Why is a writer seen here as a researcher? Because when you’re doing a PhD in anything, it’s all about the research. And for me it was about, what, when I was thinking about it, what could I do defined what’s expected for the new knowledges that’s out of the PhD. So the title of my PhD is ‘Magic realism and the writing place’, which combines two very big interests. So this is going to be a really fast overview of description of magic realism, because people don’t actually recognise the term or understand what’s being implied with it. Because, I want to read a section, a short section out of the novel, if you’re looking in your bookshops, at the end and maybe if we’ve got time for questions, possibly depends on our lovely MC out there.

So my answer to the question of why I chose to write this book in the mode of magic realism was always this, that during my thinking about what to undertake for the new knowledge expected from a PhD, three things of continuing interest come together. These are my fascination with the dynamics of enclosed communities in general and of small town Australia in particular. I grew up in a small town, and they are endlessly fascinating if you’re a watcher. My interest in writing place and how the many layers of a place can be explored, and this includes how things are named, because when the first Europeans started exploring Australia, they didn’t have the language to describe what they were seeing. And there were words that were invented and, ‘like a brook’ or ‘like a lee’ when they were going through the countryside, were used often because there was no words in the English language to describe what they were seeing. This same thing happened with the, when the Spanish hit what’s now Latin America, there was one of their very early explorers wrote home in his, to King Phillip the whatever-it-was, that he could not describe to him what he was seeing because there wasn’t the language for it, and it was the same here. The place was too different. So, and the third thing that came with me was magic realism as a way to explore the liminal of the society. So liminal, of course, is the point of conscious awareness where it becomes the unconscious, that fraction in between. In other words, I wanted to explore what holds up a society, what the things are that influence everything we do that are so deeply embedded that we don’t even think about them or acknowledge their presence. I’m talking about the old stories and mythologies that are passed down that told us, told our forebears who they are. And look, we still refer to, think the various mythological books, and I’ll include the Christian Bible in here, and the practices, law and government practices which came from Rome. They’re all there but we don’t know, we don’t think about them. They’re part of the underpinnings of our society.

But apart from that, where did this term ‘magic realism’ come from? It’s sometimes referred to as ‘magical realism’ too, basically the same thing, and what is it in a literary context? It’s not an easy journey to track, as there are many variations and byways, but
I’m trying to give, what I’ll try is to give you just one single line through the mire of discussions and arguments. Because there are many, many concepts and discussions about this very slippery term.

But the term was coined by the art critic Franz Roh in 1925 in an attempt to describe a new style of painting that emerged between the wars. It was also called ‘new objectivity’. Now the work, Roh said, had a magic of being, that venerated as a miracle the world’s natural organisation. So here’s the term, ‘the magic of reality’, that quickly turned into magic realism. It’s a catchy term. So the literary communities of Europe, and in particular those in Italy, France and Spain, soon picked it up. However the term in literature quickly came to mean different things to different commentators. It referred, and still does, equally to the cool contemporative writing of many northern European writers, and to the experimental work of those in Italy and Spain.

And the term went south with the exodus from Spain of Latin American artists and writers, due to the approaching Spanish civil war. There it came to define the literature that is most commonly understood as magic realism, that of Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende, to name but three of many who wrote in the mode. And these are probably the writers that are, for Australians in particular, because those works are accessible, they would think of as magic realist writers. Of course then there’s the work of Borges from Latin America, but it’s a different type of magic realism, it’s more reminiscent of the European style, rather than the place and mythological centred work of the other three which I’ve just spoken of.

And the term continues to mean different things to different commentators, indeed, for different practitioners. In Latin America, there are ongoing discussions, almost feuds, literally, about the constitution and origins of magic realism. However, Alejo Carpentier colonised Latin America with his term ‘lo real maravilloso Americano’, which translates approximately as ‘the marvellous reality of America’. The Australian, Beverly Farmer, wrote in a review of a contemporary novel, “in magic realism what happens is by fusion under urgent pressure of the polar opposites, magic and reality, into a momentary hyperreality, much as the surfer and the wave together make the ride.” I really like that. So it is Carpentier’s and Farmer’s understanding of this mode of writing that I was interested in as a way to explore the marvellous place of Australia.

So then. With these understandings, a brief explanation of them are, is that a writer will be writing along, writing a world that the reader recognises and understands, one that one could call reality. Then comes a moment of such intensity that realism cannot do it justice, can’t portray the depth of emotions at that particular moment. You could call these epiphanies, but they’re not necessarily so. A car fanatic I know, actually a taxi driver I met the other night, he was talking, he wanted to know what I was doing. So we were talking about it, we have a very well-educated man driving a cab. He called it then ‘supercharged moments’, and I thought that’s exactly right, cos it takes off and then it comes back. So the writer breaks the skin of realism and takes the writing into a different reality to give the reader a deeper understanding of that moment. And then they return to the ongoing realism. So MR is not fantasy, nor is it surrealism. It is, as Roh said, the
magic of reality.

And so we come to Australia as a magic realist text. Now all societies have their myths and stories that underpin their reality. My aim was to use our Australianness as a magically real place that is broken into at these times of intensity. When I was thinking about magic realism and the Australian landscape before I actually started the PhD work, I remembered the disjunctions and reversals encountered by early explorers and settlers. Not only was the country itself tucked under the globe of the world, where Europe is at the top, but the seasons are reversed and the flora and fauna was strange and threatening. Trees dropped their bark instead of their leaves, and some wept red tears when the trunks were scratched. Others had scribbled messages under the bark, scribbly gum, looks like someone’s written messages under it when you take the bark off. Birds more often squawked or laughed instead of singing. Swans were black instead of the familiar white. And for early explorers, black swans were often seen as manifestations of the devil, the black of profanity, of the perverted. In the history of Perth, there is an anecdote of the Dutch explorer, Willem de Vlamingh, who at the time was looking for fresh water. And it says, “he was travelling around the area when he entered the mouth of a river and found an abundance of swans. But everyone in Europe knew that all swans were white.” How European is that? So he left, fearing the land had corrupted the white swans and turned them black. Hence, the estuary was named the Swan River. But he left, he didn’t explore any further, it scared him away.

But to the European the bush itself was inimical, was untrackable and untracked, and it was disposed to taking children and not returning them. Peter Pierce writes in his book, ‘The Country of Lost Children’, “standing for girls and boys of European origin who strayed into the Australian bush, the lost child is an arresting figure in the history and the folklore of colonial Australia.” The lost child is a symbol of deep anxieties within the white settler communities of this country, and not only in colonial times. In 1960, four year old Stephen Walls was lost in the New England ranges. His unexpected recovery triggered a song by the country singers Johnny Ashcroft and Tony Withers, ‘Little boy lost’, which details the search and the low expectations of the child being found due to the wildness of the country. But the interesting thing about this song isn’t the very corny lyrics, but that it was written as celebration of a recovery, the indication being that children are rarely recovered from the bush.

Then there is the Azaria Chamberlain tragedy. She also was taken by the Australian wilderness, not by the bush but by a dingo. Now that’s become another part of our Australian mythology. Think about the many times it’s referred to, even in just talking to people about Australian stuff. Some people still say that it wasn’t, but it was, it most definitely was. Actually when I started, when I was writing this section about dingoes, I rang a friend of mine, or an acquaintance, who years ago was working on the Chamberlain case as a dingo authority. And he rang me, because I’d just done a production of Dorothy Hewitt’s ‘Man from Mukunupin’ in which there’s a, dingoes are referred to as acting in certain ways. So I called him and said, “well tell me about dingo behaviour”. And we talked about the Chamberlain case, and he said there was absolute certainty at the time of that trail that the dingo did it. It was just that there was political
pressure to not let the dingo do it, mainly because of tourism. So you never believe everything you read.

So we still have, so there’s Azaria, Ashcroft’s song, and the Pierce theory was the impetus for the final chapters in the novel, where an immigrant child disappears and the town searches. There are, for those who have read or are going to read the book, there are other interventions which change the focus from a purely lost-and-search impulse, but the underpinning concept is that the bush, which of course includes fauna, the animals, as well as flora, was the predator.

‘Siddon Rock’ is about stories. We all carry stories that other people don’t know. Sections of ourselves and our histories are hidden away. And in a country town, in a close community, those stories that we tell ourselves or that people tell themselves about themselves and about other people become part of their folklore and mythology and they then inform how people behave. It’s this, it’s…osmosis almost. An osmotic process between storytelling, which is vital to a community to keep it active, and the way people act within that community.

So what I’m going to read to you is quite a short section of the novel, which gives part of the story of Marg Redall, who’s the publican’s wife, and it shows how magic realism can allow an inner world to manifest externally. It’s not about, it doesn’t tap into the Australian myths that I’ve been talking about, but I wrote this section because she, this woman emerged very early in the piece, and she straight away had this cloud of blue around her and I had no idea, I had no idea what it was. I knew it was there, I knew there was a reason it was there, so I just went with it. And then when I sat down to write her story, I actually wrote, it was actually a lot longer than it is in the book and then I cut away all of the early, all her early life, because it got to be quite irrelevant.

So, where will I start? So remembering that what she carries with her is a pale blue cloud that is with her all the time. I’ll just turn over. Oh and she’s a musician, I didn’t mention that, she’s a musician. She was going to be, she’s a classical musician and she, where we pick up the story, she’s just packed up her stuff in London and she’s going to Berlin to be part of a trio there, and it’s just before the Second World War, when things are getting a little bit dicey, getting rumours of war coming out of Europe.

[reading from novel]

So there she was, at what appeared to be an impasse in her life, in that late summer of 1935. She had just left the London Symphony and was about to leave for Berlin, enticed by the idea of being part of the new ensemble. On her last night in London, her bags were packed and she was ready to go. The taxi was ordered for her the next morning. But there was a touch of chill in the night air, and in the yellowish glow from street lights, the first dying leaves from beech and oak trees spun to the ground.

Was it excitement at the new adventure, or a touch of fear about going to a strange
country from where came whisperings of war that kept Marjorie awake and drew her into the streets of Soho at night? She was walking slowly along, looking into shop windows, and obviously reluctant to go back to her packed up flat. Someone opened a door at the bottom of a set of steps leading to a basement, and music flowed out.

“Is this a private party?” she asked the man who came up the steps.

“You can go in, lady,” he said. “Anyone can go in.”

She enjoyed the music. It was modern, simple and boppy, different from her own classical world and easy to let slip into the background as she bought herself a drink and settled in a booth near the low platform stage. But as she did so, the trio made its final flourish. It was very late, after all, and the few people in the audience left quickly.

The saxophonist started to pack up but the piano player lit up a cigarette and settled back on the piano stool. Running his fingers up and down the keyboard in cadences with a slight syncopation, doodling on the black notes. The drummer touched brushes over the skins, giving a whooshy swish support to the doodles. The sax player looked at them and smiled. He took a long swig from a glass, wiped his lips, and joined them into the impro. Then the drums took over and the notes became a slow moving train. The piano player picked up the rhythm and waves rolled in on a beach and receded as the sax blew up a summer storm. Marjorie was surrounded by her music, was her music. Marjorie had found jazz.

On the table where the open sax case lay was another familiar case. Marjorie opened it, put together the pieces of the clarinet, held it up to the sax player with a question in her eyes. He nodded and she stepped into jazz and out of the Berlin Quartet. As she lifted the clarinet to her lips, her music gathered around her and she saw that it was made of deep, vibrant blue notes. Jazz.

Marjorie stayed and played, foregoing Berlin and classical quartets and symphony orchestras, for a hole-in-the-wall basement jazz and the blues. She formed an occasional friendship with the barman, a young Australian from a country town who was working his way around Europe. As he cleaned the bar down early one morning, he mentioned he was going home.

“My dad’s died,” he said. “I’ve gotta go back and look after things. Do you want to come home?”

Marjorie was startled, surprised that he could even think that she’d want to leave London and the jazz.

“What’s for?” she said. “This is my life, here.”
But over the next month, a seed took root, watered by the barman’s daily question, “Sure you don’t want to come home?” And the night he cleaned down the bar for the last time and walked out of the pub into a smoggy and icy London early morning, Marjorie felt the call of the Australian sun and walked out with him.

On the long, slow voyage across the English Channel, through the Mediterranean to the Suez Canal and down into the Indian Ocean, Marjorie and the barman watched the oceans change from cold grey to all shades of blue and green. As they saw the low, flat coastline of home, he said, “You know I’ve got to take over the family pub. You want to come too?” And this time there was no hesitation for Marjorie, no “but what about my music”, no “but what am I going to do?” In fact, not a second passed before she answered.

“Why not?” Marjorie replied, and her blue [0:19:01.6] on her shoulders with barely a sigh.

On the train, as it rocked its way across flat, pale-soiled land towards Bluey’s hometown, Bluey put his arm around her. “You going to miss all that?” he said, and Marg took it to mean, “are you going to be happy staying here at the edge of the outback, or are you going to want to go back to Europe and the music?”

“Nah,” she said. “This’ll be just fine. There’s music everywhere.”

Bluey stood firmly on the floor of the swaying train. “Can you hear it here, Margie?” She nodded, feeling through the soles of her feet a deeper sound than the rhythm of the train, a sombre, more insistent note.

Marg soon found the rhythms of Siddon Rock were quieter and rougher than anything she’d every experienced, more apparently singular but with a supportive, interwoven complexity. It took only a short time for her to settle into the routine. Sometimes when the telephone rang and Marg picked up the receiver, there was a sea-like silence broken by a single note that blew a dark hole into her day. Most times it was a flattened fifth, but now and then, a bent third emerged, and at these times Marg took herself to the top of Siddon Rock itself until the blues she found in her basement in Soho retreated to the edge of her vision. Then she would go back to Bluey Redall and his pub.

[end of recording]