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The Spell Of The Sensuous: Perception And Language In A More-Than-Human World



Synopsis

David Abram draws on sources as diverse as the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, Balinese shamanism, Apache storytelling, and his own experience as an accomplished sleight-of-hand magician to reveal the subtle dependence of human cognition on the natural environment. He explores the character of perception and excavates the sensual foundations of language, which--even at its most abstract--echoes the calls and cries of the earth. On every page of this lyrical work, Abram weaves his arguments with passion and intellectual daring."Long awaited, revolutionary...This book ponders the violent disconnection of the body from the natural world and what this means about how we live and die in it."--Los Angeles Times

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Customer Reviews

The Spell of the Sensuous reveals how our Western worldview has evolved to be based on literacy, abstract thought, and separation from the body. By "the body" I mean not just our individual, animal bodies, but the body of the earth and the material cosmos. By removing ourselves from this sensuous realm, we have lost the connection to "the living dream that we share with the soaring hawk, the spider, and the stone silently sprouting lichens on its coarse surface."There is a paradox here, because Abrams' book exposes the drawbacks of literacy and abstract, logical thinking. But it is itself a piece of very well-argued written discourse. However, it works, and not just because Abrams' arguments are so convincing. Part of their power stems from the fact that Abrams is an artist; he has the gift of using words and imagery that can reach below the logical brain to inspire a

more direct way of perceiving the world. The result is a book which is a moving combination of philosophical writing and pure poetry. Abrams works from a phenomenological standpoint, and the book begins with a discussion of phenomenology's history and major ideas.* This is a readable and unintimidating introduction to the subject. Abrams then proceeds to show how, starting at the time of alphabetization, the Western mind began to grow away from direct physical knowing of the world and toward abstract, conceptual representations. Our language became removed from nature, and helped us to remove ourselves from it and to inhabit an almost entirely human-centered world. As a counterpoint to the Western use of language, Abrams goes on to show how people in non-literate cultures use language as a way to connect with the body and the physical realm. In these oral cultures language "is experienced not as the exclusive property of humankind, but as a property of the sensuous life-world." In other words, the world--the animals, plants, stones, wind--speaks a language that most of us can no longer hear. Abrams explores indigenous oral poetry and stories to illustrate this entirely other way of experiencing language. My first reading of this book triggered a conversion of sorts. It spun me 180 degrees, from the world of concepts to the world of immediate perception. I'm on my third reading now and still incorporating teachings passed over previously. I am finding that returning my gaze to the uninterpreted physical world is a difficult practice, as I have been conditioned (like most Westerners) to run my experience through a filter of concepts and judgments. But, like meditation, this practice can help to loosen one's psyche from its "mind-forg'd manacles." For this reason, *The Spell of the Sensuous* is really a manual for liberating one's inner and outer vision.* Phenomenology is the study of how we experience consciousness. Unlike many branches of philosophy which rely on arguments built in logical steps, phenomenology is more about how we perceive and feel the immediate play of events around and within ourselves. Thus it is less abstract and more experiential than many branches of philosophy. See [...] for more information.

I read this and loved it. Afterward, it occurred on me that I wouldn't be able to find anything as good for quite a while so I immediately read it again. Sure its about the intertwined relationship of our perceptions, language and the environment. I expected that. What I didn't expect and was very surprised by was how, after reading 80 or so pages, I walked outside and the world looked very different, much more alive and involving than before. I think that maybe after a new kidney or heart for the sake of a transplant, this may be the best present I could get. Its a great primer for folks lost in the muck of analytic philosophy about the world they live in. And for the people that don't care about philosophy, its like a wonderful love letter to the earth. This book rocks. I am anxiously awaiting

the next book from David Abram. I've been waiting for about 4 years now. Dave, are you listening?
We want another book. Thanks.

David Abram has written an extraordinary book about how we stopped perceiving the world as sacred and came to feel cut off. It's a daring darting mix of ecology, linguistics, indigenous traditions and philosophy. It is also a book that is remarkably different from chapter to chapter. The first chapter, about Abram's experiences as a sleight-of-hand magician in Nepal and Indonesia, is lyrical and gorgeous. I admit that I also caught myself thinking, "Dude! I want some of what you are smoking!" I thought chapter two might advocate wearing amethyst pendants. Not remotely. The next two chapters -- on philosophy and linguistics -- require black coffee and a clear-headed morning. It is exhilarating to watch someone think this way -- like watching a daredevil making leaps over cars -- except the leaps he is making are not sport but the leaps we need to survive on the planet. Abram investigates the present, the past, the future, and where each can be found in the landscape. He even goes so far as to offer, on page 202, a meditation on how to dissolve time. (Of course I annotated my copy; you never know when you're going to need just this sort of thing.) The last section is about writing, how the Hebrews left out the sacred vowels but the Greeks left us marooned in the abstract. My crude summary does violence to the text. It is exhilarating to read. Then comes the coda and, a few pages before the end, he says, basically, "This might be true and it might not and what is true anyway? Truth is what heals the planet and falsehood is what harms it." Part of me agreed and part of me felt like the victim of a sleight-of-hand magician. I want my truths to be, well, true and not just gorgeous. The whole section made me feel uneasy. I do not mean to condemn the book. Not at all. I have told everyone I know to read it -- I want people discuss it with! Abram gave me raptures, lectures, arguments and questions. A beautiful book, well worth wrestling with and re-visiting.

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