Seeking the magic in our reality:
A critical study of magical realism and the work of Salman Rushdie and Alexis Wright

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of BA Honours in English and Writing at the University of Newcastle

Bianca Sibert
3044376
Discipline of English
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Newcastle
2012
Abstract

Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* is a unique piece of Indigenous Australian literature. Several critics have noted its narrative style as an example of ‘magical realism’. Since the text shares certain characteristics with other novels regarded as magical realist, such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, this label seems befitting of Wright’s prose. However, analysis into the origins and development of ‘magical realism’, along with a close reading of these texts focussing on form and content to determine the significance of the presence of the real and magical within their work, reveals the term’s inadequacy in describing *Carpentaria*. A ‘maban reality’, as defined by Mudrooroo Narogin, is found to be a more accurate label for Wright’s particular techniques and purposes, and thus a case-by-case approach is advocated for the study of future works.

Word Count: 14,986
# Table of Contents

Introduction | 4

Chapter One: Magical Realism and its application to *Midnight’s Children* and *Carpentaria* | 8

Chapter Two: 1001 lives, 1001 possibilities: How Salman Rushdie’s fragmented portrait of post-Independence India has reared the children of magical realism | 16

Chapter Three: Maban reality as an Indigenous land-based knowledge: Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* and the creation of a distinctively Aboriginal experience of living and belonging in contemporary Australia | 31

Conclusions | 46

Complete Bibliography | 49
Seeking the magic in our reality:
A critical study of magical realism and the work of Salman Rushdie and
Alexis Wright

... is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality? Worse: am I infected too? (Midnight’s Children 75)

If you are someone who visits old cemeteries, wait awhile if you visit the water people. The old Gulf country men and women who took our besieged memories to the grave might just climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here. (Carpentaria 11)

How would you describe a novel in which the narrator can read the thoughts and minds of others through the inner workings of his nasal passages? Or a novel where thunderous storm clouds at sea bring a torrential rain to the coast and cause time to stand still because of the excessive moisture in the air? Within both Midnight’s Children (1981) by Salman Rushdie, and Carpentaria (2006) by Alexis Wright, such a wondrous quality runs through the lines of each text, vividly portraying worlds in which supernatural elements are ordinary and accepted parts of rational, everyday reality. It is this feature that has caused both novels to be labelled ‘magical realism’.

Magical realism has been described as a genre which ‘combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed’ (Faris 163), as well as ‘the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world’ (Bhabha 6). Explaining this postcolonial concern of the genre, Maggie Bowers notes magical realism’s popularity as a narrative mode that offers ‘the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support such systems (e.g. colonialism) by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely’ (xvi). Taking the two novels by Rushdie and Wright at face value, this labelling device would seem appropriate in a comparative study; both are written from a postcolonial context, using similar stylistic techniques and dealing with subject matter that opposes a dominant, homogenous conception of identity, history and reality. Indian-born Rushdie writes from his
experience as an immigrant to the United Kingdom, trying to give texture and shape
to a vision of his homeland – one that exists primarily in his fragmented memories.
Wright on the other hand comes from the Gulf country of Northern Queensland,
Australia, and writes with a polyphonic voice encompassing Indigenous and Non-
Indigenous Australians to explore issues of land, identity and belonging. A deeper
investigation of the texts, however, the manner in which their alternate realities
present the ‘real’ and the ‘magical’, and to what purpose, reveals the possibility that
such a move does not effectively encapsulate the workings and meanings of both
texts.

What does it then mean for both these novels to be labelled magical realism?
To begin to answer this, an understanding of the origins and definitions of magical
realism as a literary genre needs to be established. The ideas and concepts behind its
initial usage, the forms and features that came to define it, and the key texts noted as
seminal examples of the genre will each be considered in Chapter One to provide a
necessary contextual background for the proceeding study.

An analysis of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, its style and structure, along
with the elements of the supernatural within its subject matter, will follow in part one
of Chapter Two. The second part will focus on how this work has become one such
pioneering text for magical realism, how it has been compared to Gabriel García
Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and how defining features for this mode
have been developed around these two texts. I will also consider the usefulness of the
concept of magical realism in capturing *Midnight’s Children*’s literary aims and
purposes and finally, how this novel’s impact on the genre can hinder effective
criticism of other works also labelled as magical realism.

Wright’s *Carpentaria* will be closely examined in Chapter Three to address
this narrow tendency of literary criticism in which texts with similar attributes are
labelled ‘magical realism’ without interrogating the reasons for such classification.
Part one will analyse the novel’s form and content to discover what view of reality is
being presented, and to therefore question its alignment with magical realism, asking
whether this move overlooks what is really at work within its pages. The possibility of
a different, and distinctively Indigenous, literary variety will thus be explored in the
second part of Chapter Three. Perhaps a more useful way of conceiving Wright’s
creation of an alternative way of seeing lies in the notion of a ‘maban reality’. Unlike
magical realism, a maban reality presents a worldview that is more valuable and real
than a Western perspective for its Indigenous characters, one that is tied to Aboriginal belief and cultural practice through the Dreaming. This concept is explored and defined by the Indigenous Australian writer and essayist, Mudrooroo Narogin, as an expression of a world-view that is distinct from a Western ‘natural scientific reality’ (par. 2), one that uses traditional storytelling structures and content to represent the Dreaming or Dreamtime¹, which denotes ‘an all-embracing set of religious beliefs and social customs instituted by the Great Ancestors when they travelled the land and gave physical form to the environment’ (Knudsen 5).

The final chapter will provide an overview of the findings of this study, along with reflections for future work into the field of magical realist discourse. This study ultimately seeks to uncover the magic and mythologies inherent within the prose of these two novels: what purpose their presence plays in the two narratives, and the meanings each author inscribes through this creative decision. My hope is that this study will aid in the examination of other such texts that attract the label of magical realism, forming an example of how to evaluate such a claim and, therefore, how to appreciate alternative visions of our world and what they have to offer in our own perception of reality.

Works Cited:


¹ A term misleadingly translated from the Aranda word ‘Alcheringa’ meaning ‘from all eternity’.


The term ‘magical realism’, not only because of the oxymoron inherent in its appellation, is one that has been the subject of much discussion among scholars of contemporary literature. While it has seen an ongoing evolution since its beginnings in the early 20th century, with its forms and features as a literary genre solidifying around certain seminal works, there has been some debate about what magical realism signifies due to its application to a wide-range of world literatures. It has also been aligned with third-world literature and postcolonialism, in that the binary opposition or ‘metaphysical clash’ (Slemon 12) represented by the meeting of two distinct cultures within a colonial setting can be expressed through the opposing discursive systems that the mode of magical realism foregrounds.

This chapter will provide a brief overview of the conceptual background of magical realism: how it has come to be defined since its beginnings in Post-Expressionist art criticism, and how it has been developed and applied to novels as diverse as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*. These works of fiction come from two vastly different contexts and authors – one written by a distinguished and prolific British Indian author, the other by an Aboriginal Australian writer and land rights activist whose Indigenous family, the Waanyi people, come from the Gulf country of Northern Queensland. Rushdie’s novel, published in 1981, has become a key text among definitions and genealogies of magical realism, thus helping to shape the conventions and criticism surrounding the term, while Wright’s 2006 novel is a recent example of a postcolonial work whose style and content have been referred to as magical realist. In providing an overview of this field of literature – its precedents and characteristics – this chapter seeks to provide a framework for the following study, which asks what it means for these two novels to be labelled magical realism, and whether it is an effective interpretive lens in understanding the complex worlds created within them.
While it has come to signify a field of literature, the term saw its introduction instead in the field of art criticism as a movement reacting against Expressionism and its campaign against Naturalism (Durix 103). This Post-Expressionist current was studied by German art critic Franz Roh and labelled ‘magical realism’ in his 1925 work, *Nach Expressionimus: Magischer Realismus*. Roh defines a form of painting that is accurate in its attention to detail, smooth and photogenic in clarity, whilst representing a mystical reality, which cannot be sufficiently expressed through empirical means (Bowers 8; Durix 103). This work went on to influence Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier in his development of the term ‘lo real marvelloso’ – a concept entreating the creation of a ‘marvellous real’ literature conceived from the existing reality of America, characterised by a complex style: ‘I have to create with my words a baroque style that parallels the baroque of the temperate, tropical landscape [of Latin America]’ (Carpentier qtd. in Aldea 2). In a 1954 lecture given by Mexican writer Angel Flores, magical realism was used to describe the mix of romanticism and realism within Latin American literature (188).

The Latin American literature boom of the 1960s saw writers experimenting with forms taken from modernist European literatures and also from innovative Latin American authors who dabbled with Surrealism, like Carpentier, Miguel Asturias and Juan Rulfo (Ocasio 89-90). These writers tapped the alternative perceptions of reality existent in their native traditions to oppose a vision of Latin America conditioned by a European worldview (Durix 109). A work considered by many as a prototype of magical realism, Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, was published in 1967, inspiring the development of various post-boom critiques of magical realism (Durix 116). Christopher Warnes notes Irlemar Chiampi’s 1980 book *O Realismo Maravilhoso: Forma e Ideologia no Romance Hispano-Americano*, used Carpentier’s term, marvellous realism, to detail the workings of a literary mode in which the worlds of the natural and the supernatural are displayed in harmony, permitting ‘the denaturalisation of the real and the naturalisation of the marvellous’ (Chiampi qtd. in Warnes 3). Following on from Chiampi’s structuralist work, Amaryll Chanady distinguished magical realism from fantastic literature, identifying three essential characteristics in classifying a text as magical realism in her 1985 work, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*: the text must feature clearly delineated codes of the natural and supernatural, a resolution to
the contradicting codes must be established, and an authorial restraint must work to enable their presence and legitimacy (3-6).

In reaction to historical definitions of magical realism and what he saw as their inability to effectively describe post-boom examples of this mode, Roberto Gonzáles Echevarría proposed two versions of magical realism, which stemmed from the ideas of Roh and Carpentier (Aldea 2). Gonzáles Echevarría formulated a ‘phenomenological magical realism’ from Roh’s work, in which the commingling of ‘subjectivity and reality, mediated by the act of perception … generates the alchemy, the magic’ while reality remains unchanged. From the views of Carpentier, Gonzáles Echevarría named as the second version, an ‘ontological magical realism’ in which the extraordinary or marvellous already ‘exists in Latin America’, perceived by ‘those who believe’ in the act of writing (Gonzáles Echevarría 113, 123). Eva Aldea notes Gonzáles Echevarría’s division asked significant questions of magical realism, interrogating what the ‘magic’ is supposed to represent – is it the supernatural at work or just a way of perceiving reality? Is it a textual device or is it inherent in reality? (2).

Here we can see explorations into and definitive features developed for magical realism as a mode of writing, despite its beginnings in the specific environments of art criticism and Latin American fiction. Further broadening the term’s application, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris published a critical anthology on magical realism in 1995, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, within which the editors sought to include a large variety of texts and traditions in order to determine the term’s suitability as a notable contemporary international mode (4). While this anthology allowed magical realism to be applied to a wide range of world literatures it simultaneously had the effect of confusing the genre’s definition in the lack of consistency across the articles. Warnes holds this produced a ‘vague and arbitrary approach’, permitting vastly diverse texts to be aligned within the same category, without regard to the distortions this can lead to, and also the inability of such essays in a critical edition to pursue comparative approaches in depth (‘The Hermeneutics of Vagueness’ 4).

Monographs, such as Jean Pierre Durix’s *Mimesis, Genres and Postcolonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism* (1998), go on to explore the concepts of magic and reality, delineating the form and phenomenon of magical realism in detail, and in Durix’s case, its place within a postcolonial ‘hybrid aesthetics’, implying the magical realist text reflects the many views of reality evident in a postcolonial setting.
(Aldea 6). Durix specifically uses García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*, to first develop characteristics and features of magical realism and second, to determine the term’s literary purpose and value (114-115). Durix finds three stylistic and conceptual features at work in the texts: an interweaving of history, fantasy and allegory; the preservation and manipulation of memory and reality; and the combination of comedy and an infringement of taboos. Within both García Márquez and Rushdie’s writing, a return to native lore and folk magic and a concern for myths of origin permeate their narratives, which tread a path between “fantasy” and a clear concern with reference, historical allegory and social protest’ (Durix 116). Memory and an awareness of the precariousness of someone else’s, or one’s own, knowledge and apprehension of reality and history, is highlighted in their writing, using metafictional devices, intertextual references and allusions to reflect the influences of post-modernism, surrealism and traditional orature on their postcolonial narratives (128-131). Through a playfulness with language and the naturalness of linear time, Durix sees both García Márquez and Rushdie applying a ‘rhetoric of excess’ to question the validity of dominant versions of reality (142).

Following Durix’s deconstruction of magical realism, using García Márquez and Rushdie as cornerstones of this literary mode, other academics have similarly employed these authors in their own studies. In Zamora and Faris’s 1995 collection of essays on magical realism, Patricia Merivale notes Rushdie’s narrative as a translation of rhetorical and metaphorical strategies from García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the ‘*fons et origo* of magic realism for the present generation’ (329). Christopher Warnes names the two authors in his discussion of literary critics’ tendency to compare texts that appear to follow formal requirements of magical realism, without considering the purposes behind this choice: ‘Frequently this approach sidesteps questions of definition by adopting a highly successful novel like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *Midnight’s Children* as a kind of norm against which other magical realist novels can be tested’ (‘The Hermeneutics of Vagueness’ 8). D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke notes Rushdie’s place among ‘the non-realist, alternative tradition in Western fiction – Cervantes, Rabelais, Sterne, Swift, Melville, Gogol, Joyce, Günter Grass, Borges, García Márquez’ (17). In his more recent study of magical realism, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*, Warnes further notes Rushdie’s place within what he names as a
‘growing corpus of literary works that draw upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in a way that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other’ (2). Warnes further postulates a ‘brief survey of canonical magical realist texts’, including Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses* among Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*, Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, all of which, despite their differences, treat the supernatural ‘as if it were a perfectly acceptable and understandable aspect of everyday life’ (2).

In criticism of the last three decades therefore, features and understandings of magical realism have been formed around these seminal authors and their works. While ‘magical realism’ can provide a helpful lens through which to appreciate literature presenting the peculiar mix of real and unreal, fantastic and mundane in a way that treats each even-handedly, it has proved to be a vague and confusing term when applied indiscriminately to the fiction of writers from vastly different contexts. For example, academic criticism of Alexis Wright’s novel, *Carpentaria*, is limited in number due to its recent publication, yet the majority of articles refer to Wright’s work as magical realism in some way or another without examining how and why this label is appropriate.

In her 2007 review essay of Wright’s novel, Francis Devlin-Glass praises the novel for ‘its bravura, its knowing literariness, which is more than aesthetic, and the excesses that mark its genealogical links to magic realism’ (84). Building on this link between *Carpentaria* and magical realism, Devlin-Glass’s article, ‘A Politics of the Dreamtime: Destructive and Regenerative Rainbows in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*’, posits that Wright’s work combines satire with ‘a new form of magic realism based in Indigenous knowledge’, and that the novel asserts a correlation between what is perceived as ‘real’ and what is ‘magic’, breaking away from dominant conceptions of these terms and presenting them in a new light (392). Robin Freeman states ‘the characteristics of magical realism appear evident in [Wright’s] work’, noting the author’s prolific reading habits and citing of Rushdie and Garcia Márquez as literary influences (139). While Freeman’s application of magical realism to describe the characteristics of Wright’s text is used fleetingly to note the unique writing style Wright presented to her publishers, and Devlin-Glass develops the idea that Wright’s
novel uses a typical defamiliarising feature of magical realism to move beyond the assumptions of this genre and represent the sacred of Waanyi cosmology as ‘embedded in the mundane and everyday real’ (Povinelli qtd. in Devlin-Glass 393), Alison Ravenscroft opposes Carpentaria’s alignment with magical realism altogether. In her article, ‘Dreaming of Others: Carpentaria and its Critics’, Ravenscroft critiques the move of fixing the text within the confines of magical realism, as she sees this label ‘is not a form of writing that arises in another’s culture, as is so often claimed: it is very much the product of a certain white Western critical strategy’ (195).

Ravenscroft views magical realism as a device developed around literary post-colonialism to read difference in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, aligning magic with Indigenous colonised subjects, and the so-called reality with the colonisers (195-196). This, Ravenscroft warns, is a trope of the genre, having the effect of further colonising and silencing Indigenous conceptions of reality (197).

Ravenscroft’s argument regarding magical realism’s colonialist assumptions is one that goes against most critical work on the genre, where many see it as a style of writing able to destabilize the dominant mode of realism and the authority of Western representation that this form represents (Takolander 14; Faris 4). However, this study takes seriously Ravenscroft’s interrogation of what is implied by the terms ‘magic’ and ‘reality’, and how the label of magical realism can affect our reading of whose version of reality the novel is privileging. The following chapters will examine the ‘magical’ elements within a novel so often cited as a seminal piece of magical realism alongside Carpentaria to determine when this term is a helpful descriptor and when it may indeed be limiting. A close investigation of the alternative vision of reality represented in Wright’s novel will therefore consider why it has been categorised in this way. An analysis of Rushdie’s seminal text will precede this, in order to first comprehend how magical realism as a mode of writing is supposed to operate, and how it suits Rushdie’s particular creative purposes.

The more recent studies of Warnes and Aldea both advocate a formal approach where ontology is privileged over anthropology, text over context, so that the real and magical elements are considered in themselves and how they relate to each other (Aldea 17). This approach will be adopted to study the two novels’ form and content so as to determine first what the ‘magical’ characteristics of their work signify; second, the particular contextual background that has influenced the creation of such
supernatural elements; and finally, the suitability of the term magical realism in describing and understanding Midnight’s Children and Carpentaria. This work will provide an example for the study of future texts exhibiting similar forms and techniques, demonstrating how and when the term ‘magical realism’ can be an effective interpretive tool in understanding literature, as well as its limitations for doing so.

Works Cited:


Merivale, Patricia. ‘Saleem Fathered by Oskar: Midnight’s Children, *Magic Realism,*
and The Tin Drum’ in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (eds)


Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) is a layered and multitudinous story of and about the human face and body of India. Through repetitious metaphors and imagery of body-parts that are grotesque and accentuated, veiled and unveiled, deformed and diseased, Rushdie paints a living, breathing portrait of the human condition and identity created by India’s independence at the stroke of midnight, August 15 1947. Concerned with the making of history and the shaping of ideas of nationhood, Rushdie uses the self-reflexive and unreliable narration of its main character, Saleem Sinai to tell a story that is at once personal and intimate, whilst also representative of the diverse makeup of Indian culture and society. Rushdie draws on Indian myths and storytelling traditions to provide a rich, symbolic background for his characters and the unfolding of key political events in this moment of Indian history.

As a Muslim Indian born in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and having migrated to the United Kingdom in his teenage years, Rushdie wishes to capture the kind of fragmented vision of India that exists in his memories. He therefore presents multiple realities, which all have an equal claim in re-telling the truth of his version and experience of Indian history and identity. The mix of these elements is all tied together through the narrator, whose momentous birth within the first hour of India’s independence metaphorically connects him to the fate of the nation. Underlying Saleem’s narration is a mode of realism peppered with elements of mythology and the fantastic, which allows the novel to portray the heterogeneity of India’s reality in a manner that opposes dominant and official representations of history and emphasises the myriad voices of its people.

This chapter will examine first the form and content of Rushdie’s novel: how he constructs multiple realities through the fallible narration of Saleem, and how supernatural features are woven seamlessly into these realities. Second, it will discuss how *Midnight’s Children* can be seen as a magical realist work: how the text has become vital in definitions of the genre, whether this interpretive lens is useful in
understanding Rushdie’s motives in creating his postcolonial picture of Indian identity, and its effectiveness as a labelling device for future works.

I

One of the most distinguishing features of *Midnight’s Children* is its self-referential and fragmented narrative style, facilitated through the use of a first-person narrator and main character. The structure of Saleem’s narration is one that constantly jumps back and forth between Saleem in the present moment of writing the story, and the past events and memories he is narrating. Saleem, and the curious coincidence of his birth with the formation of independent India, provides the means through which Rushdie is able to create a many-layered text, primarily about the importance of memory and its filtration processes, in constructing identity: ‘the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool’ (*Imaginary Homelands* 24).

This focus on the shaping and remoulding of past events and memories drove Rushdie to form Saleem’s narration in a way that would be both flawed and self-reflexive. Saleem constantly questions himself and his own reliability in retelling his story: ‘… once upon a time. No, that won’t do, there’s no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar’s Nursing Home on August 15, 1947’ (9). From the very start, Saleem admits to manipulating the stories in order to give his life significance: ‘I must work fast, faster than Sheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity’ (9). Evoking the Arabian folktales of *One Thousand and One Nights*, and its storyteller, the Persian Queen Sheherazade, who tells one story per night for a thousand and one nights to avoid being killed by her husband, Rushdie establishes the intertextual, self-conscious mode of Saleem’s narration. Comparing his plight to that of Queen Sherherazade, Saleem is drawing attention to both the urgency he feels to give voice to his stories and the metaphoric nature of these tales. Rushdie uses such cultural references to highlight his desire to represent the many voices and stories of his India.

Saleem interrupts, second-guesses and foreshadows coming events throughout the telling of his story, commenting on coincidences and moments he would have readers note as meaningful. Talking almost to himself, Saleem notes parallels in his story: ‘(And already I can see the repetitions beginning; because didn’t my
grandmother also find enormous … and the stroke, too, was not the only […] the curse begins already, and we haven’t even gotten to the noses yet!” (12). This conversational tone and style is reminiscent of traditional Indian oral storytelling, which Rushdie has noted inspired the writing of *Midnight’s Children*. Discussing the ancient Indian tradition of oral narrative, Rushdie describes tendencies of the storyteller: ‘he’ll comment on the tale, digress because the tale reminds him of something, and then come back to the present’ (qtd. in Goonetilleke 18). Saleem does just this, and like a traditional storyteller, he has an audience.

The character of Padma, Saleem’s partner and caretaker in his final years, is both Saleem’s live listener and representative of Rushdie’s actual readers. Padma is the voice of the common, down-to-earth citizen of India: ‘Padma – our plump Padma – is sulking magnificently. (She can’t read and, like any fish-lover, dislikes other people knowing anything she doesn’t …)’ (24). Her inability to read and overtly physical nature allow Padma to take on the role of the working-class multitudes, who question Saleem’s storytelling, keeping him in check: ‘But here is Padma at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next’ (38). Saleem’s narration thus represents a collaborative relationship, one that allows the awareness of self-conscious fallibility in both Saleem and the reader. Goonetilleke highlights the importance of the character of Padma in Rushdie’s desire to portray the totalising nature of historiography by keeping the reader of the novel alert and critical: ‘the novel, not mimetic, not presented as an illusion of the real world, remains, in a post-modern way, a self-reflexive artefact’ (41).

Such self-reflexivity allows Saleem to discover errors in his narrative, for example, his account of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs on the wrong date: ‘in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. Does one error invalidate the entire fabric?’ (166) While this instance demonstrates a conscious awareness of his shortcomings, in other parts Saleem’s errata are unconscious mistakes. Abandoned by Padma later in the novel, Saleem recollects another fabled storyteller whose listeners did not leave mid-story:

> When Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, dictated his masterpiece to elephant-headed Ganesh, did the god walk out on him half-way? … (Note that, despite my Muslim background, I’m enough of a Bombayite to be well up in Hindu stories …) (149-150)
Here, Saleem’s proud claim to be ‘well up’ in Hindu mythology is proven to be quite
the opposite, as Rushdie points out, it was at the feet of the bard Vyasa that Ganesh
takes down the Mahabharata: ‘Saleem is wrong’ (*IH* 22). Just as Rushdie’s migrant
experience of Indian identity shapes and distorts his memories and knowledge,
Saleem’s dubious parentage and disintegrating form influences his perception of
reality and manipulates his desire for wholeness and meaning. Rushdie wishes his
readers to be critical of Saleem’s narration, just as they should ‘maintain a healthy
distrust’ in the reading of the world around them (*IH* 25).

In addition to reshaping memories, historical events, and traditional stories,
Saleem reworks the English language, rendering it distinctive and unfamiliar. Rushdie
states he set out to punctuate the novel ‘in a very peculiar way’ in order ‘to destroy
natural rhythms of the English language’, noting the use of dashes, exclamations and
ellipses to ‘dislocate the English and let other things into it’ (qtd. in Durix et al 19-20).
We therefore find passages employing ellipses to imply the skipping forwards and
backwards in time, the invention of new words, and sometimes, whole pages without
full-stops, which build to exhaustive climaxes reflecting the frenzied and volatile state
of its narrator. This kind of playfulness with language and punctuation fosters an
appropriate setting for the creation of multiple realities as the description of otherwise
unnatural and or disparate ideas seem unsurprising in such an environment. In a
passage describing one of the central presences of the fantastic in the novel, that is
Saleem’s nose, a drawn-out sentence with repetitious symbolism introduces the
magical power of his nose in a way that renders it unremarkable:

… in a sky-blue crib in a sky-blue room with a fisherman’s pointing
finger on the wall: here, whenever his mother goes away clutching a
purse full of secrets, is Baby Saleem, who has acquired an
expression of the most intense concentration … whose nose is
twitching strangely while he appears to be watching some distant
event, to be guiding it from a distance … (141)

It is through this self-conscious, error-ridden and circular oral-style narration,
with its defamiliarising use of English language and punctuation, that Rushdie creates
various planes of reality, one of which is Saleem’s personal and intimate portrait of his
and his family’s genealogical history. In constructing this history, Saleem is fastidious and mindful of the way in which he is representing himself, establishing a series of recurrences to develop a sense of lineage and identity, which is undercut when the truth of his parentage is later revealed. For example, his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, suffers a bump to his extremely large nose when trying to pray, ‘And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole’ (12). Both the nose and the symbolic hole recur throughout Saleem’s story as signifiers of identity and meaning:

I wish to place on record my gratitude to this mighty organ – if not for it, who would have believed me to be truly my mother’s son, my grandfather’s grandson? … Doctor Aziz’s nose – comparable only to the trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganesh – established incontrovertibly his right to be a patriarch. (13)

This mention of Ganesh recurs as a central motif of Saleem’s storytelling, whilst the symbolism of the nose allows many of the key events within Saleem’s life to be loaded with meaning. Holes also reappear in the narrative, notably in the ‘perforated sheet’ through which Doctor Aziz later examines, and soon falls in love, with his future wife Naseem, and in the fragments that come to plague Saleem’s history and existence (23). For example, after Saleem’s mother, Amina Sinai, loses her first love and marries the businessman Ahmed Sinai, she begins to learn to love her new husband in small parts at a time – in fragments: ‘To do this she divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts … in short, she fell under the spell of the perforated sheet of her own parents’ (68). These instances of repeated symbolism aid in the purposeful assemblage of the identity Saleem wishes to build for himself, something Reena Mitra describes as a preoccupation with ‘the quest for identity’ and an impatience to ‘gain an insight into the ‘meaning’ of life’ (4): ‘Am I so far gone in my desperate need for meaning that I am prepared to distort everything?’ (MC 166).

Saleem’s distortions and emphases are made clear when well into the novel, he begins to hint at the adulterous act that led to his birth, and eventually, reveals the crime committed by the Catholic nurse, Mary Pereira, therefore finally laying down the ‘truth’ of his background and parentage: ‘…thanks to the crime of Mary Pereira, I became the chosen child of midnight, whose parents were not his parents, whose son would not be
his own’ (117). Saleem’s deliberate retelling of these events in this way, withholding and alluding to the truth, allows Rushdie to make his readers aware of the carefully constructed nature of national history. Neil Ten Kortenaar notes that while Aadam Aziz represents an established bourgeois narrative of Indian history, the alternative version with the English imperialist, William Methwold, as the father of a bastard, mixed-race son, rejects the conventional portrait of the nation-state (51). Saleem’s process of selection highlights what Kortenaar points to as the ‘conditions of knowing’: ‘What had seemed literal – Saleem as the grandson of Aadam Aziz – is revealed to be metaphorical … Rushdie’s point is not that there is no truth, but that there is no literal level of truth’ (52). For Rushdie, a person’s prejudiced, ignorant or misconceived version of reality is just as valuable and as true as anyone else’s: ‘History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings’ (IH 25). Saleem deliberately paints a rich and colourful picture of his family history in order to portray a vision of himself that fits comfortably into his notion of being the ‘child of midnight’, inextricably linked to the body of India and to the voices of its people.

As noted by Mitra: ‘On the one side we have Saleem’s personal life, and, on the other, corresponding to this is the life and history of the nation’ (4), which acts as another plane of reality serving to metaphorically connect Saleem with the fate of his country. Integral moments within India’s political history, such as the Amritsar Massacre of April 13, 1919, are woven into Saleem’s family history, and accorded equal significance as, unlike one thousand fellow Indians in attendance at the rally, Aadam Aziz’s life is luckily spared by the sixth-sense of his nose: ‘As Brigadier Dyer issues a command the sneeze hits my grandfather full in the face … he sneezes and falls forward, losing his balance, following his nose and thereby saving his life’ (36). Through this fictional account, the official versions of history or those propagated by the English ruling class are challenged. Rushdie notes this battle over representation as a vital role of literature: ‘Writers and politicians are natural rivals … And the novel is one way of denying the official politicians’ version of truth’ (IH 14). In his truth, the number of casualties is 1516, a figure which is estimated by the Indian National Congress, while Official Government of India sources report it to be 379 (Sayer 131).

Saleem’s birth provides another example of Rushdie’s unique version of Indian history. In this scene, Jawaharlal Nehru’s historic Independence speech is given new meaning within the fictional story of Saleem: ‘A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age
ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance…” (116). The metaphorical possibilities of Nehru’s words become the literal realities within *Midnight’s Children*, the intermingling of fact and fiction the means through which this is possible. When the notion of an independent India is born, one described by Saleem as ‘the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible’ (*MC* 112), so too are the midnight’s children, each endowed with mythical qualities and endless possibilities. This parallel between Saleem’s life and the life of India is designed to show how an individual’s life can be understood in terms of historical forces (Mitra 4), and also so that one version of events, or one view of reality, is not privileged over another.

The content of Rushdie’s multiple realities is imbued with such mythical qualities so as to assign the text with an alternative and unrestricted mode of conceiving the world: ‘I think of fantasy as a method of producing intensified images of reality’ (Rushdie qtd. in Goonetilleke 19). Using elements of the fantastic, Rushdie is both representing the world of mythology and spirits that exists for many Indian people (Kortenaar 58), and constructing a metaphorical picture of the form of India – one that is more vivid and true than the India of official history. Ordinary human physical attributes and senses are thus accorded preternatural potential, for example, the local tradition of pickling and preserving fruits and vegetables becomes a medium through which characters are able to influence others and also a central metaphor for the act of writing. Through Mary Pereira’s cooking, her strong feelings of guilt and remorse begin to infiltrate the minds of Saleem’s family: ‘Mary’s chutneys filled our dreams with pointing fingers’ (148). Saleem’s story meanwhile, is boiled down into 26 pickle-jars, ‘twenty-six special blends, each with its identifying label, neatly inscribed with familiar phrases: “Movements Performed by Pepperpots”, for instance … five empty jars twinkle urgently, reminding me of my uncompleted task’ (384). When Saleem undergoes surgery on his blocked nasal passages, he loses the ability to hear others’ thoughts but gains an extra-perceptive sense of smell: ‘I began to learn the secret aromas of the world, the heady but quick-fading perfume of new love, and also the deeper, longer-lasting pungency of hate’ (307). Taste and smell thus symbolically allow a more intense experience of India’s many-flavoured identity. Rama Lohani-Chase similarly notes the broad, reflexive view of history, allegory and metaphor allow fictions like Rushdie’s: ‘Telling history metaphorically does not make it less real, as the pickling of a vegetable does not destroy it but gives it a longer, more
flavourful life’ (37). One of Rushdie’s overriding metaphors is therefore that of bodily consumption, ‘To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world’ (MC 109).

More supernatural elements are evident in the variously deformed and deteriorated bodily forms Rushdie conceives of to shape this flavourful, heterogeneous figure of India. Developing the recurring significance of the nose, Rushdie continues to tie Saleem’s magical abilities to physical accidents. The facility to hear other’s thoughts is born in Saleem when a pyjama-cord becomes lodged in his nostril: ‘Snot rockets through a breached dam into dark new channels … Something electrical has been moistened. Pain. And then noise, deafening many-tongued terrifying, inside his head!’ (162). Further on, Saleem’s special faculty is broadened to perceive and communicate with the fellow children of midnight when his head collides with that of his friend, Sonny Ibrahim, in a circus-ring bicycle accident: ‘circus-ring accident had completed what washing-chest calamity had begun, and they were there in my head … the other children born during that midnight hour’ (187). The bump on the nose suffered by Aadam Aziz at the novel’s opening thus begins this trend of physical injuries, ailments and enhancements.

The midnight’s children themselves, and the whole gamut of supernatural abilities they collectively embody, present another example of otherworldly human forms within the text. As described by Saleem, their powers are great and diverse: ‘From Kerala, a boy who had the ability of stepping into mirrors and re-emerging through any reflective surface in the land … a werewolf from the Nilgiri Hills, from the great watershed of the Vindhyas, a boy who could increase or reduce his size at will…’ (198). The fantastic nature of their abilities however, does not become the defining characteristic of their existence, as Saleem reflects: ‘Children, however magical, are not immune to their parents; and as the prejudices and world-views of adults began to take over their minds, I found children from Maharashtra loathing Gurjaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian “blackies”...’ (254). The magic inherent in the midnight’s children becomes yet another reality through which Rushdie’s heteroglossic vision of India is expressed, the fragmented Midnight Children’s Conference (MCC) becoming ‘a mirror of the nation’ (255).

In the creation of another character endowed with preternatural physical features, Rushdie simultaneously forms a rival for Saleem and a spokesperson for another Indian reality, that is, the voice of the poor, disenfranchised slum-dwellers: ‘Despite his hidden Muslim parentage and ‘Anglo’ foster-father, he carries a Hindu
name, Shiva, which indicates deep historic roots … and has further appropriateness, given that he represents the indigenous (predominantly Hindu) proletariat’ (Goonetilleke 28). Shiva, the true son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai with whom Mary Pereira fatefully swaps Saleem, is thus condemned to a life of poverty and hardship. While Saleem, Anglicised, middle-class and educated, receives supernatural powers through his nose, which symbolises intelligence and perceptiveness according to Indian folklore and mythology, Shiva is gifted by his midnight birth with ‘two of the biggest knees the world has ever seen’ (MC 220), signifying physical strength and a firm grounding, ‘someone nearer the soil’ (Goonetilleke 28). A major Hindu deity of varying guises and attributes, among which is the destroyer, the ‘lord of the fire’ (Storl 26), Shiva is thus the fiery voice of the multitudes of downtrodden in Midnight’s Children: ‘“The thing is, we must be here for some purpose, don’t you think?” … “Rich kid,” Shiva yelled, “you don’t know one damn thing! What purpose, man? … For what reason you’re rich and I’m poor?” ’ (220). While Saleem wants to create meaning in an idealised, democratic forum for the good of all, Shiva presents the darker side of human reality and expresses the primal urge for war – to improve his situation without concern for others.

While Shiva rises to power as the charismatic ambassador of the Indian Army, aiding Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the capture and castration of the midnight’s children, Saleem suffers a symbolic death when his home in Pakistan is bombed during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965. This physical assault on Saleem’s body, the land of Pakistan, renders him with memory-loss. His traumatised body thus undergoes another transformation into ‘the buddha’ – an ‘old before his time’ (349) mute tracker for the Pakistani army, whose large nose gives him a supernatural sense of smell. After being rendered invisible by the sorcery of fellow midnight’s child, Parvati the Witch, upon Pakistan’s surrender to India, Saleem is reborn along with his memories and becomes a street-performer of the slums, an ironic role-reversal with his nemesis Shiva. The contrasting characters of Saleem and Shiva, and their fantastic physical traits and transformations, allow Rushdie to portray differing ideas of Indian identity and heroism. While bestowed with privilege and intelligence, Saleem’s passivity leads to the unnatural survival and mutation of his body, which is plunged into the depths of ambiguity alongside the story of the nation, and Shiva’s action and physicality enable him to become Indira Gandhi’s right-hand man, falling under the spell of those in power. The MCC therefore presents a diversity that denies uniformity, divided as
Lohani-Chase notes, ‘not only by virtue of difference in class, geographic location, religion and gender but by the gifts of power that are unequally bestowed on the night of independence’ (43).

Having gone through so many disfigurements and transformations, Saleem’s body itself begins to disintegrate, the ‘cracks’ that spurred his storytelling process, beginning to form. The other central metaphor of Rushdie’s work thus becomes fragmentation, signifying both his narrative style and technique, but also the fault-lines that appear upon Saleem’s body, and simultaneously the body of India. The ‘chutnification’ and preservation of history is done so in parts – the different flavours and episodes of Saleem’s, of India’s, history each contain ‘the most exalted of possibilities’: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time! … in words and pickles, I have immortalised my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods’ (459). Distortions and cracks metaphorically represent the impossibility of one truth, of wholeness and unity for both Saleem himself, and the nation that was desired in the creation of independent India: ‘portraying his very existence as miraculous and unsustainable, [Saleem] continuously asserts that he is physically decomposing as he relates his tale. His condition underscores the impossibility of the novel’s imaginative and political project to fashion a nation from the diverse subcontinent’ (Kane 96). Rushdie utilizes a mix of fantasy and realism, in which multiple realities present a many-layered, diverse portrait of India at the time of its independence, and where not one of these planes of existence holds a greater claim in portraying Rushdie’s truth: that India is and will remain fragmented, cracked, but no less meaningful. Rushdie’s reality as an Indian migrant and British citizen, his experience of spatial distance and perspective, allows this kind of representation where identity is fractured, dislocated and in-between (Lohani-Chase 41).

II

Following on from Christopher Warnes’s basic understanding of magical realism as ‘a mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural’ (2), the magical realism of *Midnight’s Children* can be seen in the characteristics discussed above, where the oral-style narration of Saleem portrays a diverse and fantastic India in a naturalised, unremarkable fashion. Such characteristics have allowed the novel to
be compared with similar works, and subsequently, to greatly influence the development and definition of the mode of magical realism over the years. One such text Rushdie’s novel draws from is García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Rushdie’s borrowing of characteristics from this work has allowed their alignment as key magical realist texts, and thus shows how *Midnight’s Children* is a useful demonstration of the genre.

In their 1995 collection of essays on the mode, Zamora and Faris number Rushdie among many ‘magical realist’ writers such as Toni Morrison, Juan Rulfo, Derek Walcott and García Márquez, who ‘self-consciously recuperate non-Western cultural modes and non-literary forms in their Western form’ (4). Two of the articles within this collection are dedicated solely to Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, respectively. Jean-Pierre Durix specifically utilizes Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*, along with García Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to develop a set of common features, which he uses to define magical realism as a postcolonial hybrid aesthetic. More recently, criticisms seeking to decipher and delineate the term refer to Rushdie and García Márquez as writers providing a model of a narrative mode that offers ‘a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy’ (Bowers 1).

Rushdie has embraced his identity as a writer who employs magical realism, seeing it as one of many modes by which the writer of fiction is able to arrive at a ‘human truth’ via ‘the road of untruth’ (‘Magical Realism Is Still Realism’ n.p.). Rushdie describes magical realism as ‘a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely ‘Third World’ consciousness’, dealing with societies ‘in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new’ (*IH* 302). Discussing García Márquez, Rushdie notes the influence of the author’s grandmother and her fantastic stories steeped in verisimilitude: ‘… using his grandmother’s narrative voice as his own linguistic lodestone, Márquez began the building of Macondo’ (301). Along with this influence of the traditional beliefs and stories of his grandmother, Rushdie notes García Márquez formed his fabulist narrative technique in response to the changes of modernity to urban life from a village world-view, and to the deceptive political environment of his South America: ‘In Marquez’s experience, truth has been controlled to the point at which it has ceased to be possible to find out what it is. The only truth is that you are being lied to all the time’ (301). From these comments, Rushdie’s own conception of magical realism, as well as the impression of Garcia
Márquez’s writing on his work and motivations, can be seen in his similar voicing of traditional Indian belief and culture in response to the creation of a modern Indian nation.

Timothy Brennan also points to the influence of García Márquez on Rushdie’s writing in his use of fantasy and metaphor to address colonialism. Brennan notes the fantastic elements of García Márquez’s work are a legacy of the European colonisers and their imperialist myth-making language; an artistic outlook García Márquez took and transformed for his own purposes (Brennan 68). This is comparable to Rushdie’s postcolonial migrant experience, one that comprises competing world-views and popular cultures. Brennan thus states ‘the “unbridled reality” of the colonial world cannot simply be reported; it has to be “translated” or “borne across” – and bearing-across is also, literally, “metaphor”’ (68). Rushdie’s ‘unbridled reality’ therefore involves a commingling of memory, time and distance as Lohani-Chase notes: ‘reflection alone, in the sense of mirroring, may not be adequate to understand reality’ (37). The manner in which Rushdie utilizes metaphor and the supernatural to represent this conception of reality points to the influence of García Márquez, an emulation which has subsequently created a convenient set of texts through which to generalize about ‘magical realism’, its techniques and aims.

In his more recent study of magical realism, Warnes postulates two forms of the mode – one that is ontological or faith-based, and another that is discursive or irreverent – which help to locate Rushdie’s purpose in utilising this narrative style and structure. Where the supernatural event or presence stands ‘synecdochically or metonymically for an alternative way of conceiving of reality usually derived from a non-Western belief system’ in faith-based magical realism, the supernatural event or presence within irreverent strands of magical realism stands, rather, ‘in place of an idea or set of ideas’ (14), thus operating metaphorically. It is with this irreverent mode that Warnes aligns the magical realism of Rushdie’s text as his magical elements work to metaphorically portray a diverse and disfigured Indian history and identity. In using Rushdie’s fiction to define this particular concept of his postcolonial magical realism, Warnes, like those before him, enables Rushdie and his work to act as a prime example of the mode. Magical realism has thus been created to fit such works as *Midnight’s Children* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which significantly affects the study of future texts displaying similar characteristics, as they will continue to be compared and contrasted to these works.
In this way, *Midnight’s Children* has become a benchmark against which definitions and study into magical realism have been developed. Thus it is a fitting interpretive lens for Rushdie’s text precisely because many of the novel’s own characteristics, such as its multiple realities, oral-style narration, its naturalisation of the supernatural and the elevation of the everyday to the sacred or uncanny, have since influenced the formation of key characteristics defining this body of work. Rushdie’s wide-ranging, heterogeneous narrative can certainly aid in the way we view other works labelled as magical realism, providing an example of how this genre operates, but because *Midnight’s Children* has had such an integral role in defining magical realism, applying the label can also limit the way other works are viewed (as the proceeding chapter will reveal).

‘Magical realism’ therefore describes Rushdie’s intention of retrieving a sense of a cultural homeland, in a way that gives voice to an alternative view of history and Indian identity, not privileging one version of events over another. His fragmented storytelling and its host of preternatural bodily forms creates a metaphoric portrait of the one thousand and one possibilities that were born alongside India as an independent nation. Rushdie’s story is a fiction, a metaphorical truth, and the truth according to Rushdie, lies in metaphor (Kortenaar 52): ‘our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind’ (*IH* 10).

Works Cited:

III

Maban reality as an Indigenous land-based knowledge: Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* and the creation of a distinctively Aboriginal experience of living and belonging in contemporary Australia

In the construction of an epic story of and about the land in the Gulf country of Carpentaria, Northern Queensland, Alexis Wright ventures beyond the boundaries of Western literary styles and conventions, presenting a narrative that re-imagines a view of reality not commonly represented in mainstream Australian literature. Motivated by a need to give voice to a polyphonic Indigenous imagination – one that is able to look towards a hopeful future – Wright is inspired by native writers of other countries, taking narrative strategies that have been labelled ‘magical realism’ and working them into *Carpentaria* for her own purposes. Within her exegesis, ‘On Writing Carpentaria’, Wright states how the writing of authors such as Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez, provided necessary inspiration for the novel: ‘I turned elsewhere to try to understand how to configure the history I know and what I understand of our realities’ (82). To allow Indigenous readers to feel a sense of familiarity with her storytelling technique, whilst posing a challenge to non-Indigenous readers, Wright tests the linearity of time through the fostering of a narrative style inspired by oral storytelling traditions and Aboriginal philosophy. It is this unique treatment of narrative time and the construction of a host of colourful characters, along with a central focus and awareness of the land and the local ancestral spirits, that enables Wright’s prose to reflect a ‘maban reality’ – an alternative worldview contributing to a decolonised space of Aboriginal cultural expression.

The following discussion will first investigate how Wright is able to establish this alternative way of seeing and being in the world through an examination of the novel’s form and content, and then consider the appropriateness of the descriptors of magical realism versus those of a maban reality. Following on from the analysis of *Midnight’s Children*, the purpose of this chapter is to determine whether Wright is employing similar elements for different purposes and to move beyond a narrow
application of the labelling device of ‘magical realism’ to explore more deeply what reality is being presented and why.

I

Carpentaria’s narrative voice is one that captivates and confronts readers from the very outset, clearly positioning the text outside contemporary mainstream Australian fiction. A capitalised prelude, in which ‘A NATION CHANTS, BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY’ and church bells call ‘INNOCENT LITTLE BLACK GIRLS … WHO LOOK AROUND THEMSELVES AT THE HUMAN Fallout AND ANNOUNCE MATTER-OF-FACTLY, ARMAGEDDON BEGINS HERE’, opens chapter one (1). This declarative and apocalyptic statement performs a number of preparatory functions for the narrative to follow. The chant of the nation expresses an apathy Wright wishes to address within the non-Indigenous Australian population of today, whilst the bleak proclamation of Armageddon, voiced through the little black girls, immediately privileges the subaltern perspective of Aboriginal Australia. This passage thus works to challenge the authority of contemporary white Australia, calling on a distinctively Indigenous view of creation and spirituality in the lines that follow the prelude: ‘The ancestral serpent, a creature longer than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity’ (1). The description of the mythical being’s formative journey across the land is the story from ‘time immemorial’ of which is referred to in the chapter title, and presents a jump back through time from the introductory prelude. This playfulness with voice and time comes to typify Wright’s storytelling technique throughout the novel, one that, like Rushdie’s text, has at its origins Indigenous oral traditions of Aboriginal Australia. Where Rushdie’s use of oral tradition is just one of several modes he deploys, in Wright’s narrative, oral tradition plays a much more important and authoritative role.

Traditionally, oral storytelling performs a central role within Indigenous Australian culture, one that has simultaneously intellectual and social significance as it sees the passing down of vital knowledge as well as the instruction of social mores, through both the stories themselves and the performative act of its telling. An Aboriginal commentator in the Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia writes of the diminishing role of elders and storytellers and thus the importance of maintaining
oral literature for the fostering of respect between young and old: ‘Because human relationships are important elements in Aboriginal culture, oral literature is a significant linchpin in its continuing viability’ (Horton in Klapproth 79). Wright thus creates a number of larger-than-life, Indigenous storytellers who use performative methods to act as the gatekeepers of sacred information.

Normal Phantom, for example, is described as ‘an old tribal man’ whose knowledge of the river is unsurpassed, and whose physical and mental harmony with its movements is passed onto his son Will. Norm’s fascination with fish also develops into a hobby of taxidermy, which can be seen as another performative mode of communicating and preserving local knowledge. Mozzie Fishman, leader of ‘an ancient religious crusade along the spiritual travelling road of the great ancestor’ (119) is an elder whose knowledge is of the land and not the water. His convoy of battered cars are a physical embodiment of the Aboriginal Law, enacting an unending ceremony over the land. Joseph Midnight is an elder from the other side of the town Desperance, and the patriarch of the Eastside mob. Despite the ancient rivalry between the Eastside and Westside clans, Joseph Midnight imparts vital wisdom unto Will Phantom through song, ‘The old man gave him the directions to the safe place in his far-off country – a blow-by-blow description sung in song, unravelling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen’ (375).

Stephen Muecke argues for the durability of an oral tradition of disseminating knowledge over the written word, which can ‘easily be destroyed’ and also ‘discourage the use of memory’: ‘The spoken word, on the other hand, may have the capacity to endure precisely through its flexibility in relation to arising situations, renewing its relevance on each occasion’ (163). This means an oral method of passing on knowledge takes into consideration the past, present and future of a specific locality in its telling, forever revitalising its message. Rather than functioning in a linear, historical manner of thinking that sees the past and the present connected via the rhetoric of an illusory trajectory of time, Australian Indigenous oral storytelling operates within a place-based continuity (Muecke 8).

In coming to her decision to write *Carpentaria*, the importance of place had a big impact on Wright, who realised her desire to ‘continue the story of this country of my forefathers’ when ‘standing where countless generations of people whose ancestry I share would have left their footprints’ (‘On Writing Carpentaria’ 80). Wright drew upon her knowledge of the oral tradition so she could write from the
perspective of contemporary Indigenous Australians living ‘with the stories of all the times of this country’ (80). Along with her storytelling characters, Wright’s narrative is composed in a way that is reminiscent of the great ancient sagas, which she notes: ‘… defined the laws, customs and values of our culture’ (80).

Chapter One of the novel is an effective example of this style, which coalesces the ancient and modern in its meandering yet purposeful prose. In introducing Normal Phantom, ‘who lived all of his life in the dense Pricklebush scrub on the edge of town’ (Carpentaria 4), Wright moves in a way that is deceptively subtle from one story to the next, from one time to another, representing the place-specific, interconnectedness of the oral storyteller tradition. A description of the time from when the Pricklebush came, ‘when goods and chattels came up by camel train until Abdul and Abdullah, the old Afghan brothers, disappeared along the track called the ‘lifeline’ (4), turns into a full-blown account of the Afghanis and the fate of their camels. Chased out of town, the abandoned camels are whipped, stoned and eventually shot over the claypans. However, this is recounted differently in the town files: ‘In the archival records written with a thick nib by a heavy-handed municipal clerk it is recorded, Camels removed’ (4-5). The manner in which Wright divulges this seemingly unrelated story works to reflect the silencing nature of history, written by those in power, choosing what is to remain recorded and thus what idea of the nation is projected into the future. Wright thus successfully marries an adept use of the English language with this winding style of storytelling that is tied to a specific place, the Pricklebush, using layered stories to add a depth of meaning.

Wright adopts different voices within her narrative style, which is at once omniscient and authorial, whilst also playful, mimicking the vernacular of the Gulf region. The use of italicised text to signify the voices of the ‘Uptowners’ in chorus is a technique Wright applies throughout the novel allowing the portrayal, and subsequent parody, of the type of people the voices represent. In many cases, the italicised expressions send up the non-Indigenous inhabitants of Uptown, who thereby become a faceless, caricatured mob easily swayed by those in positions of power, nurturing an intrinsic fear of difference: ‘Let’s take em and take em, get em off our backs, bloody mongrels are a prime nuisance to everyone anyhow’; ‘Why couldn’t we just? Bulldoze the crap out of those camps, flatten the lot?’ (30, 36). In this way, Wright is able to create serious and comic, solid and flimsy characters; the
depth of knowledge and determination of the main Aboriginal cast of characters contrasts sharply with the shallow and ignorant white Uptowners through the performative mimicry of her storytelling voice.

The time frame this narrative style operates within is one that pushes and pulls at the boundaries of conventional linear time progression that is the tradition of Western literature and, as Mudrooroo Narogin calls it, the ‘scientific natural reality’ that achieved ‘an unacceptable dominance of world-shaping’ (‘Maban reality and shape shifting the past’ par. 2). With the emphasis on place in Aboriginal ontology due to the ancestral beings’ living presence in the land, time does not represent ‘an opening out into an unknown future, but an intensifying onto the present moment down through concentric circles of forces and meanings’ (Muecke 17). Using a similar metaphor, Wright describes the condition of contemporary Indigenous storytelling as ‘a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories’ that ‘is forever moving, entwining all stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several tunes at once’ (‘On Writing Carpentaria’ 84).

This collective and encompassing model can be seen to be representative of an Aboriginal understanding of time as ‘experientially and overwhelmingly focussed, present and shared’ as expressed by Deborah Bird Rose (295). Rose further explains the living presence of time, where: ‘The person flips from being an actor in time to becoming a heartbeat of time’, an ongoing rhythm which ‘pours into and through persons, places and other living things’ (295). Rose views Indigenous thinking about time as heterogeneous, where ‘synchronicities, intervals, patterns and rhythms’ (288) are all understood as forms of time. The creation myths of Aboriginal culture, or the Dreaming, are characterised as being alive and ever-present, residing within the land in a state of rest until awoken and mobilised through ceremony (Rose 294). Through ceremony, Dreaming life – the creative life of the ancient spirits and ancestors – continues to unfold into the world through the patterned and rhythmic actions of human life (Rose 294).

Such an understanding of the world being continually regenerated allows for the belief that all times are present and significant to human life, a belief that is shared by writers from other nations from whom Wright draws inspiration for her narrative. In her exegesis, Wright quotes Mexican writer Fuentes, who, noting the European tradition of linear time constantly progressing forwards, states: ‘In Mexico, on the contrary, there is not and never has been one single time, one central tradition … In
Mexico, all times are living, all pasts are present’ (16). Similarly, the African American writer James Baldwin notes the concept of time as a living, breathing organism that is a central part of human life: ‘… we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do’ (qtd. in Wright 83). Wright’s own approach to Indigenous notions of time is demonstrated in various ways within the novel.

The character of Angel Day, Normal Phantom’s haughty wife, personifies conflicting ideas about time and progress as a consequence of colonisation, her name itself immediately aligning the character with significant Western traditions. Ignoring the warnings of her husband, Angel establishes the Phantom family home next to a swamp because of its fortuitous proximity to the town’s rubbish dump. However, the spot is also the home to a dormant ancestral spirit: ‘From day one, [Normal] knew and always said, “This house makes my bones ache” ’ (13). Angel’s discovery of an old mantelpiece clock from the town magistrate’s office and a chipped, hand-painted statue of the Virgin Mary at the dump is a playful representation of Angel’s desire to be more like white people by embracing the symbols of faith and modernity they stand for: ‘Not only would her family be able to tell the time … but they would also be prosperous …’ (23). A battle ensues over the coveted objects, resulting in the division of Westside and Eastside – a recent demonstration of the ancient wars over land.

Through this scene of grotesque carnage, Wright is revealing the struggle involving cultural tradition and imposed modernity that Aboriginal people of Australia continue to face. The clock and the statue stand for the ideological tools of colonisation practised upon the Indigenous population, in an attempt to stamp out their culture and traditions. What Wright so colourfully illustrates here is the ultimate failure of these tools, as ancient Law and tribal territories hold firm as the grounds for the behaviour of the Pricklebush people. Muecke notes the philosophy of place for Indigenous peoples and its insistence on the ongoing presence of the past in the present and future of a piece of land: ‘Their arrival and its impact are considered as additions to the place; in establishing a relationship they acknowledge the prior existence of a context they now seek to become part of …’ (69). In her wish to live by the symbols of Western culture and refusing to acknowledge tribal territory lines and sacred ancestral beings, Angel Day sparks war over the correct use and respect of land.

Chapter Three presents another example of Wright’s unique conception of temporality in its cyclical structure. It begins in a manner that recalls Western
fairytale convention, setting the story within an indeterminate past, then undermining it: ‘Once upon a time, not even so long ago’ (43). The chapter progresses in a manner reflecting Muecke’s portrayal of an Aboriginal understanding of time, as the movement of action is rather concentric, each event or sub-story shares the same axis – the character of Elias Smith – rotating down and around this central figure to add various layers of meaning. After depicting Elias lost at sea battling the monstrous waves to reclaim his memory, Wright recounts the occurrences surrounding his appearance on the shores of Desperance, along with a succession of stories about the town and some of its notable inhabitants, in a seemingly unending fashion. An account of the aftermath of the storm gives way to a report about the dispute between the Westside and Eastside Pricklebush mobs, which precedes a mocking appraisal of the town and its people’s insistence on having ‘originated from nowhere’ (57), and so on. Elias’s slow passage onto the shore represents a synchronicity over linearity or causality, revealing much about the Uptowners and their simultaneous desire for legendary tales to represent their past, and their fear of the unfamiliar:

Uptown people said all people were born without lands and came to the new world of Desperance carrying no baggage. When you think of all this philosophy, it was easy to see how momentum was building up amongst the wet throng on the beach watching Elias Smith, a vision splendid, walking in from the sea … (61-62)

Through the layered, concentric stories Wright constructs within this chapter therefore, force and meaning is loaded into the event of Elias’s coming and subsequent leaving from Desperance. Each of the synchronised events combine to establish the significance of incidents to come: ‘It was the beginning of the story of the day the spirits of the seas and storms mixed their business, and sent Elias from out of oblivion into Desperance with good reason’ (54).

Through such a unique narrative style, Wright presents the subject matter of her novel, with its concern for past and present issues of Aboriginal Australia bound up in a land alive with supernatural ancestral beings, and its people to whom this perception is their reality. According to Rose, the Aboriginal understanding of country can be conceptualised as ‘a nourishing terrain’, one that ‘gives and receives life’, encompassing a dynamic relationship with all forms of life (7). In this way, country is
a ‘living entity’ consisting of a profusion of parts, including ‘people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air’ (Rose 7-8). Normal Phantom, and his affinity to the waters of the Gulf country, reveals his sense of country is tied, rather, to the sea. Rose explains: ‘The law of the land is also the law of the sea, and sea, like land, is country that is known, named, sung, danced, painted, loved, harvested and cared for’ (8). Along with his profound knowledge of the movements of the waters, Norm’s connection to sea-country and its law is manifested through his peculiar hobby of preserving and bejewelling dead fish in his buzzing fishroom of creation, which, like the Phantom house, becomes home to ‘a powerful spirit with grander goals’ (Carpentaria 206).

Like Saleem’s chutnification of history in Midnight’s Children, Norm’s fish preservation also functions as a supernatural metaphor for the construction of meaning and a preoccupation with form. Having turned his back on the sea to be with his family, Norm becomes consumed by the precise brushwork of his fish enhancement and is thus unaware as the room’s spirit begins to reap the stories and secrets of its inhabitants, dead or alive: ‘As the room matured, Norm saw it was bending inwards, steeped with the weight of holding one miraculous discovery after another’ (207). Demonstrating Rose’s notion of a multiplicity of elements making up the living entity of country, the spirit of Norm’s fishroom finds expression through a choir of crickets who ultimately reveal the secret presence of the body of Elias, hidden there by Will, for his father to take care of:

Another requiem was being chanted when Norm discovered the body of Elias in the fishroom. In fact, it was the intensity and loudness of the sounds made by the crickets that had brought Norm running through the house … (213).

Elias and Norm become good friends through their mutual love and totemic relationship with the sea. Adhering to his ancestral law, Norm decides to return the body of his friend to the groper place, ‘the graveyard of the men of the sea’ (245), where his soul would be free to take its last spiritual journey, and reclaim his own identity with the groper Dreaming. It is a fact of Aboriginal ‘Earthborn Law’ as Rose names it, that all creatures are born of the earth and that this earth is female: ‘In her moist and pliable state she gave birth to all the original creative beings’ (‘Dingo makes
us human’ 42). It is thus essential for the continuation of the human spirit’s journey to be returned to its particular place of origin ‘because life emerges from it and goes back into it’ (Muecke 172). The supernatural elements inherent in these scenes of the fishroom and Norm, surrounded by the giant gropers, guiding him to the correct location, are examples of a ‘maban reality’ at work within the novel. These places, representations of country and the significance it carries within Aboriginal philosophy and spirituality, do not follow the principles of time and space as set out by a natural scientific or European reality and thus fulfil the terms of a maban reality as laid down by Narogin: ‘An Aboriginal writer simply presents a world which is different from what natural scientific reality once presented as the only reality. This world may be familiar as well as strange and allows for the opening of the doors of perception through language and imagination’ (‘Maban reality …’ par. 19). Norm’s groper Dreaming and his detailed knowledge of the sea thus allow him to make this epic journey to bury his friend.

The character of Will Phantom presents another example of the maban underlying Wright’s prose. Will is a young, idealistic character who recklessly strives for what he believes in, sabotaging on various occasions the internationally-owned ‘Gurfurrit’ mine that is built on the sacred ground of his ancestors, and flouts his family’s centuries-old war with the people of Eastside in his relationship with Joseph Midnight’s grand-daughter, Hope. Both Fishman and Midnight paint Will as an exceptional young man, with a strong connection to his heritage in his blood: ‘[Mozzie] lay awake, thinking of Will Phantom, who had many responsibilities for one so young’ (150); ‘Our Will, he moves lightly through the bush to the beat of the muddied and cracked dancing feet of a million ancestors’ (161). Not only does his name signify determination for change, his actions ignite the chain of events leading ultimately to the novel’s apocalyptic end of destruction and rebirth.

Will can thus be seen as the hero-type character of mainstream fiction, or alternatively, the trickster, a figure of Indigenous Australian storytelling and an ancient archetype of many aboriginal mythologies. In its earliest form, the trickster was found in North American Indian storytelling and is, ‘at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself … he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control’ (Radin ix). Will himself reflects on his irrational behaviour, not knowing why he is unlike his family: ‘Why did he not cart the ancestral, hard-faced warrior demons
around on his back as easily as others in his family were prepared to do for land?’ (203). Narogin notes the central place this type of character plays in Aboriginal literature, and also their ability to transform: ‘from tricksters to warriors, from birds to animals … in a world where those old fixities of European natural reality such as conformity to character and to species do not exist’ (par. 35). This shape-shifting view of reality represents the Indigenous belief in the metamorphosing power of the ancestral spirits: ‘The Ancestor moves in order to transform into something else’ (Muecke 16).

Will Phantom evolves from the trickster to the warrior when he discovers the murdered body of Elias, and his girlfriend and son are pursued by the mining corporation. It is only through a deep understanding of country that Will is able to elude the mining employees as they search for him in their helicopter and four-wheel drives in the uncompromising landscape of bush and lagoon, pitting Indigenous land-based knowledge against Western technology:

The machine hovered close above him. His mind running, calculating distances … He ran as a wild zigzagging animal in full alert to danger, knowing it was being hunted down, became like rubber … too hard to catch … again the headlights pass over him standing in the bush, but he remains invisible. Will Phantom is mud. (174, 182)

Norm and Will Phantom’s strong bond to land and sea-country, enabling them to perceive their ancestral spirits, challenges readers to consider an alternative knowledge tradition and reality. Whilst both Wright’s mode of narration, with its roots in oral tradition and its manipulation of conventional narrative time, and mythical content tied to the alternative worldview of Aboriginal culture, seem to follow the magical realism of García Márquez, Rushdie and others, these elements also pay homage to her own people’s storytelling culture and way-of-life. This confronts non-Indigenous readers with a new way of perceiving the world and thus indicates that perhaps a ‘maban reality’ is instead at work in her writing.
As we have seen, Rushdie also utilises an oral story-telling style, along with a playfulness and experimentation with the English language in *Midnight’s Children*. However his purposes for such features vary significantly from those of Wright in *Carpentaria*. Saleem’s narration, whilst also layered and digressive, suits Rushdie’s aim in portraying memory and the processes of selection and filtration in constructing identity and meaning. Rushdie’s peculiar use of language and expression similarly dislocates the dominant forms of English literature, creating various speech patterns and voices for his numerous characters. Yet this is executed so as to reflect the heterogeneity of India, not favouring any one perspective. Wright’s use of such techniques, rather, works towards privileging the Aboriginal voice, knowledge-system and conception of reality over the prevailing paradigms of Western language traditions. Despite the similar existence of characters with preternatural abilities, their presence also reflects these distinct motives, with the additional inclusion of ancestral spirits and other-worldly phantoms in Wright’s text highlighting this divergence in that they communicate an Indigenous reality: one that Wright wishes to represent as being more real for Aboriginal Australia, than the reality of the colonisers.

Defining his concept of ‘maban reality’, Narogin explains how the colonialisit project in Australia not only occupied the land and its people, but just as devastatingly, enforced a ‘singular European Reality based on natural sciences over various Indigenous realities’ (‘Maban reality …’ par. 2). This had the effect of displacing what Narogin names the ‘shaman or maban’ which sees the ‘magic implicit in the world’, debasing the Aboriginal worldview to the level of primitive, pagan superstition and aligning this reality with an ‘un-truth’ (par. 2). Such a conquest of ways of viewing the world meant that when Aboriginal voices began to speak for the Indigenous population, the dominant language along with its natural scientific reality, had to be appropriated in order to be heard at all (par. 4-5). Michele Grossman reiterates this claim in a reference to Gayatri Spivak’s notion of ‘epistemic violence’, explaining it as ‘an invasive order of knowledge, classification and value’ that infringes upon Aboriginal consciousness, ‘through suppressing and marginalizing its previous analphabête systems of meaning and by re-shaping the ways in which Aboriginal peoples come to know and relate to themselves …’ (par.
2). Addressing this invasive order of knowledge, Narogin sets out the defining characteristics for a maban reality in Indigenous literature, which he explicitly notes as being ‘akin to Magic Realism’ (emphasis added): ‘it is the using of our traditional storytelling content and structures in an effort to gain a wider readership’, to ‘pass over deeper knowledge of Aboriginal reality in contemporary Australia’ (par. 15). More specifically, Narogin delineates this mode as being shaped by ‘a firm grounding in the reality of the earth, or country, together with an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality’. A trickster tale structure underlines its form, with a departure from natural scientific reality into the world of the Dreaming – the field of creative endeavour (par. 16,18).

While scholars of magical realism consider as one of its defining features its ability to ‘represent both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth’ (Warnes 3), enabling the coexistence of competing ontologies within a single narrative (Barker 11), a maban reality, as argued by Narogin, is not so much about presenting a world in which competing versions of reality co-exist as it is ‘about describing a world which is as existent and as real as that constructed by European thought’ (emphasis added, par. 20). Narogin holds the world presented in a maban reality is ‘counter to the dominant natural reality of the invaders’ and therefore, unlike magical realism, allows this alternative worldview a greater claim to truth as it seeks to undermine the political construction of History, which Narogin claims ‘denied the native’ (par. 24-25).

This notion of maban reality can be likened to Warnes’s ‘faith-based’ magical realism, in which the supernatural presence operates as a metonym for an alternative, non-Western mode of conceiving reality (Warnes 14). While Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is an example of Warnes’s ‘irreverent’ strand of magical realism, *Carpentaria* is more aligned with this idea of a faith-based magical realism; however Narogin’s claim that a maban reality counters the prevailing worldview of the colonisers can be seen to offer a more accurate description of what is at work within Wright’s text. Rushdie’s migrant experience, creating a fractured sense of identity and belonging, influenced his more metaphoric use of magical realism to represent the multitudinous India of his memories. Wright’s background and identity, conversely, is firmly grounded in the Gulf country of her ancestors; thus her desire to portray this particular cultural perspective seeks to privilege one view of reality over another.
Returning to Wright’s peculiar manipulation of narrative time, an example of this discord between concepts of magical realism and maban reality is apparent. An all-encompassing view and presence of history within narrative has become a key feature of magical realism. Stephen Slemon holds as one of three qualities of a postcolonial magical realist work: ‘The foreshortening of history so that the time scheme of the novel metaphorically contains the long process of colonisation and its aftermath’ (12). Similarly, Durix notes the ‘scope of these books largely transcends the individual fate of a few characters in order to constitute an imaginary re-telling of a whole nation through several decades’ (116). Wright’s prose can be seen to be following this movement; however in highlighting the connections between the stories of Aboriginal people, including her own grandmother’s stories and those García Márquez was told by his grandmother ‘with a deadpan look on her face’, Wright denounces labelling this storytelling as magical: ‘Such stories could be called supernatural and fantastic, but I do not think of them in this way’ (Emphasis added, 88). Instead, Wright prefers to see such stories as the expression of ‘spiritual beliefs as much as the beliefs of the everyday’ (88-89). These beliefs form a system of principles for the right and wrong way to live, which therefore governs the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people. Wright proclaims the borrowing of García Márquez’s storytelling technique, along with her own grandmother’s, the means through which she can effectively portray these stories (89).

Narogin notes the writer of maban reality must confront the fact that many readers will be unfamiliar with this alternate reality and therefore ask how their writing will be able to convey a transferral into an Indigenous awareness of the Dreaming (par. 26). Wright is thus contending with what Grossman refers to as a ‘dense web of representations … originating in the colonial period and persisting into the present’ (par. 4) and is able to do so through her combination of the language and traditions of the dominant culture with her and her peoples’ own voices. Narogin also posits the difficulty in amalgamating the two styles of English and Aboriginal oral narratives and therefore speculates this as the role of the creative writer: ‘especially the creative writer of Indigenality if he or she is to escape the dominance of standard English and produce a style more in keeping with the spoken word’ (141).

In the construction of her own novel’s ‘Indigenality’ or maban reality, Wright indeed considered how best to approach this challenging task, choosing not to draw on historical incident. Wright found an answer in a recognition of her peoples’ spiritual
ancestors and their enduring existence in place: ‘the story to be told … is sung just as strongly from those of our ancestors who wrote our stories on the walls of caves and on the surface of weathered rock’. (90) Listening to the voices of her ancestors in the country of her origin, Wright therefore constructs a novel that portrays an Aboriginal perception of reality, one that is acutely aware of the powerful presence of ancestral beings and forces, shaping the past, present and future of this country.

Unlike the genre of magical realism, which sees ‘two distinct, even oppositional, representational codes at work in a text’ (Ravenscroft 196), Carpentaria presents a maban reality that insists on the existence of the Dreaming, or mythological meanings, within an everyday, mundane sense of the real (Devlin-Glass 393). This maban reality envisages a hopeful future out of a traumatic past. The Aboriginal characters’ harmony with nature, their ancestors and their culture, is how they are able to achieve heroic deeds. The maban holds greater claim to truth in the novel – Indigenous beliefs and knowledge of the land, water and weather cycles surpass the closed, scientific knowledge of the Uptowners and the mining corporation – and therefore this novel does not present an endless mingling between reality and fantasy, but rather an alternative way of seeing the world which Wright would have readers believe is a distinctively Aboriginal experience of reality.

Works Cited:


Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper, my study asked what it meant for the two novels, *Midnight’s Children* and *Carpentaria*, to be labelled ‘magical realism’. From an investigation of this complex concept and subject of literary discourse, it is clear that while it conveniently encapsulates the workings of Rushdie’s novel, it limits a comprehensive understanding of Wright’s text. Coming as it did to define a growing body of literature that deals with the realms of realism and fantasy or folktale in a way that allows neither the final say in representing the truth, magical realism offers an effective lens through which to view the multiple realities created in *Midnight’s Children*, as each reality holds an equal claim in portraying Rushdie’s vision of a fractured and diverse India. It does not, on the other hand, denote the expression of a distinctive, subaltern perspective that aspires to dislocate the dominant worldview of an imperialist legacy in favour of an Indigenous conception of reality in *Carpentaria*.

While we have seen that there are various types of magical realism focussing on different interpretations of the magic inherent in the ontology of the texts, such as Warnes’s faith-based and irreverent strands of magical realism, the supernatural elements of Wright’s novel present another purpose in the telling of her story altogether. The world constructed in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is characterised by mythological, preternatural features which metaphorically stand for the many and diverse possibilities born alongside India as an independent nation, and also for Rushdie’s own partial and evocative memories of India; the mundane remains that ‘acquired numinous qualities’ in their symbolic representations of his homeland (Rushdie 12). The transformative, shape-shifting traits of Wright’s Gulf country, and the Indigenous characters able to perceive such elements, constitute a literary communication of ‘what is believed, experienced and imagined in the contemporary world of Indigenous people in the Gulf of Carpentaria’ (Wright 85).

A close analysis of each text, their formal characteristics and subject matter, provides the means through which to interpret the treatment and significance of the magical and the real. The unreliable narration of Saleem Sinai, his self-reflexive oral style and manipulation of the English language, present the story of *Midnight’s Children* and its various layers of meaning. The personal, genealogical history of
Saleem and his family is intertwined with an account of the political moments and events surrounding India’s independence along with many cultural, religious and mythological references, so as to metaphorically link Saleem with the nation and its people. Magical occurrences, supernatural powers and bodily transformations appear throughout the narrative in an unremarkable and matter-of-fact fashion, acting as further metaphors and allegories for the processes of memory and meaning-making Rushdie sought to highlight. These features, similar to those used in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, led Rushdie’s novel to become another key work of magical realist discourse, affecting the development of definitions and characteristics of the genre in critical studies over the years.

In turn, more recent novels displaying such features are likened to these seminal works and thus labelled as examples of magical realism. As Chapter Three revealed, Wright’s *Carpentaria* also employs a distinctive authorial voice that takes Aboriginal oral storytelling as its inspiration, and plays with conventional narrative time and structure to create a ‘spinning multi-stranded helix’ of concentric stories reflecting Indigenous conceptions of time and identity (Wright 84). The presence of ancestral spirits in country and the Aboriginal characters who possess this knowledge and perception could be perceived as elements of magical realism. However, after conducting this close evaluation of the novel’s form, content and context, the appropriateness of a maban reality, one that privileges this alternative reality over the dominant worldview of a Western perspective and tradition, is evident.

From such an example, this study wishes to advocate a case-by-case approach in the reading and designating of texts as magical realism. Because of the term’s ability to describe a wide range of fiction crossing cultural boundaries and combining realism and fantasy in such a way that the resulting genre cannot be regarded as fantasy, science fiction, fairy tale, the baroque or any other category magical realism touches upon (Warnes 3), the importance of paying attention to the specifics of text, context and authorial purpose is paramount if the term is to serve as a useful tool in literary exegesis. While it is helpful in understanding Rushdie’s heterogeneous vision of India – one that devalues ‘official’ versions of history, valuing the voice of its diverse people and its fragmented reality – it is insufficient in interpreting Wright’s aims and purposes. *Carpentaria* speaks of hope and understanding for Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Australians in its rejection of a colonialist view of Indigenous culture and belief and its advocating of a reality originating in the land itself, perceived by a
people whose knowledge is just as valuable and relevant as Western ways of seeing and being in the world. The concept of a maban reality seeks to displace one truth with another and this is what Wright’s novel strives for. As noted by Aboriginal scholar Marcia Langton: ‘The majority of Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists’ (qtd. in Dodson 28). Wright’s distinctive story is one that sings of Aboriginality, the words sung through her, from the country itself.

Works Cited:


Complete Bibliography


