Explainer: magical realism

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Explainer: magical realism

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Magical realism has evolved into a heavily, and ironically, political literary form. Berli Mike

A mother lives in Ohio in the aftermath of the Civil War with the child she murdered as a slave. A poor Nigerian boy, who is also an *abiku* or spirit child, fights supernaturally corrupt politicians to remain in the land of the living.

Welcome to magical realism: a type of storytelling in which the magical makes a surprising appearance in a realistic context. The contrast between the fantastical and real elements is used to heighten drama and challenge perceptions.

With roots in post-first-world-war paintings of empty European cities, magical realism has evolved into a heavily, and ironically, political literary form.

The development of magical realism

The term “magical realism” was first used by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a new style of European painting.

These paintings, unlike Surrealist art works, were not interested in the fantastic. They portrayed vacant European cityscapes, creating a sense of mystery through stylised details and a sterile atmosphere.

Such paintings are now more commonly known by other terms such as Hyperrealism or Metaphysical Painting.
Magical realism, meanwhile, has become synonymous with literature. The label was first used in Latin America to describe the worldly and metaphysical fantasy of writers such as the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and the European Franz Kafka.

But the term came to be increasingly associated with a very different kind of writing – one tied to colonial histories and postcolonial politics. Men of Maize by the Guatemalan Nobel Laureate Miguel Angel Asturias, and The Kingdom of This World by the French-Cuban Alejo Carpentier, both published in 1949, are key novels in this nationalistic tradition. They represent the historical oppression of Indigenous and African people in Latin America by colonial forces, as well as portraying their mythological beliefs.

These texts use magic to proclaim an independent identity for Latin America, although later magical realist novels typically use magic in more ironic or satirical ways.

**Magical realism on the world stage**

Writing in the journal Critical Inquiry in 1986, the critic Fredric Jameson described the term itself as having a “strange seductiveness”. Certainly magical realist literature has proven appealing.

The 1967 publication of One Hundred Years of Solitude – often referred to as the archetypal magic realist text – by the Colombian novelist and Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez triggered a “boom” in Latin American literature.

By the 1980s, the book’s success had prompted a spate of magical realist novels internationally.

Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981) won the 1981 Booker Prize and went on to be adapted for stage and screen. The House of the Spirits (1982), by the Chilean writer Isabel Allende, was a critically acclaimed bestseller and made into a film starring Meryl Streep.

Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987) – about the ex-slave living with her murdered child – won a Pulitzer Prize and was made
into a film by Oprah Winfrey.

Such critical and commercial success continued into the 1990s.

Ben Okri’s The Famished Road (1991) – about the Nigerian abiku or spirit child – won the Booker Prize and inspired the lyrics to Radiohead’s Street Spirit (Fade Out). Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things (1997) won the Booker too, launching the Indian writer’s career as a public intellectual.

In Australia, Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet (1991) won the Miles Franklin Award, was made into a television miniseries as well as a play, and is still regularly nominated as a favourite Australian novel in national polls.

As this list suggests, magical realist novels tend to come from the world’s geo-political margins. As such, they can be seen as offering readers a window into exotic worlds in which the marvellous might really exist.

Indeed, the authors of magical realist texts have often claimed that the magic in their books is real. García Márquez, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, claimed that the challenge for Latin American writers was to make their “outsized” world believable.

It can come as a surprise to readers, then, that magical realist novels are fundamentally historical and political texts. It can also be surprising to discover that they are heavily ironic.

Magical realism and irony

Both classical and contemporary magical realist texts tend to be clearly ironic in their representation of the magical as real.

Famous examples include those already mentioned above: One Hundred Years of Solitude and Midnight’s Children. Contemporary instances include Benang (1999), by the Aboriginal Australian Kim Scott, and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007), by the Dominican-American Junot Díaz.

These texts do not ask readers to believe that the fantastic is true.

Instead, they invite readers to reflect on the significance of the outrageous events in relation to the outrageous crimes of history.
For example, while the narrator of Midnight’s Children comically swears that his tale “is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother’s head truth,” his fantastical journey mirrors and mocks India’s corrupt path into independence.

Similarly, when the Aboriginal narrator of Benang levitates, it is in the context of a novel that sarcastically documents Australian colonial policies about “uplifting” Aborigines.

The irony and political edginess of magical realist texts are not recognised enough. Yet they are surely part of the peculiar frisson of this form of literature, which has had an extraordinary rise and is still going strong.