

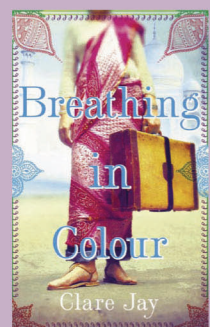
FIRST DRAFT

A published author compares a segment of her book to an earlier draft, discussing how – and why – she made her editing choices.



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Clare Jay: Finessing Sense Perception



Excerpted from
Breathing in Colour
(Piatkus, £7.99)

The work

The novel tells the story of a mother, Alida, whose teenaged daughter, Mia, goes missing while backpacking in India. Alida flies out to search for her, and finds disturbing collages in Mia's hotel room which focus on a taboo tragedy that took place in the family when Mia was only six years old. Mia's voice weaves through the book in the form of retrospective diary entries; these gradually build a complete picture of what actually happened in the past – and show why mother and daughter are estranged. In this scene, Mia relives the event of her parents' break-up, which is precipitated by the disastrous event that scarred the family.

Mia has the sensory condition of synaesthesia, where the senses are mingled so that a sound might be tasted on the tongue, or a texture perceived as a colour. I did heaps of research into synaesthesia, but since I don't have the condition myself, portraying it required leaps of imagination on my part; early on in the writing of the novel, I recognised the helpfulness of focusing on one particular sense perception and allowing scenes involving Mia to spring up from that initial impetus.

In the early draft, Mia spies on her parents through the kitchen door, but to me the scene seemed a little bland and not as involving as it could be. I realised it was more realistic that a child overhears her parents fighting while she's supposed to be asleep, so I decided to rewrite the scene focusing on the sense of hearing. Because Mia only *hears* the argument, her synaesthetic perception of their voices coming through the carpet mingles with her imagination as she pictures the scene – if she'd been physically watching at the door, she wouldn't have 'seen' her parents bleeding from the nose, for instance.

Also in the early version, the moment where Mia's father admits he's leaving her mother felt a bit tame. In the final version, I made it more dramatic by having all the noise stop – this silence expands through the house and even stops Mia's breath in her chest. The way her mother's words turn to blood in Mia's mind's eye also strengthens the impact of the break-up, as Mia understands immediately that this is a death-blow to her family. The bits I liked from the earlier draft, such as the walking jelly bean image and Mia's fear of the gaps between the words, I built in around the new draft. I rarely chuck out entire scenes; there's usually some early instinct that's worth keeping.

Sense perceptions are absolutely key to the way we experience the world; in fiction they act as a route into the beating red heart of a character. When I'm stuck on a particular scene, I ask myself: 'Primarily through which sense will this character experience this event?' Then I mentally reduce my other senses and bear down on that one doorway into my character's world. Combining the character's imagination with these primary perceptions of sound, taste or touch can be a surprisingly easy, fun way to enrich a scene.

1st draft

I'm downstairs, hugging my arms to my chest so tightly that my ribs feel bruised. They don't know I'm here, or that I can see them through the kitchen door, which is open the same width of space as my two eyes. Dad is standing against the fridge, his eyes so blue it hurts to look at them. His mouth is one flat line, the sort of mouth that only opens to say "no". Mum stalks around the table in a red cardigan which trails wisps of wool. Her hair is barbed-wire wild and her voice blackens the air.

'I'm not an idiot,' she spits. 'I know exactly what's going on.'

For weeks, I've seen the way her eyes shrink into points when she looks at him, as if he's not himself at all, but one of Poppy's trolls. It's got something to do with his new, sticky-pink jellybean smell. Dad's eyes are scared and dizzy, like someone about to jump from a plane, and the smell is all over him, turning him into a walking jelly bean, a sugar man melting in the heat.

My father opens his no-mouth just a slit. 'I don't care anymore what you do or don't know.'

My mother stops walking. I can only see her back, thin and taut, but I know she is scared. 'What are you saying, Ian?' she demands. 'Are you leaving me?'

His head falls into a slow nod and I want to leap forward and hold it up by the chin, stop him from ever agreeing.

'I can't live my life for someone else,' he says. Beneath my cold feet, the world is spinning away. I wish I could speak, but my arms are gripping my chest, stopping my breath.

'Not even for your eight-year-old daughter? She needs you, Ian. She needs *us*. We agreed to see this through.'

'I can't,' he shouts, and in his voice there are tears, the stretching red lines of old pain. 'It's too hard, and you know it.'

A silence grows around us, pressing ashes into my throat. This is the bit I dread, the gaps between the words. This is the part where, even if I'm standing within touching distance of them, I fail to understand what passes between them. My parents become invisible, silent, unreachable.

Published version

Every night, as soon as I am tucked up in bed, they sharpen their store of words and hack at each other. Every night, I press my hands over my ears so tightly that every swallow is magnified and fills my head like the gurgles of an underwater cave. But the ashy texture of the air doesn't change. I am nearly nine years old, too old to need soft toys, but every morning I wake up to find my black and white panda crushed beneath my chest.

This time their voices go right through my hands.

I slither head first from my bed and press my ear into the hairy darkness of my carpet. My hearing fans out over the surface of my bedroom floor.

I close my eyes and picture them in the kitchen. I work with the information I have: the way they looked before I went up to bed this evening, and the texture, weight and shape of their voices. Dad is leaning up against the fridge in the suit which makes his eyes shine from his face. His arms are folded across his chest and, when he shouts, his anger hits the air in concrete blocks and turns everything blotchy lobster red. Mum stalks around the kitchen table in a long cream cardigan which trails wisps of wool. Her hair is wild, and barbed wire snaps from her eyes. Her voice spatters the air with black ink. Are they arguing about the way Dad smells? Sticky pink sugar all over his bone-deep baked-potato scent.

'Don't imagine I can't see right through you,' she is shouting. 'Don't think I don't know what's going on.'

His voice is harsh. 'I don't care anymore what you do or don't know. This is where it all stops.'

When he says that, everything does stop. Mum's shoes stop their angry clacking on the kitchen floor. The hum of the house stops. My breath stops in my chest.

'You're leaving me, aren't you?'

There's a rumble, a half-groan from him. Even from here, I can tell he's agreeing with her.

My palms are oily with sudden sweat. My mother says something low and vicious. Then her voice explodes up to ceiling height again.

'And what about Mia? She wasn't even six when the first *bloody awful* thing happened in this family.' When she says that, I taste blood between my teeth. I see blood trickling from my parents' eyeballs, oozing from their noses in dangling red clots. They are making each other die.