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[Rethinking Thought](#)

Fiction-Writers Can Teach Visual Thinking

A novel about an artist reveals how one painter thinks.

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A skilled fiction writer can take a reader into an unfamiliar mind. I can't speak for everyone who reads fiction, but many of us who love reading want to explore minds — and through them, worlds — vastly different from our own. In her academic study, *Why We Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine proposes that people read to exercise their Theory of Mind — their ability to enter another person's mind and imagine life from that person's perspective (Zunshine). Zunshine's hypothesis explains why people bond with literary characters even when the characters' experiences are painful, and even when the characters' ways of thinking seem bizarre.

My journey from [neuroscience](#) to literature has introduced me to people who think in radically different ways. In my research for *Rethinking Thought*, I interviewed some people

fully convinced that thought is verbal language, to the point that they couldn't imagine what else it could be. I encountered others who felt that language obstructs their thinking, as a distorting force to fight or evade. It all depends on how one defines thinking, of course. For me, thinking includes imagining, remembering, reflecting, solving problems, contemplating alternate perspectives, and picturing multiple ways for parts to form a whole. I conducted the interviews for *Rethinking Thought* to learn how the experience of thinking varies from person to person, and the results indicate that people who deny the existence of visual thinking haven't consciously experienced it and need to learn what it is. I wrote *Rethinking Thought* to show how greatly mental worlds can differ, but skilled fiction writers do a better [job](#).

For readers unfamiliar with visual thinking, Diana Richmond's novel, *Raising Dawn*, offers a chance to enter an artist's mind. Richmond's protagonist, Karen, illustrates children's books. *Raising Dawn* depicts the suspenseful custody battle between Karen and her sister, Patty, who donated the egg for Dawn, the child to whom Karen gave birth after in vitro fertilization. Diana Richmond has artists in her family and may have drawn on her conversations with them to depict Karen at work. A retired attorney, Richmond numbers among the fiction writers I interviewed for *Rethinking Thought*, and I was struck by her visual sensitivity as well as her skill with verbal language. In the scene from which the following passage is drawn, Karen and Dawn are recovering from a fall into a river in which they both got hurt. Dawn asks if they can paint together, and on impulse, Karen decides to paint a portrait of Patty. Ironically, before she can finish, Patty will arrive at the door to remove Dawn from Karen's care. Fully absorbed in her work, Karen asks herself:

"From which direction comes the light? I decide that it comes from a hidden window on [Patty's] right, at the left side of the portrait. It bisects her face at only a slight angle, her nose creating a slanted shadow down her left cheek. The side of her face in the light is bright yellow, a cheerful but unnatural yellow. The left side presents a far more complicated question, to which the answer becomes green, gray-green in the nose shadow, brighter green below where the blue of her dress melds with the yellow of the sunlight, and a bruised purple-green in an arc below her left eye, a paler flesh/purple blend on her left forehead. I like that purplish arc and replicate it under her right eye, where it becomes rosier in the yellow wash already in place. I have pulled her hair back, as if in a ponytail. Her right eyebrow is raised, a skeptical curve; the left is furrowed, a darker slash. Her right eye is fully revealed, a cheerful blue, but the left is shadowy, enigmatic" (Richmond 54).

Anyone who questions whether it is possible to think visually should take a close look at this passage. Karen is articulating questions and answering them through movement, color, and light. With her [memory](#), her visual imagination, and her hands, she is struggling to render with watercolors what she can see in her mind. Cognitive neuroscientist Maria Kozhevnikov and her colleagues have demonstrated that visual thinking involves two distinct groups of skills, and people adept at visual thinking tend to excel at one or the other, but not both (Kozhevnikov et al. 710). Object visualizers are good at analyzing colors, textures, shapes, and the fine details of images; spatial visualizers are more adept at analyzing dimensions, distances, and velocities (Kozhevnikov et al. 710-12). Richmond's character Karen illustrates the skills of object [visualization](#).



Rosco Woman by an Unknown Graffiti Artist

Source: Pixabay. Public Domain.

By “listening” to Karen’s thoughts, rendered in Richmond’s language, readers unfamiliar with the mental analysis Karen is doing can learn what visual thinking means. On multiple levels, she is solving a complex problem: What does my sister look like? Her pose of Patty in her imagination suggests her complex blend of emotions toward her sister, with whom she will soon be fighting a legal battle. For this fictional artist, color is [cognition](#). Readers to whom her thoughts of color seem foreign will realize that her artistic abilities begin with perception. Not only is she solving problems that may never have occurred to them; she is observing aspects of appearances that they may not have consciously seen.

In an interview for *Rethinking Thought*, painter Mary Welty told me that learning to visualize means “teaching your brain and your hand to do what you see” (Welty). If she were painting me, she said, “I’d be all the time thinking where the shadow is, where the shape is in relation to . . . all around you” (Welty). She made it clear that, for her, visually observing, visually imagining, and painting are so interrelated, she can’t separate them. Practicing any one of these skills means becoming more adept at the others. One can see this synergy of visual skills at work in Richmond’s fictional character, Karen.

Since the 18th century, reading fiction has been frowned upon as an indulgence, especially an indulgence of women. No attitude could be more wrong. When the writer cares about her art, fiction-reading can offer one of the best learning opportunities there is: the chance to learn about another way of experiencing life and to recognize and change one’s mental habits.

References

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