

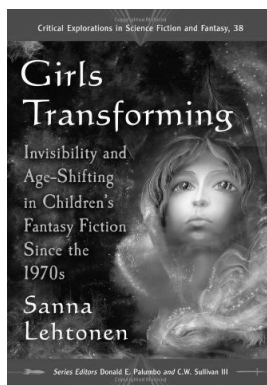


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A Book review:

Sanna Lehtonen – *Girls Transforming. Invisibility and Age-Shifting in Children’s Fantasy Fiction Since the 1970s.*

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Lehtonen, Sanna: *Girls Transforming. Invisibility and Age-Shifting in Children’s Fantasy Fiction Since the 1970s.* Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy, 38. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2013. ISBN: 978-0-7864-6136-3.

Fantastic metamorphoses have always filled human mythologies, stories and fairy tales: people turn into animals, stones or trees, or their bodies stay ageless and then suddenly age. The themes of transformations are familiar in the world literature, and many writers use them also in contemporary children’s and young adult fiction. There are many studies on bodily transformations in adult literature – Ovid throws a long shadow – but amazingly, only a few studies on such transformation in children’s literature (notably Maria Lassén-Seger, 2006, and Shelley Chappel, 2007). Those see the earlier children’s fiction as conservative and the newer as challenging conservative values.

Sanna Lehtonen’s aim is to analyse the textual and narrative representations of fantastic bodily transformation in contemporary children’s and YA fantasy novels, and how these are connected with representations of girlhood and womanhood. She concentrates on the fictional transformations of invisibility and age-shifting, and relates the analysis on feminist theoretical discourses on gender, identity, (in)visibility and aging. She wants to study how the bodily transformations are represented in the texts by textual and narrative means and how they are connected with representations of girlhood and womanhood. How do they affect power relations in the story world, who controls them? How do they function in relation to conventional children’s fantasy and fairy tales, and how in relation to feminist discourses on invisibility, aging and gender? Her main material is post-1970s children’s and YA fantasy novels, chosen on the basis that invisibility and age-shifting are central motifs in relation to the female protagonists. As Lehtonen notes, the selection is also restricted by accessibility and language barriers, so that most of the material is written in English. Even so, her primary material makes quite an impressive list. From many sources the most thoroughly analysed are several novels by Diana Wynne Jones (*Time of the Ghost, Howl’s Moving Castle, Hexwood*) and Susan Price (*The Ghost Drum, Ghost Song, Ghost Dance, The Ghost Wife*).

Looking at the bodily transformations in the texts, Lehtonen uses motif and trope as her central analytical concepts. The transformations are motifs when they serve a strategic function in the narrative, tropes when they point to a metaphorical or metonymic interpretation. She makes a close analysis of the narrative, focusing on characterization: description, action, speech, and thought of the transforming females. She looks at focalization and gendered discourses by the narrator, the focalizer and other characters. She asks what the starting point is and where do the girls end up, what kind of femininities are seen at the beginning and at the end of the narratives. She asks whether narrative closure creates a causal relationship that seems natural rather than ideological, or are there disruptions in temporality that deconstruct the obvious. Lehtonen focuses on resonances between bodily transformations and feminist theoretical discussions. Her methodological framework is feminist discourse analysis, combining ideas of third-wave feminist theories such as performativity (Judith Butler), embodied materialism (Rosi Braidotti), narratable self (Adriana Cavarero) and especially queer theory (Judith Halberstam). However, instead of contrasting the waves of feminist theoretical discussions, Sanna Lehtonen emphasizes textual multivoicedness, heteroglossia, and the intertextual nature of meaning-making and language. Multivoicedness is the starting point of analysis of gendered discourses.

The book is divided into five main chapters, plus Introduction and Conclusions. Chapter 1, "Magic Cloaks and Potions", provides a broader context for the transformation themes in literature, both adult and children's literature. Chapter 2, "Witch Power", explores invisibility and age-shifting as narrative motifs associated with the female character's agency and empowerment, and how "the witch" has been rewritten in contemporary fantasy. It analyses mainly novels that use the so-called secondary world settings. Chapter 3, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Female Subjectivity" takes up novels of fantastic realism in contemporary urban settings; the feminist ideas concern issues of agency, subjectivity and invisibility as powerlessness. Chapter 4, "Discourses on Gender, Power and Desire" analyses invisibility as power over others, relating it to the feminist discourses on gaze. Chapter 5, "Crossing Borders", relates age shifting to the ideas of queer theory, seeing the transformations as departure from conventional heteronormative life trajectories; as a specific example it considers the border crossings and transgender characteristics of shaman identity.

Looking at the bulk of the literary material, the main themes of gendered bodily transformations obviously concern female empowerment and subjectivity. Contemporary children's and YA fantasy is critical of gendered stereotypes, but the invisible and magically aged girls of the novels are multidimensional characters. Invisibility can be powerlessness and stand for a loss of subjectivity, but it can also give power over others and options of agency; age-shifting can be a curse, a possibility for empowerment or a playful identity. Either way, contemporary children's and YA fiction is indeed multivoiced and should not be categorized as simply liberal-feminist, radical feminist or queer-feminist. On the whole, Sanna Lehtonen has made an admirably thorough analysis on the subject of fantastic bodily transformations in contemporary children's fantasy. (A detail, however: why no reference to Tove Jansson's *The Invisible Child* in the overview of the literary background?) Her methodological ideas would certainly be useful to other researchers. For instance, what might the result be if somebody took up the same questions on fantastic bodily transformations of boys? The book is also very readable, quite a page-turner in several sections. It will make a good addition to a curriculum for students of science fiction and fantasy studies.

Works Cited

Chappell, Shelley. *Werewolves, Wings, and Other Weird Transformations: Fantastic Metamorphoses in Children's and Young Adult Fantasy Literature*. Sydney: Macquarie University, 2007. Print.

Lassén-Seger, Maria. *Adventures into Otherness: Child Metamorphs in Twentieth-century Children's Literature*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 2006. Print.