

Coming to Your Senses

Using the Six Senses to Bring Your Story to Life

by Deborah Raney

A good novel makes you understand the emotions of the characters. A great novel allows you to *feel* those emotions—to almost *live* them yourself for the few brief hours you invest in reading the book. Through narrative and dialogue, what is seen and heard is usually a given in even the sparsest of storytelling. But only when the reader can begin to vicariously experience the smells, the taste, the feel of your scene, can she truly be transported into the world you've invented.

Let's explore how each of the six senses can be used to enrich your novel and allow your reader to go deeper, to virtually *live* for a few hours in the story world you've worked so hard to create.

SOUND

The most obvious and important use of sound in a novel is your characters' voices, via dialogue. Using the sense of sound creatively will give each character's voice a distinct quality, and help to distinguish even minor characters from one another. Does your heroine have a Southern drawl? Is your antagonist's voice gravelly? These are distinctions of dialogue that make your characters—and thus your novel—real, rich and compelling.

One way dialogue can “nail” a character's dialect or personality is by using a distinctive speech pattern—sloppy grammar for an uneducated person, slang for a contemporary teenager. Foreign accents can be affected by using one or two words in the

character's native language or by changing the usual order of syntax. Without resorting to awkward phonetic spellings, and without using one Italian word, award-winning author B.J. Hoff lets us hear the accent of her wonderful Italian hero, Michael Emmanuel. She accomplishes this with a simple shift of word order in this line from *Cadence*, the second in her American Anthem series (W Publishing Group 2003).

He motioned Susanna into his office. "Cati likes very much to draw, no? Does she have any particular ability, do you think?"

Likewise with a few deft touches—word order and the use of “ye” and “lass”—RITA and Christy Award finalist Liz Curtis Higgs imparts the essence of Scotland in the voice of Neda from *Thorn in My Heart* (WaterBrook Press 2003).

“D’ye think the Almighty blesses only those who deserve it?” Neda laughed softly. “None of us is worthy, lass. Not one. He blesses whom he chooses, and we thank him when he does. That’s the way of it.”

But dialogue isn't the only way the sense of sound can enliven a story. Background noises are every bit as important as voices in setting the tone of the scene, and helping the reader feel they are not just reading or “hearing” your story, but experiencing it as well.

As you write a scene, concentrate on putting yourself *into* the scene. Close your eyes and imagine what sounds you would be hearing in the setting you've created. And be sure to use creative words to express each sound. Use your computer's find and replace option to search your document for the words *listen*, *noise*, *soft* and *loud*. Try to eliminate some of those common words in favor of more original choices.

With two evocative sentences in *Passing Through Paradise* (Warner Books 2002) New York Times' best-selling author Susan Wiggs makes us stop and actually *hear* these haunting sounds in our minds—one of the reasons Wiggs's books are often labeled “poignant” and “unforgettable.”

Sandra heard the faint whine of a ship's whistle in the harbor, the plaintive cry of a winter curlew overhead. No other sound intruded.

Wiggs's declaration that “no other sound intruded” is as important to the overall effect of these lines as are her descriptive phrases.

Best-selling, award-winning author Angela Hunt uses sound masterfully to enhance the mood in this scene from her new novel, *The Awakening* (WestBow Press 2004), where the protagonist wakes from a terrifying dream.

The *ticktock* of the schoolhouse clock is loud in my ears; the hiss of the radiator echoes like a giant lizard on loan from some Japanese creature feature. In the distance, a siren screams in the night.

Another effective trick is to actually imitate a sound using onomatopoeic words, as RITA and Christy award-winning author Robin Lee Hatcher does in this excerpt from *The Forgiving Hour* (WaterBrook Press 1999).

Tulips and daffodils bobbed colorful heads at passers-by, as if in welcome. Sprinklers kept time on neighborhood lawns with a steady *chick-chick-chick-swoosh . . . chick-chick-chick-swoosh . . .* while the laughter of playing children filled the air.

SIGHT

Before the characters begin speaking in a given scene (or at least *very* early in the scene) we need to be able to visualize them in their setting. This is done by “painting” a quick sketch for the reader. Consider this simple sentence:

He ran a well-manicured hand over the top of the sleek mahogany desk, and punched a button on the intercom.

With twenty words, I have portrayed a well-to-do businessman in a large office, with a personal secretary. The reader will likely extrapolate from there, picturing the office in an upscale section of a metropolitan area.

The following twenty words paint a completely opposite picture:

He shoved aside a jumble of coffee-stained papers, ran a hand over the splintered desktop and picked up the phone.

But go a step further. What is the lighting in the room like? Sunshine through a sparkling clean window; the purple tinge of fluorescent light? Or a dingy, shadowed room, dimly lit by a single light bulb? Each conveys a very different feeling. Just as on a movie set or in a painting, lighting can help create the distinct mood you want your scene to convey.

My desire in the following scene from the RITA Award winner, *Beneath a Southern Sky* (WaterBrook Press 2001), was to open the chapter with a sense of foreboding. I achieved that with a combination of gloomy images, both real and metaphorical.

The thin trail of smoke slithered toward the clouds like a cobra charmed by the music of the coming rain. Though it was hard to tell how distant the fire was, it worried Daria.

SMELL

Any setting you could possibly create will have a distinctive smell. Think how many places you could identify—even wearing a blindfold and earplugs—merely by the smell. Use that fact in creating a believable setting for each scene in your book. And don't simply say, “The doctor's office had an antiseptic smell to it.” Instead, be specific about how the smell *affected* your character: “The pungent scent of disinfectant and rubbing alcohol stung her nostrils.” The object is to get the reader's nose to sting because you've painted such a vivid picture. Ann Tatlock does it beautifully in her Christy award-winning novel *All the Way Home* (Bethany House 2002)

Then came the hissing of a match struck into flame and a brief but pungent odor of sulfur. The small circle of flame swelled as Stephen lighted his cigarette. With a flick of his wrist he put out the match. The attic filled with the scent of burning tobacco.

Again, search your manuscript for the word “smell.” Then, replace it with more creative, descriptive choices. Words like *acrid*, *pungent*, *aromatic*, *stench*, *ambrosial*, or *redolent* are fresher and more precise than *smell*. A good thesaurus can be invaluable in helping you find the perfect word to convey the ambiance you wish, based on sensations you have placed “right under the reader’s nose.”

TASTE

Taste can convey not only pleasure, as in the mouth-watering taste of savory food or the refreshment of peppermint or a cool drink of water, but it can also express emotion,

such as the bitterness of bile rising in one's throat when rage overwhelms. Tears licked from lips taste salty. A kiss has a taste evoked as much by emotion, as by anything tangible. Blood from a cheek bitten in anger has a distinctive and "emotional" flavor.

Outside of using the sense of taste to describe food, taste is probably the most neglected sense in literature. But layering taste into a scene in ways that reflect more than the obvious infuses it with deep emotion and empathy. We learn much about two different characters from this morsel by Liz Curtis Higgs in *Thorn in My Heart*.

He tasted like whisky, but she told herself she didn't mind. That tomorrow night he would taste like Jamie again.

TOUCH

Giving your scenes literal texture helps your novel become a figuratively textured piece of work as well. Don't forget that, like you, your characters have sensitive skin and fingers that allow them to feel more than mere psychological emotion. The velvety softness of a baby's skin speaks of so much more than texture. The roughness of a man's work worn hand can invoke love or hate, depending on how you write it. Use those tactile sensations to add depth and "color" to your scenes. Texture readily becomes a metaphor for the emotion you wish to portray.

With one sentence from her best-selling suspense novel, *Eyes of Elisha*, (Zondervan 2001), Brandilyn Collins conjures strong emotion with her metaphorical use of the sense of touch:

Dread drew a fingernail down the back of his neck.

In Collins's novel, *Color the Sidewalk for Me* (Zondervan 2002) we feel a variety of textures from the rough bark of the gnarled tree, the soft earth beneath our knees, and the icy coldness of the tombstone. Notice that it's no longer the character who is feeling these things, but we, the reader. That's strong writing.

In a grassy cemetery dotted with gnarled trees and wildflowers, I found the grave. I stared at the headstone, barely able to breathe, then sank to my knees. My hesitant fingers traced the letters blurring through tears. The stone was so cold, sterile, void of life.

In Colleen Coble's RITA nominated novel, *Without a Trace* (W Publishing Group 2003) the author wraps the reader in a warm robe, but the warmth is felt all the more when we know the chill that came before.

The thick terry robe felt warm and comforting after schlepping through the cold forest mist all day.

Later in *Without a Trace*, Coble uses the sense of touch to allow us to experience the emotions of her heroine, Bree Nicholls, who has lost her young son in a plane crash.

The feel of the little girl's warm body, round and innocent, brought back so many memories, both good and painful.

"How much do you love me?" she asked the child.

Penelope wrapped her arms around Bree's neck and squeezed.

"Wow, that much?" Bree hugged her close and kissed the petal-soft cheek.

Simply by knowing what the heroine felt tactilely, we learn much about her feelings for the little girl, but more importantly, we discover the relationship she had with her own son, and the grief she is suffering over losing him.

THE "SIXTH SENSE"

Webster defines the sixth sense as “a power of perception like, but not one of, the five senses; a keen intuitive power.” This sense, perhaps more than the other five, is what makes our characters most vivid and real to our readers. We all—and perhaps women, especially—have that certain intuitive sense that guides and informs the decisions of our lives, most certainly in matters of romance and love.

In the inspirational market I write for, this sense is often considered to be the leading of God’s Spirit—that “still, small voice” we seek for confirmation of the rightness and validity of our actions. Here is how Jan Karon’s hero, Father Tim, experiences it in Karon’s New York Times best-selling novel *In This Mountain* (Penguin USA 2003).

He took his Bible from beside his chair and opened it at random.

Stop seeking what you want to hear, Timothy, and listen to what I have to tell you.

He felt no supernatural jolt; it happened simply. God had spoken to his heart with great tenderness, as He’d done only a few times in his life before; it produced in him an utter calm.

In the fantasy or paranormal genres that sixth sense might take the form of a spirit guide or mental telepathy. In mystery or suspense novels, it could be the ultra-keen instinct of a detective. In matters of romance, it’s been labeled “woman’s intuition.”

More universally, it might simply be called the conscience or inner voice. Ann Tatlock uses that sense of deeper insight to foreshadow coming events in her novel, *A Room of My Own* (Bethany House 1998).

“Come on,” he said to the stranger at the door. “We’ll take the car.” As the two men made long strides across the yard, Papa hollered back to Mother that he’d be home as soon as he could. Mother stood at the screen door and watched the two men hurry to the garage in the alley...We seemed to know instinctively that Papa’s going with this man would somehow change our lives. And it did. Especially mine.

Whatever form it takes, that sixth sense incorporates deeper levels of complexity, intensity and mystery into your stories.

A PINCH OF THIS, A PINCH OF THAT

One caution in using the senses: it is possible to be *too* obvious—to beat the reader over the head with the fact that you tried to pour all the senses into each scene. Like seasoning in a fine stew, too much of one spice might overpower the more important one. So think carefully about which sense will best serve a particular scene, and then carefully pinch in just the right amounts of one or two of the other senses.

Again, the thesaurus is a wonderful tool to help you come up with creative ways to depict and articulate all of the senses. I love *Roget’s 21st Century Thesaurus*, edited by Barbara Ann Kipfer, Ph.D., because of its Concept Index that allows one to look up *auditory* or *olfactory* etc. and discover wonderfully fresh and expressive words to describe and define the senses. Liz Curtis Higgs recommends the *Oxford American*

Thesaurus of Current English, edited by Christine A. Lindberg. Whatever resource you choose, make every single word work for you.

When you've judiciously sprinkled the six senses throughout your manuscript, you'll have confidence that no nuance of your story will be missed, for your readers will be savoring the full, complex mingling of senses that you envisioned as the story first sprang to life in your imagination. Used ingeniously and artistically, a handful of words can create an entire universe.

AUTHOR BIO:

2002 RITA winner Deborah Raney is the author of eight novels, including her latest release, *A Nest of Sparrows* (WaterBrook Press/Random House, 2004). Her first novel, *A Vow to Cherish* (Bethany House, 1996) was the inspiration for World Wide Pictures' film of the same title. Deb has a new book coming out next year with Steeple Hill's women's fiction trade line. She and her husband Ken have four children and live in Kansas.