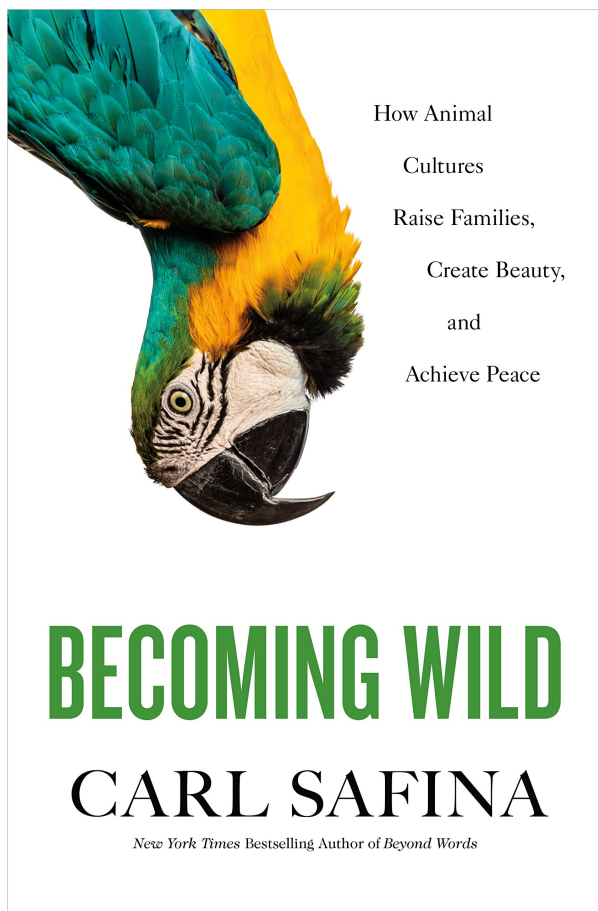


Book Review- **Becoming Wild: How Animal Cultures Raise Families, Create Beauty and Achieve Peace**

JoAnn Hackos August 2, 2020 :

Ecologist and professor, Carl Safina, has provided us with amazing insight into the minds of animals from turtles, elephants, orcas, and even albatrosses. His latest book, ***Becoming Wild***, is a remarkable account of the lives of three species, the sperm whale, the macaw, and the chimpanzee. Like his previous work, ***Beyond Words***, which focused on elephants, wolves, and orcas, Safina closely follows the work of primary researchers studying the lives of each species. [check out my review from January 2016]



Becoming Wild is a story about animal cultures. Animals grow up learning from their parents, their relatives and neighbors, and their peers. They learn how to communicate and how to belong to a particular group of individuals. They absorb the traditions of their culture, learning how to be a whale or a bird or a monkey, much in the same way that human children grow up and learn how to become members of a human culture.

The first part of ***Becoming Wild*** is about sperm whales. Safina travels with a sperm whale research team, headed by Shane Gero. They head by boat into the deep water close to the Caribbean island of Dominica

because it is an area where a significant number of sperm whales travel. The research team listens underwater for sperm whale clicks, recognizing them as the source of sperm whale communication. We learn that sperm whales have individual names, names for their immediate family groups, and names expressed in clicks for their multi-family organizations. They meet and greet, socialize, teach the young, and send messages across huge distances through their click communication. The ocean world they inhabit is far from silent.

Safina's experience with the whales and the details he gives us about their lives is incredibly compelling and beautiful. We also learn, of course, that human hunting has driven them to the brink of extinction. Their numbers worldwide continue to decline.

The second part of ***Becoming Wild*** is about scarlet macaws. Safina visits the Tambopata Research Center in the Peruvian Amazon, headed by field biologist Don Brightsmith. Scarlet macaws are very large birds with nearly four-foot wingspans and with extravagant red heads, wings in blue, blue-green, and scarlet, and bright yellow shawls. They are stunningly beautiful and very intelligent. They live in family groups, in which the young learn how to be macaws. They have much to learn during the eight years it takes them to mature.

Safina helps us understand why scarlet macaws are so beautiful. Both male and female wear the same incredible colors. They live in a beautiful forest with lots of fruit and "enormous ancient trees." He asks if other creatures, like the macaws, recognize and appreciate beauty, like humans? How could they not? Why would these and other birds be so spectacular if they don't recognize beauty?

The final part of ***Becoming Wild*** focuses entirely on chimpanzees. Chimpanzees live in a complex society, full of emotion, sometimes aggressive, sometimes violent, and many times tender and loving. Chimpanzees live in communities ruled by alpha males, with constant competition and sometimes violent aggression among the males for dominance. The females are focused on raising their young, even while they seek the attention of the dominant male.

The male aggression, often expressed by screaming and fighting, finally gets on Safina's nerves. He remarks that it's like living in a gang, dominated by male obsession with status. The chimps remind him of humans. He discusses at length the similarities between human and chimp culture, unfortunately not for the best. He contrasts them with the bonobos who live peacefully in a female-run society.

Chimps are intelligent, of course. They are regular tool users and quickly learn from one another. The young learn both tool use and social etiquette from the adults. They learn to communicate through a wide variety of calls. They smile, and they laugh. Some captive chimps have even learned to communicate through sign language and by using computers. They show compassion and care for one another. They are complex. To Safina, they are like us.

Safina fundamentally respects the cultures of the animals that he studies. They have succeeded in building lives on Earth. Unfortunately, he opines, humans seem intent on annihilating them. We threaten them, Safina holds, with the "degradation of land, exhaustion of soil, sickening pollution of water and air and food, the ways we have dismissively destabilized the life support on this planet"

Becoming Wild is challenging to read. Safina wants us to know that there is life on earth that is complete and self-sustaining. The sperm whales, macaws, and chimpanzees thrive; they do not destroy the environments that sustain them. We have much to learn from them.

Carl Safina, Henry Holt and Company, 2020