



# AN INTERVIEW WITH SHAUN TAN WINNER OF 2020 CILIP KATE GREENAWAY MEDAL

Article Author:

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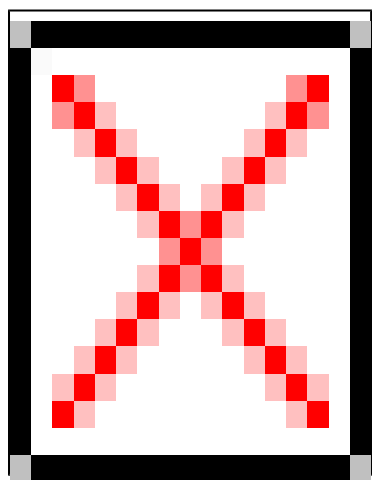
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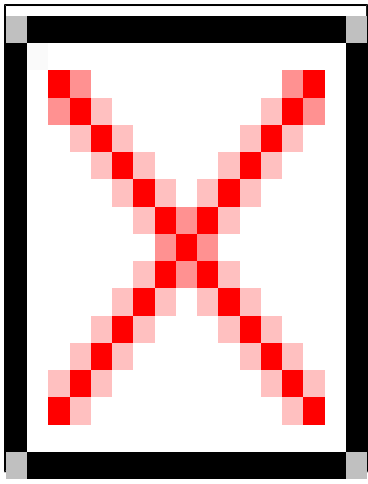
**Shaun Tan** discusses his book **Tales from the Inner City**, winner of the **2020 CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal** with **Jake Hope**.

*Shaun Tan is the winner of the 2020 CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal with his book **Tales from the Inner City**. The **Kate Greenaway Medal***

*is awarded to a book that creates an outstanding reading experience through illustration. Shaun talks to **Jake Hope** about his work and describes the relationship between the urban and the wild which lies at the heart of the book.*



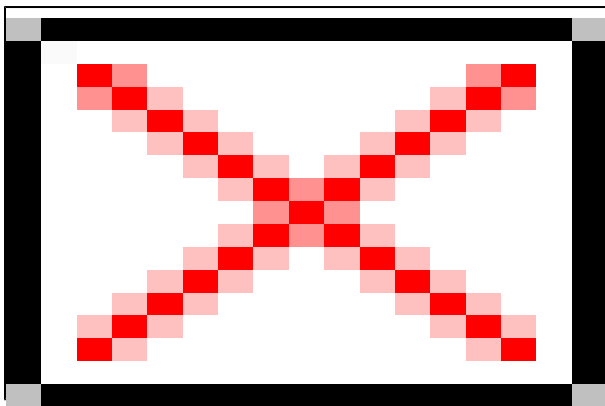
?Our daughter was born around the time I first started thinking about **Tales from the Inner City**, in 2013. As she grew our family spent a lot of time at Melbourne Zoo, which was just down the road, and I realised how much of early childhood revolves around images of animals (there was a lot of pram-pushing and time to think about it). Not just the zoo, but all of her board books were about animals, not people, and particularly African megafauna, as if there?s some deep memory about that, so deep even a baby can recognise it. At the same time, we live in a very urban, very human landscape of inner Melbourne, seeing none of those animals first-hand (except of course at the zoo, in quite contrived and mediated conditions). How strange, I kept thinking. I wondered if our abstracted urban existence actually ferments a deep longing for the things we have moved away from; the deserts, the jungles, plains and wild coasts of very old ancestral memory. What if those things started coming back into the city, how would we feel? How would we react? This was my starting point for writing and painting. I started with crocodiles filling an entire floor of a skyscraper, an idea that occurred while waiting too long for a tram in the city centre, and everything just flowed out from there. Conceptually, it did not require much force. It felt very natural to write these stories and paint these images, maybe more so than anything else I?ve worked on to date.?



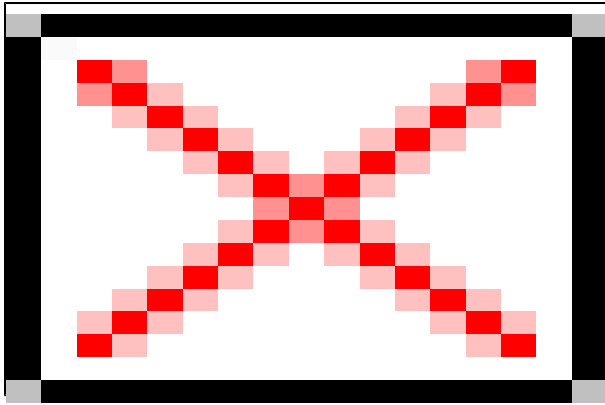
*Composed of a series of short stories, illustrated with dramatic double-page spreads of oil on canvas, Shaun discusses the story he enjoyed working upon most and the one he found most challenging.*

?I think I enjoyed the story about the moonfish the most, and it?s the image that features on the cover. Perhaps because it drew on a lot of childhood memories of night fishing, of catching and cleaning fish ? there?s a long description there about gutting a huge fish on a kitchen table, which is based on many summers of doing just that.

Interestingly, the shortest stories were often the most challenging to write, which is often the case with picture books, every word is like a chess move, but the one I struggled with the most is also one that ended up being pretty simple and unassuming, about pigeons. Which is really about money.?



*The design of the book adds to its overall visual experience with use of justified text creating parallels with the brutalist architecture of parts of its urban landscape and white space adding to the suspense of the spreads. Shaun discusses the importance of these aspects to the overall reading experience.*



?Much of the design is thanks to the wonderful Nghiem Ta, with whom I?ve worked previously on a number of projects in the UK. We work together quite closely and are always on the same page, so to speak. The intention was to keep things fairly simple, following the principle of text and illustrations being cleanly separated, which is not actually common for me. I usually enjoy mixing them up, as in **Tales from Outer Suburbia**, which also has a variety of styles,

like a fun magazine employing different illustrators. But as [Tales from the Inner City](#) [3] evolved, the style of the paintings became more uniform, a kind of dreamlike naturalism, and while there's a variation in tone between stories, they all seem to come from the same world, they are disciplined by a common idea, of an animal entering an urban space. The layout of these elements is very much about shaping an experience for the reader, particularly a clean and uncluttered space for their own thoughts. It's also as if the words are for our literate, culturally trained selves, and the pictures are for our more elemental, wordless selves, hence the separation. The beauty of books is that they move backwards and forwards quite easily, they have no specific duration, they invite re-reading, re-looking. The use of space in design helps that along too. There are absences, missing connections, things that the reader needs to come in and fill with their own speculation, their own imagination. It's a book of gaps and silences, in spite of being my most wordy publication.?

**Jake Hope** is chair of the working party for **Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**. He is a children's book and reading development consultant and is currently working on **Seeing Sense**, a book about visual literacy.

[Tales from the Inner City](#) [3] is published by Walker Books, 978-1406383843, £25.00 hbk.

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