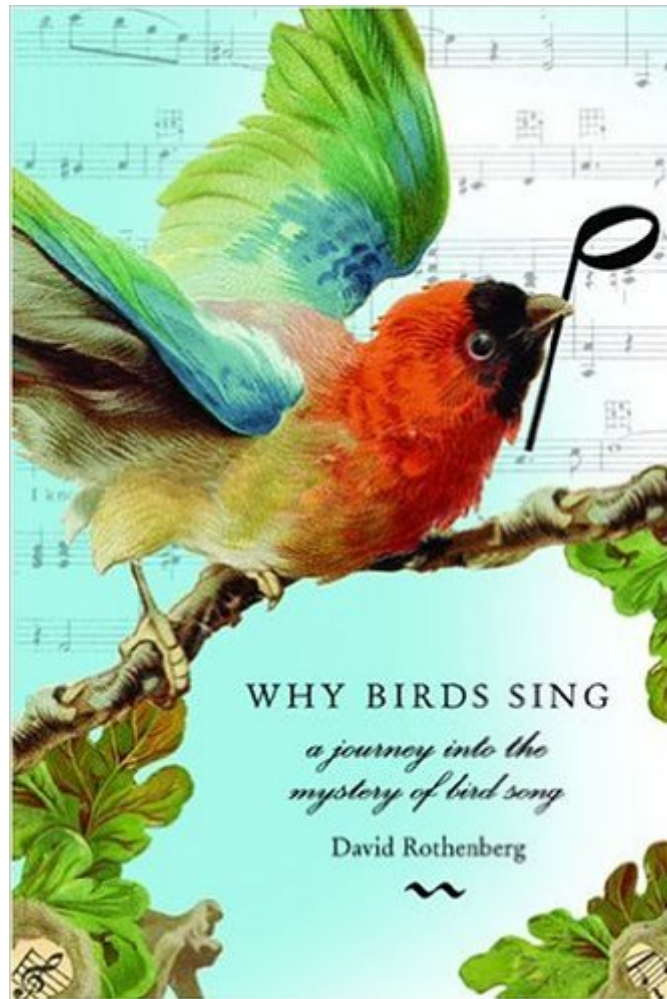


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Why Birds Sing: A Journey Into The Mystery Of Bird Song



Synopsis

The astonishing variety and richness of bird song is both an aesthetic and a scientific mystery. Biologists have never been able to understand why bird song displays are often so inventive and why so many species devote so many hours to singing. The standard explanations, which generally have to do with territoriality and sexual display, don't begin to account for the astonishing variety and energy that the commonest birds exhibit. Is it possible that birds sing because they like to? This seemingly naïve explanation is starting to look more and more like the truth. In the tradition of classic works by Bernd Heinrich, Edward Abbey, and Terry Tempest Williams, *Why Birds Sing* is a lyric exploration of bird song that blends the latest scientific research with a deep understanding of musical beauty and form. Based on conversations with neuroscientists, ecologists, and composers, it is the first book to investigate why birds sing and how, and what effect their music has on other animals—particularly humans. Whether playing the clarinet with the white-crested laughing thrush in Pittsburgh, or jamming in the Australian winter breeding grounds of the Albert's lyrebird, Rothenberg journeys to the heart and soul of bird song. *Why Birds Sing* offers an intimate look at the most lovely of natural phenomena—with surprising insights about the origin of music.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rothenberg writes with an easy intimacy, but if one takes him at his word, the intimacy that means most to him comes not by means of words but of music, and less by means of music as such than by an improvisatory exchange between, usually, himself on his clarinet, and someone else on

whatever instrument the other person is using. Given this driving urge, it seems inevitable that Rothenberg should want to cross the barrier between those most musical of creatures, the birds, and those with the most productive curiosity, the humans. His own curiosity leads him first to the birds and then to the human experts in birdsong. He gives vivid descriptions of these researchers' extraordinary devotion to their work. I especially enjoyed his description of the ability of the composer Olivier Messiaen to hear, transcribe, and whistle the complex songs of a bird he had never heard before. Although, like a few of the researchers - Donald Kroodsma, for example - Rothenberg believes in the innate pleasure birds take in their song, he checks his intuitive sense of their musicality by carefully summarizing what is scientifically known about their abilities and ways of life. Yet even though he takes to heart the criticism that the romantics "listened to birds and heard only themselves," he recalls that science, too, is fallible, and he plays on the ornithologists' conclusion that not only is each species of birds unique, but so is every individual bird. "Why Birds Sing" ends in the climactic scene in which Rothenberg and a friend go to Australia to hear, see the dance of, and try to enter into a musical dialogue with the lyrebird named George, the only member, he says, of his elusive, musically gifted species who can stomach the sight and sound of human beings.

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