

WHAT DOES WEDNESDAY SMELL LIKE?

Entering into a kaleidoscopic arena of scent and colour, **Suzy Nightingale** sets out to explore the fascinating world of synaesthesia. Images: **Frederic Malle**

Synaesthesia is a perceptual condition of mixed sensations: a stimulus in one sensory modality (e.g., hearing) involuntarily elicits a sensation/experience in another modality (e.g. vision, smell). Likewise, perception of a form (e.g., a letter) may induce an unusual perception in the same modality (e.g. a colour). synesthete.org

Red for danger, blue for calm... Most of us have certain preconceptions about colour, and sometimes even guess what a fragrance smells like before the first sniff - based on the particular shade of the bottle or attractively suggestive packaging (which we explore on p.30). But for some, the senses overlap in truly remarkable ways, with odours, days of the week, numbers, words, musical notes and even the space around them mapped out in a panoply of patterns. And it's something which is beginning to influence the world of perfumery itself...

But first: what DOES Wednesday smell like...? Approximately 2-5% of people reading this will have an answer spring immediately to mind. For them it's obvious. Wednesday is icing sugar, perhaps - a smell and a taste combined. Some may add a colour or sound - it's yellow, a flute. In fact, for some, the very text on this page may change colour or seem to emit a scent.

All of our senses are connected, but for some there are extra, even more intricate layers of perception - highly personal connections that leap unbidden from seeing a particular shade of red, for example, and linking that to a feeling, a musical note, even a scent note in perfumery or another familiar smell, emotion or sound. This multi-faceted means of experiencing the world is a neurological phenomenon called synaesthesia (sometimes spelled 'synesthesia'), the word itself originating from the Ancient Greek. Put simply, it's the overlapping of the senses - the stimulation of one neurological pathway simultaneously provoking another, or perhaps several at once.

Those people who report such experiences are known as 'synaesthetes'. Synaesthesia is actually said to be more prevalent among creative types - and certainly, many perfumers, chefs, artists and musicians seem to make up their throng: Frederic Malle, Vladimir Nabokov, David Hockney, Leonard Bernstein, Duke Ellington, Billy Joel, Franz Liszt. Norman Mailer even described Marilyn Monroe as a synaesthete: 'She has that displacement of the senses which others take drugs to find. So she is like a lover of rock who sees vibrations when she hears sounds.' ►



JOANNA HARRIS: AN AUTHOR'S INSIGHT

At The Jasmine Awards earlier this year, we were thrilled to be handed our Judges Special Recognition Award by author Joanne Harris, who was on the prestigious panel. Talking to her after the ceremony, Joanne mentioned that my dark red silk scarf 'smells like chocolate.' As that day I was wearing a white floral perfume, I looked a bit flummoxed, until she explained she has synaesthesia.

As Joanne explained: 'I find that certain colours and combinations of colours trigger scents and tastes for me - sensations that are identical to the more conventional ones. But as they're colour-triggered, they disappear if I close my eyes. So; red (not all shades of red, but a certain kind of bright red) smells of chocolate; purple smells of diesel; bright yellow a kind of floral bubblegum - the same colours always triggering the same scents. Most are pleasant, but a certain combination of purple and dirty yellow smells really fishy and horrible, and I tend to avoid it...!'

'Until recently I didn't realise that what I experienced was different from what most people see and feel,' Joanne

continues. 'I just thought that when I said "the chocolate one" to mean "the red one", or used the word "taste" to mean "smell", people understood what I meant! Bright colours are especially pleasing 'smells' for me, their effect heightened by bright light. I like bright red, lemon yellow (which actually doesn't smell of lemon, but of a kind of piney floral) and leaf-green (more of a citrusy floral).'

I asked if Joanne had certain perfumes she steers away from, and if she felt her synaesthesia altered the way she selected them. 'I try to avoid concentrating on the bottles, although there are some fragrances I would never buy, simply because I find the bottles too distracting. But in some cases (Poison, for instance) the bottle "smells" far more appealing to me than the scent...'

In Joanne's acclaimed novel *Blue Eyed Boy* (Black Swan), synaesthesia plays an important role. 'I wanted to write about different ways of perceiving the world, and of being perceived by others. There are several characters with synaesthesia in that book, and one who is blind - so in both cases, scent became the primary means of experiencing the surroundings.'

Synaesthesia can take many forms – it's believed there are over 60 different types in all – and synaesthetes can have one distinct way this shows itself, or even several which overlap. Scientists are still beavering away trying to make sense of these senses bleeding into one another – why it happens, and what new light this may shed on the ways our brains interact with outside stimuli.

One of these experts is Dr. Mary Spiller, a senior lecturer within the School of Psychology at the University of East London. I began by asking Mary (now a VIP Subscriber of The Perfume Society) how she became so fascinated with the subject as a whole. Now, many of us seem to have particular responses to certain colours that are perhaps learned in culture (e.g. red – danger, or sensual, forbidden; green – safe, fresh, natural) or may favour certain colours over others based on personal preference. So I asked Mary: does this mean we all have synaesthesia to a certain extent – and how does a true synaesthete's response differ?

'This is actually one of the big questions that researchers are still trying to work out,' she admits. 'Studies have found, for example, that when non-synaesthetes are asked to choose a colour to go with each letter of the alphabet there is a tendency for people to pair certain letters with certain colours. A is often red for example, B is blue, etc. And high-pitched tones are generally paired with lighter colours whereas low-pitched tones [are matched] with darker colours.' Her research, Dr. Spiller explains, takes a variety of forms - from getting participants to do tasks on a computer to filling in online surveys (if you'd like to try one for yourself, see DO YOU HAVE SYNAESTHESIA? on p.17).

Elsewhere, work by Ron Winnegrad, Professor of the Perfume School at International Flavors & Fragrances (himself creator of Balenciaga's Rhumba, Clinique's Simply, Giorgio Armani's Armani and Lagerfeld Classic, among others), emphasises the relationship between colour and smell as an important element of IFF's approach to perfumery - as you can see from the interpretations of colour by their leading perfumers on p.26.

This starts early in the training IFF offers, with Prof. Winnegrad seeking to break down the emotional barriers of his students and get them to 'un-learn' what they think when they smell. From the time that you came into existence, you have always been able to smell - far before you were aware of it,' he tells them. 'But then you learned to think... I

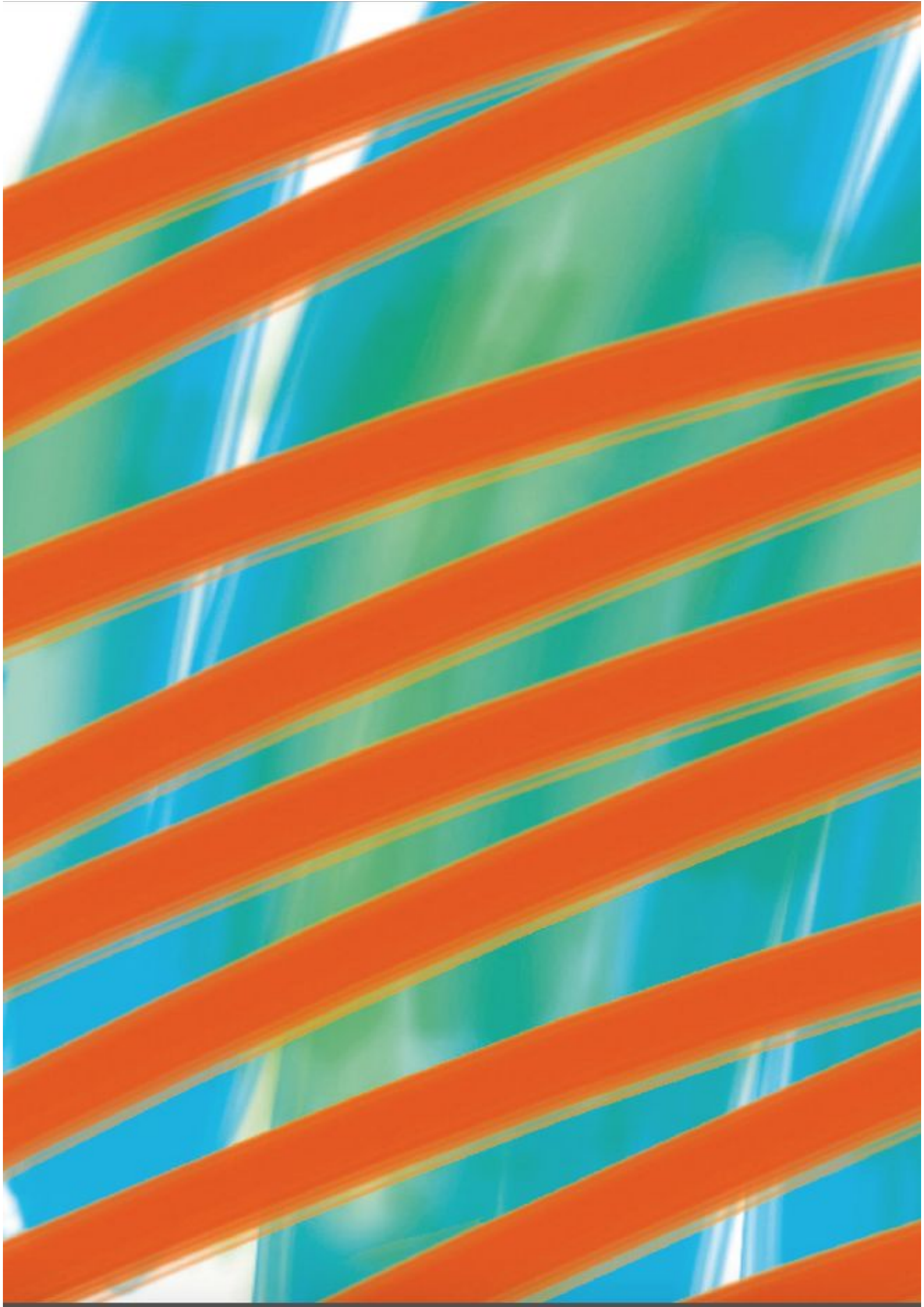


COLOUR MAKES SCENTS

'Joint Perception' is a collaborative effort between Oliver Peoples and BYREDO. It was built on the phenomenon of synaesthesia, and resulted in one unique fragrance presented in three differently coloured bottles - Indigo, Amber and Green - and packaged with the sunglasses for which Oliver Peoples are famous, the colour of the lenses 'correlating' with the aroma of the fragrance itself, which combined juniper berries with lemon,

orris butter and a smoothly musky base. The idea here was to focus perception of fragrance notes according to the colours of the bottles/lenses - did green make it smell fresher, indigo more mysteriously smoky? Reportedly so! Try them for yourself to truly judge how colour changes your personal perceptions...
BYREDO Oliver Peoples/£105 for 50ml eau de parfum or Limited Edition gift sets (with glasses)/£400 At Liberty

“Frederic Malle, Vladimir Nabokov, David Hockney, Leonard Bernstein, Duke Ellington, Billy Joel, Franz Liszt, Norman Mailer and Marilyn Monroe are all ‘synaesthetes’”



“

*While I receive
inspiration
from all things
– nature, things
I see while
walking, design
- I certainly am
also inspired by
colours*

”

Frederic Malle

don't allow anybody [who trains] here to say "I don't know", he continues. And his approach is also to emphasise to student perfumers: "You have to stop worrying about the "right" answer or the "wrong" answer. What colour do you smell...? You should not stop to think about what you think makes sense, or what you think I want to hear."

The name of Frederic Malle, meanwhile, is today synonymous with fine fragrance and 'niche' perfume; he was the first truly to champion the noses behind the scents, putting their names squarely on the front of the bottles – giving the perfumers 'top billing' and celebrating their artistry. In 2012, celebrating 10 years in partnership with Barneys New York, a little-known fact emerged when Malle released a special, limited edition range of packaging for his Editions de Parfums collection: he revealed he has synaesthesia, too. The artwork for the collection - used to illustrate this article - featured swirls of distinct colours – and was based on Malle's personal synaesthetic illustrations.

As Malle explained to Laura Feinstein of PSFK.com (an online resource for creative professionals): 'To celebrate 10 years with Barneys [a key point of sale for Editions de Parfum Frederic Malle in the US], I decided to create a line of packaging with each of these illustrations, so that – for the first time in the history of our brand - the exterior expresses what's inside the bottle...' (And aren't they stunning...?)

When smelling fragrances I see colours,' Frederic continued, in that interview. 'A few years ago, I decided to put these visions that I have when smelling the perfumes of our collection on paper. I used Photoshop, its many layers and its many brushes to illustrate the layers and textures that I smell when smelling these scents. At first the purpose of these images was to explain each perfume not using words. While I receive inspiration from all things – nature, things I see while walking, design - I certainly am also inspired by these colours.'

To be sure, many noses and creative directors behind perfume houses often cite colour as a direct inspiration for new launches – for does anything quite so succinctly capture a feeling or create an atmosphere as using a particular colour? None of us likes to admit how influenced we are by such seemingly simple methods, but imagine a dark red bottle for a moment, then spraying the perfume on your skin only to discover it smelled of freshly-cut grass and grapefruit – it would jar slightly, wouldn't it? For that split second of imagining velvety roses or ripe berries - but actually sniffing something zingy and fresh - you'd be momentarily thrown.

Scent and colour seem to fit fairly neatly together in a fairly graspable form of connection for the majority of



SMELL THE COLOUR, TOUCH THE SCENT

Earlier this year, historic British perfume house Floris sought to explore the link between the history of scent, colour and tactile art forms by presenting members of the public with a unique opportunity to visit a striking textile installation in the original perfume workshop at the Jermyn Street HQ.

This exclusive tour led the group down to the sub-basement at Floris - fondly referred to as 'The Mine'. The installation that greeted them had been developed by textile artist Katherine May, who specialises in natural plant and flower based dyes for her strikingly contemporary patchwork and fabrics. She'd found that a previous visit to Floris - still located in its original premises - provided a rich seam of

inspiration for her work.

A group of craftspeople was asked to develop ideas in response to moments of inspiration during that original walk. For Katherine the hand-written ledgers containing the original perfume recipes offered intriguing parallels to her own investigations into the unique chromatic properties of plants and flowers for her fabric dyes.

Katherine's investigation into the archives and the work of the perfumers at Floris led her to explore the relationship between colour and scent, using their original perfume recipes as a basis to create a textile-based installation in that highly atmospheric subterranean space, eventually going on to inspire a series of flower-dyed textiles and cushions which were also launched during London Craft week. (See them above.)



Having explored the senses with our specially devised scent-based menus at bespoke perfumer-turned-chef Louise Bloor's *Fragrant Suppers* for The Perfume Society (see our website for more details), we are already gleefully (and greedily!) accustomed to experiencing scent and taste combinations.

The worlds of cuisine and fine fragrance (not to mention booze) are truly coming together in all sorts of exciting cross-over events. A collaborative gastronomic project called *Kitchen Theory* has been working with a team at Oxford University's Cross Modal department, headed by Professor Charles Spence, to try to understand the phenomenon of synaesthesia through food and aromas, delivering 'an informative and interactive dining event of sensory discovery.'

The project also brought together Sean Day, President of American Synesthesia Association, Richard E. Cytowic, MD MFA, neurologist and author of *Wednesday is Indigo Blue* with chef patron Jozef Youssef, who's worked at some of London's top restaurants (Hélène Darroze of The Connaught, The Dorchester Hotel and The Fat Duck). Josef is also author of *Molecular Gastronomy at Home*, and the 'multi-sensory' menu he devised focused on interesting flavours, textures, colours, temperatures and aromas...

For news of future 'synaesthesia' dinners, keep an eye on kitchen-theory.com - and our own website.

MENU

4 Tastes

Bouba & Kiki

*The Sight & Sound
of Flavour*

*Marinetti – Cubist
Vegetable Patch*

*Betty Effron's Hidden
Passion – A Word Play*

Give Weight To It

*Believe Nothing of
What You Hear*

One of the intriguing menus

“ To me, red smells of chocolate; purple smells of diesel; bright yellow a kind of floral bubblegum ”

Chocolat author Joanne Harris

us non-synesthetes. This is something we've tapped into at The Perfume Society for our 'How to Improve Your Sense of Smell' workshops. If you're a VIP Subscriber, you may well have attended one of these, at which we ask people to smell fragrances – and ask themselves a series of questions, including: 'If this was a colour, what would it be...?'

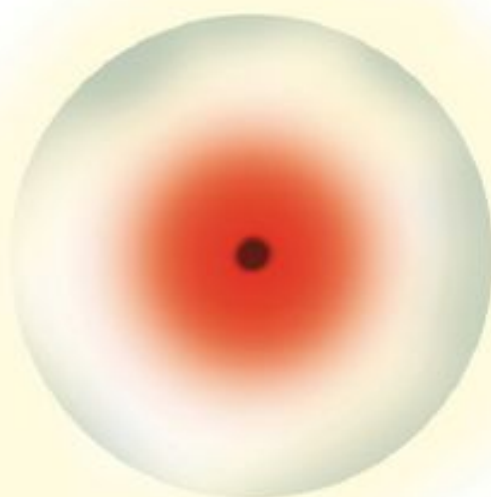
We ask attendees to let memories or feelings flood in, writing these down in a notebook, without discussing them first. It's extraordinary how often a good proportion of those attending collectively come up with an identical 'colour' for the smell – in one case, with seven individuals out of about 20 citing the colour purple. That number included Duncan Boak, of Fifth Sense (the charity for smell and taste disorders), who generally considers he can't smell at all and was really quite moved (not to mention a little shocked) to discover that on some level – even if not a conscious one – he had perhaps been picking up the same 'messages' from a perfume as his fellow attendees. We were less surprised: time after time, the same colours (or fabrics, or literary references) are mentioned when people reveal what they've been scribbling in their notebooks.

It's slightly more bizarre, perhaps, that no less than three different people cited Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* after smelling one particular perfume. A remarkable thing had occurred, for sure – a kind of olfactory magic trick the perfumer had somehow performed. When the first lady shyly put up her hand to impart this impression to the group, there were loud gasps of astonishment as the other two Wilde-o-philes nearly fell off their chairs in amazement, having written down the exact same book title. The rest of the group was stunned. The pair of us hosting the event for The Perfume Society merely grinned: we see similar things in every single workshop we do. And it's no accident, no mere coincidence: the person who created that perfume may not have specifically had Wilde as their muse, but the impressions created by a whole novel had been trapped in a bottle and communicated in scent form to three people who had never met or smelled that particular perfume before. (Keep an eye on our EVENTS section of the website for a 'Sense of Smell' workshop near you.)

So: do you now think you have synaesthesia? Glimmers, even, that your senses might be connected in ways you hadn't imagined...? (See right, for resources to help you explore this further...) We're fascinated by individuals' experiences of the interconnectedness of smell with the other senses – so do share your synaesthesia experiences, perhaps by e-mailing us at info@perfumesociety.org, or even by posting an Instagram of an image you might have created yourself, inspired by a perfume.

The bottom line is that a little like black holes, nuclear fission – and the sense of smell itself, which is still so little understood – there's still a huge amount to be researched and explored about synaesthesia. We'll be keeping our senses tuned for what scientists discover next – and look forward to sharing it with you.

So: do keep your eyes (not to mention your ears and nose) open... 📷



Frederic Malle's
synaesthetic
interpretation of
Carnal Flower

DO YOU HAVE SYNAESTHESIA?

Dr. Mary Spiller suggested heading to an online test called *The Synesthesia Battery* (synesthete.org), but reminds us: 'This is not perfect. Not all forms of synaesthesia are tested, and people say there are limits to the responses you can give. If someone is interested in learning more about their synaesthesia, they can get in contact with researchers such as myself to volunteer for studies.'

There's also the UK Synaesthesia Association (uksynaesthesia.com) who host a conference every two years, where scientists, artists and synaesthetes conduct various talks. You might want to look at some online forums like the *Synesthesia List* (daysyn.com/Synesthesia-List.html) and many Facebook groups for chatting with other people with synaesthesia and sharing experiences.' Anyone reading this who's interested in finding out about her synaesthesia research or taking part can contact Mary by email (m.j.spiller@uel.ac.uk) or follow her on twitter [@uelsynaesthesia](https://twitter.com/uelsynaesthesia)