
Defining Magical Realism in Children's Literature: Voices in Contemporary Fugue, Texts that Speak from the Margins

Yvonne Hammer

During the latter half of the twentieth century authors of children's fictions have explored boundary transgressions between fantastic and mimetic genres. While contemporary narrative texts continue this heritage, magical realist texts are differentiated by an extensive merging of realistic and uncanny events. These magical transgressions infuse and inform textual interpretations that not only record the perspectives of child subjects, but also expose mimetic representations as concomitant fictions with those of more obvious fantasy realms. This paper will examine issues relating to the emergence of Magical Realism in children's literary texts. Magical Realism is identified as a narrative mode because it is a discourse style that infiltrates realistic genres with an associated capacity to redirect textual interpretation. To facilitate the identification of magical realist strategies that are significant to this discussion, two narratives have been selected: David Almond's *Secret Heart* (2001); and Isabelle Allende's translated children's fiction, *City of the Beasts* (2003).

Magical Realist texts juxtapose magical and mimetic events in ways that create new lenses. In this sense magical realism mirrors fantasy's textual strategy. Both discourse styles interrogate mimetic representation in order to extend a manner of play that is already firmly established in children's fictions. Both narrative modes also promote magical frames that construct new perspectives in their texts. But, because magical realism redirects fantasy's subversive intent into an exploration of ideological paradox, the interrogation has a different focus: Magical Realist modes sustain conflicting perspectives in order to interrogate cultural ideologies that are associated with the narrative construction of point of view.

Though Magical Realist origins have been identified by Simpkins (1995) and Bowers (2004) in the work of Post-expressionists as early as 1925, the mode's emergence in postcolonial narratives has been noted as a defining moment for a literary form that rejects Eurocentric paradigms. In what Slemon identifies as a 'residuum of resistance toward the imperial centre' (Slemon 1995, p.408) and Faris notes as a 'decolonising effect' (Faris 2004, p.132), Magical Realist narratives redirect the postcolonialist intention to interrogate assumptions of cultural privilege and racial

superiority into a contemporary discourse strategy that examines cultural bias in narrative point of view.

Recent work by Wendy Faris theorises that five elements define Magical Realism:

- a) *Texts contain irreducible elements of magic;*
- b) *Reader hesitation not only encodes suspension of disbelief, but may inversely require a suspension of belief;*
- c) *Merged realities and blurred boundaries problematise representations of fact and fiction;*
- d) *The presence of the phenomenal world disturbs the embedding realist text;*
- e) *Notions of time, space and identity in the text are similarly destabilized.*

(Faris 2004)

This paper will focus upon the first three elements of Faris' theory and will examine specific features in the children's texts of Allende and Almond.

Faris defines 'irreducible elements of magic' as a primary feature of magical realist discourse. These magical events remain unexplained, even as their textual influence both infiltrates and reinterprets mimetic narrative spaces that encode familiar and realistic details. Whilst Allende and Almond implement what first appears to be a playful manipulation of mimetic perspectives, a closer inspection of narrative aspects indicates that the texts retain postcolonial interrogative links and contest assumptions of social and ideological superiority that are perpetuated by Western cultures, though this is accomplished in two distinctive authorial styles. Because magical interpretations infuse narrative perspectives, mimetic patterns are disrupted by infiltrations of magic that problematise Western epistemologies.

In Allende's *City of the Beasts*, the disruption creates a textual convergence in narrative point of view that promotes an awareness of disadvantaged cultures. Allende's exploration of a marginalised, third world, tribal culture, is principally focalised by the novel's adolescent (Western) protagonist, Alexander, and centres upon an International Geographic



Team's search for fabled humanoid creatures that inhabit the Amazonian Rainforest. With the aid of Nadia, the daughter of the Brazilian tour organizer, Alexander is able to negotiate further interaction with forest dwellers and their culture. Elements of magic gradually intermingle with the narrative's factual details, but cultural collisions are evident when Walamai, shaman of the tribal peoples, suddenly appears before the two young protagonists. Nadia's focalisation of the Shaman's identity indicates their difference in contrasting cultural perspectives even as Alexander confronts his own confusion:

Alex: "Who is he?"

Nadia: "He is a shaman, a very powerful witch man. He speaks through dreams and visions. He can travel to the world of the spirits anytime he wants. He is the only one who knows the road to El Dorado."

Alex: "El Dorado?...That's a crazy legend!"
Alex replied.

Nadia: "Walamai has been there many times with his wife. She is always with him."

Alex: "I didn't see her," Alex admitted.

Nadia: "She is a spirit. Not everyone can see her."

Alex: "Did you?"

Nadia: "Yes. She is young and very beautiful."...

Alex: "Do you really believe those things, Nadia? You believe in witch men and cannibal birds, and El Dorado, and invisible wives... and the Beast?"

(Allende 2003, pp.86, 87)

Magically aligned signifiers interpret Walamai's role and define the character's alternate sources of wisdom: a shaman, a successful negotiator of spirit worlds, a mediator of dreams and visions. Narrative point of view encodes the mode's diverse and paradoxical perceptions: Two views interpret this passage; two significant characters offer alternate perspectives; and their conflicting views remain unresolved. Nadia's focalisation interprets the text's phenomenological aspects as real. Even as two perspectives

maintain paradox in point of view, Allende establishes the text's ideological collisions with metafictional strategies that expose culturally diverse positions.

Later, as Alex and Nadia are led by Walamai, through the tunnels of the *tepui* on their journey to the City of Beasts (El Dorado), Alex experiences similar encounters that are rich in magical overtones, but these interactions demonstrate a new acceptance of dream and vision, ghostly wives and magical creatures. At this later point in the narrative his perceptual awareness has expanded, he has seen evidence of the Beasts' power, and Allende records Alex's acceptance of tribal magic following a rite of passage that marks his tribal initiation. Phenomenological interpretations now dominate the novel, contrasting Alex's transition and his new transcultural understanding with the narrative's previous exposure of cultural differences.

At the far end of the grotto, something moved, and an instant later broke away from a rock of blue crystal, something that resembled a strange bird, or a winged reptile. The creature stretched its wings, preparing to fly, and Alex could see it clearly. ... The Shaman's wife-spirit, as delicate as a dragonfly, flew across the grotto and descended between the animal's wings, riding it like a horse. ... Alex wondered how he could describe what his eyes had seen. If only he had his grandmother's camera to prove that this place and these creatures really did exist, and that he had not drowned in a storm of his own hallucinations.

(Allende 2003, pp.256-258)

Allende signifies changes in Alex's perceptual awareness as an ability to 'see' (bold text). But the author simultaneously records the character's dual cultural consciousness even as Alexander's wish to preserve empirical evidence gives an indication of the cultural challenge that contests the character's Western ideological frame. Linguistic expression is problematised here: 'how he could describe' cites Alex's realisation that event signification will not translate the reality of his experience into a Western ideological frame. Allende's text draws attention to conflicting cultural frames of reference that attribute value differently. The author uses a magical realist mode

to expose the deeper levels of ideology that are culturally encoded in language.

David Almond's, *Secret Heart*, examines the dysfunctional urban setting of Helmouth, where marginalised groups and individuals are either shunned or victimised because of their differences. Subaltern representations include a disadvantaged single parent family, a minority cultural group, and Almond's protagonist, Joe, whose withdrawal from the hegemonic schooling system marks the boy's difference from his peers.

He (Joe) moved through the wasteland to where he could no longer see the lights of Helmouth, just the orange glow that hung in the air above it. ...

Joe crouched on the earth, allowed the night to enter him. He knew how the lives of people and the lives of beasts could merge out here in the wasteland. He knew what it was to be Joe Maloney, but also more than Joe Maloney. ... He felt weasel fur growing on the backs of his hands. He felt claws where his fingers were. He hissed and he was a snake slipping through ancient cellars...

Nobody knew that he knew how to do these things. They were secret, things that grew from his secret heart.

(Almond 2001, pp.65, 66)

Almond images the town's wasteland as a liminal space that assists Joe's magical transition. Magical allusions reinterpret the protagonist's affinity with nature whilst encoding realistic detail: fur, claws, hissing. The mode increasingly encodes magical signifiers that reinterpret the established mimetic: Joe becomes the snake; his secret knowledge emerges in the wasteland's liminal space; and Almond's focus on transformation implies that a greater reality exists in Joe's 'secret heart'.

Magic imbues liminal spaces with transforming power in both texts. Magical events that are endowed with a numinous quality infiltrate narrative mimesis and invert Eurocentric values. In what may be identified as a most obvious level of ideological critique, the authors intentionally favour dominant themes of transition and emergence that identify ritual absences in Western cultures. The embedding realism also exposes conflicting values that encode contemporary

issues: Allende's text reflects a global concern for world forests and narrates an ever present threat to the reclusive Amazonian tribe, *The People of the Mist*; Almond's narrative examines marginalised cultures in urbanised Western spaces and depicts social practices of exclusion. Both authors establish unresolved and conflicting views within texts that draw attention to the more alienating influences of Western culture. These subaltern views construct inversions of power that advantage magical perceptions in order to reinterpret mimetic events

Faris also identifies reader *hesitation* as a defining element in Magical Realist fictions.

Because unreconciled and frequently contrasting perspectives are a prevalent feature in magical realist texts, what Todorov has defined as the principle of *hesitation* dominates narrative tensions between real and not real (Todorov 1975, p.33). The examined texts expose narrative 'seeing' to the extent that readers must consider not only 'who sees', but also 'how (things) are seen'. Because Magical Realism sustains conflicting views that are juxtaposed within these narratives, a metafictional awareness of textual construction is promoted, but reading strategies retain an alignment to that 'suspension of disbelief' that Todorov notes in fantasy modes and identifies as *hesitation*. Faris aligns Todorov's analytical appraisal of *hesitation* with the unsettling doubts experienced by readers of magical realist fictions (Faris 2004, p.17). Though *hesitation* is identified as a defining element in magical realist discourse, Faris adds that Magical Realist fictions may also apply the principle inversely: that is, Magical Realist texts may demand of Western audiences, a suspension of *belief*. Because Western epistemologies are not privileged, alternative ways of knowing (that interpret magical or uncanny events) promote new frames of reference that become dominant in the text. Shamanic transformations are common to both texts, but I will refer here to *Secret Heart*, and Almond's focalisation of transformative magic.

Almond first constructs the Tiger spirit in dream image, as Joe calls to the creature in his dream experience. The Tiger spirit is a textual symbol of power and signifies a magical transformation that similarly encodes meaning within the marginalised circus community. Joe's shamanic

abilities emerge when he carries the tiger pelt, assumes tigerness, and brings life to its spirit. Hesitation is evidently experienced by the protagonist as he waits beneath the pelt, 'He waited', but readers may also be aware of dual possibilities in the text's representation as this magical transition begins within the tent's enclosure then moves out to infuse other narrative spaces:

It was a tiger skin, huge and heavy and wonderful. It lay there spread out on the sawdust, the place where it had once leaped and roared and clawed the air. ... Joe closed his eyes. He crawled on all fours into the shadowed space. Hackenschmidt laid the tiger skin across his back... The pelt spread out around him ... The skin of the head fell down across his face. ... Joe breathed. He hung his head. He felt the skin draped over his own skin.

He waited.

No one spoke. No one moved. He waited. He waited.

The tigerness swelled ... as if from an ancient secret darkness in his heart. ... He felt fur breaking through his skin. He felt heavy paws and lethal claws. He felt the new heart, his tiger heart, drumming in his chest. He heard the roar that echoed from his throat. He clawed the air. ...

Beneath the pelt, beneath that curious tent of skin and striped fur, Joe Maloney danced a tiger dance, was transformed by tigerness, became a tiger.
(Almond 2001, p.150-152)

Reader hesitation occurs as the infusion of magic encoding Joe's 'becoming' is signified in the mimetic details that identify fur, paws, claws, with heart and voice; that transform a lifeless tiger pelt into breathed experience. Mimetic details also encode two unresolved views: tiger dance and tiger spirit, which merge within the protagonist even as magic and mimesis merge in the text. The sustained uncertainty encoded in this transformative progression may represent Faris' suggestion that hesitation also requires a suspension of belief. Because paradox is a featured discourse pattern, each text sustains complex perspectives in point of view such that meanings remain unresolved even as perceptions are also problematised. What is being seen: A dance? A physical transformation?

Faris cites a third element that similarly defines Magical Realism in children's texts: Merged realities and blurred boundaries identify spaces of confluence in narrative point of view. Allende and Almond construct multiple views that do not arbitrate between what is being seen and how perceptions might be interpreted. This textual confluence includes merged ontological and epistemological concepts that create culturally diverse, interim spaces of cohesion. Because ideological boundaries blur, other ways of knowing and understanding may emerge from their convergence. Magical realist texts particularly interrogate values associated with sources of knowledge. Within merged spaces each author examines inner transitions that promote supernatural concepts of shamanic power even as the mode interrogates the signification of mimetic views. Rites of transformation feature as magical interpretations contest mimetic boundaries in the two texts:

Almond's protagonist, Joe, nourishes a magical connection with the natural world that increasingly defines his ability to traverse ontological boundaries. Though less valued in the cultural dystopia of Helmouth, Joe's artistic and transcendent ability to traverse ontological borders provides a referential frame for his identity. Almond's closure acknowledges the limitations, builds connection with the Circus community, and offers a future possibility for relocation.

Cultural boundaries merge in Allende's narrative. Because the dual function of magical realist textuality establishes multiple focalisations, Allende's readers are distanced from the assumption of a particular subject position. The metafictional textuality that supports ideological conflict in her text, also sustains marginalised voices that promote diverse cultural opinions. The two protagonists, Alex and Nadia, become links in a cultural exchange that connects a reclusive tribe with surrounding Amazonian cultures, but this exchange is accomplished when trust relationships are ceremonially sealed by tribal initiations.

Interspersed magical elements consequently dominate the two narratives: phenomenal intrusions sustain paradox in unresolved and contrasting perspectives; merged realities create diverse perceptions in event structures. Even as extensive realistic details may establish mimetic settings,

magical interpretations subvert these views and contest their normality from within. Almond's protagonist, Joe, affirms and values his shamanic role above his struggle to adapt to town culture. As Joe carries the tiger's spirit presence from the circus tent's sacred enclosure into the surrounding wilderness, Almond images transformation: the narrative's mimetic setting is reinscribed as a magical narrative space. Wilderness is just one extension of boundary merging as Joe becomes the link in a cultural exchange and welcomes the circus community into his home and into his village community. The symbolic, aging, blue circus tent offers a similar shamanic presence: at one level it encodes a *mise en abyme*, symbolizing a space of connection that transforms lives within its magical expanse; but Almond also intends the fading blue circus tent as a metonym: the author signifies an offering, an encompassing shelter that straddles cultural boundaries; however fragmented its fabric, the tent images earth's canopy as a global refuge that welcomes and celebrates diverse performances.

Each narrative's principal challenge to mimetic assumptions centres in Magical Realism's potential to stimulate confusion in narrative 'seeing'. The mode strategically targets narrative voice in a way that differs from mimetic texts. Reader *hesitation* is sustained by factual details in two contradictory forms: mimetic details anchor the textual representation of reality; but simultaneously they signify magical events as ordinary occurrences. Consequently the sustained juxtaposition that intersperses magic with mimesis similarly exposes conflicting ideological assumptions of value as an integral part of narrative construction.

Sustained, conflicting and unresolved perspectives are also responsible for the promotion of paradox. Allende encodes paradox in her concluding scenes by refusing to provide easy solutions for her text's Amazonian dilemma. Her protagonists' successful interception of a plan to annihilate the tribes and pillage their forest paradise provides an interim solution, but the new awareness of a colony of Humanoid speaking beasts is paradoxically matched by a "western" knowledge that the fragility of their existence would not survive habitat invasion.

Magical Realist fictions encode multiple perspectives in order to interrogate social marginalization, and therefore

establish a metafictional textuality. Because subaltern perspectives profile cultural assumptions, dominant Western value systems are contested: Allende's text particularly maintains the interrogation of Eurocentric privilege; Almond's approach identifies the contemporary issue of urban marginalisation and enunciates subaltern positions of disadvantaged child subjects. The authors subsequently promote an awareness of cultural complexity that may be observed in the following five aspects. Unresolved and conflicting views provoke opportunities to question dominant assumptions that attribute value to cultural practices. The authors use inversely advantaged perspectives to assist this process and the result disrupts cultural assumptions of superiority. A second aspect ensues from the merging of boundaries between magical and mimetic views. Magical Realist narratives disclose new vistas that include diverse spaces of transformation where subaltern perspectives are valued. In the third instance, because the mode builds metafictional discourse patterns that resist easy narrative solutions, Magical Realist discourses have the capacity to adjust narrative structures. Multi-voiced patterns also offer authors the opportunity to expose cultural complexity even as they establish diversity in point of view and project the significance of other ontologies. The fourth aspect reflects a postmodern predilection for interrogative inquiry: Magical Realist modes favour paradox and their discourses therefore encode compromise and uncertainty even as they promote ontological diversity. Finally, these texts examine cultural marginalisation in a manner that reflects increased global concern for the limiting of human potential. Authors of Magical Realist texts intentionally create paradoxical spaces of confluence because they argue a respect for subaltern values.

Magical Realist texts therefore examine ideological perspectives that reflect continuing cultural changes in contemporary societies. Because polyphonic constructions of narrative view encode marginal voices, authors may profile alternate cultural truths that disrupt traditional Eurocentric expectations in their narratives. Although each of the studied texts examines surface ideologies that detail an awareness of social marginalisation, ideological interrogation is multi-levelled in Magical Realist texts. Conflicting and paradoxical perspectives co-exist and

therefore expose societal structures that sustain privilege. Whilst event closure may inscribe a degree of resolution, the underlying complexities of contemporary socio-cultural structures remain. Contrasting value systems establish a third aspect of ideological interrogation because their alignment contests underlying cultural assumptions that ascribe *truth* and *right* to civilized spaces. The postcolonial ethos that is evident in Allende's narrative establishes an ongoing global contestation: that the borders which define subaltern positions of marginalised persons are culturally and politically inscribed. Finally, authors employ magical realism to draw attention to culturally derived slippage between signifier and signifieds and therefore problematise language structures. In what is examined as a problematic relationship between what is seen (perception), how things are seen (perspective), and how these aspects are signified in linguistic systems (discourse), authors provoke a twofold awareness that builds on metafictional discourse patterns which establish first, the understanding of how a text is being constructed; and subsequently, how language inscribes cultural perspectives that define and guide perception.

Because textual interpretations of reality are contested by supernatural events in Magical Realist fictions, an interlocation between cultural perspectives and value systems particularly identifies assumptions of privilege in representations of class, wealth and race. But Magical realist narratives also defy the customary obligation for a resolution of conflicting views. In the children's fictions of Almond and Allende, although the resulting interrogation favours marginalised voices and contests socio-cultural assumptions ascribing value, the authors also signify contemporary complexities and obviate divergent cultural views.

Even as Magical Realism explores cultural diversity and its metafictional discourse patterns promote ideological revision, texts that accommodate its interrogative mode will contest the prevalence of what Sibley identifies as 'geographies of exclusion': 'Portrayals of minorities as defiling and threatening have long been used to order society internally and to demarcate the boundaries of society, beyond which lie those who do not belong' (1995:49). Magical realist fictions therefore imply that an understanding of other cultures maintains the contemporary fugue.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Yvonne Hammer is completing a PhD in English at Macquarie University. Her research thesis is titled 'Mythic Structure in Contemporary Children's Literature'. Yvonne has a Master of Arts in Children's Literature. She is currently employed as Head of Gifted Education at St Paul's Grammar School in Sydney.

