

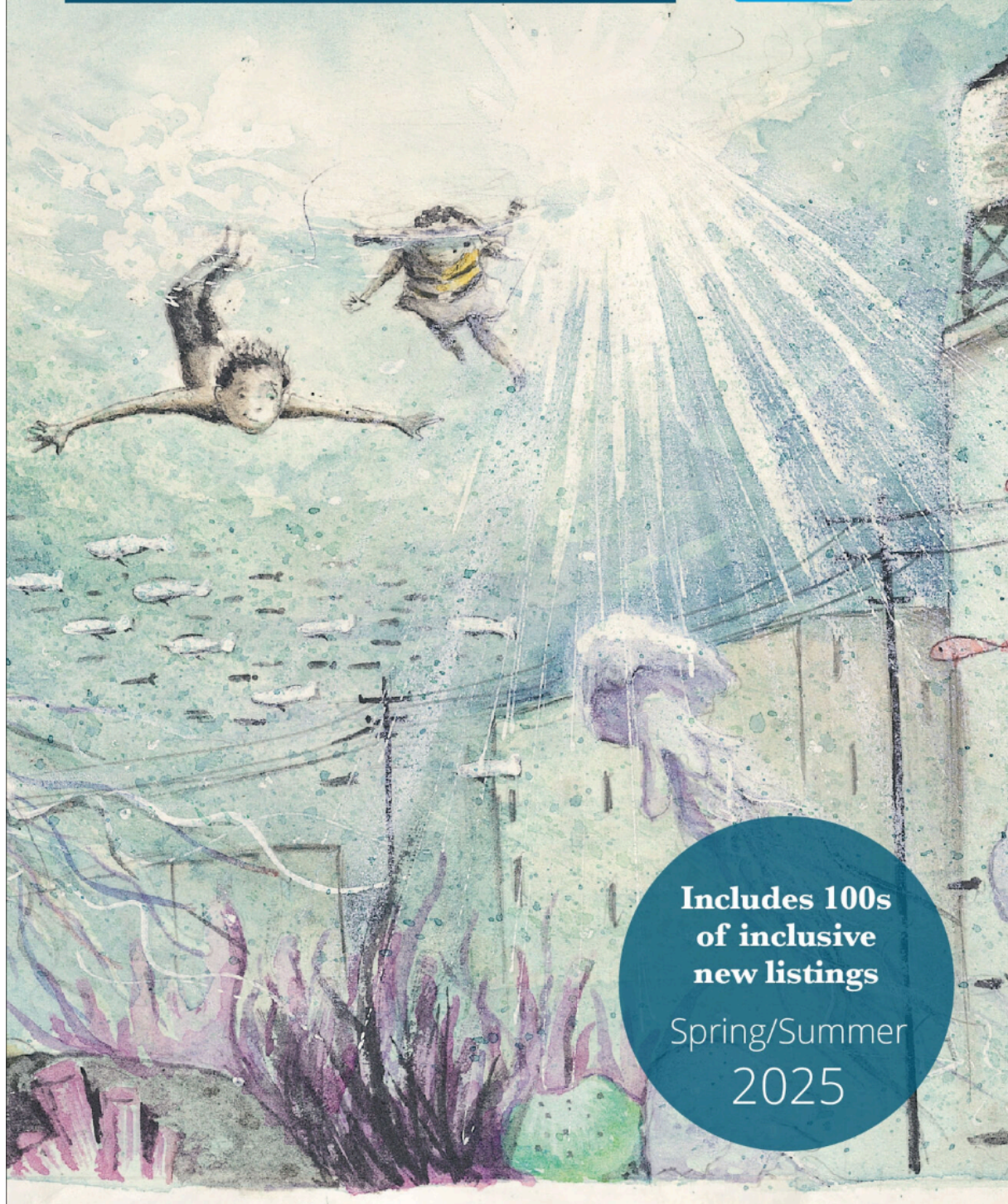
# Pen & inc.

Diversity and inclusion in children's books

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# Visual communications and connections

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**Tull Suwannakit** talks to **Jake Hope** about how his early childhood experiences around language encouraged him to explore art as a form of communication. In his latest book he takes that visual story telling to new heights as he looks at the impact of climate change in a rites-of-passage tale.

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**WITH news of climate change and subsequent flooding becoming a more and more regular feature in the news, there's an almost prophetic quality to Tull Suwannakit's extraordinary visual story, *Higher Ground*.**

Published simultaneously in Australia and the UK in March 2025, the book feels both groundbreaking and experimental in the way it skilfully moves through sequences inspired by graphic novel techniques, wordless elements and aspects of journaling. The story is both a figurative and literal rites-of-passage for the children and grandma who seek a new life following the submergence of their familiar world. They encounter numerous challenges along the way.

Key themes that course through the book are communication and connections. Both have been instrumental in Tull's own life. He was born in Thailand and stayed there for around nine years. "I was delayed in terms of speech; I communicated a lot through hand gestures but wasn't ready or in the mood to talk."

Alongside his hand gestures, Tull found he was able to communicate feelings through art. "The hobby I was most interested in was always to get pieces of paper and draw. It's where the foundations of my interest in art took shape."

Tull didn't stay in Thailand for terribly long. After

becoming more familiar with the language, he was sent to a boarding school in Singapore. "I thought it would be for a brief time, but I spent the next 10 years in Singapore alone. The language barrier was a big cultural shock. I didn't know a single word of English and felt like a fish out of water in a new country with a different culture and language. It was a really challenging time."

Reflecting on his experiences, Tull does recognise there were opportunities that arose from these, saying: "The positive side was that my parents wanted me to have a sense of resilience and to be able to adapt and to be independent. All of this helped me in terms of personal and social growth."

The move didn't come without its frustrations though. "When I first moved to Singapore, I couldn't really communicate at all. English was already hard enough and then I had to learn Chinese as another language too. Thankfully, the government gave me a temporary hold on needing to learn it. What I continued to find was that drawing worked as a means for communicating. It eliminated all of the cultural and language barriers and became a universal language. I knew then that I needed to do art."

Tull found his art was what gave a social connection to the people around him and also a personal connection to his inner self and spiritual needs. It also provided him with a means for helping to communicate information about his own culture and food.





**Tull Suwannakit.**

At this point, Tull's reading choices were also informed a lot by art and visual communication. "Growing up I read a lot of Manga like Dragon Ball and Doraemon. I would read anything Manga related that was translated into Thai! When I moved to Singapore, that became the connection or link back to my mother tongue and it also allowed me to explore an imaginative world."

Following his time in Singapore, Tull moved to the United States, where "I did 10 years at an art college". He graduated from Savannah University in Georgia before working in animation in New York city, which he describes as a mind-blowing experience!

"My animation was done with computers. It meant I wasn't really reflecting on my own skills and interests. I initially wanted to hand-draw in two-dimensions, but at the time everyone was doing three-dimensional animations as the studios were moving in that direction. I found I couldn't make my characters move as fluidly as I hoped. The art director praised my storytelling, but felt I was in the wrong field."

Tull found he was most interested in sculpting character maquettes for animators, revealing: "They would design a character and I would turn it into clay and put wire in so that it was easy for animators to manipulate it to see how it would move and how the joints and facial structure would react. Going back to basics in this way allowed me to find where my heart was."

Tull found that combining traditional techniques alongside storytelling was

what he felt most passionate about and skilled in. "The best way to do this for me felt to be in children's picture books. I moved back to Thailand and applied to a few publishers. Surprisingly I landed a few contracts, but they tended not to be story-based but rather more focused on learning, using the alphabets or becoming familiar with numbers for young children. I combined animals to help give appeal. There wasn't a proper beginning or end in these books, but they were useful for helping to introduce concepts."

After quite a nomadic lifestyle, Tull found it difficult to settle and decided to

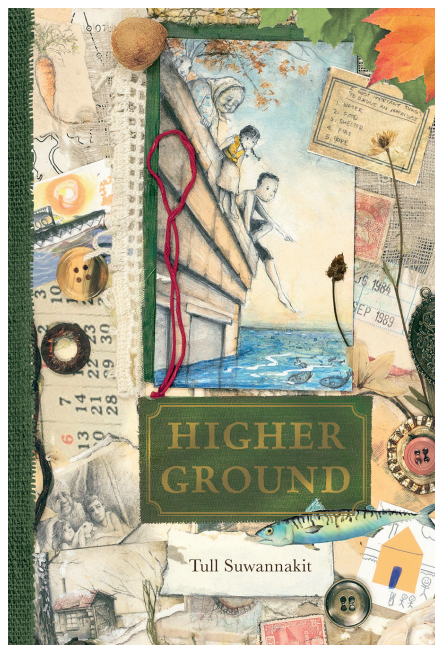
move from Thailand to Australia where he did a Master's in Fine Art. "I won a couple of awards with my books in Thailand, but that doesn't guarantee getting contracts elsewhere, so I kept working and honing my portfolio to help make it suit the market here."

Tull describes Australia as his permanent home now, saying that "it's where I feel connected". Despite this, he feels he has a migratory mindset!

"When you venture out into the wide world and gain new knowledge and connections, your mind might not initially want to go with the flow. Once you adapt to it and overcome the obstacles and try to have a positive outlook your body adapts to new lifestyles. Once you move into that phase you naturally become more migratory."

This recognition of what it is to be connected has informed his views on children's books. "A universal theme whether stories are spoken aloud or not is the role of connecting people regardless of their background, gender or culture. Single children's books can link so many people together through the interconnections they have with the world. If a book is good enough, it can almost be like a tree with different branches, in addition to the trunk, reaching up and out. I realised there are all manner of connections to community through this artform."

Tull feels an affinity with the narrative elements of visual storytelling. He has found animals a useful way of recounting





what he observes in the world. “Animals are living things that aren’t humans. This can be appealing to young audiences and combines both natural and fantasy elements.”

Some of Tull’s knowledge and observations of animals have been garnered through his interest in taxidermy. “I used them quite frequently in the Master’s degree as a way of exploring the natural world. They were animals that had died of natural causes. I worked a lot on foxes, wild pigs, rats and suchlike. This eventually manifested itself in using these characters to work into anthropomorphic animals, trying to find a sense of belonging in society, and finding a voice or a place where they could prove themselves through carrying out good deeds and changing the perceptions that are held of them.”

Reflecting on the roles that illustration can play for readers, Tull sees this as filling in the gaps and extending what is already present in a story. “The simplest analogy is that it’s like a poem. Poems are written ambiguously, unless you sit down and talk to the poet, they can be interpreted in an almost infinite number of ways.”

A recurring theme in Tull’s work is characters who are underdogs. “I like to explore different voices in characters. Are they going to be feral animals like in my book about a family of hares who are looking for a home. Perhaps they might be characters who are outside their comfort zones and have to discover a way to reach a sense of belonging.”



Some of these elements fed into *Higher Ground*. From the first idea through to publication, the book has taken around seven years to create. “Way back in 2018 it began as an idea for a standard children’s picture book. One of my editors at Scholastic was chatting and suggested breaking away from the subject matter we’ve seen and to create in a different way, with a scope that could extend beyond the standard 32 pages of picture books.”

Breaking away from traditions was liberating, but also required time and

space. Tull says: “It’s been a major project that has sometimes been placed onto the back-burner as I’ve worked upon other ideas before returning to it. It was an experiment. I knew some elements as I was creating it and others took several attempts to try.”

Tull was clear that he wanted the characters and their emotions to grow out of his own experiences and “to feel real and believable. It became a big project!”

Revisiting his own childhood and delving into memories from this time became a rewarding aspect of the work. “Grandma’s character incorporated facets of many different people that I’ve met and her wisdom is drawn from some of the different life lessons that I’ve learnt. Grandma is a real person in my mind, but in reality, is a collection of lots of little pieces and experiences that are gelled together.”

Creating a timeline was a big challenge for the book. “Creating the seasons of change, the progression of age, the loss of hope as well as how characters learn different things and come to change their mannerisms and approaches over time due to being scared and hopeless, or growing in confidence involved a lot of experimentation. I wanted to showcase the fragility and vulnerability of life. How characters age and grow can be really different.”

Throughout the course of the book, the child characters grow and become



She showed us the secrets

to keep the garden growing.





stronger whilst in turn grandma grows older and more fragile. There's a remarkable sense of the journey of life both in physical and mental terms.

It is hard to second guess what might be next for Tull after such a momentous work. "Currently, I am working on illustrations for an anthology of Australian poems, both old and new in collaboration with The National Library

of Australia. The poems were selected by Libby Hathorn (Libby wrote *Way Home*, which Gregory Rogers illustrated and won the Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration for in 1994) and Jude Fell. It will publish in November 2025."

Alongside this, Tull has the glimmering of another large-scale idea. "I don't want to jinx it, but I'm thinking of doing a book with a similar feel. It will revolve around

a different set of connections between people and their family values and where people are having to come together to work as a big group. The backdrop will be quite dystopian, so the characters will have something to move away from and to try to work towards for resolution."

In an age when there seem an increasing number of divides, a story about unity feels very prescient. **PEN&INC**

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