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Quotes and titbits

Synaesthesia in fiction

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Protagonists in novels are often given attributes that their creators hope might make them more memorable. Some authors have provided their protagonists with synaesthesia, an unusual familial condition that gives rise to a merging of sensory and/or cognitive functions. (*Grapheme-colour synaesthetes*, for example, experience colours from reading or speech, while *lexical-gustatory synaesthetes* experience tastes in the mouth.) Public unfamiliarity with synaesthesia during the last century meant that most literary cases were penned by synaesthetes themselves, and as a consequence, they had a certain realistic quality. Nabokov, for example, who saw colours from letters, captures the complexities of these sensations in *Bend Sinister*:

“Krug mentioned once that the word ‘loyalty’ phonetically and visually reminded him of a golden fork lying in the sun on a smooth spread of pale yellow silk”

(Nabokov V. *Bend Sinister*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947: p. 86.)

In a similar way, the poet in Nabokov’s *The Gift* recommends to us:

“his pink flannel m... [but not his] Russian y...so grubby and dull that words are ashamed to begin with it”

(Nabokov V. *The Gift*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991: p. 74.)

The 21st century has seen a rise in the public understanding of synaesthesia, and a sharp increase in its literary appearances. Darlene Sable, a satellite character in TJ Parker’s *The Fallen* is described here:

“From early childhood she remembered ‘seeing music’. The saxophone was of course, red and cymbals lemon yellow; violins were lime green, guitars magenta, and so

on. By the time she was five, she knew that not everyone saw music like she did”

(Parker TJ. *The Fallen*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006: p. 278.)

The central figure, Mark Lapslie, in Nigel McCreary’s *Still Waters* is described here:

“Before his medical condition had been diagnosed, back in the time he thought everyone could taste sounds, rather than just him and a handful of others in the world, he had once been almost fatally distracted when a Beatles song suddenly flooded his mouth with rotting meat... Life was just a roller coaster of unexpected sensations when you had synesthesia.”

(McCreary N. *Still Waters*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007: p. 24–25.)

While some 21st century descriptions reflect plausible synaesthetic reports, others are clearly made with greater artistic licence. The appropriately named Synaesthesia Jackson in Allan Moore and Gene Ha’s graphic novel *Top Ten*, vols. 1 and 2 is a female super-hero whose powers lie in her multiple forms of synaesthesia:

“All I got from this body was distant music, like Beethoven”. “You’re really synesthetic, huh?” “Yeah, it’s no big deal”.

(Moore A. and Ha G. *Ten Ten*, vol. 1. La Jolla, California: Wildstorm Publications, chapter 1, 2002: p. 14.)

“Commissioner Ultima, I’m placing you under arrest for the murder of Graczik. It was her perfume I smelled on Graczik’s body, but I translated it into music.”

(Moore A. and Ha G. *Ten Ten*, vol. 2. La Jolla, California: Wildstorm Publications, chapter 2, 2002: p. 11)

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Some authors use synaesthesia to give their characters a type of 'sixth sense' or extraordinary deductive ability. Dave Diotalevi's eponymous hero Myx Ammens is a 14 year-old who acquires synaesthesia after a near-death experience. He now sees flavours and hears colours in voices. The colours of people's voices let him 'know' if they are telling the truth:

"His words were green and red, but of a light shade showing me he believed them."

(Diotalevi D. *Miracle Myx*. Largo, Florida: Kunati, 2008: p. 222.)

"The different clues had never sung to me before because they didn't fit. But now, when I added the raspberry-tasting pieces from the box, the sun swelled in volume and harmonized."

(Diotalevi D. *Miracle Myx*. Largo, Florida: Kunati, 2008: p. 254.)

Myx can even smell the colour of blood on a suspect's hands:

"There was another smell, green, sharp and sour: blood."

(Diotalevi D. *Miracle Myx*. Largo, Florida: Kunati, 2008: p. 12.)

As a result of their synaesthetic advantages, a number of synaesthete characters are detectives: not only Mark Lapslie and *Miracle Myx* above, but also Detective Robbie Brownlaw in TJ Parker's *The Fallen*:

"My name is Robbie Brownlaw and I am a Homicide detective for the city of San Diego... I ...have synesthesia, a neurological condition where your senses get mixed up. Sometimes when people talk to me, I see their voices as colored shapes. It happens when they get emotional...[The shapes] linger in mid-air between the speaker and me".

(Parker TJ. *The Fallen*. New York: Pantheon, 2006: p. 5.)

"You can tell us what you know about Squeaky Cleans", I said. "Squeaky Cleans?" he asked. "I'm not sure what you mean." The red squares of the lie spilled from his mouth."

(Parker TJ. *The Fallen*. New York: Pantheon, 2006: p. 173.)

"Describe your gift," said Bart ... "I see blue triangles from a happy speaker. Red squares come from liars. Envy comes out in green trapezoids, so 'green with envy' is literally true for me. Aggression shows up as small black ovals... "That's not synesthesia," said Bart. "I've read every word ever written about the subject, and no one has ever established that a speaker's emotions can be visualized...What do you see coming from my mouth right now?" "Little black ovals. Quite a few of them."

(Parker TJ. *The Fallen*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006: p. 279-80.)

"I can usually tell when people are lying to me. It's an unusual taste. Dry and spicy, but not in a curry way. More like nutmeg. It's helped me investigating crimes..."

(McCreary N. *Still Waters*. New York: Pantheon, 2007: p. 152.)

Finally, just as art imitates life, it sometimes also imitates science. The fictional world of *The Fallen* has a familiar quality, as Detective Brownlaw explains:

"There is an entire department at the University of California, San Diego dedicated to the study of [synaesthesia], which leads me to believe that what I have is "real". There is an American Synesthesia Association, a UK Synaesthesia Association, as well as an International Synaesthesia Association. There are tests to see if you really have it. Several good books and many abstracts have been published on the subject, and many lectures have been given"

(Parker TJ. *The Fallen*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006: p. 276.)