

## On ceaseless memories and lingering smells

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Whenever I smell the characteristic aroma of Sharpie markers, my mind travels back to a particular summer, a few years ago, when my favourite – and, quite frankly, only – hobby was drawing and colouring. The hours spent with a Sharpie in hand have left that signature chemical scent forever engraved in my brain. And, if we ponder upon it, is that not the case with most smells? Curiously, many of our memories, whether good memories or just random ones, can be triggered by perceiving a certain smell. Smells enter our nostrils and reach our brains via the olfactory bulb, a neural structure with direct connection to the amygdala and the hippocampus, two areas of the brain which are responsible for processing emotions and storing memories. Thus, we are biologically programmed to trigger a rush of memories as a result of some sensory experience. For example, the powerful smell of petrol will always evoke family road trips during my childhood – early morning starts were essential in order to beat the traffic and the petrol station was the mandatory first stop. Moreover, people's experiences with smells are highly subjective, and yet it seems that some of us have this tendency to become obsessed over the same smells. Petrol is only the first out of the many instances I could name.

Books, I would say, are a very close second. I think all avid bibliophiles will agree that nothing is more satisfying than sniffing through the pages of a newly purchased book. As a former bookshop employee (and an eager reader myself) the sweet and somewhat synthetic scent of the pages takes me back to Monday mornings when, minutes before opening time, our trusted delivery man would arrive with boxes of merchandise. I always remember those days fondly – for no matter how tedious the task of unboxing, stacking, putting books away in bookshelves and repeating the same process over and over again might have been – nothing could beat the thrill of discovering hidden treasures inside those cardboard boxes. New releases, long-awaited restocks of a bestseller, beautiful hardcover editions of a beloved classic... It truly was a book lover's paradise. And even though I have not worked there for some years now, whenever I hold a book in my hands, I can almost see myself again, kneeling on the floor of the shop's backroom, opening each box and carefully unloading its contents. In short, I will always have a soft spot for that distinct bookish smell which fills my nostrils every time I flip through their pages.

But for some people, a similar feeling may be aroused by old books rather than newly printed ones. This kind is known for its rather earthy, dusty smell. They remind me of past visits to the school library in my youth, or of browsing my mother's bookcase, stacked with Biology and Maths books from her teaching years, looking for material to complete some homework. Our homes are filled with memories which our brains may easily unlock thanks to a particular smell – books being probably the most cherished. My dad's Sunday barbecues come to mind, with smoke going up the chimney and all the way into our bedrooms, swathing everything with its scent, clothes, curtains and bedcovers alike. To this day, it is still reminiscent of days spent with family and friends, of chatter, and, of course, heated arguments as well. So is the smoky aroma of a lit fireplace during cold winter nights, which had a barbecue-like effect on both clothing and every other piece of linen found around the house. But the sight – and the smell – of a blazing hearth invades me with a sense of serenity, evoking cosy evenings spent by the fire.

There is an irony that has not eluded me, and it involves thinking of how some smells, and our immediate and utterly subjective response to them, contradicts our innermost feelings. Dog food seems as good an example as any – its pungent smell excels at completely spoiling my appetite. However, the only fact I can think of when it reaches me is of how much I love my dog, and I just feel the urge to rush back home to snuggle her if I

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\* 1º premio del Concurso Literario USAL en Lengua Inglesa – Categoría ensayo (2024).

am away. Regardless of how foul the stench of kibble may be, its presence will always evoke happy memories of every pet I have ever loved. On the other hand, many people will concede that one or two expensive perfumes have been ruined for them as the result of a heartbreak. I am ashamed to admit how many times I have caught the scent of Dior Sauvage lingering in the air and willed it to be coming from a certain man, but of course it never did. Even though the person may not be physically there, our minds will always bring our memories back, for as long as we still remember what they used to smell like. After spending so much time with a person, it is only natural that their fragrance will be forever etched into our minds or, at least, for a good couple of years. This just proves that the link between our noses and our brains can strongly linger in time.

We used to have a lemon tree in my backyard when I was growing up. And now, twenty years later, I can not help but picture myself under its branches whenever I hold a lemon in my hand. Thanks to my father, a gardener, and my mother, a keen amateur botanist, our house was known for its luscious vegetation – plants in general but flowers and herbs in particular. Our back wall was covered in white and pink roses – beautiful to gaze upon but of a rather unprepossessing scent. There were also jasmine bushes by the side of the pool; its sweet, musky fragrance, mingled with the chlorine from the swimming pool and the rich, citrusy scent of the lemon tree, created a signature summer scent. Lavender flowers also spring to mind. My mother had planted them in the front yard to be admired by guests as they strolled towards our door. In good DIY fashion, we would handpick the loveliest specimens and allow them to dry out. Once the job was achieved, the dried out lavender buds would get stuffed into tiny little tulle bags which, in turn, would be conveniently placed into sock drawers. The memory of them comes back to me each morning when I am getting dressed and the soft, floral scent of potpourri is no longer there – the lavender bushes having perished a long time ago. Yet their memory remains strong and persistent, even if the fragrance does no. For it is through our senses that we connect with the world around us, and when the memories of that connection is all that prevails, is that connection really lost? Or is it the very absence, as they say, what makes the heart grow fonder?