

Reading YA: Magic Realism Reading List

Yesterday, I posted about Magic Realism and promised a reading list of novels. It's important to remember, though, that in YA, Magic Realism is snuggled right up against the fantasy border--meaning some of the books on this list may be a bit less realistic than the adult style (Paul Coelho, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende). A few, such as Terri Windling's *The Wood Wife* and Alice Hoffman's *The River King*, are adult novels that may pique the interest of mature YA readers.

**mature content

1. CITY OF THE BEASTS, Isabel Allende

Combine a magical world, mystical shamanic adventure, and feisty and eccentric characters with a fast-paced eco-thriller and you have Allende's first book for young adults. Set in the lush and treacherous Amazonian rain forest, this is the story of 15-year-old Alexander Cold and 12-year-old Nadia Santos. While his mother is in Texas for chemotherapy treatment, Alex is spending the summer with his emotionally distant grandmother, who has been hired to find and write an article on the "Beast" that has been terrorizing the jungle. Partially funded by a suspicious businessman, the party includes a self-centered professor, several photographers, a government doctor and soldiers, a few native Indians, and a guide, Cesar Santos, who brings along his daughter. Alex and Nadia become good friends, and together discover their own inner strengths through visions and shamanic journeys with the local tribe. The plot is as thick as its jungle setting. There are dangers such as the terrifying humanoid Beast that kills with huge claws, anacondas, natives with poison dart arrows, and an untrustworthy member of the expedition. The story is a struggle between good and evil, filled with surprises and adventure. Put this title on your "If You Liked Harry Potter" lists, and Allende may just find new fans. Though this is a rather hefty book, it is a real page-turner with hope for more, as Allende leaves readers with, "Until we meet again."--Angela J. Reynolds, Washington County Cooperative Library Services, Hillsboro, OR for School Library Journal

2. CORALINE, Neil Gaiman

Coraline's often wondered what's behind the locked door in the drawing room. It reveals only a brick wall when she finally opens it, but when she tries again later, a passageway mysteriously appears. Coraline is surprised to find a flat decorated exactly like her own, but strangely different. And when she finds her "other" parents in this alternate world, they are much more

interesting despite their creepy black button eyes. When they make it clear, however, that they want to make her theirs forever, Coraline begins a nightmarish game to rescue her real parents and three children imprisoned in a mirror. With only a bored-through stone and an aloof cat to help, Coraline confronts this harrowing task of escaping these monstrous creatures.--Barnes & Noble

3. HOLES, Louis Sachar

"If you take a bad boy and make him dig a hole every day in the hot sun, it will turn him into a good boy." Such is the reigning philosophy at Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detention facility where there is no lake, and there are no happy campers. In place of what used to be "the largest lake in Texas" is now a dry, flat, sunburned wasteland, pocked with countless identical holes dug by boys improving their character. Stanley Yelnats, of palindromic name and ill-fated pedigree, has landed at Camp Green Lake because it seemed a better option than jail. No matter that his conviction was all a case of mistaken identity, the Yelnats family has become accustomed to a long history of bad luck, thanks to their "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather!" Despite his innocence, Stanley is quickly enmeshed in the Camp Green Lake routine: rising before dawn to dig a hole five feet deep and five feet in diameter; learning how to get along with the [Lord of the Flies](#)-styled pack of boys in Group D; and fearing the warden, who paints her fingernails with rattlesnake venom. But when Stanley realizes that the boys may not just be digging to build character....--Brangien Davis for Amazon

4. BECAUSE OF WINN-DIXIE, Kate DiCamillo

Because of Winn-Dixie, a big, ugly, happy dog, 10-year-old Opal learns 10 things about her long-gone mother from her preacher father. Because of Winn-Dixie, Opal makes new friends among the somewhat unusual residents of her new hometown, Naomi, Florida. Because of Winn-Dixie, Opal begins to find her place in the world and let go of some of the sadness left by her mother's abandonment seven years earlier. With her newly adopted, goofy pooch at her side, Opal explores her bittersweet world and learns to listen to other people's lives. This warm and winning book hosts an unforgettable cast of characters, including a librarian who fought off a bear with a copy of War and Peace, an ex-con pet-store clerk who plays sweet music to his animal charges, and the neighborhood "witch," a nearly blind woman who sees with her heart. Part Frankie ([The Member of the Wedding](#)), part Scout ([To Kill a Mockingbird](#)), Opal brings her own unique and wonderful voice to a story of friendship, loneliness, and acceptance. Opal's

down-home charm and dead-on honesty will earn her friends and fans far beyond the confines of Naomi, Florida. (Ages 9 and older) --Emilie Coulter for Amazon

5. THE BOOK THIEF, Marcus Zusak **

Zusak has created a work that deserves the attention of sophisticated teen and adult readers. Death himself narrates the World War II-era story of Liesel Meminger from the time she is taken, at age nine, to live in Molching, Germany, with a foster family in a working-class neighborhood of tough kids, acid-tongued mothers, and loving fathers who earn their living by the work of their hands. The child arrives having just stolen her first book—although she has not yet learned how to read—and her foster father uses it, *The Gravediggers Handbook*, to lull her to sleep when she's roused by regular nightmares about her younger brother's death. Across the ensuing years of the late 1930s and into the 1940s, Liesel collects more stolen books as well as a peculiar set of friends: the boy Rudy, the Jewish refugee Max, the mayor's reclusive wife (who has a whole library from which she allows Liesel to steal), and especially her foster parents. Zusak not only creates a mesmerizing and original story but also writes with poetic syntax, causing readers to deliberate over phrases and lines, even as the action impels them forward. Death is not a sentimental storyteller, but he does attend to an array of satisfying details, giving Liesel's story all the nuances of chance, folly, and fulfilled expectation that it deserves. An extraordinary narrative.—Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley Public Library, CA for School Library Journal

6. THE GOOD FAIRIES OF NEW YORK, Martin Millar

British author Millar offers fiercely funny (and often inebriated) Scottish fairies, a poignant love story as well as insights into the gravity of Crohn's disease, cultural conflicts and the plight of the homeless in this fey urban fantasy. Due to the machinations of the obnoxious Tala, Cornwall's fairy king, only a few humans can see the 18-inch-tall fairies who alight in Manhattan: Magenta, a homeless woman who thinks she's the ancient Greek general Xenophon; Dinnie, an overweight slacker; and Kerry, a poor artist/musician who hopes her Ancient Celtic Flower Alphabet will win a local arts prize. Fairies Heather MacKintosh and Morag MacPherson scheme to put Dinnie and Kerry together, rescue fairy artifacts and prove that in love or war, music is essential.

7. DINGO, Charles De Lint

De Lint ingeniously incorporates Aboriginal mythology into an intriguing story. Miguel, 17, is minding his dad's funky comics and record store in a small resort community when a girl dashes in with her dog to escape the town bully. Miguel feels an immediate connection to her, but there

is something strange about her dog. Gradually, he discovers that Lainey is a shape-changer, a magical creature from Australia's Aboriginal past, and the dog—really a dingo—is actually her twin sister. The girls are hiding from their father, who wants to sacrifice Lainey to the powerful Aboriginal spirit Warrigal, the original clan leader, who is trapped in a tree. Suddenly Miguel is catapulted into a rain forest fantasy world complete with a talking cautionary turkey, haunted ancestral bones, and mysterious spirits. Fantasy lovers will enjoy this tale of an initially clueless protagonist thrust into a dangerous situation where he's expected to become an instant hero. A somewhat unnecessary subplot involves the town bully, who actually has a heart of gold and a tender artistic side, and is drawn into the adventure when he falls for Lainey's twin. Still, the juxtaposition of contemporary teen life with fantasy is well done. Readers might be interested enough to investigate more about the complicated Aboriginal Dreamtime of Australia and its early clan spirits and creation myths.—Quinby Frank, Green Acres School, Rockville, MD for School Library Journal

8. THE RIVER KING, Alice Hoffman**

Set in and around an exclusive private school in fictional Haddan, Mass., bestselling author Hoffman's (*Practical Magic*; *Here on Earth*) latest novel flows as swiftly and limpidly as the Haddan River, the town's mystical waterway. As one expects in a Hoffman novel, strange things have always happened in HaddanDa combination of Mother Nature gone awry and human nature following suit. In 1858, the year the school was completed, a devastating flood almost destroyed it and the town. The esteemed headmaster, Dr. Howe, married a pretty local girl who hung herself from the rafters "one mild evening in March." Local superstitions prove true more often than not, and twice in recent history a black, algae-laden rain has covered people and buildings with a dark sludge. An uneasy peace has always existed between the locals and the Haddan School, based on the latter's financial benefit to the community and the local authorities' willingness to look the other way when necessary to maintain the school's reputation. But when student August Pierce is found drowned in the Haddan River, detective Abel Grey is flooded with memories of his own teenage brother's suicide, and refuses to look away. Supporting characters are richly textured: new photography instructor Betsy Chase feels unsafe in Haddan, yet somehow finds herself engaged to a mysterious young history professor Eric Herman; Carlin Leander, a poor, strikingly beautiful young girl, comes to Haddan to recreate herself and escape her neglectful mother, and becomes misfit August's only friend while dating the most popular boy on campus; Helen Davis, chair of the history department, is haunted by a long-ago affair she had with Dr. Howe, which she believes had something to do with his young wife's suicide. As

ever, Hoffman mixes myth, magic and reality, addressing issues of town and gown, enchanting her readers with a many-layered morality tale and proving herself once again an inventive author with a distinctive touch.--PW

9. THE WOOD WIFE, Terri Windling **

When writer Maggie Black learns that her friend and mentor, poet Davis Cooper, has died and left her his house in the arid hills outside Tucson, Ariz., she travels there intending to write his biography and to investigate the mysterious circumstances of his death. Every detail she uncovers about Cooper's past, however, only seems to raise more questions. When Maggie comes home one evening to find that the house has been ransacked, it becomes clear that she's not the only one looking for answers. To solve the puzzle of Cooper's life and death, Maggie will have to outwit the Trickster and the other powerful quasi-human creatures that roam the desert hills and feed on creative energy. Although at times Windling's humans come off as too sensitive and artistic, her Native American spirits comprise an intriguing blend of human folklore and alien emotion. Her debut novel is richly imaginative, a captivating mix of traditional fantasy and magical realism.--PW

10. FIREBIRDS RISING, an anthology edited by Sharyn November

Imagine that Archeoptrix, the prehistoric link between birds and dinosaurs, had evolved into the dominant life-form on a planet. In Carol Emshwiller's *Quill*, representatives of that planet have secretly crashed on Earth and begun interbreeding with humans. In Kelly Link's *The Wizards of Perfil*, an orphan boy and his caustic cousin, both dirt poor and gifted with unusual psychic powers, are bought by a strange man to serve the awesome and forbidding wizards of Perfil, only to learn after difficult trials and life-changing tragedies that they are the wizards. In Kara Dalkey's near-future *Hives*, cell phones can beam and receive messages without external sound. The phones are highly addictive and used by high school girls to connect ultra-exclusive cliques. A former-addict-turned-girl-detective gets involved when the rejects of one such hive begin committing suicide one after another. These are just 3 of the 16 stories in this collection. The selections range in length from 9 pages (Francesca Lia Block's chilling *Blood Roses*, in which two sisters confront a serial killer) to 50 pages. Fantasy stories outnumber sci-fi two to one, and the great majority of the tales feature female protagonists. Even those with male protagonists deal with themes of friendship, family, love, and loss more than action and adventure. Compelling stories for thoughtful readers.-Susan L. Rogers, Chestnut Hill Academy, PA for School Library Journal

11. THE CITY AND THE CITY, China Mieville

The city is Beszel, a rundown metropolis on the eastern edge of Europe. The other city is Ul Qoma, a modern Eastern European boomtown, despite being a bit of an international pariah. What the two cities share, and what they don't, is the deliciously evocative conundrum at the heart of China Mieville's *The City & The City*. Mieville is well known as a modern fantasist (and urbanist), but from book to book he's tried on different genres, and here he's fully hard-boiled, stripping down to a seen-it-all detective's voice that's wonderfully appropriate for this story of seen and unseen. His detective is Inspector Tyador Borlu, a cop in Beszel whose investigation of the murder of a young foreign woman takes him back and forth across the highly policed border to Ul Qoma to uncover a crime that threatens the delicate balance between the cities and, perhaps more so, Borlu's own dissolving sense of identity. In his tale of two cities, Mieville creates a world both fantastic and unsettlingly familiar, whose mysteries don't end with the solution of a murder. --Tom Nissley, for Amazon