

Strange migrations: an essay/interview with Shaun Tan

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Strange Migrations

Shaun Tan

*with additional questions and editing by **Harriet Earle***

NB. This was originally written as a keynote address to The 33rd International Board on Books for Young People Congress in London, held in August 2012. The piece presented here is an edited version of the keynote, with additional questions by Harriet Earle.

This article is about how stories and books can cross boundaries and migrate across cultures. The invitation to write about this topic may be no surprise given my background and the kind of books that I create, typically dealing with these themes quite directly, although almost subconsciously as recurring objects of fascination: colonization, migration, translation, language difficulties and cultural differences, often featuring creatures with tentacles or strangely shaped heads, though arguably (hopefully) no less serious than any other presentation. It could actually be said that all artists and writers are preoccupied with these themes to different degrees, expressed in individual styles. The crossing of boundaries is, after all, fundamental to storytelling. It's also a universal condition of being alive, which I'll consider here by reflecting on my own small corner of experience as a creator of picture books, graphic novels and other illustrated stories.

I'm very fortunate to have my work translated into many languages, straddling different nations and cultures. It's also worth noting that my stories find themselves straddling different reading cultures too, ranging from children's literature through the orbit of science fiction, intersecting with fine art, film, theatre and comics, "migrating" through genres from fantasy to social realism. They are also enjoyed by people of different ages, representing another kind of crossover: when we talk about different cultures, we should include the differences between childhood and adulthood along with all gradients in between,

as “cultural” differences. There are all these various groups that exist beyond geographical or linguistic boundaries, which can be categorized all the way down to personal private universes. We are all practising members of our own cultures, subcultures, and micro-subcultures (our private imagination), each looking for suitable translations. Illustrated books are very good at crossing divides. However, I’ve never set out to deliberately be cross-genre, international or even intergenerational; like many other illustrators, I rarely think about the age of my readers. I’m too preoccupied in quite a narrow way at the drawing table to think about what happens once anything leaves that table. In fact I’m quite self-absorbed, even self-indulgent, which is almost necessary to some extent in any artistic practice, a certain introspective focus to the exclusion of other concerns. Maybe because of that I’m also not terribly interested in categories; I just try to make each story or image as engaging as possible, appealing to all parts of my own nature: a child, an adult, a rational critic, an emotional being, an often confused person who doodles, writes and paints as a way of figuring things out.

The theme of migration relates to my personal background, as I’m a part-Chinese, Malaysian, Irish and English person from Perth, Western Australia. Although my work is not especially autobiographical and does not dwell on these facts (which I grew up regarding as uninteresting) I suspect there is actually a strong indirect effect of this heritage. Namely that I’m routinely attracted to ideas of belonging, difference, and the conceptual boundary between what is familiar or “normal”, and what is exotic, or “weird”.

Coming from “Nowhere in Particular”

It’s important to mention that I grew up in a place that seemed known to the rest of the world only if there was a shark attack, a city that otherwise sat quietly on the edge of a far southern

continent, between the Indian Ocean and a desert interior four times the size of Texas — and that's even before you reach the state border. I wrote about my impressions of this homeland recently as a preface to a recent exhibition of paintings, many as a fairly aimless painter in my early 20s, and appropriately entitled "Suburban Odyssey": a journey you have when you're not really going anywhere. The curator asked me what my memories were of growing up in Perth, and I wrote this:

Long, hot afternoons, wide and empty suburban streets, the drawl of crows, ocean air, unfiltered light, home and school: a feeling of being somewhere and nowhere at the same time. Our family did not travel extensively so my memory of Hillarys, the northern suburb in which I spend most of my childhood and adolescence, lacked much in the way of outside definition. It was a kind of *sui generis* bubble, which may be true of many people's childhood homes, where things just are. Perhaps more so in a place that was still being invented, with bulldozers working away at the coastal dunes, literally paving the way for new roads, shops, schools and homes throughout the late 70s and 80s. The world I grew up in was one still being manufactured.

If there were any parameters here they weren't cultural or historical, but those of the bush, the ocean and the sky. It seemed that any fresh brick veneer inevitably bled away into an ancient tangle of scrubby trees and even language was doomed to evaporate under the sun. You could almost feel the dissolution of meaning as you walked from the suburbs to the beach, something we did routinely as kids, sensing the fragility of our somewhat artificial lives. The receding street signs, named after famous explorers – Flinders, Cook, Banks – seemed out of place, like so many front lawns that survived only by virtue of plastic reticulation, the water

coming from far away. The same was true of our decidedly nonindigenous culture. By comparison the surrounding coast was mysterious and everlasting (or so it seemed at the time). The old tuart trees were shaggy giants that crawled with prehistoric bugs and other nameless things. It may be that this was one thing that attracted me to painting and drawing as a child, the fact that you can represent things without words, which sometimes seems a more accurate or realistic means of expression. I still feel that way when painting as an adult, occasionally reluctant to add a title to a picture in case it creates too much of a boundary.

So Perth generally felt like a peripheral place not just physically but also in a lot of other conceptual ways. Peripheral in a positive way, implying great possibility and opportunity, and Perth is a microcosm of Australia that way, especially when compared with older cities and nations. There's a certain license to muck about in the backyard, invent your own meaning, and this was especially important when I began to think more seriously about writing and painting in my late teens and early twenties, and transforming some of that imagery later into stories. This idea of being "peripheral" has always been important to me, as I think it probably is for most creative people. It's actually much easier to cross boundaries or enjoy internal migrations of the imagination when there's not much in the way of fencing or you feel, whether by circumstance or your own volition, like a bit of an outsider already.

A Multicultural Family

It may be useful here to also say a little about my mixed-race family, which was quite an unusual thing for Hillarys (a northern coastal suburb of Perth) at the time — although much less so now, which is a positive development. My father is Chinese, his parents being migrants to Malaysia from China, and it wasn't until very recently that my Dad visited his

cultural homeland as a tourist — something I've yet to do. My mother is Australian, which is also something of an insufficient description: more specifically a third generation Australian of English and Irish ancestry, but has never visited the northern hemisphere. Interestingly, my great grandfather was sent to Australia as a child orphan with no recorded background, not an uncommon story. My father never intended to stay in Australia, but then he met my Mum, who worked in a store where he bought a pen. Our whole lives are built on such accidents. In any case, it felt very normal to be growing up in a place to which none of us had any deep historical footing, and the sandy soil of Hillarys has excellent drainage and sunlight strong enough to bleach memory. Being both culturally and genetically “across boundaries”, “transitional” or “multicultural” is a default position and nothing special, especially in Australia, a culture of multiple heart transplants and constantly shifting identity.

As a child I did feel like an outsider — well, don't we all? In my case, I can lay claim to being unusually small. I only once met a kid of the same age who was shorter than me on a softball team, and was rather disappointed to learn that he was a dwarf. More problematic was a simmering racism in suburban Western Australia during the 1980s, when it was not uncommon to hear or see spray-painted the slogan “Asians Out”. All this meant in practice was that bullies didn't even have to try to think of a flaw when it came to Asian kids — just being Asian was bad enough, which is insulting on many levels. Ideally your enemies should work hard when it comes to finding a flaw. My father suffered from the nickname “Big-Eye Kee” in his home village, due to having very big round eyes for a Chinese boy. Over time this improved, but I think it did motivate me to gain some respect through drawing and writing, or at least some precocious power of language, to try and be “smart”. Being automatically outside the forum of cool you can actually enjoy being odd or unusual, given that being normal is not an option. And my friends did appreciate that — especially a talent for drawing spaceships and monsters, which proved to be highly popular. Even though I didn't think

about any of this much at the time, in retrospect it seems that my childhood landscape and family have a big subconscious part to play in the subjects of my books, paintings and film design many years later, particularly the subject of cultural dislocation, which seems to emerge again and again like a recurring dream.

I should mention that my wife is Finnish, and we live in Melbourne, in a street seemingly ruled by patrolling Greek & Italian pensioners, and share the house with Diego, a free-range Brazilian parrot, and two crazy budgies (our only indigenous residents, Snowball and Filip). All of this seems completely normal. This mixed family has done much to inspire recent stories, including both *The Arrival* (in which you can see the likenesses of my wife Inari and myself, and a creature somewhat like Diego), and stories such as “No Other Country” about an Italian migrant family with a portal to the “old country” in their ceiling space, inspired by ethnic neighbours.

Arbitrary Realities

If the play between art and life has taught me anything, it's that there is not really any such thing as “normal”. The ordinary, the everyday, quotidian, usual, banal, familiar, commonplace, straightforward and average — all these things are a kind of illusion, one especially suffered by adults who are too adept at categorizing experience, or those unfortunate souls obsessed with mono-culturalism, and doomed to suffer all manner of debilitating prejudice. Meanwhile, the world continues every day to be as strange and miraculous as it was when we first saw it as toddlers, although it's not always so easy to notice this with age. Culture, nature, family, belief, work, play, language, all these things are flexible realities, something we realize especially when we travel overseas, and discover that

the commonplace is exotic and the exotic is commonplace, depending on what side of the tour-bus window you happen to be sitting on. One of the great gifts of travel, multiculturalism, and other boundary-crossing – including reading – is that your own culture, lifestyle and language is suddenly not so absolute, normal, righteous or sacrosanct; it's just another way of thinking and existing, based on historical accidents that mainly happened before you were born.

The first time I arrived in London, I had a very strong sense of this. This was my first independent trip to another country at the age of 22, during a very formative period as a young artist. I'd just finished my first picture book and was contemplating a second, *The Rabbits* written by John Marsden, about the colonization of Australia by the British. I was uncertain about both this quite difficult concept and, more broadly, what I was really doing as a career (I did the first tentative sketches for *The Rabbits* during a crossing in the “Chunnel”, which in retrospect seems highly appropriate.) Walking around I could see first-hand the genetic blueprint for most Anglo-Australian housing, food, language and manners, things only seen peripherally through all the BBC shows I enjoyed on Australian TV. But it was all slightly different, not better or worse, neither ancestral nor descendent — just different. Not a “mother country” at all, but an alternative cousin, very much a weird parallel universe with charming accents. Naturally, I don't have an accent. Australians are far too laid back to cultivate such affectations! It did make me wonder why we still have a British Queen as our head of state, a person that doesn't even live in our hemisphere, but I can only emphasize once again that reality is often arbitrary and bizarre.

Harriet Earle: Could you tell me a little about how you got into comics in the first place? What drew you in?

Shaun Tan: I essentially came to comics through a side door. I never actually set out to make a comic when I began working on *The Arrival*, and as a matter of fact have not properly made one since! So although I'm often identified as a comics artist, I'm not sure I qualify. That said, my interest in narrative painting and picture book illustration, film and animation, writing short stories, all of this naturally bleeds into comics since the boundaries between art forms are often just arbitrary and conventional. They are kind of the same thing: I've always been interested in any sequence of images that can tell a story, with or without words.

In the case of *The Arrival*, it had a very long and convoluted gestation, starting life as a short picture book with minimal text, about a man travelling to an exotic country, bringing with him only a suitcase, no language or understanding. I didn't even think of it as an migrant story at first, let alone a comic, just a set of interesting images, mainly landscapes. I began to add more and more pages, dividing pages into multiple illustrated panels, and dropping words, mainly to slow the pacing down at first, but later using this to emphasize evolving themes of cultural miscommunication, and general bewilderment. So the pages started looking like comics pages, and had more intimacy of action about them. I was also encountering new problems: how to show events, intentions, the passage of time at different speeds, how to place the "camera" during conversations, how you simply move from one picture to the next. I'd accidentally become a comics creator! My earliest layouts bear this out, as they were very clunky, with boring perspectives and often too much superfluous detail in each panel. Two things

helped me improve, learning a bit about storyboarding for film (I was working on an animated short, *The Lost Thing*, at the time), and borrowing some graphic novels from my local suburban library in Perth, Western Australia. Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, Daniel Clowes, some manga, and particularly Raymond Briggs, who like me seems mainly a picture book illustrator who then requires multiple panels or strips to tell his tales. Briggs's *The Snowman* was particularly influential, as was Spiegelman's *Maus* and Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* – the latter being particularly good at playing with time and space.

I now read comics quite frequently, but it's really the artistic problems of *The Arrival* that got me into it. Prior to that, I did not have a great interest or knowledge of comics, I didn't actually read them much as a kid, even though my brother was a keen *Tintin* reader. As a kid I always felt the pictures were all so small and busy!

Elemental Commonality

Cultural difference is fun and interesting for its own sake, but it also can tell us a lot about ourselves as human beings. That is, looking at so many different ways of thinking and living inevitably provokes a question of intersection. Among these variations, what do we all have in common? What binds us in the most elemental ways and perhaps defines our humanity? Where is the “train station” through which all these cultural railways pass? These might seem like big philosophical questions, but they need not be presented in big philosophical ways. In fact, they come up all the time at a modest scale, especially in literature for young people.

Here we are compelled to consider elemental things all the time and at its best this literature asks very profound questions in a way that is disarming, entertaining and even silly, much as children do.

Writers and artists (like children) don't do this by examining life reductively, the way that you might pull a clock apart, boil chemicals down to a periodic table or crack a DNA code to say "look at these fundamental building blocks". Instead we try to do what evolutionary nature does, experimenting with constant sideways variations on existing things, testing to see if anything clicks. We create small other universes that hopefully intersect in an unusual or surprising way with our own real world, like so many species of beetle studied by Charles Darwin, each further questioning and defining an essential idea of "beetle-ness". My own illustrated fiction offers an example I'm best qualified to talk about, particularly *The Arrival*. This book more or less began as a grand ambition to tell a universal migrant story. In early notes I explained to my editor that I wanted to "distil" multiple anecdotal histories I was researching – across many countries and centuries – into a single story featuring a generic everyman protagonist. That was the initial guiding concept: distillation. In practice, however, it seemed impossible to think about so many real-life tales reductively. They were all too unique and diverse, ranging from Asia to the Middle East to Europe to Australia; from 19th Century mass migrations to contemporary refugee crises; from young children to the elderly; the unskilled and educated, rich and poor; the persecuted, the adventurous, and also accidental migrations. There were many different reasons for changing lives and many different outcomes, both positive and negative. There were common elements certainly – homesickness, family, strange food, language, work – but how do you show the essence of these things in a way that's interesting, and not too abstracted or simplistic? In other words, how to make it feel real and honest? I realized that some reduction was necessary, an "elemental" approach that involves stripping back reality. In this case, removing words,

character identity, any precise notion of time or place, and also hovering between realism and the dreamlike softness of drawing. I realized that all these things allowed the reader to interpret the story in their own way, and at their particular pace or level of understanding. But what is most interesting to me as a creator is the parallel complexity of the new universe then presented, that the best way to be “truthful” is to sometimes go in the opposite direction: fantasy.

The place I thought of as “The New Country” ended up being rich in all sorts of details, so is not a boiled-down version of real history at all. It’s a sideways history, an alternate universe that we might usefully compare to our own, and consider the common intersections of feeling, what we might do as international travellers, and instinctively as readers. City streets in the book are complex and alien but also familiar, so we recognize pathways, shops, vehicles and other necessities of a working community. Language is detailed but indecipherable; the difficulty of it draws focus on the things that are most important to us, the essential need to communicate basic questions and answers. The weirdness of new-world food – how it looks, is acquired, prepared and eaten – reminds us that our own “ordinary” culinary rituals are actually pretty strange. And the problems of working life as an illiterate migrant seem more acute when they are odd; to be chased by a large reptile while delivering parcels, for instance, might best illustrate a lapse in education or street-wisdom.

It is through strangeness we arrive at a kind of clarity, like looking at things from a distance. This idea also extends in *The Arrival* to a number of short back-stories that illustrate social or environmental crises. Rather than representing these in symbolic or simplified ways, I imagined parallel realities that may or may not have specific meaning, from black serpents swimming in the air to masked giants looming over burning towns. These are as bewildering to the reader as they might be for the characters in the story, and offer some idea of what it is

like to live through traumatic historical events as they unfold, without the security of omniscience or hindsight. I quickly realized that instead of focusing on things that made sense, trying to simplify some universal migrant experience, trying to understand everything, the best thing to do is simply focus on strangeness, dislocation and complexity. In other words, trying to make a world as befuddling as our own would be to any new immigrant, to just imagine what that is like. And above all else, to never actually explain anything.

Bewilderment is not a bad thing: it can often bring out the best in us. It galvanizes our natural human ability to draw sense from a puzzle, to use our imagination, rather than lean upon received wisdom get us through. We need to trust and respect the creative abilities of other people, and I do consider readers of my work as co-creators, needing to invest meaning into illustrative stories that are really half-finished, deliberately incomplete. Surrealism has often felt very useful to me for this reason. If handled carefully it can get closer to reality rather than further away, more or less by “waking us up” from the complacency of ordinary recognition. We begin to appreciate ordinary reality as not so ordinary.

Childhood and Wisdom

Of course, we all know surrealism very well, because when we were very small, pretty much everything was surreal. We tend to forget how mystifying even the most basic things used to be and we had to constantly use our imagination through play to test “alternate realities”, to accumulate stable references, ideas that would stick together as useful patterns of meaning and agency. So much childhood play is, on some level, a kind of intensive mental laboratory where we hone our understanding. As we figure things out, we become better at communicating, organizing thoughts, discerning value and gaining wisdom, all of which is

essential. However, the cost of such education can sometimes be intellectual complacency, as if learning is something you do to graduate from one level to the next, which is often how we misunderstand schooling: having figured something out, we shut down the laboratory and move on, as if we are filling up an archive, learning tables or marking off entries in a ledger. Life can lose some of its magic that way by creeping degrees, and a kind of “closed reading” can supplant imagination altogether.

This is a problem examined in *The Lost Thing*, a story that could also be looked at as a set of questions about critical literacy — not to mention things with tentacles. It is the first story I entirely wrote and illustrated, and probably still one of my best because it is so simple: a curious boy stumbles upon a nameless “thing” in a world that has no place for it. Spurred on by this dilemma he experiences a brief adventure, trying to solve the question “where does it belong?” After a series of setbacks, an unusual solution is found: a traditional picture book structure if ever there was. There is of course a deeper question going on, which I only realized after I’d written the story: why do we feel compelled to ask or answer a question of belonging at all? Why do we crave a “right place” for this lost thing? This gets back to my own ideas about critical literacy, that there is a lot more to reading – a book, picture or the world at large – than simply asking the right question or finding the right answer, because there is no right answer in this case. The best anyone can do, whether the character in the story or the reader, is to just ask good questions, remain receptive, and know that there might not be any predictable solution. Instead, we are free to imagine all possible meanings and actions. I myself do not know what the lost thing is or where it belongs, but I still enjoy the mystery of this, the same way I enjoy the mystery of a rock, tree or bird, even after it has been fully “explained”.

On the other hand, the citizens of the fictional city in *The Lost Thing* don’t need to worry about mystery. They have, arguably, a very organized understanding of their world.

Everything has a meaning, a place of belonging, a consensus of value, and there is even a “Federal Department of Odds and Ends” to comfortably take care of any miscellaneous abnormalities, a world of closed reading that’s actually very functional, even comforting. However, it’s also bleak and ludicrous: it has given birth to a mechanized landscape that can only serve its own bureaucratic purpose. People maintain the city and the city maintains the people, and they all do it so efficiently that any question of meaning or higher purpose is simply redundant. Imagination is unnecessary. Art, music, and other purposeless activities do not exist.

I drew upon two sources of inspiration for this little universe. The first was “economic rationalism”, a popular concept in Australia at the time of writing *The Lost Thing* in the late 90s, where moral considerations are put aside in favour of more quantifiable economic outcomes (similar to Thatcherism). Who would guess that such an ideology could be so artistically inspiring? Which brings me to my second, even less colourful source of interest: a set of old physics and mathematics books from my father’s time as an engineering student. I wondered what it would be like if this was the only kind of literature in the world. That is, absolutely practical, meaningful and purposeful stuff, but also (like economic rationalism) lacking a certain humanism. There’s certainly nothing wrong with either economic or engineering reductionism, but a society based on these things exclusively would not be very open-minded. Enter into this universe a large red-tentacled thing: a lost thing. The boy (who like the main character in *The Arrival* is modelled after me, here as a teenager) is faced with an obvious problem. He does not have any idea what to do with a useless creature; on the other hand, he feels he must do something. It’s a dilemma I often confront in my own life, and part of the writing process involves examining that anxiety, the kind of dilemma that is the basis for most stories. What to do about a thing that you don’t entirely understand? Do you ignore it, become fearful or regard it with compassion, participate in an unknown risk,

and to what degree? And this is where a more expansive idea of visual literacy is useful, and where crazy stories such as this one might transcend amusement and have quite a lot to do with real-world parallels: meeting new people, encountering new situations, dealing with cultural difference, pausing to consider your own motivations and fears. In order to deal with a lot of these things, simple recognition or comprehension might not be enough, and neither instruction manuals nor ideological rules can really prepare us for many of life's hook turns.

A Note on Visual Literacy

As an illustrator I've often come across the phrase "visual literacy", which might also include art appreciation or criticism, and is generally very useful. Sometimes it's presented as a kind of deconstruction exercise, where meanings and artistic intentions are identified, subtexts and ideologies unpacked and so on. Such decoding can be an important skill, but I don't think it's necessary unless you're an academic. Far more interesting for the average reader are two very simple questions about any story, painting, or indeed life experience:

How does it make me feel?

What does it make me think about?

That covers two basic aspects of any aesthetic experience, feelings and ideas. In good art, these go hand in hand, so that meaning comes primarily from feeling and free-association, and need not be terribly privileged or cloistered knowledge. It's available to anyone who permits him or herself to be open to it. The real answers are therefore not in the work, a story or picture, but in the readers' contemplation of their own reactions to that work. This simple

realization can open up a lot of things for a lot of people, and also diminish a great deal of intellectual anxiety about reading or looking at images. You need never panic in front of a blotchy abstract painting, a peculiar art-house film, or an obscure picture book if you keep in mind that your own thoughts and feelings are the most important subject of analysis, not those of the artist. It doesn't mean that all opinions are equal, but that they should at least be very personal.

This is also great for me, as an author and illustrator, because I only have to worry about making the most interesting stories and pictures I can imagine, with no need to dwell upon what they might ultimately mean, or what kind of message I'm imparting. These things are left for the reader to decide in their own way, especially given that every reader is a unique person, and mostly unknown to me. They might be of any age, nationality, background, subculture or education level. Even when I may have made particular references or allusions to other paintings or literary works (as in *The Rabbits*, which borrows compositions from old colonial paintings) it's not important that the reader actually know about these. What matters most is that a certain feeling is conveyed (such as the vague impression of an old colonial painting): something that's much harder to academically footnote, and more likely to send thoughts trailing off in more directions than a deconstruction might allow. A good image must always remain strange, hard to circumscribe, yet open to all.

Confronting Strangeness

The question of a personal response in the face of strangeness is one I find endlessly fascinating, and lies at the core of everything I've produced, and am likely to produce until I

fall off the perch or take up golf. That is, do we respond to strangeness positively, negatively or not at all? And how do the unexpected transitions in our lives affect our thinking, or give us cause to reflect upon our values? All of my own stories illustrate various reactions that are possible when dealing with incomprehensible events. In *The Rabbits*, there are mixed reactions to the arrival of colonial creatures from a distant shore, where violence gradually supersedes curiosity, with very negative consequences. In the story “Undertow”, a dugong (a marine mammal similar to a manatee) appears on a neighbour’s front lawn one morning. Some characters are angry about this; some are concerned only with keeping the animal safe until emergency services arrive; while others long for a deeper knowledge of what has occurred. In “The Nameless Holiday”, people must offer a personal belonging to a giant reindeer that visits their roof, and are then left to consider whether it was worth exchanging a material object for an immaterial experience, is this positive or negative? In the story “Eric”, a quiet foreign exchange student is not so interested in the things his host family finds compelling, and exhibits strange habits. How are they to react to this — with irritation or tolerant amusement? When a tiny red tree starts growing in the middle of a bedroom floor at the end of *The Red Tree*, it might be approached with either optimism or trepidation.

The questions in each story really begin as questions to myself. As someone who lives a relatively stable, largely non-transitional life, I often have trouble digesting challenges, and am no more open-minded or experienced than anyone else. But art and literature offer a constant reminder to not take wisdom, experience or comfort for granted, and that I probably know and understand a lot less than I think. I create stories from rumination on problems rather than any desire to communicate a “message”, which is why I wilfully avoid didactic tales. I’m interested in elaborating an issue by presenting it in an intriguing way, not necessarily in offering a solution.

Internal Migrations

Coming back to the theme of crossings, translations and migrations, it's worth looking at this from a very personal, internal perspective. That is, while we all go on outward journeys, whether crossing a kitchen floor or relocating overseas, we also have many internal journeys all the time. In fact, in our lives there are several selves, and a spectrum of memorable transitions from childhood to adulthood, where our circumstances, thoughts, feelings and beliefs are subject to change. That can even happen in a year, week or day: small "internal migrations of the soul", each experience and thought crossing yet another boundary. And of course reading is a part of that process, being solitary, private and deeply contemplative. Stories offer us frameworks for reflecting on transitional experiences because they are always about transitional experiences: growth, trauma, discovery, transformation, destruction and creation, journeys big and small. I think good stories are those that teach us to expect these changes, to embrace new and unknown things with empathy, curiosity and imagination, rather than hope everything will stay the same and that the world will continue to be "normal" and understandable. It might be nice if it did, but let's face it, highly unlikely.

It's especially important for young people to remain aware of this, both for pleasure in the moment of reading or living, and as future adults. A lot of the negative forces currently shaping our world are – when you think about them – a rejection of exactly those values that reading and critical/visual literacy might embrace: empathy, curiosity and imagination. Is it any coincidence that the most prejudiced people, fundamentalists, oppressors and the wilfully ignorant prefer "common sense" to imagination, and almost always privilege "obvious truth" over speculation, preferring "answers" to questions? Is it also any coincidence that the best scientists, artists, business or community leaders throughout history are often the first to

admit the limits of wisdom, to openly say “I don’t know” and more than willing to consider oppositional ideas? As Einstein put it simply, “imagination is more important than knowledge”. Imagination keeps asking good questions, even after knowledge is acquired; it offers endless opportunity for growth. The unknown must remain as interesting to us as the known.

HE: Comics has always seemed to be a weird form in terms of the geographical-historical development: it’s universal, but at the same time there are some striking local flavours to be found. The most obvious example that comes to mind is the type of art and transitions used in Manga, but we could also consider the Franco-Belgian preference for *Ligne claire* or the American fondness for primary colours. Does this have any bearing on your use of the comics form?

ST: Not really; in fact, I’m still learning about these differences. Melbourne – and Australia in general – is an interesting place, producing a number of good comics artists, but without having a particular collective style or tradition. Perhaps it’s just too new or dispersed in Australia, perhaps still forming, and we pick our influences like magpies. Our picture-book culture is interesting for the same reason: there is just not much tradition, or what tradition is there does not create fixed preferences or stylistic continuity. There’s a certain freedom here, there’s not much weight when it comes to a “right way” of doing things. You notice this at international book fairs, where many of the other countries seem to have an

identifiable style. Perhaps we just don't really know what we are doing! I actually think that's a great way to be.

HE: Tell me about the artwork in *The Arrival* — why did you choose for the book to *look* the way it does?

ST: Gosh, that's a big question. It was actually a tough nut to crack, I thought of many different styles that *didn't* work, fussing with those for about a year. In the end I kept returning to a handful of inspirational images, old museum photographs of migrants stepping from ships that I had pinned to my wall, and realized I basically wanted my book to look like those. That was a terrific but also alarming realization, as photo-realistic images are laborious to produce (I know well from a former life as a fantasy novel cover artist, and occasional portrait painter), and so to do hundreds of them...well I wasn't sure how that would be possible. Stylized characters are just much easier to draw repeatedly. Continuity with realism, I found, was also a big problem, as it must be for most comics creators — making sure a lapel or vase looks like the same lapel or vase from shot to shot.

So I bought a video camera and began filming myself doing various staged actions, building simple sets in my house and garage, collecting objects and making small models, and used this as reference for illustration. This solved many visual planning problems. Technically, I decided to use graphite pencil to render my images, mainly because its very nuanced and can be edited easily, and in simple practical terms, it made the book possible to realize, even though it still took a very long time (about four years). All of these factors affected the final

look of the book, and most of them were practical considerations as much as artistic ones. Having an idea is one thing, figuring out how to share it is another, and then just getting it done is the real trick.

HE: The thing which struck me the most about *The Arrival* is that it is silent and the writing is not in a known alphabet. Why did you decide not to use spoken or (understandable) written communication?

ST: As mentioned, I dropped written words from early drafts to basically *slow down* the pace of reading, something I've often done as a picture book illustrator; I love to include silent visual sequences in the middle of otherwise wordy stories, to encourage the reader to pause and think. One slight problem I have with comics is that a string of words stretched across multiple panels can quicken the visual narrative and monopolize attention. In some ways, our culture trusts too much in the authority of words, and against images they often take on the function of captions, or when very short, interpretative titles. That's perfect for some comics, but it did not seem right for *The Arrival*, which I felt needed to unfold very slowly, as most real-life migrant tales do (I did a lot of research). Of course, once I started experimenting with wordless sequences, there was no going back; it made perfect sense when cast against a story about a man entering a foreign country, especially as a cultural illiterate. The idea of adding an invented language – since there would still be signs, newspapers and documents in this world – was a natural progression.

I was also attracted to situations where the protagonist could only really convey specific ideas such as a loaf of bread or a hotel room by drawing pictures,

as this was what I was essentially doing as an artist — telling a story with a voiceless pencil. The protagonist is basically me, and the story is not only about travelling to another country, it's also about trying to make sense of everyday life as a visual artist, and realizing that common things – food, people, customs, pets, vehicles – are all very peculiar, especially when you take away every dictionary.

Embracing the Unexpected

Key moments of transition or migration, whether external or internal, are usually quite unexpected. In his book *Black Swan*, philosopher Nassim Nicholas Taleb suggests that big turning points in our lives are typically unplanned, from a terrorist attack to falling in love. They are wildcard unknowns, much like the sighting of a black swan at a time when it was a clearly proven fact that all swans were white. Not only did black swans not exist, the very idea of them did not. Big conceptual shifts – often alarming or exciting shifts – remind us that change is the only constant and our best literature reflects this, from *Gilgamesh* to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Each tale poses an endlessly interesting question: when expectation is challenged or equilibrium disrupted and we find ourselves floundering in new territory, what do we do? Do we act well or badly? And how does this define who we are, as characters in our own story?

Transitions and migrations bring out our best and our worst. As Taleb suggests, personality might be less defined by so-called normal life than how we behave in an unusual situation; all storytellers know this intuitively, too. In the simplest terms, when faced with the unexpected, we might respond with apathy, prejudice or curiosity. Of course the last one

offers the only source of genuine hope: curiosity is a kind of empathy, a will to find “otherness” interesting rather than problematic, whether that be a person from another culture, a political idea, a tentacled creature, or any much smaller day-to-day encounter with the unanticipated. This is where literature as a play of words and pictures moves beyond entertainment, acknowledging the flexibility of reality, the actual pleasure of realizing how limited our knowledge might be, and the ensuing pleasure of speculation. Good fiction also reminds us that we are not alone in this sea of questions. I notice this especially when hearing responses to *The Red Tree* and *The Arrival* in particular, where readers express strong feelings of identification with characters who are lost or emotionally capsized. Children often comment that they enjoy *The Red Tree* because it “feels real”, which might seem odd for such a weird-looking book, but I think they like the unvarnished admission that loneliness and confusion are inevitable facts. And similarly, I receive a lot of feedback from migrants, both young and old (some of whom cannot read English), that certain sequences in *The Arrival* are remarkably accurate to their personal experience, even though, of course, it’s set in an entirely imaginary and even implausible world, not to mention a very flat and papery one. Yet the feelings of dislocation and uncertainty represented through this sideways medium are realistic, being based on real life stories gathered during my initial research.

What I think these readers are responding to, along with myself when drawing or writing, is a simple acknowledgement that our day-to-day circumstances are mysterious and weird, and that we are all adrift to some extent. But that’s okay, because our compass bearing – especially when things get choppy – is a deeper humanity, as it always has been: a confidence in our adaptable imagination, a willingness to learn, and an ability to read the world as if it were just another crazy story in a book, one that’s being continuously written and illustrated as we travel from one unexpected thing to the next.

HE: I'd like to close with a question of categorization. Your work is often considered to be children's literature. Is this something you intended, or a publisher's decision? Not to suggest that children's literature can't be complex and exquisitely drawn (of course, most is!) but the themes you talk about could be considered rather *too* complex for a young audience. What do you think?

ST: You know, I've grappled with this question my whole career as an illustrator. I would concede that my work *is* children's literature in some respects, even though I've also resisted the label. What I would say, to add more clarity, is that my work is often *about* childhood, or a certain condition of conceptual innocence, in much the same way that artist-writers like Maurice Sendak or Raymond Briggs are interested in childhood, without intending to create books specifically for children. I'm particularly interested in the things that children and adults have in common in certain situations, such as being a migrant (which has some parallels to childhood). Another is inexplicable emotional turmoil (*The Red Tree*), powerlessness and confusion (*The Rabbits*) and fears about belonging (*The Lost Thing*). Often in our adult lives we are returned to a child-like condition by a change in circumstances, and I think this is what interests me, those moments when we must completely reassess what we thought our lives were all about. We must depend on creative imagination more than wisdom or experience when faced with new things, and my tacit argument is that imagination is ultimately more important than knowledge.

Of course, the short answer is simply this: when I sit down to write or draw something, I just try to focus on the most interesting things that I can, and then figure out what they might look like or how they might sound. I don't have a clue about who the audience might be! Publishers do have a significant role in deciding how a book might be marketed, and it just so happens that the kind of illustrated stories I like can only usually be published through children's publishers, and it turns out that my work is very popular with children. I take that as a sign of getting something right, of tapping into something universal and expansive, rather than exclusive and specific as the phrase "children's literature" might suggest. If only there was another category of "books for everybody", I'd be perfectly fine with that label.