

Latin American Magic Realism:
Reading, Writing, Poetry, and Printmaking
Residency Plan, piloted at Hamilton International Middle School, Seattle,
December 2001 – January 2002

Designed and taught by Joshua Okrent, with an introduction to Magic Realism by Olga Sanchez

Grade: Grades 7 & 8. This residency was integrated with Spanish-language classes; it could be adapted and integrated with classes in language arts, social studies, or visual arts.

Time Frame: ten classes of fifty minutes. At middle schools using a “block” schedule, the two introductory sessions can be combined in one meeting, followed by four long classes devoted to poetry and printmaking.

Project Summary: Through this residency students will be introduced to examples of Latin American Magic Realism. Students will read and discuss short passages, short stories, and poems by a number of Latin American writers, and will write their own passages and poems. Students will then explore various methods of simple printmaking, which they will combine with their written work in a book. The aims of this residency are to build an appreciation of this literature and of cultural diversity, to practice writing in a Magic Realist mode, and to introduce the medium of printmaking. If the residency is conducted with Spanish-language students, as it was during the pilot at Hamilton International Middle School in Seattle, students can learn vocabulary in Spanish as well as read passages and write poems in Spanish.

Resources/Materials

- Passages and short stories in the Magic Realist mode: see the *Primer for Teachers*, which includes several short passages and references to a collection of Magic Realist stories.
- *Bestiary* by Pablo Neruda, with illustrations by Antonio Frasconi; examples from other Latin American illustrators (i.e., Jorge Borges)
- Basic printmaking supplies: water-based printing ink, in black and a variety of colors; rubber brayers; sheets of polyprint; heavy weight printing paper; scrap paper

Learning Goals: Students will explore Magic Realism through reading, writing, and making simple prints. If integrated with Spanish-language classes, students will learn Spanish vocabulary.

Goal I. Students will read Magic Realist writing.

- a) Students will learn to define Magic Realism and some of its traits.
- b) Students will address EALRs through this reading (building vocabulary; understanding elements of fiction and poetry; expanding comprehension;

analyzing authors' use of language, style, purpose, and perspective; reading for literary experience).

Goal II. Students will write their own Magic Realism pieces.

- a) Students will develop the concept and design of Magic Realist pieces in prose and poetry, and will match this style to audience and purpose.
- b) Students will use writing conventions and the steps of the writing process in composing Magic Realist prose passages and poems.

Goal III. Students will learn simple printmaking.

- a) Students will learn arts vocabulary and concepts for specific types and features of printmaking.
- b) Students will use tools and techniques for simple printmaking.
- c) Students will experiment with making two prints using found materials, one abstract and one capturing a simple image.
- d) Students will be introduced to composition/design by combining poems and images in a single page.

Goal IV. Students will learn Spanish vocabulary, which they will use in their own writing.

- a) Students will learn the Spanish words for farm animals, wild animals, the times of day (i.e. morning, evening) and the seasons.
- b) Students will complete language exercises using these new words.
- c) Students will use these words in writing poems.

Arts EALRs Addressed by the Project: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4

Residency Plan

First Session (introduction to Magic Realism): To introduce students to ideas covered in the *Primer for Teachers*, Ms. Sanchez used short passages from Gabriel García Márquez (the example from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which villagers view a block of ice with the wonder that might be accorded the largest diamond in the world) and from Alejo Carpentier to demonstrate how Magic Realism uses detailed description with exaggerated elements to make a familiar object new or “magical.” (see separate posting). She led students through two writing exercises: the first, in which students described all the features of a familiar object as though they were seeing it for the first time; the second, in which students practiced “writing in code” about an injustice in their lives.

Second session (introduction to printmaking): Mr. Okrent introduced *Bestiary* by Pablo Neruda, with illustrations by Antonio Frasconi, a poem written in Spanish and English, which expresses the poet’s wish that he could “speak to the animals.” He hypothesizes different conversations he would have with frogs, birds, pigs, spiders, etc. The poem describes following dogs through the night, appreciating the engineering

efforts of spiders, and forming friendships with cows. The poet allows himself to become a child who doesn't know the difference between human and animal speech, and finds that he prefers the company of animals.

Bestiary is illustrated with the prints of Antonio Frasconi. Using carved wood blocks, Frasconi creates images both simple and bold. Birds are represented with precise blocks of a single color, and fat pigs walk on legs that seem too delicate for their massive bodies. The images are childlike in their simplicity and demonstrate the qualities of naiveté and honest observation that characterize Magic Realism.

Mr. Okrent discussed the techniques used by these artists, specifically how the images and prints compliment each other. He asked students how the words influenced the designs of the images, and how the images changed the meanings of the words. He led students in a simple writing exercise, "What is it like to be an animal?"—the same question posed by Neruda in *Bestiary*. As in the writing exercises led by Ms. Sanchez, students were encouraged to see a familiar "object" anew, with special attention to the animal's "thoughts" or daydreams.

With more advanced students Mr. Okrent built upon this introduction throughout the rest of the residency by bringing in short pieces from Gabriel García Márquez, Eduardo Galeano, and Jorge Luis Borges, Frasconi's illustrations for children's books and his imaginative portraits of political leaders, and illustrations by José Borges from his own series of illustrated books and animal images. Students identified the traits that make the works both realistic and magical: fresh, childlike imagery; the use of caricature, exaggeration, and hyperbole; deceptive simplicity.

Third and fourth sessions; Students were introduced to simple printmaking. During the creation of their first prints, using simple found materials, students made basic printing plates, and printed them in various colors on various papers. This process gave students the opportunity to "see with new eyes," using familiar objects and materials such as yarn, felt, buttons, etc., in new and unusual ways.

Fifth and sixth sessions: Students reviewed vocabulary learned from the poems and stories of Magic Realist writers, as well as arts and Spanish-language vocabulary. Students learned Spanish words for animals, and began using them in composing poems. Students completed prints begun in the previous sessions.

Seventh and eighth sessions: Students learned Spanish-language vocabulary for identifying the times of day. Using these words and the words from the previous lesson, students completed their poems and shared them with the class. Students began their final, more complex prints, using a material called "poly print," which is similar to the woodblocks artists used to print the images already introduced. Students learned the techniques of relief carving, and such printmaking/arts vocabulary as figure, ground, relief, negative space, design and print editions.

Ninth and tenth sessions: Students completed simple, bold prints that presented animals as characters in imaginary situations. Returning to the beginning writing exercise, "What is it like to be an animal?" students wrote a poem based on their own original illustrations. Students selected a number of prints to include in a chapbook, and discussed

the relationship of their poems and prints to Magic Realism. Students evaluated their own work and that of fellow students.

Assessment Strategies:

1. Evaluation of Written Material. As the residency progressed, students had several occasions to write and read aloud. Each of these writing exercises provided an opportunity for teachers to evaluate the progress of students' understanding.

2. Evaluation of Prints and Printing Skills. Every student created three prints over the course of the residency. Ideally the prints evolved in both skill and content. Each completed print gave the teachers an opportunity to gauge student progress.

3. Spanish Vocabulary Exercises. As students learned Spanish vocabulary they completed exercises from a Spanish language workbook, which were evaluated and graded.

4. Self-evaluation. Students were asked to evaluate their own performance as individuals and as a class based on their level of participation. Were they satisfied with the work they created? Had they gained an understanding of the subject? Did their print project establish or explore a strong idea?

5. Completion of the Book. Within a few weeks of the end of class, classes received copies of their completed book. This book provided an opportunity to view students' work and to compare the different ideas and understandings gained by each student. As well, this book serves as an excellent record of the residency and should prove to be an excellent vocabulary workbook for future classes.

Key Vocabulary

Students learned arts vocabulary relating to two specific subjects: Magic Realism and printmaking.

Magic Realism vocabulary includes: Magic Realism, realism, surrealism, impressionism, expressionism, hyperbole, emphasis and exaggeration.

Printmaking vocabulary includes: woodcut, linoleum print, mono print, etching, found object, printing plate, line, outline, contour, texture, figure, ground, mirror image, register, and impression. In addition, students used specific tools including carving knives, brayers, and block printing ink.

Next Steps or Project Extensions:

The completed book of prints and poems will serve as an excellent record of the residency and should prove to be an excellent vocabulary workbook for future classes.

A packet of photocopied stories and essays on Magic Realism was made available to all interested students. These readings presented the subject in a greater length and complexity than could be explored in class.

*To bring this residency to your students, or for other arts residencies, contact Joshua Okrent:
josh@cryoftherooster.or*