "nobody understands", however, it does not offer much room for elaboration, or any embodiment of the feelings being discussed. The illustration elaborates on the message visually by the character's inability to communicate with others. It is suggested that no matter how loudly she yells or how hard she attempts to make contact, she cannot break the sound barrier of where she is trapped; thus, she is all alone. Additionally, she is isolated on a beach, appearing rather small in the vastness of the landscape. Nikolajeva and Scott comment on this style of storytelling stating, "more frequently the pictures will expand on what the text describes, but they may go far beyond this, so that the entire setting is conveyed visually rather than verbally" (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006, p. 62). This allows for children to cultivate their critical thinking and analytical skills, developing their own opinions and interpretations of the work. Tan confirms his intentions by stating, "there is no necessary deep meaning in the images, other than what you bring to them" (Tan, 2020). "Both words and images leave room for the readers [and] viewers to fill with their previous knowledge, experience and expectations" (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006,

p. 2). Ultimately, each reader will have a different experience to the last, tailoring their reception from their own struggles and beliefs.

Figure 4 also conceptualises the text and develops the story visually. The protagonist is seen to be surrounded by large ships, coming from every direction. The ships all face in different directions, overlapping and some appearing as though they may hit one another. It is a chaotic and overwhelming scene, which is similar to figure 3, elaborates on the emotions that the character is feeling. Most of the ships are positioned diagonally, which Bang (2000, p.46) argues creates motion and tension within an illustration. They are stirring up the water, creating large and unruly waves, resulting in an overwhelming image that almost loses the character within it. The power dynamic between the protagonist and the ships is suggested using scale. As the ships tower over her, she appears powerless and frightened, hiding in her tiny boat.

We feel more scared when we are little and an attacker is big, because we're less able to overcome the danger or control it physically. When we are little, we are weaker and can't defend ourselves as well in a physical fight

(Bang, 2000, p. 18).

Additionally, the character is positioned relatively low on the recto, which helps to communicate her mood and outlook. "The bottom half of a picture feels more threatened, heavier, sadder, or constrained" (Bang, 2000, p. 56). This positioning is seen throughout the majority of the book, not just figure 4 (for example, figure 3). It is interesting to note that Bang (2000) did also state "I finally realised that when [the character] is more distant from me, I don't identify with her or sympathise with her so much as before" (Bang, 2000, p. 20). This

suggests that the communication of this image could get confusing, as the character is so small and distant from the viewers, they may lose their connection to her. However, due to the other formal elements (colour and scale) being used, and the requirement for her small scale (serving the purposes mentioned previously), the illustration is still successful in communicating the intended message. If the character had been made any larger, it would have had a negative impact on the overall illustration; as this change would suggest that the character is stronger. Additionally, it would disrupt the use of scale, resulting in the ships appearing less frightening and overwhelming.

In figures 3 and 4, as well as the majority of the central portion of the book, the colours appear to have shifted slightly. These illustrations focus mostly on using blues and greys, a rather muted or possibly dull and lifeless colour range. Blue is classically associated with sadness, hence the idiom 'feeling blue'. Jonauskaite et al (2020) found that grey is commonly associated with feelings of sadness, regret and disappointment. Thus, these colours visually represent the emotions the protagonist is experiencing. Additionally, in figure 4 these colours benefit the illustration in a slightly less meaningful way by simply contrasting the protagonist's orange hair and boat, allowing her to stand out more. This results in her not being fully lost or forgotten in the details of the work.

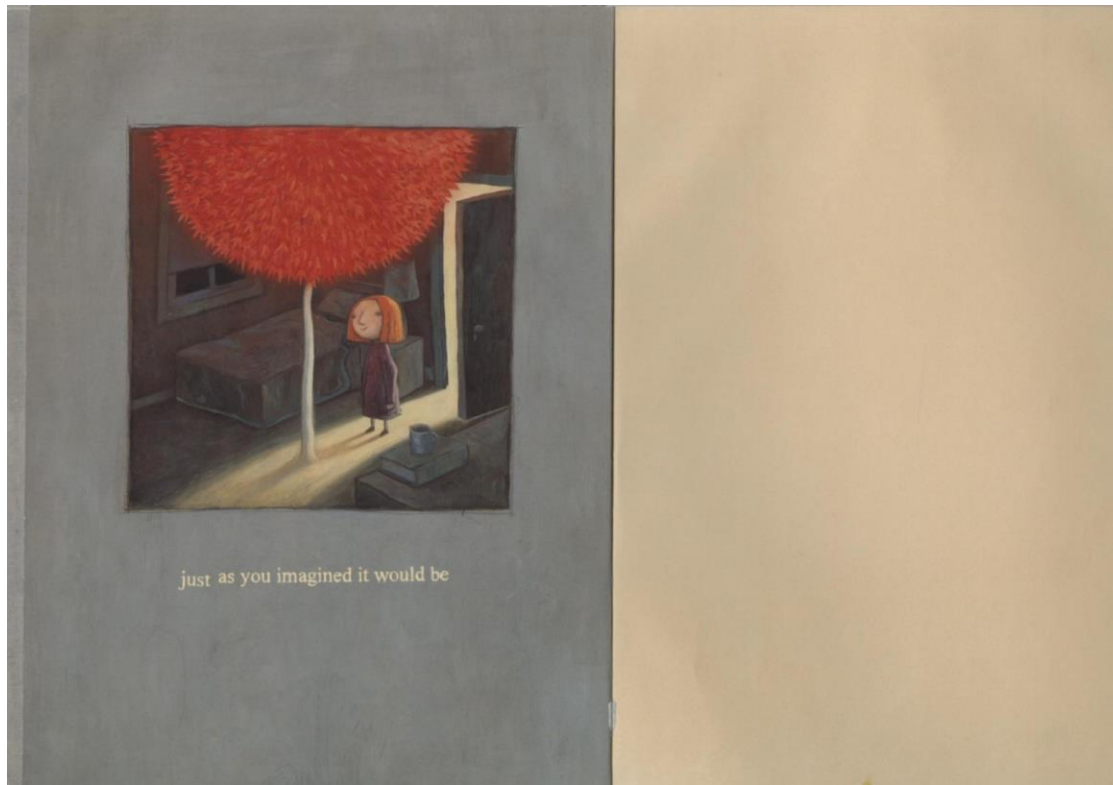


Figure 5: *The Red Tree* (2001)

At the end of the book, in figure 5, the character is seen re-entering her bedroom, working as a kind of full-circle moment. Finally, the red tree has bloomed, standing central in the image with a ray of warm light spilling onto it. This warmth is striking as the majority of the book focuses on cool colours, creating a layer of contrast. As previously established by the red leaf symbol, this tree stands as a beacon of hope or even, in this case, recovery. As this symbol was established early on, it allows the ending to be even more impactful and fulfilling.

The redness of the tree in *The Red Tree* makes it stand out against the grey background, so that it suggests something positive and radiant, without being too specific. The shifts in colour within that book also signal a big shift between worlds, as dreamlike discontinuity is part of the theme of the story

(Tan, 2008, p. 45).

The character is seen to be looking up at the newly blossomed tree, revealing her mouth for the first and only time. Although so subtle it could be missed, her newly found mouth suggests how she has gained a voice, and with it an ability to be heard. Further communicating her healing, and a stark contrast from figures 3 and 4, where she was completely ignored and unable to be heard. Additionally, the text in figure 5 has changed stylistically from the previous figures and the rest of the book. It is now seen to be a much lighter colour (cream or off-white), as well as much straighter and tidier. This acts as a subtle suggestion of the change in emotional state, appearing calmer and more stable.

Despite the overall positive message of the book, Tan discusses some negative feedback that he received from adults following the release of the book.

When the book was published it aroused very mixed feelings from people. I think it was most interestingly, was the comment from adults that it was not suitable for children and coupled with the comment from children that they love it... I also noticed that children recognised the meaning of the pictures far more readily than adults

(Tan, 2020).

This uncertainty from adults' questions what is suitable for children, what kind of topic they can understand and what could be too taboo for the young audience. Tucker (1990) argues that legibility and understanding are vital for the enjoyment of content, "readers will require a version of events that they can both grasp and sympathise with if a story is going to hold their attention" (Tucker, 1990, p. 4). However, this is not of much concern as *The Red Tree* is aimed towards nine to eleven year-olds (BookTrust, n.d.), and Tucker later states that three to seven year-olds "begin to understand the rudimentary laws of cause and effect more clearly, and so

are better able to describe what is actually happening in illustrations” (Tucker, 1981, p. 46), later stating that they are “making sense of what is going on by recalling previous pages” (Tucker, 1981, p.46). Indicating that as the age bracket for *The Red Tree* is older than the age group that Tucker is discussing, they will not struggle to understand the implied meanings within the book. Thus, young children have the capability to understand and digest more complex media than most adults would believe. Especially evident within this picture book, as a result of the symbolic content and the assistance of text.

In conclusion, *The Red Tree* approaches depression and healing, which is often regarded as a difficult, sensitive and taboo subject, with regards to realism. Tan’s illustrations are underpinned with suggestions of the symptoms of depression, turning the intangible emotions to tangible scenes. This has been achieved in an effective and accurate manner, that is gentle and opens the conversation for young people. To achieve this, Tan has combined a variety of techniques to explore and communicate the topic in a way that is understandable for a young audience. These techniques include consideration and selection of appropriate colours, utilising composition and scale and development of symbols and semiotics to suggest an abstract feeling.

The separate visual elements ... must work together; enhancing the total overall effect and not eclipsing the others in importance. As one star does not a team make, so, too, one stunning visual element does not make an effective composition. All the elements need to work together to create unity

(Stewing, 1995, p. 60).

Overall, the combination of such formal elements has resulted in a clear and easily digestible narrative that may appeal to both adults and children. Children are able to understand, sympathise or even relate to the protagonist. Allowing children potentially struggling from depression or similar mental illnesses to feel supported and acknowledged in their struggle. Thus, much like how the character is illustrated, they may find their voice and begin a path to recovery.

Bibliography

Bang, M. (2000) *Picture This How Pictures Work*. New York: SeaStar Books.

BookTrust (2020) *Shaun Tan draws a character from The Red Tree*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7rdsMEBh9k> (Accessed: 12/11/2024).

BookTrust (n.d.) *The Red Tree*. Available at: <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/book/t/the-red-tree/> (Accessed: 12/11/2024)

Jonauskaite D., Parraga C. A., Quiblier M., Mohr C. (2020) *Feeling Blue or Seeing Red? Similar Patterns of Emotion Associations with Colour Patches and Colour Terms*. Available at:

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7027086/> (Accessed: 12/11/2024).

Ling, C.Y. (2008) *A Conversation with Illustrator Shaun Tan*. Vol.85. (No.5, Sept-Oct). P.44-47.

Nikolajeva, M. and Scott, C. (2006) *How Picturebooks Work*. Great Britain: Routledge.

Royal College of Psychiatrists [RCPSYCH]. (2022). *Depression in children and young people*.

Available at: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/depression-in-young-people>. (Accessed: 12/11/2024).

Salisbury, M. and Styles, M. (2020). *Children's Picturebooks Second Edition: The Art of Visual Storytelling*. London: Laurence King Publishing.

Stewing, J.W. (1995) *Looking at Picture Books*. Wisconsin: Highsmith Press.

Tan, S. (2001) *The Red Tree*. Australia: Hachette Australia Pty Limited

Tucker, N. (1981). *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration*. Cambridge University Press.

UNICEF (n.d.). *What is Depression?*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/mental-health/what-is-depression#depression-symptoms> [Accessed: 15/11/2024].