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## **Blending Sensations Can Make the Unfamiliar Feel Real**

**Fiction and nonfiction play by the same rules.**

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Fiction writers use language expertly to help readers imagine what their characters feel. In English, the word “feel” refers to sensations as well as emotions: a person can “feel” cold or hot, nauseous or euphoric, miserable or joyous. To describe emotions, writers often use sensations, with varying degrees of metaphoricity. Novelists can pull readers into their characters’ minds by inviting them into their characters’ bodies, cueing readers to imagine their characters’ mental worlds rather than spelling out what they feel.

This technique of opening unfamiliar minds through sensations can work equally well for social scientists. Writers of nonfiction also tell stories and have to organize narratives that will

engage readers. When their participants' situations are far removed from readers' experiences, scientists can describe sensations to convey emotions the readers will recognize. Sociologist Matthew Desmond uses this strategy in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. By cueing readers to blend senses in their imaginations, Desmond takes them into the lives of people whose shared humanity they will “feel” in every sense.



Mobile Homes Caravan Park

Source: PublicDomanPictures

Desmond's work to help readers imagine his “characters” lives has political, scientific, and artistic motives. Probably, many of his readers have never lived in a trailer park or an inner-city African American neighborhood. They may never have known anyone who has been evicted. Desmond's work to understand and respect his participants involved years of ethnographic research in which he lived with the people he studied (Desmond 317-18). Politically, his book suggests that evictions have become so rampant because wealthier people can't imagine the daily lives of people struggling to survive from month to month. A great deal is at stake in Desmond's writing, because urging readers to experience a reality foreign to them could have political consequences. If he can evoke familiar sensations and emotions in his readers, he can drive home the truth of what he is describing by making readers feel its force.

In lived experiences, most people rely on all the senses available to them, and skilled writers learn how to “feed” every sense. When Desmond describes the daily round of an eviction truck, he writes: “The movers started the trucks early in the morning, diesel engines grumbling as the men gathered with [cigarettes](#) and mugs of black coffee. The city was soggy from the previous night's rain” (Desmond 113). In this brief description, the words do double duty: “grumbling” conveys a sound but also a mood. The passage suggests a combined smell of diesel fumes, cigarettes, and coffee without ever saying it is there. “Soggy” describes the way the city looks but also the way it feels. Without being told, readers can imagine dim light and messy wetness. They may draw on their own experiences to add details, such as a sodden newspaper in the gutter. Through his choice of words, Desmond has arranged cues to sensory modalities so that one imagined sensation activates another.



The well packed moving truck

Source: C. Jill Reed. Flickr, Creative Commons.

When Desmond describes people, he uses details about their appearances and actions to suggest the conflicts of their complex mental worlds. As in his depictions of the setting, he appeals to several sensory modalities at once so that readers can feel they have met a real person. About the landlady, Sherrena, he writes: “Petite with chestnut skin, Sherrena wore a lightweight red-and-blue jacket that matched her pants, which matched her off-kilter NBA cap. She liked to laugh, a full, open-mouthed hoot, sometimes catching your shoulder as if to keep from falling” (Desmond 10). In two sentences, Desmond has communicated the look, sound, and feel of this [assertive](#) woman so that readers can imagine her grip on their shoulders. He describes a resourceful businesswoman who can “grab” people in more ways than one. Desmond also encourages readers to imagine touches and movements when he characterizes an evicted tenant, Lorraine: “Smelling of sweat and vinegar, her brown hair in disarray, Lorraine stepped into the office, wringing the yellow paper like a dishrag” (Desmond 41). This quick description emphasizes Lorraine’s smell but speaks volumes about her emotions and experiences. The middle-aged woman in a trailer park loves to cook and has wiped many dishes in her time. “Wringing” invites readers to imagine sensations and movements that suggest the way Lorraine feels inside. These brief hints about her smell, look, and motions work like the pixels of an image that readers may want to complete by drawing on their own experiences.

In a book that sympathetically depicts troubled people, one of the most compelling is Scott, a nurse who became addicted to opioid medications after a back injury. Once he loses his license, Scott succumbs to [addiction](#) and starts injecting heroin. Not many readers may want to identify with a drug addict; ideologically, many would rather attribute Scott’s downfall to “poor choices” they don’t believe they would make. Desmond works hard to describe sensations that evoke emotions when he depicts experiences readers may not want to share: “In the nursing home, Scott would take a syringe and siphon [fentanyl](#) out of the Duragesic patches used for patients with [chronic pain](#). He’d then swallow or inject the drug and reapply

the empty patch, as his patients moaned softly in bed” (Desmond 83). Rather than moralizing, Desmond chooses words that convey actions (“siphon”) and sensations (“moaned softly”). He doesn’t need to tell readers how [guilty](#) Scott feels, because they may sense that years later, the helpless patients’ moans are still echoing in his head.

One of *Evicted*’s most disturbing passages describes Scott’s first use of heroin. Here, too, Desmond offers a multi-sensory picture that suggests emotions without passing judgment:

"Billy held a spoon over a stove burner to cook the tar with water. Humming softly, he then soaked up the heroin into a cotton ball and pulled it into a syringe. It was dark, coffee-colored. . . . Scott took the needle behind his right knee. He closed his eyes, waited, and then came relief, weightlessness. He was a child floating back to the surface, the diving board bouncing" (Desmond 86).

*Evicted* never advocates or condones drug use, but Desmond creates a context in which Scott’s addiction becomes understandable. Using terms Scott may have offered in conversation, Desmond describes the sights, sounds, touches, even the smells of cooking heroin. Like a fine literary description, his scene rends the heart because it invokes the abuse and abandonment of Scott’s [childhood](#) and his love of nursing. By blending these sensory details, Desmond leads readers from these sensations into a desperate character’s inner world.

*Evicted* shows how a good writer can help readers imagine emotions by offering sensory blends. Desmond chooses words that activate more than one sense, and his descriptive passages appeal to several modalities at once. His descriptions interweave rather than list sensations, so that sights, sounds, tastes, and touches mix as they might in lived experiences. If *Evicted* were a novel, one might admire its artistry, but it is a nonfiction work that advocates social justice, and it has different, though related aims. By drawing readers into the minds of people socially removed from them, Desmond evokes emotions that reveal a shared humanity.

## References

Desmond, M. 2017. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. Penguin Random House, UK.