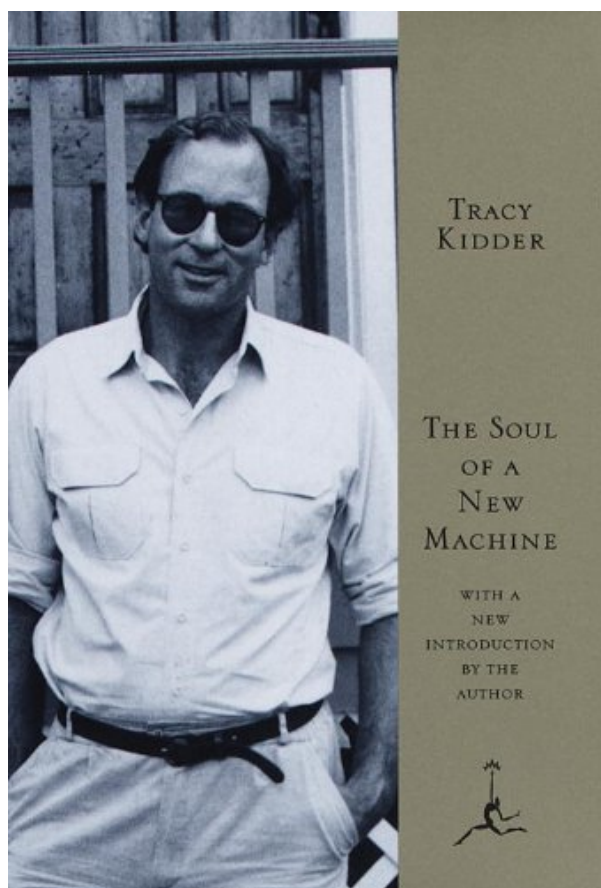
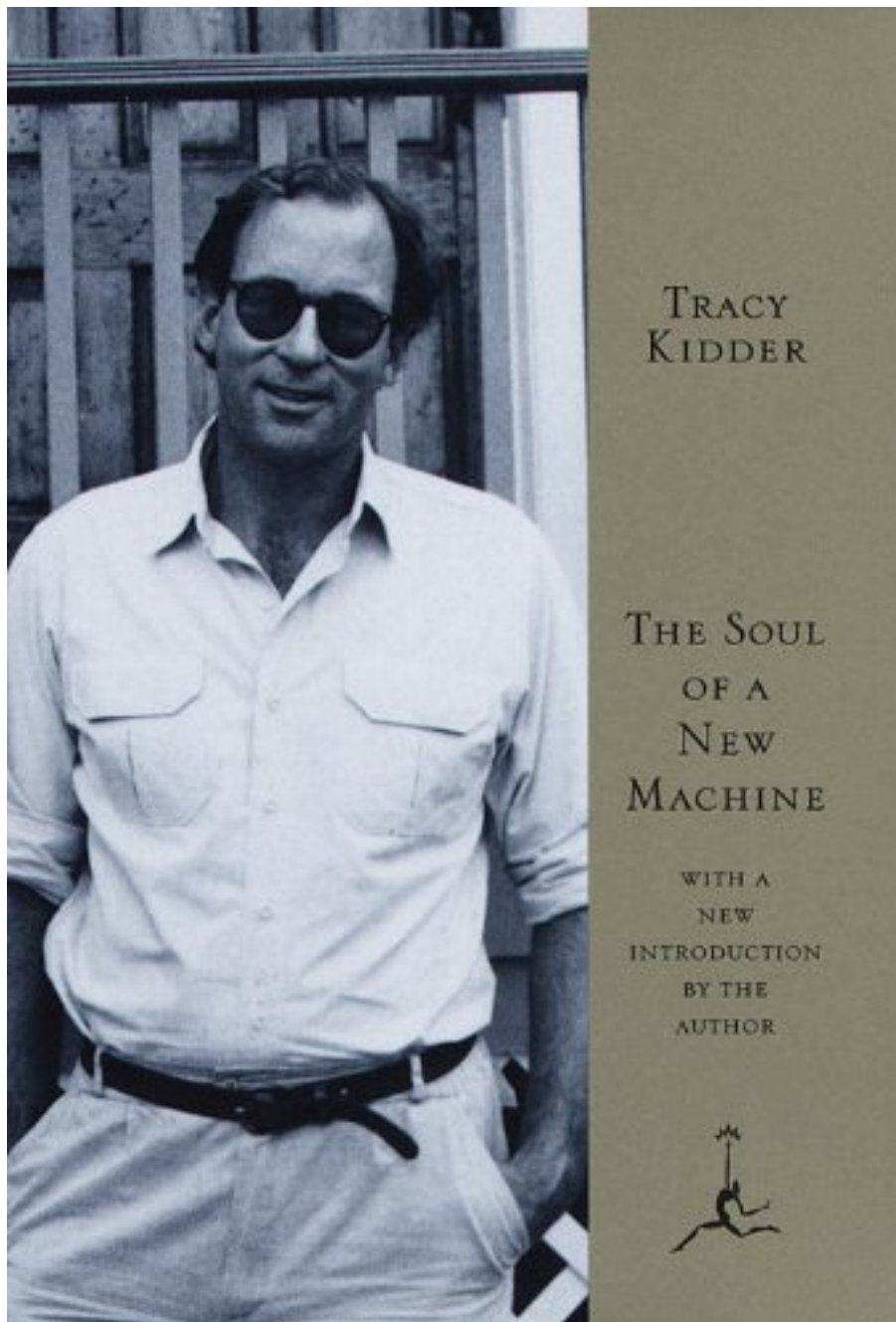


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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award, *The Soul of a New Machine* was a bestseller on its first publication in 1981. With the touch of an expert thriller writer, Tracy Kidder recounts the feverish efforts of a team of Data General researchers to create a new 32-bit superminicomputer. A compelling account of individual sacrifice and human ingenuity, *The Soul of a New Machine* endures as the classic chronicle of the computer age and the masterminds behind its technological advances.

"A superb book," said Robert Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. "All the incredible complexity and chaos and exploitation and loneliness and strange, half-mad beauty of this field are honestly and correctly drawn." *The Washington Post Book World* said, "Kidder has created compelling entertainment. He offers a fast, painless, enjoyable means to an initial understanding of computers, allowing us to understand the complexity of machines we could only marvel at before, and to appreciate the skills of the people who create them."

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Tracy Kidder has written a new Introduction to this Modern Library edition.

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-- Jeremy Bernstein, New York Review of Books

Most helpful customer reviews

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

The best book on the Engineering profession available

By Dr. Toad

I first read this book when it came out - while I was in college. It's interesting to re-read it 30 years later with the perspective of what became of the Eclipse MV8000, Data General, Digital Equipment, and the other non-human *Dramatis Personae*. As far as the people - who knows: it's easier to follow the history of an industry than the people who comprise it. But it's the people that Kidder wisely focuses upon.

What comes through is the passion that a group of people have for their work - the long hours, the camaraderie, and the joy of creation. I confess - as an engineer it tweaks me when artists dismiss the profession. Engineering is the act of creation just as much as art is - with one added requirement: the creation must be useful. The technology in the book is archaic, but the process is the same today in Silicon Valley as then in Westboro, Mass. In fact, it's the requirement for utility that consigns most engineering creation to the scrap heap in short order - that's how it's supposed to be. It's still a pleasure to do the work, and that is evident in this book.

I think that reading this book helps explain something: I've never met an engineer unhappy about his or her career choice - try finding an attorney that skips to work. Is it hard to keep sharp at the cutting edge? Absolutely - the MV8000 was a market failure, Data General went under in the 1992 recession, and mighty Digital (once the largest private employer in Massachusetts and New Hampshire) was bought in a fire sale by Compaq for access to the Alpha CPU architecture - which went unused and was scrapped when Compaq was acquired by Hewlett-Packard. The same HP that laid the cornerstone for Silicon Valley and now makes money selling over-priced printer cartridges. You drive in the fast lane, you get in a wreck or two. But it is FUN to drive in the fast lane!

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

Just as good the second time around

By rkc

I first read Tracy Kidder's book "The Soul of a New Machine" in the early 1980s, shortly after its publication in 1981. At the time I was intrigued and interested in the process and detail of engineering required to bring a new computer to market; and I was fascinated by the leadership/management skills employed by the key character to "motivate" the team. I thought it was a great read.

That was nearly thirty years ago.

Recently, I mentioned this book in a conversation with a colleague and subsequently decided to read it again. I hoped it would be as good as I thought it was the first time, but I was skeptical. Technology has changed a lot; and both the MV/8000 and Data General Corporation are now long gone. Would "The Soul of a New Machine" still be as gripping a story as it was originally? The answer, in a word, is YES!

In rereading the book in 2011, I was struck by the diversity of the team engaged in this effort, the various work methods and styles that had to come together for success. Kidder introduces the reader to a wonderful cast of characters who worked incredible hours and faced enormous time pressures under great stress for months and months to birth a new computer.

It may sound simple, but it wasn't. "The Soul of a New Machine" is a gripping, circuitous, wonderful tale of a dream and the team that brought it to life.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

An awesome documentary style book on the reality of what drives a project to completion

By Sachmo

This book is a non-fiction account of the development of a mini-computer in the 1980s. The book begins by describing the background: Data General, a computer company, has been recently leapfrogged by a competitor who put out a 32-bit mini computer system over their 16-bit system. To keep up with their major competitor (DEC), the company begins a development project for their own 32-bit mini computer.

The company HQ is based in Massachusetts. What complicates matters is that the CEO establishes a new R&D center in North Carolina where he hopes the new 32-bit mini computer will be built. The new R&D center however, creates a major rift between the engineers who stayed in Massachusetts and the ones who work in North Carolina - as both groups want to be in charge of development. A major feud begins, but basically the group in North Carolina wins and gets to build the new 32-bit system.

However, the story begins in Massachusetts....

Tom West, an engineering manager in Massachusetts, manages to convince the management that it would be worthwhile to have a 'back-up' 32-bit computer system, that was perhaps backwards compatible with their old 16-bit systems. It would be a sort of 'insurance' so to speak in case development efforts in North Carolina took too long.

With a handful of experienced engineers as team leaders, he recruits essentially fresh college graduates and works the hell out of them to create a rival 32-bit computer system.

Over the course of the book, it becomes apparent that the North Carolina facility - despite having more resources, money, engineers, etc. - will not in fact be able to launch their product in a timely fashion. West's



team of new recruits really does need to release their product in order for the company to continue competing in the mini-computer market.

The book is not written so much on the technical details of the project, but rather is more of a 'documentary' of the experience of being on the product development team.

The level of detail this book captures, and at each level (from West's perspective, the perspective of a number of the fresh college graduates, his experienced Team Leaders who speculated on West's motives in driving everyone so hard, the background situation of the company and management) is perfect.

Looking back historically, one could easily just conclude that the Massachusetts team succeeded for all sorts of technical reasons. But there were a lot of interesting human reasons for why the project succeeded. For one, the project should have never been started in Massachusetts in the first place. The company management did not seem to have any clear idea of what to put their engineers to work on (or even really know what they were working on) and a wily manager was able to sneak the project by, masquerading it as something else.

As engineer on a product development team for a robotic system, I can 100% relate to this book.

The ridiculous management decisions, the company politics, engineers working insane hours on esoteric problems, the strange culture of engineers, the product launch and general lack of appreciation for the engineer's work afterwards - it's amazingly well captured in this book, and I was surprised at how my current company and previous company experiences relate so strongly to the product development described here.

What I liked most about it, was that a lot of the decisions made by West, the company, etc were highly irrational, if you looked at them from the company perspective. The company SHOULD have only had one group working on the development project. West SHOULD have explained to his team the importance of what they were working on and perhaps been more involved on the day to day decisions of the project, just as the VP of Engineering SHOULD have been more cognizant of what West's entire team was up to. (The author writes about 'mushroom management' in the book - keep 'em in the dark and feed 'em \*edited by Amazon Censors\*). But in reality, for often political reasons, feuds, the strange driven personality of a particular manager, the strange management practices of the CEO, all of these mistakes get made, and yet a 32-bit mini computer gets built and saves the company in the end anyway.

It's a great book because it is all true.

I am not sure how interesting this would be for someone that doesn't work in product development, but for me, I see this mistakes made in my company every day. It's amazing how much individual personalities, and strange coincidences can drive a project.

An additional tidbit, Wired magazine did a follow up with all of the engineers years after this book was written:

"[...]"

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A great book.

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