

## Magical Realism

A literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre, magical realism aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites. For instance, it challenges polar opposites like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present. Magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, "an amalgamation of realism and fantasy". The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or "magical" Indian mentality, which exists in conjunction with European rationality. According to Ray Verzasconi, as well as other critics, magical realism is "an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America." Gonzalez Echchevarria believes that magical realism offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws nor objective reality. However, the fictional world is not separated from reality either.

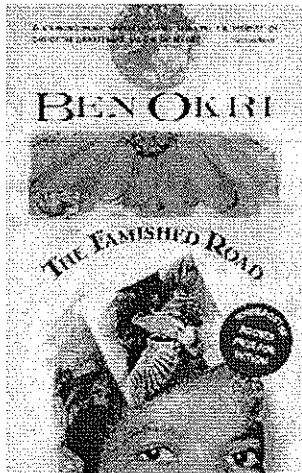
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## Background

The term "magical realism" was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism an art category. To him, it was a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. In Latin America in the 1940s, magical realism was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature.

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## Characteristics of Magical Realism



Hybridity—Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to post-colonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature. Specifically, magical realism is illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

Irony Regarding Author's Perspective—The writer must have ironic distance from the magical world view for the realism not to be compromised. Simultaneously, the writer must strongly respect the magic, or else the magic dissolves into simple folk belief or complete fantasy, split from the real instead of synchronized with it. The term "magic" relates to the fact that the point of view that the text depicts explicitly is not adopted according to the implied world view of the author. As

Gonzales Echevarria expresses, the act of distancing oneself from the beliefs held by a certain social group makes it impossible to be thought of as a representative of that society.

Authorial Reticence—Authorial reticence refers to the lack of clear opinions about the accuracy of events and the credibility of the world views expressed by the characters in the text. This technique promotes acceptance in magical realism. In magical realism, the simple act of explaining the supernatural would eradicate its position of equality regarding a person's conventional view of reality. Because it would then be less valid, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony.

The Supernatural and Natural—In magical realism, the supernatural is not displayed as questionable. While the reader realizes that the rational and irrational are opposite and conflicting polarities, they are not disconcerted because the supernatural is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictional world.

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## Themes

The idea of terror overwhelms the possibility of rejuvenation in magical realism. Several prominent authoritarian figures, such as soldiers, police, and sadists all have the power to torture and kill. Time is another conspicuous theme, which is frequently displayed as cyclical instead of linear. What happens once is destined to happen again. Characters rarely, if ever, realize the promise of a better life. As a result, irony and paradox stay rooted in recurring social and political aspirations. Another particularly complex theme in magical realism is the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque is carnival's reflection in literature. The concept of carnival celebrates the body, the senses, and the relations between humans. "Carnival" refers to cultural manifestations that take place in different related forms in North and South America, Europe, and the Caribbean, often including particular language and dress, as well as the presence of a madman, fool, or clown. In addition, people organize and participate in dance, music, or theater. Latin American magical realists, for instance, explore the bright life-affirming side of the carnivalesque. The reality of revolution, and continual political upheaval in certain parts of the world, also relates to magical realism. Specifically, South America is characterized by the endless struggle for a political ideal.

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## Magical Realist Authors

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Ben Okri

Isabel Allende

Syl Cheney-Coker

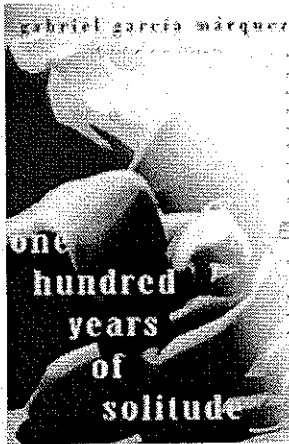
Kojo Laing

Allejo Carpentier

Toni Morrison  
Kwame Anthony Appiah  
Mario Vargas Llosa

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### Examples of Magical Realism in the works of Marquez and Okri



In One Hundred Years of Solitude, Marquez incorporates many supernatural motifs like levitation and flying carpets. Marquez also creates, in the tradition of the grotesque carnival and supernatural realism, the character of Melquiades, who is an overweight gypsy with supernatural powers. His novel contains powerful images of paradoxical bodily disgust and celebration, ambivalent celebration and laughter, and the reconstruction of human shapes, all of which exemplify characteristics of magical realism. In this novel and others, Marquez utilizes ironic distance. Okri's The Famished Road also incorporates several characteristics of magical realism. Specifically, examples of hybridity occur often. For instance, after the character Azaro wrongly believes a figure by the river to be the ferryman of the dead, he learns that she is in fact a hybrid woman, young in body but 'with an old woman's face'. The illustration is also a hybrid of ancient ritual and custom. Also, The Famished Road depicts the theme of political struggle and political corruption. The character Madame Koto is implied in the corruption of modern Nigerian politics. She encapsulates the new power herself, rather than its transgression, foreshadowing the country's civil war to come. Okri uses ironic distance in this novel as well.

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Author: Lindsay Moore, Fall 1998