



One Great Book: Volume III, Episode 4
Wednesday Is Indigo Blue by David Eagleman and
Richard Cytowic

One Great Book Volume III, Book 4: *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

Readers, when we began *One Great Book*, I knew I wanted to discuss nonfiction as well as fiction. I find that when it comes to nonfiction, so many readers delight in stumbling upon a nonfiction book that addresses a topic they didn't know they *needed* to know about—say, jellyfish, or sidewalks, or late 18th century landscaping, or mortgage-backed securities. I love when an author can show the reader the significance of a topic they didn't know they were interested in, didn't know they needed to know about—and when that new understanding changes the way they see the world.

My journey with today's great book begins back in my high school years, when I had a friend who assigned me a color: he said I was "a shimmering shade of blue." I never quite grasped what he meant by this, despite my frequent (too-frequent, I'm sure) inquiries. And it wasn't just me: he'd assigned a color to everyone he knew, and when he was in a jocular mood, he'd entertain our circle of friends by describing the individual colors of mutual acquaintances with incredible precision. Our science teacher was a respectable forest green, the shade you'd see in an Eddie Bauer catalog from the era. An acquaintance with a personality like Eyeore's was unsurprisingly tinted a saturated grey. My high school bestie was a soft lavender. I thought my



friend was playing an elaborate—and, to me, amusing—game; I loved to hear him describe people’s colors—though I wondered how he could remember which color he assigned to whom.

But then fifteen years later, I picked up a book by David Eagleman I’d heard about on NPR. It was called *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*. I was fascinated by the way he introduced certain questions of how our brains function, like, when you try to talk yourself into doing something, *who* is doing the talking? And who are they talking *to*? In the book, Eagleman makes passing reference to a condition known as synesthesia, and when I later heard Eagleman expound on it at an author event, it finally clicked—my childhood friend wasn’t playing games. His brain worked in a way that was fundamentally different from mine. Eagleman’s brief mention of synesthesia pointed me toward his whole book about the subject he’d co-written with Richard Cytowic, called *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthesia*. This 2009 book provides an intriguing deep dive into a subject I didn’t know I needed to know about. This book changed the way I relate to others and colors the way I understand some literature—and to *my* way of thinking, that makes it One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

Readers, you know you’re an avid podcast listener when you have a show for each activity: a 30 minute podcast for cooking dinner, a 10 minute show for unloading the dishwasher, a 15 minute episode for walking the dog around the block. If you need a longer show in order to complete your to do list or finish your commute, OR you just want a growing to be read list, you should be listening to What Should I Read Next—my longer podcast that answers the question that plagues every reader. Each week we talk all things books and reading and do a little literary matchmaking with one guest. Find What Should I Read Next wherever you get your podcasts. Happy reading, everyone.



Synesthesia means “joined sensation,” and for those who have it, stimulation of one sense triggers another, seemingly unrelated, sensory experience. Some synesthetes describe this as sensory “blending”; Eagleman and Cytowic describe it as “a fusion of different sensory perceptions: the feel of sandpaper might evoke an F-sharp, the taste of chicken might be accompanied by a feeling of pinpoints on the fingertips, or a symphony might be experienced in blues and golds.”

Synesthesia, like many matters of perception, can be difficult to talk about with others. Some synesthetes fear that their perception of reality is strange and troubling, their experience somehow “wrong.” But it’s far more common for those with synesthesia to assume that everyone experiences the world exactly as they do, because they’ve never known reality to be any different. Synesthesia is a perfectly normal condition of the human brain, but it *is* statistically unusual: it’s generally believed that 2 to 4 percent of the population experience some type of synesthesia; and the condition tends to run in families. I do not have synesthesia—I wish I did—but my daughter does. I say this confidently now, but it took me years to suss out the explanations behind some of the puzzling things she sometimes said. My concerns crystallized as she approached fourth grade: she did NOT want to become a fourth grader, but I couldn’t figure out why. After years of trying to assuage her reluctance to enter fourth grade, she exclaimed one day in exasperation that four is “bratty.” It turns out that for her, that number had a personality. So did all the other numbers. I wrote a blog post about how I finally pieced it together, you can find it on Modern Mrs Darcy, it’s called “When you completely misunderstand what’s going on.” I wish she got that trait from me; I’d love to experience Tuesday as orange and eleven as giggly, like my daughter does.

[MUSIC]

Synesthesia takes many forms. Experiencing the days of the week as having colors is the most common manifestation, which is one reason *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue* is such an apt title. Colored numbers and letters are the next most common. Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov was a famous synesthete (artists, in fact, are more likely to have it than the general population); as a child, Nabokov told his mother that the colors on his toy alphabet blocks were “wrong.”



Because she was a synesthete, too, she knew what he meant. Astute readers will see synesthesia in Nabokov's work, particularly in his autobiography *Invitation of a Memory*. They'll recognize it in E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, and also in books for younger readers like Wendy Maas's *A Mango-Shaped Space* and R. J. Anderson's *Ultraviolet*.

In *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue*, Eagleman and Cytowic present hundreds of highly specific insights from individuals who have synesthesia, so the reader can see myriad ways the senses co-mingle in the brains of synesthetes. The book does get science-y in places, but it's written for a general audience. The book contains numerous illustrations portraying how synesthetes visualize the days of the week, the monthly calendar, the decades throughout history. Curious readers will enjoy poring over these illustrations, which Eagleman calls "maps." (For this reason, you may want a paper version of this book—or at least an iPad version—I would miss out on a lot if I tried to read this on my Kindle Paperwhite.)

My favorite nugget from the book is when the authors explain that many of the world's best memorizers of data—like those who can recite thousands of digits of pi—are synesthetes. Their brains do more than catalogue a long stream of numbers; thanks to their synesthesia, they can remember a *story*. Each number has a color, shape, and personality, and stories are much easier to remember than abstract streams of data.

Synesthesia is one of those fascinating topics I didn't realize I wanted to know everything about, but it isn't just interesting for its own sake. Oliver Sacks said that the work Cytowic and Eagleman present have changed the way we think of the human brain. The study of synesthesia is the study of *perception*, and their work demonstrates that reality is not just something out there that we take in, but something that we each construct in our own minds.

In short, if you're looking for a book that offers a fascinating look into a little-explored aspect of the human mind, that may change the way you understand yourself and the people around you, that makes you marvel at the way our brains work, and may even make you question your understanding of reality as you know it, *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue* may be the next great book you're looking for.



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Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.