



Making Sense: Sense Perception in the British Novel of the 1980s and 1990s

(Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 81)

By Ralf Hertel

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Fiction is fascinating. All it provides us with is black letters on white pages, yet while we read we do not have the impression that we are merely perceiving abstract characters. Instead, we see the protagonists before our inner eye and hear their voices. Descriptions of sumptuous meals make our mouths water, we feel physically repelled by depictions of violence or are aroused by the erotic details of sexual conquests. We submerge ourselves in the fictional world that no longer stays on the paper but comes to life in our imagination. Reading turns into an out-of-the-body experience or, rather, an in-another-body experience, for we perceive the portrayed world not only through the protagonist's eyes but also through his ears, nose, tongue, and skin. In other words, we move through the literary text as if through a virtual reality. How does literature achieve this trick? How does it turn mere letters into vividly experienced worlds? This study argues that techniques of sensuous writing contribute decisively to bringing the text to life in the reader's imagination. In detailed interpretations of British novels of the 1980s and 1990s by writers such as John Berger, John Banville, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, or J. M. Coetzee, it uncovers literary strategies for turning the sensuous experience into words and for conveying it to the reader, demonstrating how we make sense in, and of, literature.

Both readers interested in the contemporary novel and in the sensuousness of the reading experience will profit from this innovative study that not only analyses the interest of contemporary authors in the senses but also pin-points literary entry points for the sensuous force of reading.

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Bibliography

- Rank: #11182572 in Books
- Published on: 2005-01-12
- Released on: 2005-01-12
- Original language: English
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x 6.50" w x .75" l, 1.12 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 243 pages



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