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The Spell of the Sensuous

PERCEPTION AND LANGUAGE
IN A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

DAVID ABRAM

Acclaim for

The Spell of the Sensuous

“Forges a thoroughly articulate passage between science and mysticism.... Speculative, learned, and always ‘lucid and precise’ as the eye of the vulture that confronted him once on a cliff ledge, Abram has one of those rare minds which, like the mind of a musician or a great mathematician, fuses dreaminess with smarts.”

—*Village Voice Literary Supplement*

“This is a landmark book. Scholars will doubtless recognize its brilliance, but they may overlook the most important part of Abram’s achievement: he has written the best instruction manual yet for becoming fully human. I walked outside when I was done and the world was a different place.”

—Bill McKibben,
author of *The End of Nature*

“Abram manages, almost magically, to stir in us a long-lost memory: deep in our bones, in our blood, in the air we breathe, we know that the world lives and speaks to us.... He shows that it is possible to reawaken the animistic dimension of perception and feeling without renouncing rationality and intellectual analysis.... A joy to read and a brilliant gift to our rapidly darkening world.”

—*Shambhala Sun*

“This is a major work of research and intuitive brilliance, an archive of clear ideas. At the end of our century of precarious ecology, *The Spell of the Sensuous* strikes the deepest notes of celebration and alertness—an indispensable book!”

—Howard Norman,
author of *The Bird Artist*

“A tour-de-force of sustained intelligence, broad scholarship, and a graceful prose style that has produced one of the most interesting books about nature published during the past decade.”

—*Terra Nova*

“The wind, the rain, the mountains and rivers, the woodlands and meadows and all their inhabitants; we need these perhaps even more for our psyche than for our physical survival. No one that I know of has presented all this with the literary skill as well as the understanding that we find in this work of David Abram. It should be one of the most widely read and discussed books of these times.”

—Thomas Berry,
author of *The Dream of the Earth*

“Abram’s *Spell* must be praised. It’s so well done, well written, well thought. I know of no work more valuable for shifting our thinking and feeling about the place of humans in the world.”

—James Hillman,
author of *The Soul’s Code*

“Important and highly original, a fresh look at the world we live in but don’t see.”

—Elizabeth Marshall Thomas,
author of *The Hidden Life of Dogs*

“A masterpiece—combining poetic passion with intellectual rigor and daring. Electric with energy, it offers us a new approach to scholarly inquiry: as a fully embodied human animal. It opens pathways and vistas that will be fruitfully explored for years, indeed for generations, to come.”

—Joanna Macy,
translator of Rainer Maria Rilke’s
The Book of Hours

“*The Spell of the Sensuous* does more than place itself on the cutting edge where ecology meets philosophy, psychology, and history. It magically subverts the dichotomies of culture and nature, body and mind, opening a vista of organic being and human possibility that is often imagined but seldom described. Reader beware, the message is spell-binding. One cannot read this book without risk of entering into an altered state of perceptual possibility.”

—Max Oelschlager,
author of *The Idea of Wilderness*

“This book by David Abram lights up the landscape of language, flesh, mind, history, mapping us back into the world.”

—Gary Snyder,
author of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*

“Nobody writes about the ecological depths of the human and more-than-human world with more love and lyrical sensitivity than David Abram.”

—Theodore Roszak,
author of *Where the Wasteland Ends*

“Disclosing the sentience of all nature, and revealing the unsuspected effect of the more-than-human on our language and our lives, in unprecedented fashion, Abram generates true philosophy for the twenty-first century.”

—Lynn Margulis, originator of the Gaia Hypothesis, author
of *What Is Life?*

David Abram

The Spell of the Sensuous

David Abram, Ph.D., is an ecologist and philosopher whose writings have had a deepening influence upon the environmental movement in North America and abroad. A summa cum laude graduate of Wesleyan University, he holds a doctorate in philosophy from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and has been the recipient of fellowships from the Watson and Rockefeller Foundations and a Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction. He is an accomplished sleight-of-hand magician and has lived and traded magic with indigenous magicians in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Americas. This is his first book.

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Sensuous



PERCEPTION AND LANGUAGE
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David Abram

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to the endangered and vanishing ones



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Preface and Acknowledgments



Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness. This landscape of shadowed voices, these feathered bodies and antlers and tumbling streams—these breathing shapes are our family, the beings with whom we are engaged, with whom we struggle and suffer and celebrate. For the largest part of our species' existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings, exchanging possibilities with every flapping form, with each textured surface and shivering entity that we happened to focus upon. All could speak, articulating in gesture and whistle and sigh a shifting web of meanings that we felt on our skin or inhaled through our nostrils or focused with our listening ears, and to which we replied—whether with sounds, or through movements, or minute shifts of mood. The color of sky, the rush of waves—every aspect of the earthly sensuous could draw us into a relationship fed with curiosity and spiced with danger. Every sound was a voice, every scrape or blunder was a meeting—with Thunder, with Oak, with Dragonfly. And from all of these relationships our collective sensibilities were nourished.

Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. We still *need* that which is other than ourselves and our own creations. The simple premise of this book is that we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.

Does such a premise imply that we must renounce all our complex technologies? It does not. But it does imply that we must renew our acquaintance with the sensuous world in which our techniques and technologies are all rooted. Without the oxygenating breath of the forests, without the clutch of gravity and the tumbled magic of river rapids, we have no distance from our technologies, no way of assessing their limitations, no way to keep ourselves from turning into them. We need to know the textures, the rhythms and tastes of the bodily world, and to distinguish readily between such tastes and those of our own invention. Direct sensuous reality, in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically-generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us.



THIS BOOK HAS BEEN WRITTEN WITH TWO GOALS IN MIND. I HAVE hoped, first, to provide a set of powerful conceptual tools for my colleagues in the broad world of environmental activism—for conservationists, wilderness advocates, community organizers, bioregionalists, nature writers, conservation biologists, ecopsychologists, and all others who are already struggling to make sense of, and to alleviate, our current estrangement from the animate earth. Yet I have also wished to provoke some new thinking within the institutional realm of scholars, scientists, and educators—many of whom have been strangely silent in response to the rapid deterioration of wild nature, the steady vanishing of other species, and the consequent flattening of our human relationships.

In light of these twin aims, I have tried to maintain a high standard of theoretical and scholarly precision, without, however, masking the passion, the puzzlement, and the pleasure that flow from my own engagement with the living land.

The reader will discover, for instance, that there are *two* introductory chapters to the book. There

is, first, a “Personal Introduction,” which details some of the unusual adventures that first led me to raise the various questions addressed in this work. This chapter focuses upon my encounters and reflections while living as an itinerant sleight-of-hand magician among traditional, indigenous magicians in rural Asia. Second, there is a “Technical Introduction,” outlining the theoretical approach brought to bear upon the questions addressed herein. More specifically, this chapter discusses the development, in the twentieth century, of the tradition of “phenomenology”—the study of direct experience. Originally intended to provide a solid foundation for the empirical sciences, the careful study of perceptual experience unexpectedly began to make evident the hidden centrality of the earth in all human experience; indeed, phenomenological research began to suggest that the human mind was thoroughly dependent upon (and thoroughly influenced by) our forgotten relation with the encompassing earth.

While sensorial experience, philosophical reflection, and empirical information are thoroughly entwined throughout this book, those readers who have little patience with philosophical matters should feel free to leap across the technical introduction ([Chapter 2](#))—perhaps touching briefly down to explore those subsections whose titles provoke their curiosity. Others may wish to dance across parts of [Chapter 3](#), which necessarily contains a few somewhat technical sections regarding the bodily nature of language. Toward the end of [Chapter 3](#) a very brief summary will set the stage for what follows.



MANY COMRADES LENT THEIR SUPPORT TO THIS PROJECT. AMONG those whose curiosity and kindness helped engender this book are the bioregional animateur Chris Wells, ecological cellist Nelson Denman, seeress Heather Rowntree, dreamtracker R. P. Harbour, Julia Meeks, Francis Huxley, Sam Hitt, Vicki Dean, Rich Ryan, Stella Reed, and the rest of the All-Species clan of northern New Mexico.

The various reflections in this work were honed in passionate conversations with friends in diverse places, among them David Rothenberg, Arne Naess, Rachel Wiener, Bill Boaz, Gary Nabhan, Ivan Illich, Christopher Manes, Drew Leder, Max Oelschlager, Lynn Margulis, Dorion Sagan, James Hillman, Chellis Glendinning, Laura Sewall, Rick Boothby, Baird Callicott, Starhawk, Rex and Lisa Weyler, Valerie Gremillion, Tom Jay, and the greathearted Thomas Berry. Mountain-wizard Dolores LaChapelle and letter-scribe Amy Hannon gave essential encouragement in the earliest stages. Among those who read through parts of the earliest manuscript, Peter Manchester, Anthony Weston, Paul Shepard, and John Elder all offered fine insights.

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Few people are gifted with great artists for parents, as I have been. Blanche Abram and Irv Abram, pianist and painter, provided much tactical help during the crafting of this work. I thank them for their encouragement, and for the intuition of beauty that they carefully granted to their children.

Finally, I extend a gratitude beyond words to my closest friend and ally, Grietje Laga, whose