

The Boy Who Spoke in Colors Fiction on p. 26

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Man!

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COLORWORKS



The Boy Who

He

flooded my mind with yellow. At first, I felt cheerful as I looked down on him squirming and pink-faced in his crib. The brightness and intensity of the yellow quickly wore me down, though, making me feel angry and frustrated. The



Spoke in Colors

a short story by Angie Smibert • illustration by Ryan Durney



nurse explained you had to pick him up before it got to that point. I realized then that this was his way of crying. He instinctively chose the color that reflected the most light, the loudest color essentially, to get the attention of the outside world. And the color grated on your nerves to the point that you had to make it stop. You had to pick him up.

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Sarah, an *autistic* client of mine, and I had been squishing modeling clay through our fingers when Dr. Schuyler approached me about seeing this unusual child. He could project frequencies of visible light, the doctor explained, much like we can project wavelengths of sound when we speak. No one knew how he did it. He couldn't project images, at least not yet, just primary colors, single wavelengths of light. Although he was a normal, healthy toddler in all other respects, he had never uttered a sound. He could hear. Loud noises startled him, but he never seemed to connect sound with meaning. Kids his age should be saying simple words already, responding to directions, and recognizing names of things. Dr. Schuyler had been ashamed to admit it had taken this long to realize the boy spoke in colors. The doctor hoped that as a psychologist I could figure out a way to communicate with the child.

So when I picked up the boy, I showed him a soft blue blanket that I'd brought with me. The yellow stopped screaming from his mind as he absorbed the new color. Blue is one of those colors, like yellow, to

which our brains and bodies seem hard-wired to react. Blue calms. I felt his pulse slowing, his body relaxing against mine. His skin became cooler to the touch. He reflected the blue back into my mind. I felt cool and tranquil. He eventually fell asleep in my arms. His dreams were a jumble of colors, all trying to sort themselves out.

His parents named him Christopher Michael Stevenson before they left him in the care of this institution nearly a year ago. The nurses, however, called him Lemonhead or Blue or Forest or Brick, depending on what color he'd fixated on that day. At this age, his emotions were like a box of jumbo crayons, limited in range and color but big in size. As he grew older, I knew he'd need a bigger box of crayons from which to draw what he wanted to communicate to the world.

The next day I brought watercolors and paper and color swatches. I thought that maybe I could help him develop a vocabulary, or at least the beginning of one. Children need sounds to mimic in order to develop speech. I'd give him colors. We sat in the middle of his room. I painted a big swathe of deep blue across a piece of paper. He beamed back the color to me, and I felt content and happy. I splashed some red on the paper and immediately felt excitement washing over me. Then I mixed the two colors into a beautiful purple and waited. He smiled and clapped his hands, flashing the rich color back at me. I could feel


his delight. Purple became his color of understanding.

We worked our way around the color wheel. Soon he began mixing wavelengths in his head and projecting slide shows of color at everyone. He was experimenting much the same way a normal child does with sounds, combining them to see what response he could get from the outside world. The nurses complained that I had only made him harder to understand. He's finally babbling, I told them, something babies normally do at three to four months. Some day, hopefully, he'll use those colors to paint picture sentences instead of single words.

He soon learned to ask for a toy or a food by color, but he got easily frustrated if you brought him an apple when he meant fire truck. His temper-tantrum cries were in vibrant (and irritating) colors, like neon yellows and chartreuse greens. I imagined there was so much he wanted to say but hadn't the vocabulary for yet — just like any child who doesn't know how to make the world give him what he wants.

Then one day he pointed to me and to my color swatches. I knew he didn't want to know what color I literally was. He wanted to know what to call me. I thumbed through the squares until I came to periwinkle blue, which had always been my favorite color. If he was going to call me by name, it might as well be a pleasant one. I immediately felt myself awash in the lovely color, feeling serene yet vibrant all at once.

I spread the swatches out and pointed to him. He looked through almost every square of color, pausing on several. I guessed he was trying out how they made him feel. Then he stopped on a brown that was the color of clay. He jabbed his finger at that one and then projected the color over me. It was a very natural, earthy, and restful color but it also left me feeling sad and something else that I couldn't quite put my finger on immediately. Then as I was tucking him into bed and dimming the lights and closing the door on him, all by himself in this white room in this big institution, I knew what that feeling was. The color made me feel alone, isolated.

He'd done a better job naming himself than his parents had. He was a boy who spoke in colors in a world that heard only sound. He was alone. He was isolated. And, to me, he would always be Clay. 

Angie Smibert worked for NASA's Kennedy Space Center for over a decade, before turning to writing full time. Her work has recently appeared in *Alien Skin Magazine*, *Mytholog*, *Crimson Highway*, *Flashquake*, *Heavy Glow*, *Bewildering Stories*, and *Boston Literary Magazine*.

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