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Realism and magic in Latin American children’s books

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Magical realism is an extensive and complex concept and it may seem ambitious to explore it deeply in a brief paper. I therefore offer a large framework that will allow me to contextualize the development of a type of narrative in Latin American children’s books where a symbiosis between magic and realism is attained. To talk about magical realism as a Latin American literary movement it is necessary to probe into the considerations about the identity and the historical process that produced multicultural nations with common roots; it implies the need to recognize the power of faith as part of a deep and racially mixed religiousness; and to admit the powerful presence of nature, impressive and boundless, in everyday life.

Latin America represents almost 14 percent of our planet’s continental space. Throughout its extensive area eighteen Spanish-speaking countries are distributed, in addition to other non-Spanish speaking countries such as Haiti, Brazil and innumerable islands that form Dutch, French and US overseas territories. Large regions mark notable differences in this part of the planet, the Caribbean with its clear waters, its idyllic beaches and its Afro-descendent population also covers a part of the coasts of the continental countries. The Andean region, with its colossal mountains, its perpetual snow and its lunar landscapes, is inhabited by communities that descend from the first native people. The Amazonas, for its part, with its thick rainforests, exotic landscapes and ancient rock formations, still preserves an ancestral and unknown memory.

This generous geography, irrigated by enormous and boundless rivers, interspersed with rainforests where trees grow like giants and where planet Earth’s greatest biodiversity is concentrated, also harbors a fertile melting pot of tales that have their origins in the indigenous cosmogony, the different historical inter-oceanic voyages, and legacies that time has fused together. Latin America is also the kingdom of crossbreeding. A slow and laborious process has permitted the fusion of three great cultural components. First, there is the indigenous substratum with its worldview, its mythology, its aesthetics of synthesis, its ancient languages, its connection to the natural world, its restraint. Second, the Spanish conqueror contributed a sense of astonishment, a particular religion, scientific knowledge, ambition, an expansive language, cruelty and poetry. Finally, slaves from Africa, who were forcibly brought here as a workforce, have bequeathed to us their
rhythm and musicality, their zeal for the supernatural, their profound lamentation, their rebel spirit, their animistic perception, their beliefs.

This outlook, somewhat subjective and simple, shows elements that define our crossbred cultures, and determines this permanent coexistence between the center and the periphery, the hegemonic discourses and the subordinated ones, between rational thought and magical thought, conflicting emotions, the presence of the supernatural in everyday life, and a very strong connection with the natural world, which in Latin America is characterized by its luscious, its excess and its exoticism.

During the 1940s there arose, amidst the coordinates of this geographic and social context, a literary trend that breaks the ties to a descriptive tradition and to foreign models such as surrealism. Authors such as Cuban Alejo Carpentier, Venezuelan Arturo Uslar Pietri and Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias generate a consciousness of this new way of looking with which reality is observed, and which assumes crossbreeding, indigenous heritance and elements of popular religiousness, that together with the untamed natural world, the history of conquest still warm in its ashes, and hilarious and absurd episodes related to the political classes of remote Latin American countries, make way for a different scene where magic penetrates reality as part of everyday life. In literature this idiosyncrasy, this cultural fusion, leaves deep and very distinctive marks. A new and different discourse appears and a new literary trend that flourishes with its entire splendor would surprise the world during the decades to come. Children’s books also fall under the influence of this hybrid vision of the world and of the coexistence between magic and reality in the everyday dimension.

Where does magic come from?

One of the most controversial dichotomies in Latin American children’s literature has to do with the presence of fantasy and reality in the discourses of children’s books. Since Antoniorrobles, a Spanish poet exiled in Mexico, offered a cycle of conferences in 1941 with the curious title of *Did the Wolf eat Little Red Riding Hood?* a controversial discussion about the appropriateness of magic, of fairytale’s violent and terrifying contents, the harm or benefit of offering fantasist contents to children, and the origins of fairytales and their kingdoms as counterfeit and not autochthonous universes in children’s books discourses, has been taking place. This is not the place to delve into the nuances of this discussion, but the important point to grasp is the fact of the existence, in Latin America, of other roots, other seeds, from which magic, its beings and its marvel emanate.

In this context, the indigenous worldviews represent an endless source, with their gods, protectors of the natural elements, their sacred mountains, their mythical characters that undergo marvelous transformations into animals or plants; with their dualities that expose the terrible and the luminous sides of the psyche, with their countless explanations for the understanding of an overwhelming and gigantic natural world. Then the encounter with the New World also produced another seed for magic: the astonishment in front of an untamed landscape full of wonders and images never seen before awakened the fading European fantasy, which had been fed by chivalric novels where superhuman knights accomplished great feats amidst the tricks of alchemists and wizards. Somehow, the influence of chivalric novels such as *Amadís de Gaula* and *Belíndis de Grecia* extended, during the years of the conquest, the imagery full of dragons, hags, witches, unicorns and sirens that the conquerors and chroniclers thought they had found in the new American
fauna. The terrible crocodiles, the majestic condors, the gentle manatees, the huge snakes and the strange tapirs nurtured this imagery and gave it a new unexpected surge.

In the opening of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1982, Gabriel García Márquez describes such unexpectedness as it was recounted in the journal of Antonio Pigafetta, the Florentine navigator who accompanied Magellan on the first circumnavigation of the world. Márquez suggests that what Pigafetta recorded in South America “also seems to be an adventure into the imagination”. Pigafetta writes that, “There are also some pigs which have their navel on the back, and large birds which have their beak like a spoon, and they have no tongue” (1874: 46). His description of a guanaco encapsulates the attempt to relate otherness to familiarity: “This beast has its head and ears of the size of a mule, and the neck and body of the fashion of a camel, the legs of a deer, and the tail like that of a horse, and it neighs like a horse” (1874: 50). His long account of the Patagonian native populace dwells on their difference, for example, when the explorers played host to a man described as a giant, “The captain caused food and drink to be given to this giant, then they showed him some things, amongst others, a steel mirror. When the giant saw his likeness in it, he was greatly terrified, leaping backwards, and made three or four of our men fall down” (1874: 50).

When confronted with the other, the idea of that which is monstrous appears. To the European eye, the American indigenous people represented very different races: naked, copper toned skin and plentiful hair, with ornaments on their bodies and painted skins. They embodied the enemies of a battle that was justified because of religion; they were seen as impious, Satan and pagan idol worshipers, cannibals. Such a perception was necessary if the exploitation of these new races was to be rendered morally acceptable, and representations of cannibalism played a central role, as exemplified in engravings included in the voluminous works of popular geographer Theodor de Bry. Drawing on reports by travelers, he depicted Brazilian indigenous people busily feasting upon human flesh (Bucher 1981: Chapter 6).

Representations of deformed human beings then proliferate. These already had their precedents in European imagery, as we can see in the engraving Chosmographia, by Sebastian Müster in 1544. In the center of the picture there is a headless being, whose eyes and mouth are located in his chest – that is, the mythical Ewapainoma, who would later be described by Sir Walter Raleigh during his voyage through the Venezuelan Guayana rainforests in search of the mythical El Dorado. In another map of 1599 by the Dutch cartographer Jodocus Hondius, we can once again see an image of this character (Ewapainoma) beside an athletic Amazon, one of the mythical women who gave their name to one of the greatest rivers on the planet and who were thought to dwell somewhere amongst the New World’s intricate jungle. Chimeras, products of a prolific imagination, were thus adapted to this new fantastic geography, nurturing the first tales about America, of the so called “Chronicles of the Indies”, which, from this first moment, drew the stories about this territory under the magnetic charm of marvel. Nor did this fantastic bestiary represent the only merging point between reality and fantasy.

The image of the cross section of a slave boat that appears in an anti-slavery pamphlet issued by Thomas Clarkson in London, 1798, emphasizes the inhuman way in which the bodies were laid out in the hold of the ship. The image depicts hundreds of slaves, men and women, who are being transported in ruthless conditions. Stacked up like sacks, naked, in foul and suffocating spaces, they were starting on an endless voyage towards unknown and strange lands. When they got there, they were sold like animals, branded as cattle, and forced to work through exhausting working days.
As a way of exorcising this feeling of excision, they find refuge in rites. The Catholic religious practices blended in with the religious systems of the transplanted people, such as the Yoruba, in an exceptional syncretism that gave way to Santería. The orishás, or deities, find their representation in the images of Catholic saints, which acquire an animist aura and are worshiped by rituals linked to magic. Soothsaying, the world of the dead in relation to the earthly world and the reinterpretation of that which is sacred, are some of the elements that penetrate the magic flow in Latin America.

How do these traditions affect children’s literature? They have a lot to do with this literature, as they have to do with life itself, with the way we conceive the world, and more closely, with the world of childhood, because in this dimension of wonder is of vital importance; and when we talk about magic, we are not referring to the European tradition of fairy tales, nor to the type of spells that flow from a magic wand, nor to the transformation of a pumpkin into a carriage, nor to the flying carpets of the oriental stories. Our magic comes from other sources; it forms part of our daily life, of that which is called Latin American magical realism.

Magical realism in Latin American children’s literature

Magical realism represents a literary current that symbolizes the most authentic American literature. The term was first coined in 1925 by the German reviewer Franz Roh, in regard to post-expressionist painting, referring to a generation of painters who attained a new view of reality, painting everyday objects from the starting point of contemplating the world as if it were emerging from emptiness, a magic recreation. Even though the term hardly had any impact in the European plastic arts, due to the influence of avant-garde movements, it was subsequently adopted by a generation of Latin American writers, who constituted the first generation of “magicrealists” during the 1940s and the 1950s, a period when the so-called boom of Latin American literature emerges. We owe Venezuelan writer Arturo Uslar Pietri the appropriation of this term in an essay of 1947 (published in 1948), in which he refers to that literary generation’s awareness of man as a mystery in the face of reality.

In the essay “De lo real maravilloso Americano” (On the Marvelous Real in America), first published in 1967, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier advances this condition inherent to Latin America’s deepest essence.

Y es que por la virginidad del paisaje, por la formación, por la ontología, por la presencia fáustica del indio y del negro, por la revelación que constituyó su reciente descubrimiento, por los fecundos mestizajes que propició, América está muy lejos de haber agotado su caudal de mitologías. ¿Pero qué es la historia de América toda sino una crónica de lo real maravilloso?

[And it is because of the landscape’s virginity, the formation, the ontology, because of the fortunate presence of the indigenous and the negro, because of the revelation that constituted its recent discovery, because of the fertile cross-breeding that it brought about, America is far away from having used up its wealth of mythologies. But what is all of American history if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?]

(7–8)

Magical realism has the real and marvelous, and other influences, among its first precedents; these slowly germinate until they bloom dazzlingly into a new literary model.
Magical realism

Many critics recognize the influence of surrealism as one of the primary catalysts, and also a literature of fantastic style that expands in southern Latin America with Jorge Luis Borges as its main representative. Nevertheless, the magical realism that emerges into a more authentic vision of Latin America has its roots in more remote and ancient soil.

What defines magical realism, its essence, is the way it perceives and shows reality. If surrealism shows the distortions of the world of dreams, and fantastic literature deals with supernatural events that invade reality, in magical realism it is reality itself that has the power of being exceptional. At a stylistic level, this representation is attained through resources that show, on the one hand, everyday events as if they were amazing, and on the other, prodigious incidents described as part of common life. Undeniably, the metaphor of this unusual geography is Gabriel García Marquez’s legendary town of Macondo.

In order to explain this concept in a more graphic way, I here recount two memories from my childhood. The first has to do with my grandmother. We used to spend vacations in a little town in the Venezuelan Llanos in a farm that was very far away from civilization. I remember one night that I couldn’t fall asleep, because an owl was desperately hooting outside. The farmers say that the hooting of owls attracts the dead, so obviously I was afraid. My grandmother slept deeply beside me until I woke her up to tell her about the owl. She simply told me “place your shoes the other way around so it will leave”. Said and done, I turned my shoes around under my bed and the night bird ceased to sing. Another memory has to do with nature’s force, the image of a winter night with the sky unleashing a tropical rain storm. And in the corridor of that house in the middle of nowhere, a lamp showed a curtain of light with millions of insects fluttering around it. The strange act of turning around a pair of shoes in order to drive a bird off is assumed to be part of the simplest daily life, while a natural event like a storm can give way to the supernatural, like the image of a cloud of insects that surprises us in the middle of the night.

These two evocations allow me to engage with magical realism, from certain coordinates that are linked with telluric force, a return to origins, ancestral magic and the presence of the astonishing in everyday life. To do so, I will talk about three works that are representative of Latin American children’s literature. The first is Zoro by Colombian author Jairo Aníbal Niño, written in 1976, which tells the story of an indigenous boy who, accompanied by an old man, travels through the rainforest in order to find his town. The second, Mo, written in 1991 by Lara Ríos, tells the story of a teenage girl of the Cabécar ethnic group in Costa Rica, who goes through a growing process to reach the maturity that will allow her to turn into a Sukiu (that is, a shaman), with the awareness of the magic powers and ancient knowledge of her people. Finally, the novel Tres buches de agua salada (Three Mouthfuls of Salt Water), written by Chilean author Verónica Uribe in 1992, deals with the world of Santería seen through the eyes of a little boy who isn’t able to walk well.

These three works are linked to each other in the spirit of magic realism, and have the following aspects in common: nature’s prolific force, phenomena that in the tropics reach disproportionate dimensions, the never-ending rain, the impenetrable and dense rainforest, the permanent presence of animals and plants, rivers so wide they seem to be seas, the noises of the night in the mountains. It all simply exists and there is no need to invent anything. Each of the main characters, in their own way, starts on a journey of understanding, of learning, that could be classified as a Bildungsroman. However, the characteristics that define this narrative framework are others; it is the search for origins, and they embark on metaphoric journeys in search of identity, which is an eternal and recurrent Latin American question. What are our roots? Where are our roots?
In *Zoro*, the rainforest takes on a leading value within the adventure, with its imminent danger: a crystal tiger, an eagle of ice and anacondas that seem to be lianas hint at a fantastic zoology that has a strong hold on reality. For example, the space of a house in the middle of the rainforest expands, as a resource that gives supernatural value to an ordinary event:

Suddenly, behind a reddish cloud, the big house appeared. It was a disproportionate house. So big that it filled the whole space, and inside it, through the rooms and corridors ran stormy rivers. Some of the rooms harbored strange ponds of calm waters, and to go from one wall of a room to another, you had to ride a horse.

This very realistic description doesn’t generate doubt as in fantastic literature. The unreal becomes believable, because this is how the tropics invade life—penetrating houses through cracks, with thousands of insects, plants and larvae, and birds that make their nests on the balconies.

Mo goes through an initiation process. On the one hand, she equips herself with the necessary courage to defeat the forces of evil, embodied by the wicked sorcerer. On the other, she obtains the knowledge that will allow her to become shaman of her clan, spokesperson of her ancestors and with their power to heal. The passage through different planes establishes the coexistence between real events and solutions that involve intuition, the emission of signals from natural surroundings and sudden messages from the spirits.

Finally, in *Three Mouthfuls of Salt Water* the emphasis is on Santería and the power of African magic. Here, Yemayá, the goddess of the waters, represents the character who articulates the experiences that Juan has during his vacations. Important transformations are brought about by following the ritual of drinking three mouthfuls of salt water during a day when the sea is charged with beneficial energy, or *aché*. When he returns, Juan is healed and finds love.

The close coexistence between magic and reality, the presence of a system of beliefs that blends the indigenous worldview and African animism, a sense of permanent wonder in front of the small and big miracles the tropics offer, as well as the stylistic resources, make it possible to give literary beauty to magic reality and make it an object of fiction. In a great part of our children’s literature both dimensions coexist, but the boundaries between them aren’t determinate nor is it necessary to identify resources to move from one to another. Not only has magical realism in children’s literature developed within the same coordinates as in literature for adults, but it has also inherited that unique and particular way of approaching the world, inseparable from its primal enchantment.

**Conclusion**

The magical realism movement had late derivations in Latin American children’s literature, and its manifestations tend to camouflage themselves within diverse forms of coexistence between reality and fantasy, which pertain to literature for childhood. However, visible influences of this trend can be traced in contemporary children’s narrative.

The wonders and marvelous elements amidst a boundless geographic framework find their place in works such as *El valle de los cocuyos* (The Firefly Valley) (1985) by Colombian author Gloria Cecilia Díaz, a tale that also combines the journey with the
search for identity. In this adventure, which also becomes a rite of passage, the elements of nature act as opponents and helpers of Jerónimo, the protagonist, moved by a cosmic strength that enshrines the immeasurable power of the very nature of magical realism. In the end, Jerónimo can defeat the Spirit that holds captive a mysterious woman, and that embodies a supernatural force. The recovery of ancient knowledge often takes the characters through initiation journeys, as is the case of *Sueño Aymara* (Aymara Dream) (1995) by Peruvian writer Aníbal Eduardo León Zamora. In this book, a group of indigenous children start out on a journey to the Aymara hell where they are able to find part of their identity. The eternal question of who we are and the inverse journey to our origins, our roots, give the protagonists of these voyages a special impetus. The relationship with the world of the dead as beings that cohabit with us in everyday life, without raising any surprise, reaches aspects of dark humor in *Los muertos andan en bici* (Dead People Travel by Bike) (2012) by Mexican author Christel Guczka. In this story, a boy who is repremanded at school because of his overflowing fantasy experiences an unforgettable vacation when his grandfather, who had been dead for two years, suddenly appears.

Children’s and young people’s narrative offers new opportunities for that strange reality to have a main place in literature, for the fictional universe to be imbued with the fruit of crossbreeding among that group of beliefs, and for those tiny and surprising events to coexist with quotidian life. The attitude toward surroundings that attain marvelous aspects in everyday life, or that give ordinary qualities to incredible events in order to integrate them to common life, guarantee the continuation of magical realism in children’s books. If there is a space in fiction where that hybrid condition can still project itself, or where exists that particular world view where surprise emerges from the unexpected or flows with spontaneous naturalness, that territory belongs to children’s literature.

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