Magical Realism

In these titles, the magic and mundane converge to stretch the imagination and challenge our perception of reality. Seemingly illogical events unfold to reveal deeper mysteries in the human condition.

LAROSE by Louise Erdrich
F ERD, LARGE PRINT, CD AUDIOBOOK
After accidentally shooting his friend and neighbor's young son, a man on a Native American reservation subscribes to "an old form of justice" by giving his own son, LaRose, to the parents of his victim. Erdrich sets this meditative, profoundly humane story in the time just before the U.S. invades Iraq but wanders in and out of that moment, even back to origin tales about the beginning of time. On tribal lands in rural North Dakota, the shooter, Landreaux Iron, and his wife, Emmaline, trudge toward their neighbors' house to say, "Our son will be your son now." As both families amble through the emotional thickets produced by this act (the wives are half sisters, to boot), Erdrich depicts a tribal culture that is indelible and vibrant. Electric, nimble, and perceptive, this novel is about "the phosphorous of grief" but also, more essentially, about the emotions men need, but rarely get, from one another. – Kirkus Reviews

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED by Jonathan Safran Foer
F FOE, CD AUDIOBOOK
This highly imaginative debut novel features a protagonist with the same name as the author. The fictional Jonathan Safran Foer, also a writer, travels to Eastern Europe after his junior year in college. His mission, as he ventures through the farmlands, is to find Augustine, who may have saved the grandfather he never knew from the Nazis. Accompanying Jonathan on his quixotic quest is Alex, a young Ukrainian translator who speaks hilariously fractured English. The fabled history of his grandfather's shtetl, or village, is juxtaposed with events in the present using comedy interspersed with tragedy. Generations become united across time in this fanciful tale, as Foer, the author, gives the reader a contemporary version of 19th-century Jewish drama one that blends laughter and tears. – Library Journal
THE MARRIAGE OF OPPOSITES by Alice Hoffman  
F HOF, LARGE PRINT, CD AUDIOBOOK  
In this lovely and imaginative fictionalized biography, Hoffman reenvisions the mother of Camille Pissarro, the “father of impressionism.” Rachel’s Danish Jewish family fled Europe for the safety of St. Thomas shortly before her birth in 1795. At 17, she is forced into an arranged marriage to a widower with small children in order to save her father’s fortune. Several years and a few more children later, she is widowed, and despite her keen business sense, the law dictates that only a blood relative of her husband can take control of the estate. When her late husband’s nephew, Frédérick, arrives from France and sees Rachel, his heart is immediately hers. Their lifelong passion defies Jewish law, which forbids their marriage for many years. Camille, one of Rachel’s four children, struggles well into adulthood against his mother’s cold dismissal of his artistic brilliance, which was evident from an early age. Hoffman brings into focus the birth of impressionism and the forces that shaped Pissarro’s artistic drive through the complicated, rich, adventure-filled life story of his fiery mother, fueled by her love for her family, her stubborn flaunting of society’s rules, and her deep loyalty to her friends – Library Journal

THE NEW MOON’S ARMS by Nalo Hopkinson  
F HOP  
In the lush islands of the Caribbean, Calamity Lambkin has reached midlife. Her father has just passed on, her relationship with her grown daughter is strained, and she is desperately denying the fact that she is aging. But major changes are set in motion at her father’s funeral. A hot flash magically produces a pin she lost in childhood. With each subsequent episode, another childhood object appears, including a small orphaned toddler with webbing between his fingers who speaks an unknown language. Convinced that the child comes from a family of mermaids, Calamity doggedly makes sure of his welfare, undertaking to foster him in her home. Sassy, determined, and all too human, Calamity powers through her triumphs and failures with great emotion and humor as she comes to terms with her daughter, her extended family, and her childhood friends. Hopkinson deftly blends Afro-Caribbean folk themes throughout this magical realist tale of love and loss, personal transitions, and family. – Library Journal
THE SNOW CHILD by Eowyn Ivey
F IVE
Here’s a modern retelling of the Russian fairy tale about a girl, made from snow by a childless couple, who comes to life. Or perhaps not modern—the setting is 1920s Alaska—but that only proves the timelessness of the tale and of this lovely book. Unable to start a family, middle-aged Jack and Mabel have come to the wilderness to start over, leaving behind an easier life back east. Anxious that they won’t outlast one wretched winter, they distract themselves by building a snow girl and wrap her in a scarf. The snow girl and the scarf are gone the next morning, but Jack spies a real child in the woods. Soon Jack and Mabel have developed a tentative relationship with the free-spirited Faina, as she finally admits to being called. Is she indeed a “snow fairy,” a “wilderness pixie” magicked out of the cold? Or a wild child who knows better than anyone how to survive in the rugged north? Even as Faina embodies a natural order that cannot be tamed, the neighborly George and Esther show Jack and Mabel (and the rest of us) how important community is for survival. – Library Journal

TRAIN DREAMS by Denis Johnson
F JOH
National Book Award winner Johnson has skillfully packed an epic tale into novella length in this account of the life of Idaho Panhandle railroad laborer Robert Grainer. Born in 1886, orphaned by age six and placed with cousins, he’s not outwardly remarkable or compelling as the episodes of his life unfold. He marries Gladys and fathers Kate while working for a timber company, and he witnesses disparate events and characters from influenza epidemics and the advent of automobiles and airplanes to an unscheduled area stop by a young Elvis Presley. The gothic sensibility of the wilderness and isolated settings and Native American folktales, peppered liberally with natural and human-made violence, add darkness to a work that lingers viscerally with readers. – Library Journal

GATHERING OF WATERS by Bernice L. McFadden
F MCF
McFadden reimagines the summer Emmett Till spent in Mississippi in 1955 and the events leading up to his murder. The story chronicles the young love between Emmett and Tass Hilton, which finally transcends death. Having left Mississippi for Detroit after Emmett dies, Tass returns 40 years later as a widow to reawaken his spirit, trapped in the dank waters of the Tallahatchie River. This story is deeply affecting, but the novel’s greatest triumph is the salacious tale of Tass’s grandmother Doll Hilton, as the spirit of this scorned woman refuses to rest, often returning angry and more vindictive than in her previous life. The rich text is shaped by the African American storytelling tradition and layered with significant American histories. – Library Journal

Compiled by Kimberly Burton of NoveList, updated 7/16
THE LAST WARNER WOMAN by Kei Miller
F MIL
Born in one of Jamaica’s last leper colonies, Adamine Bustamente is raised by Mother Lazurus before leaving for England, where she is met with fear when she shares her gift of warning. Now older, she seeks to tell her story to "Mr. Writer Man." for no one person ever owns a story or has the right to tell it. Prize-winning Jamaican author Miller—wonderfully weaving together realism and fantasy as he shares the story of Mr. Mac, the taxi driver, or Adamine's stubborn yet loving grandmother—shows us that magic is inherent in humanity. Each character is portrayed as a real person, not someone to be forgotten as we move on to the next. Perhaps Miller's greatest feat is the incorporation of the decorous yet often unused second person; sparingly used, it draws in the audience and demonstrates the special relationship between Adamine and Mr. Writer Man as well as the relationship between Miller and his readers. Poetic and enchanting.
– Library Journal

WHAT IS NOT YOURS IS NOT YOURS by Helen Oyeyemi
F OYE
In her first story collection, Oyeyemi conjures present-day Europe, made enticingly strange by undercurrents of magic, and populated by ghosts, sentient puppets, and possible witches alongside middle-aged psychiatrists, tyrants, and feminist undergrads. Loosely linked by a theme of keys and doors, many of the stories feature female protagonists discovering their sexuality or coming into their own. Readers will be drawn to Oyeyemi’s contagious enthusiasm for her characters and deep sympathy for their unrequited or thwarted loves.
– Publishers Weekly

THE SALT GOD’S DAUGHTER by Ilie Ruby
F RUB
When a blue moon rises, mistakes can be undone, lost children can find their homes, and sea lions can shed their skins. The selkie myth lies at the heart of Ruby's second novel. Born with a webbed foot, young Naida yearns for her mysterious father. But to understand his role in her life, she must first understand the stories of the women who came before her. The story swirls back to begin with her mother's tale. Ruthie and her sister, Dolly, grow up on the road with their mother, Diana, sleeping in their car, cursing in Yiddish, eluding mud slides and even picking strawberries as day workers. Ritually consulting her Farmer's Almanac, like Bottom in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Diana moves her small family on. Is Diana simply restless, or is she fleeing something or someone? This is a bewitching tale of lives entangled in lushly layered fables of the moon and sea. – Kirkus Reviews
THE PRISONER OF HEAVEN by Carlos Ruiz Zafon

When a stranger shows up at the struggling Sempere & Sons bookshop in Barcelona in 1957 to buy a rare and expensive volume, Daniel Sempere—the son—sets out to uncover the mysterious man's motives. The resulting mix of history and mystery drives this third installment in Zafón’s cycle about the Cemetery of Forgotten Books, a "sprawling labyrinth...like the trunk of an endless tree." What Daniel discovers will implicate those he loves, has lost, and loathes—from his soon-to-be-wed friend, Fermín; to Daniel's mother, Isabella, who died under questionable circumstances; his father; his wife, Bea, and infant son, Julian; and a host of schemers, torturers, corrupt governmental officials, writers, and lovers, many of whom have changed identities, hurriedly penned secret missives, and stashed keys to hidden treasures. Zafón's storytelling is deft and well-paced, and his vivid prose brings the cultural riches and political strife of Franco-era Spain to life. Though the book will undoubtedly please readers familiar with his other novels, as the introduction explains, the book is a "self-contained tale" capable of standing alone—something it does with aplomb. – Publishers Weekly

SWAMPLANDIA! by Karen Russell

A once-thriving destination for blue-haired tourists from the Midwest, Swamplandia boasted airboat rides and alligator wrestling until the death of the feature performer, matriarch Hilola Bigtree. The grieving chief fails to recognize that his kids are suffering, too. Osceola, the oldest daughter, communes with the dead, Kiwi, her brother, makes a pact with the devil, the Disney-esque attraction, World of Darkness, and precocious Ava secretly nurtures a rare red alligator, hoping to revive the family business. Like a kinder, gentler Carl Hiaasen, Russell manages to skewer all the Florida bad guys—Big Sugar, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Casino Gaming Commission—while writing a love song to paradise and innocence lost. – Library Journal