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Maghreb *see* North Africa (Maghreb)

Magical Realism

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In a conversation with novelist Cormac McCarthy, filmmaker Ethan Coen asks McCarthy whether he ever rejects ideas because they are too outrageous. McCarthy replies: "I don't know, you're somewhat constrained in writing a novel, I think. Like, I'm not a fan of some of the Latin American writers, magical realism. You know, it's hard enough to get people to believe what you're telling them without making it impossible. It has to be vaguely plausible" (L. Grossman, 2007, "What Happened When," *Time*, 29 Oct.). This quotation neatly catches an equivalence that has come to exist between the most commercially successful works of Latin American literature and magical realism, a concept contested by Latin American writers since it was first imported from German art criticism in the late 1920s. A concept that was for a time (mostly in the 1960s and 1970s) used to sell some forms of Latin American writing is now a straitjacket, resented by most Latin American writers, because it constrains a vast literary tradition.

The term "magical realism" was first used by Franz Roh (1890–1965) in 1929 to describe certain currents in German art after expressionism. It was used early by Arturo Uslar Pietri and Miguel Ángel Asturias, and then vigorously challenged by Alejo Carpentier. In 1949 he coined a competing term,

lo real maravilloso (the marvelous real), in several essays and prologues, as a way in which the Latin American writer, in contradistinction to the surrealists, can find the marvelous in the real. While not as influential, Carpentier's term is set out somewhat more clearly. Magical realism became a dominant critical term through Ángel Flores's "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction" (1955) and Luis Leal's 1967 essay of the same name, in which Leal argues with Flores about what the term means and whether Franz Kafka is crucial as an influence. The corpus of both Flores and Leal includes such writers as Jorge Luis Borges and Ernesto Sábato, though they are no longer thought of in this regard.

The concept, however confused, became indelibly associated with Gabriel García Márquez's epic novel *Cien años de soledad* (1967, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). From there the term became largely the property of publicists and journalists; literary critics despaired of finding a coherent concept in magical realism. It certainly does not define a dominant tradition in Latin American writing since the 1970s. However, it has been used to promote the writing of Asturias, Jorge Amado, Isabel Allende, Márcio Souza, Laura Esquivel, Demetrio Aguilera Malta, and others. Although there is no consensus regarding the term's meaning, magical realism has influenced writing beyond Latin America, as in the work of Salman Rushdie.

In the most important recent book on Latin American writing of the 1960s, Diana

Sorensen writes against magical realism. Though sympathetic to García Márquez's novel, Sorensen considers its core structural motif: the transformation of the real (ice, for instance, at the beginning of the novel) into the unreal, and the magical (the rain of yellow flowers, levitation, magic carpets) into the natural. According to Sorensen, this was not typical of the writing of the period. Nor was it read sensitively by the publicists for magical realism. The failure to be sufficiently "magical realist" contributed to the lack of global success of such Latin American writers as Juan Carlos Onetti, José Donoso, Clarice Lispector, and Juan José Saer, as well as a group of younger writers who have called themselves the "McOndo" generation as a way of distancing themselves from the flights of fancy associated with García Márquez's imaginary town.

SEE ALSO: Genre Theory, Modernism, National Literature, Realism.

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