

Born on a Blue Day

This extract is from a book by Daniel Tammet called *Born on a Blue Day*. Daniel has savant syndrome and a form of Asperger's syndrome. This means he is incredibly intelligent and has an amazing memory, but he often has trouble interacting and communicating with others.

I was born on 31 January 1979 – a Wednesday. I know it was a Wednesday, because the date is blue in my mind and Wednesdays are always blue, like the number nine or the sound of loud voices arguing. I like my birth date, because of the way I'm able to visualise most of the numbers in it as smooth and round shapes, similar to pebbles on a beach. That's because they are prime numbers: 31, 19, 197, 97, 79 and 1979 are all divisible only by themselves and one. I can recognise every prime up to 9973 by their 'pebble-like' quality. It's just the way my brain works.

I have a rare condition known as savant syndrome, little known before its portrayal by actor Dustin Hoffman in the Oscar-winning 1988 film *Rain Man*. Like Hoffman's character, Raymond Babbitt, I have an almost obsessive need for order and routine, which affects virtually every aspect of my life. For example, I eat exactly 45 grams of porridge for breakfast each morning; I weigh the bowl with an electronic scale to make sure. Then I count the number of items of clothing I'm wearing before I leave my house. I get anxious if I can't drink my cups of tea at the same time each day. Whenever I become too stressed and I can't breathe properly, I close my eyes and count. Thinking of numbers helps me to become calm again.

Numbers are my friends and they are always around me. Each one is unique and has its own personality. Eleven is friendly and five is loud, whereas four is both shy and quiet – it's my favourite number, perhaps because it reminds me of myself. Some are big – 23, 667, 1179 – while others are small: 6, 13, 581. Some are beautiful, like 333, and some are ugly, like 289. To me, every number is special.

No matter where I go or what I'm doing, numbers are never far from my thoughts. In an interview with chat show host David Letterman in New York, I told David he looked like the number 117 – tall and lanky. Later outside, in the appropriately numerically named Times Square, I gazed up at the towering skyscrapers and felt surrounded by nines – the number I most associate with feelings of immensity.

Scientists call my visual, emotional experience of numbers synaesthesia, a rare neurological mixing of the senses, which most commonly results in the ability to see alphabetical letters and/or numbers in colour. Mine is an unusual and complex type, through which I see numbers as shapes, colours, textures and motions. The number one, for example, is a brilliant and bright white, like someone shining a torch beam into my eyes. Five is a clap of thunder or the sound of waves crashing against rocks. Thirty-seven is lumpy like porridge, while eighty-nine reminds me of falling snow.

An extract from *Born on a Blue Day* by Daniel Tammet.

1 What is a prime number? How is Daniel able to recognise them?

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.....

2 marks

2 Describe Daniel's morning routine. What happens if he doesn't follow his regular routine?

.....

.....

2 marks

3 Find two examples of personification in this passage.

.....

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1 mark

4 Why does Daniel describe Times Square as being "numerically named" (line 25)?

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1 mark

5 What does Daniel mean when he says he "felt surrounded by nines" (line 26)?

.....

.....

2 marks

6 What do you think it would be like to live with savant syndrome?

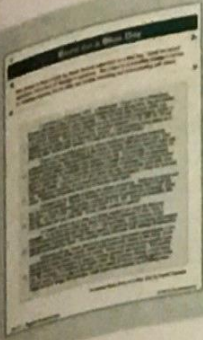
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2 marks

Total
out of 10

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Question Book:
Year 6, pages 6-7

Author / Source:
Daniel Tammet

Genre:
Non-fiction — memoir

Cross-curricular links:

- PSHE (autism spectrum)
- Art (numerical representation)
- Maths (prime numbers)

Introduction

As well as suffering from Asperger's syndrome, Daniel Tammet has savant syndrome, a rare condition in which individuals with serious mental disorders show remarkable abilities in a specific field, often either art, music, calendar calculation, mathematics or spatial skills. Like Daniel, around fifty per cent of people with savant syndrome suffer from an autism spectrum disorder, although savant syndrome also occurs in individuals with other developmental or neurological disorders. Before you start reading the extract with the class, use the introduction in the Question Book to ensure that pupils have a basic understanding of the nature of Daniel's condition.

Answers

1. E.g. A number that's only divisible by itself and one. Daniel recognises them by their "pebble-like" quality.
2. E.g. He eats exactly 45 grams of porridge for breakfast each morning, weighing the bowl with an electronic scale. Then he counts the number of items of clothing he's wearing before leaving the house. He gets anxious if he can't follow his normal routine.
3. E.g. "Eleven is friendly" and "five is loud".
4. E.g. Because "Times" and "Square" are both words that you might use in maths.
5. E.g. He means that he felt surrounded by enormous things. He links the number nine to "feelings of immensity", so the huge buildings in Times Square made him feel like there were nines all around him.
6. Any appropriate answer. E.g. I think that it would be difficult if you needed to follow the same routine every day, because sometimes things might get in the way of your routine, and that would be very stressful.

Extra Activities

- *Born on a Blue Day* is a memoir. Memoirs follow similar conventions to autobiographies. With the whole class, discuss the conventions of autobiographical writing. Ask pupils to write a short autobiographical passage, or a memoir, describing how they celebrated their most recent birthday.
- With the whole class, look at the way Daniel describes the different numbers mentioned in the extract. Ask pupils to suggest how Daniel might see other numbers, and to explain their answers. You could then ask pupils to draw or paint a picture showing the way that Daniel sees some of the numbers he describes in the extract.
- Ask pupils to write a poem describing how Daniel views his world.
- With the whole class, discuss the challenges that people living with savant syndrome and other autism spectrum disorders face on a daily basis.
- Challenge pupils to find all the prime numbers under 100.

2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13,
17, 19, 23, 29, 31,
37, 41, 43, 47, 53,
59, 61, 67, 71, 73,
79, 83, 89, 97