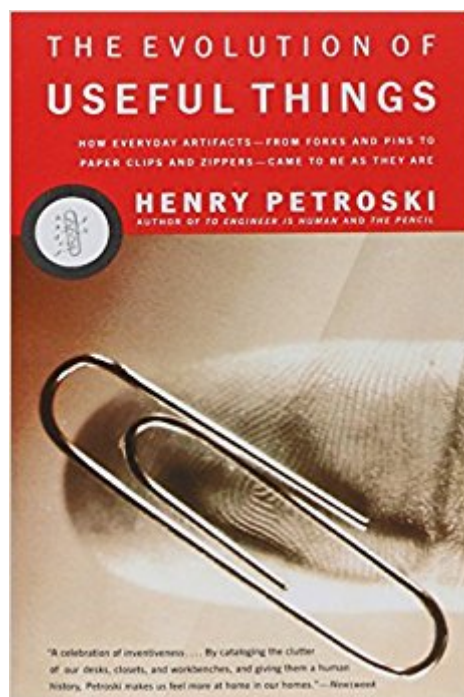




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The Evolution Of Useful Things: How Everyday Artifacts-From Forks And Pins To Paper Clips And Zippers-Came To Be As They Are



Synopsis

How did the table fork acquire a fourth tine? What advantage does the Phillips-head screw have over its single-grooved predecessor? Why does the paper clip look the way it does? What makes Scotch tape Scotch? In this delightful book Henry, Petroski takes a microscopic look at artifacts that most of us count on but rarely contemplate, including such icons of the everyday as pins, Post-its, and fast-food "clamshell" containers. At the same time, he offers a convincing new theory of technological innovation as a response to the perceived failures of existing products—suggesting that irritation, and not necessity, is the mother of invention.

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Customer Reviews

This surprising book may appear to be about the simple things of life--forks, paper clips, zippers--but in fact it is a far-flung historical adventure on the evolution of common culture. To trace the fork's history, Duke University professor of civil engineering Henry Petroski travels from prehistoric times to Texas barbecue to Cardinal Richelieu to England's Industrial Revolution to the American Civil War--and beyond. Each item described offers a cultural history lesson, plus there's plenty of engineering detail for those so inclined.

For armchair inventors or those who are curious about the way things work, this book offers hours of delight. Petroski (engineering, Duke Univ.) provides an intricate look, in lay reader's terms, at the technology and basic rationale behind a number of items we often take for granted. The list is

comprehensive: kitchen utensils, zippers, tools, paper clips, fast-food packaging, and more. The text is far from a recital of mere facts. Petroski's anecdotes and stories about individual designers and inventors are told with warm regard. Petroski also provides illuminating thoughts on the theoretical, historical, and cultural frameworks that influenced these creations. Although this book will appeal to a somewhat specialized audience, many general readers will find it fascinating and educational. For circulating libraries.- Carol J. Binkowski, Bloomfield, N.J. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book held my interest from the first page to the last. I like the logical yet sensible way the author develops his theme (in my opinion) - that there really is no such thing as an original invention. Every so-called invention is actually an improvement on an earlier design and/or a synthesis of multiple design components into a new combination. The examples are simple to understand. All in all, this is a positively fascinating book. I bought this book years ago. The one I bought from was for a friend. I not only recommend it, I buy it for friends and family.

On the face of it, the Evolution of Useful Things simply lists fun trivia about familiar objects. Why does a fork have four tines and not two or three? What's a perfect paperclip? Is there such a thing? Who invented the zipper? How many things can you see on your desk right now? However the book gives us much more. Petroski uses a large number of concrete facts to present general laws of human thought and activity. The paper clip appeared because pins used to hold papers together made holes in them and could injure someone looking through files, but it took a while for it to reach the form we know today. We invent new things because we are dissatisfied when we find problems. Form follows not function, but failure. While small objects play the center role here, large machines such as locomotives and large projects such as bridges also come up. Petroski argues that for his concepts to be valid, they must apply to the great as well as the small and he shows that engineers design new bridges or tunnels by solving problems observed found while building other bridges and tunnels. The book's title is especially good. The evolution of man-made things differs fundamentally from the evolution of living things. Natural selection follows a mindless process of sifting through countless minute _random_ changes. Things, however, evolve through a different process of sifting through countless _intended_ changes (sometimes small, sometimes large) until something arises that works better than before. Petroski's writing does annoy me a little; he's got some really bad puns. For example he follows two different quotations of how to manufacture a needle with the phrase "there's more than one way to make a point." Another problem is that he repeats himself.

For instance, he twice mentions Karl Marx's astonishment at finding 500 different kinds of hammers in a Birmingham factory. But the originality of his thesis far outweighs these minor flaws. Henry Petroski is a philosopher of engineering examining the question of why we invent things. He asks why we are always perfecting our inventions, why we are never satisfied with our tools as they are. His proposed answers in no small way explain much of the history of our rich living environment with its tens of thousands of useful things. Vincent Poirier, Tokyo

Very interesting account of how every day items began and evolved. From the development of the paper to the remarkable changes to the telephone. The material was interesting and presented in an entertaining way.

I got this for my budding inventor, 12 yo nephew. He loved it, plus another boy his age wants a copy. They are high skilled readers, admittedly, but it's not just for engineers.

i like until i spilled oil all over it

Like other books by Petroski, has a lot of obscure information, but his style is very wordy and laborious.

Love that book, but I'm a factoid nut!!!

groovy

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