

A story and picture book for adults and children alike, Shaun Tan draws a mirror to the face of Australia, with lonely people, houses where constant bickering between parents causes the boy to sleep on the lawn, communities where people use the missiles in their yards for practical purposes and an exchange student who lives in a house where little exchange takes place. Each story provokes thought about how we live and entreats the reader to give more serious consideration to our lives and the lives of those around us.

His incredible pictorial style, making references to art from the Renaissance world, Raymond Briggs, Geoffrey Smart, as well as nodding to Terry Gilliam, among others, gives an intellectual layer to the illustrations, urging the reader to reflect and ponder on what they are viewing. From the dog on the TV (dog on the tuckerbox?) to the car of people, looking for a place to sleep amongst a crowd of hotels, all showing a 'no vacancy' sign (Mary and Joseph perhaps?) each offers a suggestion of what is going on in outer suburbia. Tan's observation of life around him, particularly growing up in an outer suburb of Perth has given him a rich field from which to draw his stories.

To choose several stories from the wealth offered in this book is difficult, but I loved *Grandpas' story* which tells of the trials of a marriage, where after almost insurmountable difficulties, resulting in a no holds barred argument, the two find they must work together to find the common goal. *Eric*, too resonates with ideas. Most teachers now have kids from overseas in their classes and can view first hand the chasm which often exists between the child and his host family. *Eric* richly details this lack of communication between the family and the student, ironically underlining with humour and pathos the term exchange in exchange student. *Our expedition*, the tale of the rivalry between two brothers, resulting in their expedition to find what happens after the last map in the street directory, is just wonderful. The rivalry speaks volumes to all siblings, their quest, one of those which often occur in families and between friends, where one must prove that he is right.

For a perceptive look at the Australian suburban lifestyle, interjected with humour, pathos, allegory, and an amazing array of detailed illustrations then this book is a marvelous addition to anyone's library.

In a classroom, this book will work superbly, inviting students to reflect on what their life in suburbia is like. Any of the stories could be used as a jumping off point to encourage writing and evaluating of the Australian suburban life. Students could be asked to collect pictures which are similar to those drawn by Tan, or draw some themselves to add to a collection of drawings in the classroom reflecting life in suburbia. Dividing the class into smaller groups, with each group taking one of his stories, students could be asked to give deeper thought to their one story, adding their own stories to it, so making a collage of pictures and stories around the one.

For example, the first story, *The water buffalo*, could refer to the many people who influence us as we grow, and the scant regard we give them. Read the story with the class, asking them to postulate on its allegorical meaning, then encourage them to talk about people in their pasts who have helped and guided them, then they are there no more. The writing from your class on this one story could be significant.

On Thursday, June 12, on ABC Classic FM, Margaret Throsby interviewed Shaun Tan. It was a most enlightening interview about what motivates him to create his books. You are able to download it from the ABC, just go to [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au) and hit Radio, to find out how. There is also a large amount of information about Shaun Tan on the internet, and his website is most informative. ([www.shauntan.com](http://www.shauntan.com))

**Fran Knight, SA**

Shaun Tan has yet again provided us with another book of pure delight. *Tales From Outer Suburbia* is visually stunning as well as intellectually challenging. The book is comprised of 15 stories set against a suburban backdrop. Reality and fantasy merge to make something magical of the bland urban environment. Each story is unique and stands alone so the book can be dipped

into and out of as needed. The illustrations are superb and the layout is special; from paint, to pencil, to collage and crayon, all of the stories are brought to life. There is a gentle innocence about this book, a quiet acceptance of an ordinary life in the suburbs but where there is more meaning and individuality if you care to look beyond the asphalt and the grey.

In *The Water Buffalo*, we have the wise old buffalo that is more like a monument, he doesn't speak but her always points people in the right direction. He is always knowing and non judgemental.

There is sweet *Eric*, the foreign exchange student who looks uncommonly like an autumn leaf and like a leaf his visit is brief. He disappears in the night after leaving his host's pantry full of wonder. Eric has found meaning in the very simplest things in life and has made a gallery of found objects that he has planted illuminated flowers in. I adored this story.

*Distant Rain* is superbly designed, a collage of words and sentences ripped from a multitude of papers with different styles of type and handwriting. This is a story of what happens to all the poems that people write. They find themselves being swept into a shopping centre car park and eventually they connect with one another to form a large ball paper Mache, that floats high into the sky, while dogs bark at it from the street. Its existence is short lived as it bursts and the words fall down like confetti to the ground, with new meaning and a new order. The pencilled sketches beautifully enhance this gorgeous story.

*Grandpa's Story* was an amazing story of Grandma and Grandpa's marriage. Before being able to marry they had to set out on a quest. They must climb mountains, battle tree trunk monsters, be chased by ferocious televisions and face homelessness in the city and despair in the desert. In desperation they eventually find the two rings that they need to be married, they rush home in time for their wedding and a lifetime of joy together. This story is telling us that a successful marriage is based on facing obstacles and working together before a ring is put on a finger.

*No Other Country* tells of an ordinary family who live in an ordinary house and life is a struggle, yet they discover a secret room in their house, a room of wonder, a Grecian garden, where they escape the drabness of their lives, the story ends when they share their secret with a Greek neighbour and they both agree that in 'no other country' could such a thing happen.

I adored *Stick Figures*. Frail branches with clods of earth for heads become creatures that are outcasts, objects of ridicule. They passively take all that is dished out to them until they become boring and invisible, yet always present, passively making people question their own existence, Powerful stuff. It would be intriguing to ask children what they make of these creatures and what are they a metaphor for.

*Alert but not Alarmed* tells of a time when households have a rocket in their back yard, always at the ready in case of attack. Of course this is a satirical attack on the paranoia about terrorism. Eventually the people realise that they will never be used for their intended purpose and that they are much better used as pizza ovens and dog kennels. It is a very funny story making a mockery of paranoia. I am reminded of Sting's song, 'And the Russians love their children too', when at the end of the story the families realise that people in far away countries with rockets in their backyards have found much better uses for them as well.

There is so much potential in this book. As a teacher of Creative Writing I would use this book as a prompt for student writing. I would like to take them walking in their neighbourhoods, to observe statues and objects that they could create other realities for. I would encourage them to look beyond the obvious and try to ask the question, 'What if?' What if the garbage bin had another purpose? What if rusty car bodies had a story to tell? The questions are endless. I can see a lot of fun as students let their imagination run wild.

**Sharon Marchingo, Bendigo South West Secondary College, VIC**

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* by Shaun Tan is a compilation of 15 wonderful, magical, fantasy stories – each with its' own meaning and moral ending.

Shaun tells his stories in such a way, you can't help but be the child within the story, grabbing onto every word and picture as though you will never hear or see it again.

The Water Buffalo, where a child's imagination seems to disappear as he gets older, just like the Buffalo; Eric, an exchange student, who sees everything so differently from us; Grandpa's story, travelling through unknown territory to find symbols and items needed before their wedding; – who could pick a favourite out of them?

After having the privilege of attending a session with Shaun Tan at the recent CBCA Conference in Melbourne, and having a sneak preview of some of these stories, I couldn't wait to read the book – and it hasn't let me down.

This is a children's, young adult and adult book all rolled into one. It would give joy from anyone from 8 to 80.

**Pauline Dunn, Mountain District Christian School, VIC**

'Some things in life are like that. You have to find out for yourself .....

Tan's latest graphic novel is insightful, clever and thought provoking. At the same time, it both exposes society, yet challenges the reader to question this same society.

Through 15 short stories, Tan engages the readers' imagination via both the narrative and the visual. This is everyone's suburb, this is everyone's street; the readership of this graphic novel is endless. The detail is inspiring; from the visually pleasing, colourful front cover, to the minute and endless engagement with the endpapers, this text should inspire even the most reluctant reader.

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* works on many levels, as it confronts every layer of society, it is political, it is about cultural diversity, it is about acceptance and belonging, it is about family. The novel is accessible for upper primary and perfect for differentiated group work in the classroom, there are lighthearted stories . . . with colourful and innocent graphics, eg it questions the outcome of poetry . . . of all the poems people write that are never read by anyone . . . pages later it is almost an Orwellian warning: '... every household has its own intercontinental ballistic missile ..'

A double page spread of newspaper articles warns about the Minister for Public Denials, of record destruction and memory failure. Of the redefining of language, ongoing fear, apathetic masses, ruthless exploitation, making the graphic novel accessible to year 12 students studying Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* for their English HSC.

This graphic novel is a must read for not only everyone in your street, but also every child in your classroom. Take the time to contemplate every amazing minute detail.

**Jodie Webber, Hurlstone Agriculture High School, NSW**

From the clever design work of Inari Kiuru and Shaun Tan, which includes the "busy" end pages and using stamps as title entries on the Table of Contents page, to the fifteen unusual and engaging, thought-provoking illustrated stories, *Tales From Outer Suburbia* will indeed interest and intrigue, entertain and delight, amaze and bemuse, captivate and challenge upper primary children, teen and adult readers alike. The stories present a snapshot of the "mysteries" of everyday life, somewhere in Outer Suburbia - the water buffalo which lived at the end of the street, able to lead the way for questioning people, them becoming "surprised, relieved and delighted"; the foreign exchange student, Eric, living in the pantry and fascinated by the small objects of life; the stick figures, long time features of the suburban landscape, searching for meaning and answers as alternative versions of ourselves. With the softening, heart-warming change that the presence of a man in a barnacle-encrusted old fashioned diver's suit and helmet could make in the life of the nasty Mrs. Bad News and the inner courtyard sanctuary of peace and escape that the family discovered hidden within their house, to enrich their miserable life of poverty, accepting such a discovery gratefully, not questioning the logic of it, this fabulous flight

of fancy and fantasy also contains gems of wisdom amidst the weird and wacky, the wonderful and whimsical. Things really aren't as they might seem.

Tan's unique and extraordinary brand of storytelling and his brilliant, detailed, incredible artwork, covering a range of styles in the 70+ illustrations, combine to open up a world of possibilities and alternate perceptions, from the bizarre to the absurd, well beyond the traditional, staid suburban outlook. It is a book to be revisited time and time again, to draw different interpretations, to appreciate the detail and the hidden messages and meanings and unusual sudden twists. With its complexities and questioning, awareness-raising and understanding, warmth and humour, *Tales From Outer Suburbia* will definitely power the imagination while exploring important issues and "mysteries". As such, it is recommended for inclusion in school libraries for individual borrowing and for use within the English and Art curriculum as a valuable visual literacy / art technique resource supporting classroom analysis of the illustrated story genre.

**Alison Cassell, QLD**

Shaun Tan's *Tales from Outer Suburbia* is a collection of short stories that are accompanied with Tan's sophisticated illustrations. His tales are alternative, 'outside of the square' and these ideas are foreshadowed inside the title page where a young woman is rowing a boat down a road, that is vacant of water.

In relation to Stage 6, this text would be useful when the students are completing their Area of Study: Belonging (NSW Prescriptions 2009-2012). Students should be encouraged to read the following short stories: "eric", "broken toys", "grandpa's story", "no other country" and "stick figures". Students will need to ponder on how 'belonging' is represented in each short story; without forgetting to also focus on the narrative techniques utilised by Tan to help create the meaning of belonging.

Activities for Stage 5 might involve such things as choosing an illustration or double page spread from the text and creating their own short story from that image. Many comprehension activities could also be devised around these short stories. Multiple choice activities would benefit the students to help prepare these year groups for the coming School Certificate.

Stage 4 activities should possibly start with the crowded end pages. Both sets of end pages are different and include an immense selection of Tan's 'doodles'. The younger year groups might try to illustrate their own odd creature or situation. From these multiple images students may be able to begin to describe a setting that may be appropriate for that particular illustration; from these ideas creative writing tasks might emerge.

The only thing that 'grates' me as an English teacher is the fact that the title of the text and the short stories, along with the beginning sentence for each story utilises a small case letter. I know this is 'modern' and new but it does not cease the tick that begins in my eyelid when I view such a grammatical atrocity! Apart from this, the text is rich in amazing 'out of this world' illustrations and many quirky short tales. I would recommend this text to be utilised inside the classroom.

**Melissa Adams, St. Peter's Catholic College, NSW**

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* is the latest release from Shaun Tan, the much-acclaimed creator of *The Arrival*, *The Red Tree* and *The Lost Thing*. This book brings together fifteen intriguing and wonderfully illustrated short stories about the mysteries that lurk below the surface of suburban life. These stories will entertain and delight teenagers and adult readers alike. Each story is unique and stands alone and this book is a great resource to pull out and dip into when needed. In the classroom, this book could be used as a topic opener—inviting students to reflect on what their life in suburbia is like. Each story provokes thoughts about how we live and these stories give the students great examples of how reality and fantasy can merge in story form. Students can be encouraged to look at everyday objects in the suburban landscape and create other realities for

them during creative writing. The students could then create their own suburban tale together with illustrations, which could be brought together in a class 'tales from outer suburbia' book.

**Mel Honeycombe, New Zealand**

First, let me be upfront – I love Shaun Tan's work. I own almost all of his books and have used them with students. Therefore, I read this book expecting to like it. That aside, I absolutely loved it. This is a beautifully written and illustrated book. The general theme of this book is a celebration of imagination and everyday things in life. From 'the water buffalo' – about the water buffalo who gives directions at the end of the street – to 'alert but not alarmed' – an interesting view of a suburb full of ballistic missiles – to 'our expedition' – where two brothers walk to the edge of the street directory – each story teaches the reader to look at the simple things in life and use their imagination. My favourite story was 'eric', where a tiny exchange student asked questions about sinks and stamps that the busy people could not understand.

Like most of Shaun Tan's books, this is aimed more at teenagers and adults, not young children. I would probably use this more in my high school classes. I enjoyed reading the lost poetry pages, and I will show these to students next time we study poetry. I would use this book with my Year 11 English Studies students for their Connected Text Study, and, I think it could even be used in the Year 12 Individual Study. If we use film I see no reason we could not use this book. The use of language and pictures to tell each story are stunning.

**Anne Fry, Grant High School, SA**

Shaun Tan's latest offering, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, is a whole package that is to be poured over countless times. From the intriguing front cover, of a dog sitting on a television set, that pulls the reader, most insistently, into the book, to the back cover. The 15 stories contained within are thought provoking, they cling to the reader, like survivors of a shipwreck holding on to the remains of the ship, even though the book has been closed. Initially, with casual reading, the stories appear fantastical and even, a little weird—surely a water buffalo could not exist in a suburban landscape, and certainly would not be directing the inhabitants. Delving deeper into each story, though, the reader finds meaning in the stories, even words of wisdom. The illustrations, whose media vary from crayon, pencil, paint and collage, add further meaning and delight to a reading of the tales.

To select favourites from the 15 wonderful stories (fables), is no easy task, However the tale of Eric the foreign exchange student is a special delight amongst many. It is easy to imagine a classroom teacher reading this without the illustrations and asking the students to picture Eric. How amazed they would be to view Tan's Eric? Or what about Grandpa's Story? Or distant rain? It leaves only one thing more for this reader to say: GO, GO quickly, grab a copy of *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, find a quiet place to sit, then don't move till you have read every word and examined every illustration, over and over again. It will thrill and delight you!

**Pia Butcher, Knox Library, VIC**

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* is a collection of fifteen short stories full of curious happenings and wonderful illustrations. It is hard to pick favourites because the stories all thought provokingly mysterious, but two of my favourites are 'Eric' (the story of an exchange student who doesn't fit in, departs unexpectedly, but leaves behind a wonderful surprise) and 'Our Expedition' (two boys find out what really exists after Map 268, the last map in Dad's street directory).

This book could be used in a number of different ways and would make an excellent addition to any school library. The stories are short enough and the illustrations quirky enough they could be used as stimulus for English students writing about their surroundings. 'Grandpa's Story' starts with two pages of writing followed by eight pages of drawings each of which could be used by students as a starter. The quirky nature and different presentation of each story makes it good for reluctant readers. 'Distant Rain' and 'Make Your Own Pet' are presented collage style. The

range of styles of illustrations (from drawings to collages) makes it a stimulating resource for art students. Even the title page is unusual – an addressed (the book’s dedication) mail bag with stamps for each of the stories.

Shaun Tan is an author who somehow slipped below my radar in the past. He won’t be able to do so in the future!

**Jan Brown, Craigmore High School, SA**

What an interesting book! It doesn’t fit neatly into any particular category. It is neither picture book nor short story collection but a bit of both. I’m also not sure of the target audience. It will find a place among upper primary classes through to senior secondary and be studied on many levels. At times I both loved this book and was confused by it. Not always understanding what the author was trying to say, both literarily and illustratively. But it did intrigue.

It is loosely a collection of illustrated stories where sometimes the text and sometimes the illustration dominate. These stories are about life in the suburbs. Shaun Tan uses a variety of styles in both the text and illustration using both black and white and colour. My favourite story is “Our expedition” a journey of two brothers to find out what lies beyond the edge of their street map, the ending will surprise. This story captures essence of the whole book and reveals the thoughts of the author; a journey through his idea of suburbia with outcomes which are sometimes unexpected.

**Lorene Furmage, Department of Education, TAS**