

TEACHERS NOTES

by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

Introduction

Author's Inspiration

Themes

Curriculum Topics

- Study of history, society and environment
- English language and literacy
- Visual literacy
- Creative arts

Further Topics for Discussion & Research

Conclusion

About the Author/Illustrator

Blackline Masters

- BM1: Images
- BM2: Graphic Storytelling

Bibliography

About the Author of the Notes



= You Tube Clip Available



= Discussion Point



= Activity

Introduction

'Never break the rules. Especially if you don't understand them.'

This is a seemingly simple and yet obliquely narrated story about two boys, one rather bigger or older than the other, and the things they do one summer, which is told in a series of dramatic and evocative paintings. Rules govern all our lives in one way or another; both formal and informal. The story in each double-page spread is 'explained' by such a rule. But of course, none of them are immediately clear or precise in meaning.

The boys play together until they fight and the younger one loses, and is incarcerated in a strange bunker. The older boy eventually rescues him and they find their way home again. But is that what really happens? Or is the reader simply trying to make a linear story out of a series of disconnected incidents?

The images give the reader not so much an outright explanation but more of an impression of a feeling or experience. Shaun Tan has said that the minimal text on each page could be interpreted as a title for each painting, which can then be strung together as a sequential text in a suggestive way. He has also suggested that they might be read individually and not as a sequence. His work always allows for multiple interpretations and he likens this to 'free association' or 'daydreaming'. Aspects of these images, which are often encountered in Shaun's work, are the juxtaposition of the real and the extraordinary, and the fact that his characters invariably seem dwarfed by, and are very 'small' in, the landscape.

There is a keen sense of both excitement and foreboding engendered by the unfamiliar, here. And there is a strong sense, too, that this is a celebration of sorts, of all the things which make up our childhood; the familiar and the strange things; the frightening and the comforting moments. All of these things are linked to the sage advice to 'Always know the way home'.

Author's Inspiration

Ideas come from many sources and artists generally arrive at their finished work after years of thinking. Shaun Tan explains some of the inspiration behind this book in a series of short videos



'Shaun Tan talks about Rules of Summer Origin and Ideas'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHYRc7F0pwQ>



Shaun Tan explains his drawing process -- The 'Extras' for Rules of Summer

<http://youtu.be/5etuXDP3xc4>



Shaun Tan talks about Rules and Rabbits -- The 'Extras' for Rules of Summer

<http://youtu.be/nkGDEDxoO7k>

Themes



Several themes are covered in this book that might relate to various curriculum areas:

· Rules

This book begins with the line: 'This is what I learned last summer' and then each page contains a rule that begins with 'Never' until the last few rules, which begin with the word 'Always'. There is a surreal quality to some of the rules offered up in the text. For example, 'Never leave a red sock on the clothesline.' But this unreality might easily be construed as the artist/writer demonstrating how children feel when confronted by adult rules, which to them seem unfathomable. Why must we never leave our knife and fork on the table but rather leave them neatly together on a plate when we've finished eating? Why should we wear a uniform at school? Discuss rules with students. Are there rules that they feel are necessary or unnecessary? Are there rules that they think are stupid? Are there rules that they really don't understand at all?





Invite students to come up with a rule beginning ‘Never’ or ‘Always’, and then to paint a picture that illustrates the possibilities suggested by that rule. Encourage them to create a rule that is important to them, or to come up with a satirical commentary on rules in general. [See also **BM1**.]



Rules for living are sometimes known as ‘adages’, which are facts of experience that have gained credibility through constant use. (E.g. ‘Don’t burn your bridges.’) We also sometimes use the word ‘maxim’ for generally observed rules of conduct, or sometimes the word ‘proverb. (E.g. ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth.’)

Conduct a unit on these sayings and encourage student discussion about them.



Informal rules are just as powerful as formal ones. Clearly these two friends (or brothers?) have developed a ‘code’ by which they organise the games they play during these endless days of summer. Discuss the rules that your students observe in playing together or with members of their families.



Shaun Tan’s work is also essentially about not following rules blindly. He loves the odd congruence between chance and circumstance. Rules tend to inhibit that congruence if they are followed too slavishly. How would society function without regulations? Are we overly regulated as a society?

Have fun discovering lists of ‘rules for living’ that people have collected, and discuss your opinions of them. For example:

Golden Rules for Living (<http://www.appleseeds.org/Golden-Rule.htm>);

18 Rules of Living by the Dalai Lama (<http://theunboundedspirit.com/18-rules-of-living-by-the-dalai-lama/>).



· Friendship and CompanionShip

Friends and companions make and share memories. Each of the images in this book might represent a snapshot of the various things the boys do with each other. But we each remember things differently. Shaun Tan’s haunting images show that these two boys view the world differently despite the fact that they are together – in the spatial relationship between them; and in the creatures which accompany them – there is a constant suggestion that not only is one bigger than the other, but that each experiences this summer in a different way.



Friendship can also be an ambivalent concept. For friends often have very different personalities and needs. They sometimes become insecure or jealous. Do you think these boys are always happy with each other?



Friendship is often governed by rules as well. We learn to expect certain things from a friend and to act in a certain way with them. Examine the pictures and see if you can observe the rules that govern the relationship between these two boys.



· Disagreements/Rivalry

The two friends (or perhaps brothers?) play together and yet there is always a sense that they are rivals too. One is bigger than the other. [See notes on the cover and endpapers below.] What other signs of rivalry do you observe in this book? What happens when the boys fight?



· Outsiders, Loneliness, Isolation, Alienation and Belonging



Tan’s work has often explored the concept of being an outsider, for example in *The Lost Thing* or *The Arrival*. When asked in an interview whether he was an outsider as a child he answered

brilliantly: 'I think everyone thinks they're an outsider as a kid.'

(‘Shaun Tan Drawn Back to his Roots’, ABC News (Perth), interview with Claire Nichols published on May 18, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5_rB-Vr2Eo.)



Are we all outsiders because we are all individuals?

· **Imagination**

As in any of Tan’s texts, the adventures of these two boys might be interpreted as being their overwrought imaginings, and not reality at all. In the final scene they are watching TV together and on the wall

Curriculum Topics

This picture book touches on the themes above and might be used in conjunction with curriculum topics (with primary or secondary school students) in the following suggested areas:

Study of History, Society and Environment

· **Intolerance and Cultural Miscommunication**

Shaun Tan’s work never preaches about human rights, but he is obviously very interested in issues such as belonging, alienation, fairness, inequality, racism, immigration, intolerance, and communication between different cultures and groups of people.

He recently posted a series of images that deal with human rights, however obliquely, entitled ‘Shaun Tan – A Small Collection’, on the website Right Now: Human Rights in Australia (<http://rightnow.org.au/artwork/shaun-tan-a-small-collection/>).

Study his work and discuss how many of his books make commentary on these and other issues. Are there any human rights issues canvassed in *Rules of Summer*?

Think of how creatively we might resolve issues such as the treatment of refugees.

· **Suburbia and the Urban Environment**

Tan’s books pay homage to the dichotomy of the beauty/ugliness/fascination of the suburbs and cities in which we all live. These boys venture into the yellowing grassed paddocks in nearby rural areas, but live in the streets of Tan’s childhood in Perth and his later adulthood in inner-city Melbourne. These cityscapes are moody and suggestive. They show the encroachment of man’s influence on the natural and man-made environment – the ugliness of cement walls, overhead power lines, smokestacks, and the blasted landscape the boys bicycle through at the end of the story. What aspects of suburbia were explored in these images?

Invite students to paint a picture of their suburb, then to place themselves in that painting with a friend, a pet or an imaginary creature. Give a title to the painting.

The urban environment is a sub-topic in this theme. Clearly some man-made edifices are very ugly. How might we make our own cityscape or such edifices more aesthetically pleasing?

E.g. Brisbane City Council supports Artforce, a competition inviting artists to paint traffic signal power boxes throughout the city:

<http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/facilities-recreation/arts-and-culture/artforce/index.htm>

Have a look at some of the 2013 Australian Awards for Urban Design:

<http://architectureau.com/articles/2013-australian-urban-design-awards/>.

Visit ‘Creating Places for People: An Australian Protocol for Australian Cities’:

<http://www.urbandesign.gov.au/casestudies/awards.aspx>.

Invite students to identify an area in their local suburb which is not aesthetically pleasing and then to come up with a design to create a more people-friendly space.

English Language and Literacy

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects:



This story is told in first person as a past/present tense account of a boy reflecting on last summer. Which boy is speaking? Is it the older or the younger of the two protagonists? How did you decide?



Tan's written texts are always concise and spare. Imagine if the opening line, 'This is what I learned last summer', was written instead, 'Last summer my friend and I played at all sorts of games and had adventures with some very strange creatures. We fought and we made up. I learned a lot about things last summer, I really did.' Which is the most enticing piece of writing? Why does conciseness tantalise the reader so much? (Q. What is wrong with giving so much detail in the second version? A. It destroys the suspense later.) Write a brief description of what you did yesterday. Then pare it back to just seven words ... Compare the two versions.



Rules or 'adages' are a form of expression that offers advice for how to live one's life. Use and expand one of these rules into a short 'cautionary tale', e.g. 'Never leave the back door open overnight.'



Test your students' comprehension by asking them questions about the written text. Students might be encouraged to use critical literacy skills to unearth meaning in this text.



Read more about Shaun Tan's writing in interviews he has given. [See **Bibliography.**]



What did you make of the last line in the text: 'That's it.'

Visual Literacy

The visual text of a book works with the written text to tell the story using the various parts of the book's design, as explored below. Jane Doonan (1993) encourages 'close looking' of every image in a picture book. Each of Shaun Tan's paintings here repay multiple readings from which added meanings will emerge. Even the text pages are artworks: each is faintly inscribed with scribbles and marks, as if the artist has been using them for trial artworks. **Each of the paintings explores the relationship between these two characters and also their relationship with the world around them.**



The **cover** of a book is an evocative part of its message. This one has the smaller boy in the foreground trying on a giant eye, which is part of a mechanical creature which is lying in parts around him, while the other watches moodily in the background, accompanied by another creature. Discuss the meaning conveyed by this cover.



The endpapers are a double-page spread showing the small boy carrying a small suitcase, and racing to catch up with his larger companion, who is airborne in a retro-looking aircraft. What does this image suggest?



The title page shows the two boys playing an instrument – the older a bugle and the younger a drum, with the younger having dropped his baton. Each picture depicts these two boys doing something different. Often the pictures are enigmatic. Discuss the impressions each painting in the book gives you and the meaning you take from them.



The format of the book is landscape (270 x 300 mm). Do the format and design of the book influence your reading of it? How would a portrait format change the meaning, if at all?



The **medium or style** employed is oil painting. The rendering is very ‘painterly’ and the pages are generally less cluttered with imagery than some of Shaun’s earlier books were.

They clearly draw on the style of his earlier paintings, which can be viewed at

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5_rB-Vr2Eo

(‘Shaun Tan Drawn Back to his Roots’, ABC News (Perth), interview with Claire Nichols published on May 18, 2012).

Encourage students to discuss the medium and style employed in this work.

Question: The colours are the colours of summer, but then also of winter. Why? What does this suggest?



Tan loves to juxtapose the ‘ordinary and extraordinary’ to translate ordinary activities into fantastical scenes. When the two boys are attempting to catch small fish in a net and to take them home in a jar, they are not on a river bank, but high in the air on top of a water tank waving the nets to catch airborne fish! What other odd juxtapositions did you discover in the book?



Symbolism is another aspect of the visual text. What does the large red rabbit suggest? Why does a black crow appear in so many pictures? What are the mechanical creatures? See how differently each student answers these questions.



Create a graphic novel/comic version of any scene in this book. Read other such books as a guide to style and approach. [See **Bibliography**.] [See also **Blackline Master 2**.]

Creative Arts

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:



Create a **Book Trailer** for this title. [See **Bibliography** below.]

Create a **Model** of one of the strange creatures in this visual text.

Paint a picture of your suburb using any medium you like.

Further Topics for Discussion & Research



Research the work of Shaun Tan. Compare his other books with this one, in terms of recurring themes and images. [See **Bibliography** below.]



What other themes or ideas did you detect in this work?



Is *Rules of Summer* a reflection on childhood in a particular place and time, or is it a universal portrait of childhood?

Conclusion

Rules of Summer is a work of written and visual art, which is about childhood and ordinary life presented in an extraordinarily arresting way. It is a work that defies over-explanation for it is suggestive of the many aspects of childhood that remain mysterious and half-remembered. It is also indicative of the fact that many of our thoughts are subconscious ones and that even as adults we may not process our responses to a particular incident until much later. This is another powerfully enigmatic work from Shaun Tan, who is a master of ambiguity.

About the Author/Illustrator

Shaun Tan was born in 1974 and grew up in the northern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. In school he became known as the 'good drawer', which partly compensated for always being the shortest kid in every class. He graduated from the University of Western Australia in 1995 with joint honours in Fine Arts and English Literature, and currently works full time as a freelance artist and author in Melbourne. Shaun began drawing and painting images for science fiction and horror stories in small-press magazines as a teenager, and has since become best known for illustrated books that deal with social, political and historical subjects through surreal, dream-like imagery. Books such as *The Rabbits*, *The Red Tree*, *The Lost Thing* and the acclaimed wordless novel *The Arrival* have been widely translated throughout Europe, Asia and South America, and enjoyed by readers of all ages. Shaun has also worked as a theatre designer, and as a concept artist for the films *Horton Hears a Who* and Pixar's *WALL-E*.

He has directed a short film, *The Lost Thing*, with Passion Pictures and Screen Australia (www.thelostthing.com). His most recently published books are *The Oopstatorium* (2012), *The Bird King* (2010) and *Eric* (2010), and *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008). In 2010, Shaun Tan was Artist Guest of Honour at the 68th World Science Fiction Convention held in Melbourne, Australia.

Awards include:

2011

Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award
Dromkeen Medal for Services to Children's Literature
Academy Award Best Animated Short Film (for *The Lost Thing*)

2010

The Lost Thing: Yoram Gross Animation Award for Best Short Animated Film at the 57th Sydney International Film Festival; the Annecy Cristal Award for Best Short Film at the 34th Annecy International Animation Festival (the world's largest animation festival, in Annecy, France).

2007

World Fantasy Award for Best Artist
The Arrival:
Book of the Year, New South Wales Premier's Awards
Community Relations Commission Award
CBCA Picture Book of the Year

2000

Memorial:
APA Design Award

1999

The Rabbits:
CBCA Picture Book of the Year

1998

The Viewer: Crichton Award

1996

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1992

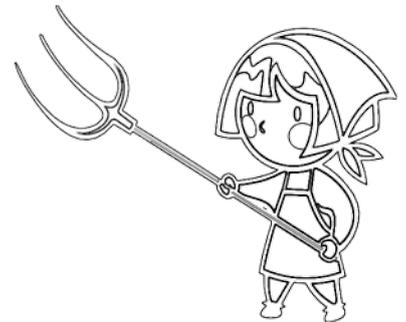
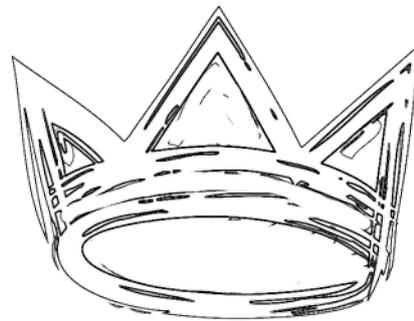
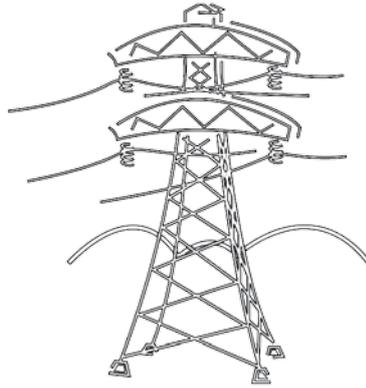
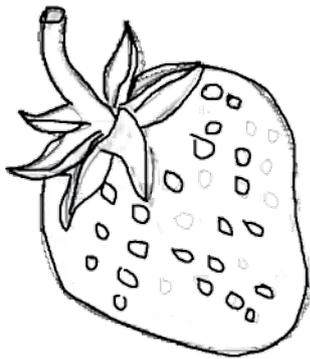
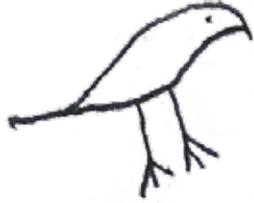
L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators of the Future Contest – first Australian to win.

See Shaun's website and blog at: <http://www.shauntan.net/>

See the official *Rules of Summer* website at <http://www.rulesofsummer.com.au>

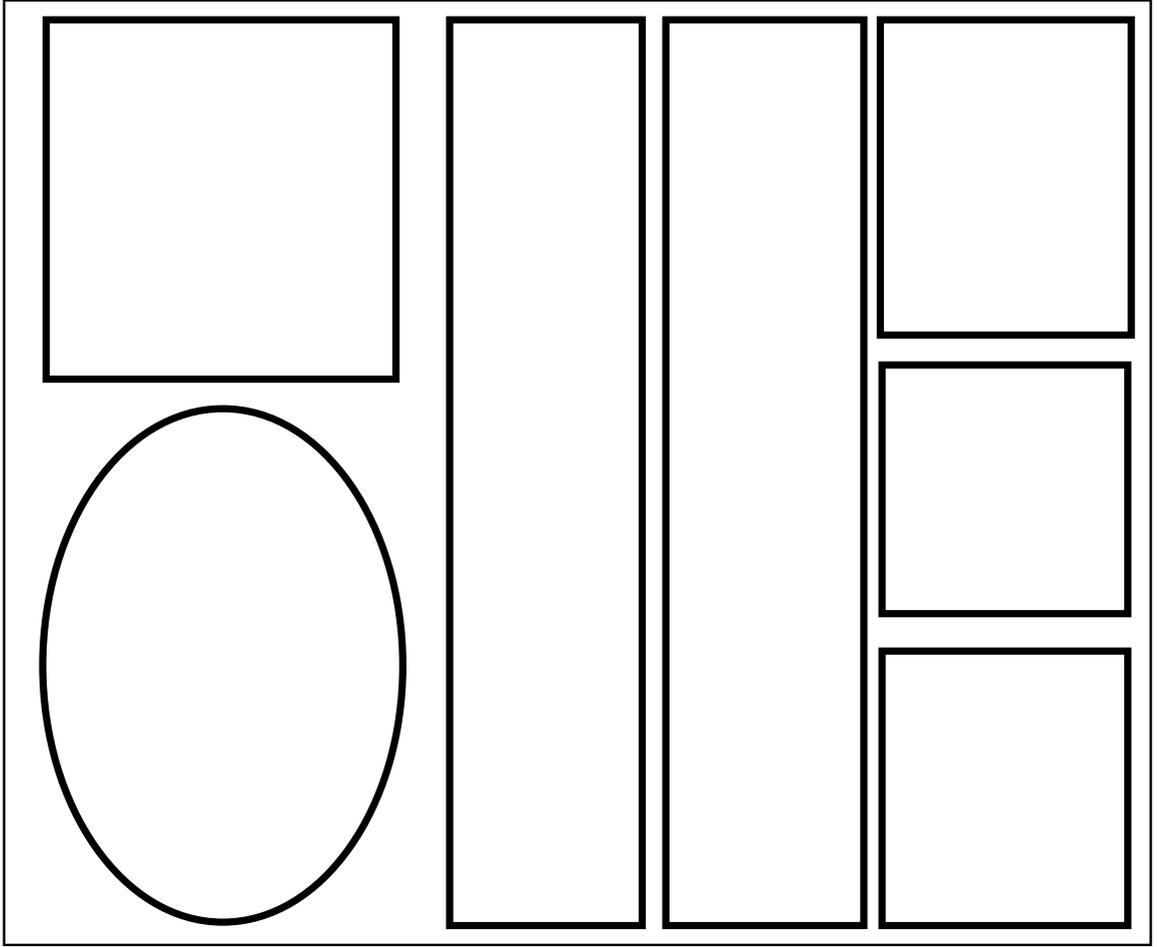
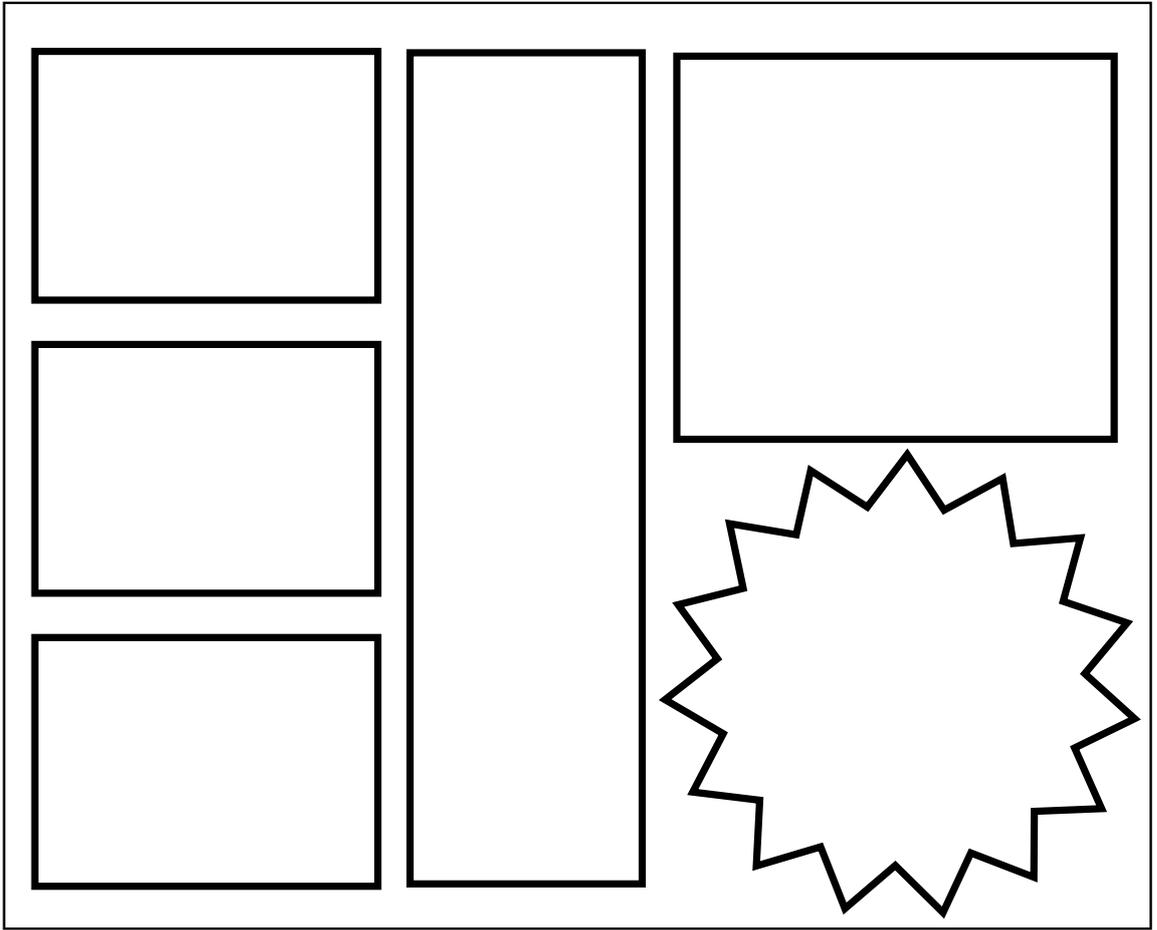
Blackline Master 1: Images

Each of these images relate to something which appears in the book. Make up a rule to go with the image beginning with the word 'Never...'



Blackline Master 2: Graphic Storytelling

Each of these images relate to something which appears in the book. Make up a rule to go with the image beginning with the word 'Never...'



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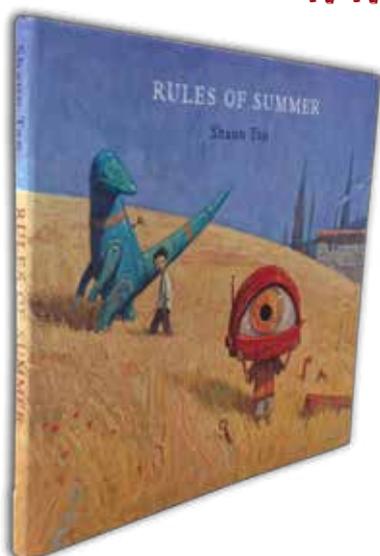
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About the Author of the Notes

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates Justified Text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Queensland Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, and in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia.

View more videos about the making of *Rules of Summer* online today.

www.rulesofsummer.com.au



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