

## Eco groups: Give up turkey

Farming conservation groups are calling on people to ditch the turkey this year as the avian bird flu epidemic highlights the effects of intensive poultry farming.

Around 600,000 free range turkeys reared in Britain have been culled or have died due to the disease this year, leading to warnings of Christmas shortages.

The Sustainable Food Trust, Nature Friendly Farming Network, Compassion In World Farming and Farm Wilder

said: "Avian flu is yet another stark reminder of the damage caused by intensive poultry farming, which has provided the perfect breeding ground for new and more virulent strains of disease, with dire consequences for farmers and wild bird populations."

The organisations also said customers should prioritise "true sustainability over tradition" and search out nature-friendly beef, wild shot venison or plant-based festive dinners.

## Royal Mail denies delay

The Royal Mail has denied claims Christmas cards may not arrive until February.

It said there is no evidence to back claims by a postal workers' union that cards will be very late with some not arriving until February.

Royal Mail workers with the Communication Workers Union will stage a fresh strike today in the long-running dispute over pay, jobs and conditions.

# Only words

### Writer on challenge of an imagination without images

By Laura Smith  
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**A terrorist group dressed in Santa suits lays siege to an Inverness shopping centre two days before Christmas. What they don't realise is that one of their trapped shoppers is a disgruntled retired police officer now working as an inside man for his former colleagues to make sure everyone gets home safely for Christmas.**

Anyone reading Barry Hutchison's latest DS Hoon crime thriller, *Eastgate*, could easily picture its action-fuelled plot playing out on TV. Anyone, that is, except the author.

It's not that he thinks his stories wouldn't lend themselves to a small-screen adaptation. Rather, when it comes to creating a mental picture of anything, be it the action in his latest novel or the birth of his children, Hutchison can't see anything at all.

The author, from Fort William, has aphantasia, a phenomenon also referred to as "mind blindness", so is unable to visualise images in his mind, even of familiar objects or family members. He struggles to remember people he meets and mentally recalls songs in his own voice. Yet he dreams in images.

"It's an inability to see mental pictures," explained Hutchison, 44. "It's not a medical condition, there's no cure. It's just how some people's brain works differently."

It was during the 2020 lockdown, while chatting with his wife Fiona, daughter Mia and son Kyle, when Hutchison realised that he perceived things in his head differently from his family.

"My daughter was talking about mentally picturing something and I'd always assumed that 'mental picture' was just a phrase for thinking about something," he recalled. "Then I realised what she was explaining was literally a picture that she could see."

"She described the process of seeing something in your mind's eye and I laughed thinking it was ridiculous until my wife and son asked what I was going on about. It was only then I realised most people can shut their eyes and picture something but I can't. I see darkness and think exclusively in words."

"If you asked me to think of a beach, I don't see an image of a beach but instead I'm aware of all the words that describe the concept of a beach. What is interesting is I see things when I dream and that seems to be common with aphantasia. But when I'm awake, if I shut my eyes and try to picture a blue ball, I get nothing. Just darkness."

While it might seem a strange

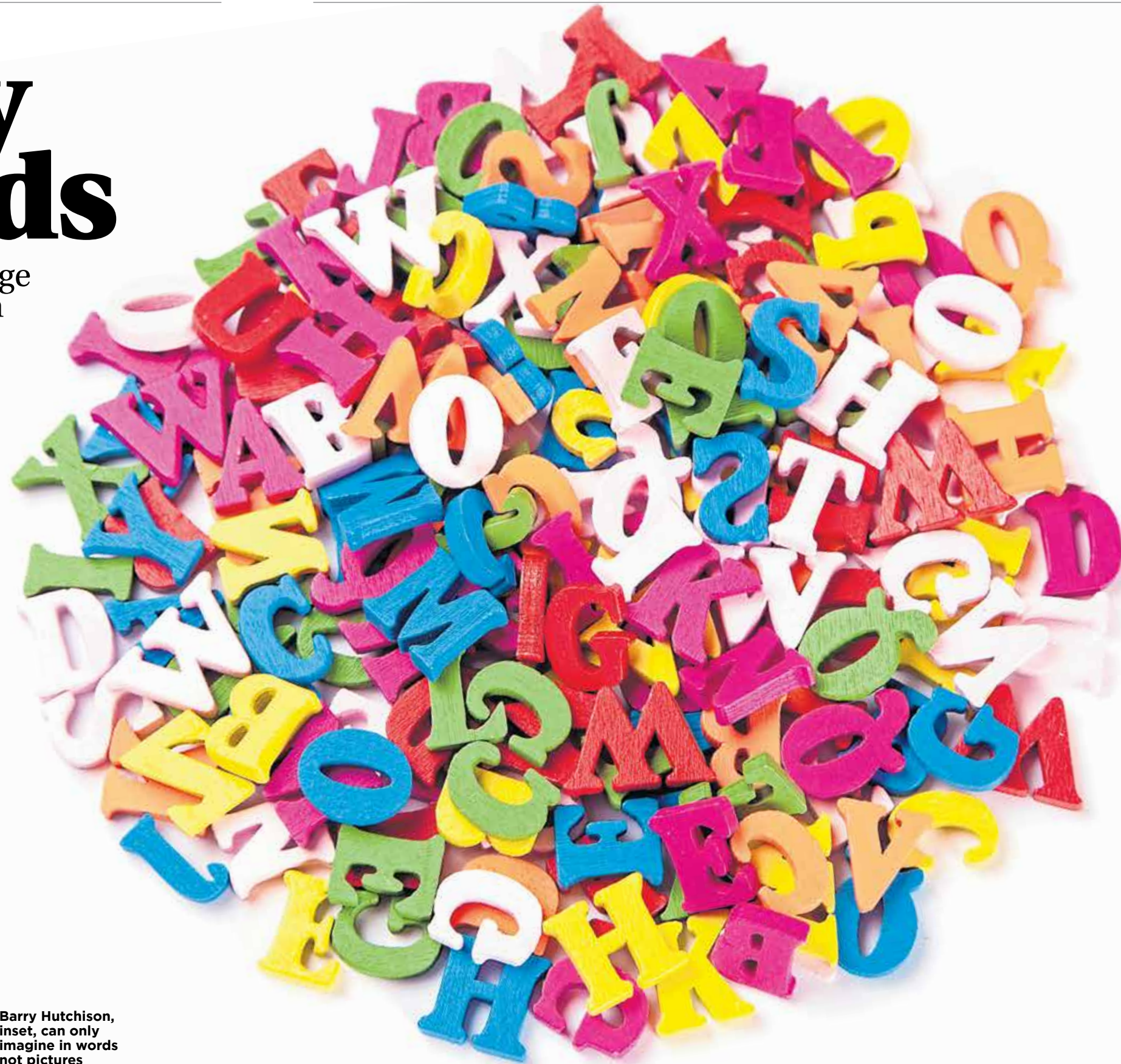
**Barry Hutchison, inset, can only imagine in words not pictures**

concept, for a long time Hutchison presumed what he was experiencing was the norm.

He said: "I remember as a kid being confused when my dad told me to count sheep when I couldn't sleep, or at school the teacher would ask us to visualise holding a number of apples in each hand to help us count. That never made sense to me. To me, go picture that in your head meant, go think about it. I'm not seeing any imagery, just thinking in words. The concept of meditation or picturing yourself somewhere else is like science fiction to me."

Hutchison can't call up a visual memory and requires a photo to trigger a recollection: "My memory is terrible because when you remember something you take a mental thumbnail that you mag to a fact to form a memory but I can't do that. All my childhood memories are based on remembering things from photos but sometimes I think I'm just remembering seeing the photo before."

When it comes to significant moments like the birth of his



children, Hutchison explained: "I remember it happening. I remember the feelings and emotions but I can't conjure an image of it. Quite often I'll forget having met someone because their face isn't familiar enough. There's one poor author I've met three times and every time I do I say, it's lovely to finally meet you!"

"Even with my own books, I need to go back and read the previous couple of books before I write the next one because I can't remember what happened in them."

Yet it seems that, for Hutchison at least, visualisation isn't central to the creative process. In fact, aphantasia has helped him become a prolific writer, able to write an entire book in a matter of weeks.

"A lot of writers will imagine a scene and translate that picture into words," he said. "For me, it just comes out as words that I immediately write down, so I skip that extra step. It's weird but because I type so fast, I feel like I'm reading it as my fingers type it out. I've always written quickly. I write

about 180 kids' books in 10 years and finished *Eastgate* in about a month. I have a treadmill set up with a desk, so I walk while I'm writing anywhere between 3,000 and 5,000 words a day."

When Hutchison's productivity began to hugely outstrip demand from his publishers, he set up his own digital-first publishing company, Zertex Media, in 2016.

He began writing and publishing crime fiction under the pen name JD Kirk three years ago with *A Litter Of Bones*, the first in his successful DCI Jack Logan series. The latest Logan book, *Here Lie The Dead*, was published in September, plus there are four novels in his spin-off series with the character DS Hoon, the latest being *Eastgate*, released this month.

"I set up my own company because I'd quickly write six books in a series but my publisher would only want to release one a year," said Hutchison. "When I was writing for children, many of my books were under pen names because I was writing so many that

I was competing with myself. This way, once I've written a book, I can put it out there straight away for people to read."

Around 2% of people could have aphantasia but it is not yet known what causes it. The term was coined in 2015 by neurologist Dr Adam Zeman of the University of Exeter, who has gone on to lead The Eye's Mind project which investigates the phenomenon.

Hutchison has now met researchers at Glasgow University who are investigating the condition and will soon undergo a functional magnetic resonance imaging scan to help experts learn more about the connection between aphantasia and brain activity.

He said: "The research isn't going to make much difference to me as it doesn't affect me negatively but it will be interesting to find out why people experience this. This is how my brain works, for better or worse."

*Eastgate* by JD Kirk is published by Zertex Media

## THE SCIENCE

### 'We scan the brain to see how it creates a visual scene'

Describing aphantasia can be challenging even for Professor Fiona Macpherson, director of the Centre for the Study of Perceptual Experience at the University of Glasgow, who has studied the condition for eight years and worked on The Eye's Mind project with Dr Adam Zeman.

"The description that you often get is that it's someone who lacks visual imagery but even that's not exactly accurate," she said.

"Some people lack voluntary imagery, so they may have the odd image flash into their mind, but they can't create an image."

"Some people have visual dreams. Some might have reduced auditory imagery, so are unable to hear a tune silently in their head or an inner voice."

"People with aphantasia can often give you a visual description of something; they just can't conjure up an image of it in their mind."

"At the other end of the scale, you have hyperphantasia where people's visual imagery is every bit as vivid as actual sight."

Estimating how many people it affects is also challenging.

"People say 1-2% of the population but that is a really rough estimate," said Macpherson.

"When we launched The Eye's Mind in 2015, we were contacted by over 14,000 people who had aphantasia."

"We don't know what causes it. We're still at the beginning of understanding what processes in the brain produce imagery."

Researchers at the University of Glasgow's Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging are using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans to detect differences in brain activity when processing internal visual imagery.

"We are looking into the brain activity related to imagery," said Dr Lars Muckli, the centre's director of fMRI.

"fMRI allows us to measure activity from many locations in the visual cortex when subjects who are blindfolded listen to sounds and attempt to create visual scenes and how that changes when people are imagining a visual scene."

"People's imagery falls along a broad spectrum so we're keen to investigate perceptual differences among people, whether they have aphantasia or not," added Macpherson, who is now working on a perception census.

She wants people to share their experiences at the website perceptioncensus.dreamachine.world



**Fiona Macpherson**

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