

Magical realism in *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig: An analysis based on Wendy B. Faris's framework

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Article History: Accepted: July 29, 2025; Revised: August 25, 2025; Approved: October 13, 2025

Abstract

This study analyses the elements of magical realism in *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig using Wendy B. Faris's five key characteristics of magical realism: the irreducible element, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity. The research uses a qualitative descriptive method to examine how magical experiences are portrayed through the protagonist Nora Seed as she navigates an in-between space between life and death. The findings show that Faris's framework is applicable to this contemporary Western novel, expanding the use of magical realism theory beyond its Latin American roots. Moreover, the narrative technique of stream of consciousness is also identified as a key device that enhances the internalization of magical experiences. This research contributes to the broader discourse on magical realism in global literature and its relevance to psychological and existential themes.

Keywords: *magical realism, Matt Haig, The Midnight Library, Wendy B. Faris*

Introduction

Magical realism is a narrative mode that introduces fantastical elements into a realistic environment without offering rational explanations, creating a seamless blend of the ordinary and the extraordinary. It allows magical events to coexist within a familiar world, where such occurrences are perceived as normal by the characters. Magical realism treats extraordinary occurrences as ordinary, thereby forcing readers to reevaluate their assumptions about reality (Faris, 2004). This genre serves not only as a stylistic choice but also as a critical lens to examine deeper philosophical and emotional truths embedded in the human condition. Magical realism's power lies in its capacity to disrupt the accepted conventions of realism and question the nature of reality through the presence of the marvelous (Bowers, 2004).

Foster and Scerbo (2019) in *Oxford Bibliographies* suggest that magical realism is not simply a genre, but a narrative mode that disrupts the boundaries of reality by presenting extraordinary elements as if they were part of everyday life (Foster & Scerbo, 2019). This perspective provides an

essential theoretical anchor, especially when examining contemporary manifestations of the genre. Expanding on this, Rahmani and Nayel (2024) highlight the crucial difference between magical realism and the "fantastic" in modern literature: the fantastic shocks its characters, while magical realism presents the supernatural with casual acceptance (Rahmani & Nayel, 2024). This distinction is particularly relevant to *The Midnight Library*, where the magical premises are woven into the character's everyday reality without disrupting emotional immersion.

Further contextualizing the genre's evolution, Setiawan and Nurhidayah (2022) analyse postcolonial magical realism through a thematic interpretation that deconstructs Western rational narratives and challenges the dichotomy between the "magical" and the "real." Their grounded-theory approach, rooted in Faris's framework, demonstrates how magical realism destabilizes dominant epistemologies (Setiawan & Nurhidayah, 2022). This narrative strategy helps illuminate how *The Midnight Library* navigates internal conflict and existential questioning through seamless transitions across multiple reality, highlighting the genre's capacity to reveal liminal spaces within the human psyche.

Complementing these literary perspectives, insights from Toxigon (2025) highlight the genre's global adaptability: magical realism remains compelling due to its seamless fusion of the ordinary and the fantastical, enabling diverse authors like Haruki Murakami, Salman Rushdie, and Laura Esquivel to explore identity, memory, and cultural histories through a subtly enchanted lens. Meanwhile Rivaldy et al. (2020) argue that magical realism narrative functions as metaphor to problematize the notion of globalization and immigrant issue in the Global North countries. According to ARTDEX (2025), this enchantment lies in how magical realism endows the banal with a deeper, often mysterious meaning, keeping it "thoroughly of this world," yet quietly alien, thereby maintaining a delicate balance that makes the magical feel both real and resonant.

Several recent studies have demonstrated the applicability of Wendy B. Faris's framework in analyzing Western literary texts. Munawar, Rafique, and Amin (2021), for instance, examined Holly Black's *The Darkest Part of the Forest* and found that the narrative reflects postmodern tendencies of magical realism through the juxtaposition of fantasy elements with realistic settings, characters, and plotlines. Their study confirmed the relevance of Faris's five characteristics: irreducible elements, unsettling doubts, the phenomenal world, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity in illuminating how magical realism functions beyond Latin American traditions. Tarigan and Ekalestari (2024) conducted a qualitative analysis of *Howl's Moving Castle*, identifying the presence of the irreducible element, the phenomenal world, and disruptions of time, space, and identity in Diana Wynne Jones's novel, thereby illustrating how magical realism shapes character development and thematic depth in modern fantasy narratives. Another study by Prasetyohadi, Pujiati, and Astutiningsih (2018) applies Faris's concepts to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, finding that the play exhibits a "magical realism-like" mode, one that remains grounded in Renaissance realism while gesturing toward an in-between space between realism and fantasy.

Meanwhile, research on *Maddah* by Risa Saraswati by an Unesa team (2023) identifies all five of Faris's characteristics within the novel,

highlighting a gradation of magical realism that is embedded deeply in Indonesian contemporary literature. These studies collectively demonstrate the flexibility and global reach of magical realism theory, setting a precedent for applying Faris's framework to a contemporary Western novel like *The Midnight Library*. Building on this global array of studies, Warohmah (2023) examines *Haniyah dan Ala di Rumah Teteruga* by Erni Aladjai and confirms the presence of all five of Faris's characteristics, includes irreducible magical elements, a phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions in time, space, and identity, in contemporary Indonesian fiction. This finding not only underscores the wide-ranging applicability of magical realism, but also further strengthens the rationale for using *The Midnight Library* as an analytical case: a Western contemporary work that similarly employs these features through a deeply introspective and imaginative narrative.

Matt Haig, born in Sheffield on 3 July 1975, studied English and History at the University of Hull before establishing his writing career (Kapito, 2022). His early years were marked by struggles with depression and anxiety, particularly during a breakdown at age 24 while living in Ibiza, which significantly shaped his narrative sensibility (The Guardian, 2024). These personal challenges later became central in his memoir *Reasons to Stay Alive*, which achieved bestseller status and brought hope and visibility to mental health discussions (Big Issue, 2024). In numerous interviews, Haig has described writing as a deeply healing process, highlighting how language helped him rebuild a shattered sense of self (The Guardian, 2024). His imaginative storytelling, grounded in raw emotional truth, has not only made him one of the most beloved contemporary authors addressing mental health but has also earned him the affectionate title of "The King of Empathy" (Kapito, 2022).

Haig's literary works span both adult and children's fiction, as well as nonfiction that blends memoir with self-help, including titles such as *The Humans*, *Notes on a Nervous Planet*, and *The Comfort Book*. His ability to weave humour, philosophical reflection, and emotional depth has attracted a global readership (Pompliano, 2021). *The Midnight Library* (2020), one of his most celebrated

novels, became an international bestseller and was praised for its compassionate exploration of regret, choice, and the value of life. In this novel, Haig creatively employs speculative fiction and magical realism to explore deeply human questions, making the narrative both imaginative and profoundly relatable. Through his work, Haig has helped bring conversations about mental health into the literary mainstream, earning recognition not only as a novelist but also as a public advocate for emotional well-being and resilience.

This novel is further distinguished by its employment of stream of consciousness as a storytelling method that allows direct access to Nora's internal dialogue such as her doubts, fears, and hopes, which rendering the narrative deeply personal and emotionally resonant. This narrative mode not only mirrors the non-linear nature of human cognition, characterized by sensory observations and looping associations, but also blurs the boundaries between external events and internal reflection (Delf, 2019). While Saxena (2024) emphasizes its departure from conventional linear narration through interior monologue, Ubaydullayevna and Abdurashitovna (2022) analyze its hallmark features such as associative syntax and immersive internal voice. Additionally, Nordquist (2018) characterizes stream of consciousness as a technique that "gives the impression of a mind at work," moving through observations and sensations with minimal conventional transitions. Together, these stylistic elements make *The Midnight Library* an ideal case study for exploring how magical realism, when paired with stream of consciousness, can facilitate psychological truth and existential introspection in contemporary Western literature.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method. Qualitative research aims to deeply understand a phenomenon from the perspective of the research subject within its natural context (Moleong, 2017). The primary data source is *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig, with selected narrative excerpts analyzed according to Faris's characteristics. Data collection includes identifying relevant textual evidence and interpreting it within

the framework of magical realism. Expanding on this methodological foundation, Furidha (2023) emphasizes that descriptive qualitative research is effective because it prioritizes detailed, low-inference descriptions that capture the richness of phenomena without relying on numerical data. This approach provides flexibility in combining data collection techniques and is particularly well-suited for literary analysis, as it enables researchers to explore experiential and contextual nuances within a narrative.

This study applies Wendy B. Faris's theoretical framework of magical realism as outlined in *Ordinary Enchantments* (2004). Faris proposes five central characteristics that distinguish the genre. The first is "the irreducible element," which refers to magical phenomena that defy logical explanation but are nevertheless presented as part of everyday reality. The second is "the phenomenal world," where the narrative remains rooted in realistic and recognizable details, anchoring the story in a familiar context despite the presence of the extraordinary. The third, "unsettling doubts," captures the ambiguity experienced by both characters and readers in distinguishing what is real and what is magical. The fourth, "merging realms," highlights the fusion of seemingly opposing realities such as life and death, dreams and waking life, or imagination and the material world. Lastly, "disruptions of time, space, and identity" emphasize how linear chronology and stable selfhood can be fragmented, allowing characters to move across multiple dimensions of existence.

By employing this framework, the study seeks not only to identify magical elements in the novel but also to demonstrate how they contribute to the thematic depth of *The Midnight Library*. This methodological approach ensures that the analysis remains systematic, text-based, and theoretically grounded while also being sensitive to the novel's emotional and philosophical concerns.

Findings and discussion

The Irreducible Element

One of the most apparent magical elements is the Midnight Library itself. The library exists as a

liminal space between life and death, allowing Nora to access countless books that each one representing an alternate life. This magical concept is accepted by the protagonist and readers without question. For instance, Mrs. Elm explains,

“Between life and death there is a library,” she said. ‘And within that library, the shelves go on for ever. Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived.’” (Haig, 2020: 29)

This sentence marks the introduction of a major magical element in the novel namely, the existence of a space beyond the logic of time and place. The existence of such a place cannot be reduced to rational explanation, aligning with Faris’s definition of irreducible elements.

Mrs. Elm’s presence as the librarian further emphasizes the characteristics of The Irreducible Element in the novel. This figure appears with a vague identity yet remains familiar to Nora, and answers Nora’s questions with mystery and composure. When asked who she is, she offers no logical explanation, but simply states her identity in a simple yet symbolic manner, *“I am the librarian,” the woman said coyly. ‘That is who.’*” (Haig, 2020: 27). This statement illustrates how the narrative introduces a character who realistically should not exist in the intrasubstance space, but is accepted as reality by the main character. Mrs. Elm is not simply a functional character, but a representation of metaphysical wisdom and power within the story world. This aligns with Wendy B. Faris’s characteristics of The Irreducible Element, where supernatural elements appear in the narrative world without any logical explanation, yet are still considered normal and accepted within the story world.

In The Midnight Library’s narrative framework, the library serves as both a setting and a figurative, tangible instrument for comprehending the complexities and potential diversities of existence. The concept of the multiple versions of life an individual can live is conveyed through Mrs. Elm’s explanation to Nora, which also introduces how the library functions as a portal between possible lives. This explanation implies a logic that is

impossible in the real world, but is treated realistically in the story,

“Every life contains many millions of decisions. Some big, some small. But every time one decision is taken over another, the outcomes differ. An irreversible variation occurs, which in turn leads to further variations. These books are portals to all the lives you could be living.” (Haig, 2020: 31)

This explanation contains a magical element that is not explained scientifically or rationally. There is no technical mechanism for how a book could become a gateway to another version of life, but it is not questioned within the story’s logic. This library not only stores information or knowledge, but also holds existential possibilities that cannot be understood through the laws of everyday reality. This is where Wendy B. Faris’s characteristic of The Irreducible Element becomes clear: a supernatural element that cannot be fully reduced or explained, yet exists as something real and accessible within the fictional world.

The Phenomenal World

Despite the presence of magical elements, the world Nora inhabits remains grounded in realism. Each alternate life is filled with mundane details, such as driving an old Hyundai or working at an animal rescue center. These details maintain a sense of realism that reinforces the believability of the narrative and contrasts sharply with the metaphysical space of the library,

“Sleep was good in this life, and she didn’t wake up until the alarm went off at a quarter to eight. She drove to work in a tatty old Hyundai that smelled of dogs and biscuits and was decorated with crumbs, passing the hospital and the sports centre, and pulling up in the small car park outside the modern, grey-bricked, single-storey rescue centre.” (Haig, 2020: 197).

This alternate life is built with highly tangible, everyday details, as evidenced by the descriptions of the "grey, one-story" animal rescue centre, the old vehicle that smells of dog and cookies, and the

crumbs on the seats. Neither visually nor emotionally, there are any noteworthy features. Yet, this world feels like the everyday existence we are accustomed to, which is exactly why it is a part of The Phenomenal World.

In another alternate reality, Nora is on a scientific expedition in a strange and extreme polar environment. Yet, despite the extraordinary and seemingly "unusual" setting, Haig presents it concretely and convincingly. The natural beauty depicted isn't presented as something magical, but as a sight that can actually be observed by the human eye in the real world, and is supported by a human count, something that is both realistic and rational.

"Around her, outside the window, was the most eerily beautiful sight she had ever seen. islands of ice, like rocks rendered clean and pure white, were visible amid the fog. there were seventeen other people in the dining hall, Nora counted. eleven men, six women." (Haig, 2020: 121)

This quotation captures the essence of The Phenomenal World, where aspects of the real world, such the dense, engulfing fog and the stone-white ice islands, are depicted with tangible numbers and visual detail rather than as fantastical settings. The characters consider this reality as genuine, natural, and measurable, even if it is the product of the library's magical mechanics. Here, magical realism functions by masking the extraordinary as something that is emotionally and physically believable.

Nora's existence in the alternate worlds she experiences is marked not only by changes in location, but also by the intensity of her bodily experiences and the surrounding atmosphere. In one of her musician's lives, Nora awakens amidst a tense and energetic atmosphere, sweating, her heart racing, and surrounded by the sounds of a crowd. All of these elements are presented not as dreams or hallucinations, but as concrete realities directly experienced by the character.

"She was sweating. That was the first observation. Her body was coursing with adrenaline and her clothes were clinging to her. there were people around her, a couple of whom had guitars. She could hear noise. Vast,

powerful human noise - a roar of life slowly finding rhythm and shape. Becoming a chant." (Haig, 2020: 157)

The portrayal demonstrates how mystical experiences, such as being transported into another existence, are truly shown through tangible and realistic details, such as perspiration, excitement, loudness, and other people. This exemplifies The Phenomenal World's qualities as an alternate reality that is lifelike in texture and perceptible to the senses and body. The reader is urged to feel the mood firsthand rather than to wonder how Nora got there.

Unsettling Doubts

The difference between the protagonists' expectations and the reality they encounter, are two more ways that doubt appears in the realm of magical realism. Nora frequently goes into another life in The Midnight Library with preconceived notions that it will ease her regrets, make her happy, or give her a sense of fulfilment. But the reality she encounters when she really steps inside is frequently less than perfect. Such moments raise serious questions about her true desires in life as well as the world she has entered, *"This was not the life she imagined it to be."* (Haig, 2020: 59). This quote implies that the alternative world that appears ideal from a distance actually harbors complexities and imperfections. his claim raises questions about both the reality Nora is living in and the idea of the optimal course of action. It begs the question of whether the life she envisions is actually better or if it is only a view influenced by regrets from the past brought on by this event. Given that the sentence is a direct reflection of Nora's thoughts and without any external explaining narrative, this process of uncertainty is conveyed in a brief but succinct internal narrative that reflects a delicate form of stream of consciousness. This kind of doubt reinforces unsettling doubts, as it shakes the perception of stability and certainty.

The realization that Nora's physical sense and her rational understanding of her existence are inconsistent is one of the most striking instances of the Unsettling Doubts that characterize The Midnight Library. She feels very much present in her body, Nora is able to stand, breathe, sense gravity, and be conscious of her position in the Midnight Library,

which ought to be a metaphysical and unreal place. This incongruity gives rise to deep doubts within her, while creating experiences that cannot be explained rationally.

“Nora exhaled heavily. It was interesting to know that she could exhale in the library. That she felt entirely in her body. That it felt normal. Because this place was definitely not normal. And the real physical her wasn't here. It couldn't be. And yet it was, to all intents and purposes, because she was - in some sense - there. Standing on a floor, as if gravity still existed.” (Haig, 2020: 84)

This quotation exemplifies Unsettling Doubts' central tension between physical awareness and the logic of reality. The physical sensations that Nora feels are completely real, but her consciousness denies that they are real. Characters in magical realism are left to linger in a state of uncertainty rather than receiving rational answers or overt miracles, which results in an internal tension that is not instantly resolved. As a character who is continuously struggling with existential issues, Nora's inner story is told as an internal monologue that flows and has the qualities of a stream of consciousness. In addition to adding realism, her self-awareness of her body and space creates an eerie yet familiar atmosphere: a space that seems real but is logically impossible.

In magical realism, doubt can also be sparked by little, concrete, and straightforward events that make the character feel unfamiliar with their surroundings, rather than by big existential problems. In one of the parallel lives, Nora discovers that she still feels alienated despite living as someone else in a world that appears to be normal. This sentiment is expressed in a statement where she likens herself to a visitor who is unfamiliar with a social structure and is unsure of how to act.

“She felt like a tourist with an unfamiliar currency, not knowing how much to tip” (Haig, 2020: 72)

This quotation serves as a metaphor for emotions of identity uncertainty and alienation. With its social customs, morals, and daily interactions, the

alternate reality Nora finds herself in appears incredibly authentic and realistic. Nevertheless, she believes she lacks the right currency since she is unsure of how to act, what other people and her own vision of herself expect of her, and how to live a genuine life. She becomes detached from this apparently real world as a result, which raises serious questions about her position and function in it. This narrative technique also touches on the subtle form of stream of consciousness, as it originates from Nora's own consciousness interpreting the world around her. This doubt is not merely a doubt about miracles, but about the authenticity of life experience itself.

Merging Realms

The existence of a transitional library where Nora Seed examines different incarnations of her life serves as a vivid example of this blending of universes. This realm spans life, death, and possibility rather than existing inside a traditional order of reality. The story's focal point, the library, serves as both a physical support system for Nora Seed, the protagonist, and a symbol or place of spiritual change. The library turns into a fixed point that keeps Nora on the verge of death in the midst of the uncertainty between life and death, making it a magical place that determines survival and operates realistically.

“While the Midnight Library stands, Nora, you will be preserved from death. Now, you have to decide how you want to live.” (Haig, 2020: 30)

This statement reveals that Nora's physical existence is inseparable from the library, as if the world were part of her biological and metaphysical systems. This proves that the magical world does not appear as an external world or illusion, but has become completely integrated with the characters' real-life systems. The Midnight Library becomes a place that simultaneously exists outside of ordinary reality, yet also regulates reality itself, creating the perfect conditions for a merging of realms.

One of the key characteristics of Merging Realms is when alternate worlds that were once considered “branches” of reality begin to be accepted as the main reality by the characters. In The Midnight Library, Nora gradually begins to accept that each

life she enters could be the “real” life she will live forever, that there is no longer a clear line between her home world and her new one. At some point, she begins to consider “living” in one of these worlds permanently.

“Maybe this was it. maybe this was, finally, the life she was going to stay put in. The life she would choose. The one she would not return to the shelves.” (Haig, 2020: 237)

The statement in this quote reflects the complete integration of the alternative world and the character's existential decisions. Nora no longer views the library as a transitory place and the other lives as “simulations” or experiments. Instead, she begins to believe that one of those lives, the one she enters through the library and could be the only reality she will live permanently. The magical world has become a world of choice, and the library is no longer just a place of transition, but an entry point to a new, authentic life.

Furthermore, the transition between the real world and the magical world in *The Midnight Library* is not only evident in the way Nora moves between lives, but also in the structure of the existential relationship between those worlds. At a crucial point in the story, it is explained that the existence of the *Midnight Library* is entirely dependent on Nora's existence in her “original” life. This means that the library is not a separate or external world, but rather an extension of the character's own consciousness and existence.

“She stared back at the screen. “Yes. You see, The Midnight Library only exists because you do. In your root life.”” (Haig, 2020: 115)

This passage makes it very evident that *The Midnight Library* is a magical universe that depends on the main character's physical and mental reality in order to exist: a space that only exists because the character is still alive. This is a tangible illustration of merging realms since the actual and magical worlds influence one another and decide each other's existence. Instead of being two interconnected universes, they are now a single system of realities that combine and create one another.

Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity

The most dominant characteristic in the novel is the disruption of time, space, and identity. Transitions between locations happen instantly, as though space and time could be jumped with just an inner decision or idea, rather than following the logic of true physical movement. This is made clear in Nora's first encounter, in which she tries suicide and awakens at the *Midnight Library*, a bizarre location, only to be instantly taken to another reality.

“She had been in Bedford. Then in that strange library. And now she was here, on a pretty village road. Without hardly even moving.” (Haig, 2020: 42)

This quote demonstrates how Nora's movement from her home world to the magical library, and then to the new world, occurs without any explicable physical process. The movement occurs “without actually moving,” indicating that space in the novel is flexible and not subject to the usual laws of geography. This is a clear example of the disruption of space, as place no longer requires causality or logical connection. Time is also not a consideration, what matters is the shift in consciousness, not the sequence of events.

The erratic flow of time between lives in *The Midnight Library* is one of the most subtly potent examples of time disruption. Nora spends only a few minutes in some parallel universes, while in others, she feels as though she has been there for days or even weeks. In addition to upsetting the sense of time, this disparity prevents the characters from feeling a connection to any one location or reality.

“Sometimes she was in a life for less than a minute, while in others she was there for days or weeks. It seemed the more lives she lived, the harder it was to feel at home anywhere.” (Haig, 2020: 215)

This quote suggests that time in the novel does not function objectively, but rather according to Nora's emotions, decisions, or consciousness. This instability has a powerful psychological effect: Nora becomes disconnected from the lives she lives, even as she is physically and emotionally involved in them. The disruption of time here begins to imply the

disruption of identity, for if one cannot settle into a time or place, one loses a sense of “home,” and with it, a sense of who one is.

Following her extensive experience in the Midnight Library, Nora eventually comes to a point where she starts to question her own identity. It's more about the loss of continuity between consciousness and self than it is about not fitting into a role. She feels fragmented as though she were only an echo of different possibilities of life, without a single core, and the name she once knew has become meaningless and empty.

“The trouble was that eventually Nora began to lose any sense of who she was. Like a whispered word passed around from ear to ear, even her name began to sound like just a noise, signifying nothing.” (Haig, 2020: 215)

This quote represents the most profound form of identity disruption. Here, Nora's identity is unravelling, not due to external influences or social pressures, but through the repeated experience of being someone else in various alternate lives. With each transition, the boundaries of her identity become increasingly blurred until eventually, even the name "Nora" loses its meaning as a marker of identity. Identity is no longer static or unified, but rather becomes an inconsistent fragment of consciousness.

Conclusion

The Midnight Library exemplifies how magical realism can be effectively used in contemporary Western literature to explore profound existential and emotional themes. Through the lens of Wendy B. Faris's five defining characteristics, the novel presents a seamless fusion between magical elements and realistic settings. The existence of a mysterious library between life and death, the multiplicity of possible lives, and the acceptance of magical experiences without logical explanation all serve to highlight how magical realism functions not merely as a stylistic choice, but as a narrative strategy to express the inexpressible aspects of human experience. Matt Haig employs this genre as a means to express complex psychological and philosophical struggles faced by the protagonist, Nora Seed. The use of stream of consciousness deepens readers'

insight into Nora's internal journey. This study shows that Faris's theory remains relevant in analyzing modern English literature, highlighting magical realism's adaptability and its power to engage with personal and social issues in today's world.

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