

Ben Holgate. *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse*. London: Routledge (*Routledge Studies in World Literatures and the Environment*), 2019. 234 pp ISBN: 1351372939; 9781351372930 AS\$196.00

Ben Holgate's *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* (2019) makes an important contribution to scholarship on the interplay between culture and society, with a distinct focus on the representation of the effects of human occupation of the natural world. It is a work of outstanding scholarship, meticulously researched and attentive to each novel's distinct cultural, political and aesthetic frameworks. Although he disputes its central premise, Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) both impels and haunts Holgate's thinking. Ghosh lamented novelists' failure to recognise and address the impact of climate change. In words quoted in Holgate, he wrote: 'the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and a crisis of imagination.' Where Holgate's thinking differs is in his view that while this may be the case with 'the conventional realist structure of the British, European or American novel' (6), 'magical realist fiction and environmental literature have a long tradition of overlapping' (1). This study is concerned with examining that overlap in a series of close readings of selected works by authors from Australia, New Zealand, India, China and Taiwan. It examines 'not only *how* magical realism is a natural ally of environmental literature but also *why* magical realism is a dynamic, constantly evolving narrative mode that can address the challenges of imagination posed by the crisis of climate change' (8–9).

For Holgate, magical realism's tendency 'to disrupt perceived ideas about time and space. . . . is one of the core reasons why the narrative mode is so useful in colluding with environmental literature to depict the long duration of environmental degradation caused by industrialisation' (7). Holgate's appeal in his work to Robert Nixon's theoretical concept of 'slow violence' to represent the extremely protracted nature of the destruction of the planet's environment, a process that gradually continues over years, decades and centuries' (7), offers a strong indication of his own critical approach. He is concerned with the full spectrum of effects of climate change, across diverse temporal and geographical settings, frequently overlapping also with the degradation wrought by colonialism. Echoing Ghosh's work, Holgate also endorses Nixon's call 'for fiction writers to create new kinds of images and new types of narratives to represent the slow-moving violence associated with climate change and environmental degradation' (8).

To this end, Holgate challenges the dominant tendency among critics of magical realism to position it as a South American literary phenomenon. He proposes instead that it both draws on some South American writing and departs from it in significant ways; in his discussion of work by the Indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright and Chinese writer Mo Yan, he shows how magical realism is infused by local, ancient cultural filaments. He posits that 'authors from disparate national, cultural and backgrounds are constantly reinventing the narrative mode to serve their own artistic purposes' (11). It is not clear why seeing the mode as largely associated with Latin America (Holgate uses both 'South' and 'Latin') is incorrect, on the basis of 'the proliferation of other kinds of magical realist fiction around the world since the 1980s' (13). Indeed, the use of that 'other' already resolves the contradiction Holgate seeks to highlight. Ultimately he settles on a view that 'the trait for every work of magical realist fiction is the representation of the magical and the supernatural in a quotidian manner that is embedded within literary realism. Without this trait a text cannot be said to be magical realist' (16–17).

That debates about magical realism are both fractious and even sterile leads Holgate to juxtapose his earlier statement—‘Without this trait a text cannot be said to be magical realist’—to the view that ‘Magical realism is, by nature, porous, spilling over into other generic kinds such that the distinction between them is often blurred’ (17). His decision to include writing with such diverse cultural, historical and political backgrounds no doubt demanded such a capacious definition. Holgate settles for what he calls a ‘minimalist’ definition of the narrative mode, and generally this works well. When a reading of a novel is less persuasive, this is much more likely the result of the difficulty in elucidating the meaning of ‘environmental literature’ as neatly. Methodologically, the study builds on ‘extant scholarship of magical realism, environmental criticism, world literature and postcolonial studies’ (11–12).

The work is organised in seven chapters, each devoted to one or two novels by the one author. Chapter 1 focuses on Indigenous Australian author Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, setting out clear resonances between the works in their treatment of history, culture, self. Wright’s complex juxtaposition of Indigenous mythology, realism and magical realist techniques creates work that fully captures Holgate’s take on magical realism as an evolving genre, enriched by its circulation in the world, as it were. Indeed, he writes that ‘while we may say *Carpentaria* participates in magical realism, it does not belong to magical realism, and, crucially, it participates at a more fundamental level as a textual representation of traditions of oral storytelling’ (51). Wright’s depiction of the Indigenous Australian experience serves as a counterpoint to ‘official nationalist history’ (47), even if it is questionable that she had to deploy magical realism to do so, as Holgate asserts (57). In these two novels, Wright ‘responds to the crisis of imagination in the climate change era by offering an Indigenous Australian ontology that is tens of thousands of years old as an alternative to the scientific rationalism of the European Enlightenment’ (66). Environmental degradation, particularly in its interplay with colonial occupation, takes centre stage in this insightful reading of Wright’s work.

Chapter 2 examines two novels by Australian Richard Flanagan, and highlights what it sees as the uniqueness of his treatment of environmental degradation through a Tasmanian prism. Commenting on Tasmania’s distinct status as a penal colony, Holgate writes: ‘Importantly, Flanagan’s novels repeatedly portray ties between the white convict underclass and the dispossessed Indigenous people’ (78). This sentimentalised reading of colonial oppression, especially popular in Tasmania, underplays the role of convicts in the genocide of Indigenous Australians on the island. It says very little about Aboriginal dispossession or sovereignty, rather more about white Tasmania: ‘Flanagan’s fiction portrays the link between magical realism and environmental literature largely through his use of Tasmania’s South-West Wilderness as a metaphorical and geographically literal site for spiritual redemption’ (90). The prevailing view of Tasmania as a fragile and endangered natural environment is inextricable from colonial discourses of Aboriginal extinction, in rhetoric that legitimises dispossession. Reconciliation will need to be about much more than white Australians, including migrants ‘made’ white by virtue of being other than Indigenous, finding it appealing to *imagine* a different past, preferably one politically and ethically less onerous. To be fair, Holgate is also very aware of the seething tensions that animate work by white Australians who drew on an Indigenous Australian cultural framework. He writes, with reference to Flanagan’s work discussed in the book, and quoting Michael Valdez Moses’s criticism of magical realism: ‘...it could also be argued whether these two novels by Flanagan are examples of magical realist fiction that offers the literary equivalent of a skilfully marketed tour of a dead or dying culture’ (80). For Holgate, Flanagan’s novels draw ‘on both European and Indigenous Tasmanian spiritualities’ (73), and his take on the ‘dual exoticism of Tasmania’ (73) leads to ‘a distinctly

Australian strain of magical realism' (83), quoting Vivian Smith's take on *Death of a River Guide*.

In Chapter 3, dedicated to Māori New Zealander Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rides*, Holgate writes that it 'presents a much different portrayal of the environment from most magical realist fiction because of its setting in and awareness of the ocean, specifically the Pacific, rather than the usual terrestrial location' (95) and goes on to say that the writer 'demonstrates an astute and prescient concern for the profound negative effects that human industrial and military activity has on the environment, in particular the extensive and harmful testing of nuclear bombs in the Pacific' (95). Here as throughout the book Holgate compares the concerns and narrative techniques in works by different authors, highlighting how Ihimaera's treatment of mythic time resonates with Wright's in *Carpentaria*. He suggests however that environmental themes are explored rather differently, for *The Whale Rider* 'moves beyond basic ecocriticism to zoocriticism, which is concerned with the rights and representation of animals' (103). While this is a valuable insight, it also highlights the tension reflected in the way the nexus between magical realism and environmental literature fades out in some chapters.

Chapter 4 focuses on another Māori New Zealander writer, Keri Hulme and her internationally successful novel, *The Bone People*. Read by Holgate with reference to the 'faith-based kind of magical realism that features in so much Latin American fiction' (114), it is also described as a work of zoocriticism. For Holgate, in *The Bone People* Hulme aims to articulate and to mediate a reconciliation between Maori and Pākehā (white) New Zealanders. In a nuanced and complex reading of the novel, Holgate addresses both Hulme's challenging work and its multiple paratexts, including the politics that surrounded its publication and subsequent award of the Booker Prize in 1985. *The Bone People*, he writes, 'demonstrates how Hulme employs magical realism as part of a broader strategy to subvert postcolonial discourse, complicating and challenging European-imposed binaries in a nation eager for reconciliation between Māori and Pākehā' (130).

Chapter 5 turns to Indian writer Amitav Ghosh's fiction, notably *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Ghosh, as noted earlier, is also the author of *The Great Derangement* and of a number of novels, frequently set in the subcontinental region of the Sundarbans. Although Holgate is correct in saying that they are neither explicitly magical realist nor environmental literature, Ghosh's fascination with the Sundarbans arguably reflects an acute awareness of the impact of humans on the environment and vice-versa. Perhaps anticipating some readers' scepticism about the inclusion of this novel in the book, Holgate asserts that it 'illustrates how magical realism can function as environmental discourse in a different manner by featuring in biological terms' (152)—the focus is less on 'the environment as a physical, geographical setting, be it land or sea' than on 'the environment in biological terms' (137). In a nod to the didactic nature of Ghosh's writing, he argues that the novel 'employs magical realism to recuperate localised knowledge—in this case Indian science—in order to challenge the orthodox British colonial version of history, which insists surgeon-scientist Sir Ronald Ross was the sole discoverer of the cause of malaria, the female anopheles mosquito, in the 1890s' (135).

Chapter 6 deals with novels by Chinese writer Mo Yan, Nobel Prize winner in 2012, and here Holgate is on surer footing in his analysis of the overlap between magical realism and environmental literature. In a thread that informs earlier chapters, Holgate examines how a Chinese author's deployment of magical realism as a narrative mode differs from those of works from South America and elsewhere. Mo Yan's novels are read for the way they bring into play a magical realism with a distinctly Chinese inflection. Like Salman Rushdie, he notes,

Mo Yan ‘develops the narrative mode in new directions’ (158). Perhaps this is common sense but the engagement with the selected work is critically nuanced and culturally informed. The inclusion of works in translation enables Holgate ‘to explore the difficulties in applying magical realism as a rubric with which to analyse non-western fiction’ (162); and he posits that novels such as *Red Sorghum* urge (western) literary critics not to rush into reading magical realist elements without first acknowledging local, contextual conditions. That is, after all, a key tenet of postcolonial criticism, though it could be pointed out that even then generalisations can occur. Holgate goes on to establish a spectrum in which western and non-western literatures, in this case Chinese, ‘overlap and criss-cross’ (164) in their deployment of magical realist elements. Work such as Mo Yan’s is integral to Holgate’s aim to demonstrate how magical realism circulates in the world, though perhaps less convincing in the context of Holgate’s focus on ecocriticism. It is something he does particularly well, much as suggesting that ‘*Red Sorghum* is also an environmental work in that the natural world permeates every layer of the textual world’ (168), seems a bit forced. Mo Yan’s writing clearly inflects magical realism in its international shape, but as an author whose writing addresses environmental degradation his inclusion is less convincing, even allowing for Holgate’s plea that this be seen in ‘a broad sense’ (196). Nevertheless, the chapter offers a particularly strong engagement with the selected novels.

In its penultimate chapter, *Climate and Crisis: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* turns to an author whose work fits the double badge of magical realism and environmental discourse much more clearly. *The Man With the Compound Eyes*, by the Taiwanese author Wu Ming-Yi, ‘reflects a growing trend among many novels in the new millennium to take a global focus about environmental concerns, rather than a regional or national one, and to address the ecological crisis of the last half-century’ (208). Yet, like Mo-Yan, Wu Ming-Yi’s treatment of magical realism as a narrative strategy has a strong local quality, in this instance what Holgate identifies as a clear nod to Taiwanese nature writing. Wu Ming-Yi ‘blend[s] myth and literary realism’ (208) and ‘reframes environmental degradation within a planetary consciousness, . . . a borderless issue that requires a global response’ (218). In common with earlier chapters, here too the selected novels are read with care and analytical subtlety, placed within and with reference to a wide-ranging cultural and critical framework. As a reader, I was especially taken with the way Holgate handles works from outside an Anglophone cultural sphere—his readings are culturally and politically sensitive and critically insightful.

Returning to Amitav Ghosh’s Jeremiad in *The Great Derangement*, in the Conclusion Holgate calls for a broader ‘reimagining of how best to live within and in harmony with the natural world’ (231). That this should be made through an engagement with magical realist fiction that more or less explicitly concerns itself with environmental degradation, is a case he makes very successfully in *Climate Crisis: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse*.

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