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***MAGICAL REALISM: WHAT EVERY WRITER SHOULD KNOW, OR, IF THAT SEEMS A SMIDGE PRESUMPTIOUS, WHAT EVERY WRITER MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER, BECAUSE IT WORKS FOR THIS GUY, AT LEAST A LOT OF THE TIME. OKAY, A FAIR AMOUNT OF THE TIME. OKAY, SOMETIMES.***

## **MAGICAL REALISM? WHAT'S THE KEY?**

Magical realism, distilled to its simplest form, is a genre that portrays fantastical events or elements in an otherwise realistic tone. The *key point* to magical realism, and the thing that makes it such a refreshing and generous genre to work in, with so much room for wonder and strangeness, *is the unwavering acceptance of what would be, in any other setting, fantastic and unbelievable*. It's this simple acceptance – when coupled with all the otherwise general cornerstones of solid fiction (character development, risk-taking, voice, emotional arcs) – that sets it apart from other genres and, in my humble opinion, allows the writer to explore complexities about people and relationships in a way that just isn't really available in other styles.

It's also an absolute blast to read and write.

But that's the most crucial point: that brazen acceptance of magic, or wonder, or the unknown. That this phantasmagorical thing or character or event is actually perfectly normal, perhaps even bland. If a character's mother slowly and in increments turns into water vapor, as in Ramona Ausubel's "Fresh Water From the Sea," both the main character and her mother are *concerned* – but only because it marks a diminishment of the mother, an illness. Not because she's, you know, *turning into water*. That fantastic, incredible, scientifically impossible element is blandly accepted by everyone involved. That's the integral part to magical realism – *the incredible is mundane*. In Benjamin Nugent's wonderful story, "Ollie the Owl," a frat kid is continually menaced by a Slavic demon inhabiting the frat's mascot, a wooden owl. The kid and his friends are terrified, of course, but facts that it is a demon doing the menacing, and that it's

aminated a wooden carving are both blithely accepted. That acceptance is the key to magical realism.

Beyond that, what remains is what always remains to good storytelling: We want to make the reader care. When we've figured out the basis of our magical realism story, we've actually only started – we've still got to write the thing, after all, and use all the tools we have available to reach out and punch people right in the heart, to stun them with our language, to use the gymnastics of our imagination. Once we've begun crafting a world in which the magical is mundane, we're just getting started.

Magical realism is often culled from fables, folk tales, and myths, and I encourage you to explore those and see what that exploration fires up in your imagination. Consider modernizing a myth. Heap today's contemporary concerns upon that long-forgotten cryptozoological creature and see what happens. Spend some time thinking about fairy tales and what life would be like for those characters, were they to become enmeshed in our world today.

#### **AN EXAMPLE:**

There's a story I'm working on right now that's a good example of when something can be considered magical realism and when it's simply fiction. Let's say, in the first draft of this story, a sasquatch is spotted walking in the woods somewhere in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. He mauls a campsite and – inadvertently or otherwise – kills a hunter's dog. The hunter is heartbroken and commits the rest of his life to tracking the sasquatch down, finally culminating decades later in a confrontation in which either he or the sasquatch is victorious. That's a *story*, yeah. But it's not really a magical realism story. When it comes to that key tenet of magical realism – that the fantastic becomes a facet of everyday life – we're asked to believe that a sasquatch exists, but that's about it. It's still very much just a man seeking revenge against some element of nature that he believes wronged him. It's *Jaws*, but fuzzier.

If you write a *second* draft from the Bigfoot's perspective, and even if you couple him with very human fears and concerns – let's say he's worried about deforestation, and his environment is shrinking, and they're putting in a new development on the other side of his territory – you're definitely getting closer to magical realism. But that acceptance that the fantastic is mundane still isn't quite there. We're still just being asked to believe that that Bigfoot exists.

So what do we do? *We go even bigger*. We still give Bigfoot his same fears, sure. After all, characters still need to take risks, and they still need to want things, and they still need to be afraid to lose what they have, or what they think they deserve. But remember, *the crucial element of the story is that Bigfoot himself is mundane*; he is simply a part of the world, on the same footing of "specialness" as the hunter. So instead, what if Bigfoot is faced with an ultimatum from some corrupt real-estate developers: *Assimilate or die*. A deal is struck, and these developers house Bigfoot in one of the McMansions in a new subdivision at the foot of the mountain he once lived in, in exchange for being the development's mascot. Where he once used to roam the territory under the dark canopy of trees, he's now living alone in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom townhouse with track lighting, giving tours to rich families looking to buy a home in the development. He bathes indoors. He learns human speech, with difficulty. He worries

about the rest of his clan, who, unlike him, still remain in hiding. And now maybe he's *neighbors* with a hunter, and like any neighbors with wildly different lifestyles, there's grand opportunity for conflict there. Said conflict grows, perhaps to the point where he kills – inadvertently or not – the hunter's dog. The point remains the same: the existence of the sasquatch is, without question, accepted by the developers and the hunter. It's the simple fact that this wild creature is now placed in the constraints of civilization that the conflict stems from. And that sort of conflict is a recipe for some fascinating fiction.

So again, the fantastic becomes everyday. Myths become static. It's that juxtaposition of where the mythic overlaps with the "normal" that your story lies.

### **ASSIGNMENT 1, 10 MINUTES:**

Write a number of *rough* synopses so you'll have a large number of potential storylines to choose from. Each synopsis should be 1-2 sentences long and outline an **element of magical realism** as well as a **single element of conflict** (at least.)

If this is tough, try jotting down a number of simple conflicts ("son/daughter returns home after a long absence", "increasing drudgery at work/problems with boss", "two lovers trying to reconcile") and put them in a pile. Mix them with an equal number of elements of magical realism ("vampire," "a person who has inadvertently turned into an animal," "Little Red Riding Hood"). Pick one of each. The combinations you come up with might not be the exact story you wind up writing, but they will most likely kick start a significant number of ideas and give you a direction you want to go in regards to your story. While it's always a good thing to let your story's conflict and worldview gestate a bit, feel free to begin writing your first draft once you've come up with 6-7 synopses.

### **GO, GO, GO:**

And that's really it, in a nutshell. The fantastic made mundane. Beyond that idea, the only other thing I really want to stress is that what you'll be writing a **first draft**, so don't worry about it being perfect. Everyone writes differently, but I've found much more success in finishing stories if I just go ahead and plow forth on the first draft and not worry too much about the niceties. Once the story's written, as ragged and ugly as it is, then you can polish it, cut it up, switch scenes, etc. For the first draft, just adhere – as loosely as you need to – to your synopsis, and go for it. It's been my experience that if I repeatedly try to get the first four pages in perfect order, the story languishes and never gets done. It's better to have a rough first draft than four beautiful pages of an unfinished story.

### **ANOTHER SUGGESTION, BORDERING ON HOMEWORK:**

I'd also *lightly suggest* that you consider tackling the following exercise at some point in your writing process. It can be after finishing your first draft, or before. Either way works. But please consider giving the following a shot.

One of the most maddening aspects of tackling a short story is knowing the starting point of a tale, and knowing what to show and what to let the reader surmise. As writers, we often want to place such emphasis on the world we're building, and demonstrate all the little nuances

and subtleties of the setting or the characters' relationships or their pasts, that we tend to info-dump. It's fun to come up with this stuff, after all, and we assume our readers will be as enrapt reading it as we have been in creating and writing it. But the challenge arises, honestly, in knowing how much to lay out for the reader, and how much to hide. We have a tendency to throw a handful of confetti right at the beginning of our stories, this cascade of all of these little details and elements and backstories, and nine times out of ten, all it does is overwhelm the reader. So, my proposal is thus: go ahead and write that stuff. Start the story where you want, put all those pieces in there, no problem. It's a first draft and you should have a blast with it.

But after you're done, try this: **Cut out that first scene.** Start your story from the *following scene*. Repair and suture the plot as necessary, but keep it sparse. How does it read now? Is the reader still afforded some sense of your world, while also giving them room for their own imaginations to breathe within your story? Ignore that fevered desire to put all of the little bits back in there, all of the factoids and histories, and try to look at what works and what doesn't from this new, truncated version. How many of those little pieces do you really need? How vital is that first scene in terms of plot? And what happens if you start your story... even further along? What happens if you distill the first scene into a single paragraph and then move on? As an experiment, it's not always going to work, but the intention here is to get our writing as streamlined as possible, to give it as much narrative velocity as we can.

I mean, it's undoubtedly neat that in your world, a secondary character can extract highly-valued chunks of obsidian from her chest cavity and use it to purchase stuff in the illicit night markets organized by undead chihuahuas on the outside of town, but do we really need to know all that? Do we really need a scene in which she strolls through said market for three pages, making various purchases and haggling with vendors, only to finally to bump into the main character on page four and finally begin to advance the plot and stir the embers of conflict? Go ahead and write that version – like I said, writing that stuff is fun – but then cut those first four pages and start the story where Ol' Obsidian Ribs bumps into the MC after a *very* brief exchange with a vendor. We still have a sense of the strangeness of the place, but dang, the story is immediately cruising along now, isn't it? The trick to navigating worldbuilding, particularly with magical realism, is to give readers enough to kick-start their sense of wonderment, of possibility, but not to overload them.

## **NOW WE EDIT**

First drafts are gloriously messy, as they should be. Written under the assumption that you've got one and are now ready to get down to the fine art of editing and revising mercilessly, let's do this. The skeleton's been built; now we begin to form the body and make the thing look horrifying, or tremendous, or quietly, unnervingly odd.

A note about editing and revision: like writing that first draft, there's just no right way to do it. It's an organic, internal process that becomes easier the more you do it. I usually get an innate sense of what is working in a story by a) writing regularly and b) reading regularly. Those are the two keys. But the great thing we've got going for us is that word-processing programs are incredibly forgiving, so if something isn't working, that's perfectly okay. It's totally natural (for this writer, at least) to struggle with a story, either in the initial phase or the revision process. It is

what it is. Just go ahead and try revising it as naturally and comfortably as possible. If it works seamlessly, and you don't hit any creative roadblocks, that's great.

But sometimes it helps to stir things up a bit, and that's when it can become invaluable to save different versions of your story and try different things. If you're feeling stuck with your particular draft and the story doesn't have the right velocity or tone or it's too slow or whatever – don't be afraid to take risks. Here's a few different things that might help you steer your story towards a successful outcome.

1) Try a draft where you decide to cut your story's word count in half. Can you do it? Staccato rhythms. Choppy, quick sentences. Pure sinew, nothing extraneous on it. Character motivation exposed in a single sentence, a line of dialogue? Does it work? Does it still retain a semblance of your original plot? Maybe it doesn't, but doing this – choosing what to cut and what to keep – will definitely get you in a different mindset, and open a number of different potential doors.

2) If your story is running lengthy, full of page-long paragraphs, consider trying a draft that's sectioned instead into short, fractured snippets. Lots of single-line sentences. Almost poem-like. Flip the story's style on its head.

3) The point, really, is simple: if you're stuck in revision, do something that will force you to view (and shape) the story through a different lens. Perhaps the simplest one - and it sounds ridiculously uncomplicated but I've had great luck with it on a number of projects – is the old “change the font” trick. (Like I said, simple!) If you're stuck on a story and your character's motivation is frustratingly obfuscated or the dialogue looks flat and the voice isn't coming and you've looked at this story ten million times now... switch the font. Switch the font and change the type size by a point or two. Seriously. How does it read now? The screen's totally different. The story has literally changed shape, and your eyes should be traveling across the page differently. It's the simplest thing, and it totally works.

This is all assuming, of course, that you might have problems with tackling a second draft. If you don't, that's great; Sometimes we come across a story that's almost in a rush to get out, and editing is a breeze, a joy. If that's what happens for you here, awesome. If not, do what you can to look at the story with a fresh set of eyes.

### **YEESH, WE HAVE TO EDIT AGAIN?**

Yeah. You've written a rough draft and then did a run-through? Cool. Do it again. (And again, probably.) Like I've said before, there's no right way to do it, and there's no correct length of time it takes to finish a story. Some people need to run through a story a dozen times, or two dozen, before the unnecessary parts are whittled away and the thing's true form takes shape; for other people, it takes much less. You'll know when it's done, and if you're like a lot of other writers, even if it *feels* like it's done, you'll have to resist the urge to whittle away at it. The curse of the writer.

### **A SESSION IN REVIEW**

We spent the beginning of the class immersing ourselves in what constitutes magical realism – defined here as “unflagging belief in the fantastic as an unexceptional part of everyday life.” Hopefully that makes sense. We’ve also had to ask ourselves **when a story truly starts**, and how to retain the reader’s interest throughout, how narrative velocity is key. We’ve had to consider what tone and voice best suits the story we’re telling. We’ve had to figure out if additional dialogue will enrich the story or mire it in inanities. We’ve had to cut sections – sometimes mercilessly so – that weren’t working, or were bogging things down. We’ve had to figure out how to toe the line between world-building and info-dump. Again, velocity is key: we should be keenly aware of moving the story forward.

All told, it’s a lot to keep track of.

But this is exactly how it gets done – one story at a time, one edit at a time. One sentence at a time. Just take it paragraph by paragraph, line by line, and ask yourself if this is something that *moves the story forward*. Is this particular plot-point or event furthering the story? Is it altering the MC in some integral way? Is it telling us about the person (or creeeeeaaaaaature, in some instances)? If so, how? Remember, this is the whole crux here – we have to care about the MC, we have to be concerned for them – even if it’s only to hope they get their just desserts. Our MCs have to risk something, have to be afraid of losing something, of not getting something they think they deserve.

Once you have all of that down, the thing that we should be focusing on is *consistency*. Consistency in tone, in keeping the rhythm and voice sustained throughout the length of the story, consistency in sticking with tenses and POVs. (You certainly *can* switch tenses and POV within a story, but it should read as intentional rather than careless.)

So now’s when we tighten down the bolts of our stories, whittle them down, check that the structure itself is solid, and then work on tackling it at a sentence-by-sentence level. Cutting what needs to be cut, finding if there’s a more dazzling or simple or interesting way to write that particular line.

And that’s it. It really does come down having a basic, organic understanding of what works and what doesn’t, both in magical realism and any other genre – and that’s something that comes with time and effort and, yes, rejection. But after that writers must move on to the gruntwork of editing, over and over, again and again. (It’s a process I cherish, but one that can also be maddening as hell.) Writing magical realism is the same as writing literary fiction or steampunk or romance or whatever – the basic underpinnings of *storytelling* are what prop everything up.

#### **SUGGESTED READING (STORIES):**

“Who Will Greet You at Home,” by Lesley Nneka Arimah

“Exo-Skeleton Town” by Jeffrey Ford

“Portal,” by J. Robert Lennon

“Shoe and Marriage,” by Kelly Link

“CommComm,” by George Saunders

“How to Stop Smoking in Nineteen Thousand Two Hundred and Eighty-Seven Seconds,  
Usama,” by Chavisa Woods