



## 'My Synaesthesia'

When did you first discover your synaesthesia?

### Jane Mackay, synaesthetic artist

"My earliest coloured sound memory was at age approximately 2 years. I remember the mauve/grey-ish/slate blue colour of the sound of wood pigeons cooing in my grand-parents' garden. Aged about four, I recall the name 'David' being a bright, solid red, but 'Andrew' was like lemony/blue/green/turquoise transparent light: rather subtle and beautiful. Slightly later on, I remember arguing with my sister about the colours of the days of the week. I only discovered the word synaesthesia approximately 30 years afterwards."

### Louise Miller, Bristol.

"My first memory of seeing colours when I heard words was when I was very young, probably about 4 years old. I was talking to my dad on the phone as he was away and I asked him what day he was coming home. He said Friday and it was a rich emerald green. I asked if this was a new day as I don't think I had ever been conscious of colours for days before!"

### Julie Roxburgh, Surrey

"I first realised that things were not quite as they seemed when, on hearing a piece of music consciously for the first time, when I was about 8, I saw the most beautiful patchwork quilt. I asked my mother what it was, and she said that it was an orchestra, made up of lots of musical instruments. This I simply could not believe. Shape, colour, movement, texture, these are how I still 'listen' to music."

### Moyra Sonley, North Yorkshire

"I first realised I had synaesthesia when I read an article about it in an in-flight magazine a number of years ago. That was the first time I realised that it was a condition and that it had a name. Before that, insofar as I thought about it at all, I assumed everyone did it. I didn't realise that not everyone knew that Moyra was red! All fairly typical of a synaesthete's experience I think. Most of my life I didn't really think about it, it was just there."

### Catherine Bailey

"My sisters and I are triplets. We first realised the three of us had synaesthesia in common when we were children. In those days we didn't realise there was a name for it. Initially, we assumed that everyone had synaesthetic responses to the world. It took time, maturity and the cynicism of others to show us that in fact not everybody was like that. Synaesthesia is frightfully normal and not much to get excited about if you've lived with it all your life. To those who haven't, it sounds like a whole load of mumbo jumbo ...."

### JD Wilson, Boston, Massachusetts

"I learned about synaesthesia from an article in The Economist five or six years ago. I just always assumed that everyone was synaesthetic, and no one talked about it because it was just so common that it wasn't an interesting topic."

### Elizabeth Blake Godstone

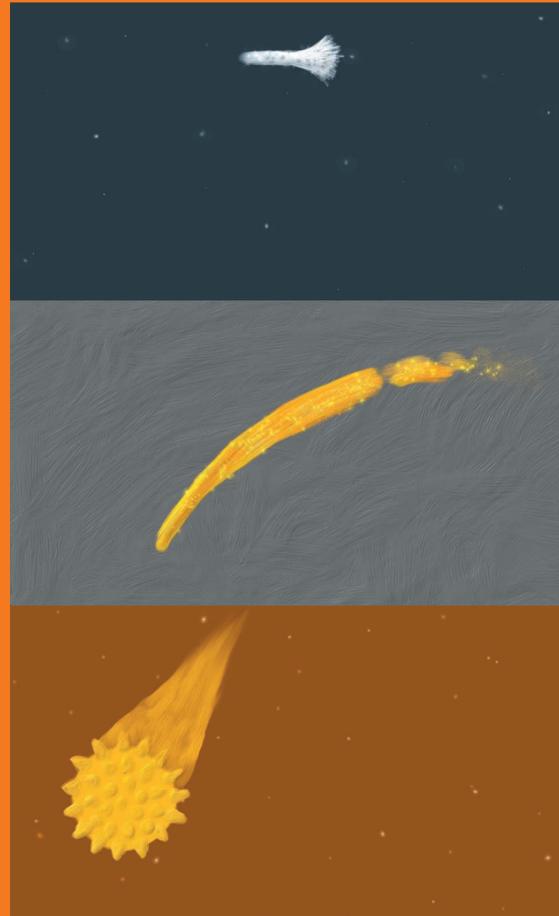
"Most of my life I have experienced seeing numbers in colour but only heard the name for this when Radio 4 had a programme on it a few years ago. Whenever I had mentioned my 'colour numbers' to friends they thought it very odd and I was relieved when I was able to report that others had even more strange experiences of the senses. It has been very interesting reading about these. I think I am only a mild case!"

Thanks to everyone for their contributions!

In the next issue – Is having synaesthesia a help or a hindrance? Please submit your answers to: [Newsletter.UKSA@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:Newsletter.UKSA@hotmail.co.uk)

## Animations

Animator Samantha Moore's representations of Julie Roxburgh's synaesthetic responses to musical notes. (Work in progress)



Top: A sharp on the cello, Middle: F sharp on the violin, Bottom: violin & cello playing a minor second (C- Db)

## NEXT ISSUE

If you would like to contribute to our next newsletter, the deadline is 1st May 2006. We welcome comments, queries, letters, short articles (two pages of A4 max.) and artwork.

In particular we will be discussing the notion of synaesthesia as either advantageous or an interference. Whether you have done research in this area, or just have a personal opinion, we'd like to hear from you!

Please submit your contributions by post to: UKSA, PO Box 6258, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 0WP or by email to: [Newsletter.UKSA@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:Newsletter.UKSA@hotmail.co.uk)

Please note: If you are sending artwork in by post please include a stamped addressed envelope if you would like it to be returned.

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## Uk Synaesthesia Association NEWSLETTER

## WELCOME

Firstly, I'd just like to introduce myself as the new editor of the UKSA newsletter and tell you a little about myself.

I am a colour-grapheme projector synaesthete and, like many people I'm sure, I was aware of my synaesthesia way before I knew the word for it!

One of my best childhood friends and I used to frequently argue over the colour of days of the week and whether words were the colour of the first letter, or made up of lots of individual colours. It was only when we extended the conversation to a wider circle of friends (and found them to generally stare back at us blankly) that we realised that this wasn't something that everyone experiences.

It is probably the case with lots of people – being aware of your synaesthesia isn't so much about discovering that you've got it, but realising that not everyone else does!

In this issue, we hear other readers' stories about when they first became aware of their experiences in the 'My Synaesthesia' section on the back page. We also take a look at the television programme 'Child Of Our Time' which recently looked at synaesthesia in children (if somewhat briefly!), and speak to Julia Simner who helped with the programme's research. Artist Philippa Stanton also shares her view that everyone has synaesthesia as children, but some of us lose the ability to use or appreciate it as we grow older.

If you have any comments on any of the items in this edition, or you'd like to contribute something new, please get in touch! I hope you like the new look, please let us know what you think! The contact details and deadline for the next issue can be found on the back page.

I hope you enjoy reading the newsletter and that many of you will attend the 2006 Annual General Meeting in April.

Best wishes,  
Victoria

Victoria Edmonds, Editor

## Do We All Have Synaesthesia?



### Synaesthete artist Philippa Stanton gives us her opinion:

Sitting in the back of the car, my father driving us home late at night was, for me, as a child a lovely and fascinating experience. Eyes closed and completely indulging myself in listening, I would see all the wonderful and interesting abstract shapes which came into my mind. How and why the night time sounds looked softer and rounder than the sharp day time ones was always a mystery, but an enjoyable one, and one I never shared, as it just seemed an integral part of what went on in life and, as a child one simply experiences life as it happens and feels and it doesn't necessarily need comment.

I cannot believe that I am really unusual in producing abstract forms in my head. I can believe that most adults have lost the capacity to access those places as most adults have lost the ability to retain any childlike qualities, wrongly, in my opinion, supposing they are 'childish'.

We all have to grow up and forsake many things we enjoyed as a child...climbing trees, sticking our tongue out at someone we don't like, running rather aimlessly around enjoying ourselves and, amongst many other things, drawing pictures...unless we are particularly good at 'art'. We all know how important it is to encourage a child to daub and express themselves freely with a paint brush or felt tips or whatever is readily available, and we're always very proud of the marks they make. I am interested in that free expression they show, which often seems to be a direct response to their senses.

Ask a 3 year old to draw the sound of the cat purring, the taste of jam, the smell of a bonfire, or the feeling of water and they never seem to question the request. They think about it and then somehow express it on paper...another fun game! But there are so many 'real', touchable things around that sooner or later they'll be encouraged to 'copy' and therein lies the slippery slope to growing up and leaving those acute sensory experiences behind...sometimes for good.

Being born a naturally creative human being, and having a family who were always ready to accept and encourage my take on the world and, at times, infuriating sensitivity, in all senses of the word, I suspect I could never and never wanted to leave my wonderful childhood

sensations behind. I liked running around and being silly, and with painting. I connect to those senses I enjoyed so much when I was little...the smoothness of chocolate, the sharpness of salt and vinegar and the roughness of a smoker's voice. I really feel if anyone is encouraged to re-kindle these sensory experiences visually, they can. I just never allowed myself to disconnect with the abstract images which sound, taste, smell and touch provoked.

Everyone is a synaesthete to a greater or lesser degree. It is obvious in a nursery class that this is the case. My son had a trumpet player visit his class and when I collected him, all the children were proudly showing off their pictures of the 'sound' of the trumpet. All were different but all shared a similarity. When children are too young to accurately describe pain, ask them to relate it to a shape and colour and it is immediately easier for them; a red triangle is obviously a very different feeling to a white star. Adults just need a bit more time and space to get their mind working in this way; after all, it's probably been a long time since their nursery days. By the time the man who fitted my lino left my house he was describing the taste of onions as zigzag lines whereas the taste of a peach was a rounder, more flowing shape (he drew them in the air with his finger), after one of my exhibitions an excited lady left saying she couldn't wait to draw her cat's miaow.

In these modern times particularly, we are given very little space to dwell with our senses or to even give them a thought...unless we are a 'synaesthete'.

We should be encouraging everyone to get in touch with this side of their being even if it is just to be aware that it is part of our human make-up. Every one of us sees the world differently inside and outside our minds...that is what makes where we live an interesting and exciting place... and with abstract forms, textures and colours, how can anyone say that anyone else has got it wrong. They are just being them. My voice portraits are just how people's voices appear in my head, and I dare say my son, the lino man and many of you reading this would see the sounds very differently...how wonderful.

For more information and commission work please contact: [info@philippastanton.com](mailto:info@philippastanton.com) or visit Philippa's website: [www.philippastanton.com](http://www.philippastanton.com)

Left: Zoë Waites' Voice as 'Reagan' King Lear, Chichester Festival Theatre 2005 Acrylic on canvass with gold leaf Right: 'Sound Of Applause'



## Annual General Meeting 2006

The UK Synaesthesia Association are pleased to announce their second Annual General Meeting. This will take place on the weekend of 22-23 April 2006. The venue is centrally located in London's Bloomsbury district.

Last year's event was a great success and provided an opportunity for synaesthetes to meet each other as well as to learn about scientific and artistic explorations of synaesthesia. At least 60% of the audience were synaesthetes, the remainder consisting of their family or people with a professional interest in learning about synaesthesia.



The programme this year is very varied with presentations on how synaesthesia may relate to memory, personality and creativity; how synaesthesia was first discovered and got its name; the genetics of synaesthesia; and many more. The keynote speech is to be given by

Dr Dominic Ffytche and concerns how the brain creates conscious visual experiences during synaesthesia and how this relates to other phenomena such as imagery, dreaming and hallucination. We may also have an art exhibition again which was successful last year. In addition, there is to be a panel debate involving synaesthetes themselves called "Me and My Synaesthesia". We are still looking for a couple more members to take part on the panel. The panel itself will be a semi-structured debate concerning how synaesthesia affects you. *Does it have benefits or drawbacks? Do you tell people about it? Is it just something in the background?* You don't have to have unusual types of synaesthesia or an unusual occupation to participate. You just need to be willing to discuss your synaesthesia.

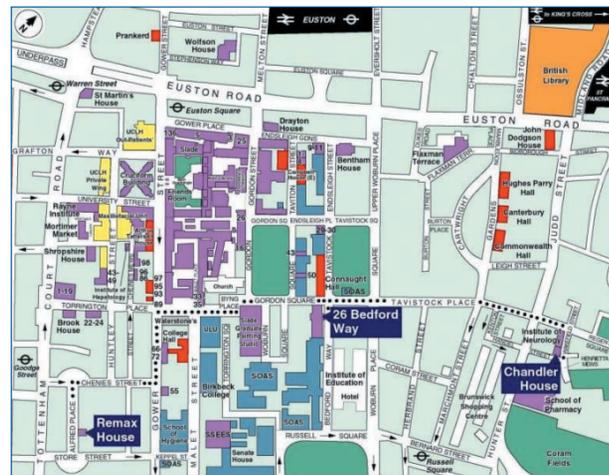
Full details of the programme, a list of accommodation in the area and other details can be found on the website ([www.uksynaesthesia.com](http://www.uksynaesthesia.com)); go to 'members area'.

The cost to existing members is £18 (standard rate) or £12 (students and senior citizens). The cost includes wine reception, tea/coffee, light lunch and hire of the room. If you are renewing your membership and attending the meeting the cost is £38 (standard rate) or £27 (students and senior citizens). This includes a renewal of your annual membership along with the cost of attending the meeting.

Those who wish to attend an optional evening meal on the 22nd April can do so at a cost of £30 per head (including wine, dessert and coffee). This was good fun last year and we hope it will be the same this year.

The conference is organised by Dr Jamie Ward and cheques can be sent to him (payable to "UK Synaesthesia Association") at Department of Psychology, University College London, WC1E 6BT. Please give us a postal address and e-mail address (if applicable) when you send your cheque. You can e-mail queries to [jamie.ward@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:jamie.ward@ucl.ac.uk) or call 020 7679 5394 (e.g. if you don't have the internet and wish to be mailed the list of accommodation or programme).

**We look forward to seeing many of you in London!**



## Books

**Almost Blue by Carlo Lucarelli**

Publisher: Vintage • ISBN: 0099459434

**SHORTLISTED FOR CWA GOLD DAGGER AWARD**

An exquisitely plotted and unique psychological thriller. The author narrates through the eyes of the protagonists, placing the reader right in the action. You will only be needing the very edge of your seat on which to read this fast-paced thriller.

A serial killer is terrorising the students of Bologna. Rookie female detective Grazia Negro is determined to solve the case. Only one witness can positively identify the killer...and he's blind.

Simone spends his days in solitude, listening to Elvis Costello's *Almost Blue* and scanning the radio waves of the city to eavesdrop on other people's lives. He likes to imagine what people are like - based on the tone and 'colour' of their voice - and his acute hearing sets alarm bells ringing upon hearing the voice of the killer.

The perspective alternates between the vulnerable and reclusive Simone and the dark and psychotic killer, obsessed with continually 'reincarnating' himself as his latest victim in a frantic bid to escape the torture of his inner demons.

Lucarelli paints his villain in a brilliant and yet terrifying light and you will have to stop yourself from screaming out to Grazia and Simone to warn them of the looming danger.

Carlo Lucarelli was born in 1960 in Modena, Italy. He has written eleven noir novels and his work has been translated into many languages. He hosts a popular late-night television show in Italy that examines unsettling and unsolved crimes. He also teaches creative writing in Turin and edits an on-line magazine.

(review and cover photo from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk))

**Almost Blue was recently adapted into a play at Riverside Studios in Hammersmith and for Radio 4.**



## A request from UKSA Membership Secretary, Anne Wight:

At present the association is undergoing a reorganisation and, as part of this process, we are updating our database. Therefore, it would be very useful if members could confirm or update us on the following information:

**Name:**

**Address:**

**Phone and/or Mobile Number:**

**Email Address:**

It is vital that we have the correct information for you, to ensure that you receive the newsletters and information on the AGM etc.

**Please send a quick email to [uksynaesthesia@hotmail.com](mailto:uksynaesthesia@hotmail.com) or post your details to: UKSA, PO Box 6258, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 0WP. MANY THANKS!**

## SYNAESTHESIA IN THE MEDIA

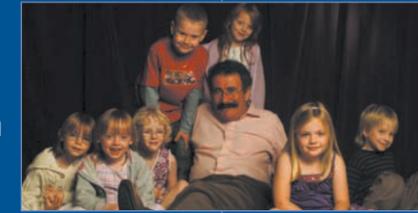
### Child Of Our Time

On Sunday 5th February the BBC/Open University TV series *Child Of Our Time* featured the topic of synaesthesia, as it looked at the 'Recipe For Success'.

The series, hosted by Professor Robert Winston, started in 2000, with the birth of 22 children. Each year a series of several programmes look at the children's progress and try to examine some of the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to their behaviour and abilities.

The programme's producer, Steve Crabtree, says the aim of this episode was to look at "how and why we learn things, and why some of us are better at learning - and therefore more successful - than others." He says they wanted to include something on synaesthesia "to see if having the condition can help you learn."

Unfortunately (or not!) none of the children appeared to actually have synaesthesia, although one of the mums strongly indicated that she has a mild form triggered by music.



However, as Julia Simner, who the BBC team used as their synaesthesia expert, explains, it is possible that this is due to standard of the testing involved. It could also be that the children are perhaps too young to recognise or describe their experiences.

After all, not all of us realise that these experiences are part of a condition until much later in life!

Whether the series will ever follow up on the topic again remains to be seen - there are 14 more years to go!

At the very least the programme has perhaps helped raise awareness of synaesthesia. Steve says the production

team knew of the topic after the Horizon documentary in Autumn 2004, and felt that such a "fascinating condition" should be brought to a more mainstream audience.

**For more information see:**

<http://www.open2.net/childfourtime/2006/>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/synaesthesia1.shtml>



**We talk to Julia Simner from the University of Edinburgh about her involvement in Child Of Our Time:**

**So firstly, can you tell us how you came to be involved in Child Of Our Time, and what your involvement was?**

I was contacted by the researchers, who'd heard about my research. I shared my knowledge about the nature of synaesthesia (i.e. answered lots and lots of their researchers' questions!). I told them what it was like, what its prevalence was, how common it might be in children vs. adults, and how it might affect childhood learning (which was the focus of this particular show).

**What is your background in this area of study?**

I've been studying synaesthesia at the university of Edinburgh since 2002, and I've just won a Leverhulme early career fellowship to study linguistic synaesthasias (i.e. those triggered by letters, numbers and words) for the next two years.

I've conducted one of the most accurate assessments of the prevalence of synaesthesia (with colleagues from the University of London), which is due out in a journal called 'Perception'.

In this we assessed almost 2000 members of the general population to screen them for synaesthesia. We found the overall prevalence to be 4%, and the prevalence of letter/number-colour synaesthesia to be at 1%. This is the most accurate assessment to date, because we sampled randomly from the population, and used objective tests of genuineness i.e. we didn't just rely on someone's subjective reports... this was a good thing too, because we found that for every one person with synaesthesia who said they have synaesthesia, there are five people without synaesthesia who said they have synaesthesia... for example artists

etc. who think that a sensitivity to colour is the same thing as having synaesthesia.

With colleagues at Edinburgh, I've also conducted the first study to screen for synaesthesia in the childhood population with objective tests of genuineness. That study is half-way through, but we've already screened about 500-600 children aged 6-7.

But my real speciality is language and synaesthesia, so I ask questions about why and how letters, numbers and words can trigger synaesthetic experiences and also, what synaesthesia can tell us about human language more generally.

**The children in the series are now aged 6 - why do you think the programme makers wanted to look into synaesthesia at this stage?**

Not sure - I think it's a lucky coincidence that their children happen to be exactly the same age as those in the prevalence study we're conducting. To be honest I think they were interested because synaesthesia has had a lot of attention in the media in the last 2 years. For example, some of the findings from a paper I wrote with Dr Jamie Ward at UCL were featured in a BBC radio documentary, and also a BBC TV Horizon documentary. Stuff like this has raised awareness about synaesthesia.

As a note, this is the main reason I offered to help the program. The more people who know about synaesthesia, the better it is for those who experience it. I know that most people with synaesthesia are either positive, or ambivalent about it. However, I get a lot of emails to my lab from people who suffer from the fact that synaesthesia is not well understood by the general population (e.g. from the parents of children with synaesthesia who are finding it an interference in the classroom but with teacher who doesn't 'get it'). With media contact, this should happen less often.

**What types of synaesthesia were the programme makers interested in?**

Any. They just wanted to see whether any of their 22 children had synaesthesia in any form at all.

**If you can tell us, what tests/research were done and what were they trying to determine?**

With my direction, they assessed all their families, (child, mother, father) first in a preliminary, subjective test to see whether any were reporting things that sounded to me like synaesthesia. Then for three of those who seemed like possibilities, I tested them again in more rigorous ways (e.g. with an on-line experiment I ran, and in person, with one of the families in London)

**Can you tell us anything about the results of this research?**

It was inconclusive. No definite concrete evidence. Some reports rang true, but couldn't be verified. The principle reason for this was that most of the testing was done by the TV people, who don't have experience with it so it was pretty rough and ready. If it had been conducted by an academic in the way we're trained to do it, I'd be able to be more conclusive about it.

In fact, I'm almost certain there must be synaesthetes among the 22 children and their immediate families (especially if you include aunts, uncles, and grandparents). This is simply because our previous research has shown the prevalence of synaesthesia to be 4 percent, so by statistical likelihood alone, there would be synaesthetes among them. We just couldn't test this definitively.

