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Follow the Sound

How to Enter Another Person's Mind

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Many people read fiction to enter new minds, and skilled authors need few words to lead them there. In William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984), hacker Henry Case experiences the sensations of another character, Molly, when a chip in her brain transmits representations of her nerve activity directly to his (Gibson). To some degree, every reader is like Case, jacked into a system transmitting code from characters' minds. No two readers respond to a novel the same way, and whether people experience the same primary sensations, or *qualia*, is an insoluble philosophical problem. Two people can discuss what the color green means to them, and neuroscientists might even compare the mental activity of people viewing shades of green. We can't know for sure, however, whether our mental representations of green or the thoughts and feelings we associate with green align with those of other people. That may be why we like to read: to compare our experiences with those of others.

Lisa Zunshine, a pioneer in [cognitive](#) approaches to literature, has proposed that people read fiction because it offers them a chance to exercise their “theory of mind,” their ability to imagine other people’s emotions and thoughts (Zunshine). Emotions are grounded in sensations, and good fiction-writing relies on the material and the concrete. Authors who catalogue their characters’ feelings will lose their readers pretty fast. In the finest, most gripping fiction, readers infer characters’ feelings based on the ways their sensations are described. Only this way can readers sense that they’re “in” characters’ minds, building thoughts and feelings from primary sensations as the characters do, and as the readers do in their lives.

Readers who [hunger](#) for new perspectives may be most satisfied by stories told from multiple viewpoints. When writers offer contrasting experiences of one situation, they face an artistic challenge: how to lead readers from one mind to the next. One way to pass the baton is through a sensory “bridge,” a sight, sound, or smell perceived by more than one character. In film, a “sound bridge” links one scene with another when a sound from the new scene begins before the current scene ends. In a similar way, a fictional narrative can follow a sound to a new standpoint, into different mind.



Source: Virginia Woolf in 1902 photographed by George Charles Beresford, Wikipedia

Few writers have equaled Virginia Woolf in offering parallel experiences of a given scene. Her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), set on a single day in London, flows between characters’ minds. Woolf tells her story with third-person narration, but her narrator is not omniscient. Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness technique shows the workings of an outer world without privileging any one view of it. Shared sensations provide a way to lead the narrative “camera” from one character to the next. Early in the novel, Woolf trains readers to follow her narrator in a sequence depicting a sky-writer. As a crowd of people watch a small plane spell an ad,

Woolf offers access to a series of minds perceiving it: those of Mrs. Coates, a woman with a baby; Septimus Smith, a shell-shocked veteran; Rezia Smith, his homesick wife; Maisie Johnson, a girl just arrived in London; Mrs. Dempster, an ageing housewife; and finally Clarissa Dalloway, the character on whom Woolf's camera most often settles (Woolf 19-28). In several senses, Woolf's characters are "reading" the world, and none of them reads it the same way. By showing her readers how the sights and sounds of the plane stir their thoughts, Woolf reveals who these people are and helps readers imagine life in their heads.



Source: Alice Munro as Western's Writer in Residence, Western News, 1974, Flickr

Canadian storyteller Alice Munro compares viewpoints in an equally complex way. In her story, "Labor Day Dinner" (1981), she reveals the tensions in a network of relationships by showing several characters' experiences of them. Roberta, a middle-aged woman with two daughters, is dissolving in her relationship with George, a critical sculptor. Like Mrs. Dalloway, "Labor Day Dinner" takes place on a single day but loops into the past through the characters' [memories](#). Like Woolf, Munro uses shared sensory experiences to lead readers from mind to mind. Halfway through the story, Roberta's daughter Angela sits down to play the piano and thinks, "I have seen [my mother] change from a person I deeply respected into a person on the verge of being a nervous wreck" (194). Angela plays "Turkish March" and then "Eine kleine Nachtmusik," and the music stirs memories of days when her mother inspired her. Out on the porch, Roberta is "listening to the piano at the same time she's listening to [her [friend](#)] Valerie" (Munro 195). Munro doesn't specify how the music stirs Roberta's emotions, but she tells Valerie, "[George] wants to be rid of me" (196). The sound of Mozart travels beyond the porch, and as George hears it out in the yard, Munro shows his response. George is [cutting](#) grass with a scythe, and "the music fits in nicely with what he's doing: first the cheerful, workaday 'Turkish March,' to go along with the scything; now . . . the subtle congratulations . . . of 'Eine kleine Nachtmusik'" (Munro 196). The same sounds resonate differently in three minds: in Angela, they stir [anger](#) and regret; in Roberta, dread and self-loathing; in George, celebration of his work and his value, as though they existed just for him.

Because the narrative follows the sound, these transitions between minds feel natural, and the story reads like something that is happening rather than something that has been made.

The way that multi-perspective fiction works invites reflections on how people might connect better in a shared world. Woolf and Munro show human conflicts with all their waste, messiness, and missed chances, and neither writer would endorse a reductive view of human relations based on universally shared sensory experiences. I see hope, however, in the fact that people like to read, and to watch gripping films. People want to enter fictive minds, and imagining the ways that others experience sights and sounds can lead us out of our caves into the light.

References

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