

## *Book Review*

# The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham (Switzerland), 2020. xxi + 650 pp.

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**Published online:** 7 October 2022

**To cite this article:** David H. J. Neo. 2022. Book review: The Palgrave handbook of magical realism in the twenty-first century. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 21: 115–118. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2022.21.10>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2022.21.10>

Magical realism has a chequered history with beginnings in Europe. *Magischer Realismus* or “magic realism” was coined by German art critic, Franz Roh, in 1923 to describe certain metaphysical elements that he saw in paintings. However, the term did not gain currency—*Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) and eventually Post-Expressionism became more accepted terms (Crockett 1999, 148–155). Magical realism found its way into literature when Massimo Bontempelli (1878–1960), an Italian writer and critic, first applied the term to literature in 1926 (Walter 1993, 13). But it only gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s when it was used to describe the “boom” literary phenomenon of Latin American fiction. And it was in Latin America that this aesthetic category developed as a form of postcolonial resistance and discourse. However, this malleable and contentious term is difficult to define. Some critics have even said it defies definition; yet there is a tacit understanding of the term. At the basic level, magical realism deals with the real and unreal in quotidian or everyday life and does not dichotomise the two. Amaryll Beatrice Chanady’s *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (1985) demonstrates the blending of the real and unreal in Latin American fiction and differentiates magical realism from the fantastic, arguing that the fantastic create antinomies of the real and unreal. However, the European strand of magical realism (especially with Eastern Europe) is more complex and with its influence of Freud and Surrealism, challenges Chanady’s ideas.

In 1995, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris’s publication of *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* was a much needed, and has become an authoritative collection of critical essays on magical realism. It was the first of such a collection. At that time, they considered it an “international commodity” and expounded that it was “a return on capitalism’s hegemonic investment in its colonies, [...] now achieving a compensatory extension of its market worldwide” (2). They emphasise its “eccentric” nature that gnaws at the “controlling centre,” creating a space for diversity and where “magic is often given as cultural corrective,” as non-Western cultural systems “privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation” (3). To commemorate Zamora and Faris’s landmark volume, Stephen Hart and Ouyang Wen-Chin, published *A Companion to Magical Realism* a decade later (20), noting magical realism’s continued popularity and currency: “There is no stopping it [magical realism]. It is in Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Italian, Japanese, Persian, Portuguese, Spanish, Tibetan, and Turkish, to name but a few languages. It is in fiction, film, and the arts” (13). However, most of the chapters in this collection still focuses on Latin America and literature; and not on film nor other forms of art. Nevertheless, the fact still remains that critical scholarly books on magical realism were sparse then and still is today.

Therefore, Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier’s latest anthology published another 15 years later (2020), is certainly another long-awaited and welcomed critical companion. Perez and Chevalier contend (chapter 1) that the persistence of magical realism in the 21st century are proliferations of “Being,” arguing

that it has become a “global genre.” They highlight postcolonial decolonised energies and attribute the phenomenon to the more intense, continual travel and migrations, along with technology shrinking time and space, increasing the contact between and within cultures that bring about reimagined spaces within continually reconfigured worlds—thus, birthing myriad forms of Being (1–10): “The concerns of contemporary magical realist literatures, then, consist in revealing how many worlds and many beings fold into each other as a result of peoples living in close relation. This confluence of bodies and cultures, now part of a variety of social contexts, makes the fantastic claims that the “magical” is woven into the everyday lives of the characters populating global literatures” (2). This extensive volume is divided into 6 parts with 27 chapters.

The first part: “Global Migrations of Magical Realism,” explores it as a “global genre” and opens with Mariano Siskind (chapter 2) giving an overview of magical realism from its provenance to a global phenomenon. While María del Pilar Blanco (chapter 5) analyses descriptive tendencies and strategies, focusing on Latin America’s iconic magical realist writer, Gabriel García Márquez’s work (10). The other two chapters by Lydie Moudileno (three) focus on African fiction and Roanne L. Kantor (four) examines South Asia. Since much of the discourse on magical realism have focused on Latin America, I will give special attention to Asia in this review (although there are not many chapters in this volume that deals with Asia). Kantor’s chapter takes Salman Rushdie (with *Midnight’s Children*) as the defining moment, the “figure” and even “the event” for magical realism (83), examining how the culture(s) of South Asia have spawned it and also the other magical realist works that followed after Rushdie’s, which bears much similarity to Latin America (Kantor also argues how Gabriel García Márquez has influenced Rushdie) and rest of the non-Western world.

“Magic, Aesthetics, and Negativity” (part 2) explores the aesthetic dimensions and negative animating force in contemporary artistic practices (2). Perez (chapter 6) theorises deontological time in *Gods Go Begging* (Alfredo Vea) by studying the negative aesthetics of the ghetto, prison, and war, where time undergoes a process of violation, depleting its animating properties and reducing Being to a ghostly iteration (10). He writes: “...the ghetto, prison, and war express a social design dedicated to death” (139), ending with: “It dares us, in short, to enter time with a difference, to reanimate, layer, and expand time, making way for magical futures and temporalities” (140). Nicholas F. Radel (chapter 7) examines marginalisation by deconstructing the “controlling centre” in Andrew Holleran (*Dancer from the Dance*) and Edmund White’s (*Nocturnes for the King of Naples*) work by focusing on multi-ethnic gay ontology and sensibility (11), which he argues is a “forgotten variety of colonialist discourse” (146). Maria Takolander (chapter 8) continues this postcolonial discussion downunder in terms of “native survivance” (182) and Aboriginal culture, discussing the ironic aesthetics (comedy, playfulness, subversiveness) particularly through Waanyi writer, Alexis Wright—who “ironize the foundational lies of the colonial past—such as the original myth of *terra nullius*, which held that Australia was not meaningfully occupied prior to European settlement” (177), evoking living Indigenous history, knowledge and system of 65,000 years (177–180). It ends with Carine Mardorossian and Angela Veronica Wong (chapter 9) that deals with “magical terrestrealism” in *Claire of the Sea Light* (Edwidge Danticat). They negatively examine the extraordinariness of humanity’s insatiable overexploitation of (Haiti’s) natural resources, which is inseparable from its colonial legacy (208).

“Magical Conditions” (part 3) probe its psychic and visceral aspects (11). Chevalier (chapter 10) analyses black humanity by deconstructing “civilised” whiteness (217) and Western universalisms (11) through Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*; and Joshua Lam’s last chapter (chapter 14) deals with “Black magic” in Ishmael Reed’s *Conjugating Hindi* that also examines the decolonial struggles of the African and Indian (indigenous) diasporas using “black pathology and hysteria” (13) as a restitutive measure against oppression. But Eugene Arva’s (chapter 11) is the most intriguing where he employs the theory of “traumatic imagination” or “shock chronotope” (12) He explains it as “A traumatic experience may often trigger off a chain reaction that starts with a psychological condition of woundedness, engages a creative psychic function, and ultimately leads to an artistic image” (241); arguing that magical realism (which has an intrinsic visual component whether realised outside of our imagination or not) is a result of “traumatic imagination.” Similarly, Claudine Raynaud (chapter 12) sees enchantment as “poetic imagination” (12) in Toni Morrison’s work that breaks away from the conventions of “realism” (where animals talk and butterflies cry), capturing the African-American discredited knowledge and cosmology that also stems from traumatic experiences (12). Md Abu Shalid Abdullah (chapter 13) in Giocondo Belli’s *The Inhabited Woman* studies female agency (293), largely ignored in official history, as “silenced” voices in the social and political violence of Nicaragua (12).

In “Racial and Ethnic Imaginaries” (part 4), Johanna Garvey (chapter 19) conceives “magical embodiment” as strategies against colonisation and plantation logics for over five centuries in the Atlantic world by analysing Toni Morrison’s fiction (435); similarly, Chad B. Infante (chapter 17) deconstructs colonial violence through Blackness and Indianness (indigenous) in Junot Diaz’s work from a feminist perspective.

Caroline Rody (chapter 15) studies contemporary post-Holocaust Jewish fiction, which according to her, evinces the clashing overlay of cultures between secular modernity and traditional Jewish culture “because the immensity and outrage of the Holocaust demand wildly resourceful expression” (337). Whereas Nicole Rizzuto (chapter 16) analyses South African, Bessie Head’s work, discussing magical realism in terms of ethico-political and eco-critical consciousness (13) through “animist materialism” (377). But Keming Liu’s (chapter 18) looks at today’s postsocialist and postmodern China, examining Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine* that employs cannibalism and corruption, revealing the economic prosperity or China’s decadent frenzy of consumerism “to highlight the poverty of the masses underneath the façade of wealth and glitz in modern China, or the awful truth that the soul of China has been sold for material wealth” (429). Part 4 and 5 especially, illustrate that magical realism is a global genre by taking us through “the changing contours of race, ethnicity, and migratory displacements precipitated by economic instability and social upheavals in recent decades” (2).

“(Trans)National Illusions” (part 5) focuses on transnationalism, refugees, and migration (14). Lorna I. Pérez (chapter 20) studies the classic magical realist text, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—her provocative reading of the nation (referencing Fredric Jameson and Benedict Anderson) challenges colonial logic, exposing its fractures and breaks, shattering the construct of the nation (465–467). While Marion Rohrleitner (chapter 22) deals with the violence undocumented migrants experience (at the US-Mexico border) in Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper*, whose “text defies audience expectations of autobiographical inspired realist immigrant novel by using highly experimental, metafictional narrative mode” (14). But Mai-Linh K. Hong’s (chapter 21) provides a fascinating analysis on Quan Barry’s *She Weeps Each Time You’re Born*. Barry’s biracial background (Black-Asian poet born in 1973), who was raised in America by an adoptive family uses magical realism as a critical and imaginative response to the multigenerational traumas of colonialism, war, sexual violence, and forced migration. These are seen through Barry’s biracial and transnational perspective against Vietnam’s highly divisive and traumatic modern history (14). Finally, Fadia F. Suyoufie (chapter 23) transports us to Iraq (West Asia) with Salim Barakat’s wonderful and unique *The Captives of Sinjar*, exposing the atrocities Yazidi women suffer (525)—where a sperm wonderfully narrates its procreative journey; mountains and clouds articulate human concerns; and amputated fingers sprout from the ground and point at the guilty (527)!

The last part: “Magical Crossings: Pedagogy, Genres, and Fairy Tales,” Kim Sasser and Rachel Mariboho (chapter 24) share their exciting (tertiary) teaching experiences, explaining that magical realism is undoubtedly today’s most compelling world fiction that opens global literary conversations. Their account reveals an enthusiastic and growing readership and appreciation for magical realism seen in their students, which is heartening to know. While Maggie Ann Bowers (chapter 25) studies satire in the work of Nikolai Gogol, Mikail Bulgakov, Günter Grass, Ngūgī wa Thiong’o, and Salman Rushdie—where she notes a pattern of political malpractice such as election rigging, corruption, nepotism, embezzlement, removal of opposition, imprisonment for political ends, and torture that are often manifested in magical realist writings (578). Lorna Robinson’s penultimate (chapter 26) focuses on words such as “magical,” gods and nature to explore magical realism in the Homeric classics and observes that 21st century magical realism is inflected by literacy and technology (607). Dana Del George’s final chapter (chapter 27) makes the provocative claim that magical realism draws from both modern literary and premodern fairy tale of oral tradition and that magical realism is the postmodern variety of the fairy tale (611)—she makes her argument by using George Saunder’s stories (623–627).

It is evident from the discussion above that this is a commendable and essential handbook on magical realism, which also clearly demonstrates that it is becoming a growing global genre; albeit unfortunately, it finds a small (accounting for the paucity of book publications on the subject) but hopefully a growing readership (as indicated by Sasser and Mariboho) of students, teachers, researchers, scholars and the general public in magical realism and postcolonial studies. But its 21st century postcolonial, contemporary, and imperative relevance is uncontested since it is a growing global phenomenon. As can be seen from the chapters in this volume (and my literature review of the scholarship at the beginning of this review)—magical realism is difficult to define or even defies definition. It is precisely its malleable nature that makes it convenient, conducive, comfortable, and even popular to work with—particularly non-Western cultures with similar struggling postcolonial predicaments. Previous book publications have largely focus on Latin American even though they acknowledge its “international” significance; it is therefore, refreshing to see a more global representation in this volume. Its glaring lack is Asian representation, I can only think of the animistic worldviews of the Nusantara, Shintoism in Japan, and syncretic folk beliefs of Asia (just to name a few) that can further enrich our appreciation and understanding of magical realism—this is perhaps the next urgent and imperative project!

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