

The BiblioFiles: Shaun Tan

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

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Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is multiple-award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling author, illustrator, artist, and filmmaker, Shaun Tan. For over two decades, Shaun Tan has created unique worlds with his books, graphic novels, and artistic projects like *The Arrival*, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, *Rules of Summer*, *Lost and Found*, *The Bird King*, *The Singing Bones*, *Tales from the Inner City*, and *Cicada*.

The cardinal points in Tan's work are connection and disconnection, the natural world and the unnatural, urbanized world. Tan deftly abolishes the boundaries between them, however, with his unrivaled imagination. Hybrid machine beasts, spires and towers, a glorious, illuminated garden, an orca swimming above a grid of city lights, Tan presents these wonders while also exploring the essential connections between everything, how we connect to ourselves, how we connect to one another, how we connect with animals, how we connect with the environment, and how, at times, we fail to make these connections or even damage them.

Distinct, expansive, fanciful, foreboding, playful, powerful, beautiful, and thought-provoking, Tan infuses his pages and canvases with a vision unlike anyone else. Tan's career has included *New York Times* bestselling and multiple-award-winning books, as well as a diversity of fantastic collaborative projects. He won an Academy Award for his short film, *The Lost Thing*, and also received the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for his outstanding contributions to children's literature. Shaun Tan, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

SHAUN TAN: Thanks, great to be here.

DR. DANA: In your book, *The Bird King-- An Artist's Notebook*, there's a piece entitled, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." In the sketch, you're holding a dripping paint brush and being followed by a host of otherworldly creatures. Looking at the drawing, I found myself wondering, are you leading the creatures? Or are you part of the clan?

SHAUN TAN: Hmm, that's a good question. Well, I guess, in the drawing, ostensibly, I'm leading the creatures, but there's also maybe some sense that I'm not entirely aware of them because I'm just walking along with a fairly happy, carefree expression, which is I guess how I felt when I was a kid. And these things are just almost evolving behind me and doing their own thing and forming their own character.

So I think it's a bit of both. You're initiating a process, and I guess that's how I feel about creativity that you initiate a process, but then you work with that process. You don't really

control it or master it or manipulate things. You just let them grow and walk by themselves. They don't always do, but, when they do, you know you're doing something right.

So, yes, you do need to like consciously start a process I've found. You can't wait for inspiration or expect things to just appear. But, once you do that little bit of work, then, sometimes, special things happen. And the subconscious starts to take over, and that's always a very nice feeling.

DR. DANA: I read that you were a little obsessed with the movie *The Dark Crystal* when you were a kid. So I'm just wondering where you fall on the Landstrider vote. Did you think they were creepy or super awesome?

SHAUN TAN: Both, both creepy and super awesome. I think that's always what's fascinated me about most things. I have to say like, often, the things I really like, deep down, I really like, my first impression is not a good one. And that's always been interesting to me.

So I'm very much like anybody else. When I see something weird, I kind of recoil. And the Landstriders in *The Dark Crystal* are a pretty good example because they are-- you know, their faces are not quite cute or anything. They're actually almost a bit like some sea anemone crossed with a rabbit on drugs or something very impersonal and hard to connect with, I think.

But, the more I watched that film as a kid and even seeing it again as an adult, it doesn't quite have the resonance now that it did for me as a child, but I still appreciate the design work, I think principally by Brian Froud, just that brilliant avocation of a world that's genuinely strange, not so strange that we don't understand what's going on because then it would be very boring, but strange enough. So, there's a mixture of attractive curiosity, but also a little bit of recoil and questioning. You don't want things to be completely appealing because life I don't think is completely appealing.

So, yeah, I really loved that film as a kid because it was-- it had no human elements in it. I don't know if I can recall any other film or television series where there was no human anchor. Like Star Wars, I was born in the right time to really be the perfect age for enjoying the first Star Wars movies, but it always had that one detracting thing for me is that there were still these humans in a far-off galaxy. And that didn't seem entirely plausible for me.

But *The Dark Crystal* was-- yeah, it was a pretty bold experiment. And I certainly appreciated it then and appreciate it now. And it's nice to see that it has become a bit of a cult film, even though I understand it was something of a commercial failure in its time.

DR. DANA: Your graphic novel, *The Arrival*, is groundbreaking for many reasons-- its format, its creativity, its wordlessness, its humanitarian themes. It was also your first *New York Times* bestselling book. What was the journey to publication like?

SHAUN TAN: Oh, very long and convoluted, partly because I wasn't sure what kind of a book it was for a number of years. I'd come off the back of doing a few successful picture books, which had a very simple narrative structure, words and pictures, usually double-page spreads with a few sentences, 32 pages long, large format.

And the style that I had adopted in the late '90s and early century was quite stylized, like stylized figures. I was kind of somewhere between fine-art painting and cartooning, which I found as a very interesting area. And, when I started *The Arrival*, it actually looked quite cartoon-like, which is strange, some of the early sketches.

And I wasn't entirely sure what it was about either. It began as an image of a person or a creature or something carrying a package in a strange city. And they had to perform a task. And they weren't sure how they were going to do that.

And that image, eventually, evolved into a man with a suitcase looking at a strange animal that's regarding him in a sort of affectionate way. And that actually became the image that's the cover of the book. The story grew out of that, and I came to the realization that it was actually an immigrant story and then followed a period of quite intensive research into immigration. I already had some thoughts and feelings and attractions to that subject, but felt I didn't really know enough about it.

It was a very-- it was a hot political topic in Australia at the time also, but I did try to ignore that sort of transient political aspect to the theme and look at a much older period of migration, so late 19th century. And that, just because of the visual resources, that increasingly led me towards the United States and looking at people coming from Europe to the United States like from the 1890s to the mid 20th century.

And I was looking at these old photographs, and I was thinking they're like pictures in a picture book or stills from a film. It's just we're missing all the bits in between. I mean, wouldn't it be great if there was like a photo album, which was also a comic, where you saw every single thing that happened to a person as they were traveling from one country to another country?

And that became interlaced with another idea that I'd been playing with pretty much all my career, which is, what do you do when you're in a place that you don't understand, like where it's culturally so different that none of the tools and skills and knowledge that you've brought with you through education are actually useful? And you have to rely on your instincts and your gut feelings and your intelligence alone, your ability to decipher strange symbols and objects and creatures and people and all that sort of stuff.

So the two ideas came together, this idea of a immigrant tale told in pictures and this idea of a fictional country. And I realized it's such a perfect concept because there's a lot of immigrant stories, but the problem with them is that we already know something about the country that's being described. We're never fully in the shoes of the ignorant immigrant arriving in a new place. The only way you can achieve that feeling of weirdness and discombobulation is to create a really fictional country. And, fortunately, that's something that I enjoy doing.

DR. DANA: It's interesting that two of your picture books, *The Red Tree* and *Rules of Summer*, are hugely uplifting, yet most of the sentences in *Rules of Summer* start with never, and the overarching theme in *The Red Tree* is about sadness and struggle. What was it like creating these books? And what have you heard from your readers about them?

SHAUN TAN: Well, I think *The Red Tree* is the most interesting one. Certainly, *Rules of Summer* is interesting, but I think it's one of my most accessible books. And children gravitate towards the never structure because that's their world, you know? It's all these rules and things they want to do, but they're not allowed to do. And they're trying to figure out-- I know, now that I have young children, they're constantly trying to figure out what's dangerous, what's not, and why, you know? Sometimes, you can't answer why.

And, in that book, it's taken to extremes because they really are ridiculous rules, but you better follow them, or there's going to be trouble. And it also simulates imaginative child play where kids get together, and they create arbitrary rules for games. I always find that fascinating because it's almost like they've ingested something of the logic of the adult world where they're noticing, hey, everything operates on arbitrary rules. Let's do that too, because it empowers us in our own way.

But that book-- yeah, I get a lot of kids creating their own rules. And some of them are pretty good. You know, I think I would have included that in my book if I had thought of them like never go and check your mailbox after midnight. I think that's a good one and stuff like that.

So it's really those books are great as a trigger for other people's imagination. And that's always been my approach. At least, as I've developed as an illustrator and a writer, I've come to the realization that my job is to create almost like good theatrical props that other people can use to tell their own story.

The Arrival is a perfect example of that because there is no story in it. *Rules of Summer* is a good example because it's so episodic. It's like opening lines to a chapter that's unwritten. It's like saying you must imagine what's going on.

And *The Red Tree* is also even more abstract because it's almost got no content, or, at least, the content is so strange that you can't understand that book using a literal approach. So, if you come to that book, and you say what does this mean, what does this mean, it's going to fail. It's pretty obvious that's not going to work.

So then you have to adjust-- well, it actually, I think, frees up the reader to go, OK, I can see this book is really strange. It's very discontinuous. It doesn't really have fixed symbolic meaning. So I'll just make of it what I will.

And, even though it's quite complex, very detailed illustrations and very specific-- you know, it's not vague. It's specific things like a dead fish floating down a stream or a strange puppet theater show or a flying machine drifting through the sky. So they're very clearly realized things like crystalline dreams, but I was very careful with each illustration that they not be particularly symbolic or lead the reader to any fixed conclusions about what's going on.

And then tolling through the whole thing is this very dire statements about bad things happening, you know? Terrible fates are inevitable. Sometimes, you just don't know what to do or where you are or who you are.

And it's interesting because, when I was working on that book, it came about as an artistic experiment initially. And I wasn't sure if my publisher would like it because I understood it wasn't necessarily palatable, not so much because of the subject, but because of the structure, that there was no story. There was no character. There was no-- there was no proper arc to the thing.

So it didn't even reach a climax and resolve. It just kind of plodded along with these miserable feelings. And then, right at the end, it just turns around in a somewhat unexpected way. And there's a red tree, radiant red tree, in the middle of a girl's bedroom, which itself is a very cryptic, nonspecific symbol, but you feel the warmth of it, that something good is happening.

And the initial response from my publisher when I sketched the whole thing out was quite lukewarm, which I expected. And, to be honest, I felt a bit lukewarm about it myself because it felt like new territory. It went against a number of principles that I'd learned about what a good picture book story is, but, at the same time, I felt this is a really honest depiction of what it's like to be depressed.

And, at the time, I had suffered some mild depression. So I understood a little bit of what that's like and, also, the way in which it skews your view of the whole world. So everything becomes negative. And, also, it always surprised me, coming out of a depression, how quickly that can happen and also inexplicably sometimes. Like there was no real reason, necessarily, why I felt better later on. It just sort of happened.

And some people criticized the book for that reason. They said, well, this is not a very good resource for people suffering from depression because the girl in the book is entirely passive. She's just experiencing these things. And then, at the end, things resolve by themselves.

And all I could say was the book was never intended to be therapeutic. It was never intended to help anybody. It was just meant to be a very honest artistic expression of my own experience of depression. And I decided it would be a project that I would do, regardless of whether it would be published or not, because it interested me so much.

So I said to the publisher, look, I'm doing this series of paintings. If you want to publish it as a book, you can. I don't mind if you don't, but, over time, my editor in particular warmed to the idea. And, when it was published, it became-- it wasn't an immediate hit. And I don't think many of my books are, but, over time, the audience for it has just built and built and built.

And I get the most interesting feedback about that book, particularly from people suffering all kinds of problems. And they're not just, you know, mental illnesses and things like that. It's any life difficulties and how that book is like a go-to resource for them. And I think really because it's--

DR. DANA: When all the troubles hit you at once, absolutely.

SHAUN TAN: Yes, yes, everyone knows what that's like. And, yeah, I see the book as a mirror. You're just holding up a mirror. It's like here's a picture. Talk to it in your own mind.

And it's been used a lot by psychiatrists and psychologists in all different areas, mainly to stimulate discussion. So, for some patients-- and I'm probably one of these people-- I don't necessarily respond well to direct discussion of a problem. But, if you showed me the picture and said, well, let's not talk about your problem-- let's talk about this picture instead-- that would really open things up for me.

So I think that's how it's been used with other people, both children and adults, is to facilitate a discussion. It's almost like displacing-- and this is true of all of my work. I'm trying to approach a subject.

I often think about as going through the side door of a house. You can't go through the front door because it's too direct. People will just know what you're doing, walking through the front door. If you go through the side door and start talking about things that way, it kind of disarms you a little bit. And it feels like a softer entry into a difficult subject.

DR. DANA: *Tales from Outer Suburbia* is a collection of illustrated short stories. It was published in 2008. Its sister volume, *Tales from the Inner City*, was published in 2018. So that's a 10-year difference between these two siblings. While their formats are essentially the same, and some of the themes are the same, I feel that these two volumes are very distinct from one another, especially in terms of your writing voice. I'm wondering if you could read the butterfly chapter from *Tales of the Inner City*.

SHAUN TAN: Yeah, sure. OK, so it's actually an untitled story, but let's call it "Butterflies."

The butterflies came at lunchtime. Not millions, billions, or even trillions, but a number beyond counting, beyond even the concept of counting, so that people on the street were relieved of any estimation. By people on the street, I mean everyone, literally, everyone. No earthquake, fire, or terrorist attack could flush so many out of cars, apartments, subways, restaurants, hotels, stores, banks, hospitals, schools, parliaments, and offices. None had ever experienced such inexplicable, joyful urgency.

And, as if in response, the butterflies came to us, descending from dizzying heights like spring blossoms of every imaginable color and pattern, gliding, skipping, fluttering around our ears in soundless wonder. We were standing so still, shoulder to shoulder, stalled as the traffic on bridges, every breath held and every eye opened, waiting for the weightless blessing of tiny insects.

"Look! Look! There on your shoulder, on your arm, your knee, your head! Hold still! Don't move! Look at this one right here on my nose!"

For that briefest of moments, faces and palms to the sky, we did not ask why. The chatter in our heads fell silent. The endless ticker tape of voiceover narrative, always prying things apart for cause and effect, sign and symbol, some kind of useful meaning or value or portent, it all just stopped, and the butterflies came to us.

Later, they would leave, technicolor clouds billowing up and drifting away to the west. Later, our minds would quickly snap back to factory settings, and the chatter would resume. Was this an omen of something good or bad? A plague? A system out of whack? A divine message? A lesson in chaos? What did it mean? What did it mean?

Later, we would study photo and video evidence with furrowed brows, listen to media analysis, consult scripture and meteorology, look at maps, graphs, stats, and bell curves. Later, we would worry.

But, for now, for that briefest of all moments, we did not ask why. We thought of nothing but the butterflies, the butterflies settling on our heads, on the heads of our friends and family, on everyone we knew and everyone we didn't, on the whole city all at once. "Don't move," we whispered, wishing it could last forever. "Hold still! Hold still! Hold still!"

DR. DANA: Thank you.

SHAUN TAN: You're welcome.

DR. DANA: In the 10 years between these books, how do you feel your writing changed or didn't change?

SHAUN TAN: I'd have to go back and read the first one. I think that each book is a different project. I don't sort of dwell on the relationship between them, partly because I'm too full with the thoughts of the current project to think about its relationship. So there's no conscious connection.

I think they both share the same approach. That is very short, dreamlike stories where there's an ordinary setting. In *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, it was pretty much the suburbs of my childhood in metropolitan Perth in Western Australia.

In *Tales from the Inner City*, it's really an amalgamation of different cities that I've visited during my travels, largely through children's literature events, actually, like anywhere from Mexico City to New York or Toronto or Auckland and Taipei, and, also, the fact that I-- in writing *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, I moved from Perth to Melbourne and lived much closer to the city center. So my proximity to a city, because I live in an inner suburb of the city, means that the imagery over time has changed. It's become less about those outer suburban spaces and more about inner, mixed residential-industrial spaces.

And, in terms of writing style, I guess I would have-- it would have changed by all the things that I've read and written in the intervening years. So it's not an evolution that I've tracked. I don't think it's necessarily improved in any way, but, certainly, with this book, I tried to be more free in my style.

I think *Tales from Outer Suburbia* was the first time I'd had-- I've always written. Like I was a writer before I was an illustrator, but I'd never really thought to have it published. And *Tales*

from Outer Suburbia was the first time that I'd published an extensive amount of writing. And I guess I felt slightly conservative about it. Or, at least, I deferred to editorial comment.

With this book, I was actually slightly more challenging of editorial correction. So, in many cases, the editor would say, "oh, this thing you've written here is not actually logical." And I would say, "that's OK because none of the story is logical. It's a dream. Just think of it as a dream."

And I was influenced, to some extent, I recall by the short fiction of Haruki Murakami, the Japanese writer. I guess you'd call him a magic realist. I'm not sure. And, also, rereading some of the stories of Italo Calvino, which I'd first read in university, and there was one in particular, a story about the moon, which left a big impression on me. And, also, the West Australian writer Tim Winton who is-- his writing style is not really like mine at all, but his attachment to landscape as a foundation for character and situation is something that I strongly identify with.

And, yeah, but the book kind of just evolved by itself. And it's another one of those projects that I did in relative isolation. I thought I'll just write all these stories over a long period of time. And it would span about, well, 10 years overall. So there were bits from 10 years ago, but a more concerted effort in the last five years.

And then, sort of putting them all together-- and, certainly, this book is more cohesive because it was more disciplined in its choice of theme in that every single story is about a particular animal in a particular urban environment. *Tales from Outer Suburbia* was a much more random, sprawling thing, which reflected my experience of childhood.

Tales from the Inner City is more of sort of almost a conscious, critical engagement with some kind of environmental issue to do with the relationship of humans with a post-industrial environment. And, yeah, the actual format of the book is also very regular so that it feels like all the stories relate strongly to each other.

I should say also that one of the most formative influences on me, as a young teenager, were the short stories of Ray Bradbury, which I came across by accident. And I ended up just reading almost everything that he wrote at a very impressionable age of about 14 or 15.

And I was just looking at this book again and realizing it actually has some debt to the style of Ray Bradbury, particularly some of his anthologies, such as *The Martian Chronicles* or *The Silver Locusts* where there's a real connection between all the stories. And, together, they form almost a novel, but in a whole bunch of broken parts.

DR. DANA: In 2015, you created 75 sculptures for *The Singing Bones*, which is your retelling of Brothers Grimm's tales. Each page spread features a brief excerpt from the tale and a single photo of a sculpture. It's very simplistic, distilled, and elemental, yet it captures so much. What was the creative process like for you?

SHAUN TAN: That was an interesting project. It was almost like a thing I'd been thinking about for years. I remember, ever since I started being an illustrator, I'd always-- I'd always looked at

retellings of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* and reading Angela Carter and writers like that who'd sort of breathed into this material.

Of course, that was something that I grew up with, but with a real sense of discord because, growing up in the semi-arid coastal plains of Western Australia is quite different from the dark forests of Europe where all these stories are taking place and, culturally, just really at odds. But I've always felt that there's something-- there's some emotional core of those stories that's compelling in them.

And it's also intrigued me that they've lasted for so long because some of them are just downright weird, you know? I'm thinking why has this strange little story persisted for over 200 years. Hasn't, at some point, someone said, nah, this is just too weird? I'm not telling that one.

And they are very much like dreams. And the way they are told, in their original form, is very interesting because they are-- the characters are incredibly two dimensional. Things are not described. And that's probably one reason why they've lasted is because, like Shakespearean stage play, it's flexible, you know?

There's just this person said this. Where they said it, how they said it, what they were thinking when they said it, that's up to you. This is what they've said.

And it's really straightforward and fast storytelling. It's just like this happened. This happened. This happened. Then this happened. Don't over interpret it too much.

And so the opportunity to actually work on this book came when I was asked to create a cover illustration for an edition of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, which had been written by Philip Pullman, which I think, in its original publication, was *Grimm Tales for Young and Old*. And my German publisher had acquired rights to that, and they were publishing it. So that was interesting, like a West Australian illustrator being asked to do the cover for a German publication of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*.

And I was actually reluctant to do so because I don't like doing cover art. I spent a lot of my career as a cover artist, and it's actually a very fraught and complicated process. But I said, you know, I've got some ideas of how you could do this cover because, interestingly, Philip, in his forward to that book, makes the point that, exactly what I was saying, *Grimms' Fairy Tales* are-- he almost says they're better not illustrated because they're like almost shadows on a wall. It's so lacking in descriptive detail that they just exist in the mind of these kind of generic impressions of princes and princesses and frogs and castles.

And I thought, yeah, that's exactly right. It sets up an interesting problem for me as an illustrator, but then I've never thought about illustration as actually illustration. For me, it's just pictures that provoke ideas, rather than describing visual images of what's happening in a story.

And I've always had this real interest in Inuit art and a lot of sculpture from older cultures that has a narrative quality to it and very simple forms. And I've always been interested in

contemporary artists who have borrowed those forms, you know, like people such as Henry Moore, and looking at African sculpture, pre-Columbian sculpture.

And it occurred to me also that many of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* sort of fit into that vein of folk lore and folk art and that the correct way to illustrate these stories would be to make little sculptures, very simple sculptures, like things you could hold in your hand, like memory devices and tradable objects, but still leave a huge amount open for the reader to interpret.

And so I made a little sculpture. And I said, you know, this is a possible cover, but I also think like, if you're going to go this way, you should really illustrate the entire book. And, at the time, Philip had chosen 50 *Grimms' Fairy Tale* stories. And I said, you know, I would be open to illustrating all of these stories with sculptures just because it's a thing I've always wanted to do.

And I said I know that's a production cost for you, but I'd be prepared to do it for you very cheaply if you let me retain certain rights to the images. And they were fine with that. And so that went ahead, and the book was originally published I think in 2013.

So I did the first 50 sculptures very quickly because our first child was about to be born. I was like, all right, I'm not going to be able to finish this book after that. So that kind of pressure actually made me work very quickly, which was to the benefit of the project. So it was 50 very simple sculptures, which I then creatively photographed and worked on digitally to create this sort of theatrical effect.

And that editorial team loved that. So they thought that was great. And Philip Pullman loved that concept too. And it worked very well.

But, always, my plan was to do *The Singing Bones*, like that this was a stepping stone to creating a much larger gallery of images with excerpts from *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. And so there were another 25 fairy tales that I really wanted to treat. And so I did those and managed to have them finished and published in 2015 as *The Singing Bones*.

Some of those sculptures I made, I barely looked at them, you know? And that was interesting too. I'm feeling them with my hand. And there's some-- there's an extra intelligence that happens when you sculpt because you're not creating an image of a thing. You're creating the thing in the real world. And your hands are wrapped around the entire visible object, including sides you can't see.

And I did heaps of sculpture as a child. So, much more than drawing and painting, I was carving stone and working with clay and papier-mâché. And all of those instincts just flooded back, and I found it was just like I would read the stories, maybe the only time I've never really done extensive sketches. I just read the story, grabbed a lump of clay, and just started pushing it around. It was a fantastic thing to do.

DR. DANA: Your short animated film, *The Lost Thing*, won an Academy Award. For us viewers, it was a thrill to see your characters walking, flying, moving, blinking, but the sounds of

the film are also fascinating, machine noises, metal hatches, wings fluttering, chirping, and some very distinct bells. What was it like as a director to explore the sounds of your creations?

SHAUN TAN: Well, it's interesting you say that because I came to that project quite reluctantly, actually, in the beginning, partly because, as a picture book illustrator, having already spent a lot of time rendering that story as a series of oil paintings, I felt that I had nailed it definitively. Like this is the story. This is the most perfect means of expression I could figure out for telling this story.

And the thought of animating it kind of felt a little bit gratuitous. Like, well, you know, I'm sure it'll reach a new audience, but it's not really going to be very different, is it? But the one thing that got me interested was actually the idea of sounds because, when you're a writer and an illustrator-- and you often forget this because you're substituting for a kind of atonal world-- but you're working in complete silence. Your medium is completely silent.

And movement is not such a big deal because you can show movement in a static picture. There's different things you can do. Especially in a graphic novel, you can really create the illusion of movement.

Sound is not something that you can easily project, even in the written word. You can sort of conjure it to some extent, but it's not quite the same. And you can't really create a surprising sound effect.

But that got me really interested. And one of the most pleasurable aspects of that project for me was, when I was doing the initial animatic-- and that's when you just have pencil drawings laid out in a sequence that you watch on a screen-- and adding sound effects because it's a very interesting and magical thing that happens when you apply sound to a still image. It really opens up a whole other dimension.

And so I had a little video camera with a microphone. This was around 2002. And I was going around my house finding anything that made an interesting noise. And I'd never really made art with my ears before. I was all about visual things, looking for visual objects that are useful, like colors and textures and shapes. And now I was looking for sound.

And I created a whole sound score for the film, which is really funny to listen to now because it's pots and pans, light bulbs knocking each other, and my garage door, the trams, and stuff like that. And it was quite evocative.

And then I met up with a couple of young sound guys that were just starting their career. And I said, OK, this is the film, and this is my kind of directorial notes of the sounds. It's all there in my pots and pans and garage door sounds. And they loved it. They thought that's so useful.

Of course, they had their own vast array of objects, including weird things that they'd made that you could sort of turn and rattle and twist and pluck and all that Foley stuff. And they also-- they drove out the industrial sites in the middle of the night to get clean recordings of factories and different machinery.

And so I had two really talented people and really dedicated to the projects. And a lot of people were working on that film for next to nothing, which is just that's the nature of short filmmaking. It's a completely unprofitable exercise. Even when it's the successful film, like *The Lost Thing*, it's really a labor of love and a lot of sacrifice, but they were totally into it.

And it's funny because I haven't watched the film for a long time, but I was looking at it again recently. And the one thing that stuck out for me was the sounds, as you mentioned. I thought those soundscapes are really beautiful and so weird.

DR. DANA: Your most recent picture book, *Cicada*, details the very bleak life of a nameless cicada who works as a data entry clerk for 17 years. The setting is a corporate building, which is very sparse, gray, and sterile. On the books and paper, however, there is this painting of a beautiful, wild, lush forest. It's a total emerald catharsis. I'm curious to know, in the process of illustrating *Cicada*, where did that painting occur in the timeline?

SHAUN TAN: It was always there right from the beginning of the earliest conception of the book. And a lot of my projects have very vague genesis stories. So it's hard for me to even know where the idea for the book began, but it was definitely something to do with two very different landscapes. And you see it in the end papers of that book, first of all, the concrete steel and glass forest of the city.

And I do actually see cities as a kind of forest that's been designed for one species, but it's got a lot of same qualities as a forest. You know, it's got the upper stories, the undergrowth, systems of flow of energy and food and things like that go in and out, and its own weather and stuff. And it grows organically.

So, cities, they're planned, but, in a more meta level, they're not planned. They're a thing that just grows the way a jungle does. In the same way, a tree is planned in terms of its DNA and its function and stuff, but the whole forest is something that just works through an organic evolution. So I've always been interested, and you'll see that in a lot of my work is both the contrast and the parallels between cities and forests. So that was always a big theme underlying this *Cicada* story.

And, I mean, I'd always been interested in that particular insect because of the 17-year lifecycle of some species where they kind of burrow underground as a nymph, and I'm not sure what they're doing there, but they're living somehow for 17 years, long enough that all the other animals have forgotten about their existence because they're so out of sync with the other natural cycles. So, when they all come out of the ground at once, the predators are so overwhelmed and surprised. They kind of don't know what to do.

So cicadas have the upper hand, and they fly around. And they mate and lay eggs and so on. And they have this very short, glorious moment of above-ground life before they die, and then it starts all over again. And I thought this is so different to any human conception of what a worthwhile life is, but, at the same time, there's so much that can be learned from that insect about what it is to be mortal and what is the joy and the sacrifice of living.

And then, just the idea of the cicada as the office worker, it just came very naturally. And then it came from, actually, watching a lot of office-based sitcoms such as *The Office*, you know, the US series of *The Office*. And my wife and I were watching that a lot.

And we've probably seen the whole thing a couple of times or more. And it's very funny and entertaining, but one of the things that holds it together for me is there's some quality of the very claustrophobic world of the office, which we rarely escape from, and how kind of post-ecological it is and how different it is from the natural world.

And I've also had friends who've worked in corporate offices. And, when I visited them, I just-- it's a mixture. It's almost like going back to the Landstrider question. Is it-- is it disturbing, or is it beautiful?

And there's something about corporate office spaces. I find them both. Like I really like them because they're so weird and bizarre for me. As someone who doesn't work in an office environment, there's something deeply disturbing about them for me, but there's a kind of beauty in it. I kind of don't know what to think about it, to be honest.

There's certainly some stories I was reading at the time or hearing from people about-- and it's become increasingly a media issue that's discussed is that kind of workplace bullying in corporate environments. And I became sort of interested in that.

And, yeah, I think, just the image of a bug working in an office, it just works for me. It reminded me of a lot of people who do work in situations very quietly, and they suffer greatly, but we don't hear from them.

And, as a kid growing up in Western Australia, cicadas were everywhere, and they would be around in summertime. And they were such a docile insect. Like you could just go and pick them off, back then, an asbestos fence and grab them by the wings. And they would just sort of weakly protest.

And they actually made the tock, tock, tock sound while they flailed their limbs. And it was so kind of sad and pathetic. You just would put them back and say, all right, I'll leave you alone.

DR. DANA: Apologies.

SHAUN TAN: Yeah, yeah. But they were the subject of bullying by other kids. And so that-- all these different ideas feed into a singular story. There was also one instance where I was in Berlin, and we were-- I was with some other authors. And we were going on this-- I think was an international literary festival.

Anyway, they bundled us all on this boat, and they sent us down the river, which ran through all these buildings. And, of course, Berlin was blasted in the Second World War and then had to rapidly reconstruct a lot of its office buildings. So they had very bleak-looking buildings, rapidly created, faceless architecture.

And there was one in particular, this vast wall of gray, square office windows. And, in one of them, I could see this bright red pot plant. And I remember I was joking with the other writers about it. Like, oh, you know, look there's a-- someone is happy. And--

DR. DANA: See?

SHAUN TAN: I also imagined that there was a-- I made some comment about, yeah, there's a big bug working in that office. As long as he just minds his own business, he's OK, you know? He's got his pot plant. He's got his little cubicle. They leave him alone.

And that was actually the genesis when I first started-- often, for an idea for a book, it's like a seed crystal. There's all this other stuff in the solution that's there, and that's in your general life. But the seed crystal comes in, and then the other things start attaching on-- cicadas with a 17-year lifecycle, the way kids would bully cicadas at school, stories of my friends and their suffering of office politics and stuff like that. And it all starts building. And you think, OK, that's a good story.

And then, as well as that, going back to your original question, the image of the urban CBD contrasting with a wild forest, like a tropical forest, and that these two things exist at the same time on this planet, which is remarkable to me, unbelievable weirdness when you contrast those two environments, and how, if you spend a lot of time in a big city, those images of the lush, tropical forests really cry out to your soul in some way. And, yeah, so all of those ideas kind of come together.

And then the process of making the book is really about a lot of boiling down, like boiling it and boiling it and boiling it. So it starts off with a very big set of ideas, very complicated images. And then I'm trying to simplify it into something very small.

DR. DANA: What projects are you working on now?

SHAUN TAN: At the moment, not a great deal. We had our second child in January. So--

DR. DANA: That is your project.

SHAUN TAN: --I'm pretty--

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah, that's it.

DR. DANA: Enough said.

SHAUN TAN: And the other one still exists. So it's a double project now. And I just managed to send one off to school. I had this brief moment, maybe about one hour of like, oh, it's quiet. And then, suddenly, baby appeared. So the cycle begins.

But it's good. I'm kind of enjoying it. I've been doing-- after our daughter was born-- that's the first one-- I was walking a pram a lot around my local suburb. And I ended up doing lots of little paintings of local streets. And that was very interesting almost to return to a kind of factory settings of where I started as a young artist. Like I used to do that a lot is very small paintings of local environments.

And that's something I really enjoy doing, almost as much as sculpting those little Grimm figures, is I have these 15-by-20 centimeter wooden panels. And I've got maybe 40 minutes. And I've got to paint the landscape. It's a really good way of responding honestly and in a very focused way to a particular slice of your environment that you'd normally not pay attention to, so just a really good exercise.

I'm thinking a lot about a book project. I'm not sure when I'll get around to doing it, but it's a strange kind of story that's been on my mind for over a decade, which is about a girl living in a very strange, slightly disturbing world of benevolent, I guess, monsters. There's no other way to put it, but they're sort of different mismatched creatures that are her family and her friends. And she loves it. She loves living with these things.

And a missionary comes to rescue her. So this is an idea that I've circled around for a long time is what do you do when somebody comes along and tells you this isn't your home. Like this place where you've grown up is not really where you belong. You belong somewhere else.

And I'm not entirely sure what that's about, almost like touches on issues like adoption. And what's the difference between your biological parents and your adoptive parents? But I think, more deeply, it's about does it matter who you are or where you come from. Or is it more important what you love or what you're attached to?

And there's also a question in that story of a romantic relationship. Like this boy comes from-- I don't know-- from space to this place where this girl is living and says, you know, everything you know is wrong. You're actually a human. And you come from a place where other humans are. You need to come back with me.

I don't know. It's a really interesting dilemma, you know? Because there's two truths there. And it's just a question of which is your own-- which is your truth. You know, what does your conscience say you should do?

And it's not a particularly original scenario. I think it's a real familiar kind of story. And it probably touches on a number of fairy tales too, but just with a very strange, intergalactic treatment. Anyway, that's something I'm thinking about.

And I wrote-- I did create a very small version of it for a British comics anthology just to try out the idea. And it was very warmly received and even nominated for an Eisner Award, this tiny little comic I drew about a girl living in a strange, strange town on another planet. And, yeah, I think it's kind of funny and amusing story for me. So, when I get a moment, I'm hoping to knock it out into an actual book.

DR. DANA: Shaun Tan, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

SHAUN TAN: Oh, no, no problem. It's been-- it's been wonderful to ramble.

[LAUGHTER]

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