

What Is Magical Realism?

“It was as if God had decided to put to the test every capacity for surprise . . . to such an extreme that no-one knew for certain where the limits of reality lay. It was an intricate stew of truths and mirages that convulsed the ghost of José Arcadio Buendía with impatience and made him wander all through the house even in broad daylight.”

—Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Magical realism is an oft-confused genre. Agents and editors frequently say they want to find magical realistic stories, but what exactly does that mean?

It is perhaps the most misunderstood concept in literature in part because the genre/style is very specific while also being intentionally ambiguous. As Mexican literary critic Luis Leal said, “If you can explain it, then it’s not magical realism.”

So what *is* magical realism, then? It isn’t straight fantasy, or even urban fantasy, which incorporates mythical creatures and magic systems into the contemporary world, but it’s not completely realistic either. It doesn’t fit neatly into any one category, which makes it hard to label. But as we all know; the publishing world loves to attach labels to books.

Essentially, magical realism is:

Real-world setting + fantastical elements = magical realism

In visual terms, think of it as a photo that’s blurred around the edges to give it an ethereal, almost otherworldly quality. It has the *feel* of magic—that anything is possible.

Magical realism focuses on ordinary people going about the humdrum activities of daily life. Everything is normal—except for one or two elements that go beyond the realm of possibility, whether it be magic or fate or a physical connection with the earth and the creatures that inhabit it, but always in a way that celebrates the mundane.

A Brief History

Despite the common misconception, magical realism didn’t originate in South America. Instead, German art critic Franz Roch coined the term “magical realism” in 1925 to describe the New Objectivity style of painting. A few years later, the concept of magical realism crossed the ocean to South America, where it was adopted and popularized by Latin American authors throughout the twentieth century as *lo real maravilloso*, the marvelous real. Notable writers include Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Isabel Allende, among numerous others. While Hispanic writers were—and still are—a major influence in modern magical realistic literature, the style is not limited to a specific time or place. In fact, writers from across the world have adopted and adapted magical realism to fit their own cultures and within their own frame of reference.

In general, magical realism is literary, in scope and tone and style. Many works of magical realism have a lyrical or ethereal quality to the writing. Even the way sentences are phrased adds to the mystical feel of the genre.

Writers of magical realism play upon the unexplainable events in peoples’ lives, making the extraordinary and fantastical almost believable. In the end, readers are never quite sure what’s real and what isn’t; they just know that it *could* be possible. It reveals the magic that is in the world around us.

When done well, magical realism convinces us of what we’ve always hoped: that magic exists, that wishes do come true, that beyond science exists a reality that defies rational explanation. We *want* magic to be real, and so we look for it in the most unassuming places, in the ordinary events of our day-to-day lives.

Magical realism in the movies:

Edward Scissorhands
Like Water for Chocolate
Ghost
Life of Pi
The Secret of Roan Inish
Pleasantville

Like Water for Chocolate
Amélie
Field of Dreams
Midnight in Paris