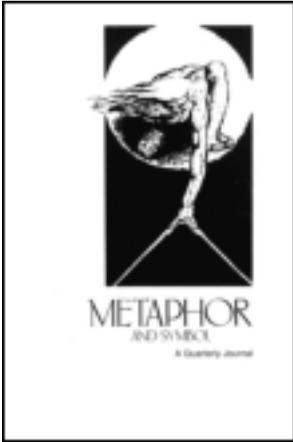


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Publisher: Psychology Press

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Metaphor and Symbol

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hmet20>

I is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World by James Geary

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Version of record first published: 20 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: Bertie Kaal (2012): I is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World by James Geary, *Metaphor and Symbol*, 27:4, 312-314

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2012.716300>

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BOOK REVIEW

I is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World. James Geary. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011. 304 pages, \$19.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9780061710285.

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James Geary is an experienced journalist, former editor of *Time* (Europe), and currently editor of *Ode*, a magazine on optimism and positive news. He contributes to *Popular Science* and is the author of two guidebooks on aphorism. *I is an Other* takes us on a rollercoaster tour through the landscape of metaphor studies and metaphors in practice. It takes us from western and non-western philosophy to cognitive neuroscientific experiments and functional metaphor studies. Free from academic rigidity the author discusses the variety of affordances of metaphor in human understanding. He shares his fascination for the many ways in which metaphors allow us to communicate thoughts and feelings by analogy to shared knowledge. The book reminds me a bit of encyclopedic journalistic works on concrete objects, such as Kurlansky's *Cod* (1997) and *Salt* (2002). But concrete objects can be described in facts and figures and Geary's challenge is to get to the heart of metaphors as cognitive phenomena that want to be taken with a pinch of salt.

The book constitutes a coherent stream of historic, personal, controversial, and academic knowledge, linking grand and less-grand theories to all kinds of real-life details, larded with examples and interesting anecdotes about your average pedestrian, poet, novelist, philosopher, and academic who speaks in or about metaphors. It is descriptive and not judgmental, which is very refreshing. Even the most up-to-date metaphorician will find new insights in this book, which seems to me a well-researched guide to what is known about metaphor. The topical chapters are balanced and vividly cross-reference to other chapters and beyond.

It all begins, as one might expect, with a philosophical, etymological review of the many definitions of the term "metaphor" and the various functions that have been ascribed to it. Philosophers, historians, famous writers and musicians are quoted, from Epicurus, Aldalqahir Al-Jurjani, Pointcare, Descartes, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, to Elvis himself. Next, we are introduced to the multimodality in which metaphors manifest themselves in words, images, colors, and gestures as co-constructions of rational meaning and embodied affect, which is further illustrated in the chapter on metaphor and body, halfway through the book. Thus, the scene is set to

look at metaphor as an evolving concept that has gone through various stages of appreciation and understanding. Geary's preferred notion is that, basically, metaphor provides a way to "shake up" (*cognito* = to agitate) conventionalized ideas, to allow taking a fresh look at things from new points of view and to reinvent meanings in changing cultural and contextual settings. Another benefit is that they give pleasure, as the much neglected philosopher Giambattista Vico pointed out that metaphor is a riddle that first needs to be constructed and then understood. Both the constructing and understanding give immense satisfaction when the interaction succeeds or leads to new insights. Metaphor is shown to be a powerful tool to cope with change, establish common ground, as well as to impress and persuade the Other.

Experimental evidence is sketched in just a couple of lucid paragraphs, for instance introducing the Stroop test and Gluckman's experiments that reveal that metaphoric truth can easily be perceived as literal truth, in spite of a cognitive dissonance between source and target domain. Tomasello's (2008) work on the evolution of communication and child language acquisition might have give more interesting evidence, in addition to the impressive list of references already given.

The persuasive power of metaphor is addressed in a chapter on metaphor and politics as a way of framing and foregrounding one thing, at the expense of another. The secret lives of metaphors can have an impact on our understanding because of what they *do not* refer to. It is a tool that can be used for either clarification or mystification, toward consensual social-political action. So too does Geary show that metaphor not only manipulates the subjective by making it seem objective, but also enhances the objective by making it affective and human. The thin conceptual line between definitions of "truth" (objective) and "believing" (subjective) is illustrated with examples from Icelandic. Truth is relativized when observing that "truth" stems from "believing," rather than from "certainty."

The chapter on mind and body concerns spatial metaphors that function to express people's subjective experience of time in terms of space, as in "*FORWARD IS FUTURE*." Or where spatial metaphor blends physical space with emotional state: "proximity occasions both bodily and emotional warmth." (p. 96). Referring to Sweetser and also to Boroditsky's work, Geary discusses the issue of cultural differences in metaphor usage and here a reference to Levinson's (2003) experiments on cultural differences in coordinating systems of thought and language would have been in place. But Geary summarizes the affordances of metaphor neatly: "Once attached to an idea, they start to work as an organizing principle through which everything pertaining to that idea is seen" (p. 124).

Apart from academic, etymological, and philosophical diversions, there are plenty of examples of metaphor in use: in poetry, in institutions, advertising, health care, and not in the least in science, which exists by virtue of novel nomenclature to communicate newly discovered concepts. He notes that metaphor establishes a dissonant relation between fact and fiction, where the conceptualization of scientific truth relies on the (subjective) imagination that is needed to coin new terms. Metaphors are also discussed as being part of the world we live in: as a feature of advertising, to improve institutional communication and action, to uphold hegemonic structures, or to give empowerment to social action. Geary takes us into both the academic and the real world of metaphor usage: why we use them, how we use them, and how they help us to make sense of the complex world as we know and experience it. Food for thought, therefore, with a pinch of salt, whatever your background.

The more than 200 endnotes and up-to-date bibliography are proof of an impressive amount of research on, and beyond, metaphor studies and provides no less evidence than would be required in academic writing, without being constrained by conventions of academic rigidity. For metaphor experts who “already knew” everything there is to know about metaphor, *I is an Other* brings it all together. Geary makes it clear that where there is change, or where change is required, there is a need for metaphor to make sense of the world as one.

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