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The Purposeful Daydream: Thoughts on Children's Literature

When asked about the purpose of my work as a writer and illustrator of picture books, here is the kind of statement I'm likely to offer: *Literature for young people profoundly enriches our culture; it enlightens and educates; it opens our minds and improves our lives.* It's a pleasing affirmation, but does it tell us anything new?

After all, this is nothing if not the tacit constitution of so many children's literature conferences, festivals, educational programs, and book-week events, all in search of an author endorsement or, even better, a promotional sound bite for mainstream consumption. And admittedly, it's a great privilege to be working in a field whose virtue, like that of schools and hospitals, is generally uncontested (I do feel sorry for politicians, currency traders, and parking inspectors—only a little!). While there are so many things in our world that leave us constantly racked by doubt and debate, ethical dilemmas and questions of motive, the deconstruction and relativism of academia, here at least is one thing that we can all agree upon as absolutely, unambiguously *real and positive*: good books for young readers.

To write an essay on the subject would seem to only preach to the converted. Who has not themselves enjoyed a childhood and adolescence enriched in some way by literature? Or witnessed the lives of others profoundly improved by reading, from the simple wonder of a bedtime story to the critical, soul-searching gaze of a great YA novel (and it's telling that when you ask people about the books that have influenced them the most, made the greatest impact on their imagination, they so often refer to a childhood or teenage reading experience). Surely all we need do as artists, publishers, booksellers, and educators is roll up our sleeves and get down to the business of making good books. The world needs good books for young people! Forward march!

As someone whose livelihood depends on such presumptions, I'm certainly not about to challenge them. At the same time I feel it's important to put them in perspective, if I'm to write honestly from a creator's point of view. The truth is that as an artist I'm about as motivated by such grand statements as I am by any other social objective or cultural manifesto, which is to say, not very much at all.

At the coalface of my drawing table, trying to think up interesting stories about lost animals or wondrous adventures, I actually find it quite difficult to simultaneously ponder a higher purpose. I also rarely think about an audience, let alone a specific audience: I've never created work with children in mind, despite being generally labeled as a children's writer and illustrator, any more than I've contemplated a target demographic for the landscapes, portraits, abstracts, and other work I create as a painter. I don't have a preconceived message or agenda to educate or enlighten, to open minds or improve lives. Frankly, it's too much responsibility! Any social consciousness that accompanies a project—and yes, I would like to think that it exists—tends to awaken only *after* I've conceived an image or story, as a kind of hopeful afterthought, a belated conscientiousness. On the rare occasions that I come into contact with a readership, such as at a festival or book signing, I often have as many questions for readers as they might have for me, both of us wanting to know why we might be attracted to the same ideas and images, as an act of mutual discovery that, at its core, is often quite mysterious and accidental. The rest of the time we live at a great distance from each other and don't know what to expect.

Occasionally I have an opportunity to step back and take in a broader view (such as when asked to write an essay like this), and I can see a strong relationship between private thought and public culture. If speaking at a conference, I can also recognize deeper intellectual and emotional currents at work, almost subconscious motivations behind the doodles, sketches, and ramblings that turn into published work; big ideas about art and life that move like tides through every creative gesture, whether one knows it or not. It's just that such big ideas only seem apparent outside my studio. If I try to bring them in, they don't really fit through the door. Which is just as well, as I'd find such thoughts more paralyzing than motivating—all that pressure to be smart and profound! Or worse, do great work all the time. More than being impossible, it's actually undesirable.

My real world, like that of most artists and writers, is one of idiosyncratic play, purposeless daydreaming, and a love of simple and ordinary things operating at a very small scale, a furtive scale, uncertain of itself. It's also very private and solitary. When I'm working, I'm more or less temporarily marooned on a desert island, only fleetingly wondering whether my work will be strong enough to float, like a message in a bottle, and able to travel any distance at all, to reach anyone. Can other people (complete strangers for the most part) make sense of my own personal obsessions, these words and images that I find so inexplicably

fascinating? Can a story move beyond my own private imagination, pass across oceans of language and culture, be understood by adults and children alike, perhaps even those living in distant places I have never visited?

These are the thoughts that every writer and artist must ponder occasionally, if not all the time, once we look up from our tables and rest our eyes on a window (in my case, overlooking an ordinary suburban street of Melbourne). It boils down to a singular question, one that draws all of us to this wonderful, rambling world of literature, and one that runs so parallel to ordinary life: “Do others see and feel the same things that I see and feel?”

I’m constantly amazed to find that the answer is *yes*, that other people *do* feel so much of what I think at first to be so weirdly private. And this promise of the strange, connective power of writing and illustration, a kind of convoluted telepathy, is a very inspirational thought. That said, the idea of creative process as *communication* can often seem so far removed from an artist’s studio space or writer’s den, where every thought happens in a merciful solitude, far from scrutiny. For me that’s just as well: I’m an introverted person by nature and not especially confident. My mind is a jumble of vague thoughts that I’m constantly sifting for grains of reliable truth, things that seem honest and real amid a lot of other noise. But I think that this, too, is a weirdly private thing we all have in common.

Drawing and writing have always been, for me, particularly helpful in sifting for meaning in everyday life. It’s very hit-and-miss, but sometimes scribble coalesces into an interesting painting or story, interesting in the sense that it reveals some true feeling or observation that was previously undisclosed. Occasionally these stories are published, and they become public suddenly, when they might be received with a frown, a laugh, or a quiet nod of assent, as if to say, “yes, I see and feel something like that too.” Joy, sorrow, fear, pleasure, and every shade of mystery in between: we can feel intimately connected in our separateness.

Drawing became particularly important for me as a young person, as it is for many young people (I seem to see more teenagers crouched over sketchbooks than any other age group) trying to figure out a place in the world. To explain a little of my own background, I grew up in Western Australia’s coastal suburb of Hillarys, which is now a place of shopping malls, highways, and tourist beaches, surrounded by a brick and tile mosaic of low suburban houses, bleeding into the ocean by virtue of an enormous marina. In my childhood, however, Hillarys was a somewhat

empty and anonymous place, a peripheral suburb in a peripheral city, like a cartographer's afterthought, something to fill the space between a map and the edge of the world. A few houses; a department store, supermarket, and burger joint; a ring of bush and an endless beach; a lot of sand and wind—a kind of suburban fishbowl, to which I had (and continue to have) various affections and aversions.

In some respects, it was a coarsely pragmatic landscape. Affordable blocks carved from ancient sand dunes by bulldozers: neat, level squares of opportunity left baking in the fierce heat of summer, waiting for young middle-class families to fill them with dreams of peace and prosperity. We were one such family, my parents, my older brother, and I. My father is Malaysian Chinese, his parents from China. My mother is a third-generation Australian of English and Irish ancestry. My own name includes all of these elements: an Irish first name with an English spelling—Shaun—followed by a Malaysian version of a Chinese surname—Tan.

Many people naturally ask me how this mixed heritage has influenced the themes of my work as an artist, particularly as I often deal with subjects such as immigration, cultural difference, and problems of language. Of course, a book like *The Arrival*, a wordless story of a man traveling to an imaginary country, was initially inspired by anecdotes from my own family, including the experiences of my wife, who is from Finland. All of my family were used as visual models for characters in my book—not that it's important for the story, but it did give me pause to reflect upon certain real-life parallels relating to migration and settlement. I drew myself as the main protagonist in *The Arrival*, and although I've never left my home country, I still have a sense of being a little displaced; working on a fictional story led me to think more about my personal reality, as if offering an objective distance. I realize that so many of us are “displaced people” if we look back far enough. The history of humanity is a history of migration, change, and adaptation.

Growing up in Perth only seemed to make a feeling of displacement more obvious. I often wondered about my family's spiritual relationship, if such a thing existed, to this semiarid patch of coast. Being half-Chinese in a very Anglo-Australian neighborhood may have compounded this, as I was constantly aware of looking different, of not entirely fitting in, perhaps even more so than most children, and very sensitive to occasional anti-Asian racism directed at my brother, my father, and me, something that used to especially enrage my mother. There was a sense of both belonging and not belonging. It's a strange thing to be constantly asked, “Where are you from?” in the place you were born. Over

time I began to realize that a clear identity or connection to a place is perhaps not something natural or innate. Sometimes you have to invent it, much like writing a good story or drawing a picture.

My parents set a good example by designing and building their own house, a process that lasted much of my early childhood: the smell of wet cement and angle grinders, lifted on the breeze from the Indian Ocean, still conjures vivid memories of a building-site playground. They were growing something out of nearly nothing, brick by brick, far from their own parents and far from the source of their own culture. Europe and Asia were utterly abstract concepts for us kids, just words and pictures in books and on TV, just a less inventive kind of fiction, like the ridiculous notion of snow at Christmas. The United States was an intangible transmission of airwaves and funny accents—rock, sitcoms, Disneyland, cola—the empire of logos, alternately schmaltzy and cool.

The only remnants of real local history were the huge, wild-looking insects and woolly caterpillars that visited our new place from the dark frontier of the surrounding bushland, objects of endless fascination and delight for us boys and technically our first pets. These disappeared over time, along with the bush and the huge orange-and-white banksia flowers you could hold with two hands like giant hand-knitted fruits. It was illegal to pick these native blossoms, so we rarely braved it. Then one day all the banksia trees were cut down and burned to make room for new houses. The nearby hillside glowed red in the night; we walked past the smoldering wreckage for weeks, kicking up plumes of ash on our way home from school. This was but one example of the strange, confusing world of adults, with their arbitrary rules of protection and destruction.

In many ways Hillarys, like most outer suburbs, is a microcosm of Australia as a whole, a land of displaced lives, of worlds imported, transplanted, and rebuilt from scratch. At the same time, Australia is a country with a troubled conscience. It's still coming to terms with a dark history: the unjust theft of land from its Indigenous people and the decimation of a fragile environment by two centuries of European-style agriculture and industry. Australia boasts the dubious title of having the highest rate of extinction in the world, among other ongoing environmental disasters, surrounded by a culture of denial, temporary measures, and the kind of politics that will leave future archaeologists scratching their heads.

This background inevitably finds its way into my illustrations in *The Rabbits*, a fable about strange creatures who destroy a country that is not their own, and a collection of short stories, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*—

an ode to my homeland—where silent creatures haunt the streets like guilty shadows and giant machines roll through quiet, dormitory neighborhoods, among so many other things that are never fully understood. Here are the strange sunny suburbs that I've grown to simultaneously love and distrust, to celebrate and criticize. Above all else, I'm fascinated by the ambiguity of it all. Not so much a moral ambiguity, but something even more fundamental, a conceptual weirdness. It's a landscape that has changed faster than it can think or remember, a post-industrial science fiction story that, like much of the modern world, is still being written.

I think children understand the ambiguity of everyday reality better than anyone. They are very sensitive to it, seeing it all fresh and for the first time, in all its strangeness. Children are still trying to figure out the inconsistencies that many adults have filed in the deeper recesses of our minds and hearts, locked up in a subconscious cabinet, being too busy dealing with more pressing, practical problems. How many of us as children noticed something baffling and launched into an endless line of questioning, one "Why?" following another, until a weary parent says "I don't know" or "That's just how it is" or "Stop asking so many silly questions!"

For example, imagine an enormous red creature, discovered on the shore of a city, that everyone sees but nobody pays attention to. It's covered with hinged doors and sports claws, bells, and tentacles without any apparent purpose. It takes a younger person to be curious enough to raise a question that nobody dares ask: "Where does it belong?" The answer is likely to be far too complicated, the implications too challenging: an unwelcome disruption to day-to-day business. In this particular story the question is never fully answered, but perhaps that's the point of fiction. Answers are not always so important, at least not as important as good questions, addressing problems that will always be a part of life.

The title of this story, *The Lost Thing*, might refer to either the strange creature we see in the illustrations, or something more abstract in the heart of the narrator, his own imagination or soul. Once again, I've represented myself as the central character, because in some ways it's an autobiographical story. It was the first picture book I both wrote and illustrated at the age of twenty-five, a time when I was accepting more adult responsibilities, worrying about making a living as an artist, and feeling some nostalgia for the curiosity, playfulness, and sideways wisdom of my childhood. The story is essentially self-critical—a warning against my own complacency, my tendency to ignore the things that are

most important. My counterpart in the story laments that he doesn't notice "lost things" anymore because he's "too busy doing other stuff," which really has a lot to do with my own preoccupations, often quite self-centered and shortsighted. The narrator recedes into the darkness, lost among the commuters on their way home from work.

Such an act of criticism, even with a bleak ending, is inherently optimistic. Such stories open the possibility of grafting childhood curiosity back into an adult consciousness, as much as it encourages young readers to hold on to those things that fascinate them and never let them go. Things in darkness are pushed back into the light. Of course, these are all things I think about mostly after the act of creation, as a way of understanding a feeling of importance behind the images that capture my own imagination and demand to be put to paper or canvas.

Indeed, writing and drawing in a sketchbook is quite therapeutic for me: there's a feeling of wholeness that comes from rummaging through all the disjointed rooms of my childhood, youth, and adulthood, looking for ideas, a mix of dreaming and remembering. Drawing for me is a single continuous project that's been in progress since I could first hold a crayon, and while the process has become more skilled, the conceptual impulse is essentially the same, with something unlearned and primitive about it. Shapes and words dangle on the pages of my current sketchbooks like fishing line, the tip of a pencil able to hook submerged memories and impressions from very long ago, things that are otherwise inaccessible to the more conscious, purposeful parts of my mind. I try not to worry about what my drawings actually mean; I just follow them where they go. Meaning, significance, good sense, order, logic, appropriateness: all such things can be indefinitely postponed when I draw—what a relief!

After years of academic study (fine arts and English literature) and personal practice as a painter, I've come full circle in respecting the intuitions of childhood. For all its awkwardness, there is something utterly sincere and profound about that early creative impulse, a natural animal instinct. Some of the most beautiful paintings in the world are not found in the secular temple of an art gallery, but pinned by magnets to that other sacred site, the fridge door. Here you will see the purest acts of casual expression, true artists immersed in the act of making, free of self-consciousness or pretension (and, mercifully, also free of art dealers and critics!). A child's imagination is a laboratory where anything goes, an endless thread of "what if" conjectures, constantly tested against reality for some kind of fit. Assumptions are derailed and common sense disobeyed. In other words, a child's imagination has all the virtues that

one is chasing as an adult artist. “Every child is an artist,” wrote Picasso. “The problem is how to remain an artist once they grow up.”

I’ve been very fortunate to find myself stumbling into the world of children’s books as a freelance illustrator, and therefore into a creative environment where children are present, to remind me how to look and see. I don’t intentionally create work for children, but I do try to learn from them. It’s a mistake to believe that childhood is just a series of educational stepping stones, something to be experienced and left behind as we graduate into adulthood. It’s more like a bag of things you take on a long journey, always being careful not to forget where you put them. Ideally our experience of life is an accumulation of things, all of which remain readily accessible.

My own fondest memories of childhood all involve making something, as my parents did, out of nearly nothing. My mother, an amateur artist, once meticulously copied a scene from Disney’s *The Jungle Book* onto a bedroom wall using a palette of acrylic colors she kept in jam jars. I was three years old and remember seeing this enormous, grinning snake appear, bit by bit: an early introduction to the magic of art. Along with other kids, I soon discovered that we too could transform cheap runny paints and butcher’s paper into birds, elephants, dinosaurs, and erupting volcanoes, as present in our minds as anything outside of them.

I suppose this is one of the positive things about growing up where I did: a feeling of undefined possibility, of living in a wide-open space without apparent history or expectation. My childhood felt like an unmeasured century that needed to be filled by small creative acts, if only to keep boredom at bay. Drawing a flower and putting cheap perfume in the middle of it; building primeval figures out of clay and sticks, making planets from paper and glue wrapped around an inflated balloon. (I remember once trying to hold sunlight in a picture by putting a layer of tape over a ring of cardboard—it’s the kind of thinking I’d love to recapture.) Just as the yellow bulldozers constantly erased the landscape of our suburb to a bed of pale sand, kindergarten easels were set up every day like a row of tabula rasa, blank slates, inviting tiny hands to conjure something new into existence, to fill the emptiness.

One of my first drawings features two birds watching an egg in a nest, waiting for it to hatch. It still hangs in my parents’ bedroom not far from another thing I drew at the age of five: a dinosaur father and dinosaur mother, with an unborn infant curled up in her belly. It’s interesting now to look at them and see recurring themes of genesis and birth, something very young children are naturally interested in, given that from their point of view the universe has not been around for very long.

It's interesting also to see how such early ideas are connected with many of my current artistic preoccupations: recurring images of eggs, sprouting trees, regenerating landscapes, and unidentified animals; strangers arriving on distant shores; and vulnerable creatures adopted by caring children.

I like looking at my earliest drawings because they remind me of a time before anything mattered very much. Certainly, I had a talent for visualizing objects, although I think "talent" is often misunderstood as an innate skill. It's really more of an excitement, a special interest or attraction—the skill is just something that tries to keep up, the watering can you reach for when you think about a garden, the backpack you reach for when you feel the urge to travel, the words conjured when you feel like talking. For me, that enthusiasm has to do with grasping the "flavor" of a thing, often a fleeting impression that exists behind the curtain of language. It's wanting to know more about the tree-ness of a tree, the bird-ness of a bird, or the house-ness of a house; to not be fooled by the deceptive simplicity of words and labels.

What are these things really? What is their essence? It's such an enticing mystery, and whenever I go out sketching, I'm invariably returning to the same starting point, drawing as a toddler, a child, a teenager, a young adult. It's always the same, elusive mystery of existence. Meanings drawn tight from years of experience as an adult are pulled open to reveal what was always enigmatic: a "tree," a "bird," a "house," and many more things with arbitrary, strange-sounding names.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, it's very easy to frame an artist's development as somehow following a very purposeful trajectory, preordained and deeply philosophical. How far from the truth! I grew up in an environment of middle-class pop culture, about as far from the artistic center of the world as you can get while still having access to fast food. A land of discount supermarkets, television, advertising, regrettable fashions, and embarrassing '80s fads. Like most kids, I did not really know about "art" and "literature" in terms of a hierarchy of quality; everything seemed tuned to the same buzzing frequency, radio signals from anywhere that was not here. It was actually unimaginable that something profound might come from our tiny castaway world of home, school, and football. My artistic diet included drive-in movies, videos, computer games, and other electronically reproduced chaos, a precursor to the contemporary screen culture so seamlessly embraced by young people today. Naturally, my favorite subjects were robots, monsters, spaceships, and disasters, and I drew these obsessively, something my

parents fully encouraged without judgment (and to this I probably owe my career, a family that supported my interests uncritically).

It's easy to be disparaging about this retrospectively, to focus instead on my experiences of fine art and classic literature, which I also enjoyed as part of an eclectic mix, thanks mainly to school and my local public library. But the truth is that my life as an artist emerged mainly from popular culture. Not because it was good or bad, but because there were some glimmers of beauty and brilliance buried in all that white noise, some interesting bits of nutrition beneath the sugar and popcorn. I just had to look critically, without even knowing what that meant. I did this by drawing the things I liked, quiet moments of meditation in which to decide the difference between good and bad.

I would often draw after coming home from a movie, using felt-tip pens on the backs of old architectural plans that my dad had set aside for me, luxuriously large pieces of paper for a child. Movie posters were quite expensive in those days, so I was effectively creating cheap alternatives for my bedroom—and also “improving” some of the scenes and objects according to my own directorial tastes. The monster might be even better with two heads, the spaceships much longer, the hero far less confident against the giant caterpillar of my own backyard. Now that I occasionally work as a film concept designer, it's interesting to see how these childhood scribbles might be added to my résumé—who would have guessed that it was all professional development?

I realize that my own book and short film, *The Lost Thing*, was subconsciously fed by the popular images of my childhood, from *Star Wars* to *E.T.*, and in turn may inspire a new generation of children. I have a little folder of “lost things” sent to me by children of all ages—drawings of creatures made of suburban junk—with, of course, each child's personal modifications and improvements. Inadvertently, they are critically interpreting my work, and also thinking about the hidden spirit locked within banal, confusing details of modern life. They are making sense of junk: in creating these “lost things” perhaps finding deeper meanings from an otherwise shallow and commercially saturated environment.

We must accept that children today find themselves confronted by a confusing mix of reality and processed reality; this is what we have to live with. It's not necessarily bad, and humans have always been living with chaos and noise, blended truth and falsehood. Personal creativity can allow us to make sense of it: drawing, writing, looking, and reading within a thoughtful, attentive space. This is how we can catch our breath, collect our thoughts, test our ideas, and inevitably figure out

who we are in the process. This is how we create our own personal map of the world.

And this is also why literature is so important. The best books were for me like a condensed organization of ideas, a calm bay of interpretation in an attention-deficit-disorder world of mass media. Reading seemed a lot like drawing and writing; like my illustrations on the backs of old architectural plans, it was a self-mediated experience. More importantly perhaps, a self-owned experience, something that is incredibly important to children, who often live in a world where they are told what to do and think either directly or by implication. Books offer the freedom to make up our own minds, the best stories being not at all instructive or moralizing, but rather asking very well-crafted questions in an entertaining way, inspiring further creative thought. In fact, I often think of a good story, whether written, illustrated, filmed, or spoken, as really being a beautiful question. The most beautiful questions are actually a little unsettling, because at their best they have no simple answer.

My first experiences of this, as I imagine is the case for most of us, were the stories my mother read to my brother and me at bedtime. Literature had not been a big part of my mother's life, having grown up herself in a household with few books, enduring a factory-like education that regarded literacy as a tool for work, in an environment where creativity was considered an idle distraction (a familiar world for many of us). Perhaps because of this, she was adamant that my brother and I be exposed to a great range of books. Also because of this, our bedtime readings were quite random and unfiltered—authors' names were meaningless to us; we read whatever was on the public library shelf and looked okay.

The most memorable of all these selections was George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The fact of it being a children's book seemed pretty obvious from the first page, and therefore appropriate for my brother and me, aged about seven and eight. We all knew as much about Soviet history as we did about the dark side of the moon, and we had no idea what "satire" meant (although I recall Mum looking it up in a dictionary at one point, for her own benefit more than ours). In any case, that first page was the hook, and we all had to see it through to the end, revisiting the Manor Farm every evening, chapter by chapter, as it became progressively more corrupt and disturbing. Why did the pigs forget the rules that had so inspired all the animals to rebel? How were the sheep so easily brainwashed? Who had written on the wall that "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others"? Why was Boxer, the heroic horse, carted off to a glue factory instead of a hospital?

Naturally, this book left a big impression on me, and it might explain something about the subjects that emerge, decades later, in my own illustrated stories: gun-toting rabbits, dogs that know how to burn down a house, blind reindeer, and sinister bureaucracies. Dark animal fables aside, the thing I appreciated most about this accidental bedtime story was how *problematic* it was. It had us all thinking long after the final disturbing image of pigs pretending to be men. That was profoundly entertaining and moving; upsetting, but in a positive way. It was also weirdly true: in the school playground, I certainly had some sense of what behavior was pig-like, chicken-like, bovine, and ovine. I also sensed that these things were far more complicated than categories of good and bad, being well behaved or badly behaved, and I remember we talked about this with Mum and Dad a lot. Character, motivation, and circumstance—these seemed to be hard questions. Orwell was not like schoolwork: it would be impossible to score a hundred percent if you were asked what it all meant; neither would it work as a multiple-choice exercise.

The same is true of all the illustrated books that impressed me the most as a child, and that continue to do so as an adult. Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* refuses to explain itself; Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* is full of narrative enigma; a set of humorous poems written by Jack Prelutsky and illustrated by Arnold Lobel, *The Headless Horseman Rides Tonight*, features zombies, ghouls, and ghosts going about their compulsive, sordid business without any hint of moral redemption. I borrowed such books from the library so often that I might as well have owned them. What they all had in common was a kind of simple confession that life is strange and funny, friendly and scary, and that meaning is something you have to find yourself; it can't be delivered like a sermon or a vaccination. It's as if the author is quietly saying to you, "What do you make of this?" and then leaving you to your own devices.

Mum read us many other stories that were very resolved and morally instructive, and that I now barely remember: kids doing bad things and facing the consequences or bravely taking responsibility. Perhaps these had some educational value, but they were as forgettable as they were didactic and, dare I say, often implausible! Too many voluntary confessions and happy resolutions. It's worth recalling here something Philip Pullman, author of the reality-bending *His Dark Materials* trilogy, said on this subject: "Children choose to read stories that please them, not stories that are ethically instructive. The moral teaching comes gently, and quietly, and little by little, and weighs nothing at all." I think the

same is true for authors as well: our meanings sneak up on us, little by little, while we are distracted by other things.

My short fable “The Water Buffalo” is very much about this. In fact, most of my work is unconsciously self-reflexive: my characters are often seen looking, drawing, reading, and writing, but rarely speaking (many of them don’t even have mouths). In this case, I just loved the idea of a big, silent buffalo that lives in an empty suburban lot, similar to one I used to walk past every day on my way to the supermarket. When asked for advice, the buffalo points in a particular direction, but he never says what he is pointing at.

This is a kind of a metaphor, I realize much later, for the work of an artist or writer. A good creative idea is little more than a hunch, an intuition that something meaningful is out there, over in the darkness beyond the houses, trees, and power lines. It can’t be spoken of directly: explanation or advice won’t work here. For an idea to really weave itself into the fabric of your memory, it must be experienced firsthand: you have to find your own resolution; you have to learn by experience. This is what good literature offers the reader, and especially the young reader, encountering so much of this world for the first time, and children will happily respond to anything that respects their own insight without telling them what to think.

As for the buffalo—the artist in a vacant lot—perhaps he knows what he was pointing at, and perhaps he doesn’t. Sometimes it’s enough to just tell a child to look carefully: the rest will take care of itself. After winning the Astrid Lindgren prize in 2011, I spent a bit of time examining books about Pippi Longstocking, trying to understand the broad appeal of this crazy character, and I particularly noticed her loud proclamation that “I’m a Thing-Finder.... The world is full of things, and somebody has to look for them, and that’s just what a Thing-Finder does.” Which prompted me to create a drawing for a Swedish museum, featuring Pippi riding atop my own buffalo, the two of them contemplating a shared but unknown destination. Artists, writers, and readers are all thing-finders. We have some sense of direction but don’t really know what’s at the end of the journey; we walk beside our readers, not in front of them.

The surrealism of my stories and pictures is partly a confession of ignorance, an acknowledgment that life is weird and mostly undiscovered. It’s okay to be uncertain and puzzled and to not have all the answers. The other great confession of literature, and one that I’ve actually found very comforting, is that life is hard. As much as it is joyful, wonderful, and astounding, it can often be depressing—people suffer,

irrational things happen, fairness is far from guaranteed, and disappointment is commonplace. Just admitting this openly can be immensely consoling, especially for a child, given that childhood is so emotionally tumultuous—there’s a kind of relief to be found in an honest, safe, and thoughtful examination of weakness, failure, and fear. Here again, art and literature cast a very open eye over that basic human question: “Do others see and feel what I see and feel?” Just asking that question ensures that we are never alone, and to talk about disturbing things is inherently optimistic. “Fiction is a kind of compassion-generating machine that saves us from sloth,” as George Saunders puts it. “Is life kind or cruel? Yes, Literature answers.”

I’ve often found it difficult to sympathize with those who consider some of my books to be “inappropriate” or “too dark.” Even the word “dark” itself misses the point considerably, as if one is dwelling on negativity rather than trying to question it in an enlightened way. *The Red Tree* is the most interesting example. It’s a story without any specific narrative, plot, or characterization; it has no particular moral message, no continuity, and no clear theme, except that it’s more or less about depression. All of these qualities seemed to me, oddly enough, perfectly suited to a picture book, even though they run counter to so many familiar picture-book conventions. And indeed, getting an original concept published has been a challenging part of my job, given that children’s publishing can be quite conservative by nature, needing to be more of a dependable commercial enterprise than a free-ranging artistic laboratory. That said, I’ve been very fortunate to work with great editors, who are very considerate of my experimental ideas. In this case, I explained that the concept for *The Red Tree* was partly inspired by children’s artwork, which often involves quite abstract “emotional landscapes”: monsters, houses, storms, animals, and plants can be seen as specific metaphors for very general feelings. This seemed to be an ideal way to approach emotional subjects I had been trying to represent for some time: depression, loneliness, anxiety, and sadness—things that might find their best expression in images rather than words.

Upon publication, the book evoked mixed reactions, some people claiming that it was wonderfully life-affirming, others that it was just plain depressing and inappropriate for children. It’s not my duty to answer any of these opinions, because a book is just a book, an autonomous object that stands or falls by itself. But I do find readers’ reactions fascinating, perhaps because my own images “say” very little, inviting personal interpretation from others.

On one page, an enormous fish—possibly dead, its clouded eye weeping black fluid, its mouth hanging agape—drifts weightlessly between the buildings of a street, casting a shadow over a downcast, red-headed girl. In the gutter, there is a tiny red leaf, which can actually be found in every picture of *The Red Tree*, following this sad-looking girl from page to page. The most interesting thing about this picture is that children are the first to notice the leaf, and they intuitively understand that it is important, without naming its value. It just exists, and they can find it. They rarely ask about “meaning” and prefer to improvise their own narrative. Adults, on the other hand, can take a little longer to notice the leaf, and many never do—especially those who believe the story to be dark and depressing. These are the same people who ask me about conceptual motivation, artistic references, and, perhaps most annoyingly, “Who is your intended audience?” Well, I know who *isn’t* my intended audience! If a reader is so busy trying to deconstruct, analyze, and categorize everything, there’s no time left to experience anything.

The good readers—children, naturally, and open-minded adults—just look. They invariably recognize joy, hope, and inspiration, as well as their dark counterparts, grief, depression, fear, and loneliness; but they also don’t want to diminish their personal reading by applying such convenient labels. They prefer the gentle mystery of it, and how that mystery occupies so much of our experience in the real world, a place of darkness and light, a place we must constantly negotiate, internally as much as externally. A good reader knows that imagination is more important than knowledge and understanding.

I myself never really know what my own paintings and stories mean—in fact, that’s how I know if they are any good! The question of meaning must remain open, carefully passed to the reader intact, like a delicate object preserved in a jar. I go to a great deal of trouble to avoid specific interpretations of my work, and over the years I’ve shied away from symbolism, allegory, and coded references, aspiring toward something more universal, something equally appreciated by both children and adults, the literate and illiterate, and ideally people of different cultural backgrounds, from Australia, Europe, Asia, America, and elsewhere.

I’m interested in characters who know little about their world but do their best to make the most of what skills they have: the girl with a tree growing in her room, the tiny foreign exchange student with an unpronounceable name; the couple who must face absurd challenges in a far-away desert before they can be married; a family who discovers another country in a secret room of their house; an immigrant who enters a new world of strange buildings and animals, unreadable language and cus-

toms. Each character represents the reader, and we are invited to walk in their shoes as they deal with problems not much stranger than our own. Like us, they live in a place where language and wisdom can only take you so far; the rest must be imagined and relearned, as if you are once again a child.

If my work has a collective theme, it's something like this: "Reality is just another strange story." It's something we constantly narrate to ourselves through this peculiar invention of language and pictures, a project that begins in childhood and never really ends. Great books become part of our own map of experience: through reading we grasp the power and unity of our own thought and feeling. We are invited to empathize with others, to see the world from alternative angles, to wonder what it would be like to live differently, and to not feel alone when we constantly ask "What if?"

As Astrid Lindgren wisely observed, "Everything of any consequence that has happened in the world happened first in someone's imagination." That's a profound thought, and perhaps the source of all hope for the future, especially when we think about the challenges awaiting those who are only now learning to look and read. Let's hope they can imagine a world in which possibility overrides impossibility, enchantment replaces disenchantment, where a curious question is more important than dogma and complacency. And then protest loudly against all those who would have us believe otherwise, people who would prefer us to vote, worship, and consume in a fog of apathy and ignorance, as if those things are normal, and be afraid to imagine alternative ways of thinking and existing.

So ultimately, I always end up returning to the kind of grand statements that seem so far from my mind when drawing and writing in my small suburban studio: literature for young people profoundly enriches our culture; it entertains, enlightens, and educates; it opens our minds and improves our lives. If nothing else, it's good to be reminded of this truth from time to time, and then I don't need to think about it so much; I can just roll up my sleeves and happily return to the task of daydreaming, pottering around with amusing stories about strange animals, bewildered people, and mysterious pieces of language, trying to resolve a crazy jigsaw puzzle into something that simply makes passing sense. Like a child daubing a paintbrush, it's just enough to know that even the most modest scribble or wordplay can at any moment lead to a simple but profound realization: the world is just what you make of it, a big, unfinished picture book inside your head.