

The Rabbits

by John Marsden

THE ILLUSTRATOR'S APPROACH

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*The following comments are taken from an interview between the illustrator of *The Rabbits*, Shaun Tan, and Nick Stathopoulos, for the magazine Eidolon. They give a good insight into the thinking behind how the book was illustrated.*

Nick Stathopoulos: Although on the surface *The Rabbits* may seem to be an allegory of white man's arrival and subsequent rape of Australia, this book is more ... much more. Not only has illustrator Shaun Tan imbued this project with his distinctive style, his evocative, colourful, sometimes whimsical paintings add new depth and subtext. The art is simply breathtaking.

Shaun Tan : I felt there was enormous potential to construct an entire universe from first principles, both conceptually and visually. The subject of colonisation has itself fascinated me for some time, not simply as a political issue, but as an event of utter aesthetic strangeness where two very different worlds collide. I realised a long time ago that everything is fundamentally strange, but that you need some oblique means of puncturing familiar surfaces to appreciate that strangeness. Thinking about a particular historical subject is one such point of departure, the past being an alternate present in many ways.

Nick: I've always felt that illustrating text is symbiotic — each (ie author and illustrator) needing each other for meaning and context. When they are perfectly mated, you get something more ... a synergy. *The Rabbits* by far is a perfect example of this.

Shaun: I do have a conscious strategy to illustrate tangentially, doing something quite removed from what the text is doing without losing the reference, so the mental circuit for the reader is quite convoluted, and therefore exciting (I hope) ... The drawings needed to be more concerned with concepts than just illusion, like a visual essay ... I also wanted to push Marsden's metaphorical approach even further. You could say the subject and its problems therefore dictated the necessary style to some extent, as with the other books I've illustrated, which are all quite different ... I want to say I don't regard the book so much as an allegory ... as much as a strange metaphor ... The fact of Australia's invasion by Europeans was for me source material in creating an entirely imaginary world, one which is parallel rather than symbolic like a political cartoon. You can read more into something like that, not to mention the fact that's more universal if it's not strapped to particular references. Hopefully an American, Asian or European reader, adult or child, can connect without necessarily knowing anything about Australian history.

Older students who are interested could look into these comments in more detail to get a greater appreciation of *The Rabbits*.

Question: *What is meant by a 'strange metaphor'*

THE AUTHOR

John Marsden is by far the most popular and successful author of young adult fiction in Australia, with strong international sales as well. He has won many awards, including the CBC of Australia's Book of the Year, 1988, for *So Much to Tell You*, and has been shortlisted for the same award for *Letters from the Inside* (1992) and *Take My Word for It* (1993); and has won numerous children's choice awards. His series, which began with *Tomorrow When the War Began*, has broken all sales records for young adult fiction.

The Rabbits is his third picture book. His first was *Prayer for the Twenty-first Century* (Lothian, Melbourne, 1997). His second was *Norton's Hut*, illustrated by Peter Gouldthorpe (Lothian, Melbourne, 1998).

THE ILLUSTRATOR

Shaun Tan is the author and illustrator of *The Arrival*, *The Lost Thing* and *The Red Tree*, both of which have won international awards such as the Honourable Mention in the Bologna Ragazzi Prizes, were CBCA Honour Books and have been widely translated. Previous books Shaun has illustrated includes the *The Rabbits* by John Marsden (CBCA Picture Book of the Year) and with Gary Crew, *Memorial* (A CBCA Honour Book) and *The Viewer* (winner of the Crichton Award for illustration). In 2001 Shaun received the 'World Fantasy Best Artist Award' for his body of work.

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Close study of: *The Rabbits* by John Marsden and illustrated by Shaun Tan.

Find book on: Part One www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTvXe84UqIQ

Part Two <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZaROIWniN8>

Questions:

Cover:

1. The rabbits have arrived in an extraordinary, fantastical ship. Look at the ship closely and comment on what the chimneys, wheels, clock and smoke stacks and so on might represent.
2. Look at the rabbits themselves. In the water, some are holding steady the small boat in which they have landed. Why do you think they have numbers on their backs?
3. In the foreground are rabbits of different status. How can we tell this? Nevertheless they bear a strong resemblance to each other. What is the illustrator telling us about the rabbits by doing this.
4. The story is told from the point of view of the possums, so how do you think this has influenced the way the rabbits are portrayed?
5. The possums are very small and in the background. Their pose is characteristic of that scene Aborigines in early colonial art. What does the disparity in size and number of rabbits and possums tell us?
6. Compare the rabbit's weapons and the possum's weapons.
7. Look at the *Opening 1* (the first double spread). It shows the land largely from the possum perspective. Look at the colours and natural elements in the illustration. A sense of space and antiquity (the ancient past) is created by the composition. How is this created?
8. However, there is the acknowledgement of the rabbit invasion in the bottom right corner. Why do you think the illustrator decided to show the rabbit invasion but no rabbits?
9. *Openings 2* and *3* show a dramatic change in the land. Examine the changing action and the words, the relative number and size of the rabbits compared to the possums. What do the details tell us?
10. The written texts on *Opening 3* is: *They won't understand the right ways*. How are the rabbits demonstrating the truth of the old people's warning?
11. *Opening 4* is also the cover. How does it fit into the story being told?
12. Take the section of *Opening 5* which has the words *They didn't live in the trees like we did* and investigate what is happening or being represented by different pieces of the picture. Show how the landscape has been taken over by the rabbits.

A Shift In Tone

13. By *Opening 6* with the sheep, the bright artificial colours have virtually taken over the natural ones, what does this tell us?
14. The possums have about one third of the illustrations, but things aren't going well. What do you think the illustrations signifies?
15. *Opening 7* shows a desolate and artificial landscape. There seems to be only one possum – a silhouette low on his right side. How does the illustration back up or complement the words here?
16. Although the rabbits and the possums, and the rabbit machinery and devices stay the same, the style of illustration changes dramatically in *Opening 8*. The sepia tones mimic the early photography. What does that tell us about the time frame?

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17. *Opening 9* with the text *We lost the fights is telling us something about the relationship between the land and its occupiers*. The rabbits are depicted as living on the surface or digging down into the earth. The body of the earth still contains the possum symbols of shells. The possums are shown chained, reflecting the words *we lost the fights*. But Shaun Tan's illustration is making a comment about what exactly has been won. Given what you know about the way Aborigines view the land, how does this illustration reflect the difference between ownership and possession?

18. *Openings 10 and 11* show a devastated environment and a devastated society. Shaun Tan uses the surrealist techniques to emphasise the powerlessness of the possums and the overwhelming power of the rabbits.

Note that while the big rabbits in the fore- and mid-ground are holding legal documents and fancy quill pens, the last rabbit in the line is turned, facing the possums. The possums have their arms out pleading for their children who are being taken away in kites, looking back at their parents. The rabbit facing the possums has some sort of weapon in his hand. How faithfully does this reflect our history, as far as you know?

19. By *Opening 12* there are very few possums, and they are huddled under the *Might = Right* sign. They appear to be living in cardboard boxes and drinking alcohol. There is no natural landscape to be seen. What do you think the author and illustrator are implying here?

20. *Opening 13 and 14* show even more horrible consequences for the land. How would you describe or explain these illustrations? How well do they match the words?

The book's message

21. After finishing the book, look back at the change of colour as the illustrations progress. What do you think this change symbolises?

22. What audience do you think this book was intended for? What was the most important factor in your decision, words or illustrations?

23. The final question is *Who Will Save Us From The Rabbits?* What is your answer to the final question?

24. You need to define the word *allegory*. If this story is an allegory, does it have a moral from which we are meant to learn?