

★ Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl

Andrea Lawlor

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Lawlor's novel introduces hefty topics in a highly entertaining, fresh, and thought-provoking way.

With their debut, *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*, Andrea Lawlor delivers a hilarious, original, gender-fluid novel replete with 1990s cachet, sex, and queer identity. It's an entrance that accomplishes what few writers can, addressing self-discovery, connection, and acceptance in a raucous, inventive way.

Have you ever wished you could be the opposite sex, whenever you wanted? Meet Paul, a shape-shifting, gender-nonconforming college student whose motivating desire is to be as hot as possible, no matter what sex he chooses to be.

Paul is adrift. Minimally showing up for classes at a Midwest college, Paul spends much time hunting for sexcapades, free coffee, and food. With Paul's ability to consciously change appearance and gender, these interlope into as many subsets of queer culture, college life, and one night stands as are available, all while demonstrating their inexhaustible knowledge of riot grrrl music and running fashion commentary.

While providing all the aesthetic of mid-1990s queer culture, and satisfying all physical urges while morphing between man and woman, Paul's shallowness masks deep feelings of isolation and yearning to connect with someone.

Lawlor masterfully exhibits their knowledge of gender identity by creating fully realized LGBTQ characters and avoiding stereotypes. They slyly intersperse the narrative with short, Brothers Grimm-like fables and fairy tales that question the historical impact of gender identity that is passed down from generation to generation.

Even with Paul's snarky humor, the story makes a pointed case that desire, and being desired, are universal attributes, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. It subtly conveys Paul's isolation by refusing to make Paul choose a gender or an orientation, instead having him search for a reflection, a kinship that supersedes anatomy.

Gender-fluid and gender nonconforming literature is underexplored in general, but Lawlor's novel introduces hefty topics in a highly entertaining, fresh, and thought-provoking way. *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* is a new benchmark for gender-nonconforming literature that introduces the undeniable skill, talent, and originality of new voice in fiction.

MONICA CARTER (November/December 2017)

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