

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LOOK WHO'S MORPHING

by TOM CHO



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First published to great acclaim in Australia, writer Tom Cho's *Look Who's Morphing* is a fresh, hilarious, and dazzlingly contemporary collection of micro-fictions that explore the slipperiness of identity, race, and gender.

Like a mad-cap version of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* set against the last 40 years of pop culture, each story in the collection features Cho's narrator morphing into various familiar and iconic cultural figures from sitcoms, Hollywood movies, anime, music videos, Saturday-morning cartoons, daytime TV talk shows, Nintendo games, and literature.

We follow Cho's shape-shifting narrator on hilarious and surreal adventures, which include dirty dancing with Johnny Castle, a rambunctious encounter with TV's Dr Phil, a job as Whitney Houston's bodyguard and another as a Muppet, a period in service with *The Sound of Music's* Von Trapp family, a totally destructive outing as Godzilla, and a high octane performance as a Gulliver-sized cock rock singer, complete with cohort of tiny adoring girls. As these fantasies of identity, sexuality, and power unfold, the narrator, his family, and everything around him, morph and change, up to the moment when the collection reaches its climax.

Look Who's Morphing is a funny, stylish, and highly entertaining literary debut.

Tom Cho will be giving readings in New York and Boston in spring 2014 in the USA. Canadian readings will be announced for Toronto and Vancouver. Dates/more information forthcoming. Tom is available for interviews and appearances and stories are available for excerpt. Please contact cynara@arsenalpulp.com with requests.

TOM CHO is a fiction writer whose work has appeared widely, including in such publications as *The Best Australian Stories* series, *Asia Literary Review* and *The New Quarterly*.

Like his favourite pop stars, Tom enjoys trying new guises on for size, and his work has been described as "transgenre, transgender and transcultural all at once". He has performed his work on the stages of many festivals, from Singapore Writers Festival to Sydney Mardi Gras, and even at a Chinatown bar where he toured *Hello Kitty*, an award-winning show that combined literature with karaoke.

Born and raised in Australia, Tom has applied for permanent residency in Canada. He has a PhD in Professional Writing and is currently writing a novel about the meaning of life. Visit his website at tomcho.com

Praise for *LOOK WHO'S MORPHING* by Tom Cho



PRAISE FOR THE AUSTRALIAN EDITION OF *LOOK WHO'S MORPHING*:

"Tom Cho's romp through identity – *Look Who's Morphing* – is a collection of carefully constructed narratives, both outrageously funny, and full of unsettling pathos. Cho manages both masterfully."

—TEXT

"Cho's fiction is playful, subversive, a big kick in the post-post-postmodern behind. There's more to Cho's work than eliciting big laughs, but how often do you close a book, then open it right back up again just to relive that pleasure?"

—*The Australian Literary Review*

"(A) delightfully eccentric look at life in a popular-culture saturated world... Cho displays a fine eye for the camp and outrageous... For those on his wavelength, Cho's book is entertaining and thought-provoking."

—*The Australian*

"There is plenty of fun to be had as Cho riffs on the idea of identity through nationality, sexuality, history and gender ... With greatest appeal for readers looking for quality narratives combining pop culture references with theory, *Look Who's Morphing* is an engaging reflection of the Zeitgeist.

—*The Age*

"Cho's debut book of 18 short stories blends cheeky, rebellious humour with philosophical introspection exploring themes including family, sexuality, language and desire. The author not only references popular culture, but literally inserts himself into it... Cho unsettles 'classic' white, hetero narratives to expose their monopoly in popular culture as unrepresentative, untruthful and unnatural... Cho has accomplished a piece of work that will surely stand the test of time."

—*ArtsHub*

The Australian release of *Look Who's Morphing* was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (South East Asia and Pacific), Age Fiction Book of the Year and Melbourne Prize Trust's Best Writing Award.



LOOK WHO'S MORPHING

Q & A with author

TOM CHO

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Q: *Look Who's Morphing* draws on and mixes all manner of retro and contemporary pop culture genres, from music, Nintendo games, and cartoons to Hollywood blockbuster films. What attracts you to pop culture narratives?

At first, I became interested in incorporating pop culture into my fiction simply because much of the fiction I'd been reading wasn't populated with pop culture. More and more frequently, I'd read a work of fiction and find myself asking about the characters: "Don't these people ever watch a TV drama or browse through a magazine at the supermarket checkout or have something to say about a new fad?"

Later, my rationale became more sophisticated, especially once I realised how fertile the territory of pop culture is for a fiction writer. For one thing, the richness and economy of invoking an existing pop cultural universe is wonderful. Whether it's *Star Wars* or *The Muppets* or something else, these universes are already products of much world-building. They come with their own characters and catchphrases and settings and influences and fan cultures. Importantly, these universes also come with a whole array of emotional responses on the part of audiences – reverence, contempt, unease, "guilty pleasure" and such – and it's this emotional territory that especially interested me while writing *Look Who's Morphing* and still interests me.

On a wider level, this actually points to one of the reasons why I write. Life can feel so heavily pre-scripted. Time and again, we encounter "scripts" that present entrenched ideas of how we're supposed to act, how our bodies are meant to look and function, what we're meant to want in life, what our relationships are supposed to be like and how our lives should pan out. In my own small way, I play with and re-inscribe some of these narratives and re-use them for other purposes. This includes the pop cultural texts in *Look Who's Morphing* and what their narratives say about our existence and behaviour. In reworking these and other narratives, I also hope to show these narratives to be exactly that – they're narratives and not natural, pre-ordained truths.

Q: In literature, we expect characters to grow or subtly change over the course of a narrative. In *Look Who's Morphing*, your narrator transforms constantly, in some ways rendering him impossible to really "know" or label in the way we expect from fiction (aside from the bits of personal details and relationships doled out in the book). Were you seeking to create a character who is both familiar but impossible to pin down?

Besides the frequent morphings on the part of the protagonist, there are time-shifts and other devices that destabilise our sense of who this figure is. So you're right – the extent to which the protagonist can be familiar to us is limited (which is one reason why I use gender-neutral pronouns in reference to them). That said, I think the morphings that the narra-

Q&A w/ TOM CHO continued on next page...



tor goes through are revealing in themselves. Also, I think the protagonist has these moments of stability and perhaps that's much like how we experience our selves and others in life. In amongst those moments of stability that we perceive, we try to discern what's familiar and knowable. Although it's hard to make that knowledge coalesce and the insights that we glean can be fleeting, I suppose that kind of piecemeal approach is better than a feeling of conclusiveness, a sense that we've arrived at some final knowledge about our selves and each other. Fiction and life need mystery, if only to keep our sense of mastery in check.

Q: You have mentioned fanfiction and the concept of the “Mary Sue” trope being a source of inspiration for *Look Who's Morphing*. Could you say more about that?

I've never produced fan fiction as part of any engagement with fan communities, but I do have friends who write “fanfic”. My knowledge of fanfic is actually quite limited, but one of the genres of fanfic that I became interested in while writing *Look Who's Morphing* was the Mary Sue genre. Back in the 1970s, a *Star Trek* fan, Paula Smith, wrote a *Star Trek* fanfic piece in which a teenage character called Mary Sue joins the Enterprise crew. In this fanfic story, Captain Kirk ends up falling in love with Mary Sue, she even goes on to save the crew and then she tragically dies. The story ends by saying that “Even to this day her birthday is a national holiday on the Enterprise.” After that story was published in a fanzine, “Mary Sue” went on to become the term for a highly idealised character type and also an associated fanfic genre. Mary Sue fanfic can be viewed quite negatively among fanfic authors and is often seen as a form of wish fulfilment on the part of an author who wants to insert themselves into the text.

This negative reaction among fanfic authors and their tendency to read Mary Sue as a projection of the author is itself interesting, but another reason why I became interested in Mary Sue fanfic was because I was interested in this idea of inserting oneself into the text. That's why some of the most interesting uses of pop culture in my book are those in which I write a protagonist who in turn takes on the role of the protagonist in some other text. For example, there's my story “The Bodyguard” which begins, “Someone is stalking Whitney Houston and I have been hired to be her bodyguard.” The protagonist of *Look Who's Morphing* assumes Kevin Costner's role in the film *The Bodyguard*. It seemed to me to be an interesting position from which to rework the film *The Bodyguard* and the tales it tells – to do it “from the inside.” to at an indirect level work from within. It points to the fact that the stories we're exposed to don't always speak to us and make space for us, which is also something that the academic and fanfic writer Ika Willis mentioned in her article on Mary Sues.

Q: Several of the stories in *Look Who's Morphing* explore, rather matter-of-factly, the idea that people are inseparable from and in part controlled by technology—bodyguards with cybernetic enhancements and a story where the narrator's uncle has been integrated with a computer program. Can you say more about this theme in your work?

Look Who's Morphing deals heavily in the un-real. I like using all kinds of fictional contrivances – basically, I'm into writing fiction that flaunts its fictitiousness. So, improbable cyborgs and people who are transformed into robots fit very well into that. These technological modifications are another fictional contrivance that I use to shine a light on artificialities in real life – including, in this case, how we all regulate and change our bodies. In real life, people can transform their bodies through fitness and dieting regimes. Applying a smear moisturiser on our skin is another intervention at the bodily level too, but it's one that's become so thoroughly absorbed into the daily routines of some people as to seem practically natural. Writing about robots and cyborgs became a good way for me to speak of artificialities, including artificialities that we've forgotten to be artificial.

In the end, I'm ultimately interested in using robots and cyborgs to speak of human concerns. I always thought it was telling that C-3PO was quite an anxious robot —C-3PO is full of anxieties that seem rather human. That's why C-3PO got a special mention in the book.

But another reason why I have written about robots and cyborgs is that I am a nerd. **END**

Tom Cho is available for interviews and appearances and stories from *Look Who's Morphing* are available for excerpt with permission from the publisher.

