Magical Realism

From the 1960s, through to the 1990s, magical realism became a much-used term in the discussion of Latin American literature. For some critics, it advertised what made the Latin American novel different from European traditions; for others, more narrowly but more usefully, it defined a specific direction that arose in the Latin American novel around the mid-20th century and that could be distinguished from Social Realism as its counterpart. This second meaning is the one that will be addressed here. Even in this case, though, the term has come to be used extremely loosely, without clarity as to the meaning of its two components (magic and realism). The only way to achieve that clarity is to place the words in a context of social and cultural history. Before doing that, however, a brief account is needed of how magical realism—as a term and as a way of writing—arose.

The key examples here are Alejo Carpentier, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Juan Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez. In the preface to his novel El reino de este mundo, 1949 (The Kingdom of this World), Carpentier proposes that “lo real maravilloso” defines the most accurate way of seeing the history of Latin America. The main characteristic of the marvellous in the real is the way in which European myths and dreams, from the Fountain of Eternal Youth to Surrealism’s desire to make dream into reality, have found their real counterparts in Latin America. The marvellous in Latin America is not a mere literary fabrication, “presupone una fe” (it assumes a belief) it is a question of people actually believing in such things as El Dorado, the city of the Golden Man, which was still being sighted, as Carpentier points out, in the 20th century.

As a method for writing novels in the 20th century, marvellous realism (though Carpentier does not actually use the term) involves juxtaposing European and native—in Carpentier’s case, African-Caribbean—perceptions of events. The best example in Carpentier’s novel is the burning at the stake of Mackandal, leader of a slave revolt. In the white version, he is seen to be consumed by the flames. In the black one, he shoots up into the sky untouched by the fire. With this method, events themselves can become ambiguous, because told from more than one narrative position, a device which responds to a situation of cultural duality. This duality between colonial and native cultures pertains in most of Latin America, giving wide relevance to Carpentier’s method.

Magical realism, as the words indicate, is the proposal of a method for giving to magic the status of reality. The main difficulty is the definition of magic. Rather than trying to arrive at a theory of it (there is no consistent theory of magical realism), it is better to trace the various ways of writing associated with it. Although the expression was first used in German art criticism in the 1920s, its Latin American meaning is different and dates from the 1950s. Works like Asturias’s Hombres de maíz (Men of Maize), Rulfo’s Pedro Páramo and above all García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude) became its defining examples. What distinguished these novels was the treatment of native and popular beliefs as valid knowledge rather than as exotic folklore. This meant that these beliefs would penetrate the language used for narrating and readers would not be able to rely on Western scientific-rational ideas associated with Progress to interpret what they read. The first few pages of any of the novels mentioned above will make that clear: in Pedro Páramo, for example, it emerges that all the characters are
dead. In opting against the rationalism of progress, these and other similar writers are adopting the ways of seeing, speaking and thinking of the regional societies which had not been modernised. In the case of García Márquez, it is the Caribbean coast of Colombia, specifically its oral traditions (full of “superstition”), which supplies a view of the world that challenges the usual Western ideas of modernity by validating magical attitudes. Neoliberal thinking of the 1980s and 1990s, as personified say in Vargas Llosa, has argued that these attitudes are “archaic” and stand in the way of progress.

However, the novels in question suggest a different way of looking at the issue. Instead of characterising the ethnic or mestizo cultures of the regions as “backward,” they propose that in Latin America modern and non-modern societies exist alongside each other, without one being superior to the other, and that it is in their creative as opposed to destructive interaction that the possibilities of an alternative, transcultural, modernity are to be found (these arguments are elaborated by J.Martín-Barbero in Procesos de comunicación y matrices de cultura and Ángel Rama in Transculturación narrativa en América Latina).

García Márquez’s methods are a mixture of this type: on the one hand Kafka and, on the other, folk-tales and popular oral memories. This mixture of the avant-garde and the nonmodern is equally to be found in Asturias, Rulfo and Guimarães Rosa, or in the films of Glauber Rocha. To call their materials magical is to draw attention to their incompatibility with those programmes of rational enlightenment and modernization which virtually all governments of the last two centuries have imposed. Historically, the “superstitions” that these artists treat seriously in their works arose during the colonial period, in the interstices of the colonial societies, where actual everyday life was governed more by a mixture of native, black African and popular Spanish beliefs than by the official version of orthodox Christian belief. This mentality continues, for example, in popular Catholicism, where saints, many of them unrecognised by the Vatican, are treated as capable of miracles, and the dead are believed to continue their lives on the earth at certain times and places.

Much criticism of magical realism ignores the fact that such a collection of beliefs is not necessarily a release but a suffocating trap (Rulfo’s characters are trapped inside the hell of popular catholicism) or more broadly a form of social control (as it is in García Márquez, particularly for the women). Magical realism in its beginnings was not a type of literary fantasy—European critics compared it with the literature of the fantastic—but a presentation of the social imagination of particular groups. Thus García Márquez has often insisted that what seems fantastic to certain readers and critics is actually an ordinary, everyday reality. It seems fantastic or exotic if you are not aware of the social and historical context.

In the 1980s, magical realism became a genre formula, transferable to scenarios that lacked the particular historical characteristics outlined above, and was even adopted as a model by non-Latin American writers (such as Angela Carter). The Chilean novelist Isabel Allende uses in her narratives magic as an amalgam of styles from previous writers like García Márquez. The term “magical” becomes problematic when it no longer includes a recognition that modern societies also use magic in that they use hidden forms of control which include what is called News, something that García Márquez learned when he was a journalist. In this light, the classic theories of realism, such as Lukács’s,
which often underlie definitions of magical realism, for example, that of Gerald Martin in *Journeys through the Labyrinth*, become untenable.

Historically, magical realism has to do with the Latin American experience of modernization, in particular with the massive migration of rural populations to cities, which produced a confrontation between urban and rural cultural universes. Removed from this base, magic becomes wish-fulfillment or drug (William Empson’s word for the Edwardian taste in magic). Latin America inherited two forms of reason that disallowed magic: medieval scholasticism and the Reason of the French Enlightenment. The first engaged in extirpating idolatry (i.e., native religions) in the colonial period, the second in eradicating superstition so as to achieve modernity. Magical realism, which draws on popular rather than erudite traditions, opens up an alternative way of looking at things.

Not all literature that explores native cultures can be called magical realist. If the marvellous, as Carpentier points out, requires faith, then it can only be experienced by a believer, in which case it is no longer marvellous. Thus the effect of the marvellous or the magical, as something capable of being experienced by a reader, arises from a dramatized juxtaposition of rationality and beliefs that do not fit. Where a writer extensively uses native cultural forms as bases for narrative, then the novel ceases to be a European, erudite form upholding a rational world that can be played off against magic. In this sense, the novels of José María Arguedas, for instance, should not be called magical realist, a fact that helps to define the limits of the concept and get rid of some of the confusions it has caused.

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*See also* entries on Best-Sellers: Isabel Allende, *El reino de este mundo* (Alejo Carpentier)

**Further Reading**


Larsen, Ross, *Fantasy and Imagination in the Mexican Narrative*, Tempe, Arizona: Center for Latin American Studies, 1977 [Chapter 7 is on Magical Realism in Mexico]

Yates, Donald A. (editor), *Otros mundos, otros fuegos: fantasía y realismo mágico en Iberoamérica*, Pittsburgh: Latin American Studies Center of Michigan University, 1975 [Published conference papers with contributions on the history of the term, etc., by excellent critics such as Emir Rodriguez Monegal]