



THE RABBITS

John Marsden & Shaun Tan

Teacher's Notes

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INTRODUCTION

This sophisticated and compelling book will provide a wealth of ideas and discussion for older students. It is an excellent example of how a picture book can challenge and engage maturing minds.

Because the author is so well-known to young people through his other works, students will readily and eagerly engage with the text. They will appreciate the manner in which the strikingly original illustrations interpret the simple, compelling text. The story, in the form of an allegory, makes a powerful statement about colonisation in general and the colonisation of Australia in particular, but more universal comments about this and many other issues can be interpreted.

The Rabbits has the potential to have a cult following because it breaks the bounds of the usual concept of a 'picture book'. *The Rabbits* raises numerous points for discussion in the classroom, as it deals with so many issues. It can be used to examine aspects of the curriculum in a creative and innovative way in the areas of English, Art, Technology, Philosophy, Studies of Society and the Environment — History, Geography and Environmental Studies — from Years 5-6 through to Year 12.

PLOT

At first the inhabitants, although mystified, are able to be philosophical about the newcomers who have come to their land. The illustrations cleverly mirror and interpret the progression of the text. The wisdom of the elders suggests a distinct wariness because these new people are different.

Then comes the ominous building up of numbers: The fact that the new arrivals have new and different ways is emphasized, but still there is a tolerance on the part of the original inhabitants.

The negatives are emphasised in the illustrations by an insertion of a monochrome portion of the page which impinges on the main story.

There is a feeling of helplessness as the invaders take over. The starkness of the illustrations reflects the feeling of impending doom. Then the sheer weight of numbers of newcomers results in fighting. This is portrayed brilliantly by the fragmentation of the page into separate pictures showing different episodes.

The text, in its minimalist manner, states the inevitable and the design of the book adds to every aspect of the unfolding of the concepts. Then comes the juxtaposition of the new order with the old — the conquerors above and the defeated, in bondage, below.

The new order 'progresses', destroying all that mattered to the original inhabitants coupled with the horror of the loss of the most precious thing — the children; the future.

Now there are the conquerors everywhere: A wall-to-wall illustration covering the page edge to edge shows this with some colour reappearing to indicate that this is the new status quo; order, alignment, MIGHT = RIGHT.

Then the desolation, the destruction, the despair are depicted:

The end result of the taking over of another country — and then the harking back to the old natural order of things as they were

Question: *How is this depicted by the illustrator?*

The rhetorical question at the end is a sobering reminder that we need solutions. There is a deliberate contrast of the endpapers with the remainder of the illustrations.

ACTIVITIES

Comment on the style of illustrations.

Read the book. Jot down some words to indicate what you felt after an initial reading. What words come to mind?

What is an allegory? A dictionary definition will give you an answer. Find other allegories — see if you can find some in picture book format.

This book is clearly not about rabbits. What do you think it is about? Why do you think *The Rabbits* was chosen as the title of the book? Give reasons for your answer. How are they depicted?

There is a paucity of words in this book, yet they are used with tremendous effect. Find examples where words are used unusually to convey a concept. Explain what effect those words have.

The illustrations go a long way towards helping the reader interpret the text. Take one page and examine it closely. Give a detailed account of what you can glean from the illustrations.

Look at the way in which the invaders are depicted and how the image of them alters as the book progresses. What effect does this have on the reader? What impressions do you get of the newcomers at first? Show how the illustrator makes us change our initial response.

Many symbols are used by the illustrator throughout the book. Find some and say what you think they are portraying and why the artist has used them.

What does the cover suggest? Comment further.

Look more closely at the way in which the book has been designed. The end papers depict a natural scene of tranquility, in stark contrast to the remainder of the illustrations. Explain what effect they are intended to have — why they are there?

Often the visuals create a particular impression. Choose an illustration (it can be a double page spread) and say what you got from it.

From whose point of view is the story told? Examine the ways in which the illustrations show the inevitable outcome of this invasion.

There is a very strong environmental message in this book. Expand on this.

Are there messages about multiculturalism in *The Rabbits*?

What are some recurring themes in the paintings? Find some and explain their function. Look at John Marsden's dedication at the front of the book: 'To Brian Farran, who cares about these matters'. What matters do you think the author means?

The book covers an incredible array of subjects which can be examined more closely — the stolen children is just one of these. Find out more. Refer to *The Burnt Stick* by Anthony Hill and other books which will tell you more.

THE ILLUSTRATOR'S APPROACH

*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.

REFERENCES

Other allegories:

Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan;
Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift;
Watership Down by Richard Adams;
Maus by Art Spiegelman;
Animal Farm by George Orwell.

Other sophisticated picture books:

First Light by Gary Crew, illustrated by Peter Gouldthorpe (Lothian, Melbourne, 1991);
The Watertower by Gary Crew, illustrated by Steven Woolman (Era, Adelaide, 1994);
The Viewer by Gary Crew, illustrated by Shaun Tan (Lothian, Melbourne, 1997);
The Drover's Boy by Ted Egan, illustrated by Robert Ingpen (Lothian, Melbourne, 1997);
Way Home by Libby Hathorn, illustrated by Gregory Rogers (Random, Sydney, 1994).

A useful teachers' resource to explore picture books more widely:

From Picture Book to Literary Theory by John Stevens and Ken Watson (St ClairPress)