



magical mystery tour

It's been derided as a lucrative marketing ploy and lauded as a means of expressing rich and complex realities. So what exactly is magical realism, and why did it come to be embraced so enthusiastically by Latin American writers? CLAIRE SCOBIE investigates.

I don't know how much of my life is dream, real, imagination, memory. I don't know how much of my memory is invented,' says Isabel Allende, the tiny Chilean writer, settling into the sofa at the Hilton café, Adelaide. 'My life is about accepting how subjective it can be ... If I did not accept that the world is a very mysterious place, that I don't know anything and that everything is possible, how could I write fiction?' As she talks in a singsong Spanish lilt, her hands make circles in the air; her dark chocolate eyes flicker like a bird's. With hair tinted copper and wearing a long elegant dress, the Queen of Magical Realism is a very stylish 62-year-old.

Allende was in Adelaide for the launch of her memoir, *My Invented Country*, and her latest novel, *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon*, at the Writers' Festival in March. She was undoubtedly one of the most popular authors there. Since her acclaimed debut *The House of the Spirits* was published in 1982, Allende has been associated with magical realism. She once defined magical realism as 'a genre that combines reality and surreality onto the same plane, therefore, a perfect device for expressing a reality that is rich and complex'. So is that the same as fantasy? She sips her black coffee and says: 'Fantasy is out of the blue. It doesn't have any basis in reality. The best example is the invisible cloak or the magic wand in Harry Potter. These are magic elements that empower the heroes in the story. Magic realism is about the serious things in real life that we can see but we can't explain, like coincidences, premonitions, prophecies, dreams – all those passions and emotions

TOP: FROM THE COVER OF THE WATERBURY CHRONICLE AT BOTTOM: FROM THE COVER OF THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

that sometimes drive people to war or to murder, or to love.'

Defining any genre that is the subject of academic theses and critics' staunch opinions is fraught, and magical realism, with its shifting boundaries between myth and memory, visible and invisible, slips between categories. Perhaps saying what it isn't is a good starting point. It isn't speculative or science fiction (no aliens, no flying saucers), or fantasy (no Gollum, no orcs). It's firmly rooted in this world – yet depicts a worldview contrary to the so-called rational, Western perspective. Prosaic reality is interwoven with dreamlike and mysterious elements, and for readers to suspend their disbelief the writer must utterly respect this alternative world.

It isn't confined to Latin America, although Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez spearheaded the movement with his 1967 classic *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, replete with flying carpets and raining yellow flowers that 'fell in a silent storm'. The genre's hallmarks include the use of opposites – rural/urban, Western/Indigenous – and recurring themes are ghosts who talk, carnivals and humans who shape-shift, such as the young woman with a haggard old woman's face in Ben Okri's *Famished Road*. In *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel the overlay of European culture with Indian tradition creates a tension that gives depth to the narrative and texture to the writing.

Influenced by the genre, *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris opens with a carnival. Not only does the spectacle usher in the wind of change to a small French town, it brings Vianne Rocher, with her witchery of forbidden chocolate delights, to threaten the conservative community. Similarly, when Melquiades the gypsy waltzes into Márquez's Macondo nothing will ever be the same again. This grotesque figure with supernatural powers brings knowledge to the patriarch, Jose Arcadio Buendía, who sets up an alchemist's laboratory, and sorrow descends on the isolated community.

Magical realism is often recognisable as a thinly disguised social critique on a place or period of history where terror reigns, usually embodied in one central figure: the tyrannical Caribbean dictator in *Autumn of the Patriarch* by Márquez or Esteban Trueba in *The House of the Spirits*, given to violent rages. Interweaving the mundane seamlessly with the miraculous allows

even the most gruesome or heart-rending tale to be told with humour, however black, and irony. Time is fluid, often circular – past, present, future meld. In *Shame* by Salman Rushdie the plot switches between the 14th century and present-day Pakistan (well sort of), a country called 'Q'. It is a book where 'two countries, real and fictional, occupy the same space, or almost the same space' and is written 'at a slight angle to reality'. A political satire with dark undertones and grotesque moments, by turns Rabelaisian and miraculous, it is a blend of myth and history that exposes the moral corruption of public life.

Allende's earlier novels, particularly *The House of the Spirits*, are broad-brush epics with characters mined from her own eccentric family. She interlaces family sagas with chilling political events (Salvador Allende's downfall and the rise of Pinochet's brutal dictatorship) and fictional characters are based on real

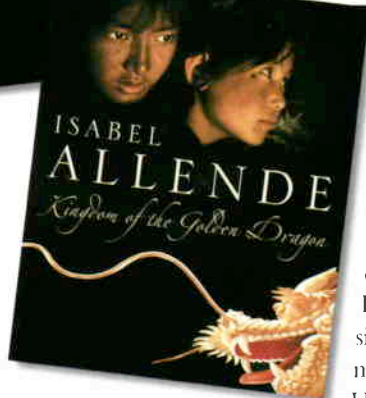
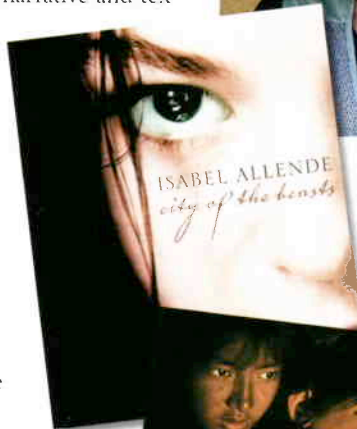
figures – the famous Chilean poet Pablo Neruda is thinly disguised as 'The Poet', her own grandmother appears as the clairvoyant mystic Clara del Valle. In her later works Allende abandons magical realism: *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia* are historical romances; *Paula*, a letter to Isabel's dying daughter, is non-fiction, a haunting masterpiece in its searing emotional intensity.

With her latest trilogy for young adults Allende says she has returned to her magical realism heritage and relishes it: 'Aaah, yes – it gives you so many resources. You can include a dream, a premonition, and it works.' *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon* is the sequel to *City of the Beasts*, which

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introduced 14-year-old Alex Cold, his irascible grandmother Kate, and the heroine, 'honey-coloured' Nadia Santos, who are on a quest for a stinking beast in the Amazonian jungle. Cloaked as a mythical adventure, this is a moralist fable, a battle cry against the destruction of rainforests and Indigenous cultures. In *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon* we meet the fearless trio again in a Himalayan land, home to half-witted yetis and compassionate lamas. This eco-paradise is threatened by a wicked multimillionaire, 'The Collector'. Reminiscent of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, even Paulo Coelho, it is an archetypal tale of good versus evil.

Allende insists this series is not fantasy: 'As opposed to the invisibility cloak in Harry Potter,' she says, 'I have Indians that are called the Invisible Indians who paint their body in such a way





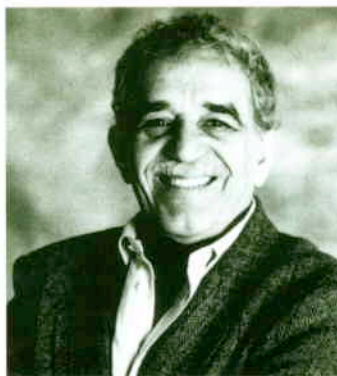
that they blend into nature and walk so silently that you can have them three yards away and you don't see them. So they disappear but there's an explanation. In the Himalayas, I have the lama communicate telepathically. It is sort of magic but it has been studied and there are people who can do it.'

The first reference to magical realism is by a German art critic, Franz Roh, who in 1925 coined the term to describe how Surrealist and Expressionist painters were portraying reality in radical and enigmatic ways. In 1949 the term *lo real maravilloso americano* was discussed by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier as a means of defining Latin American culture. 'The marvellous begins to be unmistakably marvellous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle),' he wrote, continuing that in Latin America, 'the strange is commonplace and always was commonplace'. His novel *The Kingdom of the World*, about a slave uprising in Haiti, inspired Márquez's generation to explore the paradoxes between colonial politics and indigenous mystical beliefs.

In 1967 Guatemalan novelist Miguel Angel Asturias won the Nobel Prize for literature and described his style as 'magic surrealism'. Despite relative anonymity in the West, he is considered a grandfather of the movement for his novels *Men of Maize* and *El Señor Presidente*, which contrast the terrifying phantasmagoric reality of political life with the spirituality of the Mayans.

For the next two decades it was a phrase that became synonymous with Latin American literature, known as *El Boom* – a lucrative marketing ploy for some (Márquez had countless copycats), a frustrating label for others. South American writers unhappy with being pigeonholed complained that magical realism marginalised and diminished their writing, that it had become a literary fad created by Western critics. It became as exportable as South American footballers, with Márquez carrying the trophy, Octavio la Paz and Carlos Fuentes of Mexico, Pablo Neruda of Chile and Mario Vargas Llosa from Peru the star players.

Julio Cortázar and Márquez have said magical realism is a true reflection of Latin America's worldview, portraying their particu-



Gabriel García Márquez

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larly rich, mythical culture that shifts between what can be empirically proven and what cannot. The godfather [Márquez] of the genre once declared that in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* there is no magic, it is merely realistic events portrayed as if they were magical. The difference is subtle yet profound: it is a question of perception. Márquez argues that the scene where a trickle of blood runs down the village streets, turning right angles and informing Ursula of the death of her husband, is a metaphor for how bad news spreads, but the reader may see it differently.

Predominantly a boys' club, it was not until Isabel Allende published *The House of the Spirits* in 1982 that the male bastion was broken. Allende admits that her success encouraged other Latin American women writers to follow, but personally takes no credit. 'I may have been the first, but the time was ripe ... There have been women writing forever but their voices were silenced by this male-chauvinist, patriarchal society.'

The shifting boundaries between the mystical and ordinary are Allende's hallmarks – in her books and in her life. After all, she grew up in a household where her grandmother could move the sugar bowl with her paranormal powers and preferred telepathy to telephones. In *My Invented Country* Allende writes, 'half of Chile is guided by the horoscope or by seers'.

She doesn't have her grandmother's gifts but is

guided by her dreams and has uncanny intuition. In her memoir she writes that her grandmother 'maintained that there are multiple dimensions to reality ... [and] introduced me to magical realism long before the so-called boom in Latin American literature made it fashionable.'

Magical realism is a worldwide phenomenon. It has influenced writers as varied as Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison; Günter Grass, Abe Kobo and Jorge Luis Borges. For Allende, magical realism is present in African poetry and Arabian tales, Scandinavian sagas, Gothic novels and Indian literature. So is it constantly being reinvented? 'That was the case ten years ago, but that fad has passed ... It became like a device of Latin American literature imitated by other writers in other places.

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But,' she adds pointedly, 'in Latin America there are writers that abhor magical realism.'

José Saramago, author of *Baltasar and Blimunda*, who won the 1998 Nobel Prize for literature, uses it to explore the metaphor of flight (and of figuratively moving between the worlds) in his novel set in 18th-century Lisbon. To fly or not to fly is the theme of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, about Sophie Fevvers, part-woman, part-swan, born from an egg, who seduces Jack Walsler, a straight-laced, fresh-faced reporter who is trying to discredit her claims of flying. Set in the shifting world of cabarets and circuses on a tour through early 19th-century Europe, it is by turns bawdy and touching.

Jeannette Winterson's novels may not strictly fit into the genre but there are hallmarks, especially in *The Passion*, where the scenes in Venice have a mesmerising and not-of-this-world quality. The heroine Villanelle has webbed feet and appears to change sex outwardly as effortlessly as she changes her clothes; Patrick the de-frocked priest has a squint so powerful that his telescopic vision can spy on wenches undressing two villages away. Yet with Winterson there isn't the whole-hearted acceptance of the supernatural that you find in Allende or Esquivel, and this instils a flicker of doubt in the reader, deliberately played upon by her repetition of, 'I'm telling you stories. Trust me'.

Like Water for Chocolate, about the eccentric Mexican De La Garza family, is a book in which the magical is as integral as the recipes. The contrast between the mundane descriptions of cooking and the effects the mouth-watering dishes have on those who consume them gives this novel great humour and originality.

But the days when magical realism was at its fashionable apex have passed. Says Allende, 'This generation is not concerned with politics because it's not a time of dictatorships and repression. They are more concerned with drugs, crime and more influenced by the movies, images, urban life than revolutions or Indians.'

So has magical realism been discarded on the literary scrap heap? According to the younger generation of Latin American writers it has. Since 1996 there's been a backlash against 'the jalapeño-scented, siesta-happy atmosphere that permeates too much of the South American literary landscape', says Chilean celebrity novelist Alberto Fuguet, editor of a collection of short stories by 18 new writers, all under 35, entitled *McOndo*. Fuguet, maverick author of *Bad Vibes* and *The Movies of My Life*, has rattled the old guard with *McOndo*, a pun on Márquez's Macondo, and influenced by McDonald's, Apple Macs and condos. The book's launch was in McDonald's in Santiago and the new guard toasted their gritty urban reality – American TV, net surfing and Eminem, individual stories rather than family sagas, globalisation not nationalism – with Coca-Cola.

The new kids on the block include Jaime Bayly (Peru), Sergio Gómez (Chile), Edmundo Paz Soldán (Bolivia), Naief Yeyha (Mexico), and Rodrigo Fresán and Martin Rejtman (Argentina). Some Latin American critics decry this addition to their literary lexicon, some benefit: Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat, a professor at Emory University in Atlanta, now teaches a course 'From Macondo to *McOndo*' and says, '*McOndo* replaced magical realism with virtual realism'. gr