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Fusion of History and Magical Realism in Bridget Collins' *The Binding*

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to put forth the presence of magical realistic and historical undertones in the *The Binding* in opposition to its characterisation as a trivial young adult fantasy novel. The caricatures of historical fiction are mingled with the fantastical idea of magical realism in a landscape, amplifying majorly the wild elements of the countryside. From the village clock tower and farmhands to brown, soggy, permeable, morose looking marshlands as well as the craft of Binding through the life of a Binder's apprentice, the protagonist named Emmett. The historical fiction sets the tale in the past, recreating an ambience with the essence of old pastoral setting. The bundle of hay and castle ruins, secrets locked away in a vault, bustling cobbled roads hogged by horse driven carriages of the elite, the muddy and dark back alleyways monopolised by the impoverished. There are several thematic modules set in a parallel, fictitious Victorian England, lending a voice to unchecked superstitions especially in rural communities, the unique lifestyles of rural in contrast with the urban, dominance of descriptive landscapes and seasons. It is a rendering of a historical gothic fiction speckled with magical elements, blended with the mundane. This is indeed a book about books giving it a surreal magical form by means of which, it also sketches out an unsuspecting queer romance of the moors and dales.

Keywords: Binding, Magical Realism, Rural-Urban contrast, Memories, Corruption.



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Introduction

Magical realism is a literary genre that paints the fiction on a canvas of everyday mundane life. It consists of ordinary characters who find themselves sinking their teeth against the extraordinary. It is claimed not as a genre but rather a sensibility, a way of looking at reality. This style gained momentum in the 1960s, originating in Latin America. A fictional writing in which magical elements are treated as a natural part of the story's environment. These elements though themselves are not highlighted, but are used as a medium to signify or provide means for the characters and their indirect effect on the plot. Unlike fantasy, in which there is an exercise of complete world-building and the focal point is usually the magic itself; in magical realism, the magic appears to be ordinarily blending into the tale. Magic realism was first coined by a German art critic named Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a new trend in European paintings. It was a response to the idea of realism; Roh wrote in his essay, 'Magical Realism: Post- Expressionism' - "with the word 'magic' as opposed to 'mystic', I wished to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it". (Roh, 1925)

The authors by design leave out the detailing of magic so as it remains obscure and maintains the enigma in all its ordinariness. They are so to speak, a blur between fantasy and reality. A few examples from literature taking inspiration from this literary movement include – *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami. It is an artistic exercise for exploring strangeness, a sort of familiarising oneself with the surreal.

The past that has been inherited speaks both individually to one and collectively as one, building a common thread of reality. It is also an exploration not only of history but who we were and are as a



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society, a functioning system of communities. Historical Fiction narrates the tale in the past, preferably prior to the events of the writer's own lifetime. The setting is placed in a lived, authentic period and place in history conforming to the social norms, culture, and events of that timeline. The historical characters are thrown in a conflict appropriate of its time with suitable vernacular, class-distinct vocabulary, and contexts. The actual event or events in history form the premises on which the author's imagination fabricates their own fable. It is contradictory in style wherein it pretends to be the truth of the period in focus. The constructive lies here, are intentional and purposeful to the building of the plot. Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* was one of the popular works of this genre. *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner and *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell are a paradigm typifying historical fiction.

Bridget Collins born in England in 1981, trained as an actor at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art after reading English at King's College, Cambridge. She is the author of seven acclaimed books for Young Adults and has had two plays produced, one at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. *The Binding*, her first adult novel, was the UK's bestselling debut adult novel, in hardback in 2019.

The Binding

The beginning of the novel possesses a gothic quality as Emmett, the first-person narrator finds himself losing touch with reality and has been fighting the bouts of insanity that his "illness" (Collins 4) has produced. There was a mind-body conflict within him. The entire summer was like a hole in his memory. "I'd been languishing in bed with a cough, or vomiting, or covered with pustules. Even through the haze of nightmares I could remember more than they realized; I knew about the screaming and the hallucinations,



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the days when I couldn't stop crying or didn't know who anyone was, the night when I broke the window with my bare hands". (4)

This illness caught the attention of Seredith, the closest binder in their area and she requests Emmett to be sent to her as an apprentice to learn the craft he was destined to perform. But for him, this letter of invitation was a prison sentence to a lunatic asylum for the deviants. A desolate place simmering in the rotting smell of the marshes to confine broken-minded people like him so as he no longer remained a hindrance to his suffering family. The household as was typical in their times is governed by the head man, which also added the burden of making the heavy decision on his father, Robert of sending his son away for good; it is a different kind of helplessness.

"You think I want to let him go? You think I am proud of it, when my own father lost an eye marching in the Crusade?" (11)

The last Crusade here directly correlates to the last registered execution of people in the name of witchcraft during the Eighteenth-century England. It was a campaign against the deemed witches revealing the unprecedented magnitude of murders and persecutions against them throughout Europe. Here, the crusade happened against the binders about sixty years much before Emmett's birth. Seredith remembered the hunt as she had laid hidden with her own master locked in a vault while the crusaders burnt down the binderies across regions. The nightmares still lingered on like scars in her memory. They still saw binding as evil, an awful practise of selling one's soul striking a devil's bargain. But fortunately, it was anything but that.

A glimpse of the prejudices against the binders was unveiled through Milly's father who brought his fellow villagers to get Milly's book from Seredith since Milly had lost the agonising memory of her father



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raping her multiple times, of her getting pregnant with the rapist's child and subsequently burying it alive in an attempt to end it all. Seredith as a last resort was prepared to burn with the death of her books bound by her. That night Emmet finally understood the profundity of the trade of Binding. The direness and passion to safeguard one's possession and to cherish it with love and trust entrusted upon the binder by the people who come for aid to them. If a bound book of a living person is burned, the memories are released and they return back to their owner. Hence, safeguarding the books until the person is alive was a moral protocol which a binder ought to follow.

In the beginning, being a farmer by profession Emmett is obligated to do manual labour as a farmhand in the fields, raising the livestock, seeing to the constant repairs in the house and stay in the order of 'many hands make light work'. With the illness he has turn a sorry lot in need of care, holding back others as well. There is a rich pastoral picture depicting the intricacies of the rural which dominates the expanse of the events. The rural country and folk have a better disposition in respect of work ethic and interdependence on the forces of the wild and primal. Emotions are best explored when the characters dwell in the hinterland away from the pretentious town populace who live in a superficial luxury of the worldly, where corruption and fallaciousness thrives in the households. The world is fairly simpler in the rural if one is to traverse the path of reflection of the conscience and passion.

The bindery is where he came delirious with fever and this is where he will find his restoration as well. His days at the bindery and his schooling as Seredith's apprentice covers the first of the three sections the book is divided into. In a way he finds his peace and calling in the still order of things at the bindery, finally making it his home; a place where he belongs. The importance, necessity and purpose of the slow-paced



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days at the bindery were vital to the high yielding progress of the art and the process of birthing books. As Emmett spent the weeks at Seredith's, the summer terrors gradually went away and the recuperating autumn season began.

"The benches and tools and presses murmured comfort to me: everything was useful, everything was in place...I knew what I was meant to be doing, and I was doing it." (30)

The magical realism takes a front seat as Emmett witnesses Lucian and Milly getting their memories bound by his master. He gains suspicion that somehow Lucian Darnay knew him though he cannot answer the 'how' and the 'why'. The ferocity with which Darnay stared at him was so naked, raw and intense, to what it was lost. Lucian kept apologising and dropped hints that he had known Emmett in the past before finally realising Emmett has lost that memory and no longer remembers him. Emmett is unconsciously aware of the gap in his memory. His nightmares now had Lucian's face. "Bleeding in my dreams" (41). Even the art of binding just like any other craft is imperfect. The dreams tried to show scraps of what was long erased. It is an act of rebellion. Anger of the mind towards the person for taking away an experience reserved for the mind despite how torturous it may be.

For Seredith, binding was as old as the alphabet itself, even older. It was a sacred calling. She found a certain reverence and identity. She was born to be a binder. The fate declared it for both of them. She is kind and empathetic, a true master and the only namesake family of Emmett. She justifies the Binder's fever as a natural temperament.



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“Only binders get it. People could be binders. It is how I knew you’d be a binder, boy-and a good one...my old master used to say that the binder bound fever was what made someone an artist, not a mere artisan.” (39)

She mentions the story of Margaret Pevensie, a legend amongst the binders who nearly died of the fever. It was said the greater the fever the greater is the potential of the binder in his craft.

As the season buries itself in winter, a family evening akin to Christmas is celebrated by the characters. They call it ‘Turning’ connecting it to harvesting of crops before the snow thickens on their lands.

“It hurt to imagine my family surrounded by evergreens and mistletoe, toasting absent friends in mulled ale.” (42).

It is an intimate holiday wherein the family and sometimes close friends come and dine together and, toast to each other’s health. Emmett after weeks of animosity had invited Lucien as a sign of truce and acceptance, to celebrate Turning with the Farmers as a gesture that Darnay had become a part of their family as well.

“As if I’d made a bad joke. ‘I wasn’t-’

‘May your darkness be quiet and the light come sooner than you need,’ he said. It was the old, formal salutation at the Turning.” (212)

The places employed to shape multiple settings in the play exist in England. Castleford is a real town within the city of Wakefield, West Yorkshire. Castleford is the seat of fiendish corruption of the lowest kind. It is from here De Havilland comes to the bindery when Seredith falls sick. It is him who murders Seredith in her sleep and empties her vault which she treasured with her life into his own for illegal trade



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amongst the collectors and buyers. The presence of de Havilland is like “hours passed in drudgery and resentment” (100).

He ‘attends’ distinct families who use his services at leisure and convenience to hide their misdeeds. For a true binder like Seredith, sealing off one’s memory, too unbearable to live with, once in their lifetime is more than enough. It is only a remedy not a means of exploitation. The intent of taking advantage is so ‘human’; very primal of human psyche.

“It’s all wrong. Binderies full of men who don’t understand what they’re doing-books for trade. We make books-we make beautiful books -out of love... Love. You understand?” (104)

She explains the selflessness of the act of service and the intimacy with which it is performed. “You become each person you bind, Emmett...Just for a little while, you take them on. How can you do that if you want to sell them at a profit?” (105) She answers the question of morality and how it is above power and money. How the craft has fallen from grace in the current times like a corporate business.

Emmett is forced to move to Castleford and work under de Havilland as an apprentice. His new workstation is identical to a factory. De Havilland forgets the names of subordinates. It shows his insincerity and detachment, a quite clinical and unemotional attitude in his workspace. Even the workers are like minions, producing substandard and generic books often with loose threads, unfinished endpapers and no whites before the title page, the grain direction is wrong and unruly. In fact, the very handcraft is inferior bereft of any artwork or personalisation. Like a clinic- there is an office, waiting room, prior appointments, a fee and a separate room for curing the ailment. A means rather than a craft; like sustenance as opposed to being alive; a business firm rather than a vocation.



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The historical attributes are strewn ubiquitously. The setting of Castleford where the rest of the story transpires is of tall brick houses with bare pavements and identical railings running along the street in front of every house in the vicinity. The coal sheds are in use during winters and they stoke the stove to keep the rooms warm. There is a contrast between the typical stone and brick houses of the rich and the wooden damp houses of the poor. Alleys crowded with vagabonds and paupers. The workhouses being full during midwinter forced the people to line up at the binderies to sell their living memories for a few shillings to feed their mouths. One such case is of Mags who has sold a majority of her life and neither remembers her husband nor her children. She is so fed up with her life that she wants to erase it all and become one of those “drooling lunatics” (133) hanging barely by a thread of consciousness.

The day Emmett makes a delivery of a chest full of bound books to the Darnay’s house, he is appointed to bind a maidservant’s memory. He finds Lucien has become an alcoholic unaware that he had bound himself some two months back. Lucien has a peculiar disdain for binders, especially those who serve at his father’s beck and call. In the entire novel, it is the only time when the reader experiences first-hand process of binding someone. Nell, the scullery maid is his subject. He unconsciously takes her hand to comfort her in her distress and connects with her. “The world lurched and swung. Then it turned inside out.” (149)

“I could see-I was seeing- I was someone else, looking at a world that was off-kilter, skewed by the otherness of alien eyes, the sheer otherness of her.” (151)

He delved in her mind and witnessed how Senior Darnay had continuously raped her for years. There are many gaps in her memories tinged with grey areas- the parts that are sealed off again and again



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to take away these memories of violence and violation. She is but a teenager, who due to her underprivileged life is sent to work at the Darnays. She refuses to give her master, her rapist and offender a name; calling him “the old man” (152). Emmett then tries to separate himself from Nell’s mind and stops the binding process. A binder’s curse is that they remember all the memories they have bound just like he is overwhelmed by Nell’s memories she just lost. It is but a lesser form of the atrocities that shadow these aristocratic households of the powerful.

“De Havilland sees the same servants, over and over. My father has whole shelves of books... Mary for five years, Marianne for three. Abigail, Abigail, Abigail...I can’t remember how many times, because she was one of his favourites. Sarah twice. Now Nell. And it’ll be Nell over and over, until she’s too old.” (157)

The pull of the novel is unexpectedly unfurled when Lucien discovers Emmett’s book in the chest brought by Emmett himself. In a brawl over the book, Emmett flings the book into the grate as a last resort. “Then the light leapt around it, and the pages caught fire”. (162). The book catches fire and along with it his memories plummet back into him.

The pastoral terrain overruns Emmett’s memories covering the second part of the narrative. It throws us back to the events a year prior to the current timeline. The time when Emmett was still a farmer and he encounters Lucien Darnay for the first time.

The historical undercurrents dictate the life of the characters in this segment. The winter had made it difficult to plough the hard ground. The daily struggles of farmers are acutely pinpointed and how the slightest alteration in the weather affects their work. The route to their home is enriched with forest



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lines and a massive lake adorned with a ruined castle at one of its banks. There is also a prevalence of horses as a means of transportation. Almost every faring house in the village owns a horse cart. They use horses for singular travels to cover short distances. Ferreting and poaching are few of the usual hunting games that the boys of the village band together to play. It is after ferreting that Alta and Emmett decide to take the route around the castle grounds.

This dilapidated old castle gives of an eerie forlorn backdrop to the events that would soon occur changing the course of their lives. There is a frozen moat surrounding the castle neglected for centuries. It is through which they cross over to the castle grounds.

“The sunlit green of overgrown walls, the silt moat like jade- coloured satin...but now, looking at the walls standing stark and rotten in the wintry landscape, I could almost believe that the place was haunted”. (168)

This castle becomes the focal point of Emmett and Lucien’s illicit love affair; their meeting and hiding place from the unsuspecting eyes of the Farmer family. An interesting detail albeit minute, refines the historical backdrop; the villagers did not have clocks in there households rather, a village clock tower chimed hourly as their common chronometer. Apart from that, the expensive fashion of keeping a pocket watch was a statement of the wealthy and the urban. All of the village lived like a single unified community, celebrating Midsummer Eve together. There are a number of miscellaneous fairs like Wakening Fair for example, that keep occurring in the novel. There is also reference of reading tarot cards to know one’s fate which was taken as a believable and authentic prediction. Understandably, one of the usual nuances of rural societies.



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Another significant incident that formed the crux of the novel which instigated the demise of the couple in discussion was, Piers Darnay upon realising his son's rendezvous, sent his hitman, Acre to negotiate the binding of Emmett's memories of Lucien in exchange for guineas, gold and banker's note.

"Then let me make you an offer. We will cover all expenses-transport, and so on-to allow you to visit a binder. As a gesture of apology and goodwill, we will also give you and your family a small financial gift. These occasions can be very upsetting. You'd be surprised how important it is for close relatives to feel something positive has come out of this sort of mistake". (278)

Emmett adamantly refuses and Acre through trickery kidnaps Alta, Splotch and Emmett forcing them to visit Seredith. Splotch is murdered in cold blood in front of the siblings and Alta is kept as a hostage to make Emmett forcefully consent to give up his memories to save her life. This incident becomes a landmark for the succeeding events in the story. it is the first time a perspective of the victim getting bound is laid bare. The terror of losing the most precious memories and the desperation to try and hold back even a tiniest incidental moment with Darnay. It is tragic that every person Lucien had "seduced" (289) was succumbed to this fate. In a way, Lucien had known the consequences and in spite of that he took this risk with Emmett.

There is a detailed description of the aftershock when after burning the book, the confined memories flood back to Emmett resulting in multiple rounds of spasms and retching up.

"Emmett Farmer's eyes bulge. He drops to his knees and gulps down his memories like a man being forced to drink water till his stomach splits". (295)



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This moment recurs at the very end of the narrative when they start a fire in Lord Latworthy's library prompting Lucien's book to burn along with hundreds of others. It is the last climactic point when both of them break into Latworthy mansion to find Lucian's book and find a massive multi-floored library entrapping a variety of books. In a corner, there is an iron grilled section of illegal books belonging to socially important people who are still alive. Unable to bring the imprisoned book, Emmett resorts to start the fire burning it from within. Consequently, it resolves with Lucien finally getting his memory back and both of them on a run from Castleford.

Apart from the domineering magical realistic constituents, the historical facet pervades the story as subtly and intensely as the former in the form of roles of footmen and coachmen, telegram, working for a month for sixpences and meagre number of shillings, the consumption of indigo coloured liquefied opium called Laudanum in vogue, fashion of wearing cloaks, usage of gas light to light up the town square and homes of the fortunate. The early advent of the Victorian era is quite noticeable in the style, and social societies that give this fiction a fervent taste of those times.

Conclusion

The application of magical realism in *The Binding* was creatively put and attempted aiming at 'books' to be their supernatural element, making it something eccentric and foreboding to the readers. The way each character is tied to these books and their hypnotising characteristics, an ability to keep a secret forever between the pages, is a commendable feat indeed. Both central characters are separated and get reconciled in search of their books to retain their lost memories. Alta watches her brother getting bound to save her life. The rural folk including the Farmer family despises and fears these books for it is very natural to be



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afraid of an entity and phenomena they cannot control or practice themselves. The greed of the corrupt binders who sell memories to the book readers who collect them like award-winning objects. Being a book collector and reader is frowned upon and even dreaded to a greater extent.

The class divide of the early Victorian society distinguishes the rich exploiters, factory owners and businessmen and, the wage workers, homeless wanderers, squatters and abandoned children. These books are used as means by the binders to gain memories for the big sharks that is, the avid readers and the exploited who out of poverty, freezing feet and empty mouths sell their majority of lives to earn a few shillings. The exploitation of the house servants is comprehensively conversed about in the story. Nell committing suicide after years of getting raped by the house master thrice above the teenager's age and many tens of names who now exist only in books, their memories of horror bound in books, stored to be read in the Study to 'relish' such times. For an offense by a commoner such as Emmett, the risk was to get hanged or transported to the New Lands of the west that is, America. On the other hand, upper class like the Darnays, will almost every time get out of the punishment through influence or bribery. The crude jesting about "getting his hand caught in a fan-belt" (C301) which happened quite often to the factory workers and how they would lose their arms and the jobs as well on account of being unfit for the dangerous work.

The horse is used as an animal for a range of services. for transportation in the form of carriages and carts, to single horse riders spanning miles on them, as farm animals and a mode of earning in animal husbandry. Keeping terriers for protection is a norm in the houses just like Splotch in the story. Goats are a primary source of dairy products hence, are bred and raised as farm animals as well. Rabbits and birds are



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turn into hunting games for the village children. There is an extensive and vibrant musing on the wild landscape and the sheer content and beauty of a simple mundane life. It is undeniably a rich, gothic production that explores what books have trapped in them and reminds us of the power of storytelling.

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