**Where YOU are sitting: amongst books - SMELL**

Smell is a fascinating thing, it can take you right back to a single moment in the past and unlock a memory in its purest form. I would say that smell, equal to sound but more than vision and touch has the ability to do this. Perhaps this is because sound and smell literally penetrate the body, seeping in through openings and portals through the outer layers to mingle amongst our organs, whereas when we look with our eyes we are essentially taking an image like a camera and translating the information, a process of recording and sophisticated editing between eyes and brain. The eyes when looking at a scene are registering only a selection of what is fully there in that moment before sending information to the grey matter (our brain), whereas sounds and smells hit us directly and without selection, entering our body unexpectedly to bombard the brain with information with little or almost no editing. It is easier to close our eyes or revert our gaze, refrain from touching things around us, than to close our noses or seal up our ears as we travel through our tactile, visual, smelly and noisy material environment. Smell and sound can recreate exact experiences we had when we heard or smelt something in our past - linking the gap between the present and the past with extraordinary clarity. Also, on a scientific level I found out recently that the area of the brain that responds to and processes smells, and the part that deals with memory are very close together.

I picked up a book the other day and on opening it and smelling the pages I was immediately catapulted back to the moment when I was a child reading a book from the 'Janet and John' series. If you were a child growing up in the UK in the 70's you will know what I am talking about! (I would like to mention at this point that I am referring to a particular book/page smell, not to be confused with a generic book smell that we can all locate in our set of favourite memory odours along with – freshly cut grass, roasted coffee beans and baking bread.) This smell is unique because of particular paper, glue and ink used combined with the age of the book and its history - where it has been placed in proximity to other objects and materials, picking up other smells. Similarly, if I was to describe the smell of cut grass in my mums garden in August last year, it would be different to the grass cut smell in September in my old house in Stoke Newington 6 years ago. The details are important.

This series of books was a learning tool for primary school children – one step closer to reading fluently! This particular 'Janet and John' book I did not particularly like because at the age of 7 I found it very difficult to read particularly out aloud as my nerves would literally paralyse me so I was unable to get the words out. I have awkward memories of being forced to read out aloud by my teacher at school and my mum at home from this particular book. The more these well intentioned facilitators tried to guide me with their constant interruptions of corrections the harder it became for me to do the task, the activity usually ending up with me in tears and then unable to read through my blurry wet vision. Ironically however, I also really liked this book but as an object, the blood orange coloured textured flexible canvas cover, and the pictures inside of Janet and John engaged in simple activities, such as filling a bucket of water, buying groceries ...... God knows why I found it interesting, when I think back to it now it was a very basic and unimaginative book. Perhaps it was the way the pictures were drawn and painted that attracted me, the use of simple mark making to outline the figures, objects and animals on the page with primary colours filling in the shapes, and the way the text skirted around the images, so that the words and sentences made shapes of their own on the paper.

Recently I smelt a book, one that I picked up in a library (I can't remember which book it was now, but it definitely was not a children's book – it was a small paperback of some sort). I was immediately transported back to those childhood book moments wrapped up in all my mixed emotions, and an immense feeling of nostalgia and longing to be aged 7 again. I don't have the book anymore - the 'Janet and John' book - It might be in the attic of my parents house and I suppose I could try and find it, but I'm sure it will not smell the same anymore, and I'm pretty sure if I handled it, it would not be that interesting an object, so better as a memory - even thought the memory is a mixture of good and bad feelings! I'm also not in the library anymore, but sitting in my studio writing about this experience, but I still can hold onto the strong memory of that particular booky page smell that linked me to my long ago booky page smell encounter - an example of where memories can trigger other memories. Maybe if I was in a bookshop right now or in a library like you are, smelling a book; having written this piece of text; I might simultaneously have memories of the 'Janet and John' book and the book in the library. I can't describe the smell or recreate it, but I know the experience and feeling of that smell, as clearly as I am looking at the iPad screen I am writing on right now. But, I can only have the genuine experience if I am actually holding a book and smelling it - a memory of an experience and an actual 'in the moment' experience are different things. Also, I think it is easier to conjure up an image of a memory in your head than it is to conjure up a smell memory.

Can you remember a smell that has left a strong impression on you, and have you found it again? Maybe it was a material you handled as a child, food you ate at home or school, a room you lived in or visited. Maybe there is a memory trigger for you in this library right now.

For more on *Material Engagements* go to     [www.tenderfoot.co.uk](http://www.tenderfoot.co.uk/)      by Laura White