



A review of **Shapeshifters: A History**

B.C. Kennedy

John B. Kachuba's *Shapeshifters* – fictional beings that can transform themselves from one physical form into another – presents a succession of stories of such transformations. The author tells us that the shapeshifter character is 'a powerful one that captures our imaginations and symbolizes many of our inner longings and desires, as well as our unfulfilled aspirations'. This book examines the history of the enduring shapeshifter archetype, which persists today, is found in almost every culture around the world and is believed by some to be more than myth.

Citing worldwide accounts – of selkies, vodyanoi, tengu, yawk yawks, taniwha, to name a few – Kachuba suggests that we react to the notion of shapeshifters because they capture our imagination; there is something primal about them 'that goes beyond simply wishing for the strength and cunning of animal prey'. To illustrate his point, Kachuba cites Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, arguing there is the temptation within all of us to shake off the constraints of societal rules and norms that control our 'primal animal nature' and embrace 'this nature, free of conscience, free of morality'. It is for exactly these reasons, Kachuba claims, that stories of shapeshifting are not new but have flourished from antiquity to today's popular culture.

The author highlights the shapeshifting trickery used by Zeus in his conquests as evidence that the shapeshifter archetype is not restricted to therianthropy but frequently involved gender transformation. Gender-shifting shapeshifters are, Kachuba writes, 'those mythological and fantasy creatures that embody the repressed gender traits coming into reality'. He suggests that gender-shifting shapeshifters depicted in popular culture might reflect society's burgeoning awareness and acceptance of the wide variations in human gender and sexual orientation and make these variations more commonplace and acceptable to mainstream society. This is a theme Kachuba elaborates on in Chapter 8, *Fluid Shapeshifters: Sex, Gender and Identity*. Using the idea of the theatre as an illustrative example of gender-shifting, Kachuba employs the Japanese Kabuki to illustrate his point. However, I feel that he has missed an

opportunity by excluding the more familiar *Twelfth Night* where a male actor dressing as a girl named Viola dresses as a boy to woo another boy dressed as a woman called Olivia, allowing us to question what actually constitutes a person's identity. Is it the outward appearance of a person that determines their gender, the author asks, or is it something innate in our consciousness that informs us of our gender? This is not a question that Katchuba answers.

Katchuba moves his argument from the stage to cultural gender-shifting, suggesting that 'transgender people who physically transition themselves through surgery and drug therapy into the sex other than that which they were assigned at birth undergo a form of shapeshifting'. This reads as an appeal to current popular gender trends. Even disregarding the purist's definition of shapeshifting – as one who can 'voluntary transform from man to animal without losing his human consciousness' – Katchuba's suggestion appears to underestimate the psycho-social and physical complexities that these people undergo through their journey of transition.

However, there is more to the shapeshifter figure than wishing to 'run wild' or change gender, important as these are. The shapeshifter, Katchuba suggests, represents 'the struggle to find one's identity, to find where one fits in society'. On a simple level, he tells us, shapeshifters represent 'the fantasy to turn one's self into something more attractive or more powerful' and this may account for the prevalence of shapeshifters in books and films aimed specifically towards adolescent and teenage audiences. The serial books and films of *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* and the *Harry Potter* series all feature shapeshifters that appeal to a younger audience. Because they can easily and often change appearance, emotional states and behaviour, shapeshifters bring tension into a story. Other characters – and the reader – never quite know what to make of the shapeshifter; they bring questions of faithfulness, love and betrayal into the lives of the characters. By their nature they can be considered untrustworthy; they are quite literally two-faced. Katchuba describes this as 'troubling the narrative'; because shapeshifters introduce uncertainty into the story, creating problematic repercussions for other characters and sometimes the shapeshifter itself. Their role in literature, he concludes, is to give us many perspectives while simultaneously giving the reader a deeper understanding of the 'other', no matter how broadly that term is defined.

The introduction to *Shapeshifters* describes the various shapeshifter motifs such as discipline, avengement or punishment, for example in *The Frog Prince*. Katchuba differentiates between those who have been involuntarily transformed through magic or a curse, and those who have voluntary control over their transformations and can shift at will between their human and transformed nature. The author also expands the definition of what a shapeshifter is, arguing that 'emphasis should not be placed solely upon how the transformation occurs as much as the fact that a transformation occurs at all'. Expanding the shapeshifter definition, he continues, allows for the inclusion of

characters who are permanently transformed into something other than human, non-human characters such as the *Transformers* franchise as well as shapeshifters that undergo external or internal transformations. Each subsequent chapter focuses on compilations that include these inclusive definitions, beginning with the gods and goddesses in antiquity, fairy folk and folklore, werewolves, vampires, shapeshifters in popular culture, and the power of transformation. However, this collection is not exhaustive and many famous examples of shapeshifters are missing, as noted by other reviewers, for example, Sauron in *Lord of the Rings*, the Valkyries, *Heroes*, *The Land of Oz*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the Tleilaxu Face Dancers in Frank Herbert's *Dune* series. It is interesting that the author has failed to discuss the role of viruses as the ultimate shapeshifters which impact on us all. This book is a useful starting point for anyone attracted to this particular area of interest.

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