



Tales from the Inner City

AUTHOR:

Shaun Tan

PUBLISHER:

Allen & Unwin
2018
224 pages

RRP:

\$35.00

REVIEWED BY:

Jack Tan,
The University of Melbourne

Each new Shaun Tan book is a cause for celebration, due to the long gestation period before each utterly unique creation sees light. This is due in part to his meticulous method of unravelling the themes for himself. He also daydreams to explore all possible connections to these themes.

Tan sketches, draws, paints and writes to figure out what these daydreams mean. Over the years, these reveries have taken on themes such as getting well from depression (*The Red Tree*), immigrants making sense of unfamiliar landscapes (*The Arrival*) and looking out for things that don't belong (*The Lost Thing*). The theme of not belonging is a recurring motif across his oeuvre. In *Tales from the Inner City*, readers are invited to imagine the often-challenging urban coexistence of animals and humans.

Tan's meticulousness at getting as close as possible to the truth of his daydreams also means that he will painstakingly examine his subject matter from all angles. For this collection, it involved him building 3D models of scenes to understand perspective, lighting, texture etc. before painting them onto 2D canvases. Only then would he begin writing.

Tales from the Inner City contains 25 stories, each on a particular animal and featuring a visual artwork. The animals represented include familiar pets (dogs, cats, parrots), majestic wild beasts (hippos, crocodiles, yaks), livestock on whom humans have dependency (pigs, horses, sheep), unusual marine creatures (moonfish and lungfish) and endangered species (tigers and rhinos). Tan gives voice to these animals, underscoring their fraught relationship with humans. I would like to discuss their teaching and learning opportunities in the English classroom.

Many of the tales and artwork consider the role of children as redeemer. Children are less commercial and pragmatic (thus, less adult) in their ways. They possess the original uncorrupted vision of animal-human coexistence, often initiating the rehabilitation of the animal, eg. Pim releasing the moonfish fry thus ensuring their continued survival. These stories could challenge young readers to consider their ethical responsibilities towards the natural world.

The child's connection to nature is also made possible by their unclouded imagination, a motif across many of the tales. The surreal quality of these stories (ie. Tan 'figuring out what daydreams mean') imbues the collection with a fabulist bent. There are excellent opportunities here for the teaching of text genres. The tale of the 'Frog' is a reverse fairy tale. The 'Lungfish' and the 'Tiger' stories are anthropomorphic. These tales could be used as entry points into lengthier allegorical fiction such as *Life of Pi* and *The Jungle Book*.

Three of the most impactful, albeit briefest, stories unravel the broken animal-human relationship. A glimmering tear from the endangered rhino elicits an emotional response. A teacher's consolatory embrace for the sheep is, alas, witnessed only by an empty classroom. The orca, so 'beautiful and inspiring' in captivity and display, is sadly 'out of place' away from its natural habitat. Tan's message is clear: humans are custodians of the natural world, responsible for the wellbeing of their fellow species. These tales are useful classroom resources for the discussion of ethics, environmental issues and animal rights. Their poignancy also elicits a personal response – useful as creative writing prompts.

Shaun Tan has a unique way of raising pertinent issues without sounding didactic. Thus, teachers have the flexibility to appropriate the stories to suit their particular contexts. The tales are mostly not geographically located. Their universal contexts and visual vocabulary open up meaningful spaces for discussion in multicultural/multilingual/EAL classrooms.

Ultimately, Tan invites readers to adopt a responsible aesthetic lens in approaching the stories. In the final tale 'Human', he describes our contribution towards animals as giving them 'our most beautiful words'.

Tan's menagerie of animals, imbued with aesthetic life through beautiful words and images, offers a rich resource for wide reading and study across all levels of secondary English. Because these profound tales are deceptively simple and richly symbolic, teachers could creatively draw out the relevant social, cultural, ethical, linguistic or aesthetic angle to use with their students.