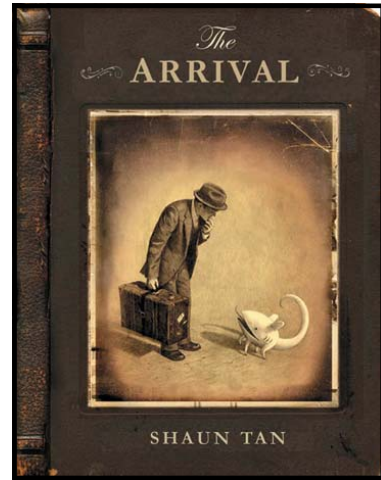


# TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

## The Arrival

Written by Shaun Tan



### Description

*The Arrival* is a 128-page book of illustrations without words, a silent graphic novel. Through a series of connecting images, it tells the story of an anonymous migrant leaving some unfortunate circumstances in his home country, crossing an ocean to a strange new city, and learning how to live here.

The story may be set some time around 1900, coinciding with great waves of migration out of Europe and into countries such as Australia and the United States, and much of my initial research has been based on autobiographical stories recorded by migrants around this period, as well as more recently. However, the world of the book is ultimately removed from any direct references: my interest as an artist has been to dislocate the reader in order to better explore the idea of being an immigrant within a foreign culture. The city where most events are illustrated is imaginary, where fundamental things such as language, transportation, food, housing and work are all quite strange, and often surreal. One of the key reasons behind removing all text from the book is to underline this principle - the main character cannot read or understand everything, so neither should the reader. Yet there is an internal logic within all of the details which can be discerned as the story progresses - how things work and so on - and the absence of written narrative seems to invite a closer visual reading, and a much slower one too. The mystery of the world is also preserved by the absence of explanation, and suggests a dreamlike journey, which is my attempt to find a fictional equivalent to the reality faced by many immigrants - both our ancestors and contemporaries.

The creation of what is effectively a 'social-realist fantasy' is valuable also in tapping into the universal nature of all migrant stories, as they do share common threads regardless of particular places and times, where individuals are from and where they go. As well as requiring no translation of text, I believe that the artwork should be equally comprehensible to readers from different cultures, itself lacking any cultural specificity.

The Arrival 1

# TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

This had possibly been the greatest challenge for me in designing the book, which has a simple graphic novel format - how to make things clear and meaningful while only marginally recognisable, and still open to multiple interpretations.

The style of the artwork borrows heavily from old sepia / monochrome photographs of the kind that typically document social life during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to some extent the book behaves like a silent film. My drawings are all graphite pencil and quite photorealistic, attempting to create a convincing world of imaginary people, animals, architecture, domestic objects, vehicles and natural landscapes (one reason the book has taken so long to illustrate!). One of my initial ideas which I have tried to preserve is that the entire book might look like a strange photo-album, since it occurs to me that photo albums are essentially silent, illustrated picture books.

The book is loosely divided into several chapters. It begins with images of a family - two parents and a child - waking up, having breakfast and going to a train station. On the way we see that the town they live in is falling apart, and has strange, enormous serpents moving through the air (for me this is an open metaphor for some kind of oppression or decay). The father leaves on a train, while the mother and child remain. This is typical of many migrant stories, where the man goes to a place first to earn money and later bring his family - though this may only become clear later in the story.

The reader is invited to ask themselves what they are seeing, and why these events might be happening.

The visual narrative follows the man as he later travels on a ship with other migrants, eventually arriving in a large harbour. Everyone disembarks and goes through a strange series of tests and interrogations (based on procedures at Ellis Island in New York). Our migrant is then released by balloon into the air to float over and land somewhere in the city - I'm interested here in the idea of migrants being sent to random places they may know nothing about, and having to make a life wherever they happen to land.

We get some glimpses of street-life upon 'arrival', which involves many unfamiliar objects and activities, and some strange animals. The migrant wanders around aimlessly for a while before a stranger offers to help him; unable to communicate the migrant draws pictures in a small book indicating things he is looking for (a room to stay in). This is a recurring detail throughout the story, where pictures within the artwork are used to communicate intentions, as well as familiar gestures. He is led to a building, and rents a room. The room itself is quite peculiar, full of many appliances with unknown functions; and there appears to be a small animal already living there, which looks something like a big walking tadpole.

This animal later follows the migrant as he goes out into the city, looking for various things - transport, food, work - and is able to help him in small and subtle ways. Readers may notice that other people also have different species of animal companions. There is no particular 'meaning' here,

# TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

although for me the friendship with a strange animal has something to do with coming to terms with the country - what at first might seem scary and alienating may eventually appear benevolent. The city itself is really quite utopian in some ways, in that it has a sense of multicultural community and a freedom. Its fanciful aspects are somehow manifestations of liberated lives and imaginations, eg unusual sculptures, weightless boats drifting in the sky, every kind of architecture.

Throughout the story the migrant is helped or 'shown' something by three strangers, and in each case the main 'narrative' digresses to reveal something about where each of these people comes from, through short visual sequences over three to eight pages. The first involves a woman escaping from industrial slavery; then a couple fleeing from a country invaded by aggressive giants (a metaphor for Nazism or Communism); and a man whose family and country have been destroyed by civil war. In each case, we observe how those people are now living new lives in the new country. One of the ideas I wanted to suggest is that everyone in this place is some kind of immigrant or refugee from elsewhere; and also that people are able to cope with their new circumstances by helping each other.

Our migrant, after some work-related mishaps, eventually gets a boring job in a huge factory. He writes letters home and sends money (from time to time he sits looking at a family photograph, so we know what is on his mind). After some time, a letter comes back and he runs out into the street to observe a balloon descending - his wife and child finally arriving.

The story essentially ends here, although there is a short epilogue (in pictures, which may be full colour), showing the family having breakfast, apparently at home in their strange new world. The viewpoint shifts to the child, and we follow him (with the pet 'tadpole') out into the street to get milk or bread. He sees a lost-looking man with a suitcase, a just-landed new immigrant, and shows him where to go by pointing; this is the final picture.

I hope to add a page of commentary to the back of the book, possibly explaining a little my ideas behind the book and offering some thoughts on migration; reminding readers that the world we live in today is the result of great waves of migration, and always has been, since before living memory; and always will be, continuing to define human society in the future also. But is perhaps most interesting at the level of personal experiences, which is why my look focuses on fairly intimate, small-scale details to do with eating, working, talking, travelling and so on. I hope that my book is 'read' as being partly about immigration, but also beyond any single social 'issue': it is intended to be more simply about the fact of changing circumstances as they inevitably happen in everyone's lives, and how people learn to adjust to and accept new situations, no matter how strange or disconcerting they at first appear.

Shaun Tan, June 2006

# TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

## About the author/illustrator

SHAUN TAN is the author and illustrator of *The Lost Thing* and *The Red Tree*, both of which have won international awards such as an Honourable Mention in the Bologna Ragazzi Prize, were CBCA Honour Books and have been widely translated. Previous books Shaun has illustrated include *The Rabbits* by John Marsden (CBCA Picture Book of the Year), and with Gary Crew, *Memorial* (a CBCA Honour Book) and *The Viewer* (winner of the Crichton Award for illustration), and for the body of his work he received the 'World Fantasy Best Artist Award' in Montreal.

At least "The Arrival" doesn't fall into the car chases and gratuitous explosions category of sci-fi. It has some semblance of scientific reason, and some pretty original ideas. The vortex balls were an intriguing touch, and the gigantic satellite dish scenes quite effective. It is necessary to suspend disbelief on several occasions, but overall the film succeeds as entertainment. Having the kid along seemed like kind of a stretch as well. If you can look past the faults in logic, "The Arrival" is totally acceptable.