

## 5.15 When History Meets Magic

### Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Tongva tribes as the first peoples of the land on which this work was developed and is presented.

[upbeat, twinkly piano music fades in]

### Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a fortnightly podcast about stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music fades out]

I don't know about you, but I love it when books blend genres. I love fantasy with a side of horror, I love sci-fi with a side of romance, I love mystery with a side of psychology. And I've recently read a lot of books that blend historical fiction with fantasy. If you haven't been here before, hello, my name is Angourie and I'm an actor and podcaster, and I created The Community Library almost three years ago as a place to talk about my love of books and stories. I recently read and loved a book called *Ring Shout* by P. Djèlí Clark. This is a fantasy horror historical novella, and it got me thinking about how fantasy is used to tell the stories of our history. Magic and fantasy have deep roots in historical storytelling. Think of Greek mythology, the ancient Egyptians, the foundations of Christianity, the origins of fairy tales. Even some historical events are interwoven with the fantastical: The Trojan War is a great example of that. Roman historians believed such a war did actually take place, though the earliest recounts of the war feature Gods and Goddesses as key players, and most of the principle heroes claim to be half-divine themselves. Historians today struggle to untangle the fantastical from the fact to determine what happened during the war – if it even happened at all, or even if Troy existed. But the blending of historical events and fantasy is something that continues to this day; as a literary device and subgenre in fiction. So I've compiled a list of a few of my favourite books that blend fantasy with reality in all sorts of different ways. I'm going to pitch these books to you, and talk about how they use fantasy as in the plot, and also why I loved them so much. To begin with *Ring Shout*:

*Ring Shout* is described as “a dark fantasy historical novella that gives a supernatural twist to the Ku Klux Klan's reign of terror.” Set in Macon, Georgia, in the early 1920s, the story follows Maryse Boudreaux, a Ku Klux hunter. So in this world, Ku Kluxes aren't just people who are figuratively described as monsters, they are literal monsters with big teeth and claws and a thirst for blood. This book reframes actual history with fantastical elements to make a point: the supernatural horror elements play off the real life horror of the KKK and their hate crimes. And the incorporation of fantasy is used to highlight themes of danger, hatred, vengeance, and strength. The issues that *Ring Shout* discusses are extremely relevant to today. Though it's an historical fantasy, it references the black lives matter movement, and explores how divisive attitudes are proliferated by fear. The thing I love about the fantasy genre is how it asks the reader to suspend disbelief. The reader is able to accept what is unbelievable to them – such as magic and monsters, but it can also ask the

reader to accept deeper, real-world themes that perhaps challenge the reader's prejudices because it's framed in this fantasy world. Fantasy operates as a metaphor in *Ring Shout*: Clark presents the reader with a literal monsters modelled on real-life metaphorical ones, and discusses the monsters' genesis, lore and belief-system in a way that mirrors an exploration of real world issues. But what I think is also so striking about *Ring Shout* are the elements that are not fantasy. Not all Klan members are Ku Klux monsters, some are just regular people; but they are no less monstrous. Clark carefully chooses moments to show violence enacted by human Klan members; driving home the fact that though the novel has a fantastical twist, the horrific effects of the Klan are part of our real-world history.

Another book which explores some similar themes is *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler, though it blends history and fantasy in a very different way. You might remember this book from when I spoke about it last episode, but in case you missed it: *Kindred* is about a woman named Dana living in 1976 who is suddenly thrust back in time to the antebellum south in the early 1800s. She quickly realises the reason she's been sent back: to save her white ancestor from dying, so he can continue the line that eventually leads to her. So, going back and forth in time, Dana must disguise herself as enslaved person, and navigate life working for her white ancestors. *Kindred* is barely a fantasy – in fact, it's probably most often categorised as sci-fi, but it's hardly that, either. It's a character-driven drama with a small fantasy element to enable the premise. So in this book, fantasy is not a metaphor, but simply the catalyst for the plot. What I like about how fantasy is employed in this novel is that it takes the form of a simple question: "What if a 20<sup>th</sup>-century black woman living in California was sent back in time to the antebellum south?" The drama stems from the conflict between Dana's modern sensibilities, and the environment of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century; and though this is an impossible scenario, the conversations and conflicts she has with the other characters are completely grounded in reality. Dana is not overly concerned about why she was sent back in time, or how to stop it from happening, but rather, how to simply survive. And so the book is much more focussed on contrasting and comparing the world of 1976 and the world of 1815. This is what I loved about the way fantasy was used in this book; it was so subtle and seemingly unimportant, and yet without it, the story couldn't have been told.

*The Deep* by Rivers Solomon is another story that can't be told without fantasy elements. The book is based on this historical fact: during the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved African women were often thrown overboard the ship if they were found to be pregnant. Using this history as a starting point, *The Deep* uses fantasy to explore these voices that were never heard. Solomon tells the story of the enslaved women's water-breathing descendants who have built an underwater society. So if *Kindred* uses fantasy as a catalyst to explore reality, *The Deep* uses reality as a catalyst to explore fantasy. If that makes sense. There is fantastical worldbuilding and magical lore, but the magic system these underwater creatures abide by can also be read as a metaphor. The protagonist is Yetu the historian; tasked to remember the entire traumatic history of their kind, while everyone else is allowed to forget. And in the world of *The Deep*, this remembering is a magical ritual that is passed from historian to historian, but it references the reality of intergenerational trauma, and how our past, no matter how far back it goes, deeply affects the people and events of the present. *The Deep* is much more fantasy than it is historical fantasy, but that's because it must construct an entirely new world to fill a missing gap in history.

It's no coincidence that the three books I've mentioned here have been written by and are about people of colour. People of colour have systematically been excluded from the western literature canon; and historical fiction and fiction throughout history has been dominated by white authors and their stories. So these authors and books I've highlighted use fantasy in different ways to reclaim and reframe history; often to explore the voices of those who were not given the opportunity to tell their stories at the time that they were living. But this collision of fantasy and history doesn't always reframe global historical events – often authors explore personal histories, too.

*Black Girl Unlimited* by Echo Brown is a book I would place in the autofiction genre; meaning it's a fictionalised account of the author's adolescence. The story follows Echo, a young teen from the East Side, as she transfers to a rich school on the West Side and struggles to reconcile the two worlds. In this story, magic is used as a metaphor to explore topics that are ordinarily very difficult to talk about; such as depression, sexual assault and drug abuse. And Brown finds magical ways to represent and talk about these issues so that they are more accessible to the reader, but no less impactful. Depression is described as a black-grey shroud that covers a person's face, and Echo can see these shrouds because she's a witch, and she uses her magical powers to recognise and ease the pain in others, as well as in herself. The magical imagery is also helpful in visually representing pain that one cannot usually see. *Black Girl Unlimited* was such an interesting and cleverly written book in the way it explored narrative and form through bringing together memoir and magic.

And then there are some books that tell a personal history which is simply infused with magic, not necessarily as a metaphor, but the characters and environment just are magical. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez is a classic. This book is a favourite here at The Community Library; we chose it as a book club pick a little while ago and I couldn't fit the discussion into just one episode, so I published it in two parts – we just had so much to say on it. Márquez is considered one of the most prominent writers in the genre of magical realism; a genre which incorporates magical elements into a realistic world, blurring the lines of fantasy and reality. But magical realism is specifically about making the extraordinary seem ordinary. So for example, *Twilight* would not be considered magical realism, since it is extraordinary that a vampire lives in town. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, however, magical phenomena are not only normalised, they're almost expected – though the book is still grounded in the reality of our world. Told simply, the story follows one hundred years of the Buendía family; but the way history meets magic in this story ... it's like you're witnessing mythology in creation. Magical events that happened one hundred pages ago are retold and mythologised, until you yourself as the reader are not sure what really happened. Magic is woven into the fabric of this family's history.

Magical realism and speculative elements have always had a place in realistic fiction – I think of *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Frankenstein*, many of Shakespeare's plays ... but what I find so interesting about the meeting of these two worlds is how it's different each time. All the books I've spoken about today could be considered some type of magical realism, speculative fiction, or fantasy. But each author employs fantasy in a unique way to tell their story. And what particularly intrigues me is why I like this genre so much. Because, to confess, I don't enjoy historical fiction, and I don't enjoy a

whole lot of fantasy. But the way history and magic interact, I just find fascinating. And I think maybe it's because I find the act of telling stories from the past inherently magical. A lot of folklore and mythology can be traced back to basis in fact, but the stories have been retold so many times and in so many different ways, that they eventually become a simple fairy story. So, it makes sense to me that stories from history are infused with magic; whether it's simply a by-product of passing down stories, or if it's intentional – in the case of a contemporary author retelling history and adding fantasy elements. This theme of magical realism and mythology has been coming up a lot recently; in just the things I'm reading, and watching and a few conversations I've had with people recently. So I've got a few ideas for upcoming episodes deal with this theme – including a whole episode on Greek mythology – so keep an eye out for that – or an ear out. Other than that, I've been Angourie, you've been a great listener, and I'll chat to you in two weeks. Bye!