

## “The Empire of Ice Cream” by Jeffrey Ford

The story is told in first person. The first page or so is a detailed description of the condition called synesthesia and what it is like for the narrator to experience the world. He is misunderstood by his parents and taken to all sorts of doctors. He finally rebels, escapes to an ice cream shop, The “Empire of Ice Cream” of the title, orders coffee ice cream, and has a vision of Anna, the girl who haunts him for the rest of his “life.” This escapade causes him to be sent to a therapist, Dr. Stullin, who diagnoses his condition.

William continues to consume coffee ice cream, though it makes him sick. He becomes a kind of voyeur, observing Anna’s life. Eventually, he discovers that regular coffee gives him an even stronger vision of Anna, and that under its influence, he can even talk to her, if she is also drinking coffee. They are both afflicted with synesthesia. Each thinks that the other is a figment of the imagination, and of the neurological condition. Eventually, it turns out that both are seeing Dr. Stullin. Also, she and Dr. Stullin are both reading a book called *The Centrifugal Rickshaw Dancer*.

This story presents a life in detail. William has parents, problems, accomplishments, talents, and a history. He has a piano teacher and a therapist whom he considers friends. His process for composing music, which is more like painting than music, is described in detail. At the end, the score of his original composition somehow ends up in Anna’s hands and she takes credit for it. She calls him, her “muse.”

On 168, when they begin speaking, each thinks that the other is imaginary. Because we have William as narrator, we identify with him. We are on his side. But the author is tricking us. Anna is real. Or is she? She says she is going to take a pill that will cure her synesthesia. When she does, William’s world gets smaller and smaller. He is likely to disappear.

Of course, we are reading fiction, so all of the characters are imaginary. However, William is more real to us than Anna.

Perhaps the most important question for us about this story is the effect on the reader of being tricked in this way. Is this a trickery that we enjoy? Or do we feel cheated?

The second question is about how the trick was performed. Why do we think that William is the more real of the two characters?