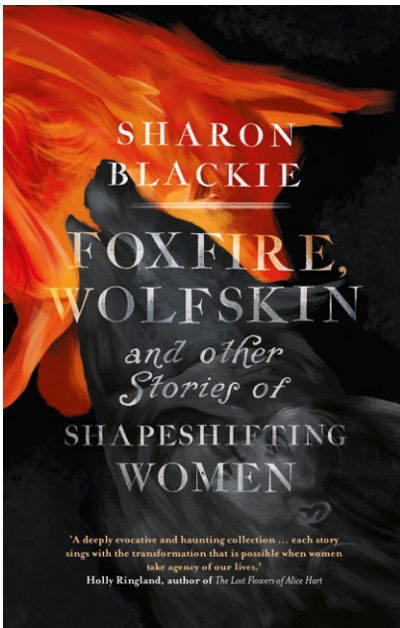


Foxfire, Wolfskin *and other stories of shapeshifting women*

by Sharon Blackie

Readers' Guide



Charged with drama and beauty, this memorable collection by a master storyteller weaves a magical world of possibility and power from female myths of physical renewal, creation and change. It is an extraordinary immersion into the bodies and voices, mindscapes and landscapes, of the shape-shifting women of our native folklore.

Drawing on myth and fairy tales found across Europe – from Croatia to Sweden, Ireland to Russia – Sharon Blackie brings to life women's remarkable ability to transform themselves in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances. These stories are about coming to terms with our animal natures, exploring the ways in which we might renegotiate our fractured relationship with the natural world, and uncovering the wildness – and wilderness – within.

To see a video of the author talking about the inspiration for *Foxfire, Wolfskin*, please visit the book page on www.sharonblackie.net.

General suggestions

- Reading each story aloud is a wonderful way to get conversation flowing, and to provide intimacy of setting.
- Most of these stories provide insights into masculinity and femininity, like facets on a cut stone. Tease out these facets when they appear. They are fertile ground for discussion.

General questions

- As indicated in the book's cover description, these stories are at heart about kinship between the human and the animal – at the same time as embracing our otherness. As you discuss each story, always make a point of talking about the ways in which the particular form of shapeshifting, transformation or human-animal interaction reflects that often-complex kinship.
- What light does each story cast on the ways in which we might come to terms with the wildness which lies both inside us and outside of us, in the natural world of which we're a part?

Wolfskin

Book Group Questions

- How is this tale both similar to and different from traditional fairy tales about skin-theft that you know? Think, for example, of the story of the selkie's stolen skin (as told in Sharon's book *If Women Rose Rooted*).
- In this tale, the man/husband in the story sells the wolf's skin for money. What does this act suggest about the man, and the nature of his relationship with women?
- Re-read the part of the story where the skin finally is able to return to the body of its owner. Have you ever had a sense of discovering a lost skin that felt that so viscerally right?
- 'Well then: say the man-child hears people whisper that his mother is really a wolf. "Mama!" he says. "Are you a wolf?" "What nonsense," says the mother, and turns away.' Why does she lie to the child, do you think?
- How do you feel about the ending? Do you like stories with *consequences*?

Journaling Prompts

- What animal do you think you would naturally shapeshift into, if you had the capability? What would losing that animal's skin feel like, and what specific skills/ways of being in the world would its loss deprive you of? What would be missing in your life?

- On the assumption that shapeshifting into an animal isn't an option, how else could you cultivate those specific skills/qualities/ways of being in the world in your life right now?

The Last Man Standing

Book Group Questions

- Who is 'she' in this story? Who is 'he'? Where does the story take place?
- What might a white hind and the other animals in the story represent, symbolically?
- Does the man kill the white hind?
- When she chooses to return to the loch at the end, what are the fairy wife's reasons for not wanting to come back again as a wife to a mortal man?
- In what ways is he the 'last man standing'?
- What is the difference in the conceptions of 'husband' or 'masculine' in these first two tales? How about the definition of 'wife' or 'feminine'?

Journaling Prompts

- What animals do you associate with the Otherworld, in whatever folk/mythic tradition you belong to or identify with?
- If you had the choice to leave this world for the Otherworld and not come back, what would your choice be and why?

The Bogman's Wife

Book Group Questions

- What might the man in this story have wanted from a wife like the narrator – a beautiful, flashing silver trout in a moorland lake? What might she have wanted from him?
- This is a complex story, but it could be said to be, in part, about the difference between the sense of justice of a man born into a particular human-centred religion, and that of a fish,

whose only 'religion' is nature. What does it tell you about the fluid nature of justice?

- How does this story make you feel? How do you feel about the trout-woman's actions, and why?

Journaling Prompts

- Imagine yourself as any water-born creature, suddenly translated into this world in human form. What would you find strangest about our world from an animal's point of view? What would you find hardest to understand?

Foxfire

Book Group Questions

- Why do you think the fox appeared to the heart-heavy woman as a wild animal, but appeared as a woman to the man? They clearly wanted different things from her ... or did they?
- Do you empathise with this woman's feeling of 'hollowness'? What do you imagine might heal such a wound?
- In this tale there is an animal – a fox; a mythical creature – a fox-woman; a story about how the mythical creature is supposed to be (but actually is not); and two human beings who seem to have stepped outside their own stories for a while and no longer know who they are. Discuss how all these different stories and identities are intertwined.

Journaling Prompts

- What animal life would you like to live?
- Describe what feels hollow in you. If you were to draw that hollowness, what would it look like? And how might you go about filling up the hole?

Meeting Baba Yaga

Book Group Questions

- Who is the narrator of this story, and what are her defining characteristics for you?

- What did you find to be the most memorable details in Baba Yaga's house and surroundings? Pick one image from the house and discuss what it means to you.
- Why does the narrator fail to understand Baba Yaga's teachings? And what is the essence of those teachings which she fails to understand?
- Baba Yaga is an example of the Wise Old Woman archetype – one who is distinctly not to be messed with. What other Wise Old Women archetypes from myth and fairy tale do you know?

Journaling Prompts

- Do mythical things happen to people who aren't mythically minded?
- Has there ever been a time in your life when you failed to see, or refused to accept, wisdom which was in front of you?

The Water-Horse

Book Group Questions

- Who is the narrator, and who is she talking to? What do you know, or what can you imagine, about the location of the story, and the nature of the people who live there?
- *'Oh, you don't really do fairy tales? Well, not many men do. Maybe that's wise. Some of us do them whether we choose it or not. They choose us; they happen to us. They know their prey. The dreamers.'* Who are the 'dreamers', and how and why do fairy tales choose them?
- Lovers in animal form, animal bridegrooms in so many fairy tales like this one... what are they calling to humans, ultimately, to do or to become?
- In the classic version of this story, the young woman escapes the water-horse and lives to tell the tale. Why did this young woman not want to escape? Can you imagine feeling like this?

Journaling Prompts

- Staying or going – one of the classic dilemmas in the lives of so many. Like the young girl in this story, have you ever been torn between staying and going? If you were to write that dilemma as a story, what kind of character would you be in it?

- Are there any ‘animal bridegroom’ stories which have captured your heart?

Snow Queen

Book Group Questions

- This story is about environmental and habitat destruction caused by climate change. Talk about any part of the story that reflects something you have noticed in the news, or in your reading about current issues.
- Why do Gerda and Kay return to the Snow Queen? Are they ‘right’ to do so?
- The Snow Queen is often portrayed (though not in the original fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen) as wicked and cruel. How do you feel about the way the Snow Queen is represented in this story?
- ‘Snow Queen will save the world from you.’ Does the world need saving from humans?

Journaling Prompts

- Many writers – CS Lewis, as reflected in his Narnia stories, is a notable example – are strongly drawn to the idea of North, and the world of ice. How do you feel about the icy North? What feelings, what images, what stories does it evoke in you? Environmental consequences aside, how do you feel about a world without the idea of ice in it?
- The story suggests that it is the death of the last polar bear which was the final straw for Snow Queen. What loss could you not bear?

The Saturday Diary of the Fairy Mélusine

Book Group Questions

- This story is a meditation on the complicated love between fairy woman who is sometimes a snake, and her human husband. Why can’t he accept her transformation? Is he threatened by it, and why?
- How does Mélusine’s husband’s inability to accept her transformation relate to your own experience – either your own life in particular, or the world in general?

- How did you feel about Mélusine's decision to leave?

Journaling Prompts

- Many of the questions Mélusine asks her husband are applicable to our own relationships, or in our own lives. Write down your own answers to the questions they ask each other, playfully, at first. For example: *What can't you forgive?* What would your answer be, and why?

The Madness of Mis

Book Group Questions

- Grief turns Mis into something part-animal, something Other; is it rage that maintains her in that shape? What other strong emotions might be conduits for bringing out the fur, the creature in us? What might these creatures look like?
- What aspects of 'civilisation' make you want to fly away, and what can you do to reduce their impact in your own life?
- Mis is the original Wild Woman archetype in Irish mythology. Do you know of any others?
- It's through compassion and gentleness that Dubh Ruis returns Mis to herself. In many ways, this reflects the old Celtic Grail mythology, and the fact that the question which must be asked of the wounded king by the knight who is seeking the Grail in the old Romances is usually a compassionate 'What Ails Thee?' How does this way of being in the world reflect a journey for men which goes beyond the simple Heroic?

Journaling Prompts

- 'It was not words you trusted now, but the barking of foxes in the wood.' Have you ever felt such solace in nature – what American poet Wendell Berry called 'the peace of wild things'?
- Mis is described as growing long fur and feathers and sharp claws. Draw the Wild Woman who lives inside you, and how does the detail of that drawing reflect the nature of your own strong emotion?

I Shall Go into a Hare

Book Group Questions

- The motif of women shapeshifting into hares is a common one in British and Irish folklore. What does the hare symbolise in this story?
- What is the nature of Isobel's marriage? What does the hare mean to her?

Journaling Prompts

- If you had an animal 'familiar', what would it be? And why?

The Weight of a Human Heart

Book Group Questions

- Who are Emer and Fand in Irish mythology? How does the current reimagining differ from the original?
- The outcome is surprising. Were you satisfied by it, or do you think Emer should have stuck by Cú Chulainn?
- Who do you feel compassion for in this story, and why? Does this change during the course of the story?
- What does the story tell you about the strength of the bonds between women – sometimes in spite of themselves?

Journaling Prompts

- Have you ever left an intolerable situation, while still feeling grief at the necessity of going, and tenderness for what you were leaving behind?
- In describing how a bird views the world, Fand teaches Emer about a lightness of being which she has never been able to attain. And many old fairy myths and fairy tales suggest to us that animals have a unique kind of wisdom which humans don't have, but sometimes need. What lesson could you learn from a bird's way of being in the world? – take any bird you know well, and write about the lessons it might have to offer you – about the particular kind of wisdom

it embodies.

Flower-Face

Book Group Questions

- The usual interpretation of the original story on which this reimagining is based is that Blodeuwedd is an evil creature for trying to kill her husband, and that she received a just punishment by being turned into an owl. What do you think?
- Was it a punishment to be turned into an owl? If not, why not?
- Is Blodeuwedd's anger towards Gwydion justified? Did she have a right to her own life? Was killing Lleu the only way forward for her?
- How do you feel about Gwydion and Mach, and their attempt to create and shape a woman for their own ends? Could such a thing ever end well?

Journaling Prompts

- If you were created from plants or flowers, which ones would they be, and why?
- *'In my world, you make no sense.'* Blodeuwedd says this to Gwydion as a commentary on the ways in which humans differ from the rest of the natural world. – ways which she clearly feels are maladaptive. If you were to see your own life from the perspective of 'nature' – a tree, a bird, a fox – what do you think would 'make no sense' about it?

No Country for Old Women

Book Group Questions

- 'When she was a young lass, the ocean *was* a forest, full of old trees.' What does this statement lead you to believe about the old woman?
- What does this story say about the consequences of the coming of Christianity to Ireland?
- Is the Old Woman archetype – represented here as the Cailleach – rising again?

Journaling Prompts

- 'Her strength has faded, along with human belief. And belief in her has been dwindling for centuries; so few now even remember her name. Even fewer can pronounce it.' Is this the reason she grows old? How does this idea make you feel? What can you strengthen or weaken by belief?
- What gives you hope in the face of so much that we risk losing? What makes you get out of bed each morning, even in the face of great grief?



Flower-Face, by Helen Nicholson