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Magic as Medicine: Exploring Trauma and Resilience in Children's Magical Realist Narratives

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the aspect of magical realism in *The Boy Who Could See Demons* (2012) by Carolyn Jess-Cooke and *The Miraculous* (2020) by Jess Redman that acts as a literary element to represent and process childhood trauma. Employing Caruth's theory of trauma as a belated, fragmented experience and Herman's three phase model of recovery, this study examines the use of symbolic elements in these novels such as Ruen, the demon and the images of spirals to externalize the internal struggles. Magical realism in these novels utilized not as mere escapist devices but as a way to maintain a safe emotional distance and symbolize trauma. The findings of this study underscore the therapeutic and pedagogical value of this genre to help young readers to confront trauma and build resilience through symbolic storytelling.

Keywords: Magical realism, childhood trauma, coping mechanisms, reader response, psychological resilience.

"Childhood trauma often resists straightforward representation because its memories cannot be easily articulated. Cathy Caruth observed that the trauma is an event that cannot be fully assimilated as it occurs, but only belatedly…in repetitive flashbacks and nightmares" (Caruth 4). That is in recurring flashbacks and nightmares. Likewise, the three step model of Judith Herman's trauma recovery that involves the phase of safety, remembrance and mourning with reconnection, highlights the need of gradual step by step and symbolically mediated approaches to process psychological wounds. The challenge for authors writing for young adult and children is to depict trauma honestly without overwhelming the young reader's emotional capacity. Magical realism, a literary form that integrates supernatural elements into everyday settings seamlessly emerges as a powerful solution by offering

narrative distance to distance oneself from trauma while maintaining its emotional authenticity.

Magical realism began in early twentieth-century art criticism, when Franz Roh talked about paintings that "combined realistic technique with uncanny, dreamlike motifs treated as ordinary" (Rajab 3). Afterward, Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpentier pioneered the genre in literature, portraying supernatural events as events in everyday reality, reflecting postcolonial and psychological complexities. It is unlike surrealism which disrupts rational perception through absurdist juxtapositions or fantasy which build entirely new and unfamiliar worlds, as its supernormal events occur just as unexpectedly among normal lives. (Hutcheon 105) By using the fantastic to tell its stories, this literature lets young characters and readers face the traumatic events they have lived through. The magical elements thus become a vehicle for truth rather than a mere escape device, granting young protagonists and readers a pathway to explore and integrate traumatic experiences.

There has been a lot of research on adult magical realism, yet its presence in children's and young adult literature has not been thoroughly analyzed. Yvonne Hammer points out that, "weaving magical realism into children's narratives allows authors to broach topics of grief, loss, and identity in age-appropriate, metaphorical ways" (Hammer 64). In addition, Abusina Biswas points out that, in youth fiction, fantasy and magical realism are often used to explore personal identity in a way that matches the age of the reader. Navascués Loganine is one of the critics who reminds readers that magical realism's style might conceal real misery, allowing the story to hide genuine feeling in favor of a dramatic effect. Yet, according to Rebekah Izard and Malene D. de Rios, magical realism might provide a therapeutic effect, as its way of storytelling parallels the mind's hidden thoughts and fosters symbolic integration of repressed grief.

Jess-Cooke in *The Boy Who Could See Demons* situates Alex in post-Good Friday Troubles in Belfast, a place marked by continuous sectarian strife, lasting pain among generations, and mental health being looked down upon. Alex experienced the death of his father, and his mother keeps having breakdowns due to the generational mental health issues. Jess-Cooke creates Ruen, who can only be seen by Alex, as a stand-in for experiences or stands for the unresolved wounds from Alex's past. Alex's insecurities are portrayed in the four versions of Ruen. Horn Head represents fear, Monster is anger, Ghost Boy stands for grief, and Old Man shows his depression. The novel's unusual journal format includes sudden, unexpected appearances by Ruen in many scenes, including realistic areas like hospital halls, abandoned apartment buildings, and dark rooms, just as Caruth mentions that trauma leaves us with vague, disrupted memories and images. Whenever Alex remembers how his father died, he sees "The policeman's head spun around to me. Blood shot out of his forehead like a red horn" (Jess-Cooke 158) causing readers to feel the protagonist's confusion and chaos without exposing them to strong violence.

Applying Judith Herman's treatment model, the first stage of safety for Alex is formed through Dr. Anya, a psychiatrist who has personally dealt with suffering. Alex finds a safe place to describe his worries and the source of Ruen's anxiety in her office, which is peaceful, warmly lit, and filled with empathy. She represents Herman's compassionate witness, gently asking Alex to think about the past at a pace that is suitable for him. As Alex recollects his fragmented memories like him seeing his father's face blurred and then the crack of the shot echoed in his mind again. Ruen acts as an intermediary who is present throughout: "He walked up to me and leaned very close. "They know you have a gift to see into our world" (Jess-Cooke 99) Ruen whispers, both threatening and also inviting Alex's willingness

to explore his suppressed emotions. With these events, Alex journeys to the part of Herman's second phase, remembrance and mourning where he externalizes his guilt over his father's death and fear for his mother's survival. It is only after Alex starts to examine Ruen's words and resist his influence that he achieves the last phase of Herman's healing, reclaiming control over what happens to him and refusing the destructive thoughts.

Instead, *The Miraculous* sets Wunder in a small English town where the silence around grief is much more noticeable than any serious disputes. When his eight-days-old sister passed away, his father and mother were paralyzed by shock from the incident. Despite looking fine from the outside, everybody in the family is all struggling with grief in private: his mother is shutting herself away with regret, while his father directs himself away by his job to keep pain away. Wunder once called himself as a "miracologist" but he no longer believes in miracles after his sister died. "Wunder felt the stone of his heart go horribly still at this, go cold at this, cold as the grave, cold as death". (Redman 273).

Spirals, found in doorways, on the leaves, and described in Wunder's journal, are introduced by Jess Redman to highlight the repetitive journey of mourning that Wunder goes through. Each part of the story spirals: Wunder finds a spiral, remembers his desire to believe in wonders, revised the journal entries of miraculous events, deals with the kind old woman referred to as a 'witch', and then goes back to the present, a little bit more hopeful. Wunder's strategy matches the same rhythm as Herman's second step, as he honors the memories and gets closer to understanding them.

The witch's home, found near the edge of the graveyard and described as peaceful with lots of interesting and warm things inside, is the first place Wunder feels safe. Amongst the dusty books and dim, burning candles, he can look at his memories without having to feel ashamed or embarrassed. The witch, just like Dr. Anya has gone through troubles herself, is the kind of compassion witness Herman notes about. She makes Wunder deliver letters to other mourning families that have suffered loss, like him. Thereby weaving Wunder's individual grief into a communal tapestry of mourning. Through this act of service, he wasn't just delivering words; he was delivering hope, one family at a time by this Wunder begins to locate his suffering within a larger societal context, proclaiming Herman's third stage of reconnection.

Even though the worlds in which Alex and Wunder inhabit are extremely different, the Belfast of Jess-Cooke is full of echoes of sectarian violence, whereas the village of Redman is characterized by smooth pastoral exteriors, they both have parallel experiences within the symbolic structures of magical realism. The supernatural in both novels is a natural extension of the psychological world of each protagonist. Ruen's ominous presence in Alex's fragmented memories and Wunder's spiral patterns serve as conduits through which trauma can be addressed, witnessed, and integrated. Each fantastical element is introduced as entirely ordinary. Alex's family does not care when he claims to see a demon and villagers in Redman's story accept fleeting glimpses of spirals and miracles without alarm. Thus, creating what Ayyub Rajabi marks as a world in which "the line between reality and fantasy cannot be differentiated" (Rajabi et al., 3).

The concept of narrative distance as put forth by Caruth is essential to ensure that trauma is made legible without re-traumatizing. By choosing to illustrate the shapes that Ruen takes in the familiar surroundings of bedrooms, corridors, therapy offices, Jess-Cooke gives Alex and the readers a kind of cushion against the impact of the violence of the death of his father. Even the abrupt flashback that disrupts an ordinary scene, like just after breakfast he heard

a gunshot and felt his head swim, enables Alex to undergo the memory of trauma in a manageable, tolerable amount. In Redman's text, the repetition of spiral imagery serves a similar function. Every time he sees the swirl on the doorway house he feels a burst of hope and terror. Wunder encounters the same spiral symbol repeatedly, symbolizing a non-linear healing trajectory that honors the unpredictable and repetitive flow of grief.

The supernatural guides, Ruen and the witch provide parallel but contrasting models of coping. Ruen, the product born out of Alex's suppressed rage and generational depression, is both kindly and horrifying. He at times tells to Alex,

> Your mother lied to protect you. Your mother lied because she loves you, and she knows all too well how much a revelation like this would hurt you. I only tell you now because you force me to. (Jess-Cooke 224)

Such ambivalence of Ruen as a person who saves and tortures reflects the ambivalence of a traumatized child's feelings which are often paradoxical: the need of protection and anger because of loss. Ruen represents a kind of projection. The guilt and anger Alex feels are projected onto a monster-like figure later whose demands Alex has to eventually reject in the process of regaining his agency. In the final sections where Alex starts to reject Ruen's orders marks a turning point that signifies Alex's journey into Herman's third phase of reconnection.

In comparison, the witch provides a nurturing figure of support. She does not push Wunder into facing memories till he is ready. She rather asks him to see small miracles, like how the sunlight plays upon these shelves, miracles may be even shadows and leads him to the path of service that is by delivering letters to other grieving families. Through these interactions, the witch facilitates Wunder's journey from isolation to connection which mirrors Herman's last phase, progressing from remembrance to reconnection. By the novel's end, when Wunder revises his miraculous journal his belief in miracles returns. This shows that he has integrated his grief into a renewed sense of hope.

Critics of magical realism warn that its figurative distance can at times have an exoticizing or making the effect on the trauma less serious. Ambal Brinda notes that allegory can smooth over the rough edges of pain, that there is a danger of a metaphorical aestheticism in which the violence of trauma is estranged. In *The Boy Who Could See Demons*, the fantastical interventions by the demon Ruen might inadvertently minimize the gravity of Alex's father's death or the ongoing trauma in the background of Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict. The clinical perspective through Dr. Anya must be repeatedly used to remind Alex and readers that Ruen is not a benign or whimsical figure.

When Ruen manifests himself in the form of Horn Head, with a crown of barbed wire and bloodstains, Jess-Cooke makes readers face the real horror behind the events that Alex has gone through: "And then, a few seconds later, Ruen appeared in the chair and I almost jumped out of my skin. He was Horn Head. I could see the blood all stuck on the barbed wire beside his furry chest and I felt stuck Noble because there was no other way out" (Jess-Cooke 122). Such visceral imagery breaks through allegory to remind readers that the pain represented is neither abstract nor easily dismissed.

Likewise, Redman's *The Miraculous* risks suggesting a neat resolution to grief Wunder's spirals which consistently lead to small affirmations but in reality grief can remain messy and cyclical. Critics such as Maria Kaaren Takolander argue that "when hope is personified too thoroughly, the complexity of mourning may be glossed over, offering comfort at the expense of authenticity" (Takolander, Maria Kaaren 95).

She avoids this criticism by illustrating instances of backsliding, when he would open his journal to discover that a miracle he previously wrote had been erased, and he would feel the familiar pangs of desperation. Sometimes he would open the journal and find a blank page where he once wrote a miracle, and feel the old sting of despair makes it clear that recovery is not always progressive or even successful. Its last pages do not declare a victorious recovery but a cautious, continuing belief in possibility: "unless it had" (Redman 265), Wunder writes that even this new-found hope might waver.

Magical realism in these novels provides a middle ground between magical realism as a genre compared to traditional trauma narratives like memoirs or realistic fiction that deal with suffering in explicit detail and are often aimed at adults, and young adult readers. *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, for example, throws an adult reader into the world of explicit grief with expressive descriptions of widowhood and mourning, complete with the detailed accounts of omnipresent sadness and constant brooding. Contrasting this Redman and Jess-Cooke embedded trauma in a world where the supernatural elements are treated as normal. Alex does not question Ruen's existence: "When I first told Dr. Anya I could see a demon, she simply nodded and said, 'Tell me more" (Jess-Cooke 23). Wunder similarly accepts the recurring spiral imagery with childlike wonder as soon as he spotted that swirl on the doorstep, his pulse quickened and he felt something shift inside of him. In each case, the supernatural elements deflect direct confrontation with trauma's most traumatic details, allowing readers to engage at a manageable emotional distance.

Pure fantasy, by contrast, places trauma and its resolutions in entirely different spheres. As in the case of Harry Potter, example, the loss of parental love and the danger of violence by Voldemort take place in the mythical land of Hogwarts and the wizarding world, even though they are highly evocative to readers (Izard 8). While this deeply resonant for many readers, such stories operate within a mythic frame that may not directly speak to experiences of sectarian violence or familial mental illness in the real world.

Incorporating the magical details into the familiar surroundings, of the bomb sites of Belfast and the typical English village, Jess-Cooke and Redman retain the cultural specificity, as well as harnessing the mnemonic potential of the supernatural. The horror is intensified by the fact that the Troubles are not a backdrop but an active influence in Alex: "An offhand remark from a PhD candidate doing her placement in Edinburgh: 'Even children who have never measured distance by the sound of a bomb experience psychological effects because of what the older generation has suffered" (Jess-Cooke 23).

The trauma experienced by Alex cannot be discussed outside of the context of what it means to be a working-class boy in Northern Ireland, where the stigma around mental-health issues is applied to a culture of stoicism that further isolates him. The demon is taunting Alex with the words he is broken and his family is also broken not only articulates a personal pain but a generational one as well when Ruen taunts him.

The situation of Wunder is shaped by the fact that he is an only child in the village where emotional restraint is valued and maintained. Death is not discussed much in the village; the loss sustained by a family is noted by polite nodding but do not talk about it any further. The invitations of the witch to share the sadness and thereby diminish its power is an interference with the cultural conventions and provide the audience with an example of how to address the feelings within, instead of being tied to the inherited transferred silence. We understand that the healing journeys of Alex and Wunder are influenced by intersecting issues, including

age, socioeconomic status, community norms which both restrain and enable their recoveries.

In pedagogical contexts, these novels can be integrated into trauma-informed syllabus for middle-grade and young adult classrooms. Planned experiences may involve symbolic mapping the students to follow the four incarnations of Ruen or map the spirals of Wunder and be encouraged to associate each symbol with feelings they are familiar with themselves. Based on the miracle diary of Wunder, reflective journaling may be employed to encourage students to recognize the existence of small wonders in their personal lives, thereby facilitating the development of gratitude and self-awareness.

The role-play of acting out major scenes like the session between Alex and Dr. Anya, or the letter deliveries by Wunder might also help develop empathy, as it will require students to inhabit the emotional world of a character. Mentors and school counselors could lead discussions based on specifically chosen extracts: the confrontation of Alex with Ruen or Wunder's conversation with the witch to demonstrate the phases of recovery identified by Herman, and suggest the students applying these phases to their own experiences with stressful situations or loss.

Mental health professionals can use excerpts to facilitated bibliotherapy groups with passages describing symbolic coping, such as how Ruen changes form monstrous observer to silent protector, being used to generate a discussion on how trauma can evolve with time. (Navascues 18–19)

Reading aloud a scene where the witch reminds Wunder that even shadows can seem like miracles could become the starting point of a discussion with the younger children about how this or that ordinary moment may include the hope. The study by Izard and de Rios confirms this suggestion based on empirical research that metaphorical narratives serve as narrative therapy, providing readers with symbolic distance and at the same time enabling emotional integration. (Izard 8-9)

However, the representative techniques of magical realism warrant careful application. Brinda cautions that when trauma is too fantastical, young readers may miss the deeper psychological truths that young readers may fail to grasp the underlying psychological truths and that such symbolism can be possibly misunderstood as whimsy.

The magical features should be balanced with references to reality by the educator and therapists, who should focus on explaining, e.g., the fact that Ruen appears to Alex indicates that he needs assistance, rather than the existence of the supernatural. Similarly, when teaching *The Miraculous,* teachers could combine classroom activities with experiences that attach spirals to more concrete experiences, such as loop drawing of memory, that help make metaphor concrete practice.

There are several under explored areas that could be tackled in the future. Reader-response empirical studies can be conducted to evaluate how real young audiences interpret and experience the emotional responses to magical realist trauma narratives. These studies could be based on surveys or focus groups or art-making sessions where children would be encouraged to draw their own versions of the "spirals" of memory or create their symbolic "demons" as a way of dealing with fear.

Cross-cultural comparisons could illuminate how magical realism is adapted to different traditions, such as considering children's texts in Latin America or South Asia which use local mythologies to give figures to trauma. The extension into visual and multimedia forms of representation like the graphic novels or animated television shows created to adapt young adult magical realist books are also ripe fields of investigation as scholars attempt to understand how the use of color, panel layout and sound effects contribute to symbolic interaction.

Interdisciplinary links among literature, developmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience also point to the direction of future inquiry. How do these metaphorical narratives activate neural pathways associated with memory and emotion? Do standardized measures of resilience and empathy reveal any detectable differences following reading magical realist trauma fiction in children? Literary analysis with psychometric instruments like pre- and post-reading questionnaires, would help to provide information about the effectiveness of symbolic storytelling as a preventative mental-health instrument.

In conclusion, *The Boy Who Could See Demons* and *The Miraculous* demonstrate how magical realism can help negotiate childhood trauma using metaphor, narrative distance, and cultural specificity. The transformations of Ruen and the spirals of Wunder become carriers of the unarticulated grief in the places ordinary to the protagonists and lead the readers alongside with them through Herman's three phases beginning with the safety and ending with the reconnection.

The normalization of the supernatural by Jess-Cooke and Redman offers young readers age-suitable models to deal with fear, name loss, and find hope. These stories highlight the fact that healing is not a straightforward or single process but a spiral interplay of memory, meaning, and community. As more young adult literature continues to address mental health, magical realism stands out as a vital narrative strategy by offering the unspoken and inarticulate, a voice that can build resilience, empathy, and greater understanding.

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