



THE VIEWER

Gary Crew & Shaun Tan

Teacher's Notes

By Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book in which seeing and watching are used as metaphors for humankind's eternal, yet impossible, quest to control the world. *The Viewer* establishes a parallel between the human quest for knowledge and civilisation's progress towards self-destruction. However, it is out of such destruction that regeneration comes. All the endeavours pioneered by humankind such as history, science and geography are depicted as 'constructs' by which we attempt to gain power over an essentially uncontrollable environment.

The **ages of humankind** are viewed as a cyclical structure in which patterns of growth and decay are repeated.

The central character, Tristan, is a boy with abundant curiosity who delights in rescuing things from the scrap-heap and making them work again. His tinkering and collecting provide an ironic commentary on human nature. We create waste and meanwhile try to control things by inventing or repairing. Our efforts may be, as Yeats has written, too futile to resist the implacable force of history:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*
'The Second Coming', W. B. Yeats. *Yeats, Selected Poetry* (Pan Books, London, 1974)

Writer, **Gary Crew**, and illustrator, **Shaun Tan**, have explored these ideas in a complex fantastical tale which is both cyclical and open-ended. The book uses written and visual symbols repeatedly to underscore its central theme of circularity and never-endingness.

THEMES AND IDEAS

The Viewer

The central motif in the book is a viewer, sometimes known today as a viewmaster. These toys date back to the Victorian era and were the forerunners of film or cinema in that they used the concept of moving pictures to tell a story. Such 'vision toys' had a variety of designs with names which reveal the close relationship between the makers of pictures and their desire to thereby somehow harness the world. Humankind, in creating moving pictures, sought to mimic God's power.

The toys were named variously the Zoetrope (originally Daedulum) or Wheel of Life, the Phenakistoscope, the Fantoscope, the Thaumotrope, the Stroboscope, and the Praxinoscope (Greek for 'action' or 'look at'). There is a strong link between the scientific principles underpinning the making of such toys and twentieth-century inventions. For example, The Praxinoscope, patented by Emile Reynaud in Paris in 1877, was modified in 1882 to project images onto a screen: 'the age of cinema had virtually begun'. (Opie, p.145)

Question: *What other references to viewing and seeing, and to inventions related to viewing can you discover in Shaun Tan's pictures?*

Activity: *Research the history of such toys and their relationship to the history of early cinema.*

Read: *Opie, Peter & Iona & Alderson, Brian, The Treasures of Childhood (Arcade Publishing, New York, 1989), pp.142–51.*

Science or Magic? Toys or Machines?

This link between the world of curiosities and toys and the scientific world is a central metaphor in *The Viewer*. Humankind's quest to know and to seek scientific assurances is a form of game-playing. Games rely on skills but predominantly on luck — roll the dice and take your chances. Science seeks to discover certainty where none really exists.

To underpin this idea, various references are made in the book which parallel the simple technology (represented by the viewer and other toys) with the advanced technologies of the twentieth century. For example, when Tristan finds the viewer discs they remind him of compact discs. Even the viewer itself presents a dichotomy. Is it just a toy, or a fantastic machine capable of spiriting Tristan and others into the chaotic whirlpool of past and future centuries? The implication is that no matter how advanced are our devices they cannot defeat fate. We are all involved in an elaborate game of chance.

Question: *What other toys and machines can you find in the pictures?*

Activity: *Research the history of these devices and inventions.*

Read: *Books on toys and early mechanical inventions. e.g. the bicycle, the printing press*

Curiosities & Strange Objects

Tristan is described as a 'curious' boy. The box he finds is one of many curious objects he has rescued, and inside it is the viewer, which is one of the many antique curiosities he finds in the box. Such 'strange objects' feature in this and others of Gary Crew's works such as *Strange Objects* (Heinemann, Port Melbourne, 1990), *The Figures of Julian Ashcroft* (UQP, St Lucia, Qld, 1996) and *The Lost Diamonds of Killiecrankie*, with Peter Gouldthorpe, (Lothian Books, Port Melbourne, 1995). Collecting things is often a pursuit enjoyed more for the symbolic power of the objects than for their intrinsic value.

Question: *What do you think these things represent for Tristan?*

Activity: *Research and interview other collectors and why they collect.*

Read: *Books in which collections provide a thematic focus. Start with Gary Crew's work, then search for others.*

These strange objects also hint at the idea of **urban disintegration**. The waste represented by modern society is depicted vividly in the phrase *'the off-scourings of a careless people'*. (pp.4–5) The irony of Tristan's passion for the contents of the dump is one of the many dichotomies explored in the book: *'to Tristan, each barbed and jagged coil of rusted wire was a chain of gold ...'* Each generation creates waste which, to the next generation, becomes precious, e.g. used postage stamps, discontinued coins.

Question: *What things from the past are now collectibles?*

Activity: *Examine the picture of the dump. Make a list of all the objects you can identify there.*

Read: *Books such as Jeannie Baker's Window (Julia McRae, London, 1991)*

Another idea suggested by Tristan's obsession with collecting is **alienation**. Gary Crew's books have nearly all featured fractured characters isolated from their peers in a sort of alienated existentialism e.g. Julian Ashcroft; Steven Messenger.

Question: *Does Gary Crew suggest that Tristan's alienation is generated by any particular influence?*

Activity: *Discuss possible reasons for Tristan's 'difference'.*

Read: *Books containing other alienated heroes.*

History is described in the pictures as *'The Ages of Humankind'*. The viewer slides depict six progressive ages, each with a particular theme:

1. **Creation and Evolution** (to a human consciousness).
2. **Ancient Civilisation** — natural disaster.
3. **Middle Ages** — war and conflict.
4. **Age of Conquest/Colonisation** — attacks on indigenous peoples.
5. **Machine Age** — oppression of people by technology.
6. **Modern ecological crisis**

Each age is depicted in slide-show fashion beginning at the top of the wheel with a human figure from that era:

1. **Hunter Gatherer**
2. **Egyptian** (e.g. Imhotep — Architect of the step Pyramid)
- 3 **Religious Figure** (e.g. Joan of Arc)
4. **Amerindian Chieftain** (e.g. Montezuma)
5. **Scientific Figure** (e.g. Florence Nightingale)
6. **Unknown Toxic Waste Worker**

Though the pictures suggest a process of decline, their bleakness is countered by the obvious messages throughout the text that each age progresses from a form of decay to some sort of rebirth. Symbols such as the snake and the dung beetle are potent reminders of this idea. Even in the scenes of creation there are images depicting decline, e.g. floods and pestilence. Nothing exists except as the outcome of another's demise. Tristan's name appears on the side of the viewer in later frames offering a mysterious hint that he, like the people named on the cover (e.g. Sophocles), may be simply part of the continuum — not destroyed by some alien force but simply absorbed into the energetic and irresistible force of history.

Question: *What do you know about the history of each of these ages?*

Activity: *Research one of these historical ages or one of the historical figures depicted.*

Activity: *Imagine the next age. What might happen after such total destruction? Discuss the possibilities for regeneration. Write or create a picture interpreting your vision.*

Read: Other books which depict a futuristic era e.g. Picture books: Umberto Eco's **The Bomb and the General** (Secker & Warburg, London, 1989); Junko Morimoto's **My Hiroshima** (Collins, Sydney, 1987), Novels: Robert Swindells's **Brother in the Land** (OUP, Oxford, 1984); Victor Kelleher's **Taronga** (Viking Kestrel, Ringwood, 1986); John Marsden's **Tomorrow When the War Began** (Pan Macmillan, Chippendale, NSW, and its sequels).

MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

Mythological symbolism (or irrational beliefs) are counterpointed in *The Viewer* by references to the rational beliefs attached to sciences and philosophies. Both in each successive age have operated in conjunction with and in opposition to each other.

Thus the book contains the strong message that science, religion and fantasy are all varying modes by which people try to order their worlds. This book contains many symbolic references — pictures which denote ideas explored in the text. The most obvious are:

a) **Viewers** — Eyes, cameras, binoculars, glasses or spectacles, a television screen — Symbolising watching and seeing.

b) **Circles**, e.g. the ‘grotesque’ image of the snake devouring itself suggests the ultimate continuity or eternity and has figured in many cultures including that of West African tribes. The idea of regeneration and decay is suggested by this and by other symbols, e.g. the Egyptian scarab or dung beetle which was the God Khepri’s symbol denoting ‘*he who becomes*’. Like the rising sun, the scarab is reborn of its own substance. Khepri was the God of transformation — the essence of Life is its potential to renew itself constantly from its own substances.

*... say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.*

T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber, 1974.

The quote is from ‘Burnt Norton’, *Four Quartets*.

c) **Cogs and wheels** — Symbolising both circularity and machinery.

d) **Snails, shells, whorls and spirals** (Tristan is swallowed by such a circle at the end) — Symbolising the idea of a circle diminishing into nothingness.

- e) **Writing implements** — Pens, pencils, quills, the face of Galileo, hieroglyphics and other ancient texts — Symbolising the encoding of experiences represented by the writing process.
- f) **Time-pieces** — hourglass, watches, sundial — Symbolising Time.
- g) **Dice, playing cards, and other parts of games** — Symbolising games of fortune and chance.
- h) **Recurring motif of the comet** — traditionally a bad omen, often associated with the fall of an empire or civilization.

Question: *What other symbols or motifs which refer to the act of seeing or viewing or any of the other themes suggested above, can you locate in the book?*

Activity: *Trace the role of this symbol in the mythology and literature of successive generations.*

Read: *Books on symbolism and mythology to assist you in researching the origin of motifs in the book, e.g. **New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology** (Hamlyn, London, New York, 1968).*

THE PARTS OF THE BOOK

The **design** of a book must reflect the ideas of the writer and illustrator. For example, the cover features diecut letters which are both literally designed to look like a viewer, and symbolic of the theme of the secret world within, where things are not quite as they seem. On the half-title page, the letters are the only bright features on a page of gloomy representations of mysterious inner workings.

Question: *How does the design of the cover mimic the ideas it explores?*

Activity: *Design your own cover for the book incorporating the ideas conveyed in the text*

The cover of ***The Viewer*** is a collage of images and text. The words of several famous philosophers are featured there, for example:

*Who can say God's purpose falters?
Time is awake, the wheel is turning,
Lifting up and overthrowing.
a distant peal of thunder (stage direction)
Thunder in the roof of heaven!*

-Sophocles

Question: *What is the meaning of this quotation and how does it relate to the message conveyed in this book?*

Activity: *Read some of these texts closely. Read them again after you have read the book. Research their origin and the work of the writer responsible for them.*

Typography — The type chosen reflects the ideas explored. It is a serif face reminiscent of early hand-written manuscripts. In one of the last pages the text is printed in an ever-decreasing spiral — another idea explored in the book, and symbolised here by the type.

Question: *How might the artist have designed the book in a different way?*

Activity: *Examine the book and discover other such design features.*

Read: *Books about design, e.g. **The Making of a Picture Book**, Ann Bower Ingram, (Methuen, 1987).*

Illustration — The media used by Shaun Tan are gouache, with coloured pencil and some graphite. These media are excellent for portraying realistic images which mimic life in photographic detail.

Question: *What are the differences and the similarities between the styles employed by each artist who has illustrated a Gary Crew picture book?*

Activity: *Compare the effects achieved by the artists*

WONDER AND THE FANTASTICAL

Gary Crew's books often refer to the 'fantastical' which has been described by theorist Todorov as relying on a 'hesitation' between a real and a supernatural explanation for events in a story. There is no definite answer to the riddle — just a suggestion of what might have been. At the end of this tale Tristan has disappeared, with no clear explanation.

Question: *What are the possible explanations for his disappearance? Discuss with your group or class. What happens next?*

Activity: *Write your own ending to the story*

Question: *What other books have you read which have a 'fantastic' ending?*

Read: *Other stories with such open endings suggesting supernatural or fantastical happenings. Start with Gary Crew's **The Watertower**. Then read some of Chris Van Allsburg's picture books. Try to find other books which rely on the reader's 'hesitation' in interpreting the ending.*