



In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing

Matthew E. May, Guy Kawasaki (Foreword by)

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What made the *Sopranos* finale one of the most-talked-about events in television history?

Why is sudoku so addictive and the iPhone so irresistible?

What do Jackson Pollock and Lance Armstrong have in common with theoretical physicists and Buddhist monks?

Elegance.

In this thought-provoking exploration of why certain events, products, and people capture our attention and imaginations, Matthew E. May examines the elusive element behind so many innovative breakthroughs in fields ranging from physics and marketing to design and popular culture. Combining unusual simplicity and surprising power, elegance is characterized by four key elements—seduction, subtraction, symmetry, and sustainability. In a compelling, story-driven narrative that sheds light on the need for elegance in design, engineering, art, urban planning, sports, and work, May offers surprising evidence that what's “not there” often trumps what is.

In the bestselling tradition of *The Tipping Point*, *Made to Stick*, and *The Black Swan*, *In Pursuit of Elegance* will change the way you think about the world.

In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing Details

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Jim says

A good read, excellent ideas. It's worthy of 4 stars as a regular book, but the audio wasn't quite as good since the PDF is needed occasionally & that, unlike the audio book, is tied up under DRM so I couldn't access it. WTF? I found it on Recorded Books' site without any DRM. Oy!

He starts off by defining "elegance" as a quality that contains: symmetry, seduction, subtraction & sustainability. It's pleasing due satisfying our desire for patterns & it often engages our mind by not giving us all the answers, so scratches our curiosity bump. What makes the Mona Lisa so fantastic is the slight blurring of the eyes & mouth so her expression is enigmatic, changing at each look, rather than static. Beethoven doesn't complete the pattern until the last chord, just constantly builds toward it.

Elegance is simple, but simple isn't always elegant. Simple can remove too much which can leave us either frustrated or uninterested, so there's a fine balance. In hindsight, it generally seems obvious & gives the maximum gain for the minimum effort with a sustainable outcome.

There are a lot of examples in the book showing a variety of elegant solutions in everything from music & paintings to architecture & traffic patterns. Some were quite surprising since they go against our nature for action & often are hampered by our brain bugs. He quoted a variety of studies & even allowed the reader to participate in some of them which was quite engaging - rather elegant.

He delves into some Eastern philosophies, examining parts of them in the search of elegance. I was particularly interested in "shibumi", the title of a novel by Trevanian about an assassin. It's the core philosophy of his life, so I found the use of it in construction quite ironic. It epitomizes some of the art of elegance through subtraction, the most economic use of form & function.

There were a lot of ideas that can help in my own life. Not only should I have a To-Do list, but also a Stop-Doing. Possibly move the lower part of the To-Do list to the Forget-About-It pile to free up resources. Look at the forest, not just the elephant in the foreground. How did he get there & where is he going?

I also found that, even though I've never used the word, I've strived for it in many ways. The bowls I turn out of green, found wood are a prime example. I rarely stain or put any decorative touches on them, preferring to create flowing curves & finishes that accentuate the innate beauty of the natural wood.

Elegance is also a term that applies to much of Roger Zelazny's writing. He's long been one of my favorite authors & now I can put a label on the appeal of his work. He doesn't tell the entire story. He tells just enough, hints at more through allusions, but those are often somewhat open to interpretation. The lack of detail intrigues & engages me far more than an overly descriptive story would. For instance, we're never sure if Conrad is just a long-lived mutant or the immortal Pan in This Immortal or possibly some combination. He scoffs at Phil's cyclic history idea, but he's not a particularly reliable narrator & a proven liar.

Interesting & well narrated. Highly recommended, but I think text format might be best.

Bloodorange says

My reading experience here is unquestionably coloured by the fact that I bought this book expecting (marketing much?) it will be in the vein of Malcolm Gladwell's writing. Which it, at least on some level, tried to be. Still, it is more business-oriented than general-knowledge-oriented. I have learnt a few new things, so I'm not mad at myself for having ordered this rather slim volume, but had I known what I'm getting, I would have spent it on something else.

Also - for those who care - the six-line 'foreword' by Guy Kawasaki is a joke.

Chris Dietzel says

Anyone who has enjoyed Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* and *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* will love May's book on what makes great ideas so great. I lost track of all the fascinating things I learned while reading this, from street design to abstract painting to advertising campaigns.

Patrick says

"In Pursuit of Elegance is a fascinating intellectual romp that will change the way you look at your surroundings. As he takes readers from Jackson Pollock paintings to Dutch intersections to the secret menu at In-N-Out Burger, Matt May reveals the hidden elements beneath genuine innovation. This book is surprising, compelling, and, yes, extremely elegant."

—Daniel H. Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind* and *The Adventures of Johnny Bunko*

Melanie Hubbard says

It's a book that makes you think.

Tian Liang says

Sometimes less is really more. May made me realise the principles of elegance in our daily lives when leaving out particular bits of information entices the intended audience even more. His four golden rules of symmetry, seduction (by nothing; the element of mystery and one's own participation to complete the picture), subtraction and sustainability are truly sublime.

David Parker says

I found it interesting at first but it began to drag half way through the book. It did not offer me something

new to chew on.

Maureen Lang says

I checked out the audio form of this book from the library quite by chance, and was pleasantly surprised by the premise and breadth of material for his chosen topic. He talks about four key elements of elegance: seduction (appealing to the senses), subtraction (keeping to the minimum but still achieving effectiveness), symmetry (necessary for all beauty) and sustainability. I slipped it in on a recent long drive thinking I would just listen to "some of it" but it kept my interest arrested all the way to the end...I guess he achieved Elegance in his work. :-)

Erica says

This is a book -- like Omnivore's Dilemma -- that really makes me rethink and change the way I see things. May gives examples of elegance, and the power of it, and its roots in simplicity -- how leaving something out, or simplifying something and eliminating the endless barrage of information, can make it easier to communicate and function in the world. He focuses on four concepts: symmetry, seduction, subtraction and sustainability.

He makes a compelling argument about a busy traffic circle in the Netherlands, where all of the traffic signs are removed, but the circle area is paved in red brick. Where there once were numerous accidents, traffic now flows smoothly, relying on people's common sense and attention rather than reliance on multiple signs.

I think of the barrage of information patrons face when they go into many libraries -- the multiple signs, flyers, bookmarks etc -- and how it creates a white noise where nothing is really seen.

This is a book I expect to re-read and continue to think about.

Brian says

I loved "In Pursuit Of Elegance" by Matthew E. May. This book will provide a basis for a whole new kind of thinking. I can not think of an audience that would not benefit from reading this book because it can apply to business, art, home-life, and many other ventures.

One thing I found brilliant about the book is that it doesn't offer specific steps to follow. This is not a "go and do" kind of book. What is NOT in the book is what makes this powerful (and elegant). May provides many case examples with different perspectives of elegant thinking without telling the reader what to make of them. After reading chapters, I found myself applying the thinking to my own situations. Powerful stuff started popping in my head based on the principles I learned about in the book. This is a highly interactive book if you plan to daydream a little bit after you read it.

I am a big fan of his last book "The Elegant Solution" and noticed a lot of similar ideas and concepts from

that book. What the author did was shake loose the Lean/Toyota anchor and make this new book more open and accessible for a wider audience. There is a lot of freedom from that decision that will make this a better book for non-Lean practitioners while still providing relevant thoughts for those who are on the Lean journey.

This book is difficult to explain the highlights because most of them came from my personal application once I understood the concepts explained. What great ideas will come to you while you read the book?

Tim Chang says

very thought-provoking ideas and insights -- applicable to business model, app, interface, or even artistic design!

Here were my key takeaways:

Key elements of Elegance: Symmetrical, Seductive, Subtractive, Sustainable

- have a Stop-doing List as well as to-do list: eliminate bottom 20% of to-do list forever.
- great art is also composed of what is not in final piece...
- familiarity with a principle means not having to know all of its applications
- difference between East and Western mindset: seeing. Big picture elements vs focus on main subject ("jungle with elephant in it" vs "picture of elephant")
- symmetry: we are natural symmetry seekers, as nature (and science, art) is mostly symmetrical. When we see asymmetry, we naturally want to fill in missing piece.
- seduction: captivates attention and imagination, leading to creative engagement...leave something to imagination and open to imagination creates irresistible aura of mystery...we are curious & drawn to unknown (ex: hidden identity of figure in ad, Sopranos' missing ending, teaser ads/trailers). - brain's satisfaction center is striatum: connected to frontal lobe parts with logical thought and goal-oriented action...releases dopamine for "rush" with puzzle solving
- subtraction: humans naturally hard-wired to hoard, push, collect, add and consume...this is why elegance is elusive (ex: Toyota kaizen, Scion has few base features for more customization, opt-out=higher participation)
- complexity isn't the enemy: elegance is chess, not checkers -- management and exploitation of complexities
- symmetry in nature: fractal patterns, ala Jackson Pollock's paintings. Having patterning in seeming chaotic sequences entices audience to untangle random arrangement, find own meanings and interpretations (ex: Samuel Beckett's "Sans" generated by random patterns)
- subtraction ex: Dutch city of Drachten removing street signs means drivers have to be more aware, present, thinking. Leads to self-organization and more flow vs automation of reliance on signs and constraints. The more we try to control & regulate risk, vs engaging brains and connecting to what is happening around us
- better design principle: observe natural order of things 1st (don't assume), then design. Avoid artificial prioritization and trying to control what may already be in balance. Ex: ice-skating rink has no lanes/signs.
- mona lisa is seductive because of sfumato style: in the manner of smoke. More lifelike, deliberately indistinct, open to interpretation. Leave something to imagination! "Confused shapes arouse the mind"
- Zen aesthetic theme: emptiness is spirit of inexhaustible spirit...silent pauses in music and theater, blank space in painting, constrained movement. Power of suggestion is authentic creation, mirroring human nature being indefinable by nature. Supply missing symmetry and allow audience to participate in act of creation.
- curiosity: 1st type is emotional response, instinctive when you see something new, out of ordinary. 2nd

type is scientific curiosity, like musical brain responding to discord. Diversive curiosity: human tendency to seek novelty, take risk, seek adventure. Specific curiosity: natural inclination to investigate something in order to understand it.

- primary stimuli to arouse curiosity: complexity, novelty, uncertainty, conflict (violation of expectations). If trigger point too low, no motivation to explore. If too high, result is anxiety and avoidance.
- information-gap theory: we feel deprived when we sense gaps in knowledge in fields we know and care about. Situational determinate: intensity of curiosity about particular missing piece of info is dependent on how well we think it will close the gap we're most interested in; also, we are more curious about a single piece of info if we think it will help solve the problem all at once vs incrementally get us closer to solution. Curiosity also increases with perceived knowledge - the more we know, the more we want to know.
- Seduction strategy: inverted U-shape relationship between level of info provided vs degree of interest generated -- ex: ad for upcoming mystery product. 1) arouse curiosity by demonstrating moderate gap in observer's knowledge. 2) provide just enough info to make them want to resolve curiosity 3) give them time to try to resolve curiosity on their own. Hardest one is giving time for people to resolve own curiosity, but most seductive & interesting: CSI, sudoku -- timing is everything
- human brain is pattern-making, recognizing and locking in, Tivo-ing every experience and storing as data in brain as additive, cumulative and unedited process. Electrical impulses are sent to nerve cells triggering grouping mechanism, filing new info with other like data creating memories and perceptions. These connections are reinforced over time and become mental models.
- our obliviousness to patterns in our brains is what makes observational comedy so funny: impartial spectator standing outside of ourselves watching ourselves in action, pointing out universal patterns of behaviors and mental models we all share.
- gestalt movement in psych in early 1900s: how we tend to see related parts as a unified whole, vs simple sum of parts - seeking closure (ex: incomplete shape seen as full, or filling in missing vowels in sentence)
- subtraction in action: hidden menu items at In-n-Out allows consumers to create UGC items. CE is good example of self-defeating overkill with feature creep & feature-fatigue. Other examples: aikido, Lance Armstrong's new training technique looking at Power = force x velocity (maxing velocity vs force), FAVI auto parts co having no policy or titles (you only work for your customer- you figure out what is needed for customer. Only customer leader & companion able to perform several different jobs).
- subtraction also works great for architecture & design: ex: Sarah Susanka Not So Big House, studying natural flow of life in a home and optimizing space for flow- build better, not bigger. Japanese principle of Shibui (quietude, refinement, elegance). Space with time view: connected spaces vs discrete rooms. Varying ceiling heights implies different functional areas. Also using fractal symmetry of squares
- sustainable solutions: people always try to leap to solution itself first, vs observe hidden causes. We tend to rely on mental shortcuts: react vs think. We also have bias for action vs observing and stop-doing. Ex: Genchi Genbutsu (go look and see): manufacturing line solutions better solved by studying local areas (line worker may have better solution suggestion!). Ex: video store problem of rewinding - just tell consumers tapes may need rewinding vs change behavior)
- ask "what is possible?" before "what should we do?" - try to favor incubation vs implementation, allow patience for optimal solution vs fast "good enough".
- Ladder of Inference: we experience one thing and build upon it with our own theories, assumptions, conclusions, and beliefs. As we climb the ladder, we are more abstract in thought and further removed from facts of situation, vulnerable to shortcircuiting and biases vs optimal action. Immanuel Kant: mind is not built to give raw knowledge of world; we must add our own certain bias to make it meaningful...but these mind sets are hidden, hard to identify, and we defend them subconsciously. We see what we believe
- subject-matter expertise can get in the way of crafting elegant solutions: if you are a hammer, everything looks like a nail. We get blinded to other solutions.
- creative impasse usually reached in 20 minutes on average during brainstorming sessions: top of mind ideas exhausted. Don't just pick best idea - take a break and return to problem later. Also: add more divergent

experience and knowledge to the room!

- be a better detective and learn to observe and spot key behaviors and clues-- ex: immerse yourself in your customer's lifestyle before designing product for them (Lexus example, Scion). Ex: Ohno Circle in assembly line: worker stands in circle all day and observes, asking why over and over again.

- creative insights and flashes come from synthesizing connections between seemingly disparate things -- give yourself physical and mental time away from the problem, engage your mind in unrelated activities. Ex: proper sleep promotes likelihood of insights, as does meditation! Brain bundles and repackages memories and fragments of info in hippocampus during sleep, sends to frontal cortex to be synthesized into higher-level thought. Brain clears and reboots itself during sleep, forming new connections & associations.

Justin Douglas says

For those who already knew that less is more, but couldn't pinpoint exactly why. Anecdotes on a variety of topics from traffic to video rentals show how Daoist principles such as "wu-wei" (doing by non-doing) can be applied (or non-applied) to modern life. A fascinating Gladwell-esque companion to the Dao De Jing, Chuang Tzu, Book of Tea, Science of Happiness, etc.

Arlington says

A book about elegance should be elegant, right? I mostly just found this book to be very tidy. I haven't read any Malcolm Gladwell, but this author seems to be camping under similar stars. I read it in one sitting and liked it. My brain feels, if not reformatted, then carefully adjusted, like I went to the brain chiropractor.

He defines elegance as a quality that falls under four annoyingly alliterative words: symmetry, seduction, subtraction & sustainability. For the rest of the book, pulls various anecdotes from all over the earth, examples of elegance. Some of these examples seem a little dumbdumb, and he marches forward with silly thesis statements, along the lines of "scientists and artists will agree: beauty and truth are beloved for their symmetry." (oh?) He has, unsurprisingly, a fetish for appropriating and clipping up Eastern philosophy and design for our own evil Western ways.

But it absolutely espoused a philosophy I'm down with, mindfulness and so forth. He gave a little elegance test at the end, and I passed it. He manicured some personal behavior patterns I've been trying to mow down, and made me feel like I could be a better person after I was done reading it. A deserved three stars for you, Mr. May. Just no more typos on your book cover and titles like "desperately seeking symmetry", ok?

Emily says

Interesting book on why we need elegance and how to achieve it. Elegance is defined as "cleverly apt and simple" and is achieved through symmetry, seduction, subtraction, and sustainability. I liked the big idea of the book and enjoyed the many examples, but did not always see the connection between the two.

"The power of elegance is achieved when the maximum impact is exacted with the minimum input." (need to work on my wordiness)

Why we need elegance: "Because by nature we tend to add when we should subtract, and act when we should stop and think. Because we need some way to consistently replace value-destroying complexity with value-creating simplicity. Because we need to know how to make room for more of what matters by eliminating what doesn't." (This is probably the main point I took from the book.)

Mike Thelen says

Matthew May, always driving leaders to the elegantly simply solution.
