

Contemporary Magical Realism

BY ELIZABETH GONZALEZ JAMES

MAGICAL REALISM MAY BE ONE of the least understood genres in modern literature, probably because, rather than being a genre in and of itself, it crosses many. Magical realism—where characters accept extraordinary things as part of their otherwise rational world—is more of an approach to storytelling wherein characters experience a reality somewhat different from our own. Ghosts, flying carpets, butterflies that follow a beautiful woman wherever she goes—these elements do not ask *what if* but present universal truths that could not otherwise be explained by traditional realism.

With his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967; trans. 1970), Gabriel García Márquez, considered the father of magical realism, introduced the world to this technique and awakened a global interest in Latin American literature. Between the 1960s and 1980s, translations of other Latin American magical realists followed: Isabel Allende, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, Mario Vargas Llosa, and many more. The social and political unrest sweeping Latin America strongly influenced their work, which often focused on the people caught in the crossfire of a violent postcolonial world.

Some contemporary magical realists borrow heavily from the Latin American tradition. Helen Oyeyemi's characters, for example, often confront the legacies of colonialism and find themselves bridging cultures. Luis Alberto Urrea's work addresses the unforbearing realities facing Mexican peasants and the curative properties of magic and hope. Salman Rushdie's strange, hallucinatory adventures "give the reader a sense of just how fantastic recent history has become" (*New York Times*).

Other contemporary magical realists steer away from political tragedy and instead use fantastic elements to underscore the magic in everyday life. Aimee Bender, Alice Hoffman, and Kelly Link, for instance, make the fantastic familiar and speak matter-of-factly about marrying ogres, taking trains to the underworld, or living in a carnival sideshow.

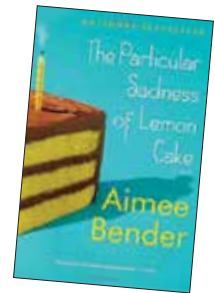
We present an overview of some contemporary magical realists. Their stories range from tragic to comic and many that fall somewhere in between, but all are guaranteed to make you wonder just how *real* the real world is after all.

Aimee Bender (1969–)

Bender bills herself as a surrealist, and, in the tradition of Salvador Dalí's melting clocks and René Magritte's raining businessmen, her stories "begin with a premise just on the fringe of the familiar, then give it a tantalizing twist" (*New York Times*). The characters in her short story collections—

The Girl in the Flammable Skirt (1998), *Willful Creatures* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2005), and *The Color Master* (2013)—are

certainly bizarre. In one story, a woman marries and raises children with an ogre, but she leaves him to confront the world on her own after the ogre accidentally devours their children in a fit of monstrous hunger. The circumstances faced by her characters may be absurd, but they are nonetheless "imbued with recognizable human pathos" (*New York Times*). Bender's *New York Times* best-selling novel, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2010), retells the familiar tale of the child who must grow up before her time. The young Rose discovers an extraordinary ability to taste her mother's emotional states through her cooking. Burdened with knowing her mother's loneliness, Rose must make sense of her family's façade, which disguises their inner turmoil.



Luis Alberto Urrea (1955–)

Urrea, born in Mexico, is an award-winning poet, novelist, and memoirist—*The Devil's Highway* (★★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2004), a true

account of Mexican immigrants lost in the Arizona desert, was a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize—and his novels elegantly synthesize factual events, personal history, and lyrical prose. Urrea spent 20 years researching his masterpiece, *The Hummingbird's Daughter* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2005), a sweeping and mostly true



tale of his great-aunt Teresita, whose miraculous healing powers helped spur late 19th-century Mexico into revolution, earning her both sainthood and the dubious label of the Most Dangerous Woman in Mexico. The sequel, *Queen of America* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2011), follows Teresita to America, where she grapples with the tedious demands of everyday sainthood while navigating a foreign landscape. Distant lands also figure prominently in *Into the Beautiful North* (2009), a modern adaptation of the spaghetti western, *The Magnificent Seven*. Urrea's only graphic novel, *Mr. Mendoza's Paintbrush* (2010), is the charming tale of a man with a magical paintbrush who acts as the self-appointed conscience of a small town in Mexico.

Helen Oyeyemi (1984–)

Oyeyemi, a British novelist hailed as “a direct heir to [Shirley Jackson’s] gothic throne” (*Austin Chronicle*), made international headlines in 2005, at age 19, when her first novel was published. Born in Nigeria and raised in London, Oyeyemi grew up between these two worlds, and her characters often bridge similar gaps. Displacement, both cultural and personal, is a theme in her first three novels, *The Icarus Girl* (2005), *White Is for Witching* (2009), and *The Opposite House* (2007), where one character, who lives in a house with two doors—one opening to London, the other to Lagos—is literally stuck between worlds. In the unsettling *Boy, Snow, Bird* (★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2014) and *Mr. Fox* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2012), fairy tale characters are disabused of their fantasies and magical ways of thinking as they confront realities (racial identity in *Boy, Snow, Bird* and violence against women in *Mr. Fox*) they would rather ignore. Her latest book, *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours* (2016), a collection of thematically linked stories about real and metaphorical locks and keys, questions whether it’s best to leave some doors unopened.



Alice Hoffman (1952–)

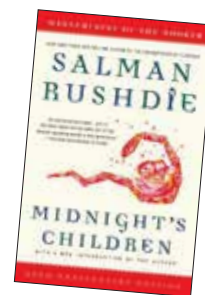
Since her debut in 1977, hardly a year has passed in which Hoffman has not written a book. She is best known for her novel, *Practical Magic* (1995), and the 1998 movie of the same name, about two sisters who, as women and powerful witches, grapple with how passion rules their lives. Witches are feminist icons for Hoffman, representing, she says, “the history of the disenfranchised and the lost,” and they appear again in *Blackbird House* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2004), a dozen



interconnected stories tracing the history of a Cape Cod farmhouse over two centuries. *The Ice Queen* (★★★ July/Aug 2005) features another strong female protagonist in search of love and passion: a death-obsessed librarian with the power to make her wishes come true. One of Hoffman’s recent novels, *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* (★★★ May/June 2014), features a lonely girl living in a Coney Island boardwalk attraction in the early 1900s, searching for love and acceptance despite a freakish deformity. See also *The River King* (2000), *The Story Sisters* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2009), and *The Red Garden* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2011).

Salman Rushdie (1947–)

Rushdie, a British Indian writer, mixes historical fiction, magical realism, political revolution, music, pop culture, social critique, theology, and philosophy in novels that reflect the “sweep and chaos of contemporary reality, its resemblance to a dream or nightmare” (*New York Times*). He is perhaps as well known for spawning controversy as he is for his writing: his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a magical realist work partly inspired by the life of Muhammad, led Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a fatwa calling for his death. In *Midnight’s Children* (1981; ♦ **BOOKER PRIZE**), Rushdie employs telepathy, time travel, and fluid gender to explore revolution. In *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2015), he takes readers on a storytelling adventure in the vein of *The Arabian Nights* with Geronimo, a Mumbai-born gardener living in New York. His irksome ability to levitate leads to a prolonged period of “strangeness” brought about by four evil spirits. Defending his sometimes criticized use of magical realism, Rushdie told *The Hindu*, “Once you accept that stories are not true ... then you understand that a flying carpet and *Madam Bovary* are untrue in the same way, and both are ways of arriving at the truth by the road of untruth.” See also *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), *Fury* (2001), *Shalimar the Clown* (★★★★ **SELECTION**, Nov/Dec 2005), and *The Enchantress of Florence* (★★★ Sept/Oct 2008).



Kelly Link (1969–)

Link is “an American Haruki Murakami, or a blue-collar Angela Carter, or Franz Kafka with a better understanding of ladies footwear and bad first dates,” writes Karen Russell about Link’s *Stranger Things Happen: Stories* (2011). Winner of several Locus, Hugo, and Nebula awards and a finalist for the 2016 Pulitzer, Link is one of America’s foremost fabulist short story writers. Her first short story collection, *Magic for Beginners: Stories* (2005), includes a tale about the marital difficulties that can arise when one partner is dead and the other is not. *Get In Trouble: Stories* (★★★★ May/

June 2015), her most recent collection, features, in a manner similar to Raymond Carver, “lower-class Americans whose dreams don’t come to much” (*New York Times*)—a superhero attending a dull hotel conference in order to audition potential sidekicks, affluent teenagers who spend their meandering days building pyramids to house their future corpses. Instead of satirizing, Link’s magical elements create and color a world where strange people experience familiar feelings of love and heartbreak that lead to small but genuine epiphanies.



Ben Okri (1959–)

When Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*) was asked who he believed represented “a new generation of African writer,” he named Okri. Born in Nigeria and raised for a time in London, Okri returned to a civil-war torn Nigeria in 1968. Such political turmoil influenced his best-known book, *The Famished Road* (1991). Winner of the Booker Prize, his third novel tells the story of Azaro, a “spirit child” torn between remaining in the war-ravaged world of the living or the spirit world of “pure dreams.” Okri revisits Azaro’s story in *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). *In Arcadia* (2002) centers on Lao, a foul-tempered television host who is commissioned by an unseen patron to produce a documentary based on the search for paradise. *The Age of Magic* (2015), the sequel, picks up Lao’s journey once again as he and the film crew ride a train through Europe on their way to Greece, where the travelers are tormented by demons, literally, and meditate on the universal search for paradise. See also *Starbook* (2007) and *Astonishing the Gods* (1995).



Laura Esquivel (1950–)

Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies (1989; trans. 1992), Esquivel’s debut novel, cemented the Mexican writer’s international reputation. Starring Tita and her gift for magical cooking, each chapter begins with a recipe. In one memorable scene, Tita is forced to bake a wedding cake for the marriage of her lover and her sister: “Crying as she bakes, her tears mingle with the ingredients and unleash a wave of longing in everyone who eats a piece.” *The Law of Love* (1995; trans.



1996), which takes place in 23rd-century Mexico City, mixes magical realism with science fiction and a healthy dose of New Age skepticism. Azucena, a scientist who helps others come to terms with their past lives, must reconcile her own past transgressions in order to be united with her twin soul, a man she’s been waiting to meet for thousands of years. Esquivel’s most recent book, *Pierced by the Sun* (2014; trans. 2016), is much grittier than her previous novels. The redemptive qualities of hope and love nonetheless emerge through Lupita (who some reviewers have posited may be a stand-in for the country of Mexico), a troubled policewoman attempting to solve the murder of a local politician killed by a violent drug gang.

Nicholas Christopher (1951–)

Christopher, who has been compared to Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, is one of America’s most inventive writers. His rich talents shine in *Veronica* (1996), where Leo meets the beautiful and mysterious Veronica on the streets of Manhattan. No ordinary woman, Veronica is the daughter of a famed magician—missing the last 10 years since a time travel magic act went awry—and Leo soon discovers he is the key to rescuing her father from the past. *A Trip to the Stars* (2000) follows 10-year-old Loren, twice orphaned, who is kidnapped by his uncle and taken to a strange hotel in Las Vegas filled with dreamers and “people looking for lost things.” The cast of characters is large and undulating—some change names midbook, and another frequently sheds his body to live in other people’s—but it is “thoroughly satisfying, [and] an erudite and artful entertainment” (*New York Times*). Though not as overtly magical as Christopher’s other novels, *The Bestiary* (2007) has mythical and supernatural touches. The title refers to the mythic Caravan Bestiary, “a renegade religious encyclopedia dedicated to the beasts that were barred from Noah’s ark” (*New York Times*), and one young orphan’s search for it (and his identity) as he comes of age in the 1950s and 1960s.

Further Reading

- ALBUQUERQUE | RUDOLFO ANAYA (1992)
- SO FAR FROM GOD | ANA CASTILLO (1993)
- THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS | ARUNDHATI ROY (1997)
- THE KNIFE THROWER | STEVEN MILLHAUSER (1998)
- PEACE LIKE A RIVER | LEIF ENGER (2001)
- DR. KING’S REFRIGERATOR: AND OTHER BEDTIME STORIES | CHARLES JOHNSON (2005)
- THE STOLEN CHILD | KEITH DONOHUE (2006)
- THE VIRGIN OF FLAMES | CHRIS ABANI (2007)
- THE LADY MATADOR’S HOTEL | CRISTINA GARCIA (2008)
- THE NIGHT CIRCUS | ERIN MORGENSTERN (2011)
- THE TIGER’S WIFE | TEA OBREHT (2011)
- TRAVELER OF THE CENTURY | ANDRES NEUMAN (2009; 2012)
- THE GOLEM AND THE JINNI | HELENE WECKER (2013)
- VOROSHILOVGRAD | SERHIY ZHADAN (2010) ■