



# Humanity's Reliance on the More-Than-Human in Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City*

*Julia Coltman, Vancouver Island University, Vancouver, BC, Canada*

## Abstract

Various aspects of human life—including art, media, and culture—are becoming increasingly informed by the climate and environmental crises. Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City* illustrate and respond to this emergency, rising questions about the consequences of humanity's disconnect from the nonhuman world. Tan's message is wistful but not hopeless: although reestablishing balance with nature will not be easy, it is the only goal that matters.

## Keywords

[climate literacy](#), [anthropocentrism](#), [empathy](#), [ecocentrism](#), [nonhuman persons](#)

## Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Dr. Terri Doughty of Vancouver Island University for her continued encouragement and support in the development of my interest and publication of my work in this journal.

Understanding the complex relationship between the health of our climate and the well-being of living creatures is important more than ever before. This understanding, an

individual's ability to critically consider both the impact that the climate crisis has on human wellness and the consequences that the demands of human life have on our environment, is a key component of "[climate literacy](#)," especially in the domains of [Earth Care and Kinship Care](#). It involves more than the necessary understanding that we, humans, should be doing better for our planet: it also implies a realization that when we actively choose against doing better to preserve our Earth, the consequences are fatal. Our culture is becoming increasingly informed by climate literacy concerns, and the rising climate and environmental sensitivity lies at the heart of much storytelling today. Shaun Tan's [Tales from the Inner City](#), a collection of elaborately illustrated, ecocentric short stories and poems offer a fresh perspective on why fostering healthy mutual connections between ourselves, other living beings, and our environment is of vital importance for today's society. It stands as a compelling illustration of the power literature holds for climate literacy education to create a more climate literate culture.

Many works in the environmental and climate literature genres are often melancholic; in part, Tan's collection is no exception. However, [Tales from the Inner City](#) also includes stories that share a lot of hope. Not only do they communicate how much we long to move away from environmentally abusive lifestyles, but they actively encourage our ability to do so. Tan's illustrations convey the way this longing is spurred by the haunting, ever-present if somewhat suppressed awareness of [what once was](#). Accompanying these illustrations are short narratives which suggest that the echoes of the past are still accessible to us, especially if we set aside our [anthropocentric](#) conceit and open our ears to them. Tan's collection communicates that, with enough effort, we may achieve a better state of balance with Nature. His tales each do so, uniquely, often by finding refreshing ways of expressing an equality or partnership between humanity and the world's nonhuman beings. Each of the tales speaks to different aspects (and species) of this longing—as do, for example, the stories called "Sheep," "Pig," and "Fox." However, when taken as a collection, they present a powerful, unified [ecocentric](#) voice that challenges us to reconsider and redefine our relations with animals and the natural world.

Many of the stories in [Tales from the Inner City](#) suggest that humanity's arrogance and capriciousness is one of our greatest downfalls. The idea that human intelligence and consciousness [are superior to those of all other species](#)—animal or plant—keeps us

from understanding how much we gain from taking a step back from ourselves and respecting nonhuman lives as equal to our own—even instead as more-than-human. The tale “Sheep,” for example, takes place in a classroom: the teacher is attempting to convince the students of the importance of respecting the sacrifices animals and other living beings make (often by our demands) to help us live well. The teacher’s lessons do not fall on completely deaf ears: the students understand and take to heart the way that the sheep’s life and sacrifices are “something much bigger than any lesson” (Tan, 2018, p. 135). However, they still struggle to let go of the comforting idea of human supremacy. Their awe and respect for the sheep is thrown off by the “rank breeze that roll[s] in from the...livestock ship” (p. 135), reminding them of their belief in the greater sophistication and refinement of human intelligence and sentience. The students bustle out of the classroom before their guilt can counteract their ego and self-importance. While doing so, however, they have to “tr[y] hard to think of something else” (p. 135), which suggests that they will not be able to unsee the respect for nonhuman lives they were just allowed to glimpse. Stepping away from human arrogance and self-importance takes a conscious effort: an effort we are each capable of enacting, with enough determination.

Many of Tan’s tales speak to concerns surrounding human/nonhuman interaction. Peppered throughout the book are passages and single-line phrases, which make us realize just how far humanity has become removed from understanding what our more-than-human counterparts need from us. In fact, Tan suggests, we have become so far removed that we are hardly even aware that there is an alternative to human selfishness and self-importance. In the story “Pig,” the narrator wonders: “[T]he pig doesn’t cry or make much noise. But maybe pigs suffer in a way we can’t know. Who can say for sure what another animal is feeling?” (p. 86). The story concludes with the narrator—presumably a child disobeying their parents’ rules—setting the pig free. In doing so, the child is actively choosing to counter human superiority, the supposed “natural” order of things. The tale further suggests that treating all living beings with the same respect we would offer to our fellow humans is maybe not such a strange obligation after all.

In several other tales, Tan depicts the importance of fostering humanity’s awareness of other creatures’ dignity. “Fox” expresses the way that we, humans, often think of ourselves as being above the nonhuman, even though our very existence relies on the existence of the world’s other creatures. We are, as if, haunted by the biological

truth we so much wish to suppress. With this idea in mind, the illustration accompanying the story depicts the pale, near-ghostly image of a person lying in their bed, while hovering above them is the figure of a bright, red-orange fox, in stark contrast against the dark neutrals of the background (pp.192-193). The fox, as the tale's narrator, explains that all of our decisions and actions in our world are always already informed by our suppressed memories of humanity being embedded in the same web of life as the nonhuman and more-than-human beings:

*Don't you know that I am as old as the blood in your veins?... I know your every thought and feeling, more than you do yourself, every craving, every fear and dream and vice and embarrassing secret, I know them all. So please, pay me no mind as I ransack the bottom drawers of your subconscious. There's nothing here that I haven't already seen a thousand times before (p. 191).*

In this passage, Tan asserts that human lives are irreversibly intertwined with those of nonhumans, whether we recognize it or not. If we deny or reject the interconnectedness between nature, animals, and ourselves, we condemn ourselves to being instead haunted by that mutual need and reliance. As the fox questions: "where could we live if not in the bottomless den of each other's shadow?" (p. 191). The missing pieces to our self-awareness are provided by the bonds we form between ourselves and other living creatures, including between our wellbeing and the wellbeing of our environment. We would not be where we are, nor even *who* we are today, without the foundation that those relationships provide us with. The nonhuman gives shape and form to our homes and identities.

Taken together, these three tales illustrate that we have drifted away from a sense of being entangled with the nonhuman beings—a self-induced separation that is significant and undeniably harmful, yet not irreversible. The bonds between ourselves and the rest of the planet's lifeforms—those sentient or not—still hold great potential, if only we act on the call to reject our arrogant comforts and to redefine those relationships. It is vital today that we foster a culture informed by [climate literacy](#), and one of the most powerful ways we can do this is through literature and other forms of popular media. Shaun Tan's [Tales from the Inner City](#) offers an invitation to a larger community of species

kinship. It exposes our despair and anxiety caused by separation, yet it affirms unrelenting hope that the human-nonhuman connection persists. The conclusion we may draw from the collection is that change is always possible as long as we commit to it.

## References

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