

Interview with Clare Jay, PhD, by James Wannerton, President of the UK Synaesthesia Association



Firstly, do you have synaesthesia? Or do you personally know someone who has the condition?

I don't have synaesthesia, but all my life I have had intensely vivid dreams in which colours seem to flow right into and through me with all the sensory power of touch. Perhaps this is why the condition strikes me as particularly fascinating, as it mirrors an unconscious tendency within me.

How and when did you first hear about synaesthesia?

I was doing internet research into a memorable experience I'd had in a dream, in which I picked up a fistful of sand without looking at it, and perceived it through texture and taste as being a deep orange. I looked, and my hand was full of this luminous orange. I quickly found Dr Richard Cytowic's online articles on synaesthesia and read voraciously on the subject, ordering books for further research.

How and why did you become interested in synaesthesia and synaesthetes?

Through the reading I did, and through my continued explorations of synaesthesia in lucid dreams – dreams in which you are aware that you are dreaming. One handy thing about lucid dreaming is that before you go to sleep, you can set yourself a task to do in the dream. I set myself the task of finding out more about synaesthetic perception. On becoming lucid in a dream, I would then perform actions such as stroking a wall of textures to see whether I would get any sensations of taste, smell, or other. In one dream, a soft, furry texture a bit like velour induced the taste of porridge.

How did you research the subject?

I downloaded scientific reports and articles from the internet and went through them underlining connections and sensations until the larger picture emerged. I watched online

synaesthesia videos, making detailed notes as I went along, and perused sites which provided links to further reading. The most useful books I read on the subject were *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*, by Dr Richard Cytowic, and *Blue Cats & Chartreuse Kittens*, by Patricia Lynne Duffy. Cytowic's articles also provided excellent food for thought. The research I undertook in my lucid dreams helped me to get inside the subject in a way that no amount of reading can.

Did you get to meet or speak to any synaesthetes in the course of your research?

I communicated with synaesthetes through online forums, visited their websites, read about individual experiences, and lifted certain synaesthetic perceptions that struck a chord with me, such as 'cool glass columns', which in the novel becomes the way that the seven-year-old Mia perceives the emotionally distant name 'Alida' as opposed to the warm apricot of 'Mummy', which she no longer feels able to use.

How did this book come into being? What gave you the original impulse to include synaesthetic characters within your novel?

I was at a stage in the writing of the novel – which I wrote as part of my PhD thesis entitled 'The role of lucid dreaming in the creative writing process' – where I knew that there had to be something different about Mia. To help me find out what, I looked to my dreams, as my PhD practice involved drawing on lucid dreams for inspiration at every stage of the novel-writing process. Soon, I had the orange-sand dream that took me straight to synaesthesia. I knew immediately that this was what I was looking for. Mia has very strong synaesthesia, experiencing any form of sensory fusion, and writing her character and perceptions was an absolute delight.

Synaesthesia being such a subjective experience is a potentially difficult condition to portray on the written page. Many authors have tried and many have failed to accurately put across the synaesthetic experience. Bearing in mind that you are not a synaesthete yourself, are you satisfied that your interpretation of the condition has managed to present the experience in an accurate and informative way to a non-specialist readership?

I recently read a novel by a sighted author who writes from the point of view of a blind woman: Linda Gillard's lovely book *Star Gazing*, in which the sound of rain on leaves helps the protagonist to understand the shapes of trees. In writing about synaesthesia, rather than sensory deprivation, there is sensory overdrive. The beauty of being a novelist as opposed to

a non-fiction writer is that the author is free to engage imaginatively with the subject. Picasso said: 'Painting isn't an aesthetic operation; it's a form of magic.' That's how I feel about novel-writing – it's a kind of magic-making; a fusion between the imagination, facts, and emotions. In writing the synaesthesia sections of the book, I drew not only on the detailed research I've mentioned, but also on my lucid dreaming mind's portrayal of synaesthetic perception, and my imaginative understanding of the condition. Accuracy and information are essential, top-of-the-list ingredients for non-fiction specialist works, and while they do have their place in imaginative writing, for me, the important thing was to add a sensory layer to the novel and make Mia's synaesthesia emotionally real to the reader. I'll let my readers decide how effective this was!

During the writing of the book, were you at any point concerned whether the majority of your readers, being non-synaesthetes, would be bemused by Mia's synaesthetic experiences?

There were moments when I imagined readers stopping in their tracks every few lines with questions such as: 'Why does she experience her father as baked potatoes, while her mother is vanilla custard? And how can high musical notes look like golden bubbles?' As I was writing Mia's scenes, I didn't let myself 'think about it'; I just let the impressions, tastes, and sensations flood into my mind, and then I wrote them down. I guess I hoped that readers, possibly initially confused by the onslaught of perceptions, would naturally reach a point where they, too, stop 'thinking about it' and simply absorb Mia's world as they follow the chain of intensely emotional events which lead to her disappearance in India.

Have you had any positive or negative feedback from any synaesthetes who have read the book?

When my agent was showing the book to editors in the Netherlands in an attempt to sell translation rights there, I was told, excitingly, that one editor who was highly enthusiastic about the book actually had synaesthesia herself. In the end, the rights were auctioned to a different Dutch publishing house, so I didn't get to speak to her personally, but I was pleased to know she had liked it! I sincerely hope that other synaesthetes will find it a tasty read, too. Learning more about the condition has taught me a lot, from a more sensory writing style to an exploration of the parameters of my own senses. *Breathing in Colour* comes out on March 5th, and I would love to hear from synaesthete readers – I can be contacted through the blog page of my website which goes live to coincide with publication: www.clarejay.com

Will you include synaesthesia in any future work?

I so enjoyed writing from the point of view of a synaesthete that I think it'll be hard to stop the occasional mingled sense perception from sneaking into my prose; I love the sensory power of working with taste, sensation, sound, scent, and sight. I could imagine one day writing a complete story in the voice of a synaesthete, because this kind of writing takes me beyond the limits of my own experience into a more magical world. For me, writing synaesthetic perception is like dreaming awake.

The thought occurs to me that having India as a prime location in the book was pretty much ideal in that anyone who has visited would instantly relate to the cacophony of sight, sounds and smells that bombard your senses. This lends itself well in the quest to understand the synaesthetic experience.

Yes – India is certainly an assault on the senses. The thought of Mia, with her very strong synaesthesia, adjusting to such an environment, was a little overwhelming. It's not surprising that being in India unleashed her exceptionally vivid dreams about the disaster which had estranged her from her mother all those years before – anyone who has backpacked around India knows that it's hard to cut yourself off from the sensory explosion, even while asleep! I like to think that immersing her mother in India too somehow brought the two of them closer on an experiential level.

And finally, Would you like the thought of experiencing synaesthesia yourself?

I feel I have experienced moments of synaesthesia already, in my lucid dreams and during the actual writing, which for me tends to take place in a kind of trance where everything is mingled – my thoughts and senses mingle with vivid mental pictures. Being more open to the senses opens the world that bit wider, so that it can come alive in a whole new way. A measure of synaesthesia seems a natural experience that I think non-synaesthetes can encourage to flourish (albeit only to a minor degree). That said, I'm still a little envious when I read accounts from synaesthetes describing poetry that moves from violet to damson... how beautiful! I can only imagine it, and dream it. That's why writing Mia was special for me; it gave me the opportunity to explore what my own synaesthesia might be like if I had the condition.