



Windows into Illustration: Shaun Tan

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[Shaun Tan](#) [1]

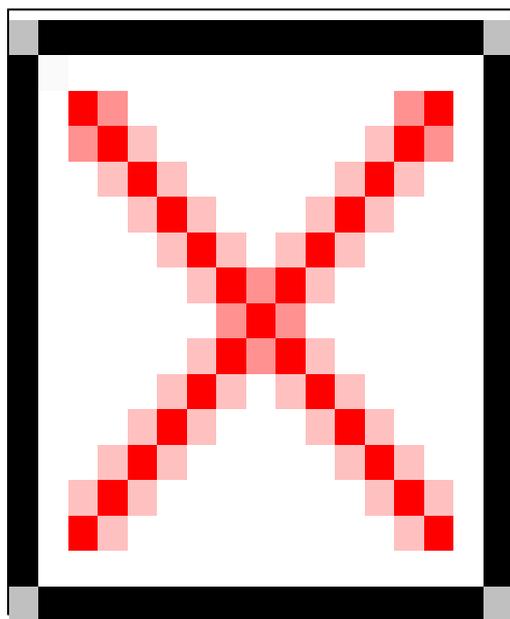
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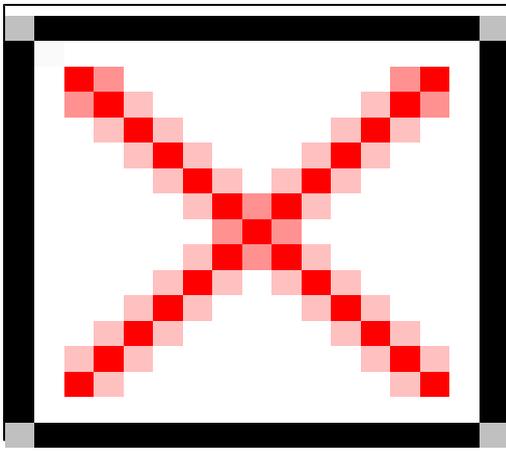
Shaun Tan on illustrating **The Red Tree**.



Shaun Tan's powerfully metaphoric picture books are experiments in visual and written narrative and aimed at a general audience that includes children rather than being for children. Here **Shaun Tan** explains the approach and technique in his picture book **The Red Tree**.

This painting is one of a series of dreamlike images from my picture book **The Red Tree**, which examines feelings of loneliness, alienation and depression. As a somewhat experimental work, I was particularly interested in the idea of a story without any specific narrative, plot or characterization, keeping it as open as possible to reader interpretation.

Accordingly there is little descriptive text, and in this case the accompanying phrase 'darkness overcomes you' does not exactly explain what we are seeing. An enormous fish - possibly dead, its clouded eye weeping black fluid, its mouth hanging agape - drifts weightlessly between the buildings of a street, casting a shadow over a small red-headed girl. The girl's head is bowed, but her expression is otherwise unclear. Other figures are also present walking through the scene, but seem oblivious to either the girl or the fish. In the gutter, there is a tiny red leaf, a detail that usually escapes notice on any first reading of the book but which, like the girl, can be found in every picture of **The Red Tree**.



What does it all mean? That's just the question I ask myself while painting, being careful to pass that question on to the reader intact and unanswered. In fact, I go to a lot of trouble to avoid specific or obvious meaning in my work. The absurd surrealism of the giant fish hopefully discourages any rational assessment, and instead invites more emotional reaction. One might see this picture as being about grief, depression, fear, loneliness, pressure or other less nameable things; there is no correct or singular response. This may be especially true if we empathise with the subject of the picture, the red-headed girl, for whom the situation is probably beyond explanation.

Why the fish? It might have been any other displaced object (I considered clouds and shipwrecks for instance) but I was especially inspired by a cover photo from one of my brother's dive magazines: a close-up of a large, big-jawed fish called a grouper that lives near coral reefs. Groupers often appear very ancient and forlorn, almost resting on the sea floor, like an emotional equivalent for something deep and unspoken. In my initial sketches, the gaping mouth was gradually emphasized in a way that reminded me of a painting by the abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell, 'Elegy for a Spanish Republic', which features large black oval shapes, like visible lamentations, wounds or tolling bells.

There are only enough figures in my painting to make the street seem populated, but their backs are turned to the viewer (they are ignoring us and the girl simultaneously), and they are almost departing the scene altogether. Both the landscape and the palette of the painting are subdued, seeking a particular kind of bleak atmosphere. Even though it looks like a sunny day, the shadows, walls and windows offer no avenue for escape, and the careful cropping of the fish, figures and buildings adds to this claustrophobic feeling. Of course, the real prison is somewhere deeper - the shadow that refuses to pass, even as one tries to walk out from under it, and all the worse for being physically invisible, and hard to explain - that inexplicable fish.

While sketching 'darkness' I was reflecting upon some of my own experiences of depression, seeing if I could draw artistic inspiration from something that can feel utterly uninspiring and useless. I was also hoping that readers might identify with this image in their own personal way, recognizing a feeling that's both private and universal. While we may suffer alone, we are never alone in our suffering, and to simply acknowledge this in a painting, story or any other expression is itself a kind of resolution, casting a little light on the darkness.

Shaun Tan is the winner of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, 2011. This award is presented to a creator in recognition of their entire oeuvre, rather than an individual work. Earlier this year Tan won an Oscar for best animated film for **The Lost Thing**, based on his book of the same name.

The Red Tree is published by Hodder (978 0 7344 1137 2, £7.99 pbk).

Shaun Tan's latest title published by Templar, **The Bird King and other sketches** (978 1 84877 050 8, £14.99), is a collection of his illustrations for 'untold' stories, observational studies, preliminary drawings for books, films and theatre and other random doodles from working sketchbooks.

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