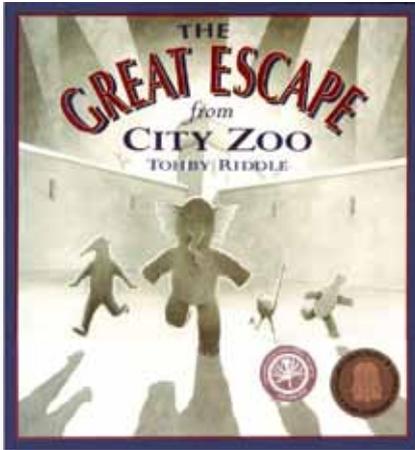


# Notes on *The Great Escape from City Zoo* by Tohby Riddle



Released in 1997, *The Great Escape from City Zoo* has been re-appraised in recent years as a picture book for readers and students of all ages, that is complex in meanings and visually sophisticated. It has recently been featured in *1001 Picture Books You Must Read Before You Grow Up* (Hachette 2009), *Bottersnikes and Other Lost Things: A Celebration of Australian Illustrated Children's Books* (MUP 2009) and various academic titles and papers, including *Postmodern Picturebooks* (Routledge 2008). Feature film rights for the book were sold to a Hollywood studio in 2000, five years before zoo-escape films such as *Madagascar* and *The Wild* were released.

**T**he *Great Escape from City Zoo* is about a legend that never was. It is largely a 1990s imagining of an earlier 20th century America constructed from the popular-culture it exported to the world. It's an imagined America, as envisioned in its movies, television, books and art. The author had never been to the real America.

## THE IDEA

The idea for this book developed along two fronts – the story itself, and how to tell or show the story. The idea for the story was sparked by a short 1990s newspaper article to do with New York City's image as a city out of control. When asked if he could take his passenger to the zoo, a New York cabbie replied, 'You're already there'. This got me thinking about zoos in cities and what would happen if some zoo inhabitants ended up on the other side of the wall.

## The development of the story idea

Most of my books start with a premise that amuses me. Immediately I saw all kinds of funny and absurd scenes as the animal escapees grappled with the complex and unfamiliar city environment. And somehow the narrative assumed an urgent pace too as the distinctly different animals sought to stay ahead of the pursuing zookeepers. Behind the initial humour there was a poignant and desperate tale of four characters who were always going to struggle on the run. They lacked knowledge, skills and resources – and they were conspicuous.

These classic themes of characters on the run and unable to find a place in the world evoked all kinds of popular culture scenarios and imagery. The story was like a kind of fish-out-of-water road-movie thriller. And the animals' situation seemed to be a metaphor for the institutionalised, the displaced, the disadvantaged and the alienated, those who may lack the skills to live completely independently in the world – which raised all kinds of questions about the lives of humans and animals.

## THE EXECUTION OF THE IDEA

An idea has within it the solutions to the rendering of it. The more I explored the idea – and the better I came to know it – the more I realised that it required a particular treatment. Its drama and adventure and its film-noir-ish narration seemed to call for cinematic black-and-white visuals.

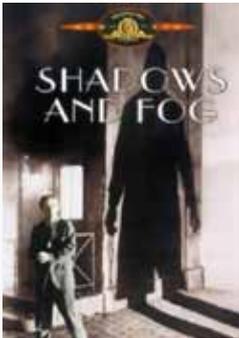
### Black-and-white cinema and photography

When I'd first begun the process of turning the idea into a picture book, I'd done a colour rough of the intended artwork. This was default thinking on my part: *picture books are in colour*. I was not cognisant of other options and therefore overlooked a choice. Yet, it soon became apparent that this idea demanded to be expressed in black-and-white – like a classic old movie, actually. That was its mood, manner and setting. I was excited by this realisation. From then on I felt I was entering new territory.

And this is how the actual rendering of the idea became an important part of the idea. I could see how powerful the black-and-white medium was. Why else do so many photographers still use it? It dispenses with extraneous or distracting information that full-colour can bring, and deals only in the essentials of light and shade. It's classic.



The power of black-and-white. Photo by US photographer Ansel Adams



As well as beautiful old Ford and Capra films, visually splendid 1990s films such as *Shadows and Fog* (Woody Allen) and *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch) spurred me on. Black-and-white was not a budgeting decision. It was an artistic choice. From here, the book would evolve into what was essentially an album of black-and-white stills from an apocryphal silver-screen-era film. This heightened the romance and drama of it and flagged to the reader that the story was from another time – a fabled and renowned time when photos and movies were sumptuous black-and-white.

A cinematic approach resonated within me. The narrative had the sweep to justify it and I looked forward to envisioning it this way. To follow up on this, I did a short course in script editing at the Australian Film and Television School and applied it to the book's development

Armed with ideas about three-act narratives, major plot points and multiple story lines I set about fine-tuning the story and its delivery. I was also intrigued by how *Simpsons* episodes could pack so much into a commercial half-hour. The turnover of ideas was so much faster than any TV show before it. It showed how an expansive narrative could be compressed into a short format (perhaps like a 32-page book!). It only seemed a matter of choosing the right moments to show and the most economical way to express them.



## Classic imagery

By seeking to construct an album of 'classic' images I was looking to lend the story the quality of a 20th century popular-culture legend: a glorious silver-screen movie that never was – or a lost classic unearthed.

Many of the story's scenes echoed themes of popular 20th century art: the great escape; the chase; the working class hero; finding one's place in the modern world, the life of the outsider or misfit or desperado ...

In order to create 'classic' images, the nature of such images required investigation. What made an image classic or iconic? There is something in great art that has to do with eternal gesture. Like a starry sky, great art has an ability to depict a universal and continuous condition, where real time seems captured, pregnant with possibility and meaning. Technical features are often emotive lighting, and – but not always – a narrow palette of colour.

One classic work had particular salience: the movie of *The Grapes of Wrath* directed by John Ford (1940). This story became an influence on the book, along with Bruce Springsteen's 1995 'sequel' *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, an album of finely written songs about equally desperate lives in late 20th century America. I often look at precedents in the arts that are thematically linked to the idea I'm working on. *The Grapes of Wrath* attracted me for three reasons: it was a beautiful example of black-and-white cinema, it was more or less contemporaneous to my story and it featured desperate protagonists who'd left what they'd known and struggled to find a place in the world beyond. Some call it the first road movie.



Another film I watched was *On the Town* (right), about three sailors with 24 hours shore-leave in New York City. I figured this might inspire some theatrical touches to the first scenes of freedom in the city. The turtle's sailor outfit was a little nod to this film. And the 'post-credits' illustration on the final page of the book evokes it.



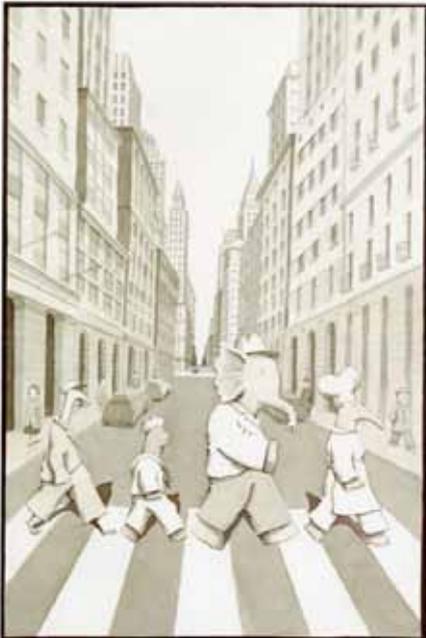
The layout of the book took its cue from a book of photos by Henri Cartier Bresson. As the book took on the form of an album of stills from a movie, I was drawn to a layout that handled this well. Hence, each illustration was shown like a photo plate (portrait or landscape), with the text becoming more like a caption to the image – inverting the convention of the image illustrating the text.



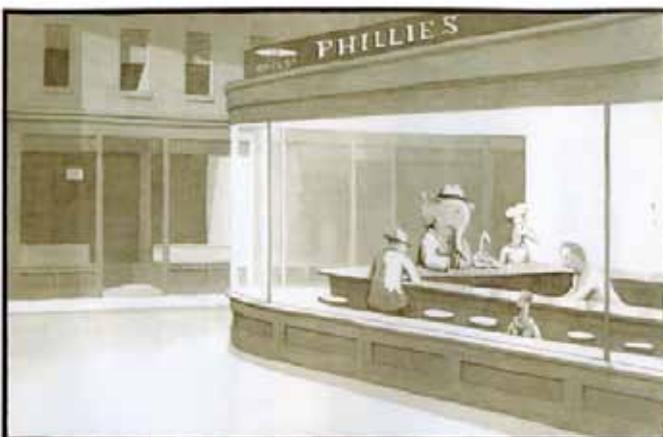
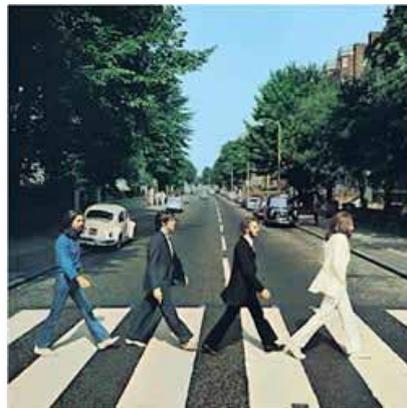
## FEATURES OF THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Another aspect of the book's development was the appearance of various popular-culture references in the artwork. This was at first an intuitive process but also a by-product of recalling or uncovering useful references by artists of the past for each image. For instance, it seemed that the kind of job an anteater would get in a Depression-era New York City (where it is implied the story is set) would be as a labourer on the construction of the Empire State Building. I soon thought of the photo-journalism of Lewis Hine, who'd documented this. So my illustration got a kind of Lewis Hine treatment but with an anteater in it. This kind of approach informed many other illustrations or parts of them, overtly or otherwise.

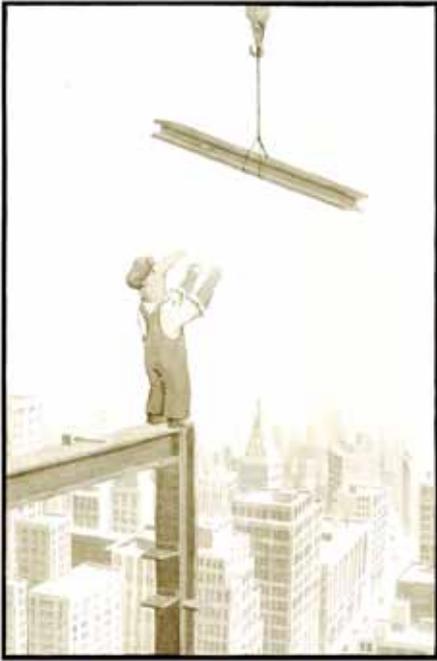
So, as I considered each image, for optimal atmosphere, meaning and composition, I recalled classic treatments of similar scenes or themes. Following, are some examples, in order of appearance (it should be noted that it was always my intention that every image work, whether or not a reader picked up on these extra features):



1. When the four characters cross a road, incorporating The Beatles's *Abbey Road* album cover was irresistible. I'm not sure what it means in this context but I like the effect.



2. When the escapees begin to feel like outsiders in a desolate city my thoughts gravitated to Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks* (1942) – a masterful rendering of this emotional reality.



3. The anteater working on the construction site recalled the photo-essay by Lewis Hine on the building of the Empire State Building.



4. I almost heard this scene before I pictured it: the crunching of leaves and twigs under foot, then the cool darkness. The psychological eeriness of the turtle and the flamingo fleeing through a dark and dense wood was amplified by studying photos of aspens by great American landscape photographer Ansel Adams.

5. The scene of the turtle and the flamingo getting a ride in an old truck through the middle of nowhere was constructed from viewing the movie *The Grapes of Wrath*. The scene felt right. And it seemed a pleasing idea that these two thematically linked stories could intersect. That's Tom Joad at the wheel.



The illustrations above are just a sample of the 28 illustrations (plus cover etc.) in the book. There are further illustrations (or parts of illustrations) that relate to famous works, including paintings by Mondrian, de Chirico and others; *King Kong* the movie (another animal at large in a city); an alleged photo of the Loch Ness Monster; and more.



A final picture that appears on the back flap of the jacket of the original hardcover implies something further about this story. Instead of providing an author photo I produced an illustration. It's of me and the animals at a Chinese restaurant. It's a kind of wrap party after the completion of the book. Besides doing it for fun, perhaps this image came to mind because I had some sense that the animals were simply actors in the reputed film that book's images were 'stills' from.

Although there is a semiotic complexity to way the images in *The Great Escape from City Zoo* are constructed and rendered, it was not driven by a popular theoretical position. It was driven purely by playfulness, a love of great art and, importantly, a desire to make each image successfully fulfil its role in the delivery of the story (without assuming reader-knowledge). No arm's-length irony was intended, nor preoccupations with formal concerns as a means to an end. At its core, the story is simply an expression of heartfelt humour.

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS / ACTIVITIES

1. Photography: The landscape photography of Ansel Adams; the photo-journalism of Lewis Hine (commissioned by the The Red Cross and others, Hine comprehensively documented the conditions of workers, including child labourers, in early 20th century America)
3. Film: *The Grapes of Wrath* (b/w 1940); *King Kong* (b/w 1933); *On the Town* (colour 1949); *The Great Escape* (colour 1963); *Dead Man* (b/w 1995); *Shadows and Fog* (b/w 1992)
4. Literature / music: the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen's album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*; The songs of Woody Guthrie
5. Art: Edward Hopper (and parodies of his painting *Nighthawks*)
6. Writing Activities: write the diary of one of the animals; write a newspaper report of the story; script a scene from *The Great Escape from City Zoo*
7. Further writing: Discuss alienation in 20th century America with reference to *The Great Escape from City Zoo*; Compare the stories of *King Kong* and *The Great Escape from City Zoo*
8. Art and/or writing: Construct a scene of a country or place you've never been to based on its image in popular culture



Photo by Lewis Hine (1930)



Scene from *King Kong* (1933)

## FURTHER READING

The following books, papers and articles feature *The Great Escape from City Zoo*:

Eccleshare, Julia, ed. *1001 Children's Books You Must read Before You Grow Up*. London: Hachette, 2009

O'Connor, Julia. *Bottersnikes and Other Lost Things: A Celebration of Australian Illustrated Children's Books*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009.

Sipe, Lawrence, and Sylvia Pantaleo, eds. *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality*. New York: Routledge, 2008

Macmillan, Cheryl. 'Metafiction and Humour in *The Great Escape from City Zoo*'. In *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, Vol. 10, No 2, August 2000.

Riddle, Tohby. 'Colour Story', *The Age*, September 1998  
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