



'IN THE SPOTLIGHT'

Each month we put a different person 'in the spotlight' and pose 12 wide-ranging questions to them. This month, we feature local poet, author, writing tutor and member of our Festival Steering Group, **Sue Johnson**.

1. Tell us an interesting fact about yourself that not many people know.

I have lexical-gustatory synaesthesia – which is a posh way of saying I taste words. It is defined as *'a condition in which one type of stimulation evokes the sensation of another, as when the hearing of music produces the visualisation of colour.'* It is believed to affect about 4% of the population in some way. When I started school, we did reading in the morning and I was so full up with the taste of the words I couldn't eat my dinner. It certainly affected the names I chose for my children! I didn't realise the condition had a name until I was in my 40s. I am a member of the UK Synaesthesia Association. I have written a short book about it entitled *'Synaesthesia: tasting words in a rainbow of sound.'* I also offer a talk on the subject.

2. What book made most impact on you as a child?

There were so many of them! I loved 'Heidi', 'Black Beauty', 'Swiss Family Robinson', 'What Katy Did', 'Little Women', 'Huckleberry Finn' and all the fairy-tales. I also loved school stories (although I hated school) like the 'Malory Towers' series and 'The Chalet School' books. The book that I read time and again was 'Ballet Shoes' by Noel Streatfeild. I did ballet from the age of three and only stopped aged 14 when forced to make a choice between that and training for athletics.

3. What is your favourite film, and why?

I spent a lot of time in the cinema when I was young. My Dad worked for Rank Film & Leisure Services and his job was to predict the success or otherwise of a film. When I was a teenager, I worked in a cinema in Croydon as an usherette for a few evenings a week. I saw '2001 A Space Odyssey' 21 times and always missed the same bit because I was sorting the ice creams for the break. Amongst my all-time favourite films are 'Gone With The Wind', 'Dr Zhivago' and 'The Great Escape.' However, top billing has to go to 'Titanic.' My Gran worked as a nursemaid for a family in 1912 and was excited when she heard she was going to New York on the Titanic. However, the lady she worked for said she had a bad feeling about it and refused to go. Her husband sold the tickets. I often wonder who bought them.

4. What are your main hobbies/interests, apart from reading, of course?

Walking, yoga and cooking. I also enjoy family history research and studying Italian. I like travelling to different places, particularly Italy, and visiting historic houses.

5. What would be the three things you would like to have if you were stranded on a desert island?

A large supply of paper and pens, a regular supply of chocolate and my guitar. My playing might improve if I was stranded for long enough!



6. What would a look at your bookshelves tell us about you?

Apart from the fact that I'm extremely untidy they would tell you that I read a wide range of novels, poetry and plays. I have a large number of books on learning foreign languages. I'm currently studying Italian but have previously studied French, German and Portuguese. I'm also addicted to buying books on creative writing.

7. If you could invite any three people, dead or alive, to a dinner party, who would they be, and why?

Mary Shelley (author of *Frankenstein*), novelist Vladimir Nabokov (author of 'Speak Memory' and 'Lolita' and singer-songwriter Billy Joel. If one of them couldn't come, I'd invite artist Wassily Kandinsky. All of them are recorded as having some form of synaesthesia so it would be interesting to discuss it over dinner. Billy Joel could play some music for us when we've finished eating.

8. What kind of music do you like, and is there one favourite soundtrack?

I am inspired by a large variety of music. Classical – J S Bach, Tchaikovsky, Elgar, Holst, Vivaldi. Rock – Rolling Stones, Deep Purple, Jethro Tull, Cream, Crosby, Stills & Nash. I visited folk clubs in the Croydon area from the age of 15. I went to concerts by Ralph McTell and Steeleye Span. I also like Joni Mitchell, Lorena McKennitt, Show of Hands, Green Diesel and local singer/songwriters like Colin Pitts and Mike Weaver. 'Fairytale of New York' by The Pogues is the track that gets me up and moving before I start a writing session.

9. What are your favourite charities/good causes, and why?

Mental health charities! My mother worked in an old-fashioned mental hospital in the 1960s as secretary to the matron. Some of the stories she told as to why people were there were horrifying. From the age of 14, I volunteered at a mental hospital near my school, helping with sports days and activities. Since 'care in the community' began in the 1980s, not enough has been done to help people. Services are still inadequate in many parts of the country. I am also keen to help wildlife charities. If we don't protect our wildlife then it will be gone. If we don't protect and nurture bees and other pollinating insects, they will be gone and the human race won't be far behind them.

10. Who is the person who has influenced you most/you most admire?

This was a very tough call between my Mum, Dad and maternal grandmother! I think I'd have to say my Dad because he introduced me to a wide variety of books. I used to 'borrow' his library book from his briefcase and read under the blankets with a torch. I scared myself badly on several occasions! He used to take me to see the ballet and also to athletics events. He taught me to visualise at an early age and how to focus on what I really wanted. He was 25% disabled following WW2 and was told he wouldn't walk again. Not only did he walk miles but he played golf and tennis. He always said that it wasn't what happened to you in life that mattered – it was how you chose to deal with it. One day when I was feeling a bit down he told me to stop and think of three things I was grateful for right now. I make a point of doing that every day.



11. What is your connection to Evesham?

I moved to Evesham in April 1998 (the week before the floods) to be with my partner – poet and environmentalist Bob Woodroffe. I can't believe how quickly those years have passed by.

12. What would you list as your greatest achievement to date?

Becoming a published writer! When I was seven I told my teacher I wanted to write stories when I grew up. She told me it wasn't a proper job and that I should think about becoming a nurse. (The last job on the planet that I would want!) Over the next thirty years, my dream was constantly dismissed as 'unrealistic' by a number of people. Thankfully, I ignored them all and kept going until I'd proved them wrong.