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Inventology: How We Dream Up Things That Change The World



Synopsis

"Elegant prose and excellent reporting . . . By the time I had finished reading, I had underlined many intriguing ideas." —New York Times Book Review "No doubt Inventology will be marketed to the creative business class, but there's ample interest here even for readers who aren't actively inventing anything." —Boston Globe A doctor realizes that an innocent-looking tube is killing his patients, then reads a newspaper article that inspires him to create a better version that serves as an early warning system for infections. A father cleans up after his toddler and builds a "sippy" cup that won't spill. An engineer dreams of a different world and pioneers the cell phone. By studying breakthroughs like these, we can learn how people imagine their way around "impossible" problems to discover groundbreaking answers. Pagan Kennedy reports on how enduring methods of invention can be adapted to the twenty-first century, as millions of us deploy tools like crowdfunding, big data, and 3-D printing to address our needs or realize our dreams. Drawing on fresh research and the surprising stories behind many inventions old and new to reveal the steps that most reliably produce discovery, Inventology is a myth-shattering book and a must-read for anyone who is curious about creativity and the mental leaps required to solve our most challenging problems. "Inventology may be a real science; researchers are beginning to study it, and teachers are teaching it . . . A delightful account of how inventors do what they do." —Kirkus Reviews, starred review "Offers a new perspective into the process of invention that will inform and illuminate." —Publishers Weekly

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Customer Reviews

"A delightful account of how inventors do what they do." ---Kirkus Starred Review --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Find out where great ideas come from. A doctor realizes that an innocent-looking tube is killing his patients. A father cleans up after his toddler and builds a sippy cup that won't spill. An engineer dreams of a different world and pioneers the cell phone. By studying breakthroughs like these, we can learn how people imagine their way around impossible problems to discover groundbreaking answers. Pagan Kennedy reports on how enduring methods of invention can be adapted to the twenty-first century, as millions of us deploy tools like crowdfunding, big data, and 3-D printing to address our needs or realize our dreams. *Inventology* draws on fresh research and the surprising stories behind many inventions old and new to reveal the steps that most reliably produce discovery. As Kennedy shows, recent advances in technology and communication have placed us at the cusp of a golden age; it's now more possible than ever before to transform ideas into actuality. This myth-shattering book is a must-read for anyone who is eager to understand how the most amazing, important new things come into the world." --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

This is an important book. Usually, that means that the topic of the book is something alarming: some horrible injustice or a situation which desperately needs to be corrected. *Inventology*, though, is mostly good news. Our lives are being improved not merely by new inventions, but by what Ms. Kennedy calls the "democratization" of invention. Many inventions of our time have come from large industrial laboratories such as the celebrated Bell Telephone Labs in New Jersey. (That laboratory, now owned by Nokia, is yet operating.) Now, however, the World Wide Web has made it possible for independent laboratories and individual inventors to access a wealth of information, so the formerly tight circle of scientists working on top-secret projects has now expanded to include . . . YOU! In addition to expedient access to information, modern inventors no longer must stake the family fortune on a device which may or may not become successful, because crowd-funding sites provide ready capital to develop an idea. Another welcome development is crowd-sourcing. In the past, large corporations, such as the auto industry, would refuse to consider any innovation which was Not Invented Here, not in-house, something that they'd have to pay to use. Now, thanks to public sites such as InnoCentive, many large corporations turn to the public to solve their problems

by offering substantial cash prizes for useful suggestions. Often experts in their discipline overlook a practical solution, and the book cites several examples where people far outside a field have suggested prize-winning solutions (practical ideas which have sometimes angered the experts). Even better, since the public in general is invited to participate, many solutions and innovations have come from minorities and women, those to whom the doors of the laboratory had previously been closed. We now have more solutions to more problems because the number of people devising solutions has thus increased exponentially. That's pretty good, isn't it? Years ago, the president of the H. L. Mencken Society told me that, excepting newspaper reporters, there were fewer than one-hundred people in the United States who made a living solely from writing. I can't confirm the accuracy of that, but Pagan Kennedy is one of those people, and there's a reason for that — she's a versatile writer and a fine stylist (except for page 208, where she refers to "a price point" — why not simply "a price"?). But I have a few complaints.

Inventology spends many pages discussing the solution to the problem of sailors determining longitude, and she credits John Harrison (1693–1776) with proposing that a ship's clock would enable a navigator to determine how far west the ship was at noon. Harrison was an important maker of marine clocks, but the idea of using such a clock to determine longitude had been around for many years before Harrison, and there were many previous attempts to devise a clock which would be reliable at sea. On page 166, Ms. Kennedy describes how automobiles are painted: "The car would be driven into a special booth and paper sheets would be taped over its windshield and other areas that needed to be kept free of paint." She mentions this as an analogy for a human tanning method, but vehicles and their components have always been painted long before any glass or trim is installed. Automakers don't use masking tape. Many pages are spent on Genrich Altshuller (1926-1998), who might be thought of as the Russian Buckminster Fuller. Altshuller, who was tortured and imprisoned during the era of Stalin, wrote science fiction and developed the TRIZ (Theory of Inventive Problem Solving) movement, but Ms. Kennedy does not make clear how TRIZ methods led to any things or techniques which we use today — just as we admire Buckminster Fuller, but we don't use any of his inventions. (Still, I guess it's nice to give such visionary eccentrics a shout-out.) Because this book covers so many ideas and inventions, it sometimes describes each inadequately. For example, she (to her credit) introduces the late Doug Engelbart (along with the use of LSD by him and others), but I don't feel that she gives adequate coverage to the scope of his work, and what's provided is reported in a matter-of-fact tone. For the best account of Engelbart giving "The Mother of All Demos" read the section devoted to it in *What the Dormouse Said: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the*

Personal Computer Industry" by John Markoff and you'll understand that Engelbart was actually a man from the future (or some other point in the space-time continuum). Ms. Kennedy may be correct that when Engelbart "was dealing lightning with both hands" (in the account of one witness), not every member of the audience realized what was actually going on, but it only took a few . . . and so here we are. My final complaint (to avoid too sour a review) is that, like many Americans, Ms. Kennedy continues to quote the blague from Thomas Edison's press agent. Thomas Edison is the most overrated person in history (with the possible exception of John the Baptist), and not only did he not invent the light bulb or anything else we use today, but in the War of the Currents, he set the United States back and at a disadvantage to the rest of the world. No serious book on invention should mention his name. (I live in a cement house, but not one of Edison's design, all of which are perfectly awful.) I can't leave without mentioning another topic discussed in this book: how do we invent? Where do ideas come from? That's a popular subject, and other reviews here mention other such Inventology books. My recommendation on the topic, in addition to this book, is "The Most Powerful Idea in the World: A Story of Steam, Industry, and Invention" by William Rosen. I favor both books because they place little stock in the popular theories of Malcolm Gladwell. I suppose that I like both books, because I admire the brilliant people profiled in them, people who are better (smarter, more productive) than I am. It's good to have heroes.

Very interesting in finding the origin of inventions. Some were inadvertent, some were not. Unusual and fun.

This is a very good book. I enjoyed reading every page of it.. it makes you believe that inventions are not only for specific people with lots of capabilities and resources. With the technologies we have in today's world, anyone like you and me can be creative and come up with inventions that can change the world!

This insightful and entertaining book looks at the alchemy behind invention - and delivers some interesting theories as to why certain people are better able to solve problems through inventiveness than others. This should be read by would-be inventors, but also by corporate R&D departments who, according to Pagan Kennedy, are actually thwarting invention in many cases. A great read.

I didn't find unexpected or interesting ideas

Not worth spending hours on, nor even one hour with; just old stories retold and retold and retold; nothing new or interesting. Reads like a elementary school students primer on inventions.

Excellent overview with many interesting examples. Entertaining and insightful. Recommended for all R&D employees or aspiring inventors.

None

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