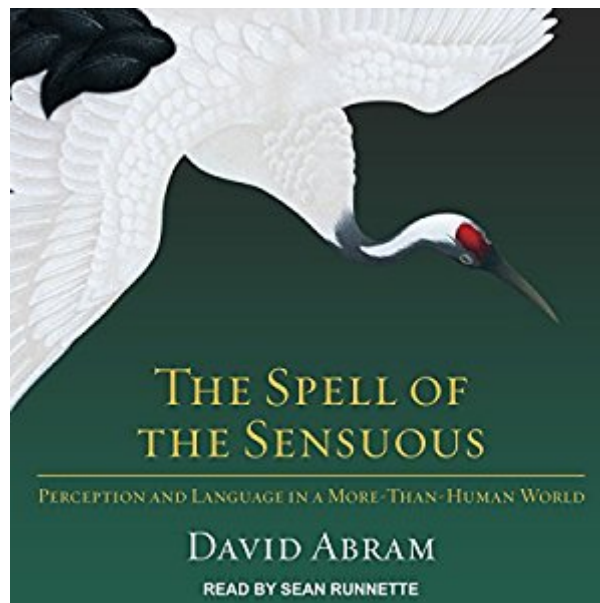




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The Spell Of The Sensuous: Perception And Language In A More-Than-Human World



Synopsis

For a thousand generations, human beings viewed themselves as part of the wider community of nature, and they carried on active relationships not only with other people but with other animals, plants, and natural objects (including mountains, rivers, winds, and weather patterns) that we have only lately come to think of as "inanimate". How, then, did humans come to sever their ancient reciprocity with the natural world? What will it take for us to recover a sustaining relationship with the breathing earth? In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 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. In this lyrical work, Abram weaves his arguments with a passion, a precision, and an intellectual daring that recall such writers as Loren Eiseley, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

David Abrams takes us on a journey back to ourselves and the route passes between the Scylla and Charybdis of discursive language. Abrams' thesis is that phonetic writing and the language associated with it separate us from the natural world. The primitive had language tied to the hunt and landscape; the modern has language in books and in his cerebrum. In one of the longer acts of irony I have ever observed, Abrams uses exquisite language to return us to an appreciation of and

participation in the natural, "more than human" world from which he claims language has estranged us. His examples are marvelous. Consider the Judaic scholars of the early middle ages, penning their Torahs and other documents without vowels; this syntactical arrangement forced the reader to consider where "the wind is to blow" and in so blowing infuse language with the creative wind of God. But we are far from that today. Now we must put down our books, listen to the wind, and consider the hawk on its windhover. If we do we are returned to ourselves.

A fascinating analysis of how written phonetic language has contributed to our cultural disengagement from the natural world, the author argues that beginning with the introduction of written language humanity began to lose its deep and profound connection with the natural world, replacing our perception of the language of nature with a kind of animistic interaction with written words. Thought-provoking, even if tedious at times. Whatever you think of the rest of the book, be sure not to miss the final chapter (Coda), which is brilliant and beautiful. As an aside, I tried the meditative technique the author recommends in Part II of Chapter 6 and was thrilled with the results. Highly recommended.

Mr Abram spent 250 some pages painstakingly building an argument that the human race was, but is no more, grounded in the wisdom and in communion with the natural world. He challenges the perception of past, present, and future as being separate and builds a case for renewal through reconnecting our surroundings. The average reader could get discouraged by the seven chapters of analysis and hypotheses written in formal, if not scientific language, that begged the necessity of the Kindle dictionary at many of the page turns. But, the Coda. Ahh, the Coda at the end is beautiful prose filled with hope and wisdom for seekers who, in their hearts, know that connection with our earth and each other is the only sustainable path forward.

One of the most important books I have ever read. It diagnoses, and offers remedies for, some of the large and destructive currents inherent in what Western civilization considers progress. The Spell of the Sensuous offers original and insightful explanations of how our species has gotten so far off course. Its prose is well drawn. Its philosophical basis is profound, but optional. For those of us who are preoccupied with ideas and want to come to our senses, to live in this more-than-human world, it offers a healthy challenge. It is potentially life-changing and hopefully world-changing.

I have known this book for many years. It is one I frequently return to. Living in a city and being a

verbal person, it's very easy to miss the the Spell of the Sensuous. When I get an opportunity to leave the city, I always know that what I learned from this book makes my non-city time more valuable. When I leave for a lengthy time, I reread it. Abram is quite elegant about the destructive power of verbal thinking even as he is well aware that his book is all words. There is a time and place for words and a time and place to totally put them aside and just be with the world around. Being able to do that takes wisdom and this book will help one find that wisdom.

One of the best original works in philosophy in the last 50 years. What is more amazing is that this text accommodates both the neophyte and Ph.D. at the same time. An absolutely perfect text for any environmental ethics/philosophy course.

This is an unusual book. It is both a clear, lucid introduction to phenomenology, and at the same time it provides a fine example of what a research in the line of that philosophical persuasion is all about. But not only it accomplishes both tasks to almost perfection, but does it in an inspired poetic language very seldom found in this kind of writings. Abrams book excels both aesthetically and intellectually, while at the same making his insights and findings bear upon our most urgent environmental concerns. Extraordinary coupling of beauty and intelligence such as this book shows deserves unordinary ratings: seven stars, if that were possible !

It seems impossible to read this book and have one's relationship with the biosphere remain unchanged. Abram argues that we have lost our previous "spell" experience in which we were entranced by our participation in the "more-than-human" world and have progressively over millennia come under the spell of the written word. Abrams, an astute academic in his own right, is not denying that study can be a thrilling experience. However, in giving ourselves over to disembodied abstraction, we have cut ourselves off from the natural world, leading us to not only our environmental crisis, but even to dehumanization of our own species as well. Our love affair with the written word has alienated us from the biosphere that we once were connected to through breathing, hearing, pre-linguistic biomimicry, and visual perception. Humans shared their subjective experience of the natural world with other animated beings, all together inhabiting and participating in an intersubjective world. In the end, Abrahms wants us re-imagine our place in the biosphere, re-balancing our mental perception from overemphasis on abstract distance to visceral participation in the total life world.

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