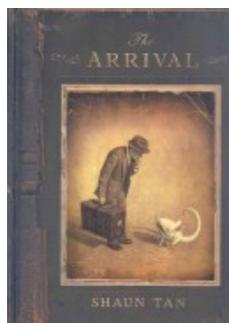


Children's Book Review

Tan, Shaun. (2007). *The Arrival*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic. Un-paged, ISBN: 0-439-89529-4 (hc), \$19.99 (Ages 11-Adults).

Reviewed by Tanvi Rastogi, Rutgers University, U. S. A.



The first thing any methodical, dedicated reader of books will notice about Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* is that there is no jacket with the typical accompanying plot summary. There is no biographical blurb, no foreword, and no introduction of any sort. Instead, readers are offered brief glimpses into *The Arrival's* content only through reviews on its back cover and an artist's note on the final page. Puzzling, maybe, but stepping into Tan's graphic novel armed with minimal narrative summary might actually be the best way to experience this strange, haunting tale of immigration.

Indeed, *immigration* would be a top contender for the single word best suited to describe *The Arrival* because it is, in fact, the story of migration from one land to another: in his graphic novel, Tan follows one man as he travels from his home to a new and foreign country, where he works to earn money so that his family can join him. His wife and daughter eventually follow in what the reader experiences as a joyous reunion.

What makes this story particularly unusual is that *The Arrival* is entirely wordless: rather than explaining the immigrant experience, *The Arrival* uses images to allow readers to become participants in that experience. This is achieved through Tan's rendering of strange, larger-than-life landscapes where every aspect of life is alien: the food, the homes, transportation via tollbooth-like structures—even the creatures locals keep as pets are odd. As we travel with our nameless hero from his ordinary home on an ordinary ship across waters to this otherworldly place, we acquire an inkling of how perplexing, mysterious, and incongruous a new culture and surroundings can seem to a lonely outsider. This is a place where city buildings stretch high and resemble castles constructed of circuit boards and compasses. Here, maps look like clock schematics. Just as in popular films—*Mirrormask* and *Pan's Labyrinth*—and books—J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series come quickly to mind—Tan exposes us to a character who is uprooted from familiar life-as-we-know-it and transported to a new, bizarre place; like Rowling's Harry and Pullman's Lyra, Tan's hero stumbles and trips through a land so foreign that it seems like a surreal and discrete world within our own.

The true brilliance of *The Arrival* lies in Tan's decision to present images without words; the isolation one experiences from being unable to communicate verbally is expressed in the text's absence of language. Wordlessness becomes a trope that simulates a language barrier. Equally extraordinary is the artwork itself, which extends

the immigrant's experience of cognitive dissonance. In the grainy, black and white (and sometimes sepia-toned) pictures, we can see that Tan has chosen to portray the migration of an ostensibly Caucasian family, yet it is impossible to say where they've come from and to where they have gone. By creating an ambiguous landscape, Tan subtly removes any possibility of reinforcing the stereotypes or prejudices that sometimes arise when "foreignness" is associated with a particular, identifiable region. Instead, readers experience the wonder and displacement universally felt by uprooted people and identify with the sense of uprootedness. We can develop empathy with strangers in our own communities by becoming newcomers ourselves in Tan's; we realize that two places on one planet can feel as if they are universes apart.

With *The Arrival*, Shaun Tan has created the ultimate "show, don't tell" book. He visually demonstrates the drama inherent in the immigrant experience and the sensations that arise naturally when we leave what is familiar for the unknown. In this way, he universalizes the experience and allows young readers to understand that the problem of immigration is not confined to one group or to one area of the world: it is a problem that involves everyone and, in fact, is not a problem as much as it is a condition of life. The publishing decision to avoid a simple précis on this title's inside cover, of course, can only have been intentional; like Tan's traveling hero left to pick his way through a foreign city, we enter *The Arrival* as we enter the world, unprepared for what strange experiences await within.