



# *The Arrival* multi-disciplinary school project

How to use *The Arrival* by  
Shaun Tan to support a  
cross-curricular book project

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Age 12-15

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CFE Levels Third and  
Fourth

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Resource created by  
Scottish Book Trust

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## About this resource

The aim of this resource is to support teaching staff to run a cross-curricular project at secondary level. The resource contains activity ideas across several areas of the Curriculum for Excellence and has been designed to promote multi-disciplinary connection and collaboration. It is recognised that, particularly at secondary level, cross-curricular work can be challenging and the resource has been designed to be flexible so that schools can choose to connect the number of subject areas that best suits their setting.

The project can be run with:

- A targeted group of young people
- A class
- A year group
- A whole school

It could be run as a yearlong project, across a term, or during an intense week or day of activities. A multi-disciplinary project would also be a great way to encourage bonding and peer-to-peer interaction in the first weeks of term.

## **Involving staff**

To run the project across all curricular areas, you will need to involve faculty members from across the school. This resource includes activity ideas that can be shared with staff to get them excited about being involved. Ensuring staff have time to read, discuss and think about their own responses to the story will also help to facilitate a shared approach.

## ***The Arrival* by Shaun Tan**

*The Arrival* is a wordless picture book, created by Shaun Tan in 2006. The central theme of *The Arrival* is the exploration of what it is like to be an immigrant arriving alone in a strange country.

### **Plot summary**

The reader is placed in the main protagonist's shoes (the author calls him the Nameless Man) as he negotiates his way through a new and extremely unusual environment. We follow him as he tries to find a home in a country where he cannot speak the language, as he learns to cook food he has never seen before and attempts to find a job in a world full of indecipherable writing. Along the way he meets other immigrants, each with their own story to tell, who offer friendship, help and advice. Ultimately he begins to build connections and make new friends as he strives to bring his beloved family to join him.

This beautiful book explores a wide range of immigration themes including; the reasons people leave their countries behind, the dangers of their journey, family, friendship and the value of kindness and altruism.

### **Sensitive subjects**

Activities within this resource have been created to help young people build empathy, develop understanding, delve into the visual narrative and form creative and imaginative responses to the story.

However, it is important to bear in mind that any project exploring refugee and immigrant narratives needs to be done with sensitivity, compassion and care. Some teachers will have young people from a refugee or migrant background in their classes, and such pupils may not wish to share personal stories, or could find aspects of the theme challenging. There may also be pupils who have negative feelings about refugees and immigrants. Anyone exploring this topic with young people should be prepared to create safe discussion spaces, build pupil empathy, and encourage collaboration.

There are many fantastic organisations in Scotland and the UK providing advice and support to educators who wish to develop teaching in this subject area and guides such as Oxfam's [Teaching Controversial Issues](#) or the UNHCR [teaching resources](#) may prove helpful before you begin.

# Pre-reading and reading activities

## Introducing the book

When using the book as a whole school or cohort, it is important to create an initial buzz, setting foundations for **all** to engage in the exciting activities. Think about holding an assembly or whole school event such as World Book Day to introduce the book. Ways to create a buzz of excitement around the project could be:

- Post “Arriving Soon” posters around school with the date of the announcement, but don’t give away what it is.
- Put up mysterious signs in the language that appears within the book.
- Have a suitcase themed display with items that hint to the book. Add one new item each day in the lead up to the assembly and “big reveal”.
- Photocopy some of the images from the book for a display, ask people to guess what is happening in them.
- Ask someone from a local drama group to dress as the nameless man and come to the school with a suitcase full of copies of the book.

## Using a wordless book

Wordless books offer unique benefits to pupils. They are accessible to all, require depth of thought and interpretation, encourage narrative comprehension, engage reluctant readers, and promote visual literacy.

Before you begin there are key points to remember when sharing *The Arrival*.

- Teacher knowledge and preparation of the resource is vital to initiate learning, especially surrounding the theme of immigration.
- Establishing pupil prior knowledge of wordless books can be helpful.
- It is important that pupils can see the images clearly.
- Allow time for them to process what they see and accept suggestions offered.

## Read the book [ENG 3-12a](#)

There are different options for reading the book as a class or cohort. You could:

- Give pupils individual copies to read over summer
- Give pupils individual copies to read during term time
- Put copies in the staff break room and encourage teacher discussion
- Use class copies to read together
- Make a slideshow of parts of the book and look at it together on a whiteboard.

Whichever approach you take, it is important that all pupils and staff have access to the story.

# Literacy and English

## **Words to the wordless** LIT 3-23a, LIT 4-23a

Ask pupils to consider why the author of *The Arrival* chose to create a wordless book. Do they think the story is more or less powerful as a purely visual narrative? In pairs or small groups, challenge pupils to choose any two pages of the book and try to add words. Ask them to consider whether a first or third person narrative voice would work best. Different groups might like to try different narratives.

Bring groups together to share their interpretations and discuss the benefits and barriers that words bring to the story. You may wish to follow this by [watching the author](#) discuss the challenges of creating a wordless book.

## **A different perspective** LIT 3-2a, LIT 4-20a, LIT 3-26a, LIT 4-26a

Ask pupils to choose one of the secondary characters in the book and write a poem or short story from their perspective. Ask them to imagine they are this character and they are meeting the Nameless Man for the first time. What do they see when they look at him? What are they doing in their own lives on the day they met him? Why do they choose to help him? Or not help him? Read out some of the pupils work and ask if they can guess whose perspective it is?

You may wish to use this to prompt discussions about writing from the perspective of someone different from ourselves. Can a man write from a woman's perspective? Should someone who has never been a refugee create a refugee protagonist? Can you authentically write about disability if you are able bodied?

## **Interactive stories** LIT 3-2a, LIT 4-20a, LIT 3-24a, LIT 4-24a

Many of the people we meet in *The Arrival* have left their home towns or countries. Some have been on difficult journeys, or have had to make tough decisions. The wordless format helps to place us in their shoes. Another way of helping a reader feel like they are immersed in a narrative is a 'Choose your own adventure' style story.

Ask pupils to create an interactive story about a journey, where the reader has to make choices that affect the outcome of the main protagonist. Pupils may wish to use a free online tool such as [inklewriter](#) or use a branching narrative chart to help them plan their writing.

Stories could have immigration themes such as in this powerful branching story film [Brothers across Borders](#) or could be about a journey of their choice. The final stories could be presented online, in a handmade book, in a clickable presentation or even through film.

# Social Studies

**The suitcase** SOC 3-05a, SOC 4-05c, SOC 4-06d

In *The Arrival* the central character takes just one small suitcase with him on his journey. Ask pupils to consider what it might be like to pack everything you need into one case.

Split the class into groups and give each a picture of a suitcase (or a suitcase prop). Tell them they leaving their home in Scotland tomorrow and can only bring this case. Besides two sets of clothes, essential medication and toiletries, they are allowed to bring three extra 'non-essential' items from the list below.

- Jewellery or a watch
- A photo or small photo album
- A small personal memento from a loved one (like an ornament, a scarf or a letter)
- A simple mobile phone (not a smart phone)
- A favourite book
- A second pair of shoes
- A hairbrush or comb
- A bag of sweets
- A torch
- A notebook and pen
- A board game or toy (like a treasured teddy)
- A sewing kit
- A radio
- Something Scottish (that would fit in a small suitcase, so no highland cows!)

Give each group some time choose three things. Encourage discussion over the purpose of the objects, emotional attachments to physical things and the benefits or drawbacks certain objects might have e.g.: how could you charge a phone on the journey? Ask each group to feedback their choices and discuss the decision making process.

You may wish to follow this up by looking photos of the items that refugees [bring with them](#) or objects that refugee children feel are [precious](#).

**Erasing culture** SOC 3-05a, SOC 4-04b, SOC 4-04c

One of the most strange and disturbing pictures in the book is an image of giants marching through a city and using machines to suck up everything, and everyone, in their path.

In [this video](#) Shaun Tan describes the inspiration for this image as being a conversation with a Romanian woman describing how she watched the 'life being sucked out' of her country. The new communist regime removed the historic architecture, destroyed the beauty of the city and she felt that they even sucked the spirit out of the people. This kind of destruction has happened throughout history and is still happening today. Discuss why a government or new regime might want to erase elements of national or spiritual culture and how precious cultural icons are to a nation.

Split the class into groups and ask them to consider the unique culture of Scotland. Which parts of Scottish culture do they consider particularly important and what would they be sad to lose. Perhaps this might be a building or monument that is uniquely Scottish, a food that makes them think of home, a type of traditional clothing or a song, an element of the landscape or an animal. Ask each group to choose three things they would wish to protect and then create a persuasive reason why each is important. The class can then vote for the three most popular choices.

### **Citizenship test** SOC 3-17a, SOC 4-18a

Some of the early images in the book are based on real photos of Ellis Island in America. This was once a busy immigrant inspection station, processing people arriving in the United States in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People arriving there had their paperwork checked, underwent medical inspection and were asked questions about why they wanted to come to America. In *The Arrival* we see the Nameless Man go through a similar process.

Ask pupils to research the processes people arriving in Britain have to go through to become citizens, including the ['Life in the UK' test](#). Discuss why they think countries have tests and what kinds of qualities make someone a good citizen.

Challenge them to create their own citizenship test with the elements they think might be important.

## **Expressive arts**

### ***Drama***

#### **Making your meaning clear** EXA 4-13a, EXA 3-15a, EXA 4-15a,

When the Nameless Man arrives in the country he cannot read or speak the language and he struggles to communicate. Because this is a wordless book, we as readers, are placed in the same predicament, we have to understand what is going on using only visual clues.

Prepare some small slips of paper with questions written on them. Questions should be simple queries such as:

*Where can I find the canteen? How old are you? What do you like to eat? Do you have a pet? Do you have any siblings? What time does school end? Who is in charge here?*

Put pupils into pairs and ask one person to draw a question out of a hat, read it to themselves and keep it secret. They must then try to ask their partner the question without speaking. Their partner will try to work out what the question was and then answer it, again without using any words. Try again and let the second person ask the question.

Discuss the tools they used to communicate; body language, facial expression, gestures etc. Use this as a springboard to discuss the importance of such things in drama productions. Would it be possible to have a non-verbal play? If they used any universal gestures, such as looking at a watch to ask the time, get them to consider a world where watches didn't exist and how this gesture might then be perceived by a stranger. You may wish to highlight how different gestures are interpreted around the world, such as the thumbs up sign being positive in the UK but offensive in the Middle East. Or that in Bulgaria, nodding the head means "no" rather than "yes".

### **Dramatic altruism** EXA 3-14a, EXA 4-14a, HWB 3-10a

In *The Arrival* the Nameless Man struggles to find a place to stay, food to eat and employment. Along the way he is helped by strangers who selflessly give him directions, share food with him or invite him to their homes. Ask pupils to consider the value of altruism. How altruistic do they think they are, would they stop to help someone who looked lost or who needed help, if not, what would prevent them from helping? Why do they think the people in the book help the Nameless Man?

Explain the theory of 'the bystander effect' and the factors such as group dynamics, fear or moral judgement and that often prevent us from helping others. You may want to begin by showing an [experiment](#) that explores this subject.

Split the class into groups and ask each group to come a short sketch that illustrates an event where someone needs help. Perhaps it will involve someone who is lost, has stumbled and dropped all their shopping, is being bullied, or has hurt themselves. Ask the pupils to explore in their drama why we might help, or not help, someone in need and the consequences of our actions.



## **Art and design**

### **Lost and out of place** EXA 3-03a, EXA 4-03a

*The Arrival* focusses on the experience of feeling out of place in a strange land and conveys this narrative without the use of words. The author of *The Arrival*, Shaun Tan, [describes](#) his intention was that each page can be seen as a single composition that tells a little story. Often these stories are told in twelve panels, a lot like a comic. Invite pupils to think about how the author keeps the narrative moving in twelve panels, his choice of colour, composition, the central emotion of the piece and the how this helps the panels come together to tell a single story.

Ask pupils to come up with some short examples of places where someone might lost or out of place? Perhaps at a party where they didn't really fit in, lost in a strange town or countryside, or simply stuck in conversation about something they know nothing about.

Challenge them to try to tell their story in twelve wordless panels. This doesn't need to be overly complex or artistically perfect, it can be done as a short sketch or a storyboard style drawing. They should focus on helping the 'reader' understand what is happening, conveying the emotions of the central character, and must not use any recognisable words, even in the background.

### **Symbolic threat** EXA 3-06a, EXA 4-06a

The Nameless Man is fleeing from his home country due some sort of unnamed threat. The author represents this as dark reptilian tentacles threading their way through the town, casting shadows across the rooftops and people in the streets. Discuss what they think this imagery represents and the reasons people might be forced to leave their home countries.

Pupils could then consider some of the threats that human beings face across the world today and discuss how they might be represented symbolically. For example; if climate change was a creature, what would it look like? What symbol could you use to represent a pandemic? How might you suggest a war without showing any recognisable weapons? If famine was a colour what would it be?

Challenge pupils to create a single picture or painting that represents a chosen threat, global or local, in a symbolic way.

### **Photos from home** EXA 3-02a, EXA 4-02a

If pupils look closely at the design of *The Arrival* they will see that it has been designed to look a lot like an old photo album. We also see that one of the Nameless Mans prized possessions is a photograph of his wife and child. Ask pupils to

consider why this might be and what significance photos might hold for someone leaving their home land?

Invite pupils to imagine they are moving to a far off land and can take a few photos with them. Challenge them to design and create a photo montage or mini scrap album of the things that they would want to look at to remind them of home, and to encourage them when they feel lost or alone. This could involve photos for friends and family, their pets, their home, or iconic landscapes or monuments. They could also decorate around the edges of their photos with sketches, poems, flags, quotes or even messages from loved ones.

## Design and Technology

**Sign language** TCH 3-11a, TCH 4-11a, HWB 3-10a, HWB 4-10a

The extraordinary world that exists within the book *The Arrival* is full of strange and indecipherable signs. As the Nameless Man navigates his way around he struggles to know which signs to follow or what they all mean. Helpfully he has a book with images of items such as a bed, or certain foods, to help him find the things he is searching for.

Ask pupils to walk around their school and record every sign that is written in English with no other visual clues to indicate what it means. If someone who struggled to read English came to their school, would they be able to find their way around? Explain that many people who can speak English may also have trouble reading these signs (people with dyslexia for example).

Choose several of the signs and ask pupils to design and create visual symbols to accompany them to help people to understand their meanings. Pupils should consider colour (yellow backgrounds work well for people with dyslexia), simplicity of image, universalism (if you are from another country) and copyright issues. They may wish to test their designs on each other to see if they understand which room or facility they represent. The best signs could then be placed in the school.

## Health and Wellbeing

### ***Home Economics***

**Food around the world** HWB 2-34a, HWB 3-34a, HWB 4-34a

In *The Arrival* the Nameless Man struggles to buy food and everything he finds seems oddly shaped or unusual. He has to explore new ingredients and tastes, just as we would if we visited another country.

The book [\*Hungry Planet\*](#) by Peter Menzel contains wonderful photos of the average weekly shop around the world. Show pupils some of these photographs, or give them a list of foreign ingredients, and ask them to consider what healthy meals they might make with them.

What do they think might seem unusual for someone coming to Scotland? For example: did they know that in America most kitchens do not have a kettle! Or that the French don't eat baked beans or marmite? Challenge pairs of pupils to pick a country out of a hat and then explore that country's food culture and common ingredients.

Finally you may wish to challenge groups to create a dish from their chosen country.

### **'Mysterious food' challenge** TCH 3-04a, TCH 4-04a

The food in *The Arrival* is so distinctly different that it is even hard for the reader to identify. The author does this so that we feel as confused as the Nameless Man does. Some chefs, such as Heston Blumenthal, like to deliberately create confusing or unexpected foods.

Challenge pupils to create a meal with common ingredients presented in an unusual or confusing way. Perhaps they might carve an apple into pieces that look like grapes, wrap cheese up in sweetie wrappers, dye tomato soup green or make a cupcake out of savoury ingredients.

Pupils can then present and taste each other's creations and discuss how the visual look of food impacts on our taste expectations and experience.

### **Food for good** HWB 3-13a, HWB 4-13a

In *The Arrival* the Nameless Man receives help from family who teach him about food and invite him to their home to share a meal. Sharing good food and drink is a wonderful and social way to bring people together. Food can be used to break down barriers and nurture a sense of community.

Ask pupils to consider how they might use food for social good in their school or community. Pupils may wish to create and sell sweet treats from around the world to raise funds for a refugee charity, donate food to a food bank, write a community cook book, create a mental wellness cafe or grow their own school vegetables.

## Bringing everything together

As you come to the end of your multi-disciplinary school project, you may wish to hold a celebratory event. This can be a great way to engage the wider school community in the themes you have been exploring and to recognise and celebrate pupils work.

A cross-curricular event will also bring the separate disciplines together, showing how they interact and complement each other to form a broad real-world picture.

Event activities could include:

- A display of the artwork and photo montages that have been created
- A performance of the drama shorts created by pupils exploring altruism
- A food table with food from around the world, or the mysterious foods.
- An interactive suitcase challenge with items to choose from and photo examples of refugee belongings.
- Readings of the poems or stories created by the English class
- An interactive world map that pupils, parents and staff can add stickers to, to show where they and their families come from
- A computer with the 'Life in the UK' test for people to try out and/or the pupils own citizenship test
- Interactive online story challenges
- A reading or display of real immigration stories

If coming together face-to-face is a difficult, you may also consider a shared online space such as a private Facebook group, a space on Microsoft Teams, a GLOW group or Wakelet page.

If you are also sharing your work on a public platform please be mindful of the sensitive nature of the books subject matter and be prepared to respond to debate or negativity.

## Additional information

If you enjoyed reading *The Arrival* you may also like read other wordless books on our [10 wordless wonders booklist](#).

### **More wordless book suggestions**

*Flood* by Alvaro F. Villa

*Flotsam* by David Weisner

*Journey* by Aaron Becker

*A Stone for Sasha* by Aaron Becker

*Window* by Jeannie Baker

*Mirror* by Jeannie Baker

### Wordless books with themes for older readers

*The Mediterranean* by Armin Greder – explores refugee death in the ocean

*The Island* by Armin Greder – xenophobia, otherness and dark social behaviour.

*Small Things* by Mel Tregonning – loneliness, vulnerability and finding help

### **Recommended titles:**

*For younger readers, but adaptable to secondary discussion*

*The Journey* by Francesca Sanna

*The Suitcase* by Chris Naylor-Ballesteros

*The Colour of Home* by Mary Hoffman

*For older readers*

*The Bone Sparrow* by Zana Fraillon

*The Boy At the Back of the Class* by Onjali Q. Rauf

*No Ballet Shoes in Syria* by Catherine Bruton

*The Fox Girl and the White Gazelle* by Victoria Williamson