

Genre (6'21'')

Narrator

On this track, novelists discuss their approaches to genre. First listen to Patricia Duncker and Alex Garland talking about the pleasures of subverting genre.

Patricia Duncker

Thinking in terms of genre is important because writing within something that's immediately recognizable, you raise certain sorts of expectations in the reader, and you need to know what you're doing with those expectations. So whilst I would say, I'm not a genre writer, I write with a very intense awareness of genre, because it's something that I want to play with, it's something I want to have fun with. The book that I've just brought out is a book called *Seven Tales of Sex and Death*, and the genre that influenced that book were the late-night B movies in France that I enjoy watching. And most of those are very violent, they're horror movies. And that particular genre had its own laws, its own traditions in a way, its own traditions of *badness* to some extent, because it was *packed* with really lurid clichés. But I became interested in the lurid clichés.

Alex Garland

I love genre. I like watching it and I like reading it and I like working within it. From the point of view of work, I think genre's a kind of free gift. It gives you all sorts of things you can subvert and if you're unsure about where you're going with something, genre will tell you where to go and if nothing else, what genre can do is it can provide you with a structure. I think that you then are likely to end up subverting it, really just to keep yourself entertained because otherwise you will just be rereading stuff that other people have done a lot before and probably more successfully than you're doing, as well. But personally I think that one of the big tricks to writing is to keep yourself from getting bored, to keep yourself motivated and interested. So you have to move away just to keep yourself entertained, keep yourself fired up about it in some kind of way.

Narrator

Now you'll hear Abdulrazak Gurnah and Louis de Bernières describe two very different genres – the realist novel, dealing with contemporary social issues, and the magic realist novel.

Abdulrazak Gurnah

Well, fiction quite often tells us things, gives us news, tells us about things. Sometimes you'll find people saying things as if this is an inferior function of fiction. But I don't think so. I think when I read fiction, I look for many things, and sometimes you get more of this than the other, but one certainly of the things that I look for, one of the things that gives me pleasure in reading, is knowing things I didn't know as a result of what I'm reading. So there is, to some extent, there is simply this, to say there are experiences which people have gone through and you should know about them, we should all know about them. But in the case of asylum and refugees, there is an even stronger reason for saying we must know about these things because they're to do with the way we live, they're to do with how and where we live. And of course every day, in the case of asylum and refugees, every day this is an issue in a kind of public discourse in the way that people speak and the way that the government functions. If I can write about it in my fiction, as well as write about other things, one of the beauties of novels is that they're not about one thing, but they're complex things so they're about different matters but they're also different things happen in them: the writing itself, the gestures that it makes, what it suppresses and what it releases and so on. So all kinds of interesting things happen in novels, but one of the things that I'm interested in doing is always raising the question of what has all this to do with how we live.

Louis de Bernières

There are lots of different kinds of magic realism, which I could go on about for a long time. Gabriel García Márquez says that his kind of magic realism is to do with taking literally what people believe. So if somebody believes that being disrespectful to your parents will wither your arm, then he would have someone in a story who has a withered arm because they were disrespectful to their parents. Whereas there are other magic realists such as Isabel

Allende – she’s a good example – who really does believe in coincidences and prodigies and ghosts and all of these supernatural things and levitation, so when these things happen to her characters, because she really does believe in all of that stuff. Other people do it more ludically, you know. It’s playing with narrative, where you have the feeling that they’re doing it mostly for fun and I think Laura Esquivel is in that category.

I think I’m more of the Márquez type myself, and I got ultimately fed up with magic realism because it made plotting too easy [*laughs*]. You see if anything can happen then anything does happen, and you can use it as a *deus ex machina* to get yourself out of sticky situations and so on. I began to feel in the end that it was cheating. But what was particularly marvellous about this magic realism which, which actually should have been called marvellous realism in the original phrase, what was marvellous about it was that it liberated the narrative. You know, you were no longer confined to kitchen sinks and families squabbling with each other and all that kind of thing. It was a sort of liberation back into the world of fairy story and I think every literature in the world has a magic realist streak. We have our own in Britain and it’s, it’s obvious to me that the legends of King Arthur are magic realist.

Narrator

Finally, Monique Roffey talks about how she made magical elements of her novel *Sun Dog* convincing.

Monique Roffey

It’s a very slow book and very dreamy and it’s a book of interiors. And I think right from the beginning you’re very much inside August’s head; you’re not just with him, you’re in him, you’re under his skin. And so I felt that right from the start the reader is almost August himself; I’m hoping that you can look out through August’s eyes. So when things do start to happen to him, I feel because you’re so close and you’re so sort of, you’ve got a great sense of what’s going on with him that, when a bud pops between his fingers or you know, a twig sprouts out of his ear, you’re totally with him, you don’t really, you know you’re absolutely happy to accept anything happening to him.