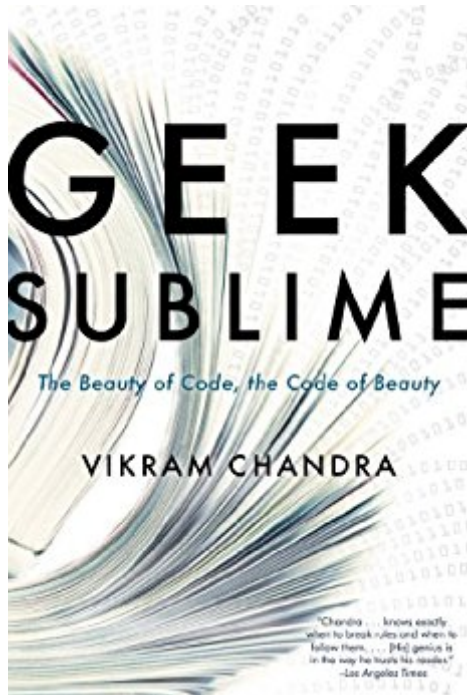


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Geek Sublime: The Beauty Of Code, The Code Of Beauty



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

There are at least two aspects to Chandra's book: the parts that apply to modern computer programming and coding and the parts that apply principles of Indian philosophy and poetry to coding. Disclaimer: I'm a programmer. I've written code for computers for many years using a variety of programming languages and running on a variety of machines and software environments. So, I'm reading and viewing some of what is in "Geek sublime" from a special point of view. Because I spend a good part of my time reading and trying to understand code and trying to make fixes to it, I care more about whether code is understandable and modifiable than I do about some notion of elegance or on aesthetic qualities based on an external standard or guide. It may also be significant that I program in high level, interpreted languages, mostly Python (<https://www.python.org/>), but also a bit in Ruby (<https://www.ruby-lang.org/en/>) and Erlang (<http://www.erlang.org/>). These are languages whose design places emphasis on code that is clean, readable, and easy to debug code over, for example, execution speed or memory usage. I much prefer Python, Ruby, and Erlang over low level, cryptic languages like C and C++, which make reading code and finding and fixing errors so much more difficult. Having said that, code that has the qualities of elegance and aesthetics that Chandra discusses, likely will trend toward readable and modifiable code. However, I say shoot for code that is readable and modifiable and the

aesthetics will follow, rather than aiming for the aesthetic qualities and hoping that the readability and maintainability follow from that.

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, enthralls 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.

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