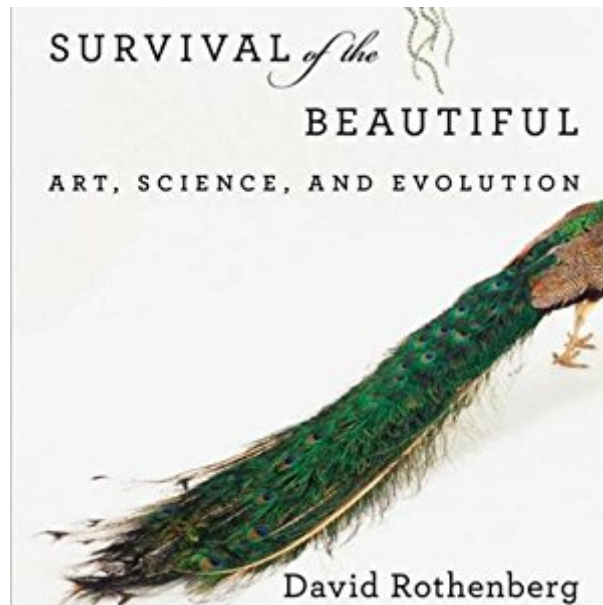


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# Survival Of The Beautiful: Art, Science, And Evolution



## Synopsis

"The peacock's tail," said Charles Darwin, "makes me sick." That's because the theory of evolution as adaptation can't explain why nature is so beautiful. It took the concept of sexual selection for Darwin to explain that, a process that has more to do with aesthetics than the practical. *Survival of the Beautiful* is a revolutionary new examination of the interplay of beauty, art, and culture in evolution. Taking inspiration from Darwin's observation that animals have a natural aesthetic sense, philosopher and musician David Rothenberg probes why animals, humans included, have innate appreciation for beauty - and why nature is, indeed, beautiful. Sexual selection may explain why animals desire, but it says very little about what they desire. Why will a bowerbird literally murder another bird to decorate its bower with the victim's blue feathers? Why do butterfly wings boast such brilliantly varied patterns? The beauty of nature is not arbitrary, even if random mutation has played a role in evolution. What can we learn from the amazing range of animal aesthetic behavior-about animals, and about ourselves? Listeners who enjoyed the best sellers *The Art Instinct* and *The Mind's Eye* will find *Survival of the Beautiful* an equally stimulating and profound exploration of art, science, and the creative impulse.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Survival of the Beautiful* journeys through a dizzying constellation of subject matter in search of the beauty that lies at the heart of nature. It is an equal meld of philosophy, science writing, ecological narrative, aesthetic guide, and spiritual tome. Rothenberg touches on many different topics but the core theme is that art and beauty are indispensable to allow us to fully understand the world. At first,

as in a slow-moving but finely-crafted film, we read about so many topics in such quick succession that we wonder "where is this all going?". Then, gently and surely, Rothenberg begins to bridge the gaps between his tales of nature inspiring military camouflage theory, the role of art in the discovery of protein structures, bizarre bird sculptures that serve no purpose except to impress, the mathematics of evolution and Jackson Pollock, and modern experiments in situational art where children get adults to think deep thoughts. What seemed like chaos at first eventually coalesces into a landscape of ideas that reveal Beauty as the glue that binds all of our different perspectives of the universe. By the second half of the book I found myself hungrily taking notes and coming up with all sorts of questions sparked in quick succession. I wondered things like "What is art? Why do we create art? Why does nature bother to create so much beauty that, sometimes, serves no adaptive or sexual purpose? How do science and art differ in the way they perceive the world? And why should we care?" One possible reason to care is inherent in Steve Jobs' phenomenal success at melding art and technology. Jobs is a perfect example of how deeply the human being craves aesthetic satiety, a dimension of life that a purely technological approach cannot comprise.

The discussion of bower birds at the beginning of the book was utterly fascinating, and I was looking forward to the rest of it. There is truly much to think about in the book, and I also appreciated the many sketches of bowers, the discussion and pictures of feathers, the many black and white pictures, and the few, but excellent, color photos in the hard-cover edition. However, as I read on, the arguments about the nature of art and the origins of artistic behavior, how and why they evolved, how artistic appreciation may have evolved, and so on, were, for me, far from "accessible" and "clear," although other reviewers seem to have found the book to be exemplary in that regard. I found myself wishing for a chart laying out the various conflicting theories, who holds them, and who agrees with whom on what points. Perhaps the fault lies in my having majored in a field far removed from biology and evolution, but I can't help thinking that if Rothenberg had been thinking more clearly--or writing more clearly (One passage that would have benefited from editing and a bit of explanation is his friend Tchernichovski's anecdote in Chapter 3 about observing gazelles. Within three consecutive sentences, "you" is used to refer to three quite different entities, and there are other things that are confusing about this paragraph, too.)--it would have been easier to follow his arguments, and that is why I didn't give the book five stars. Another, though minor frustration. Figure 16 is a drawing of "Anchiornis huzleyu first dinosaur whose real colors we have discovered". Now, wouldn't you love to know what colors those are--see a color rendition of the drawing, perhaps? Too bad! I have been looking, but haven't found one yet, not in this book!

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