



THE ASTRID LINDGREN
MEMORIAL AWARD

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Reading guide for

The Arrival by Shaun Tan

Recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2011

Written by Maria Lassén-Seger

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About the author and illustrator

Shaun Tan (born 1974) is an Australian author and illustrator. He is enjoying a hugely successful career, not only as a creator of picture books but as an artist with many different strings to his bow – he collaborates on animated film, musical and theatrical adaptations of his works, as well as producing fine art, for example. Among his twenty or so picture books, his solo works in particular have taken the world by storm.

Interestingly, Tan has had no formal training as an illustrator, learning his craft through trial and error instead. Has this perhaps sown the seed for his distinctive stories and open-minded approach to the picture book medium? Tan studied art, history and literature at university, and this is reflected in the way his books, which are often preceded by intensive research, maintain a conscious dialogue with everything from other literary texts to works of art and cinema.

When you come across a book by Shaun Tan, you are struck by the richness of detail in his surrealist worlds and the uncompromising approach to both the form and the content. Tan's often quite slim volumes have a depth that rewards countless re-reading. In the mysteriousness and inventiveness of the stories, the reader experiences both amazement and familiarity, which in turn leads the mind onto other associations. Tan himself says that he wants to get closer to reality by drawing the unfamiliar.

Tan's picture books tackle both the beauty and the sad and difficult sides of life. He explores humanity's capacity to do good and evil, but his stories always include an undertone of hope and redemption, along with a desire to portray human interaction as valuable and necessary. In his writing, he returns again and again to a sense of exclusion and otherworldly encounters. *The Rabbits* (1998), with text by John Marsden, takes the fable and uses it to examine colonialism and its dark abuse of power. *The Lost Thing* (2000), which was also made into an Oscar-winning animated short film, is a tender depiction of a meeting between a nerdy teenage boy and a grotesque being that goes almost unnoticed. *The Red Tree* (2001) tells the story of a day of adversity in a young girl's life and paints vivid, emotionally charged images of life's most difficult and beautiful moments. *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008) is an anthology of picture book novellas examining the longing, dreams, mystery and magic behind the apparently dull facade of suburban life. These are picture books with the power to move, surprise and engage their readers. Tan never hammers his message home, relying instead on the readers to think, interpret and put the pieces together for themselves.

About the book

The Arrival (2006) – a completely wordless work comprising an impressive number of pencil drawings – is Shaun Tan's most epic tale to date. It is always interesting to learn how Tan's books come about since, as a personal challenge, he often experiments with

new ways of telling his stories. *The Arrival* was initially a much slimmer book with more text and fewer pictures. However, Tan felt that this was the wrong format for what he wanted to say. Instead, he chose to present the narrative exclusively in pictures. He also chose a rather long-winded approach that involved him building up scenes from the book that he then filmed or photographed before drawing them on the page. It took him five years to complete the book.

The work is also interesting in the way that it transcends traditional genre boundaries and categories of readership. Is *The Arrival* a picture book, a graphic novel or a comic strip? Is it for children, young people or adults? In fact, the book's strength lies in its hybrid nature and the fact that, like many of Tan's other picture books, it is aimed at a broad age range. What makes Tan a fearless picture book artist is, without doubt, his ability to stretch the limits of the picture book medium and his refusal to confine his work within a particular age category.

The Arrival follows a man who leaves his home and his family and emigrates to a foreign land, where he struggles to settle in, while always dreaming of being reunited with his family. Form and content meld together, with the book's wordlessness reflected in the man's lack of language in the new country. Since the language, nature and everyday objects in the new setting are just as alien to the reader as they are to the immigrant, the reader is able to empathise strongly with the confusion and exclusion that strangers or migrants experience in a new place.

Inspired by Raymond Briggs' wordless picture book classic *The Snowman* (1978), *The Arrival* acts as a kind of silent film reel, with the difference that readers can linger over images and flick forwards and backwards in the story. This might be needed, since the events play out over a long period of time that Tan has boiled down into carefully chosen key scenes. The pencil drawings simulate sepia photographs and strengthen the sense that the surrealist images are strongly rooted in reality. Tan also conducted a great deal of research for this book, reading migrant stories and exploring photo archives.

As with so many of Tan's works, *The Arrival* is a source of hope for the future of the picture book. His enigmatic stories set in the twilight zone between dreams and reality bring picture books to a whole new readership. In typical Tan fashion, *The Arrival* is uncompromisingly thorough, considered and honed to perfection, making full use of the picture book's suitability for slow and repeated reading.

Things to think about

The book has a very distinctive design, like a worn photo album. Why?

Tan's worlds are full of symbolism that encourages interpretation. What associations are conjured up by the shadow of the dragon's tail hanging over the family and their home town? What is the role of the strange little animal that we see on the cover of the

book? Throughout the book, the man folds origami birds. What do these birds mean to him, his family and the reader?

Tan applies cinematic flourishes in the book, including zooming in and out, sometimes to capture the main character's loneliness and vulnerability in a strange and overwhelming world. Find some of these visual tricks and discuss how they affect the reader emotionally.

Tan often plays intervisual games with his readers. In *The Arrival*, he references famous images of historical migration, for example. Try to find examples of such visual references in the book and discuss what they add to the story.

Tan also plays more private intervisual games. He has, for instance drawn himself and his wife as the main character's family. You can also find his father's face among the hand-drawn photographs on the inside cover. Why does he do this? Does knowing this add anything to the narrative?

The Arrival is about what it is like to come to a foreign land and experience a feeling of being lost and an outsider. What strange objects and beings does the man encounter when he arrives in the foreign land?

For the book's main character, life in the new country also means encountering strangers. How are these encounters depicted and what do they mean to the man?

Many of the people that the man meets have their own stories to tell about why they fled or left their own homeland. What are these stories within the story about? What techniques does Tan employ to help the reader understand that these sections are flashbacks?

To start with, the man can neither speak or understand the language of his new homeland. How does he manage to understand others and make himself understood?

In many ways, the book is melancholy and serious, but there are also flashes of humour, such as when the man finds a place to live in the new land and has to work out how all the strange gadgets in his new home work. Are there any other comic touches?

One of the book's core themes is conveying to the reader the sense of feeling lost when placed in unfamiliar surroundings. Do you think the book pulls that off? Does the reader feel sympathy with the man in the story, and if so why? Can you think of any real people in your own life who are going through similar things? Have you ever felt like an outsider in an unfamiliar environment?

How does Tan depict the passage of time in the book without using any words?

The story has a clear timeframe and plot: the home – the break-up – the journey – the arrival – the acclimatising – the reunion. Compare the pictures on the first two pages of chapter 1 with the pictures on the first two pages of chapter 6. How are they linked?

What do they say about the main character's eventful journey and about life in the new country?

The book ends with an episode in which the man's daughter plays a key role. What does the book's final picture make you think of?

The book is called *The Arrival*, not *The Break-Up* or *The Reunion*. Why does the book have this particular title?

Further reading

Shaun Tan's own website: <http://www.shauntan.net/>

As well as providing a feast for the eyes, the extensive website includes links to Tan's interesting essays: *Picture books – who are they for?* and *Originality and creativity*.

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This Reading Guide was written by Maria Lassén-Seger, member of the jury for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. It was first published in Swedish in January 2012.

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