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Flowers, for all their iconic status as symbols of romance and grief, are principally functional structures of plant reproduction. Freed from folklore, and studied in relation to their ecology and evolution, flowers are revealed as highly complex assemblages of organs that are subject to natural selection and ecological contingency, and to the interplay of those processes. This is aptly summarised in the opening sentence of this important book, where Lawrence Harder and Spencer Barrett state that reproductive structures and mating in the flowering plants “exhibit greater variety than those of any other organisms.”

Understanding how and why this variety has arisen, and the implications for our appreciation of evolutionary processes and ecological functions (including the conservation of plants and their pollinators), is currently the focus of huge research effort. Over 1000 publications on plant reproduction appeared last year, and that number will surely continue...

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