

Sensory images, memories, and reading – Anežka Kuzmičová

As researcher, I have now spent over a decade thinking about the role played by *sensory mental images* in readers' experiences and memories of reading. When my first child was born in 2010 and later began to communicate his story experiences, I was pleased to learn that he, like myself, was what they call an "avid imager." Large-scale studies of young readers, such as those conducted by psychologists [Suzanne Mol and Jelle Jolles \(2014\)](#), suggest a connection between one's tendency to conjure sensory images, the pleasure one takes in reading, and academic success.

On the other hand, sensory imagery is not for everyone. Colleagues have been mentioning the *quantitative* facts to me for some time: at least one fifth of all adult readers, regardless of reading ability, are said to never conjure images of what they read about. Over the past few years, a series of conversations with among others [Teresa Cremin](#) and [Margaret Mackey](#), and their rich *qualitative* studies on young readers, finally made me start thinking through the pedagogical implications. If I was a teacher, how would I translate into practice all my knowledge of what sensory imagery *can* do for children's reading for pleasure?

Firstly, I would have to fully respect the students who are simply not predisposed to sensory imagining. And secondly, I would have to find a way to talk with my class about things that are very hard to share: visual perceptions, smells, tastes, bodily movements or tactile experiences that may feel real but are locked *inside* one's embodied mind, without any physical prompts or evidence to point at. I propose that one answer to this challenge lies in talking about readerly personal memories, so-called *reminders*, in addition to sensory images.

First studied by ingenious research team [Uffe Seilman – Steen Larsen \(1989\)](#), reminders are any conscious associations that may emerge in the course of reading. They can be things one has experienced directly, or things one has only read or heard about. Reminders may or may not be associated with sensory images (while sensory images necessarily are shaped by our personal memories). To test the practical usefulness of reminders – or what I sometimes call *life-resonant reading experiences* – in primary teaching, I recently ran a pilot study involving 144 Year 4–6 students across two primary schools in the West of England.

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Reminders

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Images

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1) My book is called:

The 91-Shrey Treahouse

2) This book reminded me of...

(Please complete a couple of sentences)

the little treahouse down in my granddads field
The medal I got from the netball tournament. I want to make a house of cards.

3) This book made me imagine (See, feel, taste, smell)...

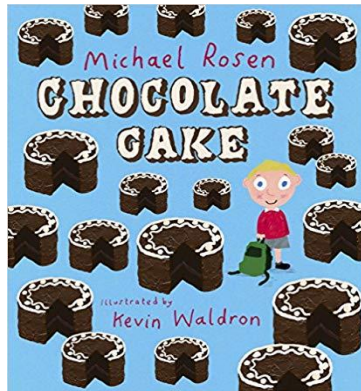
(Please complete a couple of sentences)

the most amazing treahouse, I see my pet.

The children and I first talked about reminders and sensory images, conjuring them communally in a mindfulness exercise and fleshing out the distinction between the two types of experience. Then I played a couple of audio excerpts from Michael Rosen's performance of his poem [Chocolate Cake](#). While listening, the children made tally marks, in turn, for reminders and then sensory images. At the end, they were asked to each write down a few

sentences about their reminders and sensory images in relation to a favourite book that they had brought in for the activity. I made it clear that it was perfectly fine to experience and report nothing of either sort.

Overall, the children seemed to enjoy the communal activities. A clear pattern emerged: the children generally made fewer marks for reminders (compared to sensory images), but then elaborated much more on their reminders (compared to sensory images) in relation to their favourite book. Intuitively, this makes perfect sense. Sensory images are a “simpler” mental form as it were. For most readers, they require less time to emerge, but they give us much harder time when we are asked to describe them.



Finally, there were also large overlaps between what the children described as reminders and what they described as sensory images. As researcher and parent, this tells me that next time my son muses over *Chocolate Cake*, I need to look not only into how the poem is crafted (as I would in my [early work](#) on imagery), but also into his own very concrete and personal memories of cakes, sneaking and stealing, creaky staircases and guilty pleasures. This is also what I would strive to do if I was given the opportunity to foster children’s Reading for Pleasure.

Anežka Kuzmičová works at Stockholm University, Sweden. As of 2020, she will be the leader of InT&L (Integrating Text & Literacy), a new literacy research group based at Charles University, Czech Republic. She is currently preparing the study described in this post for publication.

