MAGIC REALISM

What is Real?
Gabriel García Márquez's fiction is considered to be the defining example of magical realism, despite the author's refusal of the label. He protests that he is not a magical realist but a realist, and that there isn't a single thing in his fiction that hasn't really happened to him or someone he knows.

The Colombian author's point is well taken: the question of what is real is at the heart of magical realism. García Márquez implies that our notions of reality are too limited—that reality includes magic, miracles and monsters, and that we don't need to go around inventing special terms to describe it. By making things happen in his fictional world of Macondo that do not happen in most novels (or in most readers' experiences either), the author asks us to question our assumptions about our world, and to examine our certainties about ourselves and our community. Because the magical events in Macondo are presented matter-of-factly, our own sense of what is possible is amplified and enriched. Ordinary objects and events are enchanted. As the gypsy Melquíades says in the first paragraph of the novel, "Things have a life of their own. It's simply a question of waking up their souls."

Bridging the Cultural Divide
García Márquez also suggests that cultures and countries differ in what they call "real." It is here that magical realism serves its most important function, because it facilitates the inclusion of alternative belief systems. It is no coincidence that magical realism is flourishing in cultures such as Mexico and Colombia, where European and indigenous cultures have mixed, with the result that ancient myths are often just beneath the surface of modernity.

It's not just in Latin America where Western and non-Western cultures have converged. Toni Morrison, a Nobel laureate alongside García Márquez, writes novels that depend upon African cultural sources to describe American settings. American writers Leslie Silko and Louise Erdrich incorporate Pueblo and Ojibway cultural traditions.

Turning Proof on its Ear
Magical realism engages belief systems that defy rational, empirical (scientific) proof. So, too, do science fiction and fantasy and gothic romance. But the crucial difference is that magical realism sets magical events in realistic contexts, thus requiring us to question what is "real," and how we can tell. Magical realism undermines our certainties, and we eventually accept (often without authorial explanation) the fusion, or co-existence, of contradictory worlds—worlds that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. Magical realist fiction is not "either/or" but "both at once."

From Wikipedia:
Magic Realism vs fantasy: (Wiki) “In fantasy, the presence of the supernatural code is perceived as problematic, something that draws special attention—where in magical realism, the presence of the supernatural is accepted.”

Magic Realism vs SciFi: (Wiki) "The science fiction narrative's distinct difference from magical realism is that it is set in a world different from any known reality and its realism resides in the fact that we can recognize it as a possibility for our future. Unlike magical realism, it does not have a realistic setting that is recognizable in relation to any past or present reality."
Magical Realism: Distinguishing Features

By Tamara K. Sellman and Susan Deefholts

While magical realist stories from around the world can vary greatly in tone, context and content, they share some common elements. Identifying these features can help you differentiate between magical realism and other kinds of imaginative writing.

Consider some of the characteristics below. You may be surprised to learn that you've already read magical realism without even realizing it!

- Elements of the magical and the mundane are interwoven seamlessly, making it impossible to determine where reality ends and the extraordinary begins.

- The story is set in an otherwise ordinary world, with familiar historical and/or cultural realities. Story events are not always explained by universal laws or familiar logic.

- The ordinary aspects of the story are what produce the greatest magic.

- Objects and settings within the story may take on lives of their own in a way that is ordinary to the characters in the story.

- Constructs of time do not follow typical Western conventions. For instance, stories may be told in spiraling shapes rather than in straight lines.

- The story, as it unfolds, gives the reader a sense of being inside a puzzle or maze.

- Contradictions, inconsistencies and ambiguities color the point of view, making you question what you understand about the world at large, as well as what happens inside the story.

- A metamorphosis takes place in the story. It's treated not as a miracle, but as an everyday event.

- The story bears the influences of oral tradition: fables, myths, tall tales, urban legends, a charmed storytelling narrator (who may or may not be reliable).

- The magical elements in the story may enhance a subversive message or personalized point of view. Often the point of view is revealed through voices, ideas, and places which exist outside the mainstream or majority perspective.

- Magic occurs without using devices typical to the fantasy genre unless the devices (i.e. ghosts, angels) are employed in a context that makes them ordinary. Ghosts or angels may exist in a magical realist story, for instance, but not in a way that is surprising or unusual to the characters in the book.