

What Is Magical Realism, Really?

by Bruce Holland Rogers

"Magical realism" has become a debased term. When it first came into use to describe the work of certain Latin American writers, and then a small number of writers from many places in the world, it had a specific meaning that made it useful for critics. If someone made a list of recent magical realist works, there were certain characteristics that works on the list would share. The term also pointed to a particular array of techniques that writers could put to specialized use. Now the words have been applied so haphazardly that to call a work "magical realism" doesn't convey a very clear sense of what the work will be like...

Any genre of fiction can get at truths, of course. Some science fiction and fantasy do so, and are serious fiction. Some SF and fantasy are escapist. But magical realism is *always* serious, never escapist, because it is trying to convey the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed. Magical realism is a kind of realism, but one different from the realism that most of our culture now experiences. Science fiction and fantasy are always speculative. They are always positing that some aspect of objective reality were different. What if vampires were real? What if we could travel faster than light?

Magical realism is not speculative and does not conduct thought experiments. Instead, it tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective. If there is a ghost in a story of magical realism, the ghost is not a fantasy element but a manifestation of the reality of people who believe in and have "real" experiences of ghosts. Magical realist fiction depicts the real world of people whose reality is different from ours. It's not a thought experiment. It's not speculation. Magical realism endeavors to show us the world through other eyes. When it works, as I think it does very well in, say, Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, some readers will inhabit this other reality so thoroughly that the "unreal" elements of the story, such as witches, will seem frighteningly real long after the book is finished. A fantasy about southwestern Indian witches allows you to put down the book with perhaps a little shiver but reassurance that what you just read is made up. Magical realism leaves you with the understanding that this world of witches is one that people really live in and the *feeling* that maybe this view is correct.

It's possible to read magical realism as fantasy, just as it's possible to dismiss people who believe in witches as primitives or fools. But the literature at its best invites the reader to compassionately experience the world as many of our fellow human beings see it.

As for causality, the objective view tells us that one person's emotion can't kill someone else. We believe this so strongly that a world view in which emotion can kill won't convince us---we'll write it off as fantasy. So magical realist works put causally connected events side by side in a way that doesn't appear to violate objective reality, but attempts to convince us by details that the events described are linked by more than chance. In *Ceremony*, for example, there is a scene in which a spurned woman is dancing very angrily. Miles away, the man who betrayed her is checking the commotion his cattle are making in the night. Descriptions of the woman's heels stamping the floor are alternated with descriptions of the cattle trampling the man to death, back and forth from one to the other. No assertion of causality is made, but the dancer's heels and the animals' hooves become linked so powerfully that the reader doesn't just "get it." What's conveyed is not a symbol or a metaphor, but the reality that a woman can be so angry that when she she dances, her lover dies.

The third effect is my favorite. If your view of the world includes miracles and angels, beast-men and women of unearthly beauty, gods walking among us and ceremonies that can end a drought, then all of these things are as ordinary to you as automobiles, desert streams, and ice in the tropics. At the same time, the whole world is enchanted, mysterious. Automobiles, desert streams, and ice are all as astonishing as angels.

To convey this, magical realist writers write the ordinary as miraculous and the miraculous as ordinary. The ice that gypsies bring to the tropical village of Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is described with awe. How can such a substance exist? It is so awesomely beautiful that characters find it difficult to account for or describe. But it's not just novelties such as a first encounter with ice that merit such description. The natural world comes in for similar attention. The behavior of ants or the atmosphere of a streamside oasis are described in details that match objective experience, but which remind us that the world is surprising and seemingly full of design and purpose.

The miraculous, on the other hand, is described with a precision that fits it into the ordinariness of daily life. When one of the characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is shot in the head, the blood from his body flows out into the street in a path that takes it all the way to the feet of the character's grandmother---a miracle. But along the way, the path of the blood is described in great detail, and the miraculous journey is rooted in the day-to-day activities of the village and the grandmother's household. An even better example is the character who is so beautiful that she is followed everywhere by a cloud of butterflies. This extraordinary trait is brought to earth somewhat by the observation that all of the butterflies have tattered wings. The miraculous, looked at closely, is mundane.

As a tool, magical realism can be used to explore the realities of characters or communities who are outside of the objective mainstream of our culture. It's not just South Americans, Indians, or African slaves who may offer these alternative views. Religious believers for whom the numinous is always present and miracles are right around the corner, believers to whom angels really do appear and to whom God reveals Himself directly, they too inhabit a magical realist reality.

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Magic Realism

"My most important problem was destroying
the lines of demarcation that separates what
seems real from what seems fantastic"

- Gabriel Garcia Marquez

A narrative technique that blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality.

...A secondary trait was the characteristic attitude of narrators toward the subject matter: they frequently appeared to accept events contrary to the usual operating laws of the universe as natural, even unremarkable. Though the tellers of astonishing tales, they themselves expressed little or no surprise.