Introduction: Re-thinking Magical Realism

The term magical realism has appeared in print with increasing frequency over the last few decades. It can be found in a vast number of university course descriptions, dissertations, academic articles, in the popular press, and it is now familiar to millions through the appearance on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Even the advertising industry has begun to take an interest in the term, though it long ago learned how to capitalise on magical realist visual techniques in its quest for ever more novel ways of marketing products. But in the domain of literary studies this popularity has, until recently, not been matched by any certainty over what magical realism actually is and what it does.

Scholars new to the field are thus likely to be confronted by a number of contradictory attitudes. Thus, we find Homi Bhabha referring to magical realism as “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” (*Nation* 6), while for Jean Franco it is “little more than a brand name for exoticism” (204). According to Matei Calinescu, it can be “a major, perhaps the major, component of postmodernist fiction” (Zamora and Faris, dustcover). But Fredric Jameson sees it as “a possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism” (“Film” 302). Magical realism has by turns been praised for founding “a new multicultural artistic reality” (Durix 162) and it has been denigrated as “dangerous and shallow” (Barker 14). It has even been accused of being underpinned by “pernicious – even racist – ideologies” (Martin “Magical” 104). At the heart of the critical uncertainty about magical realism are the meanings that the term is assumed to signify: ideas clustered around notions of narrative and representation, culture,
Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel

history, identity, what is natural and what is supernatural. There are, in
the final analysis, very few realms of modern thought not undergirded
by assumptions about the nature of what is real and what is not, and it
is to these very assumptions that serious magical realist literature
claims to speak. With such an enormous scope of reference, it is not
difficult to understand why disagreement and confusion proliferate.

A fundamental question concerns the type of category that is
constituted by magical realism. Is magical realism simply a mode of
narration that may be sporadically engaged by an author; is it a liter-
ary movement with a specific agenda and defined geographical and
cultural boundaries; or is it a genre of fiction that can be compared
across continents and languages? Before these questions can be
addressed, we must acknowledge that magical realism’s problems are
rooted yet more deeply in the fact that both magical and realism
are terms fraught with a complex history of contradictory usage.2
And, of course, central to critical discourse’s problems with magical
realism is that the term is an oxymoron: magic is thought of as that
which lies outside of the realm of the real; realism excludes the
magical. Magical realism, in its very name, flouts philosophical
conventions of non-contradiction. How should one begin to pick a
path through such cluttered terrain?

Some critics have suggested that we ought to do away with the
term altogether (González Echevarría Carpentier 108; Connell
95–110). The problem with such a suggestion, even if it were possible
to implement, is that it ignores the fact that the tenacity of the term
is due in large measure to its explanatory value. There is a growing
corpus of literary works that draws upon the conventions of both
realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in such a way that neither
of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the
other. This capacity to resolve the tension between two discursive
systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive must constitute the
starting point for any inquiry into magical realism. A brief survey of
canonical magical realist texts – Gabriel García Márquez’s One
Hundred Years of Solitude, Isabel Allende’s The House of the Spirits,
Laura Esquivel’s Like Water for Chocolate, Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s
Children and The Satanic Verses, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Angela
Carter’s Nights at the Circus, and Ben Okri’s The Famished Road, among
others – will reveal that what these otherwise different texts all have
in common is that each treats the supernatural as if it were a perfectly