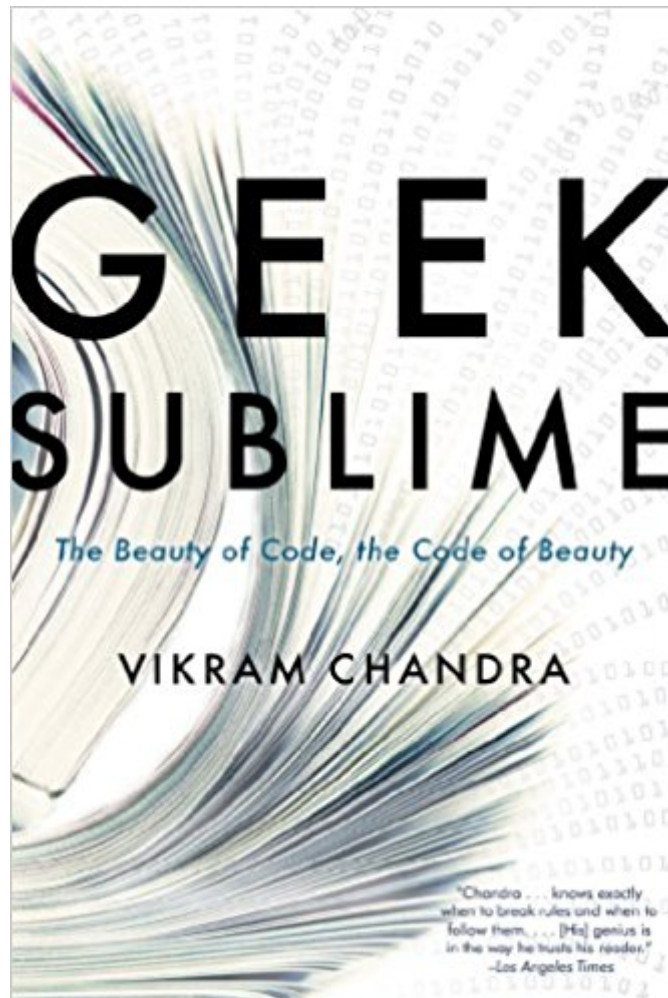


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Geek Sublime: The Beauty Of Code, The Code Of Beauty



Synopsis

The nonfiction debut from the author of the international bestseller "Sacred Games" about the surprising overlap between writing and computer coding. Vikram Chandra has been a computer programmer for almost as long as he has been a novelist. In this extraordinary new book, his first work of nonfiction, he searches for the connections between the worlds of art and technology. Coders are obsessed with elegance and style, just as writers are, but do the words mean the same thing to both? Can we ascribe beauty to the craft of writing code? Exploring such varied topics as logic gates and literary modernism, the machismo of tech geeks, the omnipresence of an "Indian Mafia" in Silicon Valley, and the writings of the eleventh-century Kashmiri thinker Abhinavagupta, "Geek Sublime" is both an idiosyncratic history of coding and a fascinating meditation on the writer's art. Part literary essay, part technology story, and part memoir, it is an engrossing, original, and heady book of sweeping ideas.

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Customer Reviews

“An unexpected tour de force. . . . Its ambition: to look deeply, and with great subtlety, into the connections and tensions between the worlds--the cultures--of technology and art. The book becomes an exquisite meditation on aesthetics, and meanwhile it is also part memoir, the story of a young man finding his way from India to the West and back, and from literature to programming and back. . . . Programmers feel an exhilarating creative mastery, and Chandra captures it.”
—James Gleick, The New York Times Book Review
“Geek Sublime dwells on

Chandra's gripping personal narrative . . . as well as his sometimes spiritual exploration of computer language, the ancient Vedas, and the way they share so many traits with fiction. In a sense, it's like Zen and the Art of Software Maintenance. 'The past and present speak to us in languages we refuse to hear,' he proclaims, and it's the book's most succinct statement of intent--not to mention its own well-earned profundity. "Chandra weaves a comprehensive understanding of the history, practice and art of programming into a startling fabric. . . . It is a dazzle, from beginning to end. . . . Plenty of programmers consider themselves artists, and plenty of writers presume to declaim about programming. But very, very few can comfortably inhabit both worlds with such grace and precision. . . . There is so much to be fascinated by here.

Salon "Chandra, brainy, delving, and spellbinding, delineates the intricacy and beauty of code. . . . As [he] illuminates links between programming and literature in bedazzling elucidations of Sanskrit, linguistics, aesthetics, and Hindu, Tantric, and Buddhist beliefs, he also conducts unique and heady inquiries into codes, ethical as well as binary. Chandra's creative and elegant meshing of thought and experience, conscience and storytelling nets both the profane and the sublime.

Booklist

Vikram Chandra is the author of three highly acclaimed works of fiction, most recently "Sacred Games," which won the 2006 Hutch Crossword Award. Chandra lives in Oakland, California and teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

The title of Vikram Chandra's book, "Geek Sublime," doesn't give away a lot about its content, and even its subtitle, "The Beauty of Code, The Code of Beauty," is somewhat elusive. When you finish this relatively brief book you'll agree that the title is apt, but still regard it as somewhat recondite. Okay, BLUF: the sum of the book is less than the total value of its parts. Chandra, a long-time writer of code, entralls the reader with his survey of the history of code, the challenges of code-writing, and the argument over whether code can be beautiful. His inside-the-business revelations, e.g., that a lot of code writers don't really understand how computers actually work, can be small epiphanies and also oddly reassuring. That's the first third of the book. The second third is a survey of classical Indian literary aesthetics, focusing on the work of Anandavardhana (9th c.) and Abhinavagupta (10th-11th c.). What? you're asking yourself. It bears pointing out, if you weren't aware, that Chandra is also an acclaimed novelist. And as an Indian by birth, he has clearly an appreciation of his cultural roots. It doesn't necessarily follow that Chandra would be well positioned to write on Indian literary aesthetics,

however, since he isn't, so far as I can tell, a scholar of Indian classical literature, but at least to this admittedly uninformed reader, he does a credible job. Although at times the Indian terms and names might cause the eyes to glaze over, this reader was able not only to follow along his discussion, but, in time, enjoy it as much if not more than the section on code-writing. If beauty in code writing was the thesis, and Indian literary aesthetics the antithesis, the final third of the book attempts synthesis. Chandra is less successful here; I found the synthesis less absorbing than the prior more-or-less independent discussions. Chandra tries to get at the kinetic nature of both poetic language and code: "What programmers want to do in their investigations of the 'eloquence' of code, I think, is analogous to what Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta tried to do with poetic language...: to understand how the effects of a language can escape language itself" (Loc 3027). He continues, "The 'rasa-dhvani' theorists ...tried to formalize the processes of literary affect, to investigate how poetry moves across the borders of bodies and selves, and to understand how consciousness uses and is reconstructed by poetry..." (Loc 3017-3033). Turning to code, then, he notes that "programs are not just algorithms as concepts or applied ideas; they are algorithms in motion. Code is uniquely kinetic.... In code, the mental and material are one" (Loc 3033). Chandra then goes on to give examples of this, such as programmed or synthetic biology (synbio), which is programming at the genetic level to bioengineer new life (beg. Loc 3059). For some of us, that sounds a bit more frightening than beautiful. However that may be, by this point rasa-dhvani theory, if ever I understood it, has become somewhat lost on me as I ponder programmed monsters. Nonetheless, I recommend this work as a thought-provoking if perhaps overly ambitious attempt to leverage Indian aesthetics to explain the beauty of code. In the end, although I enjoyed reading about code-writing, I was most intrigued by Chandra's presentation on Indian aesthetics. The best non-fiction writers will inspire their readers to pursue the subject some more; I look forward to reading more about a topic I think most Westerners know little about: Indian classical literature.

Readers should expect the majority of this book to be devoted to a detailed discussion of connections between Indian metaphysics and aesthetics and the author's personal approach to creative writing; the tech elements in the book (brief examination of digital logic, functional v object oriented programming, etc) are mostly relegated to their own segregated chapters. This makes one almost feel as if one is reading two entirely separate essays that have been interleaved with each other: an effect that certainly works against the author's apparent intent to explore connections

between the worlds of coding and the "sublime." For example, the book's strongest section details the rigorous grammar underlying classical Sanskrit, and mentions in passing the presence of constructs such as recursion/loops/etc that also appear in formal programming languages. It is certainly interesting to argue that if beauty can be produced (despite? because of?) the rigors of Classical Sanskrit (as the author amply demonstrates), similarly rigorous computer code can also be "beautiful." Unfortunately the interleaved organization of the book prevents the author from really developing this argument, and the code section of the book notably lacks any examples of code or algorithms generally thought to be "beautiful". This dearth of examples fundamentally hinders any attempt to develop a meaningful idea of what "beautiful code" is, beyond not being a big ugly mess, let alone explore in a substantive manner possible connections between the austere beauty of Sanskrit on the one hand and programming languages on the other. The author's discussion, towards the end of the book, of the difficulty of good writing also seems to be something of a missed opportunity. What if any similarities are there in the "zone" the author finds himself in, when producing/attempting to produce creative fiction, and the "zone" of a programmer trying to think about/write good code? The author offers some tantalizing insight into how, in the course of writing, he has to immerse himself in the world of his characters while remaining wholly aware of the reliance of that world on the author's choices in writing. Here again, I wish that the author had proceeded immediately to a discussion of whether this psychological duality of total immersion and total detachment also exists in the case of coding. I suspect that this duality is fundamental to all "creative activity" (whatever that means); but certainly an exploration of this duality in the context of creative writing and computer coding would have been much more interesting than this well-intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful book ended up being.

I think this book holds the most for anyone who appreciates science/ technology/ logic and all it can do, but struggles with the culture around it where (at least in modern America) it downplays things like beauty, human connection, and the ability to stir emotion. I found it to be a beautiful weaving together of computer science, premodern Indian linguistics/aesthetic philosophy, and the author's own experiences with writing, programming, and cross-cultural experiences concerning the US and India. It really resonated with me as someone who comes from a mixed American/Indian cultural background and is also involved with programming, linguistics, and the arts. That said, there was plenty of material which was new to me, and I think the author did a lovely job of explaining those things patiently and clearly (without getting boring when he covered familiar ground).

As an author of "Conceal Carry; Pause" I like interesting innovation by an author to make a book interesting. I heard the interview of the author of this book on public radio. While I am an artist in oil painting as a hobby I was enamored by the author saying he sees Computer coding as an art form genre. Thus his approach likely is a fresh breeze to be experienced by a computer science graduate so to provide a brain garnishment for a career geek. My one grandson is one such geek and he welcomed receiving this book.

excellent writing

This book will take you on a journey of the connections between zen, art, language, history, and software. Fantastic.

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