



## MACONDO IS MORE DANGEROUS THAN YOU THINK: READING MAGICAL REALISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE WITH A POSTCOLONIAL LENS

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Recibido: 21 de marzo de 2023  
Aceptado: 5 de mayo de 2023



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## ABSTRACT

The present essay is a literature review of the label magical realism in children's literature. The principal aim is to explore this literary corpus with a postcolonial framework and to expose how the (mis)representation of Latin America and Latin community can influence critical literacies that are social justice-oriented through the reading. Therefore, this text explores the idea of magical realism, its roots, development, and some examples that are present in the contemporary literature for the youth.

**Key words:** Magical Realism, Critical Literacies, Postcolonialism, Latin America, Children's and YA Literature

## RESUMEN

El presente ensayo es una revisión del estado del arte de la etiqueta realismo mágico en la literatura para niños. El objetivo es explorar el corpus literario con un marco teórico poscolonial y exponer como la (mal)interpretación de Latino América y la comunidad Latina puede influenciar el alfabetismo crítico que tiene una influencia hacia la justicia social a través de la lectura. Para esto, este texto explora la idea del realismo mágico, sus inicios, desarrollo y algunos ejemplos presentes en la literatura contemporánea para jóvenes.

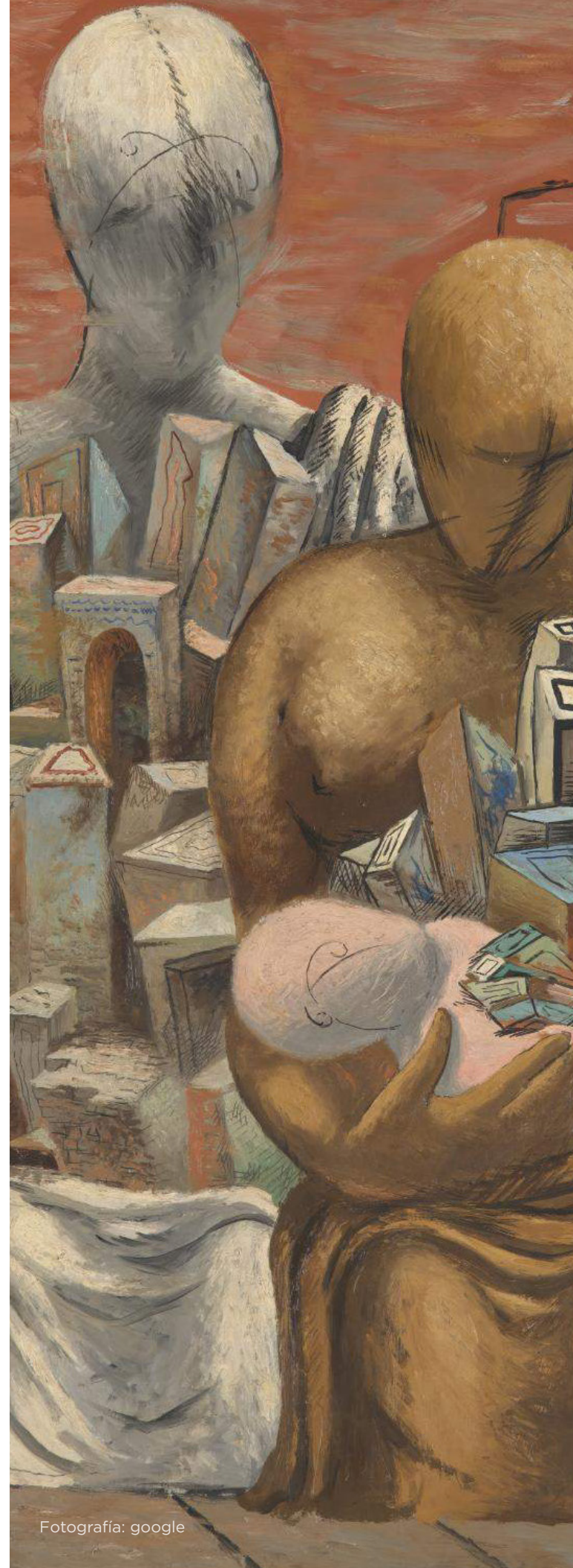
**Palabras clave:** Realismo mágico, Alfabetismo crítico, Poscolonialismo, Latino América, Literatura Infantil y Juvenil

The following text is a literature review of Magical Realism in children's literature. However, as will be further explored below, magical realism can be present in literature from all around the world. Therefore, it will recognise readings from other territories, especially those relating to the magical element within Latin American narratives.

According with a postcolonial approach the notion of magical realism is a form of cultural identity as an imposition made by external sources. The importance of understanding magical realism as part of the Latin American identity can be useful to observe literary issues like representation, not only of people but also of the land. Thus, this can lead us to a new possibility: a deconstruction of these experiences in literature.

For this purpose, this text will discuss three key elements: the concept of magical realism and its power as a disruptive element; postcolonial experiences concerning discussions of disruption; drafting the possibility of decolonisation of this literature.

During the fifty-year anniversary of Gabriel García Márquez novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) the Colombian writer Antonio Caballero questioned in an magazine article how the concept of magical realism has been used for commercial purposes; he pointed that the continuous marketing use for the term perpetuates misconceptions about the novel, and dismissing one of its cores: a subversive speech that exposed some of the worst events of the last century in Colombian history, the Banana Massacre.



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The problematic that Caballero pointed in his article is related with the idea of exoticizing Colombia as a land where magical realism can exist and, in return, reinforcing postcolonial structures that Colombia and other Latin American countries are beset with. The manipulation of this label in some Latin American countries has been applied beyond literary or artistic critique, and further presented in other areas such as tourism marketing.

The lack of clarity about this concept can be linked with one of the main problems that the same term has: there is not a specific definition of it as a literary genre or style (Zamora & Faris 1995, Warner 2009, Reeds 2013). For doing that, is necessary to stablish that magical realism is not a Latin-American product, but rather an 'international commodity' (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 2). Therefore, magical realism can, and has been, used by authors all around the globe.

The term was first coined in 1925 by Franz Roh in an essay about post-expressionist artists in Germany. In his essay, Roh does not define what he understands as magical realism, leaving an open gap for other critics to appropriate the term and use it in other contexts, predominantly in literary studies. (Guenther, 1995, p. 62). Throughout the twentieth century, magical realism was related to Latin-America's literary production, primarily with regards to critics like Venezuelan writer Arturo Uslar-Pietri and Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier; both influenced by the literary discussions taking place during the 1940s in Europe (Guenther, 1995, p 61). In parallel, Carpentier touched upon notions of Marvellous Realism in two essays(1949 & 1975) further exploring this concept as cultural identity in relation to Latin American territories (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 7).

All these uses of the term create a complex discussion surrounding the meaning of magical realism. Other scholars have talked about similar themes using other labels to these characteristics, such as *metafisica* (metaphysical) by de Chirico and Carra in Italy; or *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) by German avant-garde artists, or even the *fantástico* (fantastic) by Borges and others (Guenther, 1995, p. 62).

As it was mentioned before, Carpentier touched upon notions of 'Marvellous Realism', for Carpentier marvellous realism is the Latin American answer to the European trends, taking a step aside of the magical realism from Chirico, the surrealism from Breton and another avant-garde movement. In marvellous realism, the narrator is who introduce the bewilderment leading the implied reader to see the fantastic in the narration. With his proposal, some critics, like Parkinson Zamora & Faris, divided the magical realism and the marvellous realism identifying the last one as cultural identity concerning Latin American territories (1995, p. 7).

Despite the difficulties to define magical realism, Zamora and Faris point out some characteristics about this style relevant in common knowledge, are identified by scholars addressing magical realism in Children's literature such as Rudge (2006), Hammer (2008), Diaz (2017), Alcubierre (2014) and others. One of the common ideas of these authors is how this term denotes a duality, and therefore, the presence of magical elements leading to a disruptive narrative. Before expanding on the elements of disruption, it is important to talk about some characteristics of magical realism.

During the last century, western literature explored a boundary of transgression between fantastic and mimetic genres. During the previous two centuries, the principal resource for such narratives was a mimetic-realism (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 2). To a certain extent, this realism was hyper-realistic, very much like the idea of someone using a mirror to capture all details. Novels were full of believable characters, possible situations and plausible stories. The purpose of this was not only evident in literary studies, but also the same literary expressions were reflecting on the mimesis of the narrative:



Yes, monsieur, a novel is a mirror which goes out on a highway. Sometimes it reflects the azure of the heavens, sometimes the mire of the pools of mud on the way, and the man who carries this mirror in his knapsack is forsooth to be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shows the mire, and you accuse the mirror! Rather accuse the main road where the mud is, or rather the inspector of roads who allows the water to accumulate and the mud to form. (Stendhal, 1980: non-pagination)

In contrast, during the twentieth century, more and more authors started to include 'fantastic elements' in their narrations. Such elements were not part of the fantastic genre, but rather of realism. They were there, infringing the logic of the realms where a narration was happening. This would be possible if we consider that the fantasy genre focused for children and young readers occurs in stories in which the protagonist is transported to a new realm where magic is possible, or even when in this same realm, fantasy and magic are part of the logic that the narrative universe proposes (Nikolajeva, 2003, p. 141)..

For Warner, that is when magical realism happens. When "the signifiers depend for their meanings on a stable point of comparison a shared notion of reality- that is undermined by the relativizing effects of magical realism" (Warner, 2005, p. 7). In other words, a magical realist narration can hold elements of bewilderment, but the characteristic of magic depends on the common understanding of magic.

Is possible to recognise five features that explain the bewilderment element in a magical realist narration:

1. The texts contain an irreducible element of magic;
2. The readers may experiment hesitation thanks to the effort to reconcile the contradictory understanding of events;
3. Disturbs (or destabilized) the notion of time, space and identity;
4. Detail the descriptions that merged realities and blurred boundaries;
5. The phenomenal world disturbs the realm. (Hammer, 2006 and Warner, 2005).

The characteristics proposed by Faris try to determine what is a magical realist narration, however, some of these elements are to a certain extent, similar to those proposed by Nikolajeva in regards to what happens in fantasy: “alternative worlds, nonlinear time, extrasensory perception, and in general all kinds of supernatural events that so far cannot be explained in terms of science, but that we are not willing to ascribe to the traditional fairy-tale magic” (2003, 140). Therefore, Faris’ statement falls short of clarity about magical realism as an independent style from fantasy or, as a reflection about magical realism as another way to see fantasy?

This other perspective about fantasy has an anthropological lens and interprets magic as an “expression of particular belief systems or ways of seeing the world” (Camayd Freixa quoted by Warner, 2005, p. 6). This point of view is closer to Carpentier’s proposals about a local, cultural, and geographic identity. The principal bias of this perspective is one which creates a strong boundary around the space where magical realism can occur; this approach narrows the possibility to construct a literary corpus outside Latin America, and other peripheric narratives alike. In consequence, this falls into the assumption that rational narratives can only exist inside the hegemonic epistemic.



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One could argue that magical realism is, to a certain extent, an expression of fantasy according to Nikolajeva’s notions; in which fantasy can occur in other realms that become like a locus amenus for the protagonists of these books -that usually are children. Nevertheless, these fantastic events are temporal, and the characters return to the initial locus where the temporal and linear rules do not allow fantasy (Nikolajeva, 2003, p. 141 – 142). In other cases, fantasy happens in a whole new universe that is created for the narrator. In this fictional space, the fantastic is a dominant epistemic and not an exception (Nikolajeva, 2003, p. 143). In other words, fantastic events can occur here because these fictional universes have in their natural laws the possibility to hold the magic.

These two scenarios where the fantastic occurs is what Todorov defines as fantastic: “the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov, 1970, p. 25). Todorov’s proposal highlights the hesitation of the reader, even when the characters recognise explicitly the events as fantastic. He explains that this occurs without, necessarily, thinking on an implicit reader. The reader follows a character and perceives her/him the same as the character (Todorov, 1970, p. 31). In other words, the reader can feel hesitation as far as the narrator constructs through the characters an environment where the fantastic can happen.

All these explanations are about how narrators interpreted reality and how they juxtapose magical and mimetic events; this occurs “because magical realism redirects fantasy’s subversive intent into an exploration of ideological paradox [...] magical realist modes sustain conflicting perspectives in order to interrogate cultural ideologies that are associated with the narrative construction of point of view” (Hammer, 2006, p. 64).

For example, Hammer shows how a narrator uses metafictional strategies in the text, critical strategies to establish the culturally diverse positions that are relevant in Hammer’s perception of magical realism. These strategies not only transform the story for the implicit reader but also the ways in which the character perceives their reality affected by transcultural elements in the narrative (2006, p. 65).

These transcultural realities encounter two ideological frames: dominant and non-hegemonic. Hammer exemplifies this with an example of a novel by stating that “where marginalised groups and individuals are either shunned or victimised because of their differences” (2006, p. 65). In this case, there is a group that has more influence in the schooling system and exerts power over some students. The same happens in relation with the picture of Latin American culture when represented by an outside author. As Hammer and Alcubierre expose in their work, this form of representation commonly uses the magic realism elements without knowing about the subject and creating an exotic point of view of Latin-America.

To encapsulate these multiple definitions about what is magical realism and how it works in the implicit reader, Rudge presents a simple and comfortable description of magical realism in the study of children’s literature:

Once the reader has been positioned to expect a realist text, they will continue to read the text in this manner even when fantasy elements become part of the sole world that the text has set up and that this predisposes the reader to accept the fantastic elements as ‘real’ within the frame of the narrative. (Rudge, 2004, p. 128)

She adds that the narrative voice must be constant through the whole text; there should not be any change in the way the narrator describes the fantastic events. Like other scholars, Rudge defines that the presence of the magical in these narratives is brought by the fissures in a dominant way of thinking.

In those cases, it is in the liminal point where these two epistemic face each other and the magical realism narration happens. Usually, these narratives have a relation with western values being interrupted for non-western, as further explained by these scholars. In this sense, it is no surprise to see how magical realism is usually related to Latin American literature. Nonetheless, these authors also recognise the narrations outside of these geographies, usually coming from countries that have been European colonies.

In European literature, usually, the syncretism of these two ways of thinking happens considering the otherness, creating a contrast between each other. Unfortunately, this ‘representation’ can carry stereotypes and prejudices. This attitude is the result of European romantic literary tradition, where this other is also the representation of nature and is used “as an elusive metaphor” (Harper, 1997, p. 41).

Ultimately, postcolonial studies field focus on the literary corpus produced not only by non-hegemonic authors but also by those who are part of the dominant culture. In Harper’s words:





“[...] the rejection of Eurocentrism involves, first, the recognition of the multiplicity of colonial experiences and, second, the realisation that the definition ‘postcolonial’ itself privileges European settlement and invasion as the ontological foundation for non-European societies.” (Harper, 1997, p. 41)

In this same line of thought, postcolonial studies in children’s literature recognises a characteristic of “cultural syncretistic, hybridization, ethnicity, and resistance that have entered Western children’s literature” (Harper, 1997, 42).

In the case of Latin-American literature, the periphery and the dominant discourses coexists creating a cultural presence of

“[...] indigenous heritage 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.” (Diaz, 2017, p. 32)

Withal, following Caballero’s article explored above, affirms that magical realism in Latin-America is possible only due to the daily praxis coexisting between two realities. Thus, it could be argued, that postcolonial studies address these issues to:

“Unmask and deconstruct the naturalized and implicit assumptions that derive from centuries of colonial thinking and logic. The first and the hardest assumption to dismantle is the entrenched belief that civilization, modernity and progress are the patrimony of Europe (Eurocentrism)” (Gonzalez, 2018, p. 3)

To observe magical realism as a cultural and literary phenomenon in Latin-America, it is important to clarify that this ‘label’ covers many countries with similar roots, but with different historical and cultural identities. In this way, it is possible to find both a dominant epistemic in Latin America (usually influenced by Eurocentric thinkers) and a peripheric one. This phenomenon occurs in consequence of more than two centuries of European colonies in this territory.

To consider this territory creates some problems around its definition. For instance, the territory known as Latin-America Latin refers to the romantic languages that are spoken in the American continent, that includes countries like Brazil that the main language is Portuguese and some of the islands in the Antilles, like Haiti which official language is French and the Spanish speaker countries. For other people, the label of ‘Latin America’ only refers to the territory of the countries that were part of the Spanish Colonial Occupation. Either way, both definitions of these categories have a strong linguistic and colonial element. Nevertheless, these countries cannot be bound together by their native-languages, because the Amerindian languages –that are still present in these territories– are multiple and each of them represents different ways to observe the world; the distinctive characteristic that those countries have is that they are cover under the Indo-European languages, a dominant linguistic form.

Linguistic studies itself are not a dangerous field; however, the study of the languages can be used as a tool to reinforce the idea of ‘us versus them’ that postcolonial studies try to defeat (Young, 2010, p. 285). Therefore, to use Latin-American as a label is a device that drives the experience of postcoloniality. This notion does not only end after colonial times during the beginning of the XIX century but continued dominating as economic powers (Gonzalez, 2018, p. xi).

The colonial discourse “[...] justify and glorify colonization while hiding the dark side of military domination, economic exploitation, physical and cultural violence, slavery, and genocide, without which the colonial powers would not have been able to sustain themselves in the first place” (Gonzalez, 2018, p. 3). This discourse is what holds the relation of power that moulded the speech in Latin America, which can be reflected in the literary corpus produced by them, or for them as Gonzalez claims.

According to Young, one of the most exciting parts of postcolonial studies around literature is the richer production that occurs outside of the traditional canon (Young, 2010, p. 283). This essay has aimed to question the ways in which magical realism can be classified not only as peripheral literature (usually produced in the margins of dominated territories) but also as withstanding a hegemonic epistemic.

In this sense, the study of children and youth's literature in Latin America is a look at the literature from outside. Understanding that usually the literary studies does not focus on the literary corpus that is label for children and youth and leaves, traditionally this task, to the educational studies. Making the reading of this literature part of the periphery that excludes this literature from the academia.

Not only concepts about power are applicable to a Latin American postcolonial context, but it is also possible to observe the power exerted between adult-child relations, as suggested by Nikolajeva in her theory about aetonormative (2009). From both perspectives, the imbalance of power is a constant that can be defeated in the narrations. The intersection of both can bring the possibility to deconstruct the different schemes around narratives for children in Latin-America.

In the case of aetonormativity, Nikolajeva holds that the imbalance of power between the adult and child occurs not just in relation to the implied reader, as was proposed before, but also how the adult narrator treats the agency of the child character (p. 14 -16). Additionally, this theoretical approach not only focuses on the imbalance of power but in this case, takes one step

forward in thinking how these norms are arbitrary and focus on the norm; the possibility to transgress it, gives more power to this norm and does not see how to 'des-empower' (p. 16).

As I see it, taking away part of the power from the dominant side of the binary can be a useful recourse to (re)signify and deconstruct the postcolonial experiences that are encapsulated in the narrations that we are discussing.

Here 'deconstruction' is understood as part of the process of decolonisation, where the principal object is re-thought as the cultural praxis, we heritage from colonial times. This is possible due to different tools that postcolonial studies adopt from other theories such as feminism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, and poststructuralism (Young, 2010, p. 284).

The importance of the deconstruction of the structural imbalance can be critical as it is primordial in current critical literacies. For the scholars of Critical Literacies, the core in the education of justice-oriented citizenry is the disruption of the commonplace and the constant query about it (Vasquez



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et al., 2013, p. 8-11; Barry, 1998, p. 630). For that reason, the assumption of a label as magical realism apply to a territory reduces the interest of offer to the implicit reader a more representative literature that portraits a world that is oriented in social-justice.

One of the possibilities in this quest can be the inclusion of multiple cultural experiences that can give the same status to all narrations (Igarashi and Saito, 2014, p. 225). Accordingly, the magical realist narratives can come from authors that are part of the periphery and those who are traditionally from the canon. The multiple voices in the discussion of these disruptive epistemic can be a possibility for the development of critical literacies.

However, the magical realist narratives from outside of Latin-America need to be judged and should be revisited for a correct representation of the people and the land. Defeating these misconceptions is essential. To look at how the authors from dominant backgrounds are justifying the magical through appropriation mechanisms, or in other cases, the misrepresentation of the multi-ethnic identity that holds Latin America. This discussion can lead to an overhaul of the titles that are being currently published and question how this influence the contemporary reader.

In that case a posture from the imagology perspective it is relevant because it can provide a view about the idea of Latin America with (and without) the label of magical realism. This is especially important considering that some novels from children and young adults by non-Latin and Latin authors, uses the idea of magic devices, wonderful land, and other exotic elements about Latin America, reinforcing the misrepresentation of the people and the territories. Some books, like Stephen Cole's *The Aztec Code* (2007) or *City of the Beasts* (2002) from Isabell Allende, describe indigenous cultures as magical, showing mysticism around religious practices and, especially in Cole's book, ignoring all kind knowledge of this culture and imposing prejudices about them.

Additionally, the narratives produced by Latin American authors should also be aware as to how their presentation of the narratives perpetuate postcolonial experiences, not only in the relation of the dynamics between the Eurocentric epistemic and Latin America but also how these dynamics are replicated inside the same cultural structure. As Caballero highlights in his article, the excessive use of magical realism as a cultural identity can also be a tasteless attitude to the social, economic, and political situation in Latin America.

Books like *Zoro* (1976) from Jairo Anibal Niño are an example about how the unbelievable starts to invade our reality, the forest becomes an unstoppable force that invades all its surroundings. In this case, the nature is the element that incarnates the magic, the forest moves the story. Here, the exploitation of the idea of the indomitable land reinforces the idea about representation in Latin America. In addition, the protagonist is an indigenous boy who is searching for his village. He accomplishes this task thanks to an old man and this knowledge of the land. This allows us to see that the territory, the unknown in the forest can be conquered thanks to the consciousness about the land. Same happens around the production of books for children and young adult's that uses de identity of Latin America and framed in a magical realm, without the knowledge about the land, the people, the habits and so on, these narrations can fall short and misrepresent a multicultural region that does not recognize itself as one idea.

To summarize, there is also other type of fantastic narrations for children and young readers that can be labelled as magical realism, that are not called as such because they do not reference Latin America (the territories or the people) and therefore, they are just labelled as fantasy, for example, *Skelling* (2009) by the North-American author David Almond. Where a man with long wing appears in the life of a young boy. This character has a noticeable influence from the short story "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings" by Gabriel García Márquez who, as I said before, is one of the most notorious authors of magical realism. Despite of this, Almond's book does not classify as a magical realism narration.

The label Magical Realism is not only applicable to the idea of Latin-America, is not the way that this vast territory writes or talks about fantasy and is not a marketing label to attract tourist to a colonial territory. The lack of clarity in this concept exhorts us to be more critical about the (mis)use of it. This is a wider topic up for discussion, and a growing literary corpus currently explored from multiple perspectives. Further research around this subject should propose a more precise definition of magical realism as a way to develop a quantitative and qualitative identification about the corpus, considering the information about the context of these publications, the distribution of these works, and the content of their narrations..

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