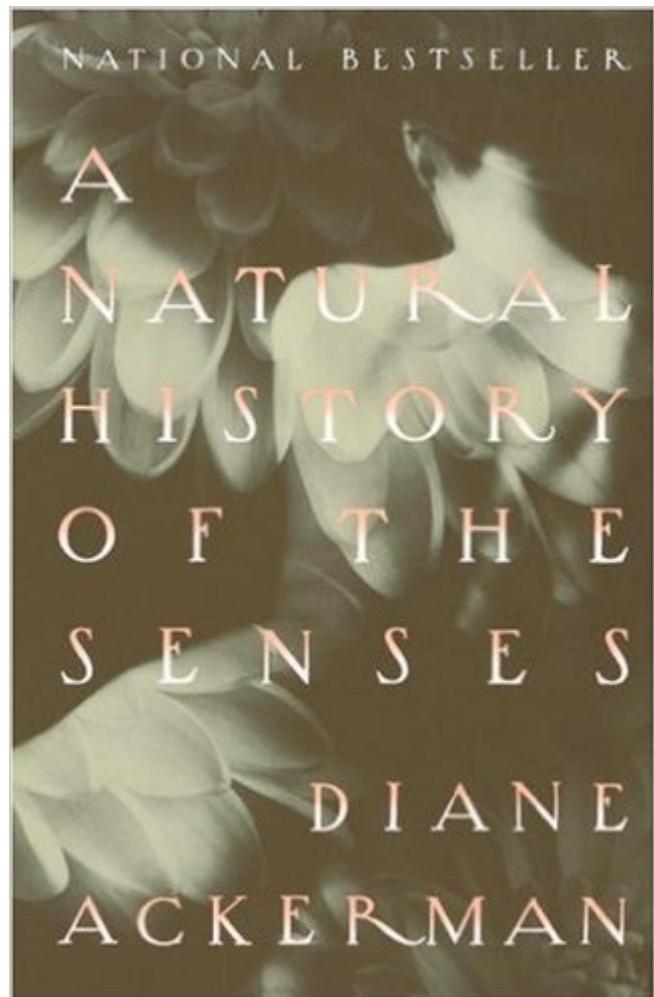


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A Natural History Of The Senses



Synopsis

Diane Ackerman's lusciously written grand tour of the realm of the senses includes conversations with an iceberg in Antarctica and a professional nose in New York, along with dissertations on kisses and tattoos, sadistic cuisine and the music played by the planet Earth. "Delightful . . . gives the reader the richest possible feeling of the worlds the senses take in."--The New York Times. (Literature--Classics & Contemporary)

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Vintage (September 10, 1991)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0679735666

ISBN-13: 978-0679735663

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (137 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #36,112 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #36 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History #61 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Nature Writing & Essays #94 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > General

Customer Reviews

When I first read Diane Ackerman's book it opened my eyes, just as these other reviews testify. It does seem to be a book people either love or hate (I have some friends who thought it was sentimental babbling) but that doesn't change how extravagantly Ackerman uses language itself to convey the lush world of the senses. I teach a creative writing course at SFSU and I use the book to promote both that poetic description and the possibilities for experience and awareness the book evokes. An excellent example of the ways poetry can be used to explain science and experience.

After reading a few of Ackerman's New Yorker pieces, as well as The Moon by Whale Light and her contribution to Sisters of the Earth, I knew I would eventually read all of her books. A Natural History of the Senses does not disappoint. It flows like cool water through literature, history, music, politics, philosophy, and poetry. As a writer, I appreciate this book as a resource of my own, a way to deepen my understanding of our sensory appreciation of the world - but also as an example of beautiful writing by a master of the craft. In a nutshell, I wish Diane Ackerman lived next door to me.

The best writing I have ever read. Totally engaging essays that will not only teach you more than you ever thought there was to know about our five senses (and more!) but will also make you laugh out loud because the writing is that good. Your world will never be the same again--or should I say, you will never see your world the same way. You will forever be more aware of the stunning intricacy, simplicity, and beauty of life that surrounds us.

Essayist and poet Diane Ackerman is probably best known for her wonderful New Yorker articles on her investigations of the animal kingdom (including extraordinarily memorable pieces on bats and penguins), most of which have been collected in books. In those acclaimed essays, her idiosyncratic and emotive musings transform the behaviors of other creatures to a human and humane understanding while avoiding anthropomorphic traps. In "A Natural History of the Senses," Ackerman shifts her considerable observational skills from the animal realm to more familiar human territory. She divides her discussion into the five senses, plus a short section on "synesthesia"; in spite of the book's title, there's not much history involved. Somewhat like her essays on nature, each chapter includes random observations, anecdotes, and thoughts on the various aspects of the topic at hand. Some of Ackerman's morsels are first-class, and she seems particularly to hit her stride in the section on "Taste." Her distinctive wit is on full display when she discusses the food endured by survivalists, such as a recipe for moose soup: "I particularly like the recipe's opening: 'You've just killed a moose.' It reminds me of recipe I read for stir-fried dog, which began: 'First clean and eviscerate a healthy puppy.'" Her book is a pleasure in such instances, when it reads like a turbo-charged entry of an encyclopedia, explaining "why polar bears are not white" or pondering the aesthetics of full-body tattoos or interviewing a human "nose" for a fragrance manufacturer or investigating the importance of touch for the healthy development of prematurely born infants. What works for her essays in zoology, however, doesn't always work for a study of our own species; she sometimes writes as if she were explaining our everyday experiences to a race of aliens. Her prose especially sags when she reduces abstractions to a not-very-informative series of metaphors, platitudes, and non-sequiturs: "Sounds thicken the sensory stew of our lives, and we depend on them to help us interpret, communicate with, and express the world around us. Outer space is silent, but on earth almost everything can make a sound. Couples have favorite songs...." Even for a book on the senses, this is all a bit too touchy-feely. Similarly, she has a tick of expanding a concept with a prose list of synonyms and puns that reduces our senses to the stimulations found in a thesaurus. Her several paragraphs on how "our language is steeped in visual imagery," for example, contain an

interminable number of sentences similar to the following: "We quickly see through people whose characters are transparent. And, heaven knows, we learn for enlightenment.... Ideas dawn on us, if we're bright enough, not dim-witted, especially if we're visionary." I'm not sure I "see" the point of these lengthy and repetitive passages. Overall, the book is certainly worth mining for its liberally scattered gems, but at times I found it tedious and simplistic as a cover-to-cover read.

Imagine having a witty and informed guided tour of one's own sensory apparatus! That is what Ackerman offers. By turns intensely intellectual and cybaritic, the result is an irresistible romp through the world of newly magnified familiarities. Some gems: chocolate as "an emotional food" (p. 154). "Hands are messengers of emotion" (p. 118). "The tongue is like a kingdom divided into principalities according to sensory talent" (p. 139). And on page 20: "Smell was the first of our senses, and it was so successful that in time the small lump of olfactory tissue atop the nerve cord grew into a brain. Our cerebral hemispheres were originally buds from the olfactory stalks. We THINK because we SMELLED." Highly recommended. A terrific mental flight while trying to endure air travel!

This is an entirely personal response, but this is one of the most important books I've read. For anyone who tries to live actively through their senses, experiencing the world around them and incorporating a sense memory, this book will satisfy powerful, intuitive feelings. It has just enough science to explain and fascinate, the rest is clear, resonant stories of sensual experience. There is a lucid, sincere and powerful feeling of sheer joy about that book, the joy Ackerman finds in her own experience and her pleasure and sharing, but the book never tips into the sentimental.

Do not confuse this book for science or hard fact. 'A Natural History of the Senses' is a well done book of lyrical prose that is meant to be relaxed with and enjoyed. Diane Ackerman is quite possibly a lyrical stylist that, much like any past writer, uses the consciousness of her time to bring alive the beliefs, feelings, and concerns that she and others face in their lifetime. Using delightful and fascinating information integrated with insight and stunning language, she makes one become more aware of the senses that we sometimes take for granted.

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