



Lemon-Scott, Candice, 'Beyond the binary: Shapeshifting and nonbinary identity in middle-grade speculative fiction'

Leaf Journal, Volume 3, Issue 1, Jul 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/55re-yv82>

URL: <https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index>

Beyond the Binary: Shapeshifting and Nonbinary Identity in Middle-Grade Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

Middle-grade speculative fiction provides a unique space for exploring nonbinary identity through the trope of shapeshifting. Historically, gender-complex characters in fantasy have been positioned as "Other," with transformation linked to monstrosity or marginalisation. However, contemporary works, such as Rick Riordan's *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* and Yoon Ha Lee's *Tiger Honor*, offer contrasting portrayals of nonbinary shapeshifters. *Magnus Chase* foregrounds gender fluidity through Alex Fierro, whose ability to shift between male and female forms parallels nonbinary identity but is at times framed as an exception within a cisnormative world. *Tiger Honor*, by contrast, integrates the protagonist, Sebin's, nonbinary identity seamlessly within a setting where gender complexity is accepted without question. This article examines how these portrayals inform the creation of *Val Silver and the Dragon's Secret*, a novel that reclaims shapeshifting as a metaphor for empowerment rather than othering in my creative practice. Drawing on posthumanist and queer theoretical perspectives, I argue that the shapeshifter archetype can disrupt binary gender norms, offering young readers inclusive and affirming representations of nonbinary identity. By situating shapeshifting within a framework of self-discovery, rather than isolation or trauma, speculative fiction fosters a space where nonbinary characters can thrive.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, nonbinary identity, middle-grade fiction, shapeshifting, speculative literature*

Middle-grade (MG) fantasy remains an ever-popular genre for tween readers aged eight to twelve, offering empowering possibilities for identity exploration (Maughan, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2023). One of its most compelling tropes is the shapeshifter, a figure that challenges fixed identity categories and lends itself particularly well to representing gender complexity. Shapeshifters have long appeared in myth, fairy tales, and speculative fiction, serving as powerful metaphors for transformation and fluidity. When viewed through a posthuman lens, shapeshifting allows nonbinary identities to be expressed in ways that disrupt binary gender norms. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) suggests, posthumanism de-centres the human subject and embraces hybrid, interconnected modes of being. Similarly, queer theory, which examines and deconstructs normative, binary structures of sex, gender, and sexuality (Jagose, 1992; Butler, 2006), provides a useful framework for understanding how these characters resist essentialist identity categories. In this article, I discuss the wider landscape of nonbinary portrayals in narratives for children which informed my creative work *Val Silver and the Dragon's Secret*. I explore how speculative fiction—and the shapeshifter trope in particular—can offer positively affirming portrayals of nonbinary identity for young readers. I then examine in more detail two influential key texts: Rick Riordan's *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series (2015–2017), and Yoon Ha Lee's *Tiger Honor* (2022), and how they influenced my creative decisions in creating a fantasy novel featuring a nonbinary shapeshifter.

Nonbinary identity refers to individuals who do not fit within the traditional male/female binary; this may include those who identify as both male and female, neither, or who experience gender as fluid or fixed (Richards et al., 2016, p. 96; Matsuno & Budge, 2017, p. 117; Vijlbrief et al., 2019, p. 91; Nicholas, 2020, p. 3). In an interview with Christina Capatides, sj Miller (2017) describes nonbinary identity as transcending male and female categories, reflecting a deeply held and intrinsic sense of self. From a queer theory perspective, such identities disrupt societal norms around gender—what Judith Butler famously terms “gender trouble” (2006). Butler, alongside scholars such as Kate Bornstein (1994), Jack Halberstam (1995), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2012) all contend that queer theory emphasises fluidity and resistance to categorisation on the basis of biological sex, gender and sexuality. In this regard, queer theorists reject hetero- and cis- normativity, questioning traditional assumptions that assume heterosexuality, and the formation of gender identity and expression in alignment with sexuality. In analysing contemporary fiction, Rachel Carroll argues that queer theory and feminism question traditional binaries that are used to identify people's sex, gender and sexuality (2012, p. 6). For youth, sj Miller (2019) refers to a framework of gender complexity. This resistance to binary classifications is particularly

notable among nonbinary youth, who are constantly redefining knowledge, language, and behaviour to express their identities in new ways that reflect who they are.

Narratives offer visibility and may construct imaginative spaces where young gender-complex readers can feel both validated and valued through being empowered in their identities. In the Cambridge Dictionary, empowerment is defined as “the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you.” The term has been further theorised in psychology as a social construct that elevates those with less power to have greater control over their own lives through self-awareness and community assistance (Rappaport, 1981; Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). In *Gender IdentityWOKE*, sj Miller argues that it is vital for young gender-complex people to have the opportunity and support to express their gender safely, and in a way that is positively affirming (2019, p. 409) in order for them to be empowered. I posit that empowerment in literature featuring nonbinary characters involves self-acceptance, visibility and joyous expression in a supportive and inclusive social environment.

In *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, Maria Nikolajeva draws on Bakhtin’s carnivalesque theory and queer theory to argue children’s fiction may be a subversive and socially liberating site, challenging dominant ideologies by offering fluid, destabilised identities that resist fixed binaries. Within this “carnival” story-world dominant ideologies may be destabilised and hierarchies inverted, allowing fictional children to become “strong, brave, rich, powerful, and independent—on certain conditions and for a limited time” (2009, p. 10). Similarly, children’s literature scholars Roberta Trites (1998) and Lori Campbell (2010) view fantastical narratives as sites where characters may experience greater power or agency than in the real-world, challenging the status quo and offering an affirming alternate worldview. These literary roles hold resonance for those marginalised by rigid gender binaries. Narratives may enable gender-complex children to glimpse a world where they are more powerful and validated, reflecting possible futures, and alluding to more equitable potential present-day realities.

Historically, nonbinary identities in MG children’s literature have been largely absent (Clyde & Lobban, 1992; Epstein, 2013; Bittner, Ingrey & Stamper, 2016; Jenkins & Cart 2018; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). However, gender-complexity has been explored in early narratives such as in Gene Kemp’s *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* (1977) which focuses on disruption of gender boundaries through tomboyism (Mallan, 2011, p. 163). Similarly, L. Frank Baum’s fantasy novel *John Dough and the Cherub* (1906), features a gender ambiguous character, Chick the Cherub (Gardner, 1973). In a modern context, however, my own nonbinary child, like many others, grew up in the early 2000s without access to books that recognised or reflected their identity. As Rudine Sims Bishop argues, it is imperative all children see themselves reflected in literature (1990). In a positive development, more recently there has been a significant shift in portrayals that encompass a broader, and more nuanced, range of gender and emerging sexuality in MG fiction.

Within the last ten years especially, nonbinary characters have gained greater visibility in contemporary Western children's literature, challenging traditional gender norms and offering young readers portrayals of gender complexity. Earlier depictions can be found in Adam Rex's *The True Meaning of Smekday* (2013) and Lisa Bunker's *Felix YZ* (2017) as well as series' such as Rick Riordan's *Magnus Chase* series (2015-2017) and Derek Landy's *Skulduggery Pleasant Books 10-13* (2017-2020). This upsurge in positive portrayals of nonbinary characters has accelerated within the last five years in MG with novels such as Yoon Ha Lee's *Dragon Pearl* (2019), Samantha-Ellen Bound's *Seven Wherewithal Way* (2021) as well as Amie Kaufman's *Elementals* series (2018-2021), L.D. Lapinski's *Strangeworlds Travel Agency* series (2020-2021), and Fiona Hardy's *How to Tackle Your Dreams* (2022). Additionally, there's been a positive shift towards the depiction of nonbinary protagonists in MG novels since 2021, such as Ami Polonsky's *Spin With Me* (2021) and Jules Machias' *Both Can Be True* (2021), A.J. Sass' *Ana on the Edge* (2021), Basil and Kevin Sylvester's *The Fabulous Zed Watson!* (2021), Alex Gino's *Alice Austen Lived Here* (2022), Yoon Ha Lee's *Tiger Honor* (2022) and L.D. Lapinski's *Jamie* (2023). The increased presence of nonbinary characters in story-worlds signifies a positive shift towards greater gender diversity in books for tweens.

Nonbinary characters, when positioned as central, capable, and self-determined in novels, offer models of empowerment in depicting gender-complexity. However, although many of the MG novels featuring nonbinary protagonists have agency in asserting their identities, they are often also forced to do so with resistance to their complex genders and within systems of adult control, particularly in the realist mode. Thus, realist characters are somewhat disempowered as they struggle to have their nonbinary identities made visible, and to be understood or accepted. On the other hand, by presenting nonbinary characters who are both recognised and empowered within fantastical contexts, children's literature has potential to create imaginative, affirming spaces where gender complexity is not only visible, but celebrated. As Judith Butler argues, "the critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality," bringing possible realities into existence (2004, p. 28). The speculative mode offers an alternate space where bodies, spaces and societal constructs may operate differently, granting children greater authority and power to assert their identities than they currently have in the real world. The connection between shapeshifting and empowerment for nonbinary characters is a key influence in how I consider the symbolic role of nonbinary shapeshifters in children's literature through a posthumanist approach.

As posthuman literary figures, shapeshifters defy fixed forms, mirroring the fluidity of nonbinary identity. Posthumanism is a broad area of scholarship which examines the interconnectedness of humans with other entities such as nonhuman animals, alienness, technology and artificial intelligence (Ferrando, 2012, p. 10). Posthumanism challenges human-centered, hierarchical binaries, embracing transformation and hybridity. Posthumanism critiques the way humanism historically

privileges the white, cisgender male to position those who fall outside this norm as the “Other” (Ferrando, 2012; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 1991). Figures like the cyborg and the shapeshifter destabilise rigid identity categories, allowing for new possibilities to emerge.

Shapeshifting as a metaphor for gender fluidity has a long history in literature and storytelling. Mythology, fairy tales, and classical texts have portrayed transformations that blur the lines between male and female, often challenging societal norms. In Norse and Greek mythology, shapeshifters and characters who change gender roles serve to question the male/female binary (Kachuba, 2023). For example, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, characters undergo transformations that challenge rigid gender boundaries, reflecting early explorations of fluid identity. Shakespeare’s works, influenced by Ovid, often featured cross-dressing characters who similarly blurred gender lines (Chess, 2022). Such mythological figures have been also reimaged and symbolised in later narratives.

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) is perhaps one of the most famous literary examples of nonbinary identity. The protagonist, Orlando, transforms from male to female over the course of centuries, symbolising the fluidity of gender. Woolf drew inspiration from Greek mythology and her personal relationship with Vita Sackville-West to explore the themes of gender and identity (Knight, 2020; GenderGP, 2021). Similarly, stories like the Grimm Brothers’ *All Kinds of Fur* use shapeshifting as a metaphor for gender transformation or ambiguity (Yocom, 2012; Meyertholen, 2021). The character Loki from Norse mythology has been reimaged in popular culture through Marvel film and television as well as in literature, such as Mackenzi Lee’s *Loki* (2019). Loki’s shapeshifting ability and gender fluidity is influential in the *Magnus Chase* series which I later discuss in this article. These texts illustrate how literature has long used shapeshifting and transformation to explore nonbinary identities and challenge rigid gender norms, inspiring modern portrayals.

The shapeshifter’s ability to exist in multiple forms challenges the binary model of gender and identity, offering exploration of nonbinary experiences. In considering the human/nonhuman shapeshifter in children’s literature as a posthuman subject, the literary figure can be seen to disrupt binary hierarchies through being in a state of flux. The anthropomorphised nonhuman animal in children’s literature highlights the interconnectedness between humans and nonhuman animals, demonstrating a fluidity of borders and boundaries (Jaques, 2015, pp. 2-3; Ratelle, 2015, p. 4). Although the scholars are speaking specifically to the anthropomorphised nonhuman animal, shapeshifters can similarly embrace fluidity of form and identity. The ability to move between forms, may therefore represent “desired notions of otherness,” where difference becomes something to be embraced rather than feared (Turcotte, 2012, p. 1). However, the construction of shapeshifters as the “Other,” beyond human, also warrants careful consideration.

While speculative fiction has the potential to challenge binary gender categories, the genre has historically tended to “other” gender-complex characters,

often linking transformation to monstrosity or marginalisation. Historically, monsters have been used to symbolise fear and the unknown, particularly for those who don't conform to societal expectations. Posthumanism, however, can be seen to reclaim the monster figure, especially when viewed through the lens of queer theory. Figures like Frankenstein's monster become powerful symbols of resistance to the dehumanisation of those who do not fit the binary (Stryker, 1994). Similarly, Halberstam (1995) and Butler (2014) argue that monsters challenge rigid categories of gender, allowing transcendence from cisnormative boundaries. In creating a MG fantasy narrative featuring a nonbinary shapeshifting protagonist I consider how authors can balance the shapeshifter archetype to avoid reinforcing harmful tropes of monstrosity, while focusing on the symbolism of empowerment through transformation and liminality. When nonbinary characters are portrayed as central, capable, and self-determined, they offer models of agency that engage positively with children navigating complex understandings of gender.

In contemporary speculative fiction, the portrayal of nonbinary shapeshifters reflects both the possibilities and challenges of representing gender complexity. For example, in the animated series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, the character Double Trouble is a nonbinary, alien shapeshifter who navigates fluidity of form without an explicit focus on gender identity. While the program has been praised for "placing queerness at the front and center of the narrative" (Ramos, 2018, p. 31), Double Trouble's depiction as a reptilian, alien villain also raises concerns about reinforcing the "Monstrous Other" trope. In positive representation, Double Trouble is not alone in their identity, with most of the *She-Ra* universe's characters also being queer. Paul Anthony Thomas terms the program's story structure a queer monomyth and argues Double Trouble's shapeshifting abilities enable the fulfilment of a range of archetypal roles, having a significant role and agency in the narrative (2021, p. 1110). Double Trouble's ability to shapeshift further enables a destabilisation of categories, which extends to that of alien/human when they change into human form and interact with the human characters. However, Double Trouble is the only nonbinary character, and the only nonhuman. As both an alien and a villain, the depiction in contrast with the rest of the cast of characters highlights ongoing issues in how speculative fiction represents nonbinary identities (Lamari & Greenhill, 2021). While it is an affirmative shift to have a program that encompasses a range of gender-complex characters within a queer story universe, I am also mindful of othering the posthuman subject.

Similarly, in ND Stevenson's graphic novel *Nimona*, recently recreated as a Netflix film, the shapeshifting protagonist explores the intersection of queerness and monstrosity. *Nimona* destabilises human categories by transforming into various creatures, embodying the fluidity of identity. When transforming into the monstrous, *Nimona* says, "You went looking for a monster. Well, here I am" (Stevenson, 2015, p. 198). *Nimona* embraces the monstrous role that society imposes on her, reflecting the defiance of societal norms. The graphic novel also adopts a queer monomythic structure while subverting hero/villain tropes. Additionally, her transformations

represent resilience, as she uses her shapeshifting abilities to reclaim power. Nimona and Double Trouble both illustrate the complexities of being othered, but they also offer alternative narratives of empowerment, where fluid identity becomes a source of strength rather than fear. These characters challenge the binary notion of identity, reflecting the potential of posthumanism to create inclusive spaces for nonbinary identities.

In literature, nonbinary youth have embraced the shapeshifter archetype through fan fiction, reimagining characters from series like K.A. Applegate's *Animorphs* (1996–2001) and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) as queer figures (Skye, 2020; Duggan, 2022). Shapeshifters offer a powerful metaphor for exploring gender complexity, as seen in contemporary narratives ranging from the picturebook *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*, (2017), written by Kai Cheng Thom and illustrated by Kai Yun Ching and Wai-Yant Li, to Pat Schmatz's Young Adult novel *Lizard Radio* (2015). In these works, shapeshifting serves as a way for characters to navigate their gender identities, offering young readers a framework for understanding themselves both within and outside the constraints of societal expectations.

For nonbinary characters, shapeshifting may initially seem to marginalise their identities by linking them to the monstrous, but it also offers a symbol of freedom and empowerment. In *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*, the nonbinary protagonist, Miu Lan, adopts various animal traits, using shapeshifting as a metaphor for fluid identity. Miu is portrayed as a shapeshifter who “exudes queer joy, while holding both history and the future close at hand,” offering readers a present-tense affirmation of trans and nonbinary identity while not erasing harmful histories (Wargo & Coleman, 2021, p. 93). As Helen Hopcroft (2013) suggests, human–animal hybrids empower children by enabling them to imagine states of transformation. Miu's emotional experiences of both queer joy through free expression, and fear and solitude through lack of acceptance, connects hybridity to their experience. The posthuman body enables a metaphorical vision of empowerment through transformation and through free self-expression beyond humanistic binaries. Rather than being perceived as monstrous, Miu's otherness and queer joy is ultimately celebrated in the denouement when “they grew feathers and wings to fly with bluebirds in the mornings, scales and a tail to swim with fish in the afternoons, and fur and paws to play with puppies in the evenings” (p. 7). That Miu is ultimately embraced by community, and shares their joy with other children, suggests imaginative, empowered roles for nonbinary characters.

In MG fiction, where characters are often at a critical stage of identity development, shapeshifting becomes a motif for exploring self-discovery and autonomy. Elaine L. Graham (2002) connects the reclamation of the monster to defiance of binary oppositions, empowering people from marginalised groups. Contemporary fantasy enables a connection between the transformative figure of shapeshifters and liminal stages of childhood (McMahon-Coleman & Weaver, 2012). In early popular culture, shapeshifters were most often found in the horror genre,

depicted as vampires and werewolves (Cohen, 1996). However, rather than frightening figures, in children's literature shapeshifters have become more visible as desirable, and often portray empowering representations of identity and belonging (Coats, 2018). While transformation does not always enable freedom, either temporarily or permanently, there is potential for shapeshifting to portray concepts of empowerment beyond the confines of binary human experience through liminality.

Although McMahon-Coleman and Weaver focus on young adult texts, MG fiction is particularly suited to exploring themes of identity, as tweens are in the liminal stage between childhood and adolescence, where self-discovery is central. Renata Tomaz notes that tweens, a distinct group recognised for only about forty years, are at a pivotal point in asserting their identities and gaining autonomy (2014). In MG fiction, gender is also often explored separately from sexuality, allowing for a focused exploration of self without the pressures of romance or adult themes. A study by Jill Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin Ryan (2014) shows that representations of tweens exploring gender identities are particularly powerful, providing young readers with models of possibility.

Shapeshifting further resonates with tweens as a metaphor for their own transitions from childhood to adolescence. In MG fiction, shapeshifting provides a framework for tweens to safely explore their identities without being confined by binary gender norms. McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2019) argue that shapeshifters allow characters to transcend traditional gender roles, while Karen Coats (2018) suggests that non-human figures in fantasy enable children to push beyond binary boundaries. Elaine J. O'Quinn contends that shapeshifting provides young readers with a safe space to explore their humanity and identities on their own terms (2004). The exploration of identity through shapeshifting as posthuman subjects is particularly relevant for gender-complex tweens.

I found Rick Riordan's *Magnus Chase* series (2015-2017) and Yoon Ha Lee's novel *Tiger Honor* (2022), which both feature nonbinary shapeshifters, to be particularly influential in my creative work. Both narratives use shapeshifting as a tool to reflect the maturation process, illustrating how nonbinary characters can defy binary notions of identity as they grow and become more independent. The portrayal of nonbinary shapeshifters in literature varies significantly, offering both positive and challenging representations of gender fluidity. In Rick Riordan's *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series, the character Alex Fierro, who appears in the second two books in the trilogy (*The Hammer of Thor* (2016) and *The Ship of the Dead* (2017)), stands out as genderfluid, in parallel with the power to shapeshift into various forms. Alex, as the child of the trickster god Loki, can switch between male and female human forms, as well as impersonate other humans, or transform into different nonhuman animals, such as a bear or dog. Riordan introduces Alex's shapeshifting ability as both an embodiment of trickery and ambiguity, traits linked to Alex's parentage, but also as an exploration of gender fluidity.

Alex's gender fluidity is approached with sensitivity and understanding. The text emphasises the challenges Alex faced in the human world—bullying, abuse, and eventual homelessness due to nonconforming gender identity, which is mimetic of the difficulties and trauma gender-complex youth often face. However, Alex's experience in Valhalla, where shapeshifting abilities are brought to the foreground as a source of power and strength, offers a parallel between personal empowerment and fluid gender identity. Alex's ability to transform at will into either male or female human forms serves as a subtle analogy for fluid gender, however the ability to shapeshift into animals is not connected to gender identity, rather it is hereditary as a child of Loki. This distinction separates Alex's gender fluidity from mere physical transformation, portraying it as a deeper, more intrinsic element of the self. As Alex states, "I will choose what is manly, unmanly, womanly, or unwomanly for me" (Riordan, 2016, p. 197). In this way, Alex's shapeshifting abilities subtly challenge readers' perceptions of gender norms, emphasising self-determination over societal expectations.

Despite a mostly positive portrayal of Alex, the narrative has some issues around the othering of a genderfluid character. As Pennanan notes (2019), Alex's queerness is often marginalised within Valhalla. For example, Alex is the only nonbinary character among a group of cisgender warriors, and there are repeated moments in the text where Alex is forced to explain and justify gender fluidity to peers, thus standing out as an anomaly in a world where even gods and monsters adhere to binary gender norms. Alex's gender-complexity is continually explained in a way that centres cisgender understanding, which may, at times, distance gender-complex readers from fully engaging with the character's identity. Moreover, while Alex's shapeshifting ability is inherited from Loki, it is not presented as entirely empowering, as the past experiences with rejection and abuse linger in current interactions, placing Alex in the category of the "Other" in both the human and mythological worlds.

In contrast, Yoon Ha Lee's *Tiger Honor* presents a different vision of nonbinary identity, one that is fully integrated and accepted within its speculative world. The protagonist, Sebin, belongs to a clan of tiger spirit shapeshifters who can transform into tigers at will. Unlike Alex, whose gender identity is linked metaphorically to shapeshifting abilities, Sebin's nonbinary identity is treated as a natural part of the narrative world. In the speculative universe of *Tiger Honor*, multiple genders exist, and Sebin's nonbinary identity is unremarkable—accepted by their peers and family without the need for explanation or justification. The seamless integration of nonbinary identity within a broader spectrum of human and nonhuman characters offers a vision of a more inclusive world, one where gender complexity is an accepted and understood part of society.

Interestingly, while Sebin's shapeshifting ability is central to their character, it is not used as an allegory for their nonbinary identity. The tiger is their "native shape," and the ability to shift between tiger and human forms is shared by their entire family. Sebin's internal struggles relate more to loyalty, honor, and navigating familial and cultural expectations, rather than a quest for gender recognition and acceptance. This

distinction makes *Tiger Honor* a unique text in that it does not focus on gender as a source of conflict or tension. Instead, Sebin's nonbinary identity is incidental to the main plot, which focuses on their personal journey of growth and self-realisation as they move between family life and a wider galactic community.

The differences between *Magnus Chase* and *Tiger Honor* are subtle but impactful when viewed through posthumanist and queer lenses. The emphasis on Alex's struggles within a cisnormative world risks portraying nonbinary identity as exceptional or othered, highlighted by Alex's shapeshifting ability causing distrust among the other warriors at Valhalla. In contrast, *Tiger Honor* integrates Sebin's nonbinary identity into a more inclusive narrative, where gender complexity is neither questioned nor marginalised, and not correlated with the ability to shapeshift. In my novel *Val Silver and the Dragon's Secret*, the protagonist is like Alex and Sebin, in that Val is a nonbinary shapeshifter navigating a fantastical world, but unlike *Magnus Chase*, their identity is accepted from the opening scenes. Similarly to *Tiger Honor*, shapeshifting is not tied to gender identity, however Val's abilities are individually unique rather than being part of a family unit of human/tiger spirit hybrids. My novel blends the concepts of *Magnus Case* and *Tiger Honor* with a posthuman narrative while centring on transformation, and fluidity, as a symbol of empowerment and joy.

A key aim in developing *Val Silver and the Dragon's Secret* is to construct a narrative that resists the isolation and otherness frequently imposed on nonbinary characters in children's literature. Informed by consultation with a sensitivity reader and my nonbinary child, and shaped by sustained engagement with texts featuring gender-complex shapeshifters, the drafting process focused on the importance of ensuring that Val was never positioned as "Other" by being villainised, isolated or positioned as an outsider—whether in relation to their gender identity or their shapeshifting abilities. From the outset, Val is affirmed by family and peers within a mimetic, realist world where nonbinary gender exists as part of the social fabric. This decision situates nonbinary identity not as anomaly or obstacle, but as already legible and valued within contemporary human contexts.

As my protagonist transitions to the shapeshifter academy, this affirmation continues. There, Val is surrounded by a diverse community of shapeshifters whose gender identities and transformative abilities are as varied as their personalities. In this space, Val's identity is linked symbolically and narratively to both the human and fantastical realms—creating continuity across worlds rather than opposition. By embedding nonbinary identity across both mimetic real world and speculative contexts, the novel avoids reinforcing conflict-based tropes and instead offers a model of inclusion, empowerment, and joy. While this vision may not directly mirror current social realities, it functions as a deliberate act of speculative reimagining. In doing so, *Val Silver and the Dragon's Secret* resists the imperative to reflect marginalisation and instead asserts the importance of modelling what a more affirming and expansive world might look like.

In *Val Silver and the Dragon's Secret*, I use the shapeshifter trope to explore nonbinary identity through a posthuman lens, centring the narrative on empowerment, growth, and joy. Unlike Alex Fierro in *Magnus Chase*, whose shapeshifting is closely tied to trauma and societal rejection, Val's transformations emerge as part of a natural maturation in the liminal stage between childhood and adolescence. Shifting into nonhuman animal, and the powerful dragon form, reflects an evolving understanding of self—where gender is not a site of conflict, but one facet of broader personal becoming. The fantasy quest structure further allows for an emphasis on autonomy and fluid identity exploration, rather than marginalisation.

The fantasy genre provides the ideal space to imagine identity beyond the confines of real-world norms. As Nikolajeva argues, fantasy does not lack mimetic potential or subversive capacity, but rather empowers protagonists in ways realism cannot, offering narrative distance through magic and alternate worlds (2012, pp. 57–61). As Jaque argues, children often do not strictly separate the real from the imaginary, so this space offers opportunities to reimagine the world on more inclusive terms. Jaque further contends that children's literature uniquely unites fantasy's possibilities with the potential for real-world change, proposing “a forward-focused agenda” (2015, p. 206). In this sense, the novel is not a prescriptive tool, but an imaginative invitation—an alternative to the societal structures children are often expected to navigate without question and within realities of adult authoritarian control.

Shapeshifting, in this context, functions both thematically and structurally to destabilise binary logic. As seen in works like *Nimona* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, shapeshifting is used to challenge not only gender norms but also binary moral frameworks. Characters like Nimona and Double Trouble complicate the hero/villain dichotomy and shift the fantasy genre's focus from triumph of good over evil to transformation and personal growth, while bringing awareness to their own position as the Monstrous Other. *Val Silver* draws on this queer monomythic structure, particularly in relation to the hero/villain narrative of conquest. Rather than defeating a monstrous antagonist, Val helps Thea—a dragon shapeshifter who has lost control—to reintegrate. The connection between protagonist and antagonist, grounded in empathy and shared fluidity, rejects oppositions such as good/evil or human/other. The narrative arc moves away from confrontation towards resolution, and inverts the adult/child relationship as the child assists the adult in finding self-acceptance. In doing so, *Val Silver and the Dragon's Secret* offers not a reflection of existing biases, but a model of inclusion, agency, and queer joy.

While gender-complex characters are becoming more visible in MG children's fiction, their stories often remain rooted in trauma, marginalisation, or the need to justify their identities. As the field evolves, nonbinary representation offers new ways to engage young readers with gender complexity—particularly through the shapeshifter trope in speculative fiction, which powerfully symbolises fluidity and transformation. *Magnus Chase* and *Tiger Honor* explore gender identity differently: one

highlights challenges within a binary world, the other presents seamless inclusion. Neither reflects reality fully, but both use fantasy to imagine a more equitable world where nonbinary children are affirmed alongside their peers.

In *Val Silver and the Dragon's Secret*, I extend this narrative by placing a nonbinary protagonist within a recognisably inclusive world, where joy and belonging are central. This choice suggests that the fantastical might enable imagined futures to inform present possibilities. My hope is that as social understanding and acceptance of gender complexity continues to grow, inclusive worlds, now only imagined in speculative fiction, may more closely reflect children's everyday realities. Yet even as reality shifts, I see that fantasy will retain its appeal—not as escapism, but as a space of empowerment, where children can safely explore identity, transformation, and belonging on their own terms. As nonbinary representation expands, the future of children's literature lies in crafting inclusive, affirming spaces where all children can see themselves reflected with agency and power. The shapeshifter, with its inherent fluidity, becomes a metaphor not for instability, but for strength, self-discovery, and connection. By embracing gender complexity and disrupting binaries, children's literature can open portals to a freedom that allows young people to imagine themselves fully.

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Candice is also a trade published author of 15 books for children with Penguin, New Frontier Publishing and Pearson Education. Many titles have been selected for school reading lists, and received awards recognition, including the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, Green Earth Book Awards and Wilderness Society's Environment Award for Children's Literature.

An advocate of reading for pleasure, alongside academic conferences, Candice frequently engages with children and adults through public engagements at schools, libraries, writing festivals and other community events.