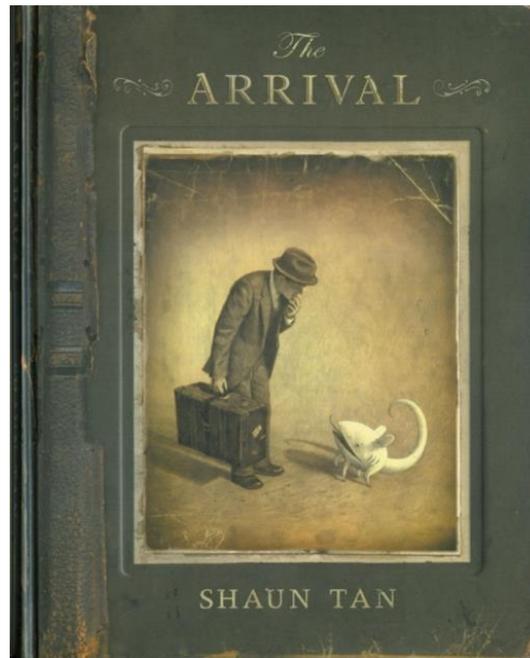


The Arrival by Shaun Tan

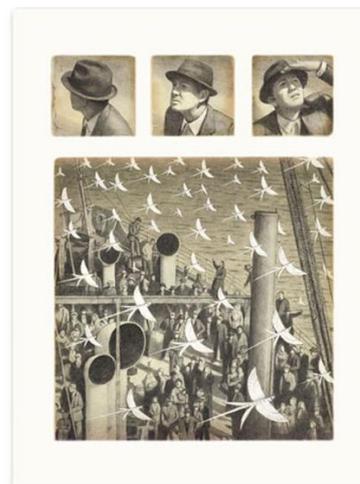
[Contemporary Fiction]



An entrancing book full of empathy, understanding and kindness, this is a treasure trove of narrative devices unique to the medium of comics, so teaching it in schools is a joy! However, explaining those devices in depth requires both more space than I have here and more precise interior art than can be found online. Hopefully we'll film another one of my exploratory show-and-tells, but in the meantime...

Shaun Tan's THE ARRIVAL is a wordless tale rendered in subtle but telling tones from the cold grey of bewilderment and despair, through period-piece sepia to a bright, burnished bronze which will lift your heart high and make your soul sing!

It's a voyage of discovery both for the book's readers and its protagonist who must reluctantly leave behind his sparsely decorated home, his soft-handed wife and their daughter, for there is something gravely wrong with their homeland. A serpent's tail, sharp with spines, snakes through narrow streets between dilapidated, terraced housing, casting its shadow across windows, blotting out the light.



It's metaphorical, of course, the fantastical nature of the oppressive intrusion cleverly left to stand in for anything from corruption, tyranny and torture... to disease, famine or war.

Whatever the affliction, our husband and father must bid his loved ones a tearful but dignified, final farewell, their hands slipping painfully from his grasp along with all that is familiar to him. He sits alone in a tiny cabin within the giant iron ocean liner which is in turn dwarfed by the open sea it crosses. That full double-page spread represents scale. A second double-page populated by *multiple* panels signifies the passage of time: each looks up into the changing cloud formations, their fluctuating tones reflecting the man's shifting moods, as surely as they'll affect your own.



It is emphatically not a pleasure cruise, cold travellers on deck huddling under blankets; but there are moments of astonishment, delight and wonder as shoals of white flying fish soar in the sky! On arrival, the skyline is recognisably that of post-war America, land of the immigrant. But beyond the docks, the interminable, cattle-like queues and the physically invasive medical procedures, the city is once more rendered fantastical – magnificent, to be sure, yet daunting in scale and alien in aspect. It is a maze of strangely shaped monuments made no more navigable by maps. Even the methods of transport are unfathomable. The customs are curious and the animals unknown: which are food, which are treasured pets? Bewildered by all this silent babble, you cannot help but fear and *feel* for the man who has nowhere to go, knows not what to do, and can only communicate with drawings.



This is why *THE ARRIVAL* is a silent graphic novel: because a) he doesn't understand the language, b) without words to guide the book's reader or its protagonist, you are artfully locked into the same shared plight of interpreting what lies in front of you. You are walking a mile in his solitary shoes.

Tan has crafted a potent impression of how daunting an experience seeking asylum must be: the sense of isolation, loneliness, and most of all helplessness after leaving your loved ones behind. Absorbing and affecting, this is a great big book of empathy for your fellow human being, and the most eloquent rebuttal to the ignorant xenophobia so prevalent right now, the fear-mongering bigotry of the Daily Mail and the vile, knee-jerk nationalism of right-leaning Little Britain.

Oh, for the kindness of strangers! Soon, I promise, the man discovers that there are others who've fled to escape the horrors of their own homelands before him. They tell their individual stories, take him under their wings, and introduce him to the spectacle and traditions of their adopted country in all its majestic, often radiant glory.

Additional resource: Shaun Tan gives an equally eloquent interview on race, identity and growing up biracial / bicultural here: <http://www.thepin.org/meet/shaun-tan>

