BOOK REVIEW

Geek Sublime:
Writing Fiction, Coding Software

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In my early days as a researcher in Artificial Intelligence in the 1980's, I envisaged writing a program that could 'capture' the essence of a person. It was my naive hope, and to some extent belief, that somehow the insights of a great novelist could be expressed in software. Reading about 'Geek Sublime: Writing Fiction, Coding Software' the 2013 book by Vikram Chandra, purportedly explaining how writing fiction was akin to coding software, naturally intrigued me. Perhaps Chandra was able to accomplish the synthesis I had been aiming for.

Abstractly, creating the synthesis between programming and writing fiction seems directly related to the aims of the International Journal of People-Oriented Programming (IJPOP). When Steve Goschnick invited me to be a co-editor of the journal, it was the ideal spur to read the book, and write the review. It is a pleasure for this to be my first book review for IJPOP.

Chandra is to be commended for writing an engaging but challenging book. He has an ideal background, having worked as a programmer, and studied and written literature. As might be expected, the book goes into depth about two topics, the experience of programming/coding and the essence of literature, especially Indian literature and concepts from Sanskrit with which the author is most comfortable.

From my experience as a computer science and software engineering academic, I can attest that the description of 'what it is to code' is valid. I can understand where Chandra is coming from in his descriptions, and there are some intriguing facts and experiences, though no new insights.

Two detailed chapters, 'The Beauty of Code: Anandavardhana' and 'The Code of Beauty: Abhinavagupta' attempt to explain relevant Indian/Sanskrit literature and Hindu concepts. The

descriptions were new to me and certainly interesting and worth reading. However I am entirely convinced that they match exactly the concepts expressed in the chapter 'The Beauty of Code' where Chandra describes the need for elegant code.

I agree that writing good code requires elegance. A common mantra from writing and teaching programming in Prolog is that "elegance is not optional. This mantra was well expressed Richard O'Keefe in 'The Craft of Prolog[Ref]' But what is elegance? A quick Internet search suggests that in elegant code, form follows function, there is nothing superfluous, all the details are relevant and important.

That same elegance can be achieved in writing. Seventeen factors are listed in a blog by Laraine Anne Barker 'In Quest of an Elegant Writing Style' (http://ewritersplace.com/aspiringauthors/article019.html) I try to write that way. But elegant writing is not enough and is not the essence of great literature.

There is a missing piece, I suggest, which lies in emotions. There is no emotion in writing software, at least not in my experience, nor in the descriptions by Chandra. However, good literature evokes emotions. There is a place for emotions in technology. Helmut Esslinger, a lead designer who worked with Apple Computer claims 'Form should follow emotion' and Apple has stood out as a technology company for inspiring people to engage with their devices.

In summary, 'Geek Sublime' is a worthwhile read if you would like to learn more about Hindu writing as a personal account of the 'Zen' of programming. From my personal perspective, the book did not advance my understanding of how to equate coding with writing good literature. Indeed, the book helped consolidate my view that the mindsets for writing fiction and programming have a strong element of difference. I am no longer hopeful of capturing the insights of literature in code.

REFERENCES

O'Keefe, R. (1994). *The craft of prolog*. MIT Press.