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# Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways Of Telling The Self (Clarendon Lectures In English Literature)



Marina Warner

*Fantastic Metamorphoses,  
Other Worlds*



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## Synopsis

Metamorphosis is a dynamic principle of creation, vital to natural processes of generation and evolution, growth and decay, yet it also threatens personal identity if human beings are subject to a continual process of bodily transformation. Shape-shifting also belongs in the landscape of magic, witchcraft, and wonder, and enlivens classical mythology, early modern fairy tales and uncanny fictions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*, acclaimed novelist and critic Marina Warner explores the metaphorical power of metamorphoses in the evocation of human personality. Beginning with Ovid's great poem, *The Metamorphoses*, as the founding text of the metamorphic tradition, she takes us on a journey of exploration, into the fantastic art of Hieronymous Bosch, the legends of the Taino people, the life cycle of the butterfly, the myth of Leda and the Swan, the genealogy of the Zombie, the pantomime of Aladdin, the haunting of doppelgangers, the coming of photography, and the late fiction of Lewis Carroll. Beautifully illustrated and elegantly written, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* is sure to appeal to all readers interested in mythology, art, and literature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The book tackles the idea of metamorphoses as a theme in art and literature. Stirred into the mix are mythology, encounters between Europeans and tribal peoples in the New World and how those encounters affected art and literature produced in the Western tradition, meanwhile relating all these

to the idea of personal identity. Among the works discussed in detail are Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, Hieronymous Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, some Renaissance-era graphic sexual depictions of Leda and the Swan, Maria Merian's late 17th century natural history studies of butterflies, and then onto a discussion of zombies, Coleridge, Jean Rhys, Kafka, Nabokov, photography, Lewis Carroll and more. This may all sound like heavy going, but Warner writes for the layperson, and you need not have read the primary sources to follow her reasoning. (But her discussion and excerpts made me want to check out a copy of Ovid and read it for myself!) The artwork is illustrated by plates, some in color. The book is an ambitious attempt to raise issues more than come to sweeping conclusions, with chapters titled *Mutating*, *Hatching*, *Splitting*, *Doubling*. Those interested in Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, and other writers on comparative mythology should find it interesting. The chapters on *Mutating* and *Hatching* were more compelling to me as someone with a special interest in art and mythology. Fans of 19th century literature, especially Gothic literature, may prefer *Splitting* and *Doubling*. And it is blessedly free of any type of academic jargon. Indeed, Warner also conveys the sheer enjoyment of reading or looking at the material she discusses.

Marina Warner is an amazing scholar and teacher. In this book, she begins with the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, and continues with other changes in the human spirit, in both literary and natural history. The chapter on zombies is particularly relevant to her novel *Indigo*; the explication of the Greek psyche is familiar ground, but well done. The only flaw in this brilliant work is the continual return to Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* as an allegory of life. Her enthusiasm for the painting does not match her vast knowledge of classical and popular literature. However, I recommend this book highly as a helpful tool to any student of the humanities.

This is a fascinating, truly fascinating, analysis of the metamorphic trends in literature, and how those trends are used in fiction to "tell" the self. It's divided into four parts. The first three: *Mutating*, *Hatching*, and *Splitting* covered a lot of new ground for me. The fourth section: *Doubling*, not so much. *Mutating* addressed the cross-pollination of ideas between cultures. *Hatching* dove more into issues of identity. *Splitting* provided an in-depth look at how Zombies came to be. *Doubling* covered a lot of ground with images and photography. It was the hardest section to read, and the least interesting. I've always viewed transformation as a positive thing. I came away from this study with the new understanding that many cultures/religions have found transformation to be threatening.

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