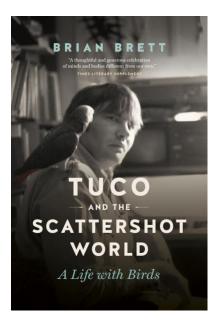


Tuco and the Scattershot World, by Brian Brett



For thirty years, Brian Brett shared his office and his life with Tuco, a remarkable parrot given to asking such questions as "Whaddya know?" and announcing "Party time!" when guests showed up at Brett's farm. Although Brett bought Tuco on a whim as a pet, he gradually realizes the enormous obligation he has to the bird and learns that the parrot is a lot more complex than he thought.

Simultaneously a biography of this singular bird and a history of dinosaurs, birds, and the human relationship with birds, *Tuco* also explores how we "other" the world—abusing birds, landscapes, and each other—including Brett's own experience with a rare genetic condition that turned his early years into an obstacle course of bullying and nurtured his affinity for winged creatures. The book also provides an in-depth examination of our ideas about knowledge, language, and intelligence (including commentary from Tuco himself) and how, as we learn more about animal languages and intelligence, we continually shift our definitions of them in order to retain our "superiority." As Brett says, "Whaddya know? Not much. I don't even know what knowledge is. I know only the magic . . . and the mysteries."

By turns provocative, profound, hilarious, and deeply moving, this fascinating memoir will remain with the reader long after the last page has been turned.

About the Author

Brian Brett is a journalist of four decades who has also written numerous books of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, and worked as an editor for several publishing firms. He is the author of *Trauma Farm*, which won the 2009 Writers' Trust of Canada Nonfiction Prize, and was the 2016 recipient of the Writers' Trust Matt Cohen Award for Lifetime Achievement. He currently lives in British Columbia.

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Selected Critical Responses Tuco and the Scattershot World, by Brian Brett

"Author Brian Brett Shows Beak Form"

Candace Fertile (Vancouver Sun, 10.30.2015) [FULL ARTICLE]

Excerpt: The genius of Brett's work is twofold: luminous prose and an ability to marry tragedy and comedy. Memoir for Brett means delving into his own life and the world at large. In Tuco he recounts events of his past while informing us about birds, books, history, travel, mythology, environmental concerns and, above all, recognition of the "Other."

As he says, "When you are born strange, you learn to see the strangeness in the world ... I learned how to behave like an Other. I dwelt in the cave behind my eyes, watching the miracle of the world unfold — a cold-eyed hawk." Imagining himself as a hawk is fitting, given the hawk's intelligence and keen eyesight....

One of the things I liked best about this book is Brett's self-examination. He admits his mistakes, and he hopes to do better. The broader mistakes are those of human beings. He is worried about the mess the world is in today, but he is also hopeful that we can make changes. He says, "What has clearly become essential to the survival of our species is the need to evolve beyond cruelty into imaginative identification with the Other."

"For the Birds: Brian Brett's Tuco"

Philip Marchand (National Post, 10.15.2015) [FULL ARTICLE]

Excerpt: An environmentalist, Brett clearly wants to expand our notion of that intelligence as far as possible. Well versed in the subject, Brett considers the work of the linguist Noam Chomsky, who has argued that language is unique to our species. Brett disagrees, but if pressed resorts to a compromise of sorts: "Of course only humans speak human language," he writes, "but is that the pinnacle of language or merely one variation on a planet of many languages?"

Another signature of humankind, one Brett does not mention but unconsciously draws upon, is the tendency of human beings to believe that there is something wrong with human beings. This is unique to our species — parrots, as far as we know, do not believe there is something wrong with parrots. And this is not because animals are Walt Disney innocents. "Cruelty has evolved within the animal kingdom, inhabiting every creature, humans included, I've spent time with," Brett states. "Tuco would kill a smaller bird without qualms."

Perhaps, Brett suggests, evolution will somehow take us to a higher level. "What has clearly become essential to the survival of our species is the need to evolve beyond cruelty into imaginative identification with the Other," he states. But Brett, an enthusiastic Darwinist, admits that evolution is a blind god....

"Evolution ain't intelligent, and it's not actually designed," Brett insists. "It's a force."



Fun Facts About Parrots

Tuco and the Scattershot World, by Brian Brett

1. The world record for a parrot's vocabulary is over 1,700 words!

A parakeet named, Puck, was recorded in the 1995 *Guinness Book of World Records* as knowing 1,728 words. Rather than just mimicking, Puck created original sentences, often used the appropriate phrase in a given situation, and sometimes displayed uncanny understanding. (Nature's Scrapbook)

2. Parrots create a natural antibacterial agent in their feathers.

A parrot's brilliant plumage has a special defense against damage: Psittacofulvins, a bacteria-resistant pigment that only parrots are known to produce. This bacteria also gives the birds' feathers their vibrant red, yellow and green coloration. (Smithsonian Mag)

3. Parrots are omnivores.

As we know from Tuco, many parrots will eat pretty much anything—fruit, seeds, nuts, insects, meat—even fudgiscles! Some species, like the rainbow-colored lories and lorikeets of the South Pacific, feed almost exclusively on nectar with brush-tipped tongues, though recently even these birds were <u>seen eating meat</u> at feeding stations in Australia. In New Zealand, native kea (*Nestor* species) were first observed attacking and <u>killing sheep</u> in 1868 and were <u>persecuted as sheep-killers</u> until 1986, when they were granted protected status. (<u>Smithsonian Mag</u>)

4. Tuco's species, the African Grey, are facing extinction

Due to a combination of habitat destruction and persistent poaching for the pet trade, the species regularly lands on the <u>IUCN Red List of Threatened Species</u>. One study, for instance, found that logging has <u>decimated 99 percent of the African grey</u> (*Psittacus erithacus*) population in Ghana, threatening wild numbers of one of the most iconic parrot species. (Smithsonian Mag)

5. Parrots eat with their feet!

Parrots have zygodactyl feet, meaning they have four toes on each, two facing forward and two facing backward. They use their feet like human hands. They don't just walk or perch on them. They can pick up objects and food and bring it to their mouths. Parrots have even been observed to favor one of their feet, in the same way humans are right- or left-handed. (Ipfactly)

6. Parrots have been kept as pets for over 3,000 years

Parrots were first kept as pets by ancient Egyptians and then by the Indians and Chinese. They were brought to Europe in 300 BC, often kept by the rich or the nobility. Famous people who have owned pet parrots include Aristotle, King Henry VIII, Marco Polo, Queen Isabella, Marie Antoinette, Queen Victoria, Martha Washington, Teddy Roosevelt, and Steven Spielberg. (Ipfactly)



Discussion Questions

Tuco and the Scattershot World, by Brian Brett

- 1. A major theme of *Tuco and the Scattershot World* is the concept of "Othering." What does the author, Brian Brett, mean by this term? And when and how in the book does it occur?
- 2. What are some examples of othering that you have witnessed, or perhaps experienced, in your own life? And what causes or effects do you believe it had?
- 3. What do you think can limit, oppose, or challenge the impulse toward othering? Can some action or effort be made so that it will happen less often in society? Is such an effort worthwhile?
- 4. Parrots are complex birds. Brian sheds light on this complexity in his portrayal of Tuco. What surprised you about Tuco's behavior or his connection with Brian?
- 5. How does Tuco's behaviour change throughout the book? Why do you think that was? And how does Tuco's behavior remain consistent?
- 6. Bullying and torment shrouds a lot of Brian's childhood memories. How is Brian's trauma from this bullying that he faced reflected in his adult worldview?
- 7. How does the isolation in Brian's adolescence influence his relationship with Tuco? Did their bond change your perspective on the need for support animals?
- 8. Brian exhibits several profound acts of empathy for the environment and other living beings throughout the book. What were some instances when this empathy changed the course of his life? Would you have made the same choices that he did?
- 9. On page 314, Brian notes, "I no longer laugh at the dinosaurs. All brawn and no brains—when I was a child that's why we thought they went extinct. The evidence today suggests our chance of lasting as long as dinosaurs is close to nil." What is Brian implying here? What is the relevance of this statement to how we view ourselves as a species?
- 10. Throughout *Tuco*, Brian delves deeply into the biology and psychology of parrots and other birds. He also details human-bird interaction over time. What personal conclusions or growth does he draw from all of this research? Did it also help you to better understand this unique relationship?