

ORDINARY MAGIC
The Roots and Wings of Magical Realism

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Ordinary Magic: The Roots and Wings of Magical Realism

The first time I heard the term magical realism was in my third year of college. I had just read my first novel by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*. I felt a kinship with him because he is Colombian, like my mother, and his stories reminded me of her way of storytelling. I connected with him in an organic way, perhaps because he is Colombian. Following this first novel, I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Mis Tristes Putas*, (*My Sad Whores*) in Spanish, before it was released in the English language. When my first story *Coco* was work-shopped, I heard the term magical realism applied to the style. I had no idea what that meant, and I had no idea that this was an actual genre. Since then, I've been fascinated with works of magical realism, and the writers who are compelled to write it.

Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia defines magical realism as:

...an artistic genre in which magical elements or illogical scenarios appear in an otherwise realistic or even "normal" setting. It has been widely used in relation to literature, art and film...

As used today the term is broadly descriptive rather than critically rigorous. Matthew Strecher has defined magic realism as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something 'too strange to believe.'" The term was initially used by German art critic Franz Roh to describe painting which demonstrated an altered reality, but was later used by Venezuelan Arturo

Uslar-Pietri to describe the work of certain Latin American writers. (“Magical Realism”)

When I investigated further, I found that all over the place, people wanted to know, “What exactly is magical realism?” Although magical realism is a fairly new term, its influences are old: folklore, mythology, and most importantly, the oral tradition of storytelling. I also found out that the genre is inextricably linked to intention. There seem to be three main purposes involved: preservation, transformation and empowerment through imagination.

The Purpose of Myth

Folklore, myth and oral tradition often convey a guide to life, a way to teach upcoming generations. These stories aren’t a factual, literal, record of history, but “early psychology” (). It was a way for humanity to ask questions about the purpose of life and how we should live. Myths were written for a purpose beyond entertainment:

“...mythology was no self-indulgent panacea. It forced men and women to confront the inexorable realities of life and death.” (Armstrong 39-40)

As mankind progressed, so did its way of life, its desires. Men and women sought ways of doing things beyond the traditions that had been handed down for generations as “the way.” From these desires the story of the hero was born. Each culture tells the story of a seeker who is willing to take a risk in order to gain new knowledge. I am reminded of the story of the Garden of Eden and Eve’s willingness to lose Paradise to gain new knowledge.

In fact, the Bible cannot be excluded when talking about magical realism. While some may take offense to calling the Bible a book of myths, the supernatural and miraculous events contained in the Bible undeniably share qualities with early folklore and legends. In the book, *Lies That Tell the Truth*, Anne C. Hegerfeldt notes:

As a fictional history sprinkled with marvelous events, it might even be proposed that the Bible be seen as an instance of magical realism. However, the Bible cannot actually be said to install realism, and it exhibits a complete lack of self-consciousness or meta-fiction an aspect too prominent in magical realist fiction to simply disregard. Nevertheless, the Bible as well as Jewish and Christian mythology in general furnish magical realist fiction with fantastic elements in the same manner as do Greek myths, Celtic legends or the Brothers Grimm's Fairy Tales—all of which, incidentally, qualify just as much as autochthonous material as the Latin American myths and legends that early critics of magical realism regarded so essential to the mode. (81)

And what do these multicultural stories tell us about our human development? Nearly always that to gain knowledge requires the hero to give up his comfortable surroundings, his community, and everything that is known to him:

A myth therefore is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information. If, however, it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed. If it works, that is, if it forces us to change our minds and hearts, gives us new hope, and compels us to live more fully, it is a valid myth. (Armstrong 10)

In its essence, myth represents the potential journey of every individual on earth. For most of us, there comes a time in which we question why we die and if there is more to life than the obvious and tangible. Seeking, we sometimes experience a transcendent moment, a moment that leaves us speechless and with a desire desperately to share this experience with others. For artists, poets, writers and musicians, the process comes naturally as they strive to capture their insights the same way that ancient myths and rituals inspired moments of spiritual ecstasy. For example, Armstrong explains, “[This discovery] gave people an ecstatic experience by making them aware of an existence that utterly transcended their own, and lifted them emotionally and imaginatively beyond their own limited circumstances” (19). Here we can begin to connect myth to what is now referred to as magical realism.

Magical realism differs from genres such as fantasy and science fiction in that it is rooted in those “limited circumstances” rather than being set in an environment that is spectacular or impossible. There is often a lack of awe or shock as characters encounter miraculous or magical events. It is not that magical realism discounts or dismisses an overtly spiritual or esoteric approach to events. However, because its transcendent moments take place in such ordinary places with ordinary people, they make the transcendent and ecstatic moments accessible to all. In this way, the sacred life is not just dangled above our heads like an impossible summit. Armstrong mentions that, “...mythology would fail if it spoke of a reality that was too transcendent. If a myth does not enable people to participate in the sacred in some way, it becomes remote and fades from their consciousness” (19).

Myth that enhances what is familiar, either in context or tone, and introduces a way to question or analyze that reality, leading to a continuing evolution of both understanding and wonder. However, myths usually approach larger than life subjects, such as creation. Characters are often gods and goddesses, and myths usually take place in an undisclosed time and place. Conversely, magical realism represents a culture and time that we are familiar with blended with a marvelous event. The characters are everyday, ordinary people and the setting is anywhere from rural Mexico to urban Chicago.

Imagination

If we relied entirely on logic, our contemplative nature would be limited. It is imagination that makes transcendence possible. Magical realism provides such lessons. It is a journey through the unknown, a quest for the extraordinary elements that permeate the mundane world around us. It asks us to hold onto wonder. It asks us to suspend our disbelief.

No sooner was I introduced to the genre of magical realism, when it became the subject of controversy. In a college seminar, a student mentioned that the term magical realism is offensive to some Hispanics and Latinos. She explained that those who oppose this terminology do so because to them magical realism is not “magic,” but a completely logical way to process events and reactions. In some cultures, in fact, magical realism is far more than a genre of writing; it is a way of life. Indeed, Alejo Carpentier writes:

The marvelous real that I defend and that is our own marvelous real is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American.

Here the strange is commonplace and always was commonplace.” (Faris and Parkinson Zamora 102-104)

I had a casual interview and with Tamara Sellman, the editor and creator of *Margin Online Magazine*, a site dedicated to magical realism. Tamara had had the same experience I had. She didn't know she was writing magical realism until someone described her stories as such during a fiction workshop. Our similarities didn't end there. She mentioned some writers as having a very “strong reaction” to magical realism. I knew what she meant.

In my experience, sometimes the anger is a reaction to the message or moral. I've often noticed this has gotten under some readers' skins. Another source of annoyance is that the magical among the ordinary infuriates some readers whose thinking is more linear. The skepticism of those readers however, can be very useful to the writer.

For the most part though, the most common frustration I've found in writing circles is the attitude, “How do we workshop *this*?” This was the initial reason that in my first year of grad school I worked on poetry. I felt that since my flash fiction was of the magical realism variety, it wouldn't be compatible with the majority of fiction in the workshop. Even when writers/readers are fans of magical realism, they find it sometimes difficult to critique, because it is the language rather than the story which appeals to them.

Despite these difficulties, when it comes to criticism, both sorts of reactions can be helpful. Those who love the language of magical realism and its perspective can tell the writer if the “big picture” or moral/message of the story came across, or if it became too convoluted to decipher.

Opinions of fiction writers/readers who are new to magical realism can be just as insightful. Often, if a reader is more skeptical of the magical component, he or she is much more likely to pick up on details that could discredit and distract from the main story. Even in a surreal world, details must be consistent. After all, magical realism isn't science fiction or fantasy. It is the examining of the magic in everyday, ordinary life and it must encompass some unity and grounding. Without a solid foundation and consistent elements, the storytelling is ineffective, regardless of lyrical language.

One teacher mentioned during a workshop that a reader can become "too forgiving" when caught up in the fabulist story and language of a piece. A story may show great ambition, but that doesn't mean that it is completely successful. At least, that is what he said about my stories. Looking through these stories again, I could recognize where I moved away from the unity of a piece. It didn't matter if those scenes were well written. What matters is that they interrupted the flow of the narrative.

In the end, it is plain to see that both myth and logic are necessary:

Myth and logos both have their limitations...A myth could not tell a hunter how to kill his prey or how to organize an expedition efficiently, but it helped him to deal with his complicated emotions about the killing of animals. Logos was efficient, practical and rational, but it could not answer the questions about the ultimate value of human life nor could it mitigate human pain and sorrow.

(Armstrong 31- 32)

For some, these two qualities contradict rather than complement each other. If a reader approaches a piece of magical realism with strict logic he or she will take the magical element literally. For example, *A Short History of the Myth* discusses the common myth

of the savior, and how it exists in all cultures. If one reads about Jesus' ascent to heaven and reads it in a literal manner, it is easy to find it irrelevant. But like folklore, and former oral traditions, these myths are examples, illustrations of a psychological desire of mankind through the ages. Jesus' ascent to Heaven for instance, is a powerful symbol of humankind's desire to transcend the human condition. Similarly, magical realism often leads in that direction. It broadens our perspective and opens new possibilities.

Preservation and Transformation

My own passion for the history and culture of magical realism stems from my mother's Colombian background and her organic manner of telling stories infused with rich, exotic details. Rather than assimilate completely to the new North American culture she found herself in, she spoke Spanish daily, cooked foods from her homeland, and most importantly, told us stories that brought Colombia to us.

I wasn't there the day my mother saw snow for the first time, just like I wasn't there when she stole mangos from street vendors. But through her storytelling, my mother gave me passage to a country and a world that I have yet to physically visit. My mother did not allow her new American experience to drown the culture she held dear. Instead my mother brought the magic of her country into my reality. The book, *Magical Realism* by Faris and Parkinson Zamora, mentions that, "In *House of Spirits* Allende writes to 'keep alive the memory' of her country Chile. Similarly, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison is explicitly concerned with the process of 'rememory' as she will be later in *Beloved*' (285).

In primitive cultures, stories were also told for the purpose of guidance, and were passed onto younger generations, that they might also instill similar values and concepts to their children and that these traditions and morals would continue throughout generations to come. Since we are no longer a culture that preserves our history with public storytelling through fables, illustrations and folktales, magical realism in novel and short story have taken over oral storytelling. Fiction influenced by magical realism is written much more in the vein of oral tradition than traditional prose. Toni Morrison acknowledged this when she said the following:

We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel. (Faris and Parkinson Zamora, 285)

I was fortunate enough to have this nearly lost tradition in my life. Throughout my entire childhood, almost every night, my mother would follow me to bed, pray with me, and talk about Colombia like a love-struck teenager. She told all her stories in Spanish, having refused to learn English until her first two children were in their teens. It is not as if she spoke of angels falling from the sky, or a young girl's rapture to heaven. But the way she talked about the sheets of rain, the trees in the yard, her mother's arms, the wild stories of potions and *curanderas* always contained an unconscious element of magic and exaggeration.

It is often writers whose cultures and traditions are most threatened by being swallowed up by and forgotten in North American society who has kept the oral tradition

alive. Tales once told in a circle around a fire, or on a mother's lap, or by a grandmother to her grand-children, have evolved into the genre known as magical realism.

When I started writing I didn't think of myself as a writer. I thought of myself as a storyteller. And it was my mother's form of storytelling that I found myself putting down on paper: "It just so happens..." or "Picture this..." or "There was this man and this woman..." After reading my short stories, my professor introduced me to Sandra Cisneros by loaning me *The House on Mango Street*. While I grew up in a very rural neighborhood and Cisneros stories are set in Chicago, I felt an instant kinship with her as I began reading her work, which included lots of Spanish and "Spanglish."

In my little rural neighborhood, we were entirely a community of farm workers. From asparagus fields to apple orchards to hops fields, mothers, fathers and even children woke up before sunrise to get to work. My father was an anomaly, the one "white" man in a neighborhood made up of Chicano, mostly Mexican American families. In his own home, cultures also blended, and my father tended to be the odd one out. But after having lived in Colombia for three years, and falling in love with Latino culture, he was adamant that all his children learn to speak, read and write Spanish fluently:

Magical realism depicts the point where two very different realities come together in much the way advocated by Gloria Anzadua, in calling for her "hybrid, malleable, mutable" Chicana, in short her "new mestisa consciousness" with its "tolerance for ambiguity." (Christie 44)

Besides the kinship I felt to her personally, Sandra Cisneros' work opened my eyes to a new form of writing. Her short-shorts were something I had never seen before in books. That was how I had been writing my own stories. Since *The House on Mango Street*, I

went on to read *Women Hollering Creek* and *Loose Women*. In all of these works, Cisneros described a Latin-American culture very similar to the one I was growing up in. Her stories were only a couple pages long and often based on true events yet told in a fable-like, or casual manner. I could see why my professor felt that she would be a good read for me.

I would argue that magical realism, rather than avoiding social upset through escapism, approaches reality with a mythical manner that empowers us by doing something other forms of fiction cannot. It places the power of magic right on the reader's lap, not in some place far, far away in some unknown galaxy. Magic becomes even more significant when it emanates from primitive cultures' folktales and oral traditions. Rather than giving into the hopelessness of an unsettling political or social climate, magical realism suggests the possibility of transforming it by offering a perspective that is larger than life.

In other words since the impossible, whether beautiful or terrifying, takes place in a realistic realm, the elements of the fantastic create not a separate world or escape, but celebrate instead the magic of ordinary life by putting miracles within reach.

Influences

I've focused a great deal on the Latino culture and the more obvious, popular writers of magical realism, such as Marquez, because of my Colombian heritage. However, magical realism should be explored on a multi-cultural level. Just as with myth, oral storytelling and folklore, the genre of magical realism transcends all cultural borders.

This is evident when we consider the diversity of influential magical realist writers. For instance, Franz Kafka was a main influence and inspiration to Gabriel Garcia Márquez:

While in Bogotá, Garcia Marquez took up a program of self-directed reading. “Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka was one work which particularly inspired him. He was excited by the idea that one could write acceptable literature in an untraditional style that was so similar to his grandmother's stories which "inserted bizarre events into an ordinary setting and related those anomalies as if they were just another aspect of everyday life". He was now more eager to be a writer than before. (“Gabriel Garcia Márquez”)

In fact, there are striking similarities between Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” and Garcia’s “The Old Man with Enormous Wings.” Both stories describe the human reaction to the marvelous, to the seemingly grotesque. In the “Metamorphosis,” Gregor Samsa, a selfless and kindhearted son is ostracized and completely neglected and abused by his family after turning into something they can’t process. In “The Old Man With Enormous Wings,” an angelic creature is poked, probed, and eventually discarded. Miracles are brushed aside, unappreciated, and what remains is the tragedy of an unsung hero.

An on-line commentator on “Metamorphosis” made this observation:

Kafka's “Metamorphosis,” a story about a person who turns into a cockroach, is an example of this because everything except for the turning into a cockroach part is realistic. The setting, the family relationships, the emotions, the motivations, etc. Human nature. ... the magical part is a person turning into a cockroach, and making something that we find disgusting even bigger and more obvious. This is something that fiction often does... magnifies a small truth to huge proportions, so

that we can examine it and see it more clearly. In this case, it is a truth we don't really want to look at. We'd rather ignore or destroy a cockroach, and the story makes us look at how we see the people around us, and how we treat them if they aren't beautiful or interesting to us. (“Literature Classics”).

Salman Rushdie is another essential writer to discuss. What is particularly noteworthy about Rushdie is the fact that this author put his life on the line to express an important religious, political truth. Salman Rushdie earned a death sentence from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini for writing *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie’s book caused tremendous controversy and even violence because of its portrayal of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. This extreme example is evidence of the power of magic. As Salman Rushdie himself said, “One of the extraordinary things about human events is that the unthinkable becomes thinkable” (Reder, 10).

When it comes to women and magical realism, one of the first writers to come to mind is Isabelle Allende. When asked by *Margin Online Magazine* in a 2003 interview whether she considered her work to be Magical Realism, Allende answered:

I believe that in my books there are elements of imagination; there is hyperbole; there is gross exaggeration; there is recurrent use of premonition, of coincidence - - of things that happen in fiction that wouldn't seem to happen in real life; but, actually, if you pay attention, they happen often enough. In that sense, there are elements of magical realism in some of my novels -- but not in all of them -- and they always have a logical explanation if you look for it. (Zapata-Whelan, Carol, “Isabelle Allende”)

Other well known women writers of magical realism include Kelly Link, Julia Slavin, Jeanette Winterson, and my personal favorite, Aimee Bender. I fell in love with Aimee Bender, author of *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, *Willful Creatures* and *An Invisible Sign of My Own*. I managed to get everyone in my seminar group to read *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*. There wasn't much of a middle ground as far as opinions went.

Students either loved her with an almost cultish fervor or rolled their eyes and dismissed her as being infatuated with her own cleverness. I fall into the cult category.

I connected with Aimee because generationally we have a lot in common, and because she has a gift for finding the oddities of life and highlighting both their beauty and danger. Aimee Bender represents a very new generation of magical realist authors. She, like many others, is an author who naturally found her voice in the realm of magic realism. Most of her characters are young women and there is a tone of female sensuality throughout both her short story collections that is so multidimensional and unpredictable that it reaches an audience of women that much of mainstream fiction does not address. Her heroines are often deeply flawed, insecure, quirky and vulnerable. And while I hesitate to refer to her stories as lessons, I feel that for a particular population of readers, the stories resonate so strongly, that they inspire a subconscious transformation, be it temporary or long lasting.

Editor and author, Tamara Sellman, who I mentioned earlier, had the opportunity to interview Aimee Bender. Tamara's web site is on hiatus while she writes a book on how to write magical realism. This brings up an interesting question. The majority of writers I've talked to have written what is considered to be magical realism not

deliberately but because they came to them naturally. Bender comments on this new trend by saying:

If their work goes that way organically, then follow it through. And just keep at the work, both on a language level, and an emotional level. If the writer is risking something, then that's a good direction. If writing magic is somehow the safe route, then I'd tell them to write something real. But if there is real joy and work happening, then on with it!" (Sellman, "Aimee Bender").

The genre of magical realism is often immediately associated with Latin American culture. With such masters as Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Isabelle Allende, it is understandable that readers and critics make this association. While traces of magical realism exist throughout the cultures of the world, as a continuation, if not modern evolution and exploration of myth, this genre is seldom associated with our North American culture. Tamara Sellman approaches this subject in her interview with Aimee Bender and she answers why she thinks magical realism is a difficult route for our society to take:

TKS: You have cited work by Arundhati Roy and Haruki Murakami as having blown you away, commenting that much of the literature that attracts you comes from "other places," that there's "often more room, for whatever complicated reason, for magic, surrealism, and all its contortions in writing from other countries." What theories do you have for why this isn't happening in the US?

AB: I think the American bootstrap, pull-yourself-up phenomenon is maybe a part. People think that real stories have more depth. And it's often highly religious Catholic countries that have a well-developed sense of magical realism.

Tamara also interviewed another author I've come to be very fond of, Paola Corso. In this interview, Tamara probed the authenticity of modern magical realism in North America. Paola Corso is of Italian-American heritage. Her book, *Giovanna's 86 Circles* is made up of ten short stories set in Pittsburg, which delve into the lives of working class families. The magic is woven into each story, and the tales are rich and timeless. That instinctive lean towards magical realism doesn't come as a surprise when we take the details take her daily life into account. The daughter of a steel worker, living in an economically depressed town, Paola's attention turned to the remaining natural beauty of an industrially barren society:

I grew up in a city with three rivers. Behind our backyard was undeveloped land clear to the Allegheny River. My friends and I built treehouses, swung on bullropes, collected rocks for science class, and, of course, swam in the river. It was a place for making discoveries, room enough for an imagination...I try to capture the magic of the river's flow in my stories, which are primarily set in a working-class world on the decline that in many ways is like a box of restrictions the work uniform, the time clock, the assembly line, the paycuts, the layoffs, foreclosures. It's a far-fetched idea that you can control what you have no control of, somehow free yourself from what's pinning you down, even for a brief moment in a daydream or a little folktale. (Sellman, "Paola Corso")

Paola's heritage, along with the perils of her days, gave her the ability to imagine life beyond the first layer of economic stress and gloom. Although now a successful, well educated, professional woman, Paola's writing is the work of a blue-collar girl, who writes with earnest vulnerability and courage.

Ultimately, Corso's fiction empowers the voices of those that feel the most ordinary and unremarkable, by revealing the phenomenal that coexists within the dreary and dull. If there is one word I could use to sum up what magical realism offers up to our culture, it is transcendence. From culture to culture, the common denominator I find in the writers of magical realism is the desire to transcend the physical world, the purpose being "to make people more fully conscious of the spiritual dimension that surround[s] them on all sides and [is] a natural part of life" (Armstrong 16).

Magical realism is able to show us the same scenery through a different lens. Marquez, Allende, Bender, and Corso could stand side by side looking out at the same river, the same forest, the same industrial warehouse, but they'll come up with different possibilities even from the same vantage point. The most poignant observation and revelatory statement made by Aimee Bender has to do with truths that magic reveal:

Flannery O'Connor has good stuff to say about the grotesque. She talks about it as though it's real. A child draws a big head, she says, because the child sees a big head, not because the child is trying to be funny. So distortion comes from truth, too. There really is distortion in everything anyway, and inside the grotesque, we are just putting that fact front and center. (Sellman, "Aimee Bender")

Reading "distortion comes from truth" brought everything together for me. Not only did this phrase help me better understand the spirit in which magical realism is

written, but it moved me to realize the reason that I have written it myself, and why it was my natural instinct. A common reason I've heard writers give when asked why they write is that they write to find out what they know. In other words, writers are looking to come to the center of their own truth. Regardless of how distorted our truth may look to another person, it is still the most genuine offering we can make.

Web sites dedicated to magical realism, and submission calls for fiction with a magical realism bend are popping up everywhere, which leads some readers to believe that this genre is "new." We know however, that it is far from new. But as writers such as Aimee Bender, Tamara Sellman and Julia Slavin gain popularity with their strange tales and unique perspectives, it is natural to wonder why this so-called trend in fiction has gained such momentum:

TKS: So you see a move toward alternative realism (magical realism, slipstream, surrealism, etc.) as part of a backlash to the gritty realism of those decades? Or are there other motivations for writing alternative realism?

AB: In a way, yes. It's not only that, but I do think there has been a resurgence in the past five-ten years, and part of it is reactive. In the way that all things are reactive. And there's always motivation for writing alternative realism -- it's really just as much a part of art as realism, and so it's always there, always, whether or not it's the dominant presence or aesthetic. (Sellman, "Aimee Bender")

The reemergence of mythical fiction implies a collective change of consciousness. Humankind is again asking the eternal, universal questions about life. We are questioning

our belief systems, our morals, and our approaches to life. We are questioning former myths, and as we evolve, new myths are forming and a new awareness is emerging.

My Personal Journey to the “Realms of the Unreal”

My mother still doesn't know who Gabriel Garcia Márquez is. She's never read any of his novels or short stories. Maybe she and Marquez brushed elbows at the market, if so my mother wouldn't have known. I like to imagine that this is the case. I told my mother that her not knowing who Marquez is like a North American not knowing whom Elvis Presley is. So, as likely as it would have been for me to be introduced to Marquez by my mother, a native of Barranquilla, Colombia, it was my pursuit of a higher education that brought me to Marquez, and introduced me to a genre that would lead me to my voice.

I didn't know who Márquez was until about six years ago. The first thing I read was the aforementioned story “The Old Man with Enormous Wings.” Out of all the short stories and novels we read in my English Literature class, this one affected me the most. At that time, I wasn't really sure why. All I knew was that I felt the ultimate reality of the story. The undertone of this short story conveyed to me a particular truth, a very real message: the puzzling human tendency to exploit or destroy what you do not understand.

When I started college at age twenty-five, I was a single mother with a GED. As an adolescent growing up in a very strict Christian household where I was expected to read the Bible daily, recreational reading seemed like another chore, especially when my readings included whole books of the Bible in one sitting. It occurred to me much later why the impossible nature of “The Old Man with Enormous Wings” was not so puzzling

to me: I had witnessed through the Bible such “impossible” stories as the parting of the Red Sea, the dead being brought back to life, the burning bush, and, of course Jonah and the whale.

At the heart of my writing, I find myself wanting to preserve the gift my mother gave me. At the same time, I know that if she read one of my short stories inspired by tales of her childhood, she would not immediately recognize her influence. That is because once she shared her stories with me, they became mine, and through my childhood lens, I found the magic in the tales my mother thought of as nothing but direct, factual telling.

As I explored my roots, I found that my journey expanded past my life. I could take the themes and search the world using that lens. I could stretch out and find “truth in distortion.”

I was poor. I was a minority. I was female. I was a member of a strange and exclusive Christian cult. I spent much of my life using my imagination to transcend and transform a life that felt restrictive and limited. Without these conditions, I might have never felt the urge to ponder the strange, the grotesque, and the forbidden so-called darkness. And yet, it was in these places that I found beauty, and discovered the world all over again.

Rather than deny, forget or lament my past, I’ve come to cherish its weirdest elements. It is within the true functions of myth, folklore and magical realism that I find the greatest and most valuable truths. In that discovery is where the ordinary can offer up the terrifying, the poetic, the romantic, the gruesome, and sometimes—if we can learn to make the most of our ordinary existences—hope.

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