

Look Who's Morphing

Tom Cho

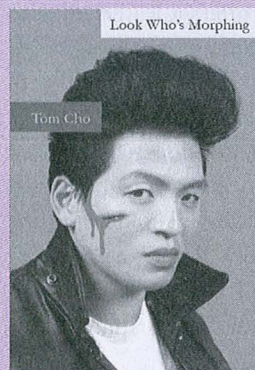
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The narrator of 'Cock Rock', one of the stories in Cho's innovative first collection *Look Who's Morphing*, poses the question: 'What would an experience that perfectly combines fantasy and the literal look like?' It's a rhetorical aside that pretty much encapsulates Cho's *modus operandi* for the book.

In terms of genre, *Look Who's Morphing* remains hard to categorise. Cho's writing has a performative sensibility, often more familiar to other contemporary art practices or extra-literary writing. It feels slightly inappropriate to bandy about elevating conceits and cite influences from Cervantes to Swift to, most obviously, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*; on the surface (despite being published by a boutique literary publisher) *Look Who's Morphing* is more immediately in dialogue with popular culture and subculture (unlike, say, Nam Le's short fiction, which is crafted to meet more conventional expectations).

Cho's *avant*-identity politic has polarised many of his critics. The book was short-listed for the Age Book of the Year, though others found its style affronting. Perhaps the kind of cultural values Mark Davis identified in *Gangland* are not necessarily a generational or institutional divide anymore but have become more of a cultural meme. In the *Australian Book Review*, reviewer Adam Rivett positioned himself as a defender of literary timelessness from 'the transience of pop'. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer, David Messer, chastised Cho for not writing a more conventional Asian-Australian narrative: 'one can't help but feel that Cho could have written a much better book, although obviously a completely different one, if he had restricted himself to the question of Chinese/Australian identity and presented it in a more conventional tone and structure'.

Well, *Wild Swans* it ain't: Cho disrupts the expectations, especially those held by some



Western readers, of Asian diasporic literature. The book's a strange paradox, with potential for mass *Fight Club* appeal on the one hand, and the more marginal, local experimental kudos of *Working Hot* on the other.

While I'd read many of the individual stories before, one of the pleasures of *Look Who's Morphing* was reading them as part of a discontinuous, yet interrelated, narrative cycle. Far from being disposable, clever appropriations of pop-culture that assume Cho's *real* identity lies elsewhere in the 'Asian' experience, these stories actively reform pop culture and identity to the extent that it is impossible to maintain such distinctions. The book's title, coupled with the scar-faced author photo on the cover, ultimately becomes a kind of taunt. The obvious answer is 'Cho', yet in refusing direct self-disclosure, Cho is more concerned with artifice and the artful, the fictional masking and critical unmasking of self-image.

Cho wouldn't be the first to pose the meta-fictional relationship of author and narrator. His narrators are perhaps avatars in the Hindi sense of the word (or incarnations of a parallel or parody self). Cho's book starts getting really edgily literary in its reconfiguration of the idea of character interiority. Without the conventions of realist depth, what's more likely to be 'inside' the mind of the artist these days is the kind of rationalised grant-speak spoken by the narrator's demonically possessed aunty in 'The Exorcist'.

The sexuality and gender identity of the various narrators in the stories are also slippery signifiers. Narrators often turn up as stars of retro romantic flicks (in this sense Cho's stories read like slash or fan fictions). In 'Dirty Dancing', the narrator 'Baby' dissociates during

heterosexual sex and proffers a leather man to take her place. It's a coming of age story, written by someone who likely came of age with VHS recorders. 'The Bodyguard' is a classic play on butch/femme relationships – and indeed many of the stories also imply a heterosexual imaginary, here more easily realised when the narrator is male. In 'Cock Rock' the narrator becomes a 55-metre tall cock rock god who struts along the streets of Tokyo riffing on his guitar and ends up, Gulliver-like, bound and prostrate (in what I imagine as Yoyogi Park) being sexually 'worshipped' by a legion of female fans. The longest (almost novella length) story in the book (compared to Cho's signature style short short stories), 'Cock Rock' is perhaps the ultimate reflection on 'size' and the book's subversive scale. 'Cock Rock' flirts with provocative phallocentrism (replete with sailor-suited schoolgirls with strap-ons) and, while it follows the excessive and repetitive logic of pornographic fantasy, there are moments of exquisite (quasi-philosophical) meditation on embodiment.

Many of Cho's critics slip up in their Adorno-like assumption that mass culture is, at best, something literature must resoundingly critique (and in assuming that, as readers, any of us can act as definitive arbiters of what is satire and what isn't). Reading negative reviews of *Look Who's Morphing* reminded me that my response to the multivalent levels of the book's humour wasn't always shared. If the drugs don't work for you, the book could appear to be 'bad writing' and affectively alienating, as Rivett writes: 'This is writing as karaoke: bliss for the person with the microphone and his inebriated friends; mounting impatience for everyone else.' I don't think Cho makes any apologies here; his isn't a universalist aesthetic.

While Cho's popular culture references often engage with the pleasures and complexity of spectatorship, they also explore what happens when you cannot assert 'yourself' so simply into the dominant cultural imaginary. The logic of Cho's version of 'The Sound of Music' may seem surreal but read as a form of transgendered

desire – 'Can who you like to "do" also be bound up in issues of who you are or want to be?' – it makes perfect sense. Similarly, the narrator of 'Pinocchio' is a 'not-so-real boy' who undergoes an operation and has his bandages removed to reveal a puppet penguin. All of Cho's stories engage with a certain incommensurability that haunts even the most seamless transitions. Here perhaps a notion of the performative doesn't go far enough – as it implies a form of mimicry – whereas Cho's narrators embody their transformations.

Perhaps a productive way to shift away from reading the book in terms of the relationship between the author and his various narrators is to focus on the experience of reading: something I can claim as transgendered, transcultural, and transmogrified. There are places Cho can go as a writer that I can only go as a reader. And I do go there with him, even if our fetishes are sometimes different: I'm so into Suzi Quatro, but giant robots leave me cold; my mum loves Olivia Newton-John too, but she's not Chinese. Is the photograph on the front of the book homage to the Fonz or a Harajuku rocker? The answer depends (as does much in this book) on your particular bent.

Keri Glastonbury

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