

David Rothenberg. *Nightingales in Berlin: Searching for the Perfect Sound*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

*Reviewed by Austin Bennett*

Nearly two decades ago David Rothenberg made his fateful journey into the National Aviary in Pittsburgh to play his clarinet, à la Rahsaan Roland Kirk, to the birds. A laughing thrush responded and a solo improvisation morphed into a duet. That jam session quickly evolved into an obsession with “interspecies music” and scientific disruption. His international acclaim came with his book *Why Birds Sing* (2005) where to the astonishment of ornithologists everywhere he made the claim that birds make music.

Since then, Rothenberg, once mentored by Arne Naess (one of the founders of “deep ecology”), has invited readers to join his travels into whale music, *Thousand Mile Song* (2008), and bug music, *Bug Music* (2013), as he continues to decenter humans from the natural world by demonstrating the artistic capacity of other species. His latest stop comes with a return to one of literatures most celebrated birds, nightingales, in *Nightingales in Berlin: Searching for the Perfect Sound* (2019).

He begins with a clash between the artist and the scientist, a concert, and a metaphor. On the night of the 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII, Rothenberg along with human musicians and an audience enter Treptower Park (Berlin, Germany) sometime after midnight to play music with a male nightingale. This landscape has long been inhabited by nightingales even while 100,000 people died during the Battle of Berlin. The concert could result in the nightingale “jamming the signal” out of aggression or improvising along with the human musicians.

But the concert never starts.

A researcher interrupts them fearing that this *type* of human interaction will ruin the bird along with years of research. The story almost plays out like an Andy Kaufman sketch, but instead of burning bridges, Rothenberg desires to build them and moves on to another tree, another bird, and a melodious concert proceeds.

As the title suggests, this book centers as much on nightingales as it is a quest into the aesthetic. Science cannot answer the question “Is birdsong beautiful?” Or, from Rothenberg’s perspective, it cannot do so yet. Though he continues to partner with scientists to find these answers, his quest appears to be more personal—the artist’s passion—and is rooted in the concept of the *sharawaji effect*.

Early on, he briefly, and tentatively, defines this bastardized and uncertain term. The word is etymologically either Chinese or Japanese based, brought to Scandinavia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and interpreted as “beauty of studied irregularity.” It appears a fitting concept for it takes into account, or may only exist, in an object/subject relationship and though Rothenberg spends a whole chapter describing this concept, it is never fully developed. Yet, in true Rothenberg fashion, he utilizes the *sharawaji effect* as a loose thread that binds the rest of his subject matter together as he quickly meanders from birdsong to soundscapes to originality.

This is the serpentine path that the musician-philosopher has become well-known for, sticking to no specific style. Where his earlier work seems to strive for the literary, his latter work, especially here, is an improvisational mashup, a true mixed-genre book. The reader will ask, is this a memoir? Travel essay? Scientific article? Philosophical argument? And they will be correct. Rothenberg drifts from sonograms, literary allusions—eastern and western—and poetry as he progresses from subject to subject often recycling previous observations; a favorite being how whale song mirrors nightingale song when sped up. Page by page and chapter by chapter,

the reader will move in frustrating delight unsure of what will come next. And that's kind of the point.

In a post-truth era where skepticism increasingly comes without the faculties to navigate such doubts, Rothenberg still asks the question. He just shifts the question from a narrow human-based perspective toward a deep ecological perspective. As an advocate, he desires that his curiosity helps spur the reader's curiosity. The reader needs to be entangled with the natural world. What is not questioned is easily denied. Humans should not have the final say on what is considered musical or beautiful and the nightingale is Rothenberg's exemplar. He writes:

Nightingale—

Your song has been here long before we first arrived.

Must we ask forgiveness before we join in?

We've misread you for years. . . .hearing madness, unfulfillable

love,

Your hymn is more sincere than that.

Compelled to sing, you

always know just what to do.

When are humans ever so sure—of anything?

As long as we don't wipe out your world,

and don't completely figure it out,

you're never going to stop.