



Sharing Tales from the Inner City

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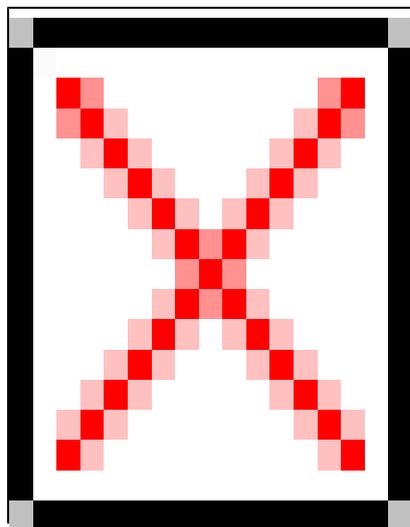
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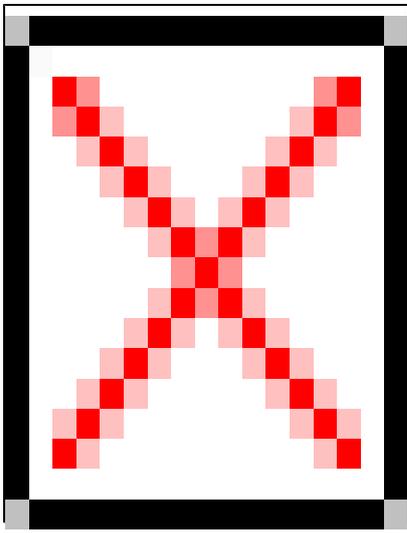
Kate Greenaway Medal winner Shaun Tan interviewed by **Jake Hope**

Winner of the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal 2020, Shaun Tan

discusses his childhood and the ongoing influences this has upon his art and books with Jake Hope.

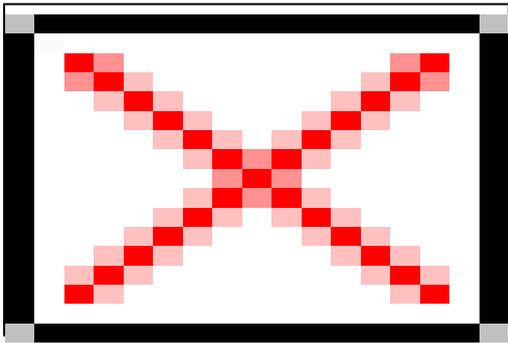


I'm a West Australian boy, and it's hard to grow up in that state without a strong sensory experience of nature, whether the forested southwest or the arid north, the vast inland desert, the endless beaches. Our family spent a lot of time fishing, crabbing, prawning, basically killing a whole lot of edible creatures ? and there's a remorseful story about that in the book. But that same foraging also nurtured a sensitivity to the landscape, its texture and connections and its seasonal changes. Also a fearful respect, of the sea, of fires, of storms and the sheer scale of things, both in space and time, how old things were. I spent a lot of time as a teenager painting the coast (often while my family was fishing), becoming more and more aware of how tiny and transplanted I was as a well-clothed, well-fed human. A lot of those early paintings show huge granite outcrops tumbling into the sea, with human beachcombers so small they are a dot of paint, a little interloper, you'd miss them if you blinked. I was also reading plenty of science fiction under those same outcrops, and the stories I now write are possible a fusion of these mismatched experiences. Or not so mismatched.?



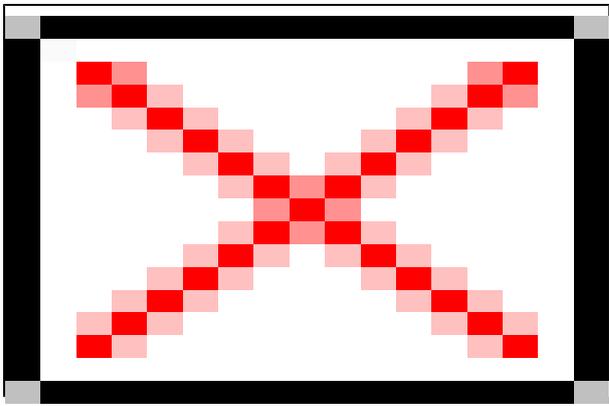
Tales from the Inner City features stencilled graffiti art of different animal characters, Shaun talks about his inspiration for these and about his brother's interest in palaeontology and the awareness behind his work.

The thing about stencil graffiti is that it has such a wonderful ghostly presence. It puts me to mind of the human shadow etched in stone, found after the Hiroshima bombing, but also less violently of fossils, the leaves of a fern or an ancient fish that you might find in split shale. My one older brother grew up absolutely obsessed with palaeontology ? he turned his bedroom into a museum with this amazing backlit wall display ? and his obsessions have always had a strong influence on me. I once asked him about the fascination with fossils and rocks, and he replied simply that they were older than anyone could imagine, and yet you could hold them in your hand. He was not interested in dinosaurs, much to my junior disappointment, because they weren't old enough! He preferred fish and molluscs from around 500 million years ago. More recently I've been thinking how *everything* is old. How our bodies are old, are actually related to those early fossils, how all animals are just really, really, ancient. The endurance of their evolving forms in time and space is just remarkable. And yet here they are, going extinct one by one, in a rapid decline, after all those ages of survival. I wanted my silhouettes to have some resonance of that, of contemporary fossils, of something that might one day be little more than a memory, a tag on a wall, perhaps uncovered in the rubble by some future archaeologist. Animal shadow etched in stone.



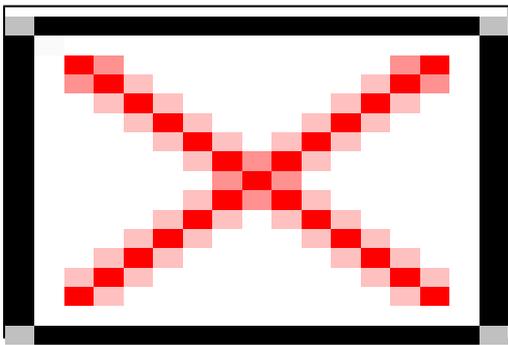
This is fascinating, you have a wonderful line in Tales from the Inner City about 'the crazy fluke of existence'. That sense of awe, wonder and the uncertain permeates much of your work.

Going back to my brother's fossils, he was very interested in the accidents of evolution too, the gamble of it, and how we humans are one thread of many possible living outcomes. Then how amazing to have the consciousness to look upon ourselves and recognise this crazy fluke, that we are improbable, that everything around us is highly improbable, and basically miraculous. It's funny, because it's not an idea you can hold in your head very long, everything soon reverts back to the normal, everyday problems, of common things and quotidian experiences. But I love any art, science or simple conversation that triggers again that latent realisation, that everything is actually bizarre and unusual, that we are only tricked into thinking that it isn't, lulled into a fog, the way we take weird dreams for granted in our sleep, hypnotised by provisional realities. I suppose the question is: how do we get to those moments of wonderful awareness? That's also a question I'm constantly asking myself.

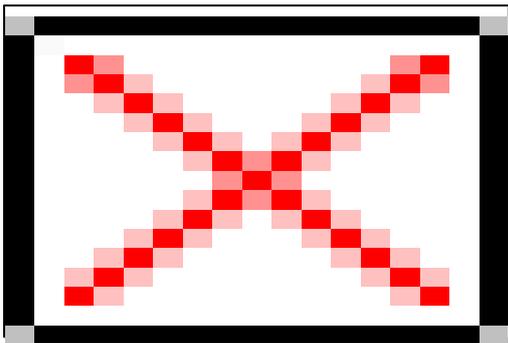


Is your artwork one means through which you're able to achieve this?

Drawing in a sketchbook is certainly one way, such as the sharp observation of an object in real life, a landscape, a person's face, a simple glass of water. The more you study things in stillness, the weirder they become. The more you appreciate their uniqueness as phenomena, rather than just recognisable or useful things of preconceived value. They become special. The other kind of drawing that works is random doodling, a bit like finding shapes in clouds. The fact that lines do funny things, create odd illusions on the page, means they open up a kind of conversation with reality, and then again you tune into the special qualities of that reality, a reality of memory. Words and writing of course do the same.



Interestingly, a new way of looking at things also happens with accidents of perception. Things like misheard phrases or contextual errors. The story in **Tales** about horses, for instance, came from a comment our two-year-old daughter made during a night drive. She called out 'elephants running!' and I could see her looking up at passing electrical wires. To me it immediately conjured the image of animals running alongside us, or ghosts of animals on wires. She was actually commenting on the music in the car, which perhaps was Henry Mancini's Baby Elephant Walk, but the error of interpretation was enough to make me think about the history of animals in urban spaces, especially animals used for transport, and so I began researching that, and the story and painting about horses resulted. I believe it takes a little derailing from ordinary thinking to develop any new insight, a little stone on the tracks of our neural networks. Otherwise it's quite hard to break with programming.



How far do you feel visual storytelling represents a way of breaking with that programming and seeing things in a different way?

I'm basically very interested in the experience of seeing something for the first time and not knowing at all what it is. I'm fascinated by first contact stories between civilisations, by how toddlers or any other young animals engage with new sights, sounds and experiences, and how they must do so without language. I also like to see what a reader will make of things, such as in the 'Dog' story in **Tales from the Inner City**, when you remove much of the narrative and just show the same landscape changing over aeons. It's probably what also attracts me to children's literature as a genre that I find myself in, that it's all about elemental experiences, pretty raw, undescribed experiences that have yet to be processed and named. Sometimes they *can't* be named, but you can still draw and paint them very precisely. Anything from migrant stories to the inner worlds of animals.

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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