

# Magical realism to conquer emotions



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

There are a handful of logical approaches and techniques that human beings use to rationalize and understand situations we are not completely sure of. When placed in a situation in which we feel trauma or fear, our immediate reaction is to concoct a way to understand what is going on specifically to us. Though this is a common human reaction to uncertainty, we see children use this tactic more often than adults. One literary device commonly connected to children's understanding of the unknown is magical realism. Magical realism is an approach that tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality than the current one. In magical realism, the aspects that make it “magical” are not fictional, but what is actually being experienced by the present character; the magical and ordinary are one in the same. In the works *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz and *See Under: Love* by David Grossman, we see children use magical realism as a device to better understand the trauma and fear present in their young lives. Through magical realism, we are invited to see the world through the characters eyes in these works and understand how Schulz and Grossman use this approach to help children deal with distress.

In Schulz' *The Street of Crocodiles* we are thrown into a dark world in which our narrator re-lives his childhood by telling stories of his experience growing up in an unstable household. Though we are to assume the narrator is much older during his retelling, the stories themselves are told through the eyes of him as a child, twisting imagination and reality. Through various short stories, *The Street of Crocodiles* tells the tale of a young boy growing up with his merchant family in the Polish city, Drogobych. Though the book explores a variety of shortcomings faced by the family, one of the main focuses is on

the narrator's father, Jacob. Jacob, meant to be the rock of the family, is very far from a strong father figure. Jacob is constantly dealing with mental illness throughout the entire novel, and through his struggle, we as an audience watch how his breakdown not only affects his mental state, but how his condition reflects upon his family as well. As we take the journey with our narrator we watch his family not only struggle with the father's mental illness, but an unstable business, a city drowning in poverty and the irregular labeling of whom has power in the family.

Due to the fact that *The Street of Crocodiles* is told through a child's vision, it allows magical realism to be present. Magical realism is used by the narrator to cope with the image of his father having a mental breakdown. We specifically see magical realism emerge in the short chapter "Birds". The narrator's father had been locked away in the attic for some time, secluded from the entire family. Jacob begins to import rare bird eggs to hatch and breed in his domain. He becomes obsessed with these birds and takes on the role as their master. His time spent in the attic begins to dominate his entire existence, and when he did come down from his "kingdom" he looked frail and sickly. It becomes so dominant in his life, that when the narrator describes finally going into the attic and seeing his father, he claims that his father had turned into a bird himself. "Occasionally forgetting himself, he would rise from his chair at table, wave his arms if they were wings, and emit a long-drawn-out bird's call while his eyes misted over." (50, Schulz) When the obsession had become too much the house maid, Adela, tried to put an end to the madness by freeing the birds in the attic by opening a window. It is at this point that the father's transformation became full when he tried to

fly out with his flock. “ My father waving his arms in a panic, tried to life himself into the air with his feathered flock. Slowly, the winged cloud thinned until at last Adela remained on the battlefield, exhausted and out of breath, along with my father, who now, adopting a worried hangdog expression, was ready to accept complete defeat.” (50, Schulz) The narrator uses the vision of his father physically transforming to cope with the fact that he was losing his mind. Because he is seeing this as a child, there is an innocence and inability in being able to truly understand the severity of mental illness. Instead of seeing his father break down, playful images such as him transforming into a bird imprint his memories. This specific image may have been chosen due to the fact that birds are a symbol of “ freedom” and “ escape”. The narrator watching his father try to fight off this mental burden in hopes of escaping it can reflect why the child visualized his father becoming a bird. Schulz uses magical realism as a coping mechanism for a child who cannot fully grasp the erratic condition of his father.

In David Grossman’s novel *See Under: Love*, we are introduced to an Israeli boy named Momik whose parents and great uncle survived the holocaust concentration camps. Momik’s great uncle, Anshel Wasserman, was also a writer of a famous child book series called “ The Children of the Heart”. Momik and Wasserman are introduced during Momik’s youth when Wasserman is sent to live with his family in his old age. “ For him, the Holocaust was a laboratory gone mad, accelerating and intensifying human processes a hundredfold...” (50, Grossman) Due to the severe conditions of the holocaust, Wasserman is severely traumatized; He shares stories and experiences with Momik, leaving Momik not only frightened but intrigued as

well. “ And then my grandfather explained -in his language- that utopias are not for mortals. And that people are like flies, that the stories they are told must be like flypaper. Utopias are gold-covered paper, he said, and flypaper is covered in everything man secretes from his body and his life. Especially the suffering. And our hope is that its measure is the measure of man, and forgiveness.” (225, Grossman) Broken up into three sections, See Under: Love explores Momik’s experiences with Wasserman as a child and then a retelling of Wasserman’s experience in the camps through Momik’s vision, placing Wasserman in a Utopia.

Magical realism allows Momik to re-write the holocaust as a kind of fantasy in which good triumphs over evil. Grossman uses magical realism as a device to help Momik not only understand the terrors his great-uncle faced during his time in the camps, but as a tool to help him overcome his fear of the holocaust. Momik recreates his Great-Uncles experience, placing him in a world where death is non-existent and Wasserman is a hero, capable of taming the “ Nazi beast”. Wasserman is held as a prisoner in the extermination camps where he is asking to be put to death in hopes of escaping the holocaust once and for all. We see Wasserman survive getting gassed and shot; both tactics used to exterminate during the holocaust are not capable of taking out Wasserman. Instead of granting his wish, Neigel, a Nazi commander, forces Wasserman to tell him stories; if he told a good enough story, his death wish would be granted. Due to Wasserman’s background as a children’s author, we see him tie in continued stories of his characters from “ Children of the Heart”. Neigel, being a fan of the series written by Wasserman, becomes broken down by the horrific twists

Wasserman puts on Nigel's favorite childhood characters. Wasserman finds a way to break Neigel down by ruining his childhood fantasies and in-turn "tames the beast". Neigel claims the tales don't affect him, but he commits suicide; the captor loses the battle while the captured triumphs. Through his childish eyes, Neigel is imagined as turning into an actual beast to reflect Momiks understanding of how terrible the Nazi's were. Creating this experience of the holocaust not only helps Momik overcome his fear of the holocaust, but also helps him understand his great uncles experience as well as gain a further understanding of where he comes from.

Schulz and Grossman both use magical realism through the eyes of children to get at underlying issues being faced in their lives. Though both authors use children as the outlet to express the "magic", the reasoning behind its usage is different in the two works. In *The Street of Crocodiles*, Schulz using magical realism as a coping mechanism for the narrator. The trauma of watching a parent diminish not only physically, but mentally as well is agonizing. We see our main character envision his father transforming into actual animals as an explanation of his father's state. Incapable of accepting his father's downfall, he creates fictional images or actual situations to avoid the reality of his father's illness. Schulz' use of magical realism is used mainly to explain a child's way of coping with something they do not want to accept. Grossman's use of magical realism, though similar, has its differences. Momik uses magical realism as a better way to understand his family's tragedies and rewrite history. The magical aspects in *See Under: Love* are through revision of Wasserman's experience, over actual "magical" transformation. Though we do see Neigel turn into a "beast", the overall

magic here is in the fact that Momik creates an entire new experience for his great uncle, and tells it as if it is the truth about what he experienced. Momik uses magical realism to inform himself and understand another's experience. Grossman uses this device to further educate, while Schulz uses it as a device to block something out.

“ Reality is as thin as paper, and betrays with all its cracks its imitative character.” (63, Schulz) Magical realism twists the reality we know to help us further understand situations we are not completely sure of. Bruno Schulz' *The Street of Crocodiles* and David Grossman's *See Under: Love* use magical realism through the eyes of children to help their readers get a better understanding of what the characters are actually experiencing. Reality is obsolete, and the images and ideas the protagonists concoct are their realities, even if they seem fantastical to us. Because the works use children as the “ creators”, it is easier for us to understand why the visions and situations are colorful and “ magical”. By using magical realism, fear, uncertainty and unawareness are conquered.

## **Works Cited**

Grossman, David. *See Under: love*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989. Print. Schulz, Bruno. *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin, 2008. Print.