

A circus of the senses

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Aeon:

Vladimir Nabokov once called his famed fictional creation Lolita ‘a little ghost in natural colours’. The natural colours he used to paint his ‘little ghost’ were especially vivid in part because of a neurological quirk that generated internal flashes of colour whenever letters of the alphabet appeared within his mind. In his memoir *Speak Memory* (1951), he described a few of them: ‘*b* has the tone called burnt sienna by painters, *m* is a fold of pink flannel, and today I have at last perfectly matched *v* with “Rose Quartz” in Maerz and Paul’s *Dictionary of Color*’. The condition he had was synaesthesia, a neurological oddity that mixes up the senses, making those who possess it see as well as hear music, or taste the shapes they set their eyes upon.

Synaesthetes such as Nabokov see letters and numbers wreathed in fixed, seemingly idiosyncratic colours. Grapheme-colour synaesthesia, the term for this variety, is the most common sub-type of synaesthesia, occurring among four people in 100. It’s also the most widely studied. Other common varieties are chromaesthesia, in which tones or notes set off flashes of colour and a symphonic wall of sound can summon a three-dimensional landscape, and spatial-sequence synaesthesia, in which seconds, weekdays, months or years encircle those who experience it, like planetary rings. Some have lexical-gustatory synaesthesia, which lends every word or name a strong, specific taste, making some delicious, and others too bitter to utter. Still other synaesthetes report ordinal-linguistic personification, in which they ascribe distinct genders, colours or personality types to letters and numbers: ‘4’ might be an ill-tempered, ungenerous man, constantly heckling his wife, while ‘6’ turns out to be a dignified, genteel woman with exquisite manners.

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