

Jessica Maufort
Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
jmaufort@ulb.ac.be

Ben Holgate. *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 234 pp.

DOI: 10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.1.3265



Urged by the accelerating pace of climate change and its related social-economic and political challenges, recent ecocritical studies more than ever question the potentialities of the arts to represent the anthropogenic crisis in all its manifold manifestations and ramifications. The literary modes and genres commonly examined from an ecocritical standpoint comprise science fiction, the Gothic, fantasy, the fable, and the apocalyptic tale. Ben Holgate's *Climate and Crises* usefully sheds new light on the contribution of magic realism, as detected in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century works of fiction, to what he calls "environmental discourse."

Holgate's monograph at long last explores the connection between magic realism and environmental criticism, one which previously remained either at the stage of embryonic intimations or was restricted to isolated academic pieces. This omission might be explained, the critic argues, by the fact that critical scholarship of magic realism began nearly a century ago, much earlier than that of ecocriticism. More importantly, magic realism and ecocriticism constitute two notoriously "amorphous" literary concepts, which are still the object of tense discussions (4). From the close readings of his selected corpus, Holgate draws "four commonalities of magical realist fiction and environmental literature" (2). First, these narratives display "a postcolonial perspective, with writers frequently reacting against colonial legacies" (2). Second, both magic realism and environmental literature strive "to develop new kinds of expression and language in order to portray ideas and ways of seeing the world that counter dominant ontologies and epistemologies, usually the [Enlightenment-inherited] scientific rationalism" that separated human and non-human spheres (3). Finally, they share a "biocentric [...] focus on the interconnectedness of all [existing] things" and "a transgressive nature that dismantles [ontological] binaries" (3). With these characteristics, magic realism aptly depicts the multi-scalar complexities of the Anthropocene era, climate change, and the (neo)colonial and eco-imperialist practices of industrialisation. To demonstrate this, Holgate narrows down the definition of magic realism as a writing mode to a single trait, i.e. "the representation of the magical or supernatural in a quotidian manner that is embedded within literary realism" (16-17). Holgate argues that such a "minimalist definition," (17) inspired by Derrida's genre theory, better highlights the porous delimitations of magic realism transcending geographical parameters, as well as its fluctuating associations with other literary genres and forms.

Holgate's book certainly offers an innovative perspective on magic realism. However, Holgate's use of *genre* theory is at first disconcerting as it emphasises the flexibility and openness of magic realism as a *mode* of writing. On the other hand, this approach is understandable inasmuch as it criticises the tendency of some scholars and the market industry to cast this mode as a fixed tool for understanding and classifying fictional texts. By contrast, in light of "Derrida's notion of a single, common trait for each genre," the narratives examined in Holgate's study may be said to "participate" in magic realism without necessarily "belonging" to it in an immutable and comprehensive fashion (16). Holgate's argument is solidly anchored in magic realist scholarship. Yet, his homogenisation of the "North American" deployment of magic realism overlooks the substantial discussions around this mode of writing in Canadian literature.

Regarding his literary corpus, Holgate opts for a transcultural and transnational focus. Some of these works are already milestones within magic realist and ecocritical scholarship: i.e. *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* by Indigenous Australian Alexis Wright, *Death of a River Guide* and *Gould's Book of Fish* by Tasmanian Richard Flanagan, *The Whale Rider* by Māori Witi Ihimaera, and *The Bone People* by Māori Keri Hulme. However, the real innovative nexus of Holgate's thesis of "magic realism as environmental discourse" can be found in the last two chapters, which are devoted to the literary input of Mo Yan (China) and Wu Ming-yi (Taiwan). Holgate's bold but righteous move of including novels from Asia reinforces the versatility of magic realism with regard to other epistemologies and literary forms, and helps inscribe this mode into the global scope of environmental world literature. Indeed, in such a comparative exercise, Holgate is wary of artificially transposing Euro-American understandings and techniques of magic realism: in the case of Mo Yan's and Wu Ming-yi's novels, this mode constitutes an inspirational stepping stone from which the authors can experiment respectively with Chinese literary techniques, Chinese folklore, and Taiwanese nature writing, while retaining the cultural and spiritual idiosyncrasies—such as Taoism—that shaped these literatures. Furthermore, Holgate's comparative study frequently alludes to other major magic realist writers, including Morrison, Rushdie, Okri, and Marquez, so as to better contextualise his thesis and encourage further exploration of magic realism through ecocritical lenses.

Overall, Holgate's approach is decidedly postcolonial, thereby revealing how the critic conjoins magic realist studies with the postcolonial branch of ecocriticism. In Holgate's analyses, the magic realist mode remains associated with the postcolonial strategy of giving back their voice to those silenced by imperialist, authoritarian, and capitalist structures. Including animals and the non-human environment as part of those entities re-empowered through magic realist techniques allows Holgate to foreground the issues of species boundaries—with instances of metamorphosis, cannibalism, environmental toxicity—and of non-human agency.

As it happens, specialists in ecopoetic form and aesthetics might regret the lack of a more ecocentric structure in Holgate's close-readings. While his unveiling of the ramifications between postcolonial and environmental issues is illuminating, one might wish for a better balance between social justice and environmental justice aspects. For instance, the problem of rewriting "official" history, which is primarily connected to the

social and political marginalisation of some human groups, tends to be examined first, as part of a novel's and an author's background information. In some chapters (e.g. those on Flanagan and Mo Yan), these notions are investigated at such length that discussions concerning the non-human agentic/aesthetic voice are relegated to the end of some analyses, explaining what and how animals, plants, or natural elements intervene in the context of eco-imperialism and the postcolonial resistance thereof. Could this order of argumentation be reversed, foregrounding first the *bios* in itself? Of course, balancing the human and non-human is a multi-faceted challenge for all ecocritics, as these realms are intricately interlocked in physical and conceptual terms. One also has to admit that Holgate never claimed to offer a formalist study *per se*.

All in all, *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* offers a long-awaited study of the connections between the magic realist mode and environmental criticism. Holgate refreshingly demonstrates that this mode can be deployed not only in Commonwealth but also Asian literatures, thereby paving the way for further investigation of its contribution to the sublime, science fiction, eco-cosmopolitanism, and the traumas of climate change.