

# **The Magic of Everyday Things: Magic Realism in the Works of Joanne Harris**

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## **Introduction**

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Joanne Harris has frequently been referred to as a writer of magic realist fiction due to her penchant for magic, old-fashioned fairy tales and the occult. However, it is a term often repudiated by the author, who has questioned the validity and meaning of the term ‘magic realism’ altogether. When speaking at the Birmingham Book Festival in 2003, Harris claimed she was “never quite sure” about the concept of magic realism, particularly when applied to her own work. She claimed her writing style was indicative of a quaint upbringing rather than a deliberate pastiche of the magic realist narrative mode. In transcribing Harris’s speech, Serena Trowbridge claimed:

Asked if she believed in [magic realism], [Harris] said that her upbringing was by a superstitious family well versed in folklore, and that living in a haunted house has brought her to an understanding, if not quite a belief, in magic and the occult (Trowbridge, ‘The Agony Column’, 2003).

Despite Harris’s suspicion of the term, her work does demonstrate many of the key elements of magic realist fiction. Her pre-occupation with “everyday magic”, and the revelatory focus on the magic of quotidian occurrences, follows the narrative structure of magic realist fiction and aligns her work with some of the genre’s most notable writers. Her work acts as more than an exercise in traditional magic realism, however. It is infused with acute social commentaries on the role of women, food and religion in society, and considers how the binary opposites of guilt and pleasure, abstinence and fulfilment, tolerance and prejudice can coexist. It juxtaposes the typical features of the magic realist genre with modern-day ideals and a sometimes frivolous departure into fantasy and escapism.

### **The origins of magic realism**

In order to place Harris’s work in context with the wider body of magic realist fiction, it is important to understand the foundations and key concerns of the concept. The term ‘magic

'realism' was first coined by Franz Roh in 1925 in an attempt to describe new forms of painting that emerged from the Expressionism movement to re-embrace features of Realist artistic expression. It represents a dichotomy of artistic views; magic realist artists marry fantastic and mysterious images with the realities of quotidian responsibilities to present alternative views of everyday life. Guenther believes that much of this dichotomy is drawn from magic realism's status as the "child of Expressionism". Implicit in the complexity of this new genre was the fact that:

The child did not even embody one coherent style, but instead comprised numerous characteristics, new ways of seeing and depicting the familiar, the everyday. It was in effect, *ein neuer Realismus* (a new Realism)  
(Zamora and Faris, 1995, pg 33).

It is the oxymoronic nature of the concept that makes it both interesting and problematic, particularly in terms of attempting to prescribe a singular definition. As a result, 'magic realism' has been used to label a range of literary formations and narrative styles. Fantasies, fairy tales, myths and folklore narratives have all been aligned with magic realism to varying degrees, emphasising both the broad spectrum of styles that the concept encompasses and demonstrating the difficulty of assigning a specific definition to the use of magic realism as a literary mode.

### **Locating magic realism**

Perhaps more so than other literary styles, magic realism has been associated closely with specific cultures and national identities. Critics including Angel Flores and Amaryll Chanady have focused on the emergence of magic realism in Latin American writings, with the concept often cited as a tool for exploring the cultural, political and social debates rising from the countries and governments of South America. Indeed, Flores in her 1955 essay 'Magical Realism in Spanish America', claims that the novel way in which Spanish American writers created an "amalgamation of realism and fantasy" (Zamora and Faris, 1995, pg 109)

lead to their culture's prolific association with magic realist fiction. European explorations of magic realism have also been recognised, mainly building on Germanic traditions of folklore and fairy tale storytelling cultures and taking inspiration from the genre standards set by South American writers. Many critics, however, argue that this type of geographic classification offers a reductionist view of the genre. Foster, for instance, claims that magic realism should not be consigned to a particular time nor place, as its ideological and narrative value transcends cultural and stylistic boundaries:

Magical realism seems ultimately to belong with such intermediate terms as surrealism, expressionism and futurism, all of which designate movements with a significant presence in several national cultures but with no pretension to characterise an entire epoch (Zamora and Faris, 1995, pg 267).

Although writers including Laura Esquivel continue the tradition of Latin American-inspired magic realism, many contemporary authors share Foster's view, and appear to be moving away from the geographical origins of magic realism to explore how the concept can be applied to an eclectic assortment of cultures.

### **Defining magic realism**

This combination of oxymoronic terms, and the separate cultural identities that pepper magic realist texts, make offering a definitive outline of magic realism difficult. Bowers provides a limited but concise summary of the concept:

A term introduced in 1925 referring to art that attempts to produce a clear depiction of reality that includes a presentation of the mysterious elements of everyday life (Bowers, 2004, pg 130).

Indeed, magic realism works to make the mysterious real, to make quotidian fantastic, strange and preternatural occurrences. Nevertheless, this definition fails to acknowledge the

extent to which magic realism is bound up in a range of cultural and social traditions, striving to articulate the values and beliefs of its chosen societies by exaggerated and extravagant means. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B Faris have produced a comprehensive collection of essays on various themes of magic realism in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Within the collection, Faris offers a detailed definition of magic realism, suggesting that the genre comprises five key components. In 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', Faris claims that magic realist texts feature an irreducible element of magic; a detailed presence of the phenomenal world; contradictory understandings of events; the near-merging of two worlds or realms; and an embedded questioning of ideas about time, space and identity (Zamora and Faris, 1995, pg 163-187). These definitions highlight the complexity of magic realism and its artistic scope as a narrative mode. Foregrounding the genre's capacity for ideological and creative experimentation, these definitions also recognise the subversive nature of magic realism, its ability to present alternative views and to challenge accepted perceptions of natural and social laws.

### **Categorising magic realism**

Although the origins and features of magic realism have been fervently debated, two clear categories of the concept have emerged: ontological and epistemological magic realism. Ontological magic realism is grounded firmly in the culture of its setting, with the beliefs and practices embedded within it sourced from the culture in which it is staged. Epistemological magic realism, a term developed by Echevarria in 1974, has much more diverse source materials and takes inspiration from beliefs, practices and cultures that are not necessarily part of the text's nor writer's own cultural experiences. Each category analyses the beliefs and practices of its focus in magical terms, distorting accepted perceptions to reveal the fantastic idiosyncrasies that the author associates with those cultural forms.

## **Harris's interpretation of magic realism**

Harris's writing contains many of the staple components of magic realism. A belief in the occult, characters charged with extraordinary abilities, an innate tension between two societies and an underlying fascination with myths and folklore all feature within her work. Her writing is occupied with exploring the stylistic variations provided within the boundaries of magic realism itself, testing the narrative potential of both the ontological and epistemological approaches to magic realist fiction. *Chocolat*, for instance, takes as its subject the social and religious values of the Lansquenet villagers and pits them against Vianne's brand of tempting confectionery. Although Harris draws on references to other cultures, *Chocolat* pivots on the tension between the dogmatic beliefs imposed by Father Reynaud and the much more liberal attitude personified by Vianne's chocolaterie and her magical abilities. *Holy Fools* veers more towards an epistemological approach as it references an eclectic range of cultures. Based firmly around the carnivalesque tradition and festive culture, it mixes circus acts with religious ceremonies, gypsy lifestyles with the austerity of the convent. Costumes, role play and actors help to distort the reality of the novel, challenging the reader to distinguish between the protagonists' true characters and those they adopt as part of the troupe of performing artists.

Reviewing magic within the quotidian constraints of small French villages places Harris steadily within the ideological boundaries of magic realist fiction, and her quest to write about magic in realist terms pays obvious debts to the body of fiction gone before her. This dissertation shall attempt to place Harris's work within the canon of magic realist literature, considering how she simultaneously borrows from and builds on the traditions of magic realism established throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Looking specifically at *Blackberry Wine*, *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools*, the dissertation will review the presentation of the magic woman, food and religion in each of the novels and consider the social commentaries and literary styles explored within each theme. Overall, the dissertation will attempt to analyse Harris's unique contribution to the magic realist genre, with a focus on her ability to juxtapose the social and cultural ideologies of the concept with her own contemporary concerns.

## The Magic Woman

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The female protagonists of Harris's novels are strong, powerful and sexual. They have an intrinsic allegiance with the natural world and an uncompromising awareness of their own innate abilities. These accomplishments are showcased in various guises across the course of Harris's work; culinary expertise, physical agility, horticultural skill and a knack for the performing arts are all proficiencies accredited to Harris's female characters. However, permeated beneath these personal attributes are characteristics that categorise the protagonists as 'magic women'. The ability to foretell future events; to read the thoughts of other characters; to predict the favourite chocolates of new customers; the use of cantrips and forked fingers to ward off the ill wishes of one's enemies - these are all crafts mastered by Harris's 'magic women' and are all characteristics seeped in the historical and sociological connotations of witchcraft, evil and magic. This chapter shall discuss the role of the 'magic woman' in Harris's work, looking at how the author has built on traditional literary portrayals of magic women and the social, ideological and gendered commentaries her exploration of the theme offers to a contemporary audience.

### Exploring witchcraft

Harris's novels contain a self-conscious awareness of the social and literary connotations of witchcraft that have gone before her. The novels *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools* are her most prolific in terms of tackling the perceptions and social significance of witchcraft and magic women. They are constantly attuned to the potency of the terms 'witchcraft' and 'magic' and of the repercussions of such accusations being levelled at women. The opening chapters of *Holy Fools* set out the significance of witchcraft and magic within the context of the novel's seventeenth-century setting, evoking the fear and social threat provoked by the terms. Juliette recalls the dreaded jurisdiction of Judge Rèmy, who boasts of killing two thousand witches in nine countries before bringing his punishments to the village of Epinal. Harris encapsulates the danger of accusation in these chapters and demonstrates the way in which hysteria could implicate any ostracised group in the wake of a natural disaster:

Players, travellers and gypsies have always been useful scapegoats for any misfortune, be it crop failure, famine, bad weather or plague (*Holy Fools*, pg 81).

Nevertheless, it appears that witches are the most popular scapegoats in this environment (four women alone were burnt the previous month for accusations of witchcraft), and that poisoning, spells and tampering with the natural order are explanations much easier to accept than scientific or rational conclusions:

Witchcraft was what they believed in: witchcraft and poisoning. It's all there, in the Bible. Why look any further? (*Holy Fools*, pg 82).

The negative associations of witchcraft have been explored through various social and artistic means for centuries. Harris's work borrows from and builds on these literary traditions and, to some extent, relies on the reader's previous perceptions of the term to analyse it fully. Richard Cavendish's *A History of Magic* provides a detailed account of how magic has been used across time to expose the insecurities and fears of human nature, while simultaneously revealing some of its greatest strengths. Cavendish explains how magic can be segmented into the distinctions of 'white' and 'black' magic (the former working with natural ingredients for altruistic means, while the latter works on more avaricious and 'evil' principles). However, the association of women with any form of magical activities has historically, in both a literary and social sense, been viewed as negative:

Witches could kill or injure people and cattle, drive victims mad, ruin crops, stir up storms, provoke lust or hinder love...They reversed all normal and decent values, revelling in evil, blood and dirt (Cavendish, 1990, pg 32).

Much of the fear of the miscreant witch is derived from her innate prowess. While male magicians were, Cavendish argues, often viewed as artisans of magic, as people that worked

actively to tame nature, female witches were accredited with an intrinsic ability to yield power over nature:

Witches worked their magic through the power of their goddess, but they might also possess innate powers of their own and many of them were believed to have the evil eye. They used incantations and images, herbs, poisons and all sorts of materials which had magic force in proportion to their peculiarity and repulsiveness (Cavendish, 1990, pg 33).

In her novels, Harris chooses to embrace these negative charges and undermines the disapproving social connotations they contain by doing so. It is because, rather than in spite, of these abilities that her magic women, Vianne and Juliette, are powerful; it is these abilities that enable them to fight the dogmatic and socially dangerous forces that challenge their existence throughout the course of *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools*. Harris has consciously embraced the historical connotations of witchcraft and recategorised them as positive attributes. Vianne's ability to guess customers' favourite chocolates or Juliette's use of incantations to ward off LeMerle are not portrayed as deviant or evil actions. Indeed, Harris encourages her reader to see such actions as rituals that protect her characters rather than talents that are put to evil use.

### **Subverting social orders**

In adopting the negative connotations of witchcraft as protective and nurturing actions, Harris creates a tolerant text in which the reader is encouraged to embrace the characters ostracised by the dominant societies of each novel. This narrative approach aligns Harris further with the traditional ideologies of magic realism, as she works to subvert the accepted social order by giving a voice to disenfranchised characters that exist on the fringes of their worlds' prescribed social constructs. Amaryll Chanady has described magic realism as a "tolerant type of fiction" in recognition of its illumination of outcast groups. Chanady argues that the narrative point of view in magic realist texts relies upon "an absence of obvious

judgements about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of world views expressed by the characters in the text" (Bowers, 2004, pg 4).

Indeed, Harris provides a platform from which her characters can reveal their truths independently rather than scrutinising their actions, beliefs and values from the outset. The story of Vianne's mother and her death, for instance, is revealed over the course of the novel, with Vianne allowed the time to unravel the truth of the story to the reader organically. Conversely, Harris also encourages her reader to challenge the narratives of her characters and exposes their extravagant tales as fictions created to fuel the exotic connotations attributed to them. Joe in *Blackberry Wine*, for example, is introduced as a world traveller who has experienced a broad range of cultures and societies from across the globe in his youth. These tall tales, however, are based not on physical travels but on Joe's collection of *National Geographic* magazines and his vivid imagination. In offering these contrasting examples, Harris further explores the realms of magic realism and of the possible. Although Joe's world travels are not authentic in a physical sense, the reader is encouraged to accept his reasoning that "astral travel" (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 163) transported him to the foreign lands of his stories. We are therefore pushed to question the reality of Harris's novels but also to embrace the fantastical means with which she explains them.

### **Myths of magic and witchcraft**

The magic powers of Harris's female protagonists are not expressed as a product of vicious or malicious motivations. In fact, they are employed wholly for benign and fairly domestic purposes: as modern-day complementary therapies; as a means of nurturing and comforting through food; and, ultimately, as a means of protecting one's friends and family. Harris's contemporary reader is acutely aware of the attributes that denote a witch, being exposed to fairy tales and folklore narratives that vilify witches as child-killers, social deviants and sexual predators from an early age. Harris makes explicit references to the cannon of childhood narratives in *Chocolat* and makes clear to the reader the potency and significance of those tales to her female protagonists. When Father Reynaud recounts his childish fear of

the ‘Hanzel and Gretel’ tale, it is clear that the morality and social values expressed in that story are directly influencing his perceptions of Vianne and her chocolaterie:

When I was a child I used to listen in terror to the story of the gingerbread house, of the witch who tempted little children in and ate them (*Chocolat*, pg 305).

Harris’s subversion of these accepted stereotypes therefore makes a strong statement to a contemporary reader: she is out to challenge not only the tropes associated with the accepted literary portrayal of a witch, but to challenge the accepted portrayals of women as a whole. In *Chocolat*, for example, Harris appears to draw comparisons between the social reaction to a witch and a single mother. Vianne’s single status is met by the Lansquenet villagers with as much distaste and scorn as her magical abilities and liberal attitude. Her correction of Father Reynaud that she is in fact *Mademoiselle* Rocher rather than *Madame* Rocher reveals Father Reynaud’s “disapproval” of Vianne (*Chocolat*, pg 50). Vianne’s single status and rejection of the prescribed family structure contributes to her ‘witchness’ as it, along with her liberal inclusion of gypsies, encouragement of Armande’s rebellious behaviour and support of Josephine’s escape from her husband, is indicative of the direct challenge she poses to the dogmatic social order and hierarchy advocated by Father Reynaud and Lansquenet’s other conservative residents.

### **Fairy tale traditions**

In drawing on fairy tale narratives, Harris creates a sense of literary history in her novels and engages her reader with tales he or she has encountered multiple times in his or her childhood. In a 2003 interview with Harris, Melanie Ashby raised the inclusion of fairy tales in Harris’s work, claiming that Harris’s appeal lies in her “inventive revisiting of the fairy tale for adults” (‘Mslexia’, 2003). Consequently, when embarking on Harris’s work the reader feels part of a literary memory that evokes narratives, characters and tales from his or her childhood and is invited to interrogate such narratives as an adult. Angela Carter, in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, encounters this adult perception of fairy tale

narratives. Carter argues that fairy tales “are part of a continuity with a past that is in many respects now alien to us, and becoming more so day by day” (Carter, 2000, pg x). This chronological distancing from the fantasy of fairy tales affords an adult reader, as Carter terms it, an “affectionate scepticism” (Carter, 2000, pg x) with which to judge the gendered, social and political themes embedded within the seemingly benign childhood fables.

Fairy tales act as a means of escapism and of expressing the creativity and fantastical ideas of magic realism. Alicia Ostriker, in reviewing Anne Sexton’s contemporary reworking of the Grimm fairy tales in the poetry collection *Transformations*, argues that the appeal of fairy tales is essentially amoral but bound in a fascination with irrationality and artistic and social freedom:

[Fairy tales] are, as the central fact of magic in them partially indicates, rooted in and addressed to something less rational in our natures than the impulse toward social reform (Colburn, 1998, pg 268).

Harris’s female characters, those which she associates explicitly with the infamous icons of fairy tale culture, are appealing because they express a sense of freedom and offer an alternative to linear means of thought, social behaviour and morality. Although they are often perceived as immoral by conservative bystanders, their behaviour, like those of the fairy tale characters, is amoral in its essence; they advocate only the right to choose one’s social path rather than recruiting followers to a more deviant way of life.

It is important to recognise that fairy tales and fantastic narratives are social constructs themselves. They offer an alternative view of reality but also reveal the values that a society holds dear through the actions they categorise as deviant and as moral, and by the social groups they embrace and those they ostracise. In *Breaking the Magic Spell*, Jack Zipes analyses the social function of fairy tales and argues that, at their heart, they offer power to disenfranchised classes:

Folk and fairy tales have always spread word through their fantastic images about the feasibility of utopian alternatives, and this is exactly why the dominant social classes have been vexed by them...so it is not by chance that the culture industry has sought to tame, regulate and instrumentalise the fantastic projections of these tales (Zipes, 1979, pg 3).

Father Reynaud's connection of Vianne with fairy tale narratives therefore becomes a socio-political act, whereby he identifies her with a particular social class and as a threat to his own social position simply because of her use of the rituals that have been exaggerated and vilified in fairy tales.

### **Magic mothers**

Motherhood plays a significant role in Harris's work and she strives to create a sense of maternal lineage throughout her novels. Vianne and Juliette contemplate the relationship they each had with their mothers in the course of *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools* and it is clear that the mother-daughter relationship has been the most significant in both of their lives. Despite the fact that Vianne and Juliette's mothers are dead before the opening of each novel, the texts are coloured with memories and recollections of the two women:

Only the eye of love could recall her as I do, so sweet and so strong, her beauty crystallising in my mind so that she is far lovelier than Clémentine or the Holy Mother herself (*Holy Fools*, pg 109).

Comparable not even to the Holy Mother, the mothers of the two characters are elevated above all other women and are clearly the architects of their daughters' personalities, values and social behaviour. Their mothers are also the source of their magical talents, with the use of cantrips and herbal remedies remembered as rituals passed down through maternal influence. Vianne overtly recognises her mother's magical power, stating expressly in the opening of the novel that "my mother was a witch" and that it was "from her that [Vianne]

learned what shaped [her]" (*Chocolat*, pg 44). In recounting the skills nurtured by her mother, Vianne lists a collection of magic-based rituals alongside her mother's liberal lust for travel and new experiences:

The art of turning bad luck into good. The forking of the fingers to divert the path of malchance. The sewing of a sachet, brewing of a draught, the conviction that a spider brings good luck before midnight and bad luck after. Most of all she gave me her love of new places (*Chocolat*, pg 44).

This episode of *Chocolat* is significant in two ways. Firstly, it pushes forward Harris's magic realism agenda by cataloguing Vianne and her mother's magical activities in a nonchalant manner, accepting them as quotidian elements of their daily lives. As Bowers observes, "magic realism relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings" (Bowers, 2004, pg 3). Vianne's straight-forward recounting of her mother's magical skills - which she has now mastered - therefore fuels the novel's representation of fantastic, magical concepts as everyday occurrences. Secondly, the episode acknowledges the accomplishments of Vianne's mother that exist outside of the qualities traditionally associated with motherhood. Although the episode is recounted in the context of a mother passing on her skills to her daughter, it focuses on competencies beyond the domestic realm, of activities and adventures outside the sphere of domesticity usually assigned to mothers. As Sceats explains:

The maternal role in western society is ambiguous, if not ambivalent; mothers are overwhelmingly powerful but at the same time are socially and domestically disempowered by their nurturing, serving role (Sceats, 2000, pg 11).

Mothers yield power through their ability to create and nurture life but those same abilities mean that they have been traditionally constrained to the domestic realms, often prohibited or excluded from other social spheres. Harris recognises the nurturing skills and, indeed, failures

of the mothers in her novels but she also accredits them with abilities unique to their own personalities and those which complement rather than hinder their maternal instincts. Magic realism, in this context, acts as a tool with which to empower female characters. The mystical and fantastic characteristics it comprises bring with them a power that offers a personal and social freedom. Once again, Harris's use of magic realist concepts offers a tolerant narrative through which the strength and power of 'magic women' is expressed.

### **Bohemian promiscuity**

In contrast with the other women featured in Harris's novels, magic women are presented as overtly sexual beings. They possess an acute sense of their own sensuality and have a liberal perspective on sexual activities and relationships. Both Vianne and Juliette are uncertain of the paternity of their daughters and their first sexual experiences are undertaken with limited naivety. The women's attitude to sexual activity borders on the nonchalant, accepting it as part of their being and existence rather than viewing it with prudish shame or discomfort. Vianne, for example, likens her sexual experiences with nature and appears to reject any stigma associated with her self-confessed promiscuity:

[Anouk's] father never knew her - nor am I sure which one he was in the  
wilting daisy-chain of my brief encounters. It doesn't matter. I could have  
peeled an apple at midnight and thrown the rind over my shoulder to know  
his initial, but I never cared enough to do it. Too much ballast slows  
us down (*Chocolat*, pg 46).

This passage raises various issues associated with Harris's portrayal of magic women. Firstly, she has forged overt links between female sexual promiscuity and magic. Vianne's magical abilities and fecundity appear to be entwined in the passage, as Harris juxtaposes sexual experience with mysterious rituals. In making these associations, Harris once again references classical portrayals of witches and magic women. As Cavendish argues:

The witch is sexually voracious and is often described working magic to ensnare men she desired. She also casts spells for clients, frequently in connection with sexual matters (Cavendish, 1990, pg 35).

In mastering their sexual prowess, magic women possess the power to command men and dictate the course of love for their often unwitting contemporaries. Harris's work adopts a slightly different approach when tackling sexuality. Vianne and Juliette do indeed understand their sexual resources and how to use them but, in *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools*, those sexual powers appear to yield more control in the social rather than sexual spheres. Father Reynaud, for instance, admits to dreaming about Vianne and it is clear from his description of the vision that her sexual image is transposed with her social rebellion:

I dreamed of her last night. Oh, no not a voluptuous dream, but one of incomprehensible menace. It is the sense of disorder which she brings, père, which so unnerves me. That wildness (*Chocolat*, pg 159).

For Father Reynaud, Vianne's threat to his community is expressed explicitly in her "wildness", a term that encapsulates all of the social deviance contained in her character: her sexuality and promiscuity; her liberal attitude to other ostracised groups; and her rejection of religious dogma.

In *Holy Fools*, Harris takes a more explicit approach to sexuality. While Vianne's promiscuity is described with magic-infused euphemisms in *Chocolat*, Juliette's sexual experiences are explained in more literal terms. She speaks directly of her sexual frustrations and desires, of the way in which the all-female environment of the nunnery stifles her sense of freedom:

The hot weather, the sleepless nights, the dreams of LeMerle...I needed a man. That was all. L'Ailée had a different lover every night, choosing as she would - smooth or rough, dark or fair - and her dreams were scented and

textured with their bodies (*Holy Fools*, pg 106).

Like Vianne, Juliette expresses neither shame nor regret about her sexual promiscuity and revels in the satisfaction her sexual exploits provide. She embraces her sexual desires as part of her womanhood and offers no excuses for her want to be with a man. Vianne and Juliette both link nature and artistic accomplishment to sex, creating a lineage between their bohemian lifestyles and their sexual histories:

Juliette, too, was a sensual creature: Giordano scolded her for bathing naked in the rivers, for rolling in the morning grass and for the secret hours she spent with his Latin poets, struggling with the unfamiliar syntax for the sake of the occasional taut glimpse of Roman buttock...(*Holy Fools*, pg 106).

### **The act of gender**

Juliette is portrayed in three guises in *Holy Fools*: as acrobat L'Ailée; as troupe regular Juliette; and as dour nun Soeur Auguste. It is interesting that the level of sensuality demonstrated by Juliette changes in relation to the guise she adopts. L'Ailée, as the extravagant circus player who marvels crowds with her acrobatic agility, is more promiscuous and thrives on the revelries of her flamboyant role by taking a different man to her bed after each performance. Single mother Juliette is devoted to her daughter but still acknowledges her own sexual desires and need for a male companion. Soeur Auguste, however, is unable to demonstrate or act upon any sexual desires and is suppressed by the abstinence advocated at the nunnery:

But I - Soeur Auguste, a man's name and an old man, at that - what do I have?  
Since Fleur there have been no more men. I might have turned to women for comfort, like Germaine and Clémentine, but those pleasures never appealed to me (*Holy Fools*, pg 106).

In presenting Juliette in three different guises, Harris demonstrates the complexity of her female characters and the extent to which their personae are shaped by their societies. Juliette's sexual desires are not removed when she becomes Soeur Auguste; merely they are repressed because the chaste environment of the convent demands it.

The ideas of multiple female personae and performance with which Harris peppers her portrayal of Juliette echo the theories presented by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler considers how women and the feminine are represented on a textual, physiological and theoretical level, arguing that certain roles, functions and actions are consigned to the concept of 'femininity' prescribed by a male-dominated, heterosexual society. In particular, Butler refers to gender as an "act" that "requires a performance that is *repeated*" (Butler, 1990, pg 140) in order to maintain its authority. She claims it is the repetition of this act that underlies all concepts of gender:

If gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (Butler, 1990, pg 141).

It is apparent in Harris's work that gender, or at least the identities of her female characters, are constructed and are limited to the connotations held within those constructs. Vianne, for instance, must work to redeem herself from the fairy tale witch image that Father Reynaud attributes to her through his memories of gingerbread houses and other fantastic tales. Conversely, Juliette must embrace the behavioural models, values and ideals prescribed by each of her three guises in order to survive, or remain unnoticed, in the worlds each character occupies.

## Carnivalesque traditions and performance

The carnivalesque tradition is evoked through Juliette's lifestyle and sexuality. Her performances in the *Théâtre des Ciues* are akin to the staged traditions of the carnivalesque culture in which groups of performers would act out the social fantasies of their observers, often distorting momentarily the boundaries of social hierarchy, gender and reality. As Peter Stallybrass describes, the carnivalesque promotes:

A world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning, and excess, where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled  
(Bowers, 2004, pg 71).

This sense of distortion and transposed reality bears obvious similarities with magic realism, and many magic realist authors have absorbed carnivalesque concepts into their work. Bowers argues that magic realism texts encourage the "carnivalesque atmosphere" as they "rely upon a reversal of categories in which the magical becomes real and the real becomes magical" (Bowers, 2004, pg 70). In offering three guises and versions of Juliette, Harris distorts the reality of her novel through carnivalesque means. Juliette is at once three different women and adopts costumes, masks and accessories to carry out her performance in those roles. The carnivalesque is rooted in the basest of human actions and Juliette's overtly sexual narrative, which focuses on romantic as well as physical sexual desire, once again links Harris's text with the carnivalesque tradition. Robert Stam has observed that this acknowledgement of base human functions adds to the liberation afforded by carnivalesque, and, subsequently, magic realist, fictions:

By focusing on the shared physiological processes of bodily life - copulation, birth, eating, drinking, defecation - the carnivalesque aesthetic offers a temporary suspension of hierarchy and prohibition (Stam, 2005, pg 327).

In showcasing the sensuality and sexual desires of Juliette in the context of a carnivalesque atmosphere, Harris is therefore able to explore the complexities of her magic woman and contribute to the magic realist aspects of her writing.

This chapter has explored Harris's portrayal of magic women. It has demonstrated that Harris's characterisation of magic women is founded on historical and cultural ideas of witches and magic, but that her magic protagonists - Vianne and Juliette - are also explored in relation to contemporary concerns, including single motherhood, sexuality and the complex demands of the female role. Magic realism fuels this characterisation and Harris utilises the subversive ingredients of the concept to propel her analysis of the role of the magic woman and the ideologies that inform it. The following chapter, 'Food, Consumption and Magic', will discuss the use of food in Harris's writing and its contribution to her exploration of magic realism.

## **Food, Consumption and Magic**

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Like Harris's exploration of the magic woman, the use of food in her novels is tied up in commentaries on femininity, motherhood and sensuality. It is a key ingredient in her investigation of magic realism and contributes to the sense of fantasy and magic within her writing. Following in the traditions of such novels as *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, Harris mixes food preparation, cooking and culinary experimentation with the everyday occurrences of her characters' lives. Her descriptions of such activities are charged with an evocative, luxurious vocabulary that emphasises the sensuality attributed to cooking and eating, and one which foregrounds the potency of cooking in shaping the lives and social status of her characters. This chapter will review the significance of food in Harris's novels, considering in detail how her culinary narrative contributes to her ongoing exploration of magic realism.

### **Appetite for magic**

Food is linked explicitly to magic from the beginning of Harris's novels. Her food trilogy, as the author has termed them, *Blackberry Wine*, *Chocolat* and *Five Quarters of the Orange* often refer to food as an additional character, as a personified element that plays as much of a role in each story as the key protagonists. Harris charges her descriptions of food and the cookery process with magical traits and offers an apparently self-conscious nod to the theoretical concepts of magic realism in doing so. Vianne in *Chocolat* and Joe in *Blackberry Wine* both pay homage to the "everyday magic" (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 55) and "layman's magic" (*Chocolat*, pg 64) that is embedded in the food and wine they cultivate. These terms echo the definition of magic realism offered by Bowers whereby the term "includes a presentation of the mysterious elements of everyday life" (Bowers, 2004, pg 131). They reflect the acceptance of magical events as part of the quotidian fabric of life, as explored in the definition of magic realist fictions offered by Zamora and Faris:

In [magic realist texts], the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it *is* an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence - admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalising. It is a simple matter of the most complicated sort (Zamora and Faris, 1995, pg 3).

Eating and drinking act as great levellers that are reminiscent of our baser instincts and physiological needs. In *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Sarah Sceats argues that dialogues about eating intrinsically recognise the social significance of food:

Food is our centre, necessary for survival and inextricably connected with social function. What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food and why - even who they eat - are of crucial significance to an understanding of human society (Sceats, 2000, pg 1).

Food therefore offers a canvas on which a magic realist writer can explore the very essence of everyday occurrences and provides a tool with which to analyse the realist acceptance of magical events.

### **Gastronomic metaphors**

Harris has acknowledged the extent to which the metaphors in her work are fuelled by images, encounters and actions associated with food and drink. In a 2001 interview with Dennis Lythgoe, Harris outlined succinctly the food metaphors distributed throughout her food trilogy:

Each food stands for a different metaphor. Chocolate stood for tolerance and enjoyment, blackberries stood for changes from the past and the orange is a metaphor for hatred and is used as a weapon (Lythgoe, *Deseret News*, 20 May 2001).

These metaphors exist outside of the realms of magic realism as they rely neither on distorted realities nor mystical powers but simply on the flavours, emotions and connotations evoked by food and drink.

This linear metaphorical style has led some critics to argue that Harris has failed to capitalise on the creativity offered by magic realism, instead favouring the more realist commentaries offered through the use of gastronomic metaphors. Nancy Willard, for example, has observed that “magic abounds in [*Chocolat*], but don’t look for the magic realism of *Like Water for Chocolate*” (Willard, *The New York Times*, 7 March 1999). *Chocolat* owes obvious debts to Laura Esquivel’s 1989 novel *Like Water for Chocolate*. Esquivel takes as her subject the domestic lives of the women of a Mexican family and uses recipes, food preparation and eating as symbols through which to articulate her characters’ emotions and inner thoughts. However, where Harris’s use of food in *Chocolat* is linked to magic and to the magical occurrences in the novel, Esquivel presents food as the vehicle through which magic is exclusively conducted. For instance, Bowers has noted how the food of the protagonist, Tita, “communicates her emotions to such an extent that the people who eat it enact her emotions for her” (Bowers, 2004, pg 46). This action, as Bowers argues, extends metaphors into a “real state” and consequently into the realm of magic realism. However, in spite of Willard’s observations, one can see that Harris’s work offers some exposure to this concept of the “real state”. *Blackberry Wine*, for instance, offers a similar sense of magic realism through the effects of Joe’s ‘Specials’, the six-bottle brew infused with magic. In lamenting the consumption of the last of the ‘Specials’, Jay recalls how the concoction can be used to “[get] people to tell [him] things” (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 322). The potency and magical influence of the ‘Specials’ is noted as well by the personified narrator, who claims that, by the end of the novel, they “were in everything now, the ‘Specials’ - in the air, the ground, the lovers” (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 321). In *Chocolat*, also, Vianne admits to “scrying with chocolate” (*Chocolat*, pg 124), an act that contributes to the list of magic rituals she and her mother performed to protect themselves but one that does not provoke the sense of supernatural occultism presented in Esquivel’s writing. Arguably, Harris’s use of food in a magic realist

sense can be summarised as a delicate balance between elaborate, fantastical events and traditional magic rituals.

### Magical menus

The magical nature of food is reiterated throughout Harris's work, with her characters constantly championing the extraordinary properties offered by gastronomic exploration. Vianne, in fact, offers a detailed description of the cookery process as a means of defending its significance as a form of everyday magic, and as a valid alternative to her mother's more supernatural practices:

There is a kind of sorcery in all cooking: in the choosing of ingredients, the process of mixing, grating, melting, infusing and flavouring, the recipes taken from ancient books, the traditional utensils - the pestle and mortar with which my mother made her incense turned to a more homely purpose, her spices and aromatics giving up their subtleties to a baser, more sensual magic (*Chocolat*, pg 62).

Despite its homely and baser purposes, cookery is magically charged in Harris's novels and offers an equivalent, but perhaps less socially deviant, source of power to traditional forms of magic. Joe's 'Specials' are treated with the same mysterious allurement that Harris applies to Vianne's confectionery, assigning them with both a sense of luxury and magic:

But inside [the 'Specials'] was a hive of secrets. There was no escaping them; their whisperings, their catcalls, their laughter...And yet there was an appealing impudence to these six freebooters, a hectic clash of flavours and images to send more sober vintages reeling (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 10).

Creating a narrator from one of the 'Specials' adds to the magical connotations attributed to Joe's wine. The novel opens with the axiom that "Wine talks. Everyone knows that"; once this

reality is established, the reader is lead through the story on the unquestionable assumption that the wine bottle is a lucid, informative and reliable narrator. The personification of the wine bottle, and the logic and intelligence attributed to the character of the animated drink, is magic realist in essence as it disrupts the reader's understanding of reality and reverses normal realist standards. Faris's essay 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', which reviews the impact of early magic realist writing on postmodern authors and readers, offers some interesting insights into the effects of the manipulation of "textual life". She argues that magic realist authors reverse ideas of "materiality" in order to facilitate a metaphor (or metaphors) on the presence or existence of that material world:

The material world is present in all its detailed and concrete variety as it is in realism - but with several differences, one of them being that objects may take on lives of their own and become magical in that way...This materiality extends to word-objects as metaphors, and they too take on a special sort of textual life, reappearing over and over again until the weight of their verbal reality more than equals that of their referential function (Zamora and Faris, 1995, pg 170).

The 'Specials' narrator - via the way in which it offers both a verbal reality and magic function - is consequently a key feature of Harris's fantastic narrative and paramount in her exploration of the traditions of the magic realist genre, specifically those that feature dialogues on presence and absence.

### **Layman's alchemy**

Alchemy plays a large part in Harris's portrayal of food in her novels. *Chocolat* and *Blackberry Wine* make constant references to the alchemy evident in food-making processes, and of the chemical reactions that occur during cooking. We have already seen how Vianne acknowledges the sorcery embedded in the cookery process, and this analogy is extended further when she alerts the reader to the transformative properties of food:

There is a kind of alchemy in the transformation of base chocolate into this wise fool's gold, a layman's magic which even my mother might have relished (*Chocolat*, pg 64).

Such descriptions encourage the reader to view an everyday, mundane occurrence like food preparation as a magical transformation of rudimentary ingredients into luxurious, opulent confectioneries that provide sensual satisfaction and fulfilment. Magic realism as a concept is challenged somewhat by this portrayal. Magic realism works to present the occult and mystic as commonplace affairs, but Harris's presentation of "layman's magic" strives to highlight the magical properties of quotidian activities. She foregrounds the miraculous, transformative powers enclosed in the cookery process, powers that are often disguised to a modern reader by the banality of the act of cooking.

Joe's activities are very much tied up in the idea of "layman's magic" and focus on the magical properties offered by the materials, equipment and ingredients that surround him. He encourages Jake to utilise the natural materials at his disposal in order to strengthen existing defences and reinforce Jake's own abilities. Joe's magic is alchemic in regards to the way in which it combines an eclectic and multi-cultural collection of rituals, beliefs and customs from a variety of cultures, echoing the heterogeneous ideology of epistemological magic realism:

With Joe, Chinese medicine rubbed shoulders companionably with English folklore, chemistry with mysticism...Everyday magic, that was what Joe called it. Layman's alchemy (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 55).

Harris highlights this chemistry persistently in *Blackberry Wine* and reiterates the concept of the layman's input in this chemical equation throughout the novel. She creates the sense that the ingredients, herbs and potions concocted by Vianne and Joe are not necessarily magic in themselves but provoke magical effects when mixed with the emotions and personalities of their consumers. In essence, the alchemy occurs when the characters come in contact with

the food and drink, when the chemistry is sparked by the consumption of the carefully prepared and delicately crafted wine and confectionery:

Jay thinks of it as destiny. Joe called it magic. But sometimes all it is is simple chemistry, something in the air, a single action to bring something which has long remained inert into sudden, inevitable change. Layman's alchemy, Joe called it. The magic of everyday things (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 17).

Harris's writing establishes food and drink as the means of viewing the "magic of everyday things". By foregrounding the alchemic properties of culinary processes, she promotes the idea that magic and the mundane can coexist, concluding that magic and reality are not as opposed as her reader might imagine.

### **Food and femininity**

Harris's commentary on food and the properties it possesses is associated strongly with ideas of femininity and sensuality. *Chocolat*, for instance, examines the role played by food in women's lives and the significance of food preparation in shaping the social function of female characters. Vianne notes how her enthusiasm for cooking met with disdain from her mother, who preferred more supernatural and transient forms of magic:

To [my mother], food was no pleasure but a tiresome necessity to be worried over, a tax on the price of our freedom (*Chocolat*, pg 62).

To Vianne, food is a homely and domestic influence, an anchor that provides some stability in the mist of her mother's constant roaming from one country to the next. While she appreciates the artistry, craft and flavours of culinary mastery, Vianne is drawn to cookery because of the connotations of domesticity and comfort it contains; she claims recipes and thoughts of food "give weight to [her] wanderings" (*Chocolat*, pg 296). Vianne arguably takes on the role of food provider so vehemently because of the lack of stability and maternal support offered by her mother. Sceats has noted that contemporary women writers have worked to critique the

historical assumption that women and mothers are food providers and nurturers, striving instead to analyse how “the importance of good mothering, its personal inadequacy, wickedness or the impossible and contradictory demands of the role itself” are promoted through the mother’s relationship with food (Sceats, 2000, pg 12). Harris interrogates these contradictions to reveal the often hypocritical demands placed on mothers. However, her characterisation of women - particularly Vianne - demonstrates that these historically and socially constructed myths of motherhood are often perpetuated by women themselves, with Vianne striving to rectify the ‘maternal inadequacies’ exercised by her own mother.

### **Public and private consumption**

Vianne’s relationship with food is interesting when considering the gastronomic history she has inherited from her mother. Her mother viewed Vianne’s interest in food with “indulgent contempt” (*Chocolat*, pg 62) and, when recollecting her nomadic childhood, it is clear that Vianne’s early food experiences took place in restaurants, bakeries and other take-away outlets. Vianne’s childhood food encounters are consequently set firmly in the public arena, with non-family members serving food and witnessing its consumption. *Food and Cultural Studies* explores the relationship between the public and private consumption of food and argues that private food activities are indicative of familial relationships:

‘Home-cooked’ meals are seen as imbued with the warmth, intimacy and personal touch which are seen as markers of the private sphere and in opposition to foods which are the products of a public, industrialised and anonymous system of food production (Ashley, Hollows, Jones and Taylor, 2004, pg 124).

The food that Vianne consumed as a child, and the food that her mother provided, was steeped in such anonymity, lacking the personal and homemade properties of the chocolate she now produces. Chocolate provides an alternative both to this gastronomic inadequacy

and to the often “intrusive” magic (*Chocolate*, pg 63) that Vianne’s mother prescribes; it offers instead a sense of security and comfort:

Now making chocolate is a different matter. Oh, some skill is required. A certain lightness of touch, speed, a patience my mother would never have had. But the formula remains the same every time. It is safe. Harmless. And I do not have to look into their hearts and take what I need; these are wishes which can be granted simply, for the asking (*Chocolat*, pg 63).

Food becomes a signal through which Vianne simultaneously accepts and rejects her maternal inheritance. She embraces her eclectic, public gastronomic childhood by becoming a caterer and serving food to patrons in the public arena, subsequently continuing the external relationship with food introduced by her mother. On the other hand, she rejects the magical teachings of her mother that require extreme intrusion into another person’s life, those that require her to “look into their hearts and take what [she] needs” (*Chocolat*, pg 63). Chocolate becomes an interesting collaboration of familial tradition and next-generation innovation, a hybrid product that mixes the foundations of Vianne’s childhood with the values, lessons and ideas collected in her adulthood. It echoes Harris’s approach to magic realism, as the author merges staple ingredients of the genre with contemporary issues, narrative styles and concerns.

The public and private categories of food have been recognised as signifiers of social class. Eating out is a privilege often reserved only for those in the middle and upper classes that can afford to spend money on luxurious and extravagant menus; equally, eating in or home-cooking is traditionally associated with working class backgrounds and with those with little or no disposable income. *Food and Cultural Studies* recognises this class-based understanding of food, arguing that the bourgeoisie experience of eating and food provision “produces a disposition towards food which forsakes the ‘immediate’ satisfactions of eating and the ‘biological need’ to eat, in a preference towards ‘light’ and ‘refined’ foods...and for ‘quality’ over ‘quantity’. They are more concerned with the style, presentation and aesthetic

qualities of food" (Ashley, Hollows, Jones and Taylor, 2004, pg 122). Although there is a clear delineation between the private and public spheres of eating in Harris's work, her writing does not prescribe to this paradigm of class-based consumption. In fact, it works to reverse these polarised stereotypes: it is Vianne that is concerned with the style, presentation and aesthetic qualities of food in *Chocolat*, taking care to select only the best ingredients for her confectionery:

I only use the best...Some confectioners buy their supplies already tempered, but I like to do it myself. There is an endless fascination in handling the raw dullish block of converture, in grating them by hand - I never use electrical mixers - into the large ceramic pans (*Chocolat*, pg 64).

Her social status is linked more closely to Roux and the other gypsies - considering her nomadic history and non-conformist attitude - than it is to the middle class, dogmatic residents of Lansquenet. The drama of *Chocolat*, in fact, hinges on the bourgeoisie villagers' rejection of the style, presentation and aesthetic value of the chocolates and their preference for plainer and more rustic foodstuffs, those traditionally associated with the working classes. Rather than advocating the culinary class argument of Ashley, Hollows, Jones and Taylor, Harris works to reverse the assumptions associated with the tastes and flavours favoured by both ends of the class spectrum.

### **Women, food and control**

Pleasure and denial are most closely entwined when looking at the relationship of women to food. Lawrence has noted that this relationship is complicated by the fact that women are traditionally the main providers of food but are bound by social and physical ideals to deny themselves the pleasure of consuming such goods:

Eating is a source of pleasure, but not often for the people who have the

primary responsibility for providing it. Women take control of food, while simultaneously denying themselves the pleasure of it (Lawrence, 1984 in Ogden, 2003, pg 56).

Harris's novels do conform to this argument to some extent, as Vianne, for example, takes control of her life, employment and social status through the provision of food. However, the denial or shame associated with food and its consumption is assigned in *Chocolat* not to women but to Father Reynaud. When he breaks into the chocolaterie and gorges on handfuls of confectionery, the extent of his denial is finally realised:

I have no time to read the labels; I cram chocolates into my mouth at random.  
The pig loses his cleverness in the face of so much delight, becomes a pig again,  
and though something at the top of my mind screams at me to stop I cannot help  
myself (*Chocolat*, pg 312).

This episode demonstrates the negative effects of long-term denial and advocates the acceptance of small, everyday pleasures. Wrapped in sexually charged images and vocabulary, the scene is also indicative of the sexual pleasure denied by Father Reynaud and his conservative attitude:

I can hear myself making *sounds* as I eat, moaning, keening sounds of ecstasy  
and despair, as if the pig within has finally found a voice (*Chocolat*, pg 313).

Finding this voice and embracing small pleasure is, Harris suggests, the way to achieving personal satisfaction; extreme denial leads only to extreme repression while small pleasures offer ongoing fulfilment.

## Sensual pleasure and passionate consumption

As well as expressing sentiments of familial tradition and maternal nurturing, food acts as a vehicle through which sensuality is evoked. *Chocolat* pivots on the sensual connotations of chocolate and the passionate responses it provokes from the Lansquenet villagers, both in terms of a culinary and social reaction. In his 2001 review of the cinematic adaptation of *Chocolat*, Matthew Bond recognises the sensual status of food in Harris's writing:

[*Chocolat*] was about the impact that the arrival of a beautiful, enigmatic, chocolate-maker had on a small, sleepy French village, but far more importantly it was about temptation, sensual pleasure and the awakening of desire (Bond, *Mail on Sunday*, 4 March 2001).

Everything from the names of Vianne's chocolates - Nipples of Venus, for instance - to the sexually charged way in which Harris describes the chocolate-making process, creates a sensuality that underlies the entire novel. Vianne takes seriously the sensual process of creating food and works tiresomely to retain the almost sexual pleasure offered by culinary artistry. When describing her enthusiasm for food preparation and cookery, Vianne's language is steeped in sexual and loving undertones:

And it is partly the transience of [cooking] that delights me; so much loving preparation, so much art and experience put into a pleasure which can only last a moment, and which only a few will ever fully appreciate (*Chocolat*, pg 62).

The evocative, uninhibiting properties of chocolate are juxtaposed with the ancient mysticism of exotic cultures in *Chocolat*, and indeed by Joe in *Blackberry Wine*, helping to draw food back to Harris's exploration of epistemological magic realism and the inebriating effects of potent foodstuffs. Vianne reiterates the exotic lineage of her recipes throughout *Chocolat* and subsequently forges a lineage between her confectionery and her magical past:

Before Christ - before Adonis was born in Bethlehem or Osiris sacrificed at Easter - the cocoa bean was revered. Magical properties were attributed to it. Its brew was sipped on the steps of sacrificial temples; its ecstasies were fierce and terrible (*Chocolat*, pg 64).

These fierce and terrible ecstasies are fuelled by Vianne's chocolate but Harris remains ambiguous about the true origins of such pleasures: are they simply a product of carefully chosen ingredients and ancient recipes, or are the pleasures evoked by the presence of magic and the subtle encouragement of inhibition embedded supernaturally within the food by its chef? This integral question once again foregrounds the innate tension in the concept of magic realism: are we to believe in the realist explanation that certain ingredients can evoke certain chemical reactions, or do we accept that more mystical powers are at work? Harris encourages her reader to believe each argument and to acknowledge the powers buried in both the natural and preternatural elements of everyday life.

### **Pleasure and denial**

Key to Harris's narrative on food is the exploration of the binary oppositions of pleasure and denial. Food represents passion and the consumption of it is symbolic of the fulfilment of that desire. Descriptions of chocolate, wine and other luxurious dishes are fuelled with undertones indicative of sexual desire and vitality. It is interesting that Armande in *Chocolat* chooses to have her final birthday party surrounded by food; the act provides an opportunity to gorge on rich, exuberant and extravagant dishes in the company of her friends and family as a means of demonstrating her uncompromising lust for life. *Blackberry Wine* offers a similar commentary on the vitality of potent foods when describing the evocative aromas of carefully crafted fare:

He could hardly recall what it did taste of, but that scent remained with him, the scent of Marthe's cooking and the way the smoke used to cling to her hair

and make the apples of her cheeks stand out red...all the day's cooking smells would be trapped in the tendrils at the nape of her neck (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 256).

Food, its taste, aromas and textures, are juxtaposed here with the sexual desire Jay feels for Marthe and it appears that the scent acts as a trigger from which those desires are expressed. In *The Psychology of Eating: From Healthy to Disordered Behaviour*, Jane Ogden suggests that to align food and sex simply because they are fundamental survival functions of human nature is "biologically reductionist" and ignores the socially charged understanding of the two acts (Ogden, 2003, pg 56). While Harris's novels establish food and sex as essential components of human survival, they also analyse the extent to which the two inform social structures and sexual, familial and public relationships. Drawing on the fundamental features of human existence contributes as well to Harris's magic realist narrative and to the interrogation of social conventions through carnivalesque modes. As Stam has noted:

Magic realism...bypass[es] the formal conventions of dramatic, illusionistic realism in favour of such alternative modes as the carnivalesque...[which often provide] other views of the body, sexuality, spirituality, and the collective life (Stam, 2005, pg 317).

Harris has argued that Juliette's performing lifestyle, and the carnivalesque tradition in which it exists, offers a platform from which to analyse such ideas about social hierarchy:

These characters offer a writer a great dynamic, interacting with all different levels of society often being the only entertainment for communities who haven't changed in years. It was a very interesting lifestyle, the downside being that itinerants and outsiders were often used as scapegoats, a mentality that is still prevalent today in the way that migrants and travellers are still treated (*Lincolnshire Echo*, 6 May 2003).

Rather than being “biologically reductionist”, the complicated relationship between food and sex, and the carnivalesque tradition that embraces them, therefore offers a means of exploring concepts of both biological and social significance.

### A hybrid genre

In *Food and Cultural Studies*, editors Ashley, Hollows, Jones and Taylor recognise that the increasing presence of gastronomic literature has created a “hybrid of romantic fiction and food writing” which provides an alternative genre through which social concerns can be explored. However, this hybrid genre has been rejected by some critics for its sometimes saccharine approach to handling challenging social and domestic issues, something which Harris has recognised in her own writing. In Serena Trowbridge’s transcript of Harris’s session at the Birmingham Book Festival 2003, Harris expressed her concern that gastronomic fiction is often viewed as a subsidiary genre that fails to present the hard-hitting, wry social commentaries of ‘high-brow’ literature:

Asked if she finds that feel-good novels are not taken seriously in a literary manner, [Harris] agreed that this is a problem which a lot of good writers have faced. Having fun with books, she says, is the literary equivalent of junk food, not recommended by experts but usually enjoyable (Trowbridge, ‘The Agony Column’, 2003).

Harris’s association of her writing with junk food is an appropriate one, given her novels’ focus on the pleasures and sensual satisfactions offered by luxurious but typically unhealthy foods. However, to reject the ideological challenges and social commentaries embedded in her novels simply because they facilitate those discussions through food is reductionist and rash. As we have seen in this chapter, food plays a vital role in exploring numerous social issues in Harris’s novels and the theme facilitates rather than reduces the novels’ ideological understanding of women, religion, desire and pleasure. The following chapter, ‘Church not Chocolate’, will address the treatment of religion in Harris’s novels, further exploring the

significance of food as well as the innate opposition between magic and religious beliefs and practices.

## **Church not Chocolate**

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Each of the key themes of Harris's work - food, sexuality, womanhood, magic - is fuelled by an underlying reference to religion. Harris does not offer a favourable presentation of religious belief nor the Catholic Church in her novels, however, choosing instead to reveal the innate hypocrisy and contradictions on which such dogma is founded. *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools* are Harris's most religiously concerned novels, with each text considering the opposition and ideological conflicts encountered when magic is pitted against religion. This chapter will explore the role played by religion in Harris's writing, considering how far it simultaneously challenges and informs the key themes of her narratives.

### **Where superstition and religion belong**

Before looking at Harris's portrayal of religion, it is vital to make a distinction between magic and religion. The terms have been recognised as binary opposites in historical, social and even scientific terms and Harris exploits this tension to dramatic effect within her writing. Her characters either believe in magic or they have religious faith; there is a very limited landscape between. This innate tension is something that intrigues Harris and the author has acknowledged the extent to which her writing is informed by a quest to understand the similarities and differences between the concepts of magic and religion:

An interest I have had for a long time is where superstition and religion belong - where they begin and end and how beliefs have changed over the years (*The Sheffield Star*, 21 April 2003).

Harris's notion of superstition is of interest here. While the term magic evokes connotations of witches, magicians and marvellous spells, superstition occupies a different realm of belief. It suggests colloquial and quaint fears of walking under ladders and avoiding black cats rather than the more extreme occultism and social deviance offered by the ideological reputation of magic. It implies the following of practices and the adherence of particular beliefs as a means

of avoiding dire consequences. The categorisation of magic and superstition is blurred in Harris's novels, however, as her characters are often preoccupied with both ideas. In *Chocolat*, for instance, Vianne's mother is categorically referred to as a witch but she also follows quaint superstitions to ward off bad luck, including: "the forking of fingers to divert the path of malchance. The sewing of a sachet, brewing of a draught, the conviction that a spider brings good luck before midnight and bad luck after" (*Chocolat*, pg 44). Lehmann argues that magic is defined by the "practising of superstitions" and "beliefs which are neither religious nor scientific" (Mauss, 1972, pg 13). Indeed, superstition in Harris's work is found neither in religion nor science but often in fear of the unknown and a quest to explain the apparently unexplainable. However, superstition appears to be the first step towards an affinity with one of two opposing choices: magic or religion. In *Chocolat*, the practising of superstitious rituals leads Vianne and her mother to magic and to an appreciation and mastery of the occult, mystical and fantastic. In *Holy Fools*, superstition leads to greater belief in religious teachings and a conviction in the categories of good and evil. When Juliette dyes the convent's well so that its water source turns red, the nuns believe their water has been turned to blood as a punishment for the apparently disrespectful burial of Mère Marie. Juliette's reasoning of red clay or iron contaminating the water is dismissed by Soeur Alfonsine, who is convinced of evil influences:

Anyone would think you didn't believe in the devil, the way you always try to find reasons for everything (*Holy Fools*, pg 185).

Superstition, Juliette claims, "has never been far away" in the convent and the nuns "turn to it more than ever" (*Holy Fools*, pg 281) when strange occurrences are increasingly staged. Keith Thomas's analysis of the church in medieval culture purports an underlying presence of the devil, whereby "Satan was a convenient explanation for strange diseases, motiveless crimes, or unusual success" (Thomas, 1971, pg 476). Harris's exploration of the tensions between superstition and religion in *Holy Fools* is indicative of this seventeenth-century ideology, with her religious characters choosing to believe evil forces are at work rather than accepting rational or scientific reason. Similarly, the religious characters in *Chocolat* reach for

devilish activities - including “arcane sacrifice, devil worship, live burnt-offerings to some savage ancient gods” (*Chocolat*, pg 175) - to qualify and explain Vianne’s deviant behaviour. Superstition therefore becomes a vehicle through which the rationales of magic and religious belief are unravelled, with Harris using superstitious rituals, rites and traditions to explore the different methods of coping with a fear of the unknown and unexplainable.

### **Magic and religious belief**

Marcel Mauss’s *A General Theory of Magic* argues that magic and religion are extremely similar ideologies due to the strength of conviction each evokes: “magic, like religion, is viewed as a totality; either you believe in it all, or you do not” (Mauss, 1972, pg 91). This is an interesting axiom to apply to Harris’s work. Her characters are clearly assigned to the polarised camps of magic and religion, with few characters appreciating the values and beliefs of both concepts. However, the two ideas occupy comparable stature for their believers as each value system offers a comfort and security to its followers. Vianne’s “ingrained influences” (*Chocolat*, pg 196), the magical practices she learned from her mother, are exercised instinctively when she is threatened and requires a ritual to make her feel safe: “automatically I forked his ill-wishing back at him with a quick flick of the fingers” (*Chocolat*, pg 196). Juliette clings also to the protective power offered by the practise of such magic rituals, which are often used in both *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools* to ward off the threat posed by the novels’ religious characters: “my mother’s cantrip - *evil spirit, get thee hence* - calmed me a little” (*Holy Fools*, pg 205).

Religious practices offer an equivalent comfort to their believers. The forking of fingers draws similar physical comparisons with the Catholic sign of the cross, an act that reminds its practitioner of the power and structure of the Holy Trinity on which Catholicism is founded. Religious thought offers discrete, clear-cut explanations for a variety of events, looking most often to the devil to justify evil actions, thoughts or behaviour. As LeMerle notes in *Holy Fools*, “the wonderful thing about the Bible is that there’s a quote to justify anything, even lechery, incest and the slaying of infants” (*Holy Fools*, pg 123). Although magical

practices are often conducted to dispel negative influences, religious thought appears more willing to place blame on evil influences as a means of explaining unfortunate events. Thomas argues that one of the key differences between magic and religion is the extent to which each concept attempts to control its environment, with “a prayer [being] a form of supplication; a spell [being] a mechanical means of manipulation” (Thomas, 1971, pg 41). If we classify the brewing of special wines and the making of intoxicating confectionery as expressions of magic, then Harris’s novels perpetuate this argument as her magic characters take greater control of their environments than their religious counterparts, who seem only to express their religious conviction with significant fervour when threatened by magical, and in their view, evil forces.

### **Gendered belief**

Religion is a gendered debate in Harris’s novels. Her male characters are associated strongly with religious thought while her female protagonists are placed firmly in the realms of magical belief. As discussed in ‘The Magic Woman’, the link between magic and women is an historical one concerned with a variety of issues including sexuality, femininity, social freedom and gendered power. Women embrace magic in Harris’s novels as a means of empowerment and hold securely to magic rituals in order to perpetuate that power. Those women that favour a religious lifestyle - *Chocolat*’s Salvation Sisters, for instance - are dismissed by Harris’s magic women as unthinking, gullible fools that follow a dogmatic order without question. *Holy Fools* works to reveal the archaic beliefs of religious thought, demonstrating throughout the novel the extent to which scientific fact and rationale are dismissed by the apparently omnipresent nature of evil:

[Juliette] explained how regular washing sometimes prevented disease.

[Soeur Tomasine] looked sceptical. ‘I don’t see how it can’, she said. ‘You need holy water, not soap and water, to drive out evil’ (*Holy Fools*, pg 262).

Although Juliette learns to appreciate the women with whom she shares the nunnery and Vianne eventually understands Caroline's often aggressive and religiously motivated concern for her mother, religious women are still viewed with scorn in Harris's writing. They are the weak and obedient counterparts to their more recalcitrant magic-favouring rivals.

### **Naming witchcraft**

Harris is quick to acknowledge that recognition as a witch affords an innately deviant social status. While many of her characters embrace the moniker, the negative social connotations of the term nevertheless remain. Diane Purkiss argues that "being accused of witchcraft is thought to remove your identity and replace it with one that is not of your choosing...Having a reputation for witchcraft is seen as something which is done to women, not something they do" (Purkiss, 1996, pg 145). This labelling is religiously endorsed in Harris's writing, with religious characters precipitating the accusatory categorisation of magic women. Juliette bemoans the threat of the "charge of witchcraft" (*Holy Fools*, pg 349), while *Chocolat* explores the very act of naming a witch. Vianne appears wary of the term ("that word again" (*Chocolat*, pg 85)) when Armande attempts to pinpoint her skills, but her mother is much more accepting of the term and embraces all of the potent connotations it envelops:

My mother was a witch. At least, that's what she called herself, falling so many times into the game of believing herself that at the end there was no telling fake from fact (*Chocolat*, pg 44).

Harris presents an ambiguous argument here, leaving her reader to wonder whether Vianne's mother is truly a witch or has simply been enthralled by her own imagination. Purkiss suggests "anyone who participates in such labelling is seen as the mouthpiece of a patriarchal ideology of submission" (Purkiss, 1996, pg 145). This paradigm is not applicable to Harris's work nor to Vianne's mother; the act of naming a witch, or of accepting magic as real or at least as a preferable alternative to religion, is an empowering one. Despite its negative

social stigma, the term affords a rebellious authority to those that accept it. In comparison to religious servitude, it offers women a clear source of strength, recognition and identity.

### **Religious men**

Harris's male characters are subject to this sectarian categorisation as well. Although there are usually fewer male protagonists than female ones in Harris's writing, the men that do feature are often extreme examples of magical or religious belief. Father Reynaud represents the staunch presence of religious restraint, acting as a strict follower of the dogmatic rule of the Catholic Church and criticising all people that choose to defy such papal laws. Father Reynaud is established at the beginning of *Chocolat* as Vianne's nemesis and the conclusion of the novel - in which Father Reynaud succumbs to his carnal desires for pleasure, satisfaction and chocolate - indicates Harris's favour for the plight of her magic characters above that of her pious ones. In reviewing Harris's work, Amanda Craig identifies this favouritism as one of Harris's key, and most overt, ideological concerns:

Few who read *Chocolat*...can be under any illusions about what [Harris] thinks of the Catholic Church. A tale of sensuousness versus censoriousness, liberality versus meanness, and chocolate versus the Church (Craig, *New Statesman*, 12 May 2003).

Vianne and Father Reynaud take on these symbolic roles of chocolate and church throughout the novel, offering their political manifestos in the form of sumptuous confectionery and pulpit rhetoric, inclusive comradeship and enforced ostracism. The threat posed by Vianne is diluted, however, due to Harris's characterisation of Father Reynaud. Although the term witch is levelled at Vianne constantly within the novel, the reader is encouraged instead to see the ridiculous nature of Father Reynaud's claims that Vianne is the embodiment of evil and carnal desires. Father Reynaud complains:

I have preached against her in church to no effect but my own ridicule.

Chocolate, I am told, is not a moral issue. Even the Clairmonts see my obduracy as slightly irregular (*Chocolat*, pg 209).

The very idea that chocolate could evoke a social and religious revolution large enough to overthrow the church in Lansquenet is quaffed both by Vianne and Harris, with the author using Father Reynaud as a pawn with which to demonstrate the hysterical and irrational teachings of the Catholic Church.

### **Church not chocolate**

Nevertheless, the ‘church not chocolate’ campaign is of great importance to Harris’s exploration of religious belief in *Chocolat*. As outlined in ‘Food, Consumption and Magic’, food is paramount to Harris’s work and acts to propel both her weighty ideological concerns and escapist, romanticised writing. Food takes on a dual identity when viewing it from the perspective of *Chocolat*: it is at once a source of pleasure and satisfaction and simultaneously embroiled in religious iconography designed to promote Catholic doctrine. Food has a eucharistic significance in the Catholic Church, acting as a symbol for the body of Christ and demonstrating, when consumed, one’s commitment to the related religious teachings. Food as an expression of desire or as a symbol for receiving sensual pleasure is therefore in direct opposition to this eucharistic approach. Harris emphasises this symbolic tension by staging Vianne’s chocolate festival in the mist of the Easter celebrations, which are traditionally fashioned to reinvigorate religious faith and foreground the principles of sacrifice, restraint and control. Easter Sunday is the culmination of Lansquenet’s religious festivals and signifies the end of a 40-day period of fasting for the Catholic villagers. Harris uses the event to once again reveal the hypercritical and often contradictory values of the Catholic Church, which appear to advocate fasting and feasting intermittently throughout the year. Father Reynaud’s anti-chocolate propaganda argues that Vianne’s chocolate festival “makes a mockery of everything that Easter stands for” (*Chocolat*, pg 257), but this statement seems a little hysterical when considering that Easter is the celebration of the end of a lengthy fast. While Lent is designed to provide time to recollect on the sacrifice made by Christ, Easter

celebrates his rebirth and symbolises the end of fasting and restraint. Is it such a heinous crime to accompany those celebrations with chocolate? In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that contradictory food patterns are a quintessential part of religious teachings:

It is crucial to note that fasting, feasting and feeding are merely aspects of the same phenomenon: the religious significance of food (Bynum, 1987, pg 227).

It is clear that the church is not opposed to feasting so why is Father Reynaud so opposed to Vianne's confectionery? Is it simply because her arrival in the village came during Lent when the rest of the village was fasting, causing an immediate binary between her lifestyle and that of the church's followers? Or is Vianne feared because her chocolates offer so much sensual pleasure? Like Father Reynaud's reaction to many other aspects of Vianne's bohemian lifestyle, his opposition may lie most strongly in the sense of power afforded to Vianne as a food maker and provider. The religious relationship with food is one that advocates patriarchal gender roles and places men, as priests, in the role of food giver and communicator with God. By acting as a food provider for the entire village, Vianne therefore establishes herself in direct competition with Father Reynaud's clerical role, albeit one that does not lead directly to God. Bynum's analysis supports this argument by purporting that women's relationship with eucharistic foods poses a threat to the church's patriarchal power:

In their eucharistic visions, women not only received God as holy food, they also sometimes claimed for themselves, at least metaphorically, both the priest's proximity to God and the sacerdotal role of the mediator between human and divine (Bynum, 1987, pg 227).

By challenging religious festivals, offering a more sensual alternative to religious practices and posing a direct threat to patriarchal religious roles, Vianne comes to personify all of Father Reynaud's religious, social and gendered fears.

## The Black Man

The imagery that Harris assigns to Father Reynaud is much more sinister than her portrayal of Vianne, conjuring a variety of nefarious connotations. Vianne views Father Reynaud as the Black Man, someone that haunts her dreams and threatens to destroy her personal happiness.

How can we live here, how could we have been foolish enough to think he wouldn't find us even here? The Black Man has many faces, all of them unforgiving, hard and strangely envious. *Run, Vianne. Run, Anouk. Forget your small sweet dream and run* (*Chocolat*, pg 61).

This use of imagery is interesting as the Black Man has traditionally been associated with religious thought and represents a threat to the religious rather than pagan order. As Thomas suggests: "religious despair and prohibited desires were customarily personified in the crude form of the black man or strange animal" (Thomas, 1971, pg 475). Like her treatment of magic, Harris has chosen to subvert traditional views and ideologies in order to demonstrate an alternative perspective. By employing the Black Man as a pagan fear, Harris dilutes the potency of religious hysteria and illustrates that her magic characters are plagued by ideological concerns and insecurities as much as her pious ones. Drawing similarities to Father Reynaud's application of fairy tale axioms to his understanding of Vianne's life, Vianne must convince herself that her visions of the Black Man are precipitated by fear and mythical stereotypes:

The Black Man is a fiction, I tell myself firmly. An embodiment of fears underneath a carnival head. A tale for dark nights. Shadows in a strange room (*Chocolat*, pg 247).

Through the relationship between Father Reynaud and Vianne, Harris demonstrates that opposing ideologies can share similar fears, with each expecting the other to destroy their

values or eliminate their belief system. However, the key difference between the two characters is that Vianne's belief system - her appreciation of magic and respect for other cultures and lifestyles - enables her to embrace her fears and come to terms with the source and cause of her anxiety. Father Reynaud's Catholic values, on the other hand, offer no tools with which to understand other cultures, with the eruption of hysteria in the final scenes of the novel indicative of his religion's ideological failings.

### **The greatest villain of them all**

LeMerle, *Holy Fools'* villain, is arguably Harris's most interesting male character due to the way in which he transcends fluidly the boundaries of magic and religious thought. LeMerle's Machiavellian ability to mislead and deceive other people makes him a successful player in each of the worlds he encounters. Helen Falconer has labelled LeMerle as "the greatest villain of them all" in the context of Harris's work but is quick to recognise the dichotomous fascination with the character:

Guy LeMerle [is] a cut-throat so disloyal, so morally empty...yet I found myself idly musing, "well, I wouldn't kick him out of bed for eating biscuits..." Thus does Harris entice us to confirm the central creed of her latest novel - that evil can entrance the human soul (Falconer, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2003).

This combination of evil manipulation and sexual prowess caused problems for Harris when attempting to bring LeMerle to life. Harris's publishers fought with the author to dilute the characterisation of LeMerle and to censor the religious fervour created by his actions. The author claimed four months before *Holy Fools* was published that "LeMerle [had] already caused more controversy than any other character [she] had ever created" (Falconer, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2003). Harris, however, did not agree with her publisher's linear view of LeMerle, claiming instead that she "does not see him entirely as a villain. In fact, he is a kind of existential hero" (Falconer, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2003). Indeed, LeMerle can be seen as an experiment in literary existentialism, exercising and pushing the boundaries of the extent to

which an individual can act as a free and self-determining agent. However, that self-determining agency comes at a price for the other characters in *Holy Fools*, and LeMerle's rakish charm diminishes with every crime and cruelty against an unknowing innocent. It is this very duality, the multi-dimensional nature of LeMerle's character, that has lead critics such as Falconer to revere his wickedly attractive charm.

### Pleasure in wrongness

LeMerle's Machiavellian actions act to reveal the values and desires of his victims and contemporaries. The similarities between Juliette and LeMerle are iterated throughout *Holy Fools*, similarities which offer some insight into Juliette's long-term obsession with the man:

I know what motivates him. Desire. Mischief. Applause. Sheer pleasure taken in wrongness, in biting his thumb at those who thwart him, in the tumbling of altars, defiling of graves. I know this because we are still alike, he and I, each a small window into the soul of the other (*Chocolat*, pg 211).

LeMerle's victims permit his action to a large extent, as they seem to search for or seek out the alternatives he offers. Whether it be an artistic stage, religious comfort or sexual expression, LeMerle manages to tap in to and exploit the repressed desires of *Holy Fools'* other characters. As Falconer argues:

LeMerle is evil triumphant, but he triumphs because stupid, uncalculating innocents can hear a man intone the scriptures and believe it is the voice of God; because we are gratified by our helplessness in the face of sin; because we set out to be possessed by lies; because we think truth is boring and the devil fun (Falconer, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2003).

LeMerle bases his power on the age-old axiom of the attractiveness of evil. Despite knowing of LeMerle's wicked past and the deceitful practices he currently promotes, Juliette is

compelled by the “sheer pleasure in wrongness” (*Chocolat*, pg 211) that he advocates. This illegitimate pleasure echoes the sense of fulfilment and sensual satisfaction provided by Vianne’s chocolates and Joe’s ‘Specials’, with the luxurious foodstuffs offering an illicit yet gratifying pleasure similar to the excitement provided by dealings with LeMerle.

### **The Blackbird**

The relationship between LeMerle and Juliette mirrors the complexities depicted between Father Reynaud and Vianne. Although LeMerle and Juliette share a more personal relationship than *Chocolat*’s warring duo, Juliette qualifies LeMerle’s existence with the same Black Man imagery with which Vianne views Father Reynaud. The Blackbird in *Holy Fools* occupies the same sense of superstitious fear as the Black Man, becoming a symbol for the insecurities of and threats facing Harris’s magic women. Lucy Clark argues that much of this fear is contained in the dichotomous love-hate relationship forged between Juliette and LeMerle:

With [the new abbess] comes a man from Juliette’s buried past, LeMerle, The Blackbird, now posing as a charismatic cleric with a bad plan. Juliette fears and loathes him as much as she loves him (although she is in denial about this) (Clark, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 11 January 2004).

Regardless of their similarities and of Juliette’s ongoing fascination with LeMerle, the two characters are distinctively different in their values and sensibilities. It is Juliette’s humanity and sense of empathy, combined with a streetwise savviness, that enables her to survive LeMerle’s malicious manipulations. A review of *Holy Fools* in the *Lincolnshire Echo* recognises the extent to which these values are the distinguishing feature between Juliette and LeMerle, between Harris’s magic characters and their religious or Machiavellian counterparts:

An excellent villain, LeMerle is separated from the beautiful heroine of Juliette

by their differing capacities to love which in turn is seemingly affected by incidents in their early upbringing (*Lincolnshire Echo*, 6 May 2003).

Like Vianne's ideological battle with Father Reynaud, Juliette's bohemian lifestyle and magic-informed values facilitate this survival. The tolerance, appreciation and knowledge of an eclectic range of cultures afford Harris's magic women the ability to survive religious oppression and intellectual manipulation.

Throughout Harris's writing, magic women look for alternatives to prescriptive religious teachings, seeking lifestyles, beliefs and ideologies that celebrate rather than restrict pleasure. As Juliette muses:

There must be something else, I told myself repeatedly; something beyond sin and solemnity, dust and devotions; something which loved life as indiscriminately as I did (*Holy Fools*, pg 45).

In the context of Harris's writing, this alternative is found in magic. The practising of magic - in small rituals, traditional superstitions and sophisticated spells - provides Vianne and Juliette with the abilities to emerge from the threats posed by religious zealots, Machiavellian villains and dogmatic oppression. Harris's scorn for religious belief, the Catholic Church and its related doctrines is clear throughout her entire body of writing, and this chapter has demonstrated the extent to which the author advocates the small pleasures of magic above the restrained abstinence of religion.

## Conclusion

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Joanne Harris's body of work provides a unique interpretation of the narrative styles, ideological concerns and creative capacity of the magic realist genre. *Blackberry Wine*, *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools* explore the genre in great detail, testing its ontological and epistemological approaches, acknowledging its carnivalesque influences and reviewing the effects of magical thought on conservative ideals.

Key to Harris's engagement with the genre is her presentation of the magic woman. Her novels are informed by and hinge upon historical understandings of witches, occultism and magic, with traditional fairy tales, ideologies and beliefs contributing to the characterisation of her magic women. Harris, in line with the standards of the magic realist genre, chooses to subvert these traditional perceptions and opts to embrace, and consequently recategorise, such negative connotations by championing them as positive attributes of her magic women. Harris accentuates her exploration of magic realism by borrowing from carnivalesque narrative modes. The collaboration works to expose and subvert prescribed social hierarchies - particularly those that promote rigid female roles and parochial views of magic - looking closer at the baser and more carnal instincts that those hierarchies have been designed to control. Embracing the mystical characteristics of magic realism and combining them with discussions on the role of strong, independent women in society and religious orders, adds a contemporary twist to Harris's portrayal of traditional themes.

One of the distinctive features of Harris's work is her preoccupation with the value and social significance of food. In *Blackberry Wine* and *Chocolat* Harris builds on the traditions established by novels including *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* and *Like Water for Chocolate* to explore the extent to which food can facilitate an exploration of magic realism. However, Harris uniquely challenges the previous collaborations of food and magic to subvert the application of magic realism to gastronomic literature. Rather than using food as the

exclusive vehicle for conducting magic, Harris chooses to reveal the magic contained within food and the cooking process. She revels in the alchemic properties of food production and, in doing so, demonstrates to her reader the extent to which magic exists in quotidian activities. Harris's novels remind us that, when it comes to food, magic and the mundane are not as opposed as we would imagine.

While Harris's writing is preoccupied with revealing the magical nature of everyday events, the author does not prescribe magic as an explanation for everything. Magic can become a convenient explanation for an infinite list of supernatural and extravagant occurrences within the magic realist genre, but Harris offers a balanced mixture of magical and realist explanations within her writing. Joe's experiences of astral travel in *Blackberry Wine*, for instance, are exposed as the literature-inspired dreams of a deluded old man, who himself blurs the boundaries of reality and subconscious thought. However, rather than advocating the exclusive belief in magic or realist explanations, Harris encourages her reader to accept the strange, mystical elements of everyday things as well as the scientific and rational conclusions of the modern-day world.

Harris's writing acts as a vitriolic assault on the restrictive nature of religious belief. Both *Chocolat* and *Holy Fools* work to expose the danger of religious thought and the threats posed by long-term restraint and abstinence. Harris's analysis of belief systems extends to magical conviction, looking at the fears, stereotypes and prejudices advocated by belief in magic. In reviewing both the religious and magical belief systems of her characters, Harris not only foregrounds the innate conflict between the two ideological camps but exposes the similarities between the paradigms. Each system features an intrinsic fear of its rival and is founded upon elaborate, fairy tale-style images of one's enemy. Harris's investigation of these two belief systems favours the realm of magical belief, with the author concluding that magical teachings offer a more tolerant and accepting mode of existence than the prescriptive denial of religious doctrine.

It is clear that Harris's writing has been inspired by an eclectic range of literary genres. Her work takes a great deal of inspiration from the creativity of magic realism, but is also strongly influenced by the carnivalesque narrative mode and the traditional styles and ideologies promoted through ambient fairy tales. What is distinctive about Harris's work is her collaboration of these traditional magic-inspired genres with contemporary narratives, such as a preoccupation with food and concern for the position and fate of single mothers and women in a male-dominated world. Harris's biggest achievement, however, is to apply the concepts of magic realism to the basest forms of quotidian existence - food and eating, motherhood and nurturing, sexuality and pleasure - to bask in the "magic of everyday things" (*Blackberry Wine*, pg 17).

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