



Magical Realism in Gareth Brown's *The Book of Doors*

YULIA EKA PUTRI

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia

Email: pyulia903@gmail.com

ANIK CAHYANING RAHAYU

Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia

Email: anikcahyaning@untag-sby.ac.id

Abstract. This study discusses the presence of magical realism elements in Gareth Brown's *The Book of Doors*. The objective of this study is to analyze the use of magical realism by identifying the five primary features of magical realism within the novel's plot, characters, and setting. In answering the problem of the statement, this study uses new criticism literary approach and Wendy B. Faris' theory of magical realism. This study uses descriptive qualitative as the research design, focusing on textual analysis by interpreting specific quotations. The novel, *The Book of Doors* by Gareth Brown serves as the data source for this study. The result shows that all five elements of magic realism can be found in the novel. The irreducible element can be found throughout the story with the existence of magical books, primarily the Book of Doors and the Book of Shadows. The phenomenal world is proven with how familiar the settings and the activity in the story that resembles the real world, for example, the social gap between Cassie and her employer. Unsettling doubt appears as characters and readers question the boundary between reality and magic. Merging realm is shown through the natural coexistence of the ordinary world and the shadow realm. Lastly, characters are able to roam across time and space using the ability of the Book of Doors, reflecting the disruption of identity, time, and space.

Keywords: identity, magical book, magical realism, responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Magic realism or magical realism is a literary genre that combines elements of fantasy and reality. Quoting from Rahayu et al. (2024:109), Kostadinović (2019:35) claims that magical realism refers to a type of short story in which the view of a man as a mystery surrounded by realistic data dominate. Magic, as cited from the book *Magic: A Very Short Introduction* (2012:2), originates from the Greek term *mageia*, which initially refers to the ceremonies and rituals conducted by a *magos*.

In literature, particularly within the magic genre, this concept manifests through the exploration of fantastical elements. Characters often engage in rituals that blur the distinction between reality and the supernatural, reflecting humanity's interest with the mystical and the unknown. On the other hand, realism is a literary device used to portray real-life situations. Realism involves utilizing the raw materials of life to create a world

for the reader by presenting a narrative in a way that resembles real world experiences. The statement aligns with Megbulem's ideas, where she mentions that one of the essential characteristics of realism in literature is its focus on representing life in an accurate manner (2023:1).

Following Faris' theory of magical realism, the concept is characterized by five main elements including irreducible element, phenomenal world, unsettling doubt, merging realms, and the disruption of time, space, and identity. Such features can be found in many literary works containing magical realism and serve as a useful framework for analyzing Gareth Brown's *The Book of Doors*. The novel tells about the journey of a woman named Cassie, who has been given a mysterious book by her friend, Mr. Webber. The book has the ability to open to various location as the user wishes. This book not only introduces the protagonist to magical experiences but also challenges her understanding of what is real and what is not. The combination of magic and reality allows the story to explore important themes like identity and personal growth. As Cassie learns to navigate her new abilities, she also learns more about herself and her place in the world.

The magical elements in the story serve as a way for Cassie to confront her fears and discover her strengths. This aligns with the idea presented by Herrera (2024:5-6), who states that magical realism often used as a means for characters to explore their inner lives and confront societal issues as exemplified in Márquez and Allende's literary works. In Cassie's case, her journey of interacting with magical objects throughout the novel reflects her struggle with self-acceptance and empowerment.

Therefore, using Faris' idea of magical realism, this study discusses the application of magic realism in Gareth Brown's *The Book of Doors* by identifying the five elements including irreducible element, phenomenal world, unsettling doubt, merging realm, and disruption of space, time, and identity. This study aims to deepen the understanding how magical realism works in the novel, ultimately revealing its potential to enrich the thematic depth within modern literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Magical Realism

Magical realism did not initially emerge from literature, but rather from visual arts. The term of magical realism was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art Critic to refer to a new form of post-expressionist painting (Bowers, 2004:2). This concept becomes popular in literature, especially during the "Boom" era of the 1950s and 1960s, and is frequently associated to Latin American authors. To define magical realism in a literary work, Faris suggested five primary characteristics of magical realism namely irreducible element, phenomenal world, unsettling doubt, merging realms, and disruption of time, space, and identity.

Irreducible Element

Irreducible element, according to Faris (2004:7) is something that cannot be explained according to the natural order of the universe. Magic realism cannot be rationalized or explained away as it simply exists as part of the narrative's world without justification. Faris uses the term irreducible to emphasize that magical aspects in magic realism defy conventional logic or scientific understanding. In a magical realist text, characters typically do not question or react to the strange occurrences as if they are unusual. Instead, they treat them as part of their reality.

Phenomenal World

Phenomenal world in magic realism is the element that distinguishes magic realism with fantasy. As cited from *Ordinary Enchantments Magical Realism and Remystification of Narrative*, Faris (2004:14) explains that unlike fantasy, which often takes place in entirely imaginary worlds with complex and otherworldly settings, magical realism uses vivid, realistic details to create a world that closely resembles the real world. By presenting the realistic details, magic realism creates a strong sense of familiarity which increase the impact of the magical elements. In essence, the phenomenal world in magical realism allows the readers to connect deeply with the story's setting and characters.

Unsettling Doubt

This element of magic realism exists because of the hesitation from the reader as they decide whether an event or element should be seen as ordinary (realistic) or extraordinary (magical). According to Faris, hesitation may obscure the irreducible element, which consequently is not always so easily perceived as such (Faris, 2004:17). Faris also explains that question of belief plays a central part in here, which clarifies the reason of this frequent hesitation rooted from the implicit clash of cultural system within the story. This uncertainty is important to magic realism, as it creates a unique tension between belief and skepticism. Rather than providing clear explanations for the magical occurrences, the narrative leaves the readers open to interpretation.

Merging Realms

The fourth element of magic realism is the experience of two worlds being closely intertwined or nearly merging. Faris describes the magical realist vision as existing at the intersection of two realms, represented metaphorically as a double-sided mirror that reflects both directions (Faris, 2004:21-22). This imagery illustrates how magical realism allows for the coexistence of different realities, specifically, the ordinary world of everyday life and the extraordinary realm of magic or the supernatural. For example, ghosts and texts, or figures and words that seem ethereal, inhabit this reflective space between life and death.

Disruption of Time, Space, and Identity

The last element is connected and is the result of merging realms, which causes the disruption of the received ideas about time, space, and identity. As written in *Ordinary Enchantments Magical Realism and Remystification of Narrative*, Faris states that an extensive number of magical realist fictions delineate near-sacred or ritual enclosures, but these sacred spaces leak their magical narrative waters over the rest of the texts and the worlds they describe, just as that exterior reality influences them (2004:24). The term "leaking" described in the statement implies that the magical qualities of these spaces extend beyond their boundaries, influencing the entire narrative and allowing magical events to affect the real world within the story.

METHOD

This study uses intrinsic approach, new criticism as the literary approach. Cited from *Critical Theory Today*, Tyson claims that the concept of new criticism is focusing closely on the actual words, structure, and form of the text itself (2006:135). The statement suggests that one of the most valuable ideas from new criticism is the practice of using clear, detailed examples from the text itself when analyzing or interpreting literature.

This study applies descriptive qualitative method as the research design. Descriptive qualitative method is a research method focused on providing a detailed understanding of phenomena through non-numerical data, such as words, observations, or experiences. Siedlecki (2020:8) states that descriptive studies or research aim to describes people,

events, or circumstances by observing them in their natural settings with the researcher merely discusses the data or variable without changing or manipulating any of them. The data source for this study is a novel entitled *The Book of Doors* by Gareth Brown that was first published in 2024. The data are collected by reading the data source, applying magical realism to identify the data, and classify the data based on the problem statement.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Irreducible Element

On page 26, Cassie and her roommates experience magical phenomenon for the first time as the book who was given by Mr. Webber starts emitting a strange light. The glowing, rainbow-colored aura around the book presents as magical event that just happened without any explanation. The glow is described in concrete, sensory detail: it moves with the book, it's colorful, and it behaves in a physically observable way. Cassie's roommates, Izzy, even reacts to it by exclaiming, "*It's glowing!*", reinforcing its presence as something real within the narrative. Later on page 27, a scene shows a moment in which Cassie observes the glowing aura surrounding the magical book dissipate. The Book of Doors even looks more real and ordinary as it loses its glow after being used. The after effect of the Book of Doors making it looks like a realistic object, phone for example, that died or got turn off.

Another magical object that serves as irreducible element is the existence of the other book, Book of Shadows, that can be seen on page 37 where the narrative first introduced a supporting character, Drummond, who possesses the Book of Shadows and use it to vanish within the shadows. There is no attempt to explain how or why the book allows this transformation to happen; instead, it is treated as a familiar tool that the character, Drummond, has used for years. Thus, making him able to do magical action such as disappearing into shadows after he tears the page of Book of Shadows. As explained by Faris, irreducible elements are those aspects of magical realism that cannot be logically explained or reduced into metaphor, hallucination, or symbolic meaning. In this case, the book's power is not figurative, instead it has a direct physical effect that allows its user to vanish into shadows. From the line "*Drummond had grown used to carrying the book this way over the years.*", it is implied that he has been used to the book and its ability, which further normalize the magical aspect and making it an unquestioned element of his daily life.

B. Phenomenal World

The novel mentions a specific, real-life location such as the apartment where Cassie and Izzy lived, Lower Manhattan. The place is not fictional or vague, it is an actual neighbourhood in New York City that the author or readers may have visited, lived in, or seen in media. The description of the apartment: small, oddly shaped due to the landlord's subdivisions, uncomfortable in both summer and winter further strengthen that this is not a romanticized version of city living but one that reflects the gritty, practical reality of renting in a densely populated area such as Manhattan.

The reference of the Second World War also immediately sets the narrative in a recognized and profoundly impactful historical period. The Second World War was in a time of immense global turmoil, secrecy, and the safeguarding of valuable assets. This historical anchor makes the subsequent actions of the Fox Library seem plausible within the context of a real-world crisis. The decision of the library activities and possessions to be hidden and keep out of sight due to the war is completely rational and realistic response to a time of conflict and potential danger.

C. Unsettling Doubt

On page 20, there is a scene where Cassie first discovered the ability of the book. She observes rain on her skin and a breeze from what is revealed to be a completely different place, a city in another country that somehow visible through her apartment's door. Her mixed reaction of awe and disbelief reflects a mind trying to process a magically impossible event (instantaneous access to a distant place) with her understanding. She feels the rain, she sees the other city, and yet the logic of how such a thing could be happening is not given. The scene when Cassie is trying to comprehend what is really happening at the moment captures the lingering uncertainty. Instead of responding with fear or total acceptance, Cassie is drawn into a state of deep thought as she attempts to process the unfamiliar things happened right before her eyes.

D. Merging Realms

After reuniting with Izzy, who she thought were already dead, Cassie describes the Book of Doors that allows her not only to travel physically, but to escape emotionally. Her statement where she claims that she wants to open the door into *nothingness* reflects her state of grief, numbness, and loss. The idea that she can open a literal door to a place that mirrors her mental and emotional experience blurs the line between the external reality and internal emotion. In the real world, someone can feel like they are nowhere when grieving, but in this story, that feeling manifests as an actual place she can go to by using the power of Book of Doors.

E. Disruption of Time, Space, and Identity

On page 122, Cassie uses the Book of Doors to enter Fox Library, which has been hidden in the shadow realm by Drummond using the Book of Shadows. The realm doesn't follow the normal rules of space as it is described as silent, gray, and every movement creates ripples like water. The fact that the Fox Library, a place that is supposed to be in the real world, has been transformed into a non-physical environment makes this a strong example of spatial disruption. It is now placed outside of ordinary realm and is only reachable by magic. Disruption of time also exist in the shadow realm, as Drummond explains in page 124 that time works differently in the shadow realm. It implies that while they are inside the realm of the shadows, time either passed faster, slower, or in a non-linear way compared to the real world.

CONCLUSION

After conducting the analysis on Gareth Brown's *The Book of Doors*, it can be concluded that the novel exhibits all five key features of magic realism. These include the presence of irreducible elements, phenomenal world, unsettling doubt, merging realm, and the disruption of time, space, and identity. With all these elements present, the novel can be classified as a representation of magical realism.

The first characteristic of magic realism, the irreducible element, appears throughout *The Book of Doors* through magical objects like the Book of Doors and the Book of Shadows. The Book of Doors enables Cassie to teleport instantly by opening nearby doors. The phenomenal world is grounded in real locations such as New York City, Chile's Antofagasta, and the Scottish Highlands, with vivid details of daily life adding realism. Unsettling doubt arises from Cassie's initial disbelief and growing confusion, mirroring the reader's uncertainty. The merging of realms is evident as magical doors collapse boundaries between distant or metaphysical spaces, such as their apartment leading to Venice. Emotional states also shape physical reality, like the "nothingness" realm. Lastly,

the disruption of time, space, and identity is seen in Cassie's time travel, particularly when she meets her grandfather and becomes the cause of receiving the Book of Doors herself.

REFERENCES

- Arisakti, A. (2021). *MAGIC REALISM REFLECTED IN RICK RIORDAN'S PERCY JACKSON AND THE OLYMPIANS: THE LIGHTNING THIEF*.
- Asmida, E. (2020). Magical Realism in Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*. *Eralingua: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Asing dan Sastra*, 4(1).
- Bowers, M. A. (2004). *Magic(al) Realism*. Taylor & Francis.
- Brown, G. (2024). *The Book of Doors: A Novel*. HarperCollins.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. SAGE.
- Faris, W. B. (2004). *Ordinary enchantments : magical realism and the remystification of narrative*. Vanderbilt University Press.
- Faris, W. B., & Zamora, L. P. (1995). *MAGICAL REALISM: Theory, History, Community* (4th ed.). DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS.
- Hasanah, S., Kuncara, S. D., & Astuti, A. D. (2021). MAGICAL REALISM IN NEIL GAIMAN'S THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE NOVEL. *Ilmu Budaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Budaya*, 5(2).
- Hegerfeldt, A. C. (2005). *Lies that Tell the Truth: Magic Realism Seen Through Contemporary Fiction from Britain*. Rodopi.
- Herrera, J. (2024). Magical realism and social critique in Latin American literature: A comparative analysis of García Márquez and Isabel Allende. *Studies in Social Science & Humanities*, 3(2), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.56397/sssh.2024.02.01>
- Interview with an author: Gareth Brown*. (n.d.). Los Angeles Public Library. <https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/interview-author-gareth-brown>
- Laily, V. R. (2020). Magic Realism in John Bellairs' *The House With a Clock in Its Walls*.
- Megbulem, S. N. (2023). REALISM IN LITERATURE: PORTRAYING LIFE AS IT IS.
- Pamungkas, O. Y., Hastangka, H. (2023). Discovering the Value of Education in a Fantastical World: An Exploration of Magical Realism in a Contemporary Novel. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 11(3).
- Rahayu, A. C., Sudarwati, S., & Garnida, S. C. (2024). Magical phenomena in reality in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. *Seltics Journal Scope of English Language Teaching Literature and Linguistics*, 7(1), 109–125. <https://doi.org/10.46918/seltics.v7i1.2198>
- Siedlecki, S. L. (2019). Understanding descriptive research designs and methods. *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, 34(1), 8–12. <https://doi.org/10.1097/nur.0000000000000493>
- Tetania, A. A. (2023). MAGIC REALISM IN ENCANTO (2021) FILM.
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory today: A User-friendly Guide*. Taylor & Francis.
- Wati, I. M., & Ayu, H. R. (2019). Magical Realism in Riggs' *Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children*. *Litera-Kultura*, 7(4).