

Teachers' Notes (Late Primary & Secondary)
Robyn Sheahan-Bright

Tales from the Inner City
Shaun Tan

Recommended for ages 12–18

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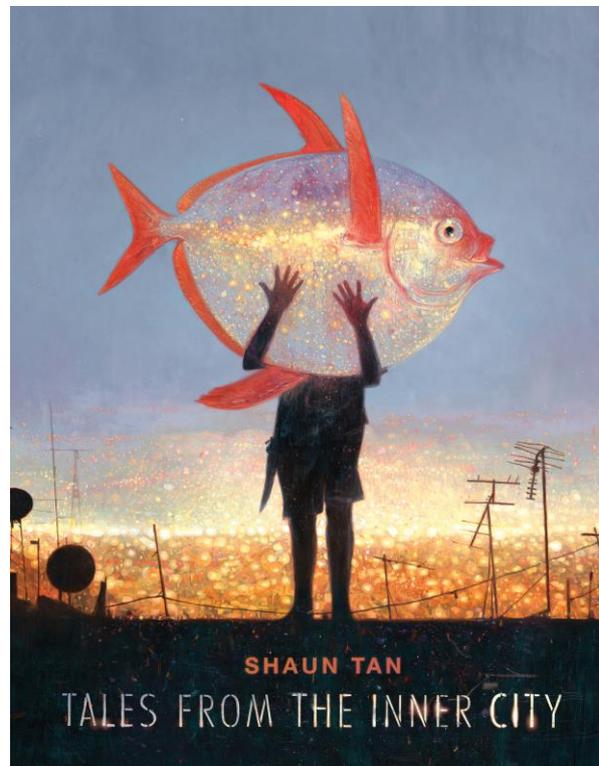
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INTRODUCTION

STORY SUMMARY

The animals of the world exist
for their own reasons.

– Alice Walker

Creating an uneasy, unsettling disjuncture between realism or facts and imagined scenarios, is Shaun Tan's trademark narrative position. Each vignette/microstory in this book is a philosophical reflection on human existence via the prism of the animal being celebrated.

Cities are places created by human beings. Or so we imagine. This work explores the idea that animals have as much right to respect as humans do, and that they also view and perceive the world in just as sophisticated a way as humans do.

There is a dystopian sense in each story and the accompanying images in this collection that animals inhabit/dominate the cities just as humans imagine they do: a forest of deer looking out an unfinished window in a skyscraper; an entire floor inhabited by crocodiles and the one above by 'hairless apes' (humans – p.2); horses on an unfinished overpass. These images arrest the eye and invite the reader into the complex text which is here to be unravelled.

Humans and animals are intricately bonded in the same ecosystem. These texts refer to many issues which affect both. They invite the reader to ponder both the human voice we generally hear, and the animal voices we ignore, or fail to hear, when reflecting on the world we live in.

In one poetic imagining, a whole population is entranced by a signature event of swarms of butterflies descending upon it and arousing a 'joyful inexplicable urgency' (p. 7):

The chatter in our heads fell silent, the endless ticker tape of voice-over narrative, always prying things apart for cause and effect, sign and symbol, some kind of useful meaning or value or portent – it all just stopped, and the butterflies came to us.'

(p. 8)

The uses to which animals are put by humans is one of the themes explored—cats used as domestic pets and as pseudo/substitutes for human comfort; sharks as feared adversaries, hunted out of fear; horses used for work, racing and then sent to the knackery—each sub-topic gives the reader pause for thought and reflection.

Tan's haunting lament about the impending apocalypse and the failure of flawed human aspiration is juxtaposed against the hope and love which he invests in every word and image.

His humour also infuses each text and image and reminds us of the value of self-deprecation as a quality—one which is lacking in many of our world leaders.

Shaun Tan's illustrations or visual poems are extraordinary. But to be able to write such spare and evocative texts, as well, is even more extraordinary. What continues to haunt Tan's illustrative work is what an incredibly gifted writer he is.

Tan's *Tales from Outer Suburbia* traversed the suburbs but used the same microstory format to create evocative vignettes of lived experiences. This new work *Tales from the Inner City* is a salutary series of cautionary tales for humanity, and quite simply, is a numinous masterpiece for all ages.

Oh, that song! We scale the ridge and see it, a glacial river of light moving slowly from east to west, and quickly quickly quickly we run over jagged stones to join the chorus, our naked feet as light as air.

(p. 209)

THEMES

There are several key ideas or themes which flow through this work. They are ideal for classroom discussion from late primary school through to Year 12 and could be used in core subjects such as Art, English and HSIE.

- Relationships between animals and humans
- City life versus 'natural' life
- Environmental damage and climate change
- Relationships between humans
- Unknowability of animals
- Fear of living versus sweetness of living
- Joy of creation
- Redemption
- Flawed human aspiration
- Impending apocalypse

These themes could be considered in conjunction with the following school curriculum areas.

CURRICULUM TOPICS

1. Study of history, society and environment
2. English language and literacy
3. Visual literacy
4. Critical Literacy
5. Creative arts
6. Learning technologies

The notes which follow are designed to be used largely in upper primary and secondary classrooms. Teachers should be able to adapt them to suit the demands of their curriculum.

STUDIES OF HISTORY, SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ANIMALS AND HUMANS

One of Shaun Tan's themes in this work is that human beings are animals, and yet often lack understanding, respect or empathy for their fellow beings. He celebrates and laments the many ways in which life offers moments of wondrous joy and of brutal tragedy.

The illustrative key or visual contents page at the front of the book lists each of the 25 animals included and the page relevant to their story:

Crocodile * Butterfly * Dog * Snail * Shark * Cat * Horse * Pig * Moonfish * Rhino * Owl * Frog * Hippo * Lungfish * Orca * Tiger * Sheep * Parrot * Bear * Eagle * Fox * Pigeon * Bee * Yak * Human

[There is one further animal – deer – not included in the key, as it is depicted on the opening spread between the half title and the title page. The tiger also appears not only in a story but also on the back endpaper.]

Discussion Point: Fittingly, we are reminded at the end of this sequence that we are all animals or primates. Human beings have much in common with their animal neighbours. We co-exist even in the cities and can learn from each other; we live and die and will survive or decline together.

Research: Do some research into some or all of these creatures and the special qualities that make them unique.

Discussion Points: Sub-topics to be explored in these shorts texts include: Domestication of Animals as Pets; Ethics of Hunting; Ethics of Using Animals as Working Animals; Racing and Betting; Ethics of 'Humane' Forms of Killing; Live Animal Transport etc.

Discussion Points: Animals are represented in museum collections all over the world. Animal skeletons or taxidermied bodies of animals are displayed—butterflies are pinned to display boards; polar bears in glass cabinets; recently the Natural History Museum in London unearthed a blue whale skeleton and restored it to display in spectacular fashion suspended from the roof of Hintze Hall [Brown 2017]. Discuss the value of such displays and the ethics of them, as well.

Discussion Point: Some museum displays employ virtual reality instead of real specimens. David Attenborough's spectacular TV series *Planet Earth* (2006) and *Planet Earth 2* (2016) also employs such techniques. What does virtual reality have to teach us about animals?

Discussion Point: Researchers often use the dissection of animals and humans to advance their knowledge. Discuss the ethics of this practice.

Discussion Point: Some museums are now treating human remains as museum exhibits: 'Humans are animals, and as long as the specimens have been acquired ethically (as required by the Human Tissues Act), I think human remains should be included in zoology displays wherever they can be instructive.' [Ashby 2016] Discuss this statement.

Discussion Point: In what fields do animals assist humans?

Discussion Point: What exceptional skills do some animals have which humans do not?

Discussion Point: Shaun Tan has written about his love for George Orwell's classic novel and political allegory *Animal Farm* (1945) and was commissioned to create a new jacket illustration for it which he writes about in his blog *The Bird King*: <http://www.shauntan.net/news1.html>. Examine that image and read and discuss some of the ideas in *Animal Farm* and how they relate to *Tales from the Inner City*.

CITY LIFE VERSUS NATURAL LIFE

Discussion Point: What does this text suggest about city spaces and their connection with humans and animals?

Discussion Points: Sub-topics to be explored in these short texts might include: City Planning; Architecture and High-Rise Buildings; Workplaces; shared city spaces for recreation.

Discussion Point: Examine the story about board members turning into frogs (pp. 119–123). What does it suggest about the corporate building as a place of work? What does it suggest about the hierarchy in such a workplace? (Read Shaun Tan's picture book *Cicada* [Hachette, 2018] in further comparison to this topic.)

Discussion Point: Examine any image and discuss what the human figures depicted in it indicate about society.

Discussion Point: The tiger is camouflaged by the safety stripes he walks through on the back endpaper. Discuss the city landscape as a place of camouflage. Invite students to draw or paint their own image of an animal camouflaged in the city.

ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Discussion Point: What do these texts suggest about how human beings use/employ/destroy their landscapes?

Discussion Point: In which of these short texts is climate change suggested?

Discussion Point: What other aspects of environmental damage are suggested in these texts?

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMANS

Discussion Point: All sorts of families are depicted in this book. Discuss with students a particular story and what impressions of a family it gives them.

Discussion Point: Relationships between friends are often fraught with emotions such as envy, anger, and insecurity. Discuss with students a particular story and the emotions it explores.

Discussion Point: Love is a complex emotion. Which of these stories explores romantic or sexual love and what does it suggest about it?

Students might also wish to discuss the further themes (Unknowability of animals; Fear of living versus sweetness of living; Joy of creation; Redemption; Flawed human aspiration; Impending apocalypse) in relation to this text

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- 1) These texts are written in **25 different narrative voices** in present tense and past tense, and from first, second and third person narrative perspectives. Most are **short stories** in prose, some are **microstories** (flash fiction) in prose, and some are written as **free verse (poems)**.

Discussion Point: Discuss a number of these stories and why the decision about creating each narrative 'voice' might have been made.

- 2) This book consists of a series of stories each of which have a **structure** to be analysed.

Discussion Point: Discuss the structure of a number of these stories.

- 3) **The Conclusion of a story** should cement its themes.

Discussion Point: Discuss the ending of any one of these stories, in relation to its theme.

Discussion Point: Discuss the final story, in relation to the book as a whole. What effect is achieved by putting the 'Human' story last?

The **language used is inventive and original**. For example, read the passage describing dissecting the parts of the moonfish (pp. 86-7), or read: 'And then, as the sheer weight of blossomy tonnage drips down like suds in an overflowing bath, drenching the night with perfume, the crowd erupts into applause.' (p. 194)

Activity: Choose your favourite passages and analyse how the language works to achieve its effects.

- 4) There is **no written contents page**, but there is a **visual contents page** or 'key' to the animals and their stories. Nor do the stories have **titles**, although they are introduced by a **visual black & white image of the animal** as a **visual title**.

Discussion Point: Why has the writer chosen not to employ these written devices?

- 5) This work might be compared to other works which explore the human/animal relationship.

Activity: Compare this work to *Only the Animals* by Ceridwen Dovey (Hamish Hamilton/Penguin Australia, 2014), a collection of short stories, each told by the soul of an animal that has died because of human conflict.

N.B. *Only the Animals* is a work for adults: some stories may not be suitable for your students, but most will be.

- 6) **Study the Collective Nouns** for these animals: e.g. 'swarms' of butterflies; 'kit' of pigeons; 'drift' or 'drove' of pigs; 'convocation' of eagles.

Activity: Make a list of the collective noun for each of the twenty-four non-human creatures featured in *Tales from the Inner City*.

- 7) '**Epiphany**' is a word to describe a revelatory moment or spiritual insight. Its secular usage was popularised by James Joyce who employed it as a literary device. The Joycean epiphany has been defined as 'a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene,

event, or memorable phase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it.’ *Wikipedia*

Discussion Point: In each of Tan’s stories there is a vivid moment of such revelation. Choose a story and discuss its ‘epiphany’.

8) Writing Exercises

Activity: Study the **Microstory form** as it is demonstrated in this work. Choose an animal and write a story in a similar format and style. Expand the story and write a **short story** on a similar theme.

Activity: The tribute to the dog (pp. 13-49) and some other excerpts are written in free verse. Study **Free Verse** poetry. Then write a free verse about any of the animals in this book.

Activity: Study Shape Poetry. Then write a shape poem about a butterfly.

Activity: Study Acrostic Poetry. Then write an acrostic poem about a crocodile.

Activity: Study Haiku Poetry. Then write a haiku poem about a shark.

9) Reading Exercises

Activity: Study animal poetry. Read famous works such as William Blake’s ‘The Tyger’ or Lewis Carroll’s ‘The Crocodile’. Discuss in relation to this text. [See Bibliography]

Discussion Point: *Anthropomorphism* is a literary device that can be defined as a technique in which a writer ascribes human traits, ambitions, emotions, or entire behaviours to animals, non-human beings, natural phenomena, or objects. *Zoomorphism* is a literary technique in which animal attributes are imposed upon non-animal objects, humans, and events; and animal features are ascribed to humans, gods, and other objects. [*Literary Devices* <https://literarydevices.net/>]

In this book, *Shaun Tan uses neither device*. Instead, he has human narrators observe animal characters whose natures are obscure to those narrators; he suggests that they are capable of deep and complex thought but suggests that they are ultimately unknowable and mysterious, but also deserving of deep respect.

Discussion Point: Read each story carefully and then consider each story before reading the notes on each story below under Critical Literacy.

VISUAL LITERACY

1) Visual texts may be interpreted very differently by a reader, particularly where a text has an ‘open’ ending.

Discussion Point: Choose any story and discuss what the final image in the story suggests. Listen respectfully to all points of view: there is generally no ‘right’ answer.

2) The **Typography** (font) used is a serif font called Simoncini Garamond.

Activity: Discuss the use of fonts and the differences between serif and sans serif fonts.

3) The **Media** used in this book are **photo collages and oil painting**.

Shaun Tan explains: ‘The paintings are all oil on canvas, most of them are actually quite large, at 150 x 100 cm. There have been small digital adjustments in some cases, but what you see on the page is pretty much straight photographs of the paintings. They are photographed by a specialist art photographer, and there’s a lot of work later to make sure that the colours are preserved in print.

‘The reason I work in oils is because I’m well practised in this medium, I’ve been painting in oils since I was about 15 (am now 44). It is especially good for subtle naturalistic effects. I work slowly too, and like the paint to stay ‘wet’ for longer, and oils are very slow to dry. I also enjoy painting at a large scale because it enables certain textural effects, using larger

implements like palette knives, where you scrape paint on and off, sometimes in quite big strokes. I also use a shower-screen cleaner (those things with the straight rubber edge) to smear paint on when I start, to get interesting accidental effects. You can see this on paintings like 'tiger', 'hippo' and 'yak', where paint can be seen to have been scraped on, i.e. I drag or smear the paint across the canvas in large strokes in the early stages of a painting. I will work with big house-painting brushes and rollers down to the smallest watercolour brushes for fine details, like the 'butterflies' painting, or the details of dogs' faces and distant city lights in 'Orca'.

'Interestingly, many of the images were 'sketched' first using photo collages, which is quite new for me, as normally I draw things with pencils and pastel crayons. In many cases I used found images, cut them up and rearranged them digitally. I also took photographs of animal toys in some cases, to work out lighting and compositions. For the deer painting, for instance, I constructed a small forest using sticks, leaves and paint, with toy animals, on my windowsill to work out the composition, and I think that effort paid off in creating the illusion of a very realistic scene with unusual lighting—a daytime window in a night-time forest.'

Activity: Choose an image from the book and describe the emotions conveyed in it.

Activity: Read what Shaun Tan has to say about his painting, generally.
<http://www.shauntan.net/paintings1.html>

- 4) The **colour palette** is at turns sombre, moody and arresting with splashes of dramatic and vivid colour amidst panoramic views of city landscapes.

Discussion Point: What effect does this colour palette have on the reading of this work?

- 5) **Design encompasses every aspect of an illustrated book's construction**, including the front and back cover image, a dedication page, a title page, the double page spreads, which illustrate each story, and a final imprint or publication details page. The juxtaposition of images and words on each page contributes to meaning in this and in other books.

Activity: Choose a double page spread and discuss how its design contributes to meaning.

Activity: Examine the front and back cover of the book. What meaning do you make from the design of these cover images? Read the blurb on the back cover. Then write your own blurb for the book.

CRITICAL LITERACY

Critical Literacy can be employed to examine each double page and to discover inter-textual references. Shaun Tan has written some brilliant observations about his inspiration which can be read prior to reading my further commentary about each story. 'Commentary by Shaun Tan' can be downloaded from <https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/childrens/Tales-from-the-Inner-City-Shaun-Tan-9781760523534>

Having read **Shaun Tan's Commentary**, teachers might now invite students to examine each page carefully: each short story/microfiction text is introduced by a black and white image of the animal represented. Each is followed by an illustration or series of illustrations. The sequence of the volume is as follows:

Cover: Standing on a city rooftop skyline, a young boy holds aloft a beautiful moonfish against a sky at dusk. The twinkling lights of the city stretch away and merge with the colours of dusk.

Front Endpapers: Safety stripes on a city wall.

Half title page: Blue impression of city with title.

The **opening double page spread** between the half title and title pages contains no written story, but the visual text is provocative and arresting. Two **deer** are depicted living on an unfinished floor of a high rise building and a forest has grown around them. They are

seen from behind, and are looking out of an unfinished window frame, at a densely populated high-rise cityscape.

Question: What does the image say emotionally?

Title page (Usually on RHS, but here taking up a double-page spread) Title, author and publisher.

Question: Explain the double meaning of the title. i.e. the *inner life* of the city and the *inner suburbs* of the city.

Key to the 25 animals contains numbered silhouettes as a visual contents page to the stories.

Alice Walker quotation (on right hand page; opposite page is blank and there is no other writing on the quotation page)

Question: Discuss the quotation's relationship to the book.

Chapter/story opening (on LHS, an image of a crocodile. In place of a story title.)

Pages 1–5 contain a microstory about **crocodiles** living on the eighty-seventh floor of a high-rise building, narrated by a maintenance guy. It is followed by an image of the narrator washing the building's windows. The sky behind him is reflected in the glass panels of the wall of the high-rise building which fills the frame. So, what may seem to be sky painted in a chequered geometric pattern of blue rectangles can be interpreted as the wall of the building.

Nothing shrinks the imagination like a waiting room, and a lift is nothing if not the smallest of all waiting rooms. (p. 2)

I mean nobody even remembers that this whole city was built on a swamp. (p. 3)

Question: What does this story suggest about cities and the people who live in them?

Pages 7-11 contain a microstory about a **butterfly** swarm. The accompanying image depicts the human population with swarms of butterflies above, suggestive of a meteoric event. There are several intriguing details such as the pink cloud on left (suggesting fire?), the impression of a cloud obscured by the buildings—or is it an explosion? (terrorist attack?)—and the fact that the crowd seems to be split (possible earthquake?), plus a whited-out film screen or billboard. But the overwhelming impression is of the joyous uplifting moment when all other thoughts are consumed by the wonder of this event.

No earthquake, fire or terrorist attack could flush so many out of cars, apartments, subways, restaurants, hotels, stores, banks, hospitals, schools, parliaments and offices. None had ever experienced such inexplicable, joyful urgency.

(p. 7)

Discussion: Discuss how each detail in the image references this preceding text.

Pages 13-49 contain a verse poem about 'man's best friend', the **dog**. It consists of a series of evocative paintings which are a sort of short history of the world; the dog and his male or female companion travelling through the ages and repeating patterns of behaviour; but it seems to end on an ominous note:

But now everything is different.

The river flows wrongly,

the plains are gone,

the sky presses down like a thousand ceilings.

It feels like time is only ever running away from us.

Where will we go? What will we do?

(p. 56)

Question: What global issue might this story engage with?

But there is one final stanza:

*You pull at my hand,
push your nose into the back of my knee,
and cry out to me as you always do,*

This world is ours!

*And just like that
we are walking again.*

(p. 47)

Discussion: Compare the attitude of human and dog, as expressed in these two final stanzas. Compare the tenses used: 'Where will we go?', 'This world is ours!'.

Do you experience the final stanza as *redemptive*? Why? Why not?

Pages 51–53 contain a microstory about two giant **snails** who are depicted making love on an overpass, with an underground rail tunnel below, where a hooded busker sits strumming his guitar.

Discussion: Discuss this curiously evocative tale as a lament for human prejudice and a eulogy to love.

Pages 55–59 contain a microstory about a **shark**; the terrible 'maw of the monster' is depicted, suggestive of the monster within; a sea of people dressed in formal office wear are gazing up in awe of the shark which is ready for flensing. The image is largely in tones of black except for impressionistic touches of red throughout the image.

We searched for words that didn't exist, wondered why we needed them so badly, then went home. The Fisherman didn't look at any of us, not once, just kept on cutting, even after they turned off the floodlights.

(p. 67)

Discussion: Discuss this sombre and horrifying statement about killing animals, and the legacy of that reaching back generations.

Pages 61–71 contain a microstory about a lost **cat**. It makes observations about what a pet means to a family. A mother is so immersed in juggling familial and work responsibilities that she feels metaphorically consumed by the sea. A cat which has given purpose to their lives has gone missing. The glorious image of mother and daughter sailing away atop the cat's head is brilliantly evocative.

Now everything just emptied into a black sea, with one dark wave rising after another; each angry, foaming lip threatened to peak and break and crash, only to subside at the last moment, making room for yet another swell, another rising line of whiplashed foam, another promise of destruction withheld.

(p. 63)

Question: Invite students to respond to the final image in their own words.

Pages 69–73 contain a microstory in which a two-year-old child is driving with her parents when she spies horses (or the souls of horses?) in the night outside. An image of horses on an unfinished overpass which goes nowhere follows this text suggestively. The second person narrative perspective is arresting and engages the reader emotionally:

*Your parents loom silently before you, stoic and reassuring like mountains
in the night.*

(p. 79)

The idea of horses being used and discarded is suggested:

*Carved in the timbers of multi-storey stables, the mantra of their keepers:
sentiment pays no dividend. Horses know this more than most: the greatest
curse of any animal is to be worth money to men.*

(p. 80)

Discussion: Discuss the issues of animals as companions and animal cruelty in relation to this story.

Pages 75-79 contain a microstory of a pig which is slowly disappearing in the back room of an apartment; the story is followed by a moving portrait of a pig gazing towards the crack of light through a doorway. This may be a metaphor for how animals are disregarded and their feelings ignored; how captivity is endured by so many animals; and how they lose their sense of self when contained unnaturally.

Question: Discuss the emotional themes being explored in this image.

Pages 81-93 contain a short story about the capture of a moonfish. It is a quite stunning tribute to the mysterious power of life and family. The image which follows is luminous and warm.

Question: Why a moonfish? What does it symbolise?

Pages 95-97 contain a two-verse poem about the 'last' **rhino**—the powerful image of the animal is seen in profile (with a tear in the eye?) and foregrounded against a blurred image of a traffic jam. This is an ironic comment on how we convince ourselves that we are not responsible for our actions.

Discussion: Discuss endangered creatures and human attitudes to them.

Pages 99-117 contain a longer verse poem about a patient anxiously waiting in a hospital; the talons of the **owl** move closer amidst the 'comforting' voices of the medicos; amidst the white noise and metal in this institutionalised setting This story contains five evocative paintings of soulless medical places and the owl.

Question: Hospitals as institutions can be imposing and frightening, and the language used within them, often impenetrable. What does this poem suggest about being a patient?

Pages 119-123 contain a short story about a board room full of men who turn into **frogs**. It explores the spectre of corporate life. A secretary discovers their transformation which leads to an internal monologue about the corporate world she is a mere 'speck' upon.

*That's something that the wealthy don't understand about the rest of us, she
thought, that our world is constant worry about money. We are the ones who
worry, who prop up the world with our worry. They think it is the other way
around, doing the things that they do, as if that's the natural order, top to
bottom. But there's no natural order, it's all luck and absurdity, it's up and down
and upside-down, where you were born, the colour of your face, the debt you
inherit before you're even pushed out.*

(p. 120)

Question: What is the nature of the hierarchy in corporate workplaces?

Pages 125–127 contain a microstory about a teacher who encourages his students to ‘Respect the **sheep**’; it may be a subtle commentary on our use of animals in general, and on issues such as the live export trade. A teacher whose love for this creature knows no bounds, hugs the sheep in an image. But does the teacher really understand the sheep? This portrait is a stunning juxtaposition of an ordinary classroom and an arresting embrace.

Question: This is a complex image and story. What does it mean?

Pages 129–135 contain a short story about **hippos** seen in dreams by an infant prodigy who is mocked, and escapes into obscurity. This is a commentary on celebrity culture; on over-ambitious parents; on how ‘hiding beneath the surface’ can sometimes offer protection from hypocrisy and exploitation. It concludes with a gorgeous portrait of a hippo, in which Tan’s ‘marks on paper’ are richly suggestive.

Question: What is the hippo symbolic of?

Pages 137–145 contain a short story about lungfish—tiny creatures growing into human selves with aspirations. Their achievements do not, however, make these ‘humans’ behave better and so they gradually fade away. Is the image of the empty theatre a metaphor for lost ideals?

Maybe this is what our young doppelgängers failed to understand. They believed their good example would be enough. That just being right was enough. They knew nothing about injured pride or the true inertia of human nature. They didn’t know how to speak to us.

(p 143)

Discussion: Discuss the concepts of human inertia and failed or lost ideals.

Pages 147–149 contain a microstory about an **orca** being placed in the sky but now separated from its mourning mother. The humans who put it there don’t know how to get it down...The story concludes with a magnificent portrait of it sailing above the lights of a huge city. This might represent well-intended human interventions in animal life, such as capturing sea-creatures to live in theme parks and zoos. Is this different from brutal interventions, such as whaling?

Discussion: Discuss any of these or other flawed forms of animal exploitation.

Pages 151–157 contain a short story about a **tiger** in which one of the ideas explored is that it is human nature to either resist advice or to adopt it slavishly. The tiger prowls from an underground tunnel and we see the shadow of a silhouetted dancer leaping on the wall beside him.

And all for just wearing an unusual head covering! Not that the mask is ever mentioned explicitly as the reason for discomfort or ridicule. But then again, feelings of contempt are never well concealed among humans. Like the tiger, we are skilled in the art of passive aggression.

(p 165)

Question: What is the message you took from this story? Support your answer with quotes from the story.

Pages 159–163 contain a short story and a gorgeously satirical reflection on human beings and their deluded belief that **parrots** ‘do’ things for humans. The portrait inverts that with an image of a huge parrot head and a man sitting beside it. Is the parrot inspecting its caged human?

Question: Do we underestimate animals’ intelligence?

Pages 165–171 contain a short story about **bears** having their own laws which trump human laws. This is a dark and potent satire of the hubris of human laws set against the 'laws of nature'. The image of a huge bear being helped up the stairs of the court by his female legal representative is oblique and suggestive.

Question: What does this story suggest about the legal profession?

Pages 173-177 contain a short story about an **eagle** in an airport terminal—a ghostly reminder of the unreality of such travel; the gruesome remains of the bird's kills are underfoot. It depicts the disconnectedness of a traveller where nothing is real; all is ephemeral as we race towards our next flight in a ceaseless journey.

Questions: Is travel the ultimate form of delusion? What is real about our daily lives?

Pages 179–183 contain a short story in which a **fox** addresses the reader in first and second person as the over-tidy, over-organised resident of a home he haunts. Day brings a different attitude; tidy/untidy – night/day. A bed with a male figure on one side, and an empty space beside him, and a fox looming above suggests an aching loneliness but potential companionship.

Question: What is the nature of the duality being explored here?

Pages 185-189 contain a short story about **pigeons** roosting atop an ultimately meaningless edifice erected by the human corporate world and said to underpin all wealth; a skyscraper which is empty. The pigeons' bank of superphosphate is far more valuable than meaningless coinage such as hedge funds and bitcoin.

Only the pigeons will ever know the truth as they scatter in search of new rookeries of hard, grey, unpollinated stone. No history of economics will ever record what pigeons already know—that they alone are humanity's greatest investment bankers.

(p. 187)

Discussion Discuss the ethics of banking and corporate culture.

Pages 191-197 contain a short story about **bees**: Mrs and Mrs Katayama invite all and sundry to attend the flowering of the tree on their rooftop which they have lovingly tended for over a hundred years. This is a rumination on the tending of relationships; on the passing of time; on the fleeting moments of life. The descent of the bees to take the pollen from the tree's flowers is a luminous moment—an epiphany of shared joy. The final image of a cloud of pink lights is transcendent.

'Why do our mouths always taste like honey?' (p. 205)

Question: Was this story joyous or sad? Was the party a celebration or a lament?

Pages 199-205 contain a short story about a **yak** which juxtaposes the inhumanity of the factory with the warm, slow comfort of riding on a yak. Work versus home; fast versus slow; automation versus hand-made; the need for care and love in the world.

How many of us will it carry? There seems to be no measure. It just carries as many people as want to be carried: give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses! I will rise up and long like a mountain chain!

(p. 202)

Question: Discuss this quotation in relation to this story.

Pages 207–211 contain a short story about **human beings**. It is a reflection on the futility of looking backwards; of failing to look at the ground we actually walk on. Fossils show us what we once were and will become. Is the final image a joyous one of a sun rising or a grim depiction of the apocalypse?

Question: Discuss the multiple meanings to be found in this story and image.

pp. 212–213 Acknowledgements (on right hand page)

p. 214 Imprint Page (blank reverse of back endpaper is opposite)

Back Endpapers Tiger emerging from safety stripes on a wall.

Discussion Point: What other 'sub-texts' did you discover in the images in this book?

CREATIVE ARTS

This text will encourage students to explore various other creative arts.

DRAMA

Activity: Invite students to write a short playscript based on one of the stories in this book.

MUSIC

Activity: Choose or write a song to enhance the play you are writing and performing.

CRAFT AND DESIGN

Activity: Design a poster about the issues explored in this book. Study other posters, and consult references for advice, such as: 'Poster Design to Change the World' *Oxfam Australia*: <https://www.oxfam.org.au/secondary-section-1-part-3-what-makes-a-successful-campaign-poster/>

FILM

Activity: Create a Book Trailer for this book. [See **Bibliography** for resources.]

LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

This book might be used as a tool for investigations on the Internet.

Activity: Research the issues discussed in these notes and explored in this visual text.

Activity: Research the work of Shaun Tan online.

CONCLUSION

Tales from the Inner City is a masterful work by a virtuoso of the illustrated book form. It might be used to discuss any of the topics explored above or to demonstrate creative techniques as an exemplar of the best of both writing and illustration.

It is a story for all times about every man and woman; every animal and creature. As much as it is about human ignorance and the blighting of the world, it is about human empathy and understanding...and love.

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[These resources are for teachers to use for background information. Some may be suitable for reading by upper secondary level students as well.]

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FILMS

Choose some films which demonstrate the grandeur and mystery of animal life to complement the students' discussion on this book. See for example, David Attenborough's *Planet Earth: The Complete Collection* 2006.

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A young girl spends the summer closely observing and following a wild fox. Her natural desire to befriend the animal leads to a crisis—but not, perhaps, a disaster. The young girl is particularly resourceful as she roams alone on forested mountains and extremely patient when observing animals. Quite an eye-opener for city dwelling children, one suspects.

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On Poster Design

'Poster Design to Change the World' *Oxfam Australia*

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ABOUT THE WRITER/ILLUSTRATOR

SHAUN TAN

Shaun Tan grew up in the northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. In school he became known as the 'good drawer' which partly compensated for always being the shortest kid in every class. He graduated from the University of WA in 1995 with joint honours in Fine Arts and English Literature, and currently works full time as a freelance artist and author in Melbourne.

Shaun began drawing and painting images for science fiction and horror stories in small-press magazines as a teenager and has since become best known for illustrated books that deal with social, political and historical subjects through surreal, dream-like imagery. Books such as *The Rabbits* (1998), *The Red Tree* (2001), *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008) and the acclaimed wordless novel *The Arrival* (2007) have been widely translated and enjoyed by readers of all ages. Shaun has also worked as a theatre designer, and as a concept artist for the films *Horton Hears a Who* and Pixar's *WALL-E*, and directed the Academy Award winning short film *The Lost Thing* with Passion Pictures Australia. *The Rabbits* was made into an opera with Opera Australia in 2015 and several books have been dramatised as plays. His latest works include *The Bird King and other Sketches* (2010), *The Singing Bones* (2015) and *Rules of Summer* (2016). In 2018 he will also publish *Cicada* (Hachette).

In 2011 Shaun received the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, honouring his contribution to international children's literature and was presented with the Dromkeen Medal for Services to Children's Literature in Australia. His other awards are numerous: a selection includes CBCA Picture Book of the Year 1999 for *The Rabbits*; Honour Book, CBCA Picture Book of the Year 2000 for *Memorial*, 2001 for *The Lost Thing* and 2002 for *The Red Tree*; CBCA Picture Book of the Year 2007 for *The Arrival* and both the NSW and Western Australia Premier's Book Awards 2006 and 2007 respectively for that book; CBCA Picture Book of the Year 2014 and shortlisted for the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal for 2015 for *Rules of Summer*. Visit his website: <http://www.shauntan.net>

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ABOUT THE WRITER OF THESE NOTES

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Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for her Outstanding Contribution to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award