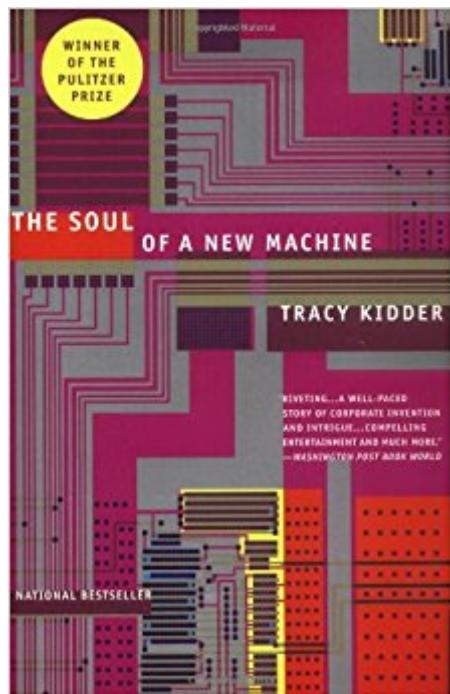


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The Soul Of A New Machine



Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize winner Tracy Kidder memorably records the drama, comedy, and excitement of one company's efforts to bring a new microcomputer to market. Computers have changed since 1981, when *The Soul of a New Machine* first examined the culture of the computer revolution. What has not changed is the feverish pace of the high-tech industry, the go-for-broke approach to business that has caused so many computer companies to win big (or go belly up), and the cult of pursuing mind-bending technological innovations. *The Soul of a New Machine* is an essential chapter in the history of the machine that revolutionized the world in the twentieth century.

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Customer Reviews

The computer revolution brought with it new methods of getting work done--just look at today's news for reports of hard-driven, highly-motivated young software and online commerce developers who sacrifice evenings and weekends to meet impossible deadlines. Tracy Kidder got a preview of this world in the late 1970s when he observed the engineers of Data General design and build a new 32-bit minicomputer in just one year. His thoughtful, prescient book, *The Soul of a New Machine*, tells stories of 35-year-old "veteran" engineers hiring recent college graduates and encouraging them to work harder and faster on complex and difficult projects, exploiting the youngsters' ignorance of normal scheduling processes while engendering a new kind of work ethic. These days, we are used to the "total commitment" philosophy of managing technical creation, but Kidder was surprised and even a little alarmed at the obsessions and compulsions he found. From in-house

political struggles to workers being permitted to tease management to marathon 24-hour work sessions, The Soul of a New Machine explores concepts that already seem familiar, even old-hat, less than 20 years later. Kidder plainly admires his subjects; while he admits to hopeless confusion about their work, he finds their dedication heroic. The reader wonders, though, what will become of it all, now and in the future. --Rob Lightner --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Pulitzer Prize winner Kidder's 1981 volume was published when mini-supercomputers were still the stuff of science fiction. How the world has turned. Though technology has grown immeasurably since then, this volume still serves as an interesting history of the machine that conquered the world. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Great story that gives a layman point of view on engineering a functional 32 bit computer in the turbulent computer industry of the late 70s. Gives an interesting look at the engineers back stories. Book can feel frustrating and slow moving at times, but this is also how it feels when creating something. I could feel the stress, monotony and endless hours poured into something. Shows the dangers of becoming an engineer and the pressure people feel to work insane hours to accomplish a goal that may never see the light of day. At the end of this book I found myself split on two separate opinions: 1. The ability for a team to come together and against all expectations to produce something faster than anyone expected. This was an amazing feat. 2. Given the right circumstances, a strong leader, fresh college graduates, managers willing to push, and a lofty high goal, a team and its members can be pushed to work 80 to 100 hours a week for years to achieve said lofty goal for a company that only pays them for 40 hours a week. It shows the ability to create/exploit cult like behavior to create something new. I have no doubt that a similar story could be made for countless products. We hear stories of the first Macintosh and iPhone, and how much work and sacrifice was put into these products. We praise the iPhone and Mac as being revolutionary products, but what if in the end it was just a normal product. This is the story of that machine.

If you are an old computer geek, as am I, having started my programming career in the early 70s with CDC 6000 series mainframes and PDP-11 minicomputers, you'll love the history behind the technology and programming techniques you used over the years. -

That this book won the Pulitzer is no surprise. It combines a deft hand at journalism with a subject that at the time was probably little known, though now, 30+ years later, it is very well known. It is chic now to be geek. In the early 80s such was not the case. Data General, left the stage in 1999 when it was acquired by another company. But when it was making new computers, and the men assigned to make new computers, that was a time little grasped by the world. Kidder is able to inform us of that time, but then he also goes to extremes such as always describing like a terrible dime store mystery, each member of the team when he introduces them. What he thinks might be infusing these sketches with depth actually reads like details from an index card that have to be injected in a particular order. Then, he does not seem to have a computer persons understanding of a computer. He breaks up the distinction between hardware and software and thinks he gives us an overview of what the two are doing but as a geek, as a writer of software and a electronics lab guy in high school, I am at a loss to understand what he was trying to say. That disconnect just does not hold up. We want to understand more about the boards constructed and how system language was so important on a new 32 bit project. Kidder captures that a team went in and built a computer that had not been built before, but there were other 32 bit computers out there already and profiling the first, the challenges to overcome from 16 bit to 32 bit, or really focusing on why this 32 bit was so much better, was needed. This is not anywhere near the iconic Insanely Great. And for that it suffers.

I worked at Data General in the years after this was written before the company went the way of all the super minicomputer companies. This book deservedly won the Pulitzer prize for non-fiction. Even for those not into computers, it is immensely readable -- reading like a high-tech adventure story. The author does not get lost in high-tech language -- explaining along the way what certain terms mean so even the lay reader can follow and find the story enjoyable and fascinating. It gives a great look into the culture of a company that epitomized that era -- and, I dare say, the culture of many current firms as well.

This book is a fascinating recount of Data General's effort to bring a new computer to the market. Through the stories we re-live moments of "drama, comedy, and excitement" as an engineering team works day and night in the goal of developing a computer - project code "Eagle". The author focuses on the natural tension that exists between the engineers and their management. Particularly that of a focus on product vs. the market and the race to develop the next computer. Within this book are numerous lessons on technical leadership, management and organizational dynamics. The lead

on the effort (Tom) is a strong believer in grass-root effort and had the ability to build a team, rally them toward a common cause and lead them to success. As mentioned on the cover: "What has changed little, however, is computer culture: the feverish pace of the high-tech industry, the mystique of programmers, the entrepreneurial bravado that has caused so many start-up companies to win big (or crash and burn), and the cult of pursuing mind-bending technological innovations. By tracing computer culture to its roots, by exploring the "soul" of the "machine" that has revolutionized the world, Kidder succeeds as no other writer has done in capturing the essential of the computer age." A fun classic read with numerous applicable lessons! Below are two excerpts that I found particularly relevant:

1- "Software compatibility is a marvelous thing. That was the essential lesson West took away from his long talks with his friend in Marketing. You didn't want to make a machine that wasn't compatible, not if you could avoid it. Old customers would feel that since they'd need to buy and create all new software anyways, they might as well look at what other companies had to offer; they'd be likely to undertake the dreaded "market survey".

2- "Adopting a remote, managerial point of view, you could say that the Eagle project was a case where a local system of management worked as it should: competition for resources creating within a team inside a company an entrepreneurial spirit, which was channeled in the right direction by constraints sent down from the top. But it seems more accurate to say that a group of engineers got excited about building a computer. Whether it arose by corporate bungling or by design, the opportunity had to be grasped. In this sense, the initiative belonged entirely to West and the members of his team. What's more, they did the work, both with uncommon spirit and for reasons that, in a most frankly commercial setting, seemed remarkably pure."

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