

What Is Magical Realism? Definition and Examples of Magical Realism in Literature, Seven Magical Realism Novels You Should Read

Magical realism is one of the most unique literary movements of the last century. While most commonly associated with Latin American authors, writers from all over the world have made big contributions to the genre.

What Is Magical Realism?

Magical realism is a genre of literature that depicts the real world as having an undercurrent of magic or fantasy. Magical realism is a part of the realism genre of fiction.

Within a work of magical realism, the world is still grounded in the real world, but fantastical elements are considered normal in this world. Like fairy tales, magical realism novels and short stories blur the line between fantasy and reality.

What Is the History of Magical Realism?

The term “magischer realismus,” which translates to “magic realism,” was first used in 1925 by German art critic Franz Roh in his book *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus (After Expressionism: Magical Realism)*. He used the term to describe the “Neue Sachlichkeit,” or New Objectivity, a style of painting that was popular in Germany at the time that was an alternative to the romanticism of expressionism.

Roh used the term “magischer realismus” to emphasize how magical, fantastic, and strange normal objects can appear in the real world when you stop and look at them.

The genre was growing in popularity in South America when *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* was translated into Spanish in 1927. During a stay in Paris, French-Russian Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier was influenced by magic realism. He further developed Roh’s concept into what he called “marvelous realism,” a distinction he felt applied to Latin America as a whole.

In 1955, literary critic Angel Flores coined the term “magical realism” (as opposed to “magic realism”) in English in an essay, stating that it combines elements of magic realism and marvelous realism. He named Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges the first magical realist, based on his previously-published collection of short stories *Historia Universal de la Infamia (A Universal History of Infamy)*.

While Latin American authors made magical realism what it is today, authors had previously written stories

about mundane situations with fantastical elements before magical realism was a recognized literary genre. For example, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*—a novel with themes that today's critics would consider to be magical realism—was published in 1915, a decade before Roh wrote about magic realism and well before the genre emerged in Latin American literature.

What Are the Characteristics of Magical Realism?

Every magical realism novel is different, but there are certain things they all include, such as:

- **Realistic setting.** All magical realism novels take place in a setting in this world that's familiar to the reader.
- **Magical elements.** From talking objects to dead characters to telepathy, every magical realism story has fantastical elements that do not occur in our world. However, they're presented as normal within the novel.
- **Limited information.** Magical realism authors deliberately leave the magic in their stories unexplained in order to normalize it as much as possible and reinforce that it is part of everyday life.
- **Critique.** Authors often use magical realism to offer an implicit critique of society, most notably politics and the elite. The genre grew in popularity in parts of the world like Latin America that were economically oppressed and exploited by Western countries. Magic realist writers used the genre to express their distaste and critique American Imperialism.

- **Unique plot structure.** Magical realism does not follow a typical narrative arc with a clear beginning, middle, and end like other literary genres. This makes for a more intense reading experience, as the reader does not know when the plot will advance or when the conflict will take place.

Seven Magical Realism Novels You Should Read

Read these magical realism stories for inspiration when writing your own novel or short story. They all blur the line between fantasy and reality and include magical elements that don't exist in the real world:

1. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez (1967). A multi-generational story about a patriarch who dreams about a city of mirrors called Macondo then creates it according to his own perceptions.
2. *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie (1981). A novel about a boy with telepathic powers because he was born at midnight the same day India became an independent country.
3. *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende (1982). A multi-generational story about a woman with paranormal powers and a connection to the spirit world.
4. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987). A novel about a former slave haunted by an abusive ghost.
5. *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel (1989). A novel about a woman whose emotions are infused in her cooking, causing unintentional effects to the people she feeds.

6. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami (1994). A novel about a man searching for his missing cat, and eventually his missing wife, in a world underneath the streets of Tokyo.
7. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman (2013). A novel about a man who reflects on his past after returning to his hometown for a funeral.