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All the Sights, Sounds and Smells – Sarah Marie Graye

Jun 19, 2021 | Bookworm | 0 comments

READING TIME: 5 MIN (WORD COUNT: 1083)



336 pages

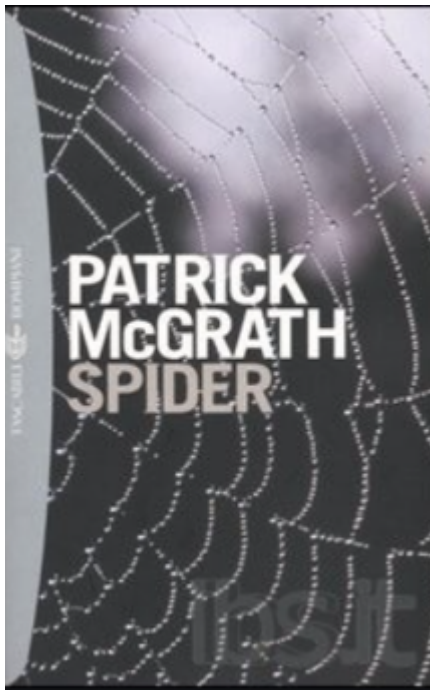
St. Martin's Griffin

Published 2015

227 pages

Gallimard Education

Published 2002



*Understanding Schizophrenic hallucinations through the first-person fiction of Nathan Filer's *The Shock of the Fall* and Patrick McGrath's *Spider**

In medicine, there is a search for one particular answer: the truth. There is no such restriction in fiction. This distinction means fiction is allowed to forge a representation of mental health symptoms – such as what it is like to live with Schizophrenia – without having to prove they are accurate.

Fiction writing is able to stretch itself to fit around the various ideas of what a mental health condition is. Both *The Shock of the Fall* by Nathan Filer and *Spider* by Patrick McGrath, are first-person fiction novels where the narrator suffers from Schizophrenia – and both use the tool of unreliable narrator to play with the rules of fiction writing so that the reader can witness the disintegration of the mind of the sufferer, but not so much that the reader can no longer follow the narrative.

Published in 2013, *The Shock of the Fall* won the Costa Book Awards and achieved a level of commercial success that *Spider*, published in 1990, did not. However, much can be gained from reviewing the books together.

The key difference is that Filer's protagonist Matthew Homes acknowledges his mental health issues, whereas Dennis Cleg (McGrath's protagonist, who goes by the nickname Spider) does not. But even with this distinction, the reader soon learns they cannot trust everything that either narrator tells them.

The unreliable narrator Matthew tells us: "There is weather and there is climate. If it rains outside, or if you stab a classmate's shoulder with a compass needle, over and over, until his white cotton school shirt looks like blotting paper, that is the weather." (Filer 2013, 67)

His story begins normally, talking about weather, climate and rain. But then he relates stabbing a classmate to also being the weather, which is absurd – and there is no warning when his narration will switch between normal and nonsensical.

When Spider explains his mother has gone missing and that "she lived only in me now", we naturally assume he means that she lives on in his memories, but this is not the case. He goes on to explain that: "I developed in time my two-headed system. The front of my head was what I used with other people in the house, the back of my head was for when I was alone. My mother lived in the back of my head." (McGrath 1990, 98).

The role of the unreliable narrator allows both Matthew and Spider to experience hallucinations without telling us: they share their hallucinations as fact, and it is up to the reader to decipher what is real and what is not.

Spider experiences an hallucination during dinner with his parents: "I cut into my potato, and dead in the middle of the halved potato there was a dark stain. I stared at it with some unease. Then a syrupy fluid began to ooze out of the potato, the thick, slow discharge of what after a moment or two I recognised as blood."

(McGrath 1990, 117).

The reader is able to establish this is an hallucination because what Spider is witnessing doesn't occur in real life: blood pouring from a steak would be acceptable; but not from a potato. But at no point is the hallucination confirmed because Spider believes what he is seeing is real.

Cracks in dreams

Matthew has a better comprehension of his mental health issues and is aware that he suffers from hallucinations. He describes them as a breakdown between dreams and reality: "It's like we each have a wall that separates our dreams from reality, but mine has cracks in it. The dreams can wriggle and squeeze their way through, until it's hard to know the difference." (Filer 2013, 21).

However, when this breakdown happens, Matthew is not actually aware; he knows he suffers from hallucinations but is not able to grasp when they occur. One example is when he believes he can see his deceased brother in birthday cake candles: "Everyone broke out into a loud chorus of Happy Birthday. Simon joined in too. He was in the flames. Of course he was in the flames. A nurse grabbed hold of my wrist, leading me quickly to the clinic where she held my blistering fingers under the cold tap." (ibid, 276).

The first-person narration from both Spider and Matthew allows us to see how quickly they can slip between reality and hallucination and back again without any forewarning; how much a part of their everyday life is a mix of reality and mental disturbance without grasping the difference between the two.

Olfactory hallucinations are rare in Schizophrenia diagnoses. Spider, who is suffering from a more severe form of the condition experiences them, but Matthew does not. Reading both novels allows the reader to benefit from being able to experience different variances of the illness.

Spider believes his body is emitting the smell of gas: "It was a long night. I still don't know how I got through it, for it was probably the worst one yet. Despite further layers of brown paper taped onto my torso, despite the layers of vests and

shirts and jerseys on top, the smell of gas was with me until dawn.” (McGrath 1990, 154-155).

Individuals who suffer from such hallucinations often experience a breakdown between abstract and absolute. Spider’s olfactory disturbance is a representation of his inability to leave his past behind because of the murder he may or may not have committed during a psychotic break.

Sensory overload

Hallucinations are one of the symptoms of Schizophrenia that can be represented in first-person fiction to show the reader that the narrator is not fully in touch with reality. Descriptions of hallucinations allow the reader to witness both their inward destruction and their outward manifestations.

While the range of sensory hallucinations and how they are experienced is unique to each individual, even within these idiosyncratic patterns there are significant links between how symptoms are explained by actual sufferers of Schizophrenia and how they are expressed in fiction.

When it comes to fiction, the medical profession’s current understanding of mental health sets the groundwork, but it is up to writers such as Filer and McGrath to imagine how a sufferer would interpret their symptoms in order to be able to tell their story.

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Sarah Marie Graye is a novelist, poet and essayist. She has two published novels, *The Second Cup* (2017) and *The Victoria Lie* (2018). Her writing has been featured in or is scheduled to be featured in *Atticus Review*, *The Banyan Review*, *The Polyphony*, *Pulse*, *BMJ Medical Humanities Blog*, *Huffington Post* and *Additude Magazine*. Sarah Marie is a PhD candidate on the University of Kent's Contemporary Novel: Practice as Research program. Her research focuses on identity, trauma and memory. She is currently writing her third novel.

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