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Wendy Mass

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Mia Winchell appears to be a typical kid, but she's keeping a big secret—sounds, numbers, and words have color for her. No one knows, and Mia wants to keep it that way. But when trouble at school finally forces Mia to reveal her secret, she must learn to accept herself and embrace her ability, called synesthesia, a mingling of the senses.

A Mango-Shaped Space Details

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From Reader Review A Mango-Shaped Space for online ebook

Erin says

Synesthesia is not at all how Mass portrays it in the book. Since you are born with it, you don't remember a timer when "Dave" did not taste like turnips. You don't get scared of it, and its not really something that interferes with your social life. Sure, the occasional "whats the color of my name?" tactic or the "what color is chicken?", but never that someone stops being your friend. When you figure out that other people don't see what you see, you just end up wondering why the heck Tuesday isn't lime green (or at least in my case).

Oh, and by the way, synesthesia is NOT a disability! You barely think about it, and its not something that will harm you. I know its pretty rare, but its not like you end up falling in shock and see figures swarm around the room when Chopin plays. Its just something you see in your head or very vaguely in real life (I see blue smoke at the sound of loud drilling, it doesn't mean I'm blind!). Your life doesn't get deeply affected by Synesthesia, like it does if you are, for example, deaf.

So over all, very dissapointed in this book and at Wendy Mass for inacurately portraying Synesthesia.

(Although I have to give credit to Mass, Synesthesia is a hard thing to describe, even when someone who actually has it has a difficult time describing their experiences.)

Kristin says

I haven't read this, but the synopses actually put me off of it. As someone with synesthesia, I don't see how anyone could think they need to go to a doctor for it or have problems as a result of it. I've never thought it was anything special or scary, just mildly funny-- when I was growing up, my parents just always told other relatives with amusement, oh what a funny kid, she says "it tastes purple" or "it makes my stomach feel blue" or "the air smells orange." Then, when I grew up, I simply kept these exclamations to myself, as with any other exclamations, or if I really did, whoever I was talking to was, again, amused, and thought I was weird in a fun way. I only found out at age 26 that there was an actual name for it and that it was an actual thing and that people have different combinations of it. It sounds like this book tries to be unique by having a main character with this special kind of brain cross-wiring (which is all it is, as I understand it), but takes it up a notch by attempting to use it as the mechanism for character isolation prevalent in YA stories. I just don't think that sounds believable. Granted, the character has a different brand of it than I do, but I still have a hard time imagining that a person couldn't extricate themselves from it, such that they would have a strong NEED to express it as with colored chalk for numbers. It's in your head, and it's NOT hard to keep it there. I don't go around putting colored body paint on my belly so it looks right, or whatever. Anyway, I'll give this book a gander if I come across it, but I don't think I'll seek it out because of these things.

Spider the Doof Warrior says

First of all, synesthesia is not a disability. You wish you had it. Since it's my username and something I have, I have personal experience on the subject.

My sort of synesthesia equals seeing colours in music based on the key, smelling music, tasting it. Feeling the

texture of it on my skin. Songs can have a temperature or a time of day like as song can be in the key of D or something and feel like a night sort of song or in the key of D minor and be grey like an overcast day.

I can also taste words, associate people and concepts with scents that don't exist.

Mia, the girl in this book has a sort of synesthesia I don't have; associating words and letters with colours, or seeing shapes and colours in the air. She's freaked out by it. I don't remember being freaked out by my synesthesia other than wondering why pianos don't have red keys.

She felt like she couldn't tell anyone about the way she saw the world and when she did, it was treated a bit like an illness.

But, soon she learned that it's not an illness, but a fantastic gift that is just AWESOME.

I wonder if I should try acupuncture for a better synesthesia experience?

Also, it was frustrating that the cat was called Mango because it kept making me picture an orange cat.

Update 10/31/16

I still like this book. Still haven't tried acupuncture. I still think it's treated a bit like an illness than something that spices up your life though. I've never lost my synesthesia due to trauma. Not even when I lost Bernie, my rabbit or my grandmothers. Does that happen to other people?

snowplum says

I enjoyed reading this book, yet I would hesitate to say that it is such a great book that anyone or everyone should rush to read it. My favorite parts of it were reading about the various manifestations of synesthesia, which I suppose I could have read about somewhere else; but there is something to be said for a character in a book who is treating acupuncture with all the traditional behaviors of a junkie -- sneaking out, lying, spending all her money on it -- all because it amps up her synesthetic responses to the point where she's seeing trippy colors everywhere and even having visual responses to pheromones. For those descriptions alone, I considered this book worthwhile.

But I think there are some problems with characters and plot points that would keep many older readers from thinking this is a story that works profoundly for all ages. Generally, most of these issues can be reduced to glossing over serious events, or characters having emotional responses to things that are either too extreme or resolved too easily.

For example, a major potential romance is terminated completely based on the guy's sort of clueless response to Mia's missing a gathering when her cat dies. And therein lies the point: Adam is not a bad guy. He's a teenage male who has never lost a pet he loves, so he doesn't know how Mia feels, and he's traveled halfway across the country hoping to see her, so I would say he's understandably disappointed when she doesn't show. He isn't mad, mean, or hateful about it. Just disappointed and clueless. But Mia writes him off forever because he's selfish. Honey, if you write off boys your whole life when they're basically nice but sort of clueless about your feelings... you're gonna end up a spinster.

I'm also not a huge fan of how Mia's friendship with her best friend Jenna plays out at various crucial points. Jenna isn't presented as an otherwise irrational girl, yet she gets furiously mad at Mia twice in the course of the book, and then gets over it quickly without any sense that these events have been resolved in such a way as to strengthen the friendship. Maybe it's just me, but I feel like when a relationship comes so close to being

damaged by a problem or misunderstanding, there should be a resolution that leads to real improvement, not just a return to the status quo. I also think it's poor characterization on Mia's part that she forgives Jenna's outbursts and betrayals without seeming to have any doubt over whether she should, but she won't even consider "forgiving" Adam's unintentional cluelessness.

So, these are the things that would keep me from enthusiastically recommending the book to most of my adult friends, and I would also hesitate to give it to a middle grade reader as an exemplary portrayal of friendship or dating when you're that age. I would present it as a pretty interesting book about a girl with synesthesia that has some really cool parts about the condition alongside some less thrilling stuff about family and friends.

(Note [if there is anyone who doesn't understand and was about to get all uppity with me about self esteem]: I'm not saying you should always accept it if a guy doesn't understand you or care about your feelings. I'm just saying you should give him a couple of chances as you're getting to know each other by telling him what you're feeling and how his reactions make you feel. See if he really just needed a little wake up call about sensitivity and perspective.)

I'm also not sure why this book is presented (in everything from the title to the afterward notes about helpful websites and books) as being largely or even predominantly about the death of a pet. Mia's beloved cat dies very near the end of the book, and that is the catalyst for some dramatic interactions and feelings -- but at least 85% of the book takes place before Mango's death and is not about the cat at all. I'm not saying this is a bad thing; I'm merely saying that if you want or need to find a book about helping a child deal with grief over the loss of a pet, this is probably not as spot-on-target as you've been led to believe. This is a book about a girl with synesthesia, secondarily about family and friendships, and only then about the loss of a pet.

Elise (TheBookishActress) says

It's been eight years since I've read this this, and the message of this book still might be one of the most moral repugnant I've ever seen. What's saddest is that *A Mango Shaped Space* could be a great book, were it not for the terrible moral of the story.

So. *A Mango Shaped Space* is about a girl who begins a journey to learn who she is and accept her own synesthesia. Along the way, she makes friends at conventions for people with synesthesia. She even learns that acupuncture feels really good for people with synesthesia (which is really cool and something I didn't know).

This is where everything about this book goes wrong. Along the way, she starts to abandon her family. Her new friends turn out to be false. (view spoiler)**All of these things are portrayed as direct results of her synesthesia.** It's even weirder when you consider that she starts talking to her family less because they didn't accept her synesthesia, even though it was *their* choice to not accept her synesthesia, not hers.

The message that comes out, intentionally or not, indicates that learning who you are is a bad thing.

The narrative punishes the main character for 1) being different, 2) liking the things that make her different, and 3) wanting to know who she is. That's a really messed-up narrative. That was the message I took from this book is sixth grade or so. And that wasn't a good message for me to internalize, or for any kid to internalize.

The author also **does not have synesthesia herself**, and there are several other reviews on this page talking about how that negatively affected the book. Wendy Maas overexaggerates the issues that come along with synesthesia, making it seem like a blessing that makes the protagonist better than everyone else. Not only does this book have a fucked-up narrative around our differences, ***A Mango-Shaped Space* doesn't even portray that difference correctly.**

So. I can't recommend this book, no matter how much I enjoy the writing style or the characters. I just can't. This is a really messed-up narrative and I can't believe anyone has the nerve to sell this to *kids*.

Elspeth says

You can also read mine, and MLE's reviews on our blog.

This would have been a four star book if it wasn't for the degradation at the end into a swirling mass of teen angst.

Yeah, I am not so much into teen angst.

The author did a great job in getting you into Mia's head, on how scared and frustrated she was with her synesthesia. It made you think, on how the torments of the other children in her third grade math class effected her. On how she kept her synesthesia a secret until she had to tell her parents under the fear of failing two of her classes.

I really enjoyed how odd each of her family members were, on how they each popped off the pages with their own personalities. I really loved her little brother, who was obsessed with superstitions.

I also really enjoyed the descriptions on how her synesthesia effected her, on how it made certain things easier or harder. How she had a good eye for color in her art, on how she remembered names and numbers by the color she saw them as. I found all this extremely interesting, so I was really disappointed in how it just went to crap in an angst filled avalanche.

So when at fifty percent in when she went boy crazy, her best friend went all drama llama, and I foresaw the future, it just became all too after school special for me.

So the first half of the book was four stars, the second half two for an average of three stars.

Skip says

I chose this book because the protagonist, Mia Winchell, has synesthesia: a mingling of sensory perceptions. Letters and numbers have colors associated with them for Mia, and this causes her difficulty in math and Spanish. Her parents don't understand initially, and then think she has a disease or mental disorder, but eventually they find a specialist at the University of Chicago to diagnose her condition and to help, enabling Mia to understand that she is not a freak. The book also deals with grief: family loss.

Gerry says

I find adults who read young adult novels to be kinda creepy, like the men I see playing Magic: The Gathering with teens at the comic book shop on Saturdays. Then again, I am buying comic books on a

Saturday, so maybe I'm full of it.

But I, a fully grown human adult, did read *A Mango-Shaped Space*. My daughter recommended it to me after I gave her a copy of *Animal Farm*. I'll let you decide who got the better deal.

So this young girl named Mia has synesthesia, a condition that causes her to see sounds in the form of colors and shapes. These colors and shapes hang in the air after a sound is made. She named her cat Mango because his purring is mango colored.

Despite the fact that there's this thing called the Internet, everyone in this book--including Mia--acts as if Mia has a contagious disease or is psychotic. Two chapters in I silently screamed "Just Google 'sounds have colors' for chrissake!" Basically, every character's reaction to Mia's "condition" is infuriating. Mia sees colors when the door slams. So? It's a harmless crossed wire. She's terrible at math. So? I'm terrible at math and I can't see a difference between blue and indigo.

One subplot involves Mia's best friend, a girl whose name I've already forgotten. Why Mia is friends with this girl boggles the mind because she's selfish, needy, backstabbing, and overdramatic.

I gave it two stars mainly because the grammar was good.

Cassidy says

This book is very special to me. It is about a girl named Mia with a rare neurological condition called synesthesia. People with synesthesia "blend senses". Some common examples include colored hearing, tasting words, colored graphemes, personified graphemes, colored personalities, colored emotions, tasting colors, colored scents, hearing colors, colored units of time... even having unique visual maps of abstract concepts, such as time (for example, September might be three feet above your left shoulder).

The story is charming and the writing is good, but the reason why I love *A Mango Shaped Space* is that if I hadn't read it, I would have never found out that I myself have synesthesia. In fact, this book is absolutely famous among us synesthetes for doing just that because it's just about literally the only mainstream fiction book that is about synesthesia.

So, I can promise that this is an accurate portrayal of what it is like to have synesthesia. It is perfect for elementary school kids and brings attention to a very obscure and sometimes life-changing subject.

IMPORTANT NOTE: If you read this and found yourself thinking, "I also experience music as being colored (or any other sensory pairing like so), but I only see the colors in my head, so I don't have synesthesia," you should know that quite often synesthesia is only experienced internally (associative) and not externally (projectory). Associative synesthesia is just as legitimate and in fact far more common than the type described in this book.

Hooma says

A Mango-Shaped Space (2003) is a novel by Wendy Mass. This brilliant book is about Mia, a thirteen year

old girl living with synesthesia. Her synesthesia causes her problems in school, with friends, and just having her parents understand her. For example, Mia first experiences ridicule at the hands of her third-grade classmates when she is called to the front of the room to do a math problem. She uses coloured chalk to make the numbers fit into the synesthesiatic form in which she sees them. Her teacher tells her to stop stalling by making up silly stories. Mia is left confused and alone, because she thought everyone saw this way. After that, Mia tells nobody about her colors.

When Mia is twelve her most beloved friend, her grandfather, dies. During her grandfather's funeral, Mia finds a Gray and white kitten with eyes just like her grandfather's. She immediately decides that part of her grandfather's soul is living in that kitten. She takes him home and names him Mango. Not because of his orange eyes, but because his meows and his heavy wheezing are different shades of orange and yellow to her; like a mango in different seasons. The wheezes are actually caused by a deep rip in Mango's lung, which cannot be repaired, but Mango copes with it.

When school trouble in 8th grade causes Mia to tell about her colors. Her mother takes Mia to many different doctors, but only one has an answer. He is a doctor who demands they call him Jerry, nothing else. He tells Mia all about her synesthesia, and gives her loads of information about it. He even gives her a website where Mia can communicate with other synesthetes.

Later on in the story, Mia has her first kiss with a boy named Adam, a boy she met on that website.

Because she is so preoccupied with her condition and life, Mango dies of cold, because he got locked outside and was unable to reach the warmth of his home. After Mango dies, Mia is extremely depressed and her colors disappear. They come back when she meets up with a young boy named Billy, who shares her condition. Billy helps her realize that she has to move on to help other synesthetes.

However, Mango ended up mating with one of the neighbor's female cats before he died, and she gave birth to some kittens. Mia saw that one of the kittens sounded like the color of Mustard. She knew on the inside Mango would want Mia to have his son, so his spirit could live on.

Emma (Miss Print) says

Here's what I like about *A Mango-Shaped Space* by Wendy Mass: The plot is extremely interesting and really, for lack of a better word, new. Mass talks about a condition that most people have never even heard of and she just runs with it.

Here's what I don't like: Mass is at pains throughout the novel to make sure everyone knows her narrator is young. I also have mixed feelings about it winning an award (the Kaplan award I believe) for artistically representing life with a disability.

Here's some information so you can actually understand what I'm going on about: Okay, so the book follows thirteen-year-old Mia. Mia has synesthesia, a neurological condition that allows her to see letters and numbers in color. As the blurb on the back of the book states, Mia named her cat Mango because that is the color of his breathing. That is, you will agree, pretty cool. The action of the story starts when Mia realizes she can no longer keep her condition a secret from her friends and family because it's starting to interfere with her schoolwork. So Mia starts going to doctors and she finally meets people just like her.

So, on one level, this story is about dealing with synesthesia. But it also has a lot more going on. Mia's grandfather has recently died and, as readers will learn, Mango's place in the story is intricately tied to that of Mia's grandfather. At the end of the day, more than being about dealing with a disability (I'm not even sure I like calling synesthesia a disability) *A Mango-Shaped Space* is about accepting who you are and coping with the harder parts of life.

I read this book back-to-back with Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* so comparisons are inevitable. What I found really interesting is that Alexie's narrator is only a year older than Mia, but the story is clearly appropriate for teens--I'd never give it to a ten year old for instance. Mass' novel, on the other hand, could just as easily be cataloged as a Children's book rather than Young Adult (left to my own devices I think I would do just that). Why? Well, like I said, Mass makes sure we know how young Mia is. Revelations like Mia never previously sitting with a boy at lunch or attending a boy-girl party abound in the narrative--sometimes unnecessarily.

At the same time, the material is just less heavy. The tone is lighter and the characters are a little less developed so that their hurts never quite hit home. I'm not sure if this is a bad thing though--it just makes it clear, while reading, that the book could be appropriate for a younger audience.

I'd definitely give this book a look though. The prose is easy to digest and the story is really interesting. And, surprisingly, the story features a lot of characters who are just as interesting to meet as Mia (with her synesthesia)--Mia's little brother Zach is a particular favorite for this reviewer.

You can find this review and more on my blog [Miss Print](#)

Bluesequin says

Having strong synesthesia myself, I was not very pleased with the way it is portrayed in this book. I understand that Mass does not have synesthesia herself and that this lack of experience clearly makes it difficult for her to portray the condition accurately. Nonetheless, throughout the novel, she either makes synesthesia seem like a harrowing handicap or divine euphoria. Honestly, it's neither. I think Mass made it seem greater than what it actually is. I've never encountered a synesthete who felt this way about their synesthesia. It's just like a cool little thing we have, something that deepens our affinity for art, but it's not this colossal issue in our lives.

Mass's descriptions of synesthesia felt unnatural to me; synesthesia is such a natural part of a synesthete's life that it's not something you notice. You just see it, and they're often not solid either. A lot of times, it's so vague, and I just barely grasp it; and a lot of times, when I even try to describe it, it goes away. I understand that the condition is difficult to convey in the written word, but I think Mass could have slipped in those descriptions more discreetly (and made them better).

Also, the main character was slightly annoying. Or maybe it was just because I didn't like the way she handled the "issue" of synesthesia. Synesthesia is not that much of a handicap. I swear to you -- it's not. And yet, Mass exaggerated it here and made it the subject of her whole book. Really, synesthesia is much like psychedelic effects of drugs, but it's natural, involuntary, and usually not so dizzying.

Megan says

With the rise in popularity of YA novels, I think that somehow we have all forgotten what it is like to *actually* be a teenager. Even the better (and some of my favorite) YA's feature a girl who is clever, has great self-esteem, and knows who she is. One of the many excellent aspects of *A Mango-Shaped Space* is that 13 (or is it 14?) year old Mia is not only a cool protagonist, she is also a bit childlike. Granted, she is younger than the typical YA heroine, but she has a bit of naivety and immaturity that is missing from so many YA novels. It was refreshing to find it here.

A Mango-Shaped Space is the story of Mia as she enters the eighth grade and confronts her synesthesia, a condition in which her senses are mingled. For Mia, each letter, number and word has a color associated with it. Even noises and physical sensations evoke a specific color or shape for her. For years she kept this a secret from others, but she has finally decided to share her condition with the world.

But this isn't just a book about synesthesia. It is also a well written coming of age story. Mia has the predictable fights with her BFF (Oh, I had forgotten how some girls are so emotional and sensitive at that age!) She starts to notice *boys*. And not the super-suave and impossibly cool boys found in so many YA's. These boys are definitely *not* sophisticated playa's. They are dorky, awkward teenage boys. Not at all swoon worthy, but painfully reminiscent of that weird hormonal puppy love we all experienced before developing actual relationships. As the middle child, Mia has a not-too-annoying little brother, and a bitchy older sister. There are fairly involved parents and the star of the story, a cat named Mango. (Okay, Mia is the star of the story. But Mango does play a large role in the book (view spoiler))

A Mango-Shaped Space is a book I can't praise enough. It is a fantastic middle grade read, but I whole heartedly recommend it for all adult lovers of YA as well. My only critique of it is that it has an old fashioned feel to it. In fact, if not for the mention of computers and internet this book could have just as easily been written in the late 1970's or early 1980's. A lot of the narrative and the tone of the story somehow reminded me of the YA books I read when I was in middle school. It's not just the mention of kids running an actual lemonade stand (with drinks made from real lemons), feety pajamas, braided friendship bracelets, or the small town feel of the novel. It's something about the tone of the novel which makes it seem older than it is. But in a way, that is so refreshing. Again, YA is often about strong heroines, issues, true-lurve, or some wacky paranormal mystery. But this is simply a sweet, well written story about growing up.

Meg says

I read "A Mango Shaped Space" in sixth grade.

Let me tell you, this book drastically changed my life.

This book isn't about mangos, it's about a young girl named Mia, who associates numbers, letters, sounds, days of the week, and months with colors. This isn't a disease, it isn't a disorder, it's simply a condition, or as I usually refer to it, a gift, or a blessing. It's called Synesthesia (sin-es-tee-ja).

I read this book, and contemplated Mia. It sure sounded awfully familiar...

When I was in preschool, I used to recite to anyone I met, "Pink and red are my favorite colors". This being that my name - Meg - is a deep blood-red to me (Pink being every preschool girl's favorite color. It has nothing to do with my name). My full name, Meagan, is blood-red and brown.

So, actually realizing that these associations weren't normal, I dove into research, finding that my gift is actually very, very rare. So rare, in fact, that my parents didn't and still don't believe me.

Synesthesia is a neurological blessing. There are probably about 100 different types, and Synesthetes most commonly have more than one type. For me, I associate colors, numbers, days of the week, and months with colors.

Key word being "ASSOCIATE" here, guys. I do not look at a paper full of black print and see one million different colors. It's hard to explain beyond the fact that it's just an association. Having that aside, I can tell a person the colors of their name. Like "Silvina" is blue and orange. My friend who goes by "Eka" has a beautifully colored name - light green and dark brown.. so natural!

In this novel, Mia doesn't know it's abnormal either. She keeps remembering back to 3rd grade, when she stalls on a math problem by writing then numbers in their proper colors, and the whole class laughs and ridicules her in that insensitive 8-year-old way. When she speaks up to her parents, after some convincing they agree to take her to find out just what is going on when she sees a beautiful rainbow of colors when Mozart is playing, to put a name to it - Synesthesia.

katarzyna says

This book is great! I recently recommended it to one of the middle school students I work with and it seemed to going over really well with her.

I'm only a few years shy of being twice Mia the narrator's age, but found her to be awesome. Definitely not perfect and kind of a pain in the butt to other characters at times (terrible school project partner, for one) but such a realistic, hilarious 13-year-old.

The character development was great in general, and I ended up liking pretty much everyone. Although some of the characters would perhaps seem cliché and over-the-top coming from a different author (I'm thinking the weird little brother in particular), somehow Mass kept him charming and fun rather than tritely and annoyingly precocious.

I also thought this book covered the relationship between pet and pet-owner so perfectly. Anyone who's ever loved a cat, dog or any other pet would probably be able to relate to the sweet dynamic between Mia and her cat Mango.

The topic of synesthesia was one that I was completely unfamiliar with and I enjoyed learning about the condition. It's really fascinating but rare, so you don't ever really hear much about it. I was so curious that I looked up some info about it online, found out that Pharrell Williams is a synesthete.
