



DOG

SHAUN TAN

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Format: Hard back

Recommended reading age: 10 years and older

Summary

A beautifully poetic and gorgeously illustrated reflection on the relationship between dogs and humans. *Dog* is a stand-alone picture book of one of the most-loved stories from the bestselling and internationally acclaimed *Tales from the Inner City* by Shaun Tan, winner of the 2020 Kate Greenaway Medal.

Author style

Featuring a free verse poem with a series of evocative paintings, *Dog* is both a short history of the world as well as an exploration of the bond between the loyal dog and his human companion as they travel through the ages. But it is also so much more.

'Overlaying [this] story is a dystopian sensibility, with the accompanying images arresting the eye and inviting the reader into the complex text which is here to be unravelled. But Shaun Tan's haunting lament about the impending apocalypse and the failure of flawed human aspiration is juxtaposed against the hope and love which he invests in every word and image. His humour also infuses each text and image and reminds us of the value of self-deprecation as a quality – one which is lacking in today's world.

'Shaun Tan's illustrations or visual poems are extraordinary. But to be able to write such spare and evocative texts, as well, is even more extraordinary. What continues to haunt Tan's illustrative work is what an incredibly gifted writer he is.'

[This description of the author's style is an edited version of longer notes about Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City* written by Robyn Sheahan-Bright, available on the A&U website at <https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/childrens/Tales-from-the-Inner-City-Shaun-Tan-9781760523534>]

Themes

Animals • environment • loyalty • devotion • companionship

Suggestions for classroom discussion and application:

Visual literacy

Design encompasses every aspect of an illustrated book's construction, including the front and back cover image, the title page, the double page spreads, and the final imprint or publication details page. The juxtaposition of images and words on a page contributes to meaning in this and in other books.

- How does Shaun Tan convey the passage of time through these illustrations? What changes and what doesn't between spreads? What message did you take away from these illustrations?
- The colour palette in *Dog* is at turns sombre, moody and arresting, with splashes of dramatic and vivid colour against a changing landscape marking historical change. What effect does the colour palette here have on your reading of *Dog*.
- Do you find that your eye moves horizontally or vertically through these illustrations? Do you think Shaun Tan planned this, and if so, why? What is the effect of the penultimate illustration of the pedestrian crossing cutting through the dominant horizontal line?
- Compare and contrast the first and last spreads in the book. How do these spreads visually convey the message of the free verse poem?
- How does the distance between human characters and dogs on each page reflect the change in their relationship over time?
- Does Shaun Tan use a serif or sans serif font for his free verse? Why might his choice be important to how we read *Dog*?

Studies of history, society and environment

Consider the lines from the text below: What global issue do you think Shaun Tan is referring to here?

But now everything is different.

The river flows wrongly,

the plains are gone,

the sky presses down like a thousand ceilings.

It feels like time is only ever running away from us.

Where will we go? What will we do?

IN THE CLASSROOM...



The text ends as outlined below. Is this an optimistic or pessimistic ending to the story?

*You pull at my hand,
push your nose into the back of my knee,
and cry out to me as you always do,
This world is ours!
And just like that we are walking again.*

This story reminds us that human beings and dogs have spent millennia coexisting and learning from each other; and that we will live and die and survive or decline together. In light of this, research and discuss the following topics:

- The domestication of animals as pets
- The ethics of using animals as working animals
- Racing and betting
- The ethics of 'humane' forms of killing dogs

English language and literacy

- What style of verse has Shaun Tan used here. Why do you think he chose this form over other types of verse or prose for this story?
- How are imagery and repetition used to complement and extend the message of the illustrations?



In the author's own words:

'The relationship between dogs and humans is unlike that of any other. There are perhaps few inter-species friendships so epic and transforming, spanning some 15,000 years, enduring the vagaries of history, the rise and fall of countless societies, shaping each in turn. Every time I see people walking their dogs at my local park, I never cease to be heartened by the endurance and affection of this bond, its strangeness, its apparent naturalness.

'But fates are never quite aligned and our hearts so frequently broken. For many years I've had a news clipping on the pin-up board that overlooks my desk, a picture of a dog whose owner died in a tragic house-fire. There is something about the dog's hard-to-read gaze that I've always found compelling. It reminds me of many stories such as that of the famous Hachiko, the Japanese dog that waited patiently at Shibuya train station every evening, up to nine years after his owner, a university professor, had died suddenly at work. The sheer loyalty and urgent optimism of dogs has always been a great inspiration for their human companions, who so often wander from such virtuous paths and anxiously question their place in the world. No matter what future meets our planet, no matter how transformed or tragic, even apocalyptic, it's hard to imagine that a dog will not be there by our side, always urging us forward.'

– Shaun Tan

Author background:

Shaun Tan grew up in Perth and works as an artist, writer and film-maker in Melbourne. He is best known for illustrated books that deal with social and historical subjects through dream-like imagery, widely translated throughout the world and enjoyed by readers of all ages. Shaun has also worked as a theatre designer, a film concept artist and won an Academy Award for the short animated film *The Lost Thing*. In 2011 he received the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in Sweden, in recognition of his services to literature for young people. He is also the recipient of the Kate Greenaway Medal 2020 for *Tales from the Inner City*.

For more information about Shaun Tan's work go to: <https://www.shauntan.net/>

