The New York Times Magazine https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/magazine/mag-24Tan-t.html

Shaun Tan's Wild Imagination

By Carlo Rotella

April 22, 2011

A vine has invaded Shaun Tan's house in suburban Melbourne, Australia, through a previously unnoticed gap where the window of his studio doesn't quite meet the sill. Advancing along a curtain rod and sinking offshoots into the dark places behind his desk, the vine has overgrown Tan's workspace. He has to trim it back, because it keeps trying to grab things — an electric pencil sharpener, unopened letters in his inbox. Recently he returned from a trip to find that it was exploring the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet, where he keeps new projects.

The vine had a chance to make some headway in February when Tan spent a week in Los Angeles for the Academy Awards, where he collected an Oscar as co-director of "The Lost Thing," a short animated film based on one of his picture books. In it, a young man collecting bottle caps at the beach befriends a tentacled beast with a bright red metal shell and tries to find a home for it in a cheerless city where people ignore such anomalies. In his acceptance speech, Tan said, "Our film is about a creature that nobody pays any attention to, so this is wonderfully ironic."

"The Lost Thing" is a kind of manifesto for Tan's way of looking at the world. Again and again, his stories introduce a lonely character in an alienating landscape and then, often by concentrating on some previously overlooked detail, transmute the feeling of isolation into something more like an artist's sensibility: a more purposeful and yet more playful state infused with an intensely observant appreciation of the secret beauty of life. In his book "The Red Tree," a girl toils through a series of tableaus of crushing anomie — including a particularly memorable one in which she trudges down the sidewalk in the shadow of a titanic gape-mouthed fish floating above her with dark gunk streaming from its eye — but returns home at the end of the day to find her little room transformed by the miraculous appearance of a bright red tree. If you go back and look carefully, you can find a leaf from the red tree, unnoticed the first time through, in every one of the book's pictures. In "The Arrival," a wordless monochrome immigrant fantasy that became an international best seller, a young man leaves an obscurely menacing Old Country and makes his way to a city that looks like a dream vision of New York. His eventual achievement of belonging in this strange new place, his arrival in full, depends upon attending closely to the details of fellow newcomers' stories, customs and advice.

Tan himself has arrived in a big way this year. A few weeks ago, a month after collecting his Oscar, he received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the richest ($765,000) international prize for children's literature, adding to a string of past honors that include the Hugo and the World Fantasy awards. Already celebrated in his native Australia, he has emerged on the global stage at age 37 as a major

visual storyteller. This spring, Arthur A. Levine, his American publisher, followed up "The Arrival" and a book of illustrated stories titled "Tales From Outer Suburbia" with "Lost and Found," a volume collecting three of Tan's most popular Australian picture books. And he's in talks with Nick Wechsler, producer of "The Road" and "Requiem for a Dream," about a feature-film adaptation of "The Arrival."

Tan creates picture books, but he's not a children's author, exactly; "The Arrival" is a masterpiece of the graphic-novel form, but he's not really a graphic novelist either. Chris van Allsburg, author of "The Polar Express" and other picture books that parents are happy to pore over repeatedly with their children, comes to mind as a peer, but the Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki, perhaps best known for "Spirited Away," might make a better comparison. Like Miyazaki, Tan engages audiences across a wide range of age and sophistication. I teach "The Arrival" in a graduate seminar on the city in literature, and my wife teaches it in an undergraduate course on immigrant narratives, but our daughters enjoyed it when they were kindergartners, and one of them, now 10, has recently been stealing "Lost and Found" from my desk. Tan's low-key, open-ended, enigmatic stories are often about coming at a forbidding world from a fresh angle, making it strange on the way to making it one's own — an experience that children share with immigrants and with artists.

"You discover how confounding the world is when you try to draw it," Tan says. "You look at a car, and you try to see its car-ness, and you're like an immigrant to your own world. You don't have to travel to

encounter weirdness. You wake up to it."

THE COASTAL WESTERN AUSTRALIAN suburbia around Perth in which Tan grew up has a kind of Martian grandeur. Gigantic cloudscapes roil over a repeating pattern of developments, freeways, chain stores. Nick Stathopoulos, an illustrator and artist who has been a mentor to Tan, says: "When it's hot, it's incredibly bleak. You don't see people on the street. You see this bakingly hot, empty landscape." Ann James, an author and illustrator of children's books who co-owns a gallery in Melbourne, says that "Perth has even more pure light than other parts of the country." She sees that light and "a lot of Australian color" in Tan's pictures, as well as recurring elements of the Western Australian landscape: "That horizon, that enormous sky, the clarity."

Mia Mala McDonald for The New York Times

In one story in "Outer Suburbia," two young brothers walk along suburban roads past malls and streets identical except for their names, scaling multilevel parking garages to get their bearings and making notes in an exercise book. At sunset, they reach the limit of their map and, apparently, of the world. In the story's final image, they dangle their sneakered feet over the sheared-off edge of a road

into a great pink-tinged void with puffy white clouds and a single black bird. Down below, water cascades from projecting drainage pipes into the unknown.

"When we were growing up, a lot of the area around Perth was still under development," Tan's older brother, Paul, told me. "Now it's sprawl, but we were on the fringes then, and there was a lot of bush. We would walk a long way, all the way to the beach." Paul, who grew up to be a geologist, collected rocks. Shaun collected shells, among other things, and drew them.

Their father, an ethnic Chinese immigrant from Malaysia (their mother is a native Australian of Irish and English heritage), is an architect who modeled for his sons the virtue of precise attention to detail. Shaun showed a talent for drawing at an early age and built an identity around it. "It was better to be known as the kid who could draw," he says, "than as the short kid." Being known as a clever artist also gave him a way to belong in an overwhelmingly white school. "Now there are lots of Asians and Eurasians where I live," he says, "but back then in Hillarys," the suburb of Perth in which he grew up, "we were practically the only ones." So he drew his way in from the margin.

His father gave him his first paying gig when he was 7 — 20 cents for adding a single palm tree to an architectural sketch. After formal art training in high school and a college career devoted to critical study of fine art and literature, Tan became a freelance illustrator. Taking on every kind of work he could get, from diagrams of microscopes to sword-wielding warriors on the covers of fantasy novels, he gradually

filtered elements of his own style from the techniques he sampled and from influences that ranged from Edward Hopper to Terry Gilliam to the designer Milton Glaser.

He also painted landscapes, and still does. He keeps many of the finished canvases stacked against the wall in his studio. He may exhibit them one day, he says, but painting has always been "a largely private exercise" for him, as opposed to illustration, which pays the bills. "Illustrating is more about communicating specific ideas to a reader," he says, while "painting is more like pure science, more about the act of painting." When he visited his brother in Norseman, a remote town in Western Australia, Shaun collected rocks, dirt and rusted gears and other half-buried industrial detritus left over from a century of mining. He applied these materials directly to the canvas to create a literal "landscape painting" that meditates on the region's economic and natural history — and on painting a landscape.

Tan's on-the-job training as an illustrator and his experiments as a painter led to a mature style that developed in a series of celebrated picture books. The breakthrough came in 1998 with "The Rabbits," an allegory of the colonization of Australia written by John Marsden. Tan's rapacious, rectilinear rabbits, some with wheels for feet, are stuffed so tightly into their uniforms that their ears stick out straight backward like a sprung collar. The gently rounded indigenous creatures in their way don't stand a chance. It's a children's book, sort of, but with scenes of bloody battle and befouling of the land and a final image that runs against the grain of Marsden's bleak closing line

("Who will save us from the rabbits?"): a rabbit and an indigenous creature sit facing each other on a littered plain, perhaps tentatively beginning the process of mutual recognition.

"The Lost Thing" followed in 2000, then "The Red Tree" (2001), "The Arrival" (2006) and "Tales From Outer Suburbia" (2008). Tan rapidly became a star in the Australian children's-book market and beyond. When I talked to prominent Australian illustrators and authors of children's books, Tan's colleagues and friends, some of them took the opportunity to joke about being jealous of his talent and fame. Ron Brooks said: "When I first met him, maybe 10 years ago, I thought, This isn't fair; he's only 12. He's a quiet young man, very serious. At least 13 or 14 now." Nick Stathopoulos said: "Shaun knows I hate him. I could have broken his fingers so many times. The one thing that gladdens my heart is that he's going bald." Short and slight enough to be mistaken for a boy from a distance, Tan looks a lot like the ethnically ambiguous immigrant hero of "The Arrival." He has the same scattering of a few unruly hairs at the front of his neat part, the same quietly ambitious drive beneath a shy, modest manner.

When I asked Tan's peers what about his work struck them as particularly Australian, they pointed to his visual references to the Western Australian landscape, the historical imagination of "The Rabbits," the Melbourne trams in "The Lost Thing." Ann James argued that Australian children's literature takes more experimental chances than its more established American counterpart. "We don't have this tradition on our shoulders telling us to do it that way," she said. "Our children's-book industry has only grown up in the last 30

years," and the market is still small, "so we're very willing to break new ground. And we're more willing to leave it up to the reader to work things out. It's often about what's unsaid and left out."

WHEN I VISITED Tan at his oceanfront hotel in Santa Monica, Calif., the day before the Academy Awards ceremony, he was perhaps alone among the nominees in wondering out loud whether winning the Oscar would be a good thing. Discussions about a feature-film adaptation of "The Arrival" were under way before his nomination, and he was already well known in Hollywood (he consulted on "Wall-E" and "Horton Hears a Who"), but an Oscar would undoubtedly bring more opportunities to make movies, more invitations to do things other than hang around at home and draw. "I'm not dying to make a feature film," he said, "which people around here can be surprised to hear. It's about money and therefore audience, and that's somewhat counterproductive for me. I kind of like not having to feel that the work's going to be successful. Money does buy you time, it's true, but I have time now."

Being nominated for an Oscar had already taken him away from his routine as an artist. "This has not been a very productive period," he said. What with travel, press appearances and meetings, he hadn't been doing much of the low-stakes sketching that drives his creativity. "The Lost Thing," for instance, grew from a sketch of a hermit crab he made at the beach. Idly imagining what it would be like if the crab were huge, he drew a man next to it for scale, and the possibility of a relationship between the two figures became the germ of the book.

"There are two worlds that I move in as a creator," Tan said. "One is my own, in my suburban surroundings with my cup of green tea, and it feels like nothing's really going on and nothing's consequential. Since I was a kid, that's when everything gets done." He and his wife, Inari Kiuru, a graphic designer and jewelry maker from Finland, lead a peaceful life in Brunswick, an inner suburb of Melbourne. They don't have children — "Haven't got to that bridge yet," Tan says — and their time is their own. They work at home on their separate projects in a house they share with a yellow parrot named Diego and two budgies. They share an eye for neglected, out-of-the-way things, so their afternoon walks in the neighborhood can be "transforming experiences," Kiuru told me in an e-mail. "When the light changes, when something's fallen by the roadside in a particularly interesting way, when a fat cat chases a two-legged dog up a hill. . . ."

That's the artist's world, where Tan's sensibility can order his days and the work gets done. "Then there's the social world," he said, "and there's nothing more social than the Oscars. That makes me a little skeptical about film." Making a feature film would allow his sensibility to take new forms and extend its reach by commandeering some of the matchless resources that the movie industry usually devotes to reproducing well-tested formulas. But embarking on the project — traveling, negotiating, delegating, compromising — might well carry him away from the wellspring of that sensibility.

And making movies means collaborating with multiple authors, a change of pace for an artist who usually works alone. Tan worked with a very small crew on the movie of "The Lost Thing," but making a

feature would oblige him to reckon with many more potential muddiers of his clarity of vision. "I wrote that book for $600 in a studio in Perth," he told me. It might be easier to see the overlooked, to collect lost things, when operating on that cottage-industry artistic scale.

He was also perhaps alone among Oscar nominees in preferring a book to his own filmed adaptation of it. "I'm proud of the movie we made," he said, "but, without being immodest, I think that book is perfect. The film is a powerful experience, but there's something about the book that nailed the slightly Asperger's quality of the city."

Andrew Ruhemann, his co-director, pushed for more narrative drive, greater drama, but Tan wanted flat affect, a sense of nothing much happening, and he mostly got his way. After the young man in the movie finds an appropriate place for the lost thing, he fades back into workaday life, his sense of wonder eclipsed by mundane experience. The last we see of him, he's on a tram identical to all the others chugging across the cityscape, passing into a state of overlooking, of forgetting. So the movie is true to the book, but it has greater forward momentum just by virtue of being a film. Even with remote control in hand, the viewer doesn't dictate the duration of images the way a reader does. Picture books encourage Tan's kind of lingering, contemplative attention to detail.

Tan has turned down Hollywood before. During the five years that he worked on "The Arrival," he declined an offer to be production designer on a major feature film. And he has already turned down a good offer for film rights to "The Arrival," because he would have had

to give up artistic control. But if he can bargain for the resources and authority to do it right, he'll be sorely tempted to take a lead role in adapting "The Arrival." If he does, it will extend the logic of the book in at least one sense. Using live models, including children he "borrowed" from a nearby school, he shot video and photographic images that he compiled into a storyboard to guide him in drawing the book's hundreds of gorgeously meticulous pictures. He shot the footage in his garage, using a cheap video camera, empty boxes to simulate sets, lights from a hardware store and bedsheets to manage the sunlight. "It ended up being all about lighting," he said, sounding like a guy who might find it interesting to direct a feature film.

For now, though, he's back home, working on a new picture book, tending the vine growing across his desk, settling back into the life that nourishes his sensibility. He seems to be keeping his recent triumphs in the perspective afforded by that vantage point. Shortly after he got back from Los Angeles, a photograph circulated among his friends of Diego the parrot biting Tan's Oscar on the head.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Page 24 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: A Wild Mind Loose in Suburbia