



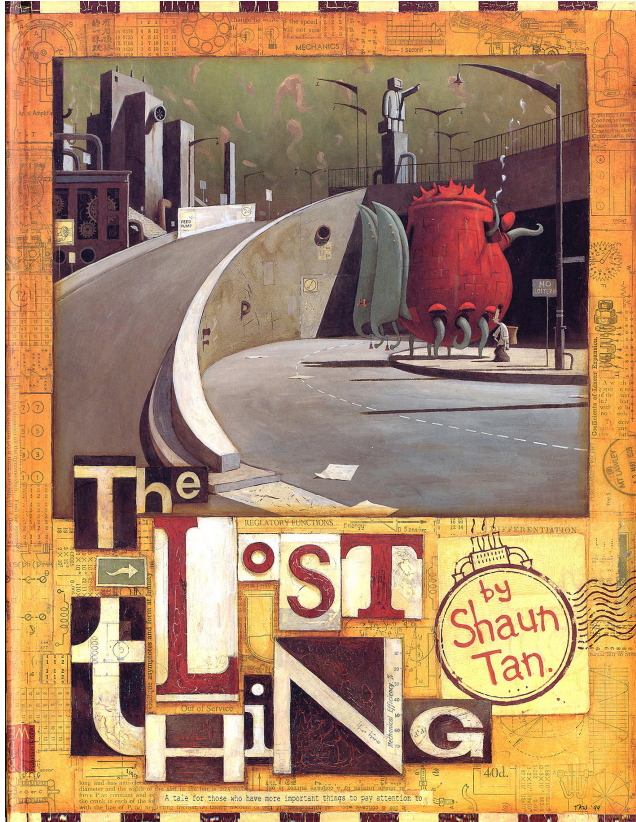
Shaun Tan: The Art of Story

Discovering *The Lost Thing*

Book to film

14 July to 18 August 2016

The Grace Cossington Smith Gallery is delighted to
present a visual exploration of the process of creating
The Lost Thing story in picture book and animated film
Curated by Books Illustrated Gallery



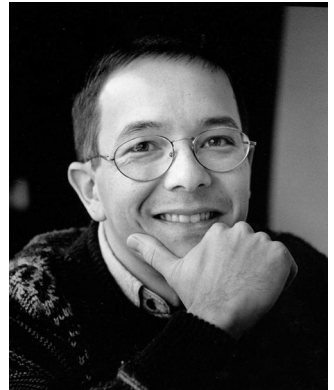
All images have been supplied by Shaun Tan

Illustrations by Shaun Tan from *The Lost Thing*, published by Lothian/Hachette Books, 2000

Images by Shaun Tan from *The Lost Thing* film produced by Passion Pictures, 2010

From Shaun Tan

Welcome to this exhibition of *The Lost Thing*, charting the journey from book to film of this very unusual and, for me at least, surprising project. I'm particularly happy to see it presented in this environment as it's the kind of exhibition I would have much loved to see myself when I was a student, back when I had little to no idea of what I would end up doing with my life, and trying hard to see a place for creative expression in a world that doesn't easily facilitate it. That pathway often seems shrouded in darkness: at least this was my experience when I was at school. All I knew was that I really loved drawing and writing stories, but what to do with that?



All of us, regardless of career or direction, have some kind of sparkling energy in our core that is unique, a special voice or awareness, a desire to share observations about the world, to say something important, to do something we might call inspiring. Not just for others, but for ourselves, to figure out who we are and why we are here. Being an artist, as I'm sure is the case with other careers, is about pursuing that search for enlightenment, both individually and collectively. But it's hard to know what we are doing, and if we did, the work would quickly become boring and meaningless. What a dilemma! Much like the lost creature in a back shed that we don't know what to do with. We are sure it is special, well, we think we are sure, but we also have a hard time getting anyone to pay attention to it.

All of this is a longwinded way of saying that my own personal journey of developing this story, first as a book and then as a film, has been highly surprising and unpredictable, as much as the fact of becoming an artist (my initial career direction at the end of high school was actually to study biotechnology!) There was no big plan for a picture book, much less a successful short film, and the peculiar business of winning an Oscar is still bizarre beyond reckoning – a very long way from the tiny suburban room / paper landfill in which I work. Much more affecting for me is seeing how many people have responded to this simple story at a personal level, and been as quietly engaged by it as I have been over the past 18 or so years (phew – I must be getting on). This has taught me a lot. In particular, that insignificant things can end up becoming very significant, you just need to keep your ears, eyes and mind open to them. The story of *The Lost Thing* is really no bigger than the op-shop kitchen table upon which I originally scribbled a first draft one hot January morning in Perth. Nobody is ever going to want to read this nonsense! Or so I thought at first.

I kept coming back to it again and again, as if in a day-dreamy sort of way I'd opened the door to a little world that had a lot of actually important things to say: about society, about my feelings as a young person, about the problems of being an artist, and most of all, tentacles. What was it really about? I didn't know, often the sign of a good idea. I drew a bit more to find out. And then I kept drawing... I've now drawn the lost thing creature itself about 2,000 times, and am still wondering what it is.

Since then I've come to realise that the need for a clear pathway, a road that leads to an important destination, is maybe not so important. In some cases, random play can be just as useful

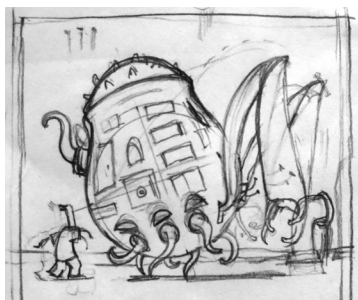
as a career prospectus. From that idle and fairly uneducated scribble on a kitchen table came a decade of strange obsession, the remnants of which you can see scattered on the walls around you. Who knows what is next? You never can tell. I've learned to put deep trust in the things that I initially laugh off as nonsense, the strange whisper than comes from the side. Or the freaky thing you find washed up on a beach.

Shaun Tan, Melbourne, July 2016



Room 1 - Entry

- Front cover of the book
- First ever drawing of *The Boy and The Lost Thing*. Collaged mock-up for the title page, ideas for the back cover, painted mock-up and pencil layout
- First sketches for story characters and early sequences for the picture storybook. Pencil and collage
- Original artwork for front and back endpapers of the book. Mixed media, collage, bottle tops, ink and paper



- Original artwork for the book cover image. Mixed media, paints, collaged printed paper
- Rough layouts for book pages 4 to 7. Pencil, ink and gouache
- Saying Hello mixed media original artwork for page 6. Mixed media, paint, pencil, collage
- *Feeding Time* original artwork for page 14. Mixed media, oil and acrylic paints, pencil and collaged printed paper

Room 2

The Book

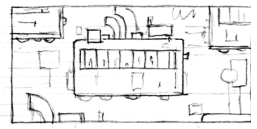
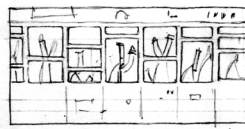
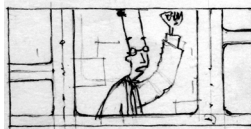
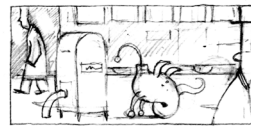
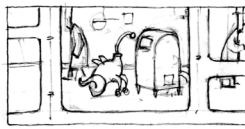
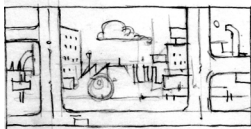
- Early sketches for page layouts of Utopia. Pencil
- Layouts for Utopia pages 26 to 27. Pencil, ink and gouache
- Digital print of the original illustration page 26 to 27

Between Book and Film

- Beach scene – book
- Beach scene - film

The Film

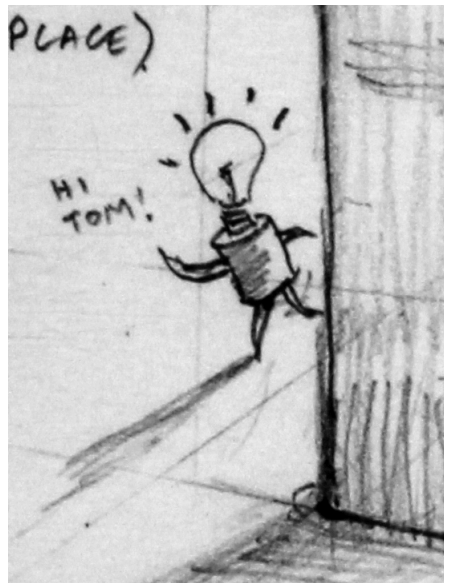
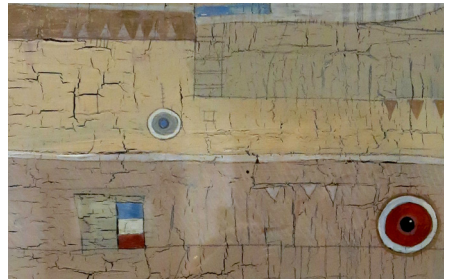
- Film publicity poster
- Four works: The character The Boy; cutout drawing of The Boy; two storyboard sketches; annotated drawings of Pete's head and body
- Three works showing light & shade colour script instructions for internal and external scenes in the animation. Soft pastel on coloured paper



Room Three

Texture paintings for animation using a variety of materials

- Skin for Tappy (top) Iron lung and Incubator (below)
- Down the alleyway textures for walls and floors Mum's jumper (top) Any old shirt (below)
- Multipurpose textures for walls, clothes and other objects
- Micro-dog (top) Animal, vegetable and mineral texture created by pressing acrylic paint between glass sheets and then onto paper (below)
- Useful bits of wall
- Stained and polluted wall texture Colour palette
- Road surfaces
- Grit, marks and other stuff
- Skin of the Blimp (top) Dusty plum for Obbie (below)
- The Blimp, colour film still
- Utopia, colour film still
- Drawing of Utopia and annotated drawing. Pencil
- Drawing of door to Utopia (top) Drawing of Utopian inhabitant Narcoleptic fable-furnace (below) Pencil
- Drawing of Iron Lung 890kg incubator bell with some of their children and drawing of polyglot wingbeater and obstetric metallurgist (below) Pencil
- Digital print of original kite paintings for Utopian scenery



Room Four

- 🌀 DVD with film sequences for Utopia
- 🌀 DVD with 3 slide shows on process of sections of film -
slideshow - pencil sketches for arrival in Utopia - Utopia
doorlift - 19 images - slideshow - pastel colour script story
board, 20 images, slideshow - pencil drawing storyboard,
85 images
- 🌀 DVD *The Lost Thing* - distributed by Madman: 15 mins



The Lost Thing - Picture Book to Animated Film

'From 2002 to 2010 I worked as part of a small team on a short animated film adaptation of THE LOST THING, produced by Passion Pictures Australia with financing from both Screen Australia and Passion Pictures.

I've been involved in this project as a director, writer, designer and artist, working with a core team of four other creators in a Melbourne-based studio (one reason for my relocation to Melbourne in 2007). It has been a long and complex project, and a great opportunity to learn about the differences between book illustration and animated film. My background as a painter means that I'm more accustomed to working with still, silent pictures that allow a viewer plenty of time to contemplate individual compositions. Animation is a very different medium, where questions of time and pace are much more critical, not to mention layers of sound and music.

In re-creating the story from the ground up, we've elaborated some aspects of the 'Lost thing universe' which could not be entirely expressed within the confines of the original 32-page book. In fact, I always saw the story in my imagination as a short film or theatrical piece, where the book presents us with a set of stills from some larger production. The key character, a faceless creature, has an inherently animated personality which a painting struggles to convey - and finds it's full expression in the medium of film.'

Shaun Tan



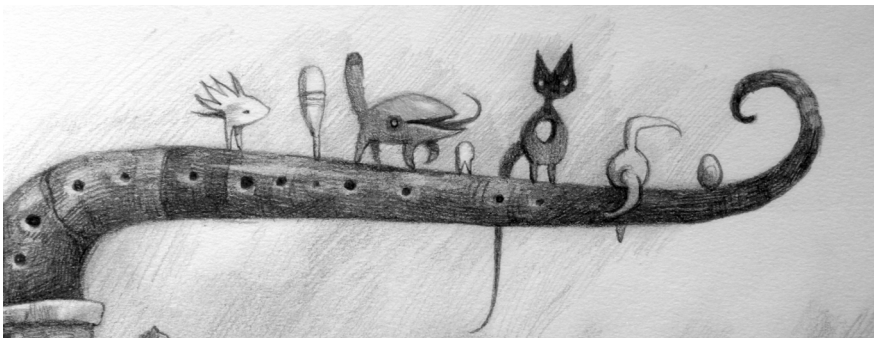
QUESTIONS ABOUT WRITING AND PAINTING

Following are some responses to questions that I am often asked, by readers, students and researchers of children's literature, mostly about influences and working practice. Other comments on writing and illustration can be found in the 'Notes' page of <http://www.shauntan.net/>

What books influenced you the most as a child?

This is somewhat difficult to answer because the things that most influence my work are probably also the ones I most take for granted. Something as simple as the availability of paint and pencils may be more important than any books (my Dad was an architect and my Mum liked to paint giant Disney pictures on our bedroom walls). Generally I had a very happy childhood filled with many pictures and stories.

My Mum read to my brother and I quite a bit when we were small, and it was pretty broad ranging. My family are not 'literary' types, so we were reading whatever was at hand in terms of stories without too much discrimination or guidance (as was the case with TV and movies). One story Mum read which really sticks in my memory is *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, which she must have thought was a children's book. None of us



recognised the satire about Soviet politics, but we all thought it was a great story, and the fact that it did not have a happy ending was something I found surprising, disturbing and, I recall, quite satisfying! I still think a lot about *Animal Farm* as a reference point for both my writing and illustration now – it's a book that's simple, absurd and truthful. It also achieves a universality

outside of any specific satirical references, a comment on human nature everywhere; as shown by the fact I could enjoy it as a child. One of my first picture books, *The Rabbits*, has a slight Orwellian feel about it in retrospect, probably a result of that very early influence.

In terms of illustrated books, there was a book of horror poems called *The Headless Horseman Rides Tonight*, written by Jack Prelutsky and illustrated in creepy but also amusing pen and ink drawings by Arnold Lobel. I can still recall the images quite vividly, and borrowed that book many times from the library. Anything about monsters, outer space or robots was very attractive to me.

The first book I ever bought, with my entire life savings at the age of seven, was an illustrated book of dinosaurs, which I looked through all the time, reproduced drawings from and dutifully memorised all the dinosaur names. There was also Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* which I still admire as an adult as an ideal picture book experiment - a whole series of fragmentary sentences and singular strange drawings that are never fully explained. I also liked *Fungus the Bogeyman* by Raymond Briggs, but only discovered a lot of his other books (and been quite influenced by them) as an adult. There are a number of Quentin Blake images that stick in my head too - particularly one about a jam-powered frog - and I was a great fan of anything by Roald Dahl.

Later (about 10-12) I remember being impressed by *The Hobbit*, and a trilogy of books by John Christopher about a future world invaded centuries ago by giant, sentinel robots that everyone just accepts as normal: *The White Mountains*, *The City of Gold and Lead*, *The Pool of Fire*. As a teenager I was mostly influenced by the short stories of Ray Bradbury, which were like strange dreams or adult fairy-tales, and probably cemented my interest in science-fiction / fantasy as a way of communicating ideas. My particular favourites were *The Silver Locusts* and *The Illustrated Man* - in many ways my own book *Tales from Outer Suburbia* nods towards these anthologies.

Visually, I was probably more influenced by movies and TV; the first Star Wars films for their designs much more than the story, and certain fantasy films like *The Dark Crystal* (which I was obsessed with when I was about 10). I also watched a lot of *Dr Who*, *Star Trek* and such shows, but never became a big follower of these. I was much more interested in *The Twilight Zone*, again because it was 'real world' fantasy with a short fable-like structure I think. One reason I do picture books today is that I remain interested mostly in very short philosophical stories: picture books are perfect for this.

So I think all those things have influenced me, plus a great deal more. Some of it is conscious, but most probably isn't - you just get a sense that a painting or story 'works' because it feels right, and this feeling is informed by a mixture of both a first-hand experience of life, and the models of story-telling and imagination provided by books, TV, movies and so on; culture, art, language. I don't make much discrimination between 'high art' and 'popular culture' - it's just whatever happens to be interesting and memorable.

Which artists' work most influences your own?

I'm pretty omnivorous when it comes to influences, and I like to admit this openly. Readers of *The Lost Thing* often notice my parodies of famous paintings by artists like Edward Hopper and Jeffrey Smart, or slight references to the medieval artist Hieronymus Bosch and Spanish Surrealists. I could list hundreds of illustrators, writers, cartoonists, photographers, filmmakers, and artists (both historical and contemporary) who influence me by virtue of the fact that I'm interested in their work, but it changes from time to time. I would also have to include equally important, though seemingly banal influences like suburban streets, cloud formations, conversations, the way paint runs down a canvas, or colors go together, or objects arranged on a table or landscape - basically a kind of more abstract realm of inspiration that is rooted in everyday encounters and accidents of perception. And there's always something to discover, usually in the same old stuff you've been looking at every day - there's no shortage of material. You just have to apply your imagination and look at it all from a new angle.

How do you make a finished illustration?

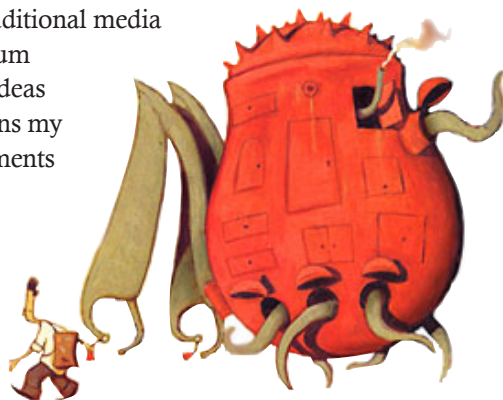
I take my rough drawings up to the point where I have a fairly clean line drawing in layout paper that I can trace onto a support (usually stretched medium weight watercolour paper, very smooth, primed with acrylic paint) using graphite or white transfer paper. Most of my illustrations are not huge because they need to fit on a scanner for reproduction, which demands they be around A2 - A1 in size. I find it is better to work closer to the scale that the reader will see them, so that details don't end up being too small (most artwork reproduced is reduced from a larger image).

I usually paint from dark to light, so I trace white lines onto a dark grey or brown background. I also do a small, very quick colour sketch of the image using acrylic paint and pastel crayon over a photocopy of a preliminary drawing, sometimes a couple of these using different colour schemes. I paint quite quickly in thin acrylic to start off with, and continue the editorial process of the sketches where I'm still changing my mind (hence the use of opaque media, where 'mistakes' can be covered). I then paint over these layers in oil paint, which offers slightly richer colour, and slower drying time which I prefer, being a slow painter.

I also work in other media, and in the past have used scratchboard, pastel crayons, coloured pencils, gouache, watercolour, pen and ink, linocuts and assemblages (using found objects); apply these to paper, canvas and plywood board. I also use collage frequently, because it allows unexpected elements to be introduced into a painting and creates an interesting texture, both of physical surface and ideas. Recently I've been experimenting with combining traditional media with new digital ones. Each medium works well for conveying certain ideas and effects, and this is what governs my choice, along with various experiments that often include mixing media.

Shaun Tan

Information from
Shaun Tan's website
<http://www.shauntan.net/faq1.html>





Top: Film still showing The Boy and the Lost Thing at the Beach Below: Pastel drawing showing light & shade colour script instructions for the animation.



GS
Gallery