



**CULTURAL MULCH:
STORIES ABOUT
WHO WE ARE AND
WHERE WE GROW**



IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL:

- read, view and respond to issues about cultural identity and understandings presented by a variety of texts, including multimodal texts
- evaluate how people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their cultural and personal value systems and share personal responses to these texts
- analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts
- explore and explain the combinations of language and visual choices that authors make to present information, opinions and perspectives in different texts
- respond to texts by evaluating the social, moral and ethical positions they present
- create sustained texts, including those combining specific digital or media content, for imaginative, informative or persuasive purposes that reflect upon challenging and complex issues.



START HERE



- What do you know about your family's or your classmates' cultural background and traditions?
- What influence does cultural background have on the way you read, view and produce narratives?
- What do you know about the ways texts are shaped by the cultural understandings of their writers?
- How do words and pictures work together to make meaning in narratives and in what ways do the illustrations help readers to transcend cultural difference?
- How are online environments and multimedia tools creating new ways of presenting our cultural stories?



metaphor

a comparison of one thing to another where it is described in terms of being something else without the use of 'as' or 'like'

culture

a shared and learned system of values, beliefs and attitudes that shapes and influences who you are and your place in the world

cultural background

the context of one's life experience as shaped by membership in groups based on religion, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status and gender

This chapter title is a metaphor that is drawn from gardening and requires you to see society as a garden and citizens as individual plants. Mulch is a very important part of an Australian garden. It is a covering that protects plants from the extremes of weather conditions and provides essential nutrients that plants need to grow healthily. The **metaphor** that compares garden mulch to **culture** draws attention to the natural ways that an individual's growth is influenced by her or his **cultural background**.



A variety of factors contribute to our cultural background

'Cultural mulch' is formed from the complex blending of the different sets of **cultural understandings** that a society tolerates and/or encourages. In Australia, cultural understandings result from a blending of the many different racial, ethnic and national backgrounds that have developed over many generations. Sometimes, the mulch surrounding individuals contains more of one kind of cultural background than another.

For example, compare the cultural mulch of an Aboriginal Australian with that of a recent immigrant from Somalia. Variations in the cultural mulch ensure the development of healthy individuals who each receive the essential nutrients and correct level of protection from the surrounding environment. Healthy cultural mulch helps ensure the best growing conditions for each person.

Not all mulch is automatically healthy, however. Australian gardeners often have to experiment with mulches to get the right balance of protection and nutrients for the plants they want to grow. Too much fertiliser in the mix might burn sensitive plants. Too much nitrogen and the leaves will grow, but the plant won't flower. Sometimes the mulch is too dense to allow water to penetrate to the plant roots. Getting the right balance of protection and nourishment can be tricky with cultural mulch too.

Some individuals thrive in their cultural mulch. Others find their growth can be limited until they change some of the ingredients in their cultural mulch or until the mulch wears away.

cultural understandings

the ways in which particular groups of people perceive, interpret and understand the world around them, these understandings enable individuals in the group to relate to each other, and could concern ideas about race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, age, art, music, clothing, architecture, and so on

Eventually, all mulch breaks down to become part of the earth and the constituent parts are no longer recognisably different from the original dirt. This is what happens to cultural mulch too. Different cultural ideas and understandings become blended and unified, and are no longer easily distinguishable as being from, say, an Italian background or a Jewish background or a particular political background.

Cultural ideas and understandings that have broken down and blended into the garden soil of society become accepted as Australian cultural understandings.

REFLECT AND INTERACT >>

Activity 1.1 The mulch around you

Bring in some of the objects that make up your cultural mulch. This may include your favourite books, a necklace or gift given to you by someone special, family photos, your favourite foods or your favourite song.

- 1 Pair up and introduce your partner to these items.
- 2 Now listen to what your partner has to say about their items.
- 3 Consider the following things when introducing your items:
 - What do they say about who you are?
 - Why are they important to you?
 - How would you feel without them?
 - What do they say about your cultural background?
 - Do any of these items tell your partner that you are Australian?

texts

communications in various media; texts can be written, visual, spoken or multimodal and in print or digital form

narrative

the relating of stories of events or experiences, imaginary (fiction) or real (non-fiction), including what is narrated and how it is narrated

In this chapter you will explore how a **text** can communicate the cultural understandings of its writer – and the way your own cultural understandings affect the meanings you make when you read and view texts. There will be many opportunities in this chapter for you to dig into the cultural mulch that nourishes the members of your English class by creating and sharing a **narrative** or story that is part of your collected cultural background.

REFLECT ON

Think about stories that your parents, grandparents or other people in your community have told you that mean a lot to you. Do these stories tell you something about who you are and where you come from? Does telling them to other people nourish you and make you feel closer to your cultural background?



We all have stories to tell

Texts play an important role in the way cultural mulch is blended, unified and spread across a society. We can better understand the way that texts serve this social purpose if we extend the cultural mulch metaphor by thinking of texts as kind of garden tools – spades or hoes, say – which dig down into cultural mulch, aerate it, blend it and spread it, and thus help create a rich growing environment for a healthy and modern society.

Let's get started – and 'dig in' by considering how ideas about cultural mulch have inspired writer and artist Shaun Tan.

READING WORDS AND IMAGES: 'eric' BY SHAUN TAN

The first story you will read is 'eric' by Shaun Tan, from his collection *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (2008). It is about a family's experience with a foreign exchange student called Eric. You will probably want to read this story more than once, but not because it is a difficult read. On the contrary, the print language is conversational and unchallenging. However, it does not tell the whole story. In order to fully comprehend this story, you must view the pictures not as merely conventional illustrations of what is described by the words in the story, but as an integral part of the storytelling method. Following are the first two pages from 'eric'. You will need to read the entire story to complete the following activities.

eric



some years ago we had a foreign exchange student come
to live with us. We found it very difficult to pronounce
his name correctly, but he didn't mind.
He told us to just call him 'Eric'.

We had repainted the spare room, bought new rugs and furniture and generally made sure everything would be comfortable for him. So I can't say why it was that Eric chose to sleep and study most of the time in our kitchen pantry.



'It must be a cultural thing,' said Mum. 'As long as he is happy.'
We started storing food and kitchen things in other cupboards so we wouldn't disturb him.

Activity 1.2 Reading words and pictures together

- 1 Read the full story 'eric' from *Tales from Outer Suburbia* by Shaun Tan.
- 2 Who is telling the story? Find some evidence to support your answer.
- 3 Do the images present the same point of view as the printed words? Again, find some evidence to support your answer.
- 4 What aspects of the first picture of Eric suggest that he:
 - is foreign?
 - doesn't mind that the family can't pronounce his name?
- 5 What aspects of the second picture suggest Eric's feelings about living in the pantry?
- 6 What aspects of the third picture suggest:
 - the subject of Eric's study?
 - Eric's 'silent, intensity' and his 'curiosity'?
- 7 The panel of four pictures on page 11 of 'eric' gives examples of his questions. 'Translate' Eric's questions into English. Can you think of any better answers than those given by the narrator?
- 8 Propose a setting for each of the six pictures that show Eric 'the best places in the city and its surrounds'. How does the positioning of Eric in each of these pictures support the narrator's concern that 'it was hard to really know' if Eric enjoyed the trips?
- 9 What understandings do you form of Eric's cultural background from the final picture of his gift to the family?

REFLECT ON

Has your family ever hosted a visitor from another culture?

- 1 Work with a partner to brainstorm a list of the challenges and benefits of sharing your home with someone who has been growing in different cultural mulch.
- 2 Share your ideas with another pair of students.

TEXT CONVENTIONS

Hopefully, your answers to the questions above will have alerted you to an interesting feature of Tan's work, which is the way he combines images and print (words) to tell the story. So far you have looked closely at the content of the images and the way they present Eric's perspective. Did you notice how Eric's size and shape affected what he saw in the new culture that surrounded him? Did you use clues from Eric's body language to help you decide how he was feeling about what he was doing and seeing?

Eric's perspective on a culture that most of us will recognise as being a lot like our own allows us to question details we have previously probably taken for granted. Why do we assume that everyone will be made to feel comfortable by new furnishings? Why are the drain grates shaped like flowers?

The content of Tan's illustrations raises all sorts of questions about our culture.

Eric has quite a profound effect on his host family and this is shown to readers not only by the way the narrator says Eric's goodbye gift is 'the first thing we show any new visitors'. Eric's time with the family has led them to reassess their cultural mulch. Conventional ways of thinking and behaving are somewhat shaken up and reassessed and this is signalled by some interesting differences in the **text conventions**.

Conventions can be seen as codes or ways of reading and writing that become widely used in a culture or across a culture. A fairly basic convention of all print texts in Western culture is that they are read from left to right, from front to back. The opposite is true for the way texts are structured in some Asian cultures. In Japan, for example, print texts are conventionally structured to be read from right to left, back to front.

When reading 'eric', did you notice that most of the print is centred or right justified, rather than lining up on the left-hand side, as is the convention in print texts? It's as if Eric has taught the narrator how life can be more interesting when he challenges some of the conventional details of life. You probably did notice that the narrator's culture is represented in black and white drawings and that the drawing which shows Eric's gift is the only use of colour in the story.

Using colour is a convention of picture books, and here Tan is able to use it both literally – because Eric's gift is colourful, and also as a **symbol**, because Eric's gift has taught the family, and us as readers, how paying attention to the small, usually taken for granted, details can bring colour into otherwise black and white worlds.

As your analysis of the story has shown you, much of 'eric's' meaning is anchored in how you read the visual features of the text. Tan's quirky artwork illuminates just how much of our own cultural mulch we take for granted, until we see it through the eyes of someone from another culture altogether.



text conventions
the generally accepted rules, usage or standard formats that structure texts

symbol
something that stands for or represents something else within a text

MULCH FOR HAPPINESS AND WELLBEING: 'NO OTHER COUNTRY' BY SHAUN TAN

The combination of print and visual features to make meaning is characteristic of Tan's work. In another story from *Tales from Outer Suburbia* called 'No Other Country', you will explore the idea of how important cultural mulch is to people's happiness and wellbeing. If you read and analysed this story in *English for the Australian Curriculum Book 1*, you will be able to build on your understandings through the following activities.



Cultural mulch helps us to grow and be happy

Here is the opening section of the story:

The green painted concrete out the front of the house, which at first seemed like a novel way to save money on lawn-mowing, was now just plain depressing. The hot water came reluctantly to the kitchen sink as if from miles away, and even then without conviction, and sometimes a pale brownish colour. Many of the windows wouldn't open properly to let flies out. Others wouldn't shut properly to stop them getting in. The newly planted fruit trees died in the sandy soil of a too-bright backyard and were left like grave-markers under the slack laundry lines, a small cemetery of disappointment. It appeared to be impossible to find the right kinds of food, or learn the right way to say even simple things. The children said very little that wasn't a complaint.

'No other country is worse than this one,' their mother announced loudly and often, and nobody felt the need to challenge her.

After paying the mortgage, there was no money left to fix anything. 'You kids have to do more to help your mother,' their father kept saying, and this included going out to find the cheapest plastic Christmas tree available and storing it temporarily in the roof space. Here was something to look forward to at least, and the children spent the next month making their own decorations, cutting paper and foil into interesting shapes on the living room floor, and attaching pieces of thread. It helped them forget about the sweltering heat and all their troubles at school ...

Source: Shaun Tan, 'No Other Country' in *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2008, pp. 56–7

Activity 1.3 Images in 'No Other Country'

Read all of 'No Other Country' from *Tales from Outer Suburbia* by Shaun Tan and closely examine the accompanying images, noting whenever you detect language, images and ideas that seem to come from the cultural mulch in which Shaun Tan was nourished.

- 1 Annotate the text as you read, and after you have finished reading it, using the signs in this table.

?	Write ? in the margin for any questions you have about what is happening or about the vocabulary.
<u>Underline</u>	Underline aspects of Tan's writing style that you like, dislike, find amusing or interesting. Put a double line under what you think is the best written sentence in the story.
C	Write C in the margin for your connections when the story reminds you of something you have read or seen or done in your own life. This might be where the images or the story connect to aspects of your own cultural mulch.
!	Write ! in the margin when you find aspects of the story (in the words or the images) that could have come from Tan's cultural mulch.

- 2 Discuss your annotations with a partner. Share any other opinions, ideas or connections you have made about the cultural understandings communicated in the story.

LOOK CLOSER

- 1 What do you think the cultural background of the family is?
- 2 Which country is the setting for the story?
- 3 What is the family's attitude to their new home at the beginning of the story?
- 4 What is the family's attitude to their new home at the end of the story?

Your answers to these questions will be the result of inferences you make when you read. An inference is the process of drawing a logical conclusion from circumstantial evidence. Much of the meaning a reader makes is the consequence of the process of inference. The circumstantial evidence that leads to the logical conclusions or inferences comes from within the text and from a reader's own background knowledge. For example, think about the way a reader will infer a villain's motives from a few text details, supplemented by what the reader knows about villains from previous experience.

Readers and viewers will often draw inferences from a **stereotype** found in a text. Stereotypes are generalisations that writers and readers share about the characteristics

stereotype
a widely held but oversimplified image or idea about a particular type of person or thing

of specific groups or types of individuals. For example, think of the way stereotypes can be used to imply a lot of information with a few words or images. Consider the different inferences you would draw about a character in a story if he owned a well-groomed toy poodle as compared to a ferocious Rottweiler.



EVALUATE >>

Activity 1.4 Cultural understanding in 'No Other Country'

Record the details that informed your inferences in a T-chart like the one below. A T-chart is a handy note-taking framework to use when you want to link your inferences and assumptions to specific textual details. Some ideas and textual details have been included in the following chart to help you get going. Fill in the blank sections of the T-chart before recording any other assumptions and inferences you formed.

My assumptions and inferences	Supporting textual details
Family are immigrants	'It appeared to be impossible to find the right kind of food, or learn the right way to say even simple things.'
They come from a place with a more temperate climate	
	It's hot at Christmas time and there are lots of flies
	'It helped them to forget about the sweltering heat and all their troubles at school'
	The trees Shaun Tan has drawn in the inner courtyard are not trees that are native to Australia

The title words 'No Other Country' are used a few times in the story and mark a shift in the attitude of the characters, especially the mother's. Much of this shift in attitude is due to their discovery of the impossible inner courtyard. The courtyard is symbolic of the cultural mulch the family have brought with them from their home country, and which will now nourish them in Australia. Its importance to the family is emphasised by its location in the centre of the house.



The inner courtyard from 'No Other Country' in *Tales from Outer Suburbia*

LOOK CLOSER

- 1 Explore Shaun Tan's final illustration for 'No Other Country' (reproduction above), which follows the final words of the story from the neighbour with the Greek cultural background: 'Yes, yes, every house here has the inner courtyard, if you can find it. Very strange, you know, because nowhere else has this thing. No other country.'
- 2 Note down the first five things you notice when you look at this image.

SYMBOLS

The illustration is, perhaps, a representation of the frescoes referred to in the story as being on the walls of the family's inner courtyard:

'There were ancient walls decorated with frescoes: the more they looked at them, the more the family recognised aspects of their own lives within these strange, faded allegories.'

allegory
story or image
that has two
meanings, one
which operates on
a symbolic level

An allegory is a story that has two meanings – a literal one and a symbolic one. The symbolic meaning develops when objects, people or actions in a story are given meanings that lie outside the story itself. This meaning has cultural, moral, religious or political value.

As is the case with 'eric,' the illustrations in 'No Other Country' complement the story told in the print text in many interesting ways. The fresco provides a good deal of detail about the cultural background of the family that is not given in the print. You can draw inferences from Tan's choice of objects. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- The trees pictured behind the line of drying washing in the back left-hand corner are all species of conifers and are not native to Australia. They are native to many European countries and might be part of what reminded the family of their life in their previous country.
- Now consider the man in the foreground who is carrying a ladder and a bag of fruit. He looks to be moving towards the fruit tree in the middle of the painting. His hat, clothing and equipment suggest he is a fruit gatherer from the middle of the twentieth century. The colour of his skin suggests he might have a southern European or Central American background.
- Inferences you could draw from his inclusion in the fresco might concern his country of origin or his work as a new immigrant. Many first generation immigrants last century began their working lives in Australia as rural labourers. The demand on their use of English in this kind of work was not as strong as would have been the case with skilled work.
- Even further layers of meaning are achieved if you read the fruit gatherer as a symbol. Fruit appears in many cultural stories from all around the world. Often it is the symbol of abundance and associated with goddesses of fruitfulness, plenty and the harvest. You could draw inferences from the inclusion of the fruit in the fresco about the fruitfulness and abundance of the immigrant's life in his new country.

Activity 1.5 Symbols

Most of the objects in Shaun Tan's illustration of an 'ancient wall decorated with frescoes' can be read symbolically.

Work with a partner to make inferences about the meanings of the symbols listed in the table below. You might need to use an online search engine to help you interpret those that are not familiar from your own cultural background. Don't hunt for too long, however. Most often, the best interpretation is the first one that occurs to you. This is because the meanings of symbols often seem to come to us quite naturally, especially when they have become an integral part of the cultural mulch that nourishes us.

Symbol	Interpretation
Running water	
Woman holding a baby	
Angel carrying a bountiful harvest	
Stag	
Laundered clothes	
Book (held by girl)	
Telephone	
Flowers	
Turtle	

The meanings you make when you 'read' this picture are not limited to the objects represented. Tan's use of artistic conventions such as colour, shading and the positioning of objects also contributes to the meanings that you make. As is the case when you interpreted the symbols, your understanding of the significance of these conventions may seem quite natural to you. This is because they are very familiar to you from your experience of growing in your cultural mulch. Everywhere you look, you will see images that use the same conventions.

Activity 1.6 Visual features

Complete the chart below to help you begin to examine how Tan utilises layout and object positioning to suggest aspects of the family's cultural background. His use of colour has been done for you.

Visual feature	Example	Inferences made about family's cultural background
Colour	Pastel colours	Soft colours create a hazy, dreamlike effect, emphasising it is a memory
	Gold	Links to sunlight and positive feelings about memories
	Brown, green, blue – colours from nature	Links to nature and a feeling of calm
Layout and positioning	Human figures, central and foregrounded	
	Line of washing, left background Rotary clothes hoist, right background	
	Animals, left front corner	
	Turtle, right front corner	
	Grey sky and European trees, left background Blue sky and fruit tree, right background	
	Telephone on small table, central	

Activity 1.7 Exploring frescoes

- 1 Search online for the word 'fresco' and find several examples of frescoes to compare to Tan's example.
- 2 Choose the one you like best and post it on the class wiki. Include any information about the real world setting of the frescoes you find, as well as any details about the subject or content.

- 3 Consider and comment on the visual details of the fresco you post. You could comment on details such as the choice of objects and their positioning in the foreground or the background of the fresco.
- 4 Which parts of the fresco do you focus on to help you make meaning? What do you notice about the use of colour?
- 5 Once you have posted and commented on one fresco, add your comments to the frescoes posted by a few of your classmates. Make sure you have looked closely at several frescoes before you consider the following questions about the fresco in 'No Other Country'.

LOOK CLOSER

- 1 What details in this picture link to the descriptions of the family's inner courtyard given in the story?
- 2 What details in this picture suggest that the family's inner courtyard is not exactly 'like being back in their home country', it was 'also somewhere else, somewhere altogether different'?
- 3 What allegorical story about immigration, new lands and homelands can you now read in the fresco?

NOSTALGIC PLACES

Read what Shaun Tan has written about his inspiration for 'No Other Country':

I read one story of an immigrant who referred to 'the curse of two countries'. He spoke of the tendency to idealise one's homeland in the face of problems and disappointments experienced in a new place; 'it's never as good as home.' Yet when he revisited the Italian town of his youth as an older man, he realised that it was not actually the nostalgic place constructed in memory (one that overlooked certain flaws and annoyances). Moreover, it was also greatly transformed due to social and technological change, such that the 'Old Country' now existed only in his imagination. My small story takes some inspiration from this condition, the 'curse of two countries', and also its simultaneous 'blessing': the opportunity for a richly imagined, internal landscape, the immigrant's 'inner courtyard'.

Source: www.shauntan.net



nostalgia
derived from the Greek
phrase for 'returning
home', it describes a
longing to return to
happier times or to a
place where one was
happy

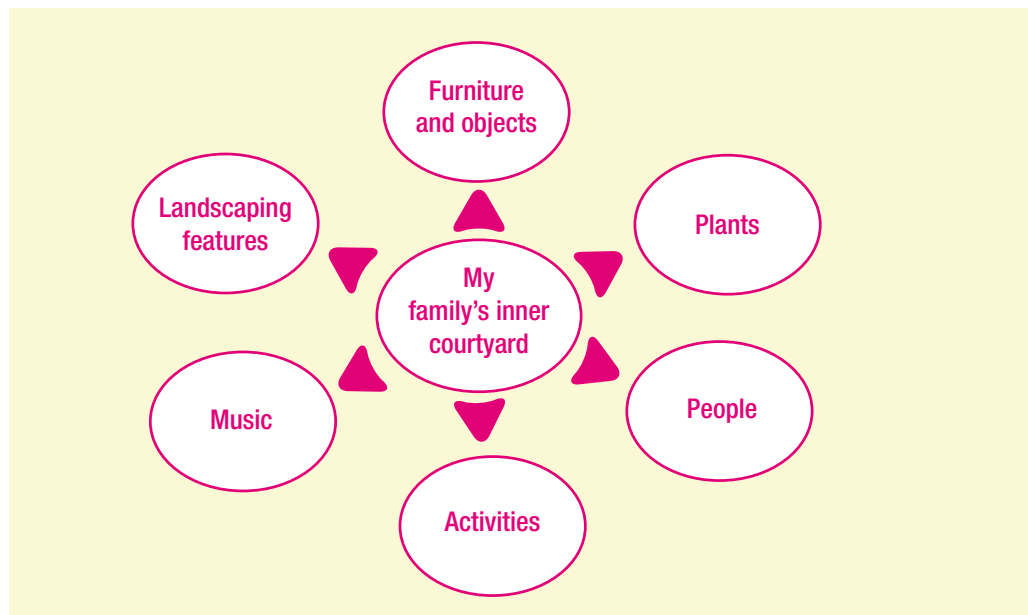
Tan's musings about his story reveal the power of **nostalgia** in helping all of us to create a 'richly imagined, internal landscape,' even if we are not immigrants. One meaning of 'No Other Country' could focus on the part played by nostalgia in creating a new layer of cultural mulch for immigrants living in a new country.

REFLECT AND WRITE >>

Activity 1.8 What makes you nostalgic?

What makes you nostalgic? Imagine how your nostalgic longings could be represented in a 'richly imagined, internal landscape,' perhaps as an inner courtyard, or maybe some other kind of room that lies within the walls of your own family home. Use the idea of an inner courtyard from 'No Other Country,' as well as what you have learned about allegory and symbols, to write a description of your personal nostalgia.

- 1 Begin by creating a concept map of the buildings, objects, plants, music, characters and activities that would symbolise your longings. Use the concept map below as a guide.
- 2 Use your concept map to help you structure your written description. Each set of details on the concept map might be expanded into separate paragraphs.
- 3 Alternatively, you might use a structure of the five senses: what do you see, smell, taste, hear, feel in your inner courtyard? Each sense could develop into a paragraph, drawing on the various details contained in your concept map.



Activity 1.9 Ideas about belonging

- 1 In pairs, read an interview online with Shaun Tan about *The Lost Thing*, which explores his ideas about belonging (search for 'Interview with Shaun Tan – Australian Edge').
- 2 Make a list of two to four questions you would ask Shaun Tan about his work and belonging.
- 3 In your pairs, choose one person to act as the interviewer and the other to pretend to be Shaun Tan and conduct an interview using the questions you have written.
- 4 Record your interview either as a podcast or vodcast, depending on the equipment you have access to at your school.
- 5 Post your interview on a class wiki.

USING SENTENCE STRUCTURE FOR EFFECT

Good writers control the structure of sentences to emphasise important details and create appropriate moods. The length of sentences, the word order and the form of sentences are all aspects to consider when you want to make your writing more interesting and engaging for your readers.

Let's have another look at this sentence from the opening paragraph of 'No Other Country':

The hot water came reluctantly to the kitchen sink as if from miles away, and even then without conviction, and sometimes a pale brownish colour.

The sentence follows this pattern:

- 1 Adverbial phrase
- 2 Adverbial phrase
- 3 Adverbial phrase
- 4 Adjectival phrase

– as evident below, where the sentence has been broken into its parts to help you see how the structure works:

The hot water came

- 1 *reluctantly to the kitchen sink*
- 2 *as if from miles away, and*
- 3 *even then without conviction, and*
- 4 *sometimes a pale brownish colour.*

This sentence has a poetic quality. It is a kind of grammatical metaphor for the way the water moved through the pipes. Tan has used a simple sentence structure – it has only one verb – 'came'. However, the simple sentence has become quite lengthy with the addition of three adverbial phrases and an adjectival phrase which describe how the hot water came.

Activity 1.10 Sentence structure

Using this sentence structure as a model, revise some of the sentence structures in your description so that they also become grammatical metaphors. For example, you could create sentence structures that echo content about:

- the way vines and creepers grow in the courtyard
- birdsong
- the aromas of food cooking
- leisure activities and sport.

READ MORE

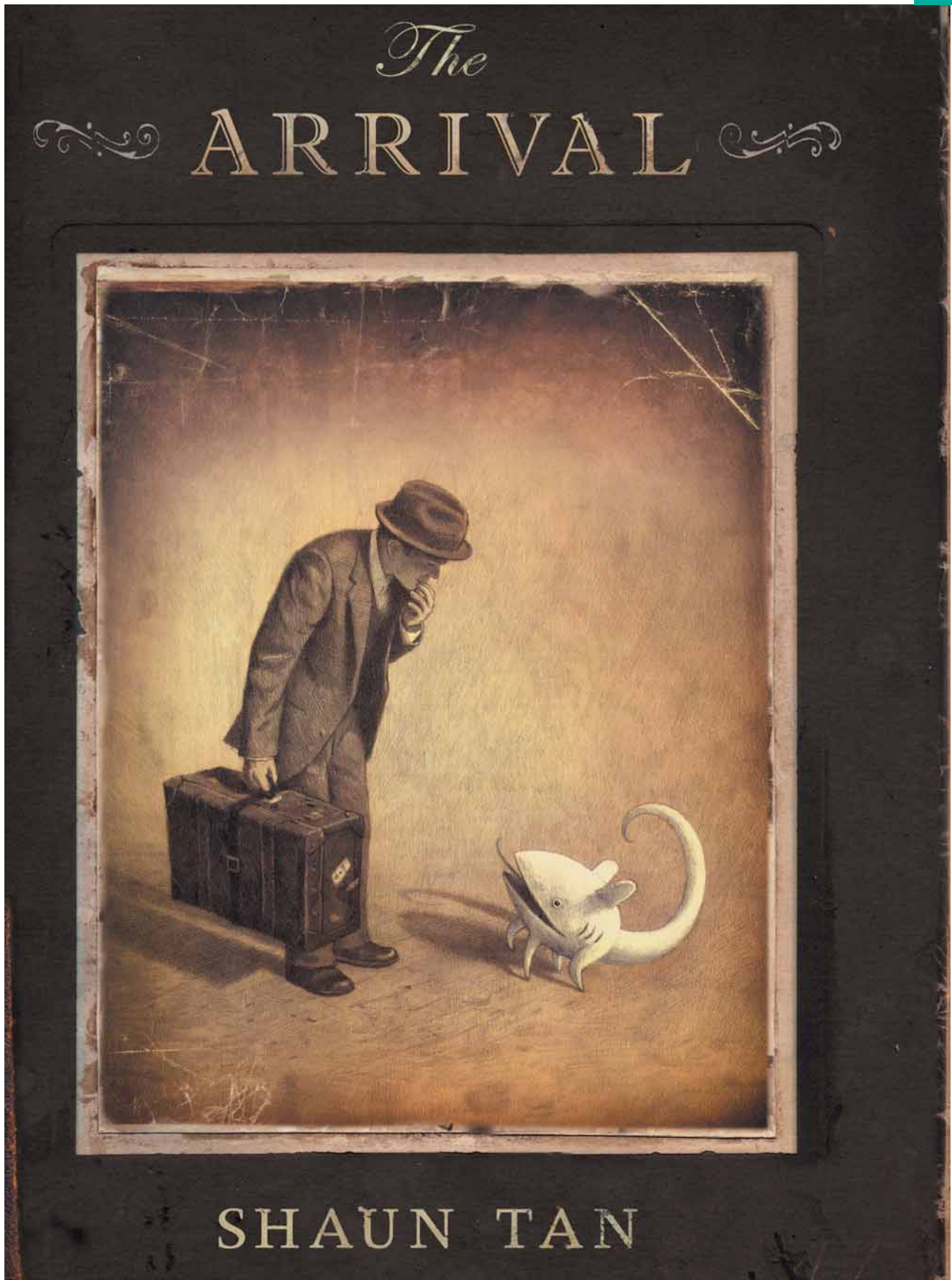
Visit Shaun Tan's website (www.shauntan.net) to develop an appreciation of this talented and quirky artist's contribution to contemporary Australia's cultural mulch. Here you will be able to source details of his other works, including picture books, graphic novels, films, essays and visual art.

TRANSPLANTING CULTURES AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

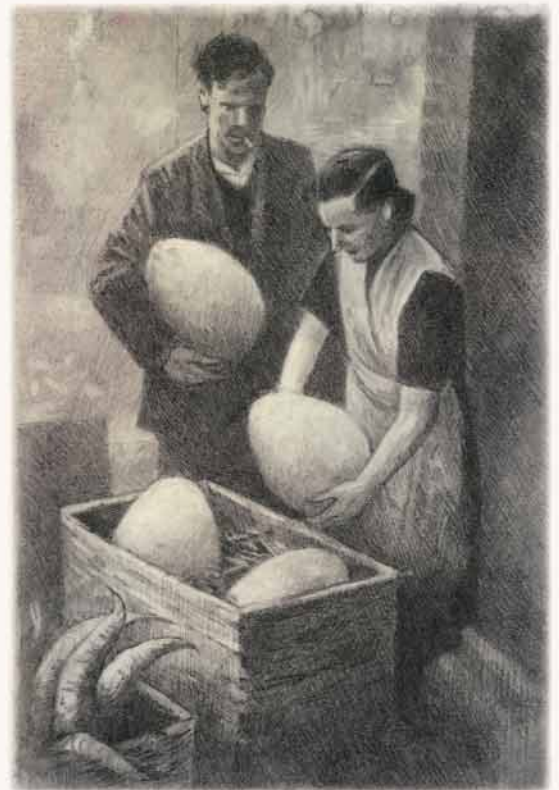
Shaun Tan is a writer and artist who actively explores the experience of immigration and its effect on our cultural understandings in his book *The Arrival* – a graphic novel that tells a migrant's story through a long series of wordless images. Shaun Tan utilises symbolic and sometimes **surreal** imagery to develop the reader's understanding of the immigrant experience.

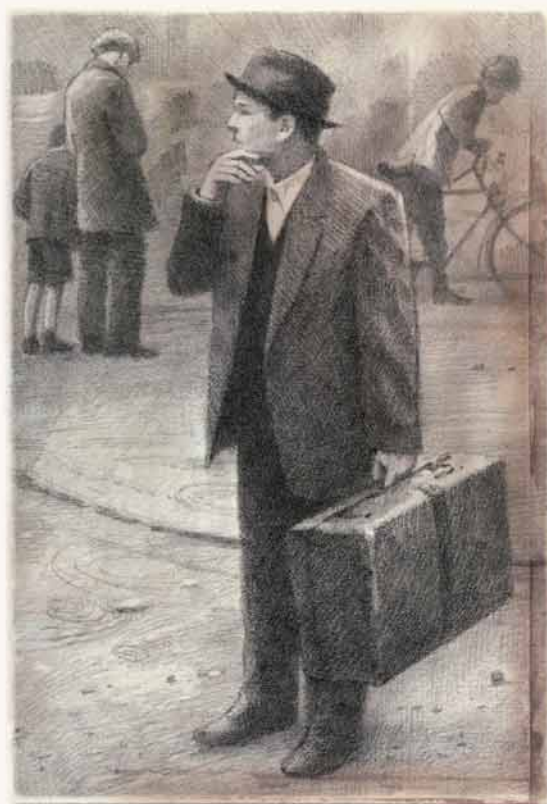
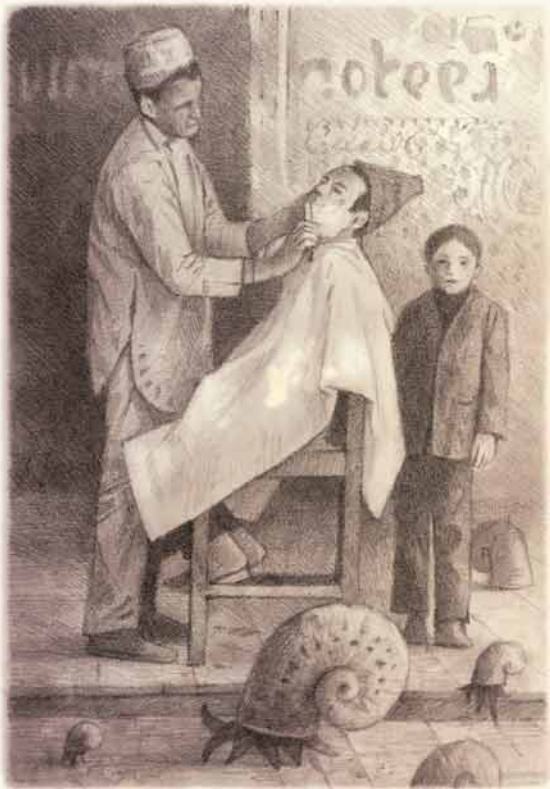
Here are the pages that follow from the main character's arrival in his new home town by balloon lift. First, we see the street sights from the man's point of view – we see what he sees in this new, strange land. In the frames that follow, Tan places the man into the scenes.

surreal
describes imagery that is bizarre or fantastic, often displaying characteristics and qualities that you might associate with dreams



The Arrival cover art by Shaun Tan





REFLECT ON

In a whole class discussion, create a list of reasons why people choose to immigrate. In your list, include the reasons given by classmates who are immigrants or who are the children and grandchildren of immigrants.

empathy

the experience of identifying with the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of another; it is an important aspect of the way readers engage with a narrative – the more you empathise with a character, the more involved you might find yourself in the story; a reader empathises when they imagine how similar their own feelings and responses would be if they were in the character's shoes

The only English words in *The Arrival* are those in the title. The absence of words is a powerful way for readers to develop an understanding of how challenging it must be for migrants who must build new lives in a country where they do not know the language or share many of the cultural understandings of those who already live there.

The final frame on page 21 communicates the feelings of wonder, confusion, frustration and fear that the man experiences as he tries to navigate his way through new and very unfamiliar territory. Although much of what Shaun Tan creates is very different to what you know, you are able to make meaning by inferring from what is familiar to you. You may experience **empathy** when reading *The Arrival* because you see what the central character is feeling from his facial expressions and gestures, and you can share his feelings because you also find the objects in the environment simultaneously familiar and strangely different from what you are used to.

IDENTIFY AND INTERACT >>

Activity 1.11 Annotate images

Shaun Tan's work depends on your shared cultural understanding of body language and the function of objects.

- 1 Choose one or two individual drawings from *The Arrival* and use post-it notes to annotate the details that are familiar and also those that are different from what you are used to. The first frame has been done to give you some idea of how to proceed.

The boy's gaze is out of the frame. He looks like he is scanning the area for approaching customers. His old-fashioned cap and clothing remind me of newspaper sellers in historical movies.

It looks like a poster, but I don't understand the symbols. It reminds me of the headlines posters I used to see in newsagents and on corners where newspapers were sold.



Angle of head suggests man is looking at object he is holding in his hand. It looks like he is reading a newspaper that he has just received from the young boy.

The boy's hand is ready to take one of the papers from under his arm. He looks like he is distributing the papers. He reminds me of the newspaper sellers that used to work in the city.

- 2 Share your work with three or four students in your class. Create lists of the familiar and different objects.

As you can see from Activity 1.1.1, many of the inferences you make about the main character's feelings depend on your shared cultural understandings about **body language** and the function of objects. Often it is the familiar body language that enables you to infer the function of the strange objects Shaun Tan has created.

The following images from *The Arrival* develop ideas about why people choose to emigrate from the country in which they were born.

body language
the various physical, mental or emotional states that we read from non-verbal communication made up of gestures, postures, facial expressions



The old country



The story of the giants

Activity 1.12 Interpreting images

- 1 Work with a partner to discuss the images ‘The old country’ and ‘The story of the giants’.
- 2 Draw inferences and then propose an interpretation of each image.
- 3 What does each image suggest about why someone would want to leave that environment?

Activity 1.13 Further interpretations

- 1 Working in pairs, use a T-chart to link your inferences to particular textual details.

Image analysis: *The Arrival*

Textual details	Your inferences
<p>‘The old country’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • narrow streets • reptilian tails and shadows • minute human figures • narrow multi-storied buildings with little doors and windows • numerous chimney stacks 	
My interpretation:	
<p>‘The story of the giants’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • giants • lights in their helmets • suction guns destroying buildings that look like churches • suction guns killing humans • fires • scavenging seagulls • buildings 	
My interpretation:	

- 2 Share your interpretations with another pair of students. What are the similarities and the differences in your interpretations?

READ MORE

You can read other stories about the immigrant experience online. The website Immigration Bridge (www.immigrationbridge.com.au) is a good place to start.

If you are an immigrant to Australia, you may wish to contribute your own story to the website.

IDENTIFY AND CREATE >>

Activity 1.14 Imagery, metaphors and symbols

- 1 Identify a reason for migrating that might be represented through imagery, metaphors or symbols. You will need to think of images and symbols that will make concrete such abstract ideas as poverty, environmental degradation and political or religious persecution.
- 2 Create a visual representation of the reason for migrating. You might prepare a poster, a collage, a multimedia presentation or, as Shaun Tan has done in *The Arrival*, use a graphic novel layout to tell a migrant's motives in leaving their home country.

SPEAK AND INTERACT >>

Activity 1.15 Gallery walk

A gallery walk is a discussion strategy that will give you the opportunity to share your work with your classmates and check that you understand the ways that images, metaphors and symbols work to communicate abstract ideas.

- 1 Copy the following questions onto the top edge of a piece of paper that is larger than your work:
 - What motives are suggested for a migrant leaving their home country?
 - What images, metaphors and/or symbols imply these motives?
- 2 Fix your work to the middle of the piece of paper. There should be enough room for classmates to place Post-it notes around your work.
- 3 Display your work on the walls of the classroom.
- 4 Arm yourself with a wad of Post-it notes and a pen.
- 5 Assume that your work is 12 o'clock. Locate the work that is closest to six o'clock (that is, directly opposite yours) and examine it closely. Write your answers to the questions onto the Post-it notes and affix them to the paper surrounding the work – closest to the details you have noticed. Work in a clockwise direction and examine at least three or four pieces of work, repeating the annotation exercise for each piece.

- 6 Return to your own work. Read through the notes that have been left by your classmates.
- 7 Conclude this exercise with a reflective journal entry or a class wiki post in which you assess the extent to which your work was well understood by others and the extent to which you understood the work of others. Can you suggest which cultural understandings are shared by your class?

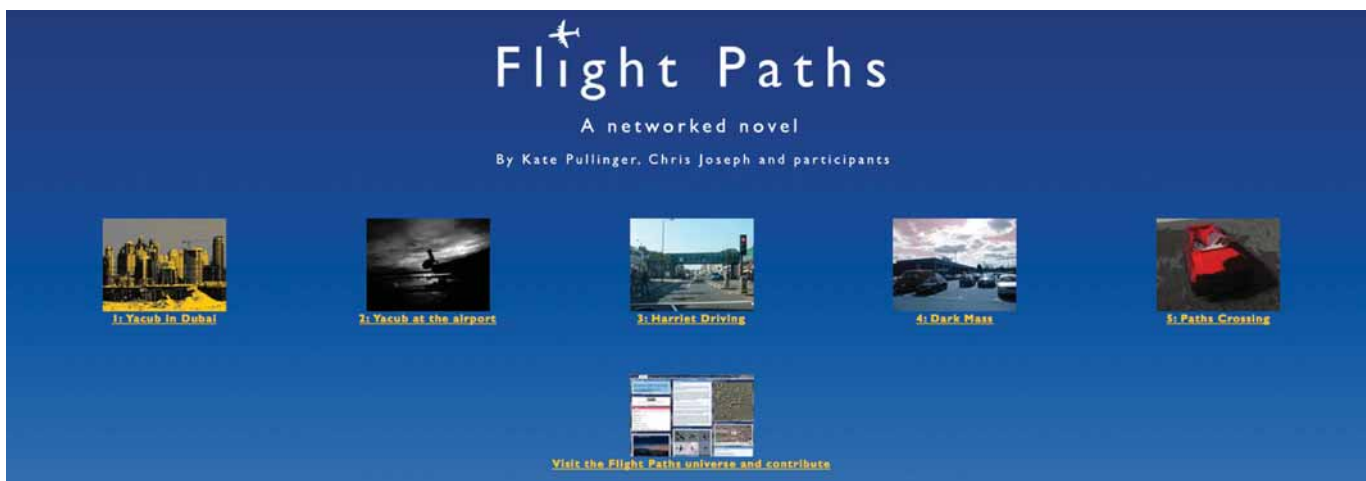
TRANSPLANTING AND TRANSFORMING CULTURES THROUGH THE WORLD WIDE WEB

In a few short decades, the online environment has become an easily accessible way for Australians to share their stories. You are possibly a member of at least one social networking platform where you keep the world informed about your particular values, attitudes and activities. Maybe you have uploaded or forwarded documents, images and videos that communicate your ideas about what is funny, interesting, entertaining, annoying and challenging.

Your class wiki is an efficient and effective way to collaborate with classmates to create a wide range of different and interactive texts. Your online presence can be a significant indicator of your beliefs and cultural values. It is also an important medium for you to receive ideas about what the rest of the world believes is important. The internet has become a rich depository of cultural mulch.

As you will have seen from your visits to the Immigration Bridge site, the World Wide Web provides a rich source of stories about the immigrant experience. *Flight Paths: A Networked Novel* by Kate Pullinger, Chris Joseph and others (www.flightpaths.net) is another narrative that uses online technologies to tell a chilling story in which the lives of two culturally different characters, Yacub and Harriet, intersect. It is made up of five separate but interconnected stories. You will read and view the online novel and ask questions about what you read and view to increase your engagement with the text.

*Flight Paths:
A Networked
Novel homepage*



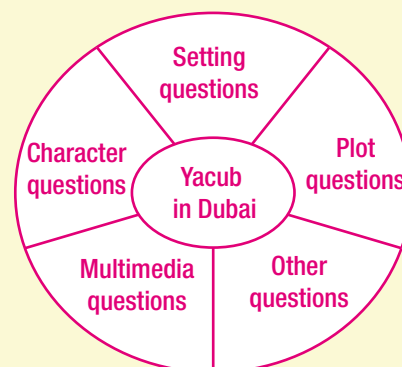
Activity 1.16 Asking questions

This is intended as a whole class activity where you view the novel projected onto a whiteboard if you can. Someone will need to advance each frame of the story with a mouse click.

- 1 Go to www.flightpaths.net and view the five chapters of the narrative. There is a soundtrack, so make sure you keep your speakers on.
- 2 Individually, develop questions about the setting, characters, plot and multimedia tools used to tell the story.
- 3 Stop after each chapter to record your questions in a chart like the one below. Some sample questions have been provided. Try to have more questions than anyone else in your class. You might even ask questions for which you think you know the answers.

Flight Paths Who are the creators?	Setting Where and when	Characters About the people in the story	Plot About the events and the order they occur	Multimedia tools	Other questions
Yacub in Dubai	Where is Dubai?			Why is a yellow accent used in all the images?	
Yacub at the Airport			Why did Yacub climb up into the plane's landing gear?		
Harriet Driving		Is Harriet rich?			
Dark Mass				Why is the screen split? Why do the images of the supermarket feature the word 'free'?	
Paths Crossing					Are they dead?

- 4 Share your questions in a class graffiti exercise. This requires five large pieces of paper – one for each chapter of the story – which act as the graffiti boards. An example is provided here.



Activity 1.17 Jigsaw activity

Once everyone's questions are recorded, divide into five groups for a jigsaw activity.

What is a jigsaw activity?

This activity is characterised by participants within a cooperative group each becoming expert on different aspects of one topic of study.

- Before presenting and teaching to the cooperative group, students form 'expert groups', comprised of individuals from different cooperative groups who have the same assigned topic.
- Together, expert partners study their topic and plan effective ways to teach important information when they return to their cooperative groups.
- One way of teaching is for the expert group to display their information on paper.
- Participants return to their cooperative groups and then take their cooperative group on a Gallery Tour (walk around the room) to each display.
- Alternatively, participants can return to their cooperative groups and teach all members of their group, as they are now the experts.

What do you do?

- 1 Expert groups are each assigned one of the graffiti boards. They should discuss and propose answers to as many of the questions listed as possible, making sure that they firstly address all questions with multiple ticks.
- 2 The home cooperative groups reform and each member's questions are answered by the relevant expert.
- 3 All unanswered questions at the end of the jigsaw should be addressed in a whole class discussion.

multimodal text

a text that combines language modes (reading, viewing, writing, creating, speaking and listening) and processes; for example, the production of visual, audio, spoken and non-verbal forms of expression through a range of technologies

MULTIMODAL TEXTS

A **multimodal text** is a text that combines two or more communication modes. Shaun Tan's stories, with their vivid blend of print and images, are multimodal texts. *Flight Paths*, with its combination of text, images and sound, is also a multimodal text.

The multimodal method of storytelling used in *Flight Paths* is relatively new, primarily because the software used to create it and the space where it exists, the internet, has only been generally available to the public since the mid-1990s. It is interesting to note how storytelling adapts to new forms and technologies as they become available.

The multimodal features of *Flight Paths*, such as the use of sound loops, split screens, Flash animations and picture transitions, help the creators of the story to draw your attention to some big ideas and provide you with new ways to evaluate your values and beliefs. Technology will no doubt continue to provide storytellers with new and surprising ways to shape their ideas.

New ways of telling stories will undoubtedly continue to emerge. However, more traditional and conventional **narrative structure** and technique will also continue to be important to the construction of good stories. *Flight Paths* utilises the classic narrative structure of exposition, conflict, rising action, climax and denouement. It also conforms to the traditional conventions of short stories in that:

- it can be read in one sitting
- it has only two developed characters
- it concludes with a sudden and unexpected twist.

Flight Paths has its inspiration in the details of a factual event: the discovery of a body in an English shopping centre's car park. It developed into a work of fiction when Pullinger and Joseph imagined the body falling into the car park in the course of a normal English day. They juxtapose the life of a desperate and poor Indian labourer with that of a wealthy, middle-class English mother. Harriet's story begins in Chapter Three ('Harriet Driving') with her driving to the shopping centre and pondering the needlessness of her planned purchases. Her meaningless consumption of goods contrasts sharply with Yacud's poverty.

Did you notice how the images inside the shopping centre in Chapter Four were dominated by the words 'Free' and 'Special offer'? Such details serve to emphasise the overabundance of Harriet's lifestyle and, through the comparison, the deprivation of Yacud's. **Juxtaposition** is a structural feature of the storytelling and a strong indicator of meaning.

Flight Paths raises many challenging questions and, no doubt, encouraged some interesting class discussions of significant issues such as the values of a consumer society, world poverty, and beliefs about what happens after death.

Remember the metaphor with which we began this chapter, comparing the function of stories to that of a garden tool with which readers are able to dig down into the cultural mulch in which they grow? Like most literary narratives, *Flight Paths* may be seen to entertain and also to provoke readers to 'dig down' into some weighty, real-life cultural issues. When literature works in this way, it is often interpreted as having a social purpose or social value.

REFLECT ON

Consider the ending of the story. What impact did it have on you? How did it make you feel?

narrative structure
the framework and order
of a story

juxtaposition
to place two things
side by side, especially
for the purposes of
comparison or contrast,
to draw links between
them

READ, WRITE, CREATE

This chapter has given you many opportunities to dig through the cultural mulch in which we all grow. Now you are invited to experiment with any multimedia tools you can access to tell your own stories.

Create your own multimodal story and post it on the class wiki. Aim to create a story that fulfils the dual social purposes of entertaining and also provoking your classmates to think about the way your cultural background has affected your personal values and beliefs. Reading your story should give your classmates an understanding of how you see your world.

WHICH STORYTELLING TOOLS?

Make your own multimodal story using software such as Photo Story 3, Movie Maker or iMovie. It is very likely that your computer will have movie-making software as standard. However, if it doesn't, then Photo Story 3 is freely available to download. Movie-making software programs are quite straightforward to use, but if you have never used one before, a simple internet search will provide you with many 'how to use' tutorials.

If you are using your school's computers for this activity, make sure you get permission from the people responsible for technology support before you download any executable programs.

All of the movie-making software programs allow you to import images, soundtracks, sound effects, voice-overs, titles and credits. You can also experiment with different transition effects and different ways to pan and zoom on each image. These features will ensure that you can focus on the particular details that you consider important in each image.

WHAT STORY?

This chapter has provided you with several ideas that you could present in a multimodal form.

- 1 Revisit your concept map for your hidden courtyard and create a digital description of your family's inner courtyard.
- 2 Prepare a digital story of the reasons people choose to immigrate. Incorporate images from the class display and include screen shots and or quotes from websites such as Immigration Bridge.
- 3 Create your own version of *Flight Paths*. Juxtapose the story of an asylum seeker with images from an ordinary Australian day. Conduct an internet search on aircraft stowaways or people smuggling. Develop your understanding of what drives desperate people to commit such desperate acts. Create a story using the same techniques utilised by *Flight Paths*.

- 4 Create a digital representation of your own cultural mulch – of where you come from and/or where you feel you belong. You could scan in images of the loyalty cards in your wallet, include screen dumps of the websites you like to visit, images of your family's favourite foods and, of course, photographs from your family albums. Your soundtrack could make use of national songs, football team anthems and/or recordings of your family singing traditional lullabies. You can use captions, mottos and family sayings to help explain your selections of sounds and images.

GOING FURTHER

Write a critical reflective commentary about the text you have created in which you explain your purpose as a writer/creator and the audience you are writing for. Make particular reference to your use of linguistic and visual tools, explaining why you used them and how they help to communicate or achieve your purpose. Also discuss how notions such as cultural background are relevant to the story, and what social purpose/s are underlying or driving the text.

REFLECT ON WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

The activities in this chapter have emphasised the importance of figurative language in leading readers to active meaning-making.

- 1 Review your work and the work of classmates and reflect on the extent to which metaphors and symbols add to the meaning of each work.
- 2 Write and post on the class wiki short reflective responses to each of the multimodal productions created by class members. Comment on what each multimodal story reveals about the values, attitudes and beliefs of its maker.

