Tales From Outer Suburbia by Shaun Tan

An exchange student who's really an alien, a secret room that becomes the perfect place for a quick escape, a typical tale of grandfatherly exaggeration that is actually even more bizarre than he says... These are the odd details of everyday life that grow and take on an incredible life of their own in tales and illustrations that Shaun Tans many fans will love.

Features:
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**Personal Review:** Tales From Outer Suburbia by Shaun Tan
Shaun Tan wowed readers young and old with his magnificent sepia-toned wordless graphic novel, The Arrival, about a young man's journey to a bizarre new world to start a life for his family. The New York Times called it...
the "Best Illustrated Book of 2007." It also made Publishers Weekly's, School Library Journal's and Horn Book's "Best Book" lists for the year. It should be of no surprise, therefore, that his latest collection of short stories and artful collages, titled Tales from Outer Suburbia, carries much of the same weight and majesty as its predecessor.

The 15 skillfully constructed pieces in Tales are truly breathtaking to experience, each in its own way. All are accompanied by whimsical illustrations (some done in pen and ink, some presumably in watercolors/acrylic/oil paint, others in what looks like words or images drawn on torn pieces of paper and pasted on top of a painted background) that do much more than provide a simple backdrop for the story being told. In fact, many of these works of art tell powerful stories of their own.

In "eric," a foreign exchange student (drawn as a waify black cat-like figure) is awed by the trinkets and cultural oddities he picks up off the ground during his stay. As a parting gift to his host family, he leaves behind his stash (shown on the last spread in black and white sketchings, peppered by splashes of radiant color) and, therefore, a window into what it must have felt like for him to spend time with them in an unknown environment.

In the wonderfully tender "grandpa's story," a crumbly and loveable grandfather shares the story of his wedding day with his rapt grandkids. As only the best grandparents can do, he weaves an enthralling tale of their journey "past all the factories and landfills" and "beyond on the signs and roads" as they embark on a wild Scavenger Hunt to find a list of objects required for their wedding. The stunning illustrations show them being attacked by angry unplugged TVs, riotous tree roots, hordes of wind-up penguins and other fanciful villains. Of course, the two lovebirds overcome their obstacles against all odds, and the ending is so knowingly touching, it just might bring tears to your eyes.

As seen in many of his previous works, Tan takes to soapboxing in some of these pieces --- but always in a digestible and unimposing way. "The Amnesia Machine" (laid out in a newspaper-clipping format) takes on subliminal advertisements, corrupt governments, rising unemployment and the environmental crisis in a delightfully chuckle-worthy tone one might find in The Onion. "alert but not alarmed" imagines a Ray Bradbury-esque world where nuclear "backyard missiles" are used as flower pots, dog kennels and pizza ovens instead of weapons of war. "stick figures" and "no other country" riff on what it means to be a "stranger in a strange land" while also extolling the often unseen advantages to one's home environment.

All in all, there isn't a vignette in this book that dips below expectations --- it's a solid, heavy-hitting package through and through. It's worth repeating that Tan has a gift for expressing the inexpressible and highlighting those universally poignant moments that life surprises us with from time to time,
through his careful coupling of words and art --- a balance many authors or illustrators might find difficult to replicate. It also goes without saying that while this collection is slated for a young adult audience, it's strongly recommended for adults as well. With all the fluff and vapid picture books on the market these days, Tan's rare talent and sophisticated offerings are a much-needed breath of fresh air.

--- Reviewed by Alexis Burling

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