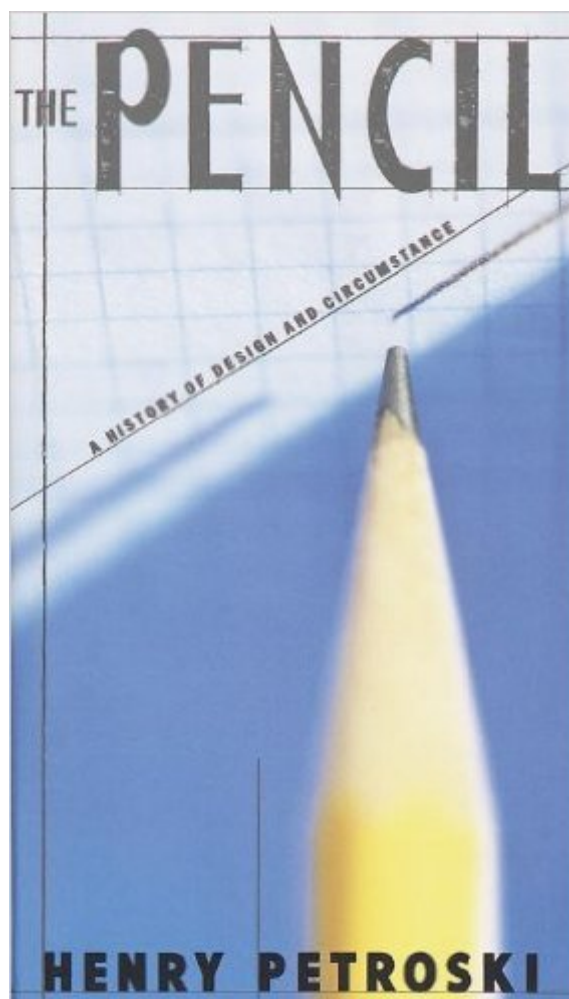


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The Pencil: A History Of Design And Circumstance



Synopsis

Henry Petroski traces the origins of the pencil back to ancient Greece and Rome, writes factually and charmingly about its development over the centuries and around the world, and shows what the pencil can teach us about engineering and technology today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Petroski is more than a little obsessive. He has the ability to collect an astounding amount of information on truly arcane topics. He is not necessarily the most riveting author, though. It comes as no surprise to see the number of engineers who rave over his books and the lack of attention from non-engineers. Personally, I dabble on the knife's edge between the technical and non-technical, so perhaps that was why I was able to read this book through. I'm almost embarrassed to admit to burning curiosity about many issues associated with the pencil. Why are they yellow, why are they cedar, who was Eberhard (and does the name refer to the longevity of the point?), and why don't old men sharpen them with pocket knives any longer? This book answered all of those questions and more that I hadn't come close to anticipating. While there is certainly plenty of information to satisfy the curiosity of a pencil enthusiast, the book brings a deeper level of meaning. Performing such a detailed examination of a common product provides insight into human character and economics. It provides understanding of why businesses flourish or fail, and how that affects the mundane details of our everyday lives. Certainly, anyone with an interest in the subject matter would be entertained by this book--it is a veritable information orgy on the subject of

pencils. However, I also recommend it to anyone with an interest in the history of technology--how it develops, why product categories are made the way they are, and how society appropriates these products and adapts itself to them. "Everyday Things" was too boring to me to complete, but I read "Pencils" cover to cover. Perhaps there is more to be learned through detailed research into one specific and common technology than there is through the broad brush approach of "Things."

I loved this book. No surprise, because several years ago I became aware of the differences in the way pencils write. I picked up a great pencil as a giveaway from a community college. It felt like satin gliding along the paper. I kept it tucked safely inside my desk where my students could not get it. The first of the book is thought provoking as it discusses how the pencil has been ignored. This book and the EVOLUTION OF USEFUL THINGS, causes one to pause and consider the important, overlooked items of our daily lives. Maybe a reader is left with a good life lesson. THE BOOK ON THE BOOKSHELF is my next read. One thing for sure, you have to have a bit of an engineering streak in you to hang on every word. Get ready for strange looks when you answer the question, "What are you reading now?"

What a surprise! Who could think that such a simple object could have such an interesting history? Henry Petroski, as in his other books, weaves a tale that entertains and amazes in this history of the pencil, looking at both its historical progress and technical progress. Worth the read, no matter whether you are interested in engineering or not!

Every once in a while everyone should take a look around the room and think about how the stuff in it came to be there, and about the people who invented them. If, like me, you are in an office, one of the objects your eye will encounter will be the lowly pencil. So who invented it? Why is it yellow and hexagonal in cross section? What is the lead made out of? Lots of questions--enough to fill a book! And this is the book that provides answers to all the questions, and more. It is a superbly written, well organized, and beautifully produced with lots of illustrations. It is a book about the history of a technology and the people who made it. Petroski brings it all to life. This is a fascinating tale of the quest for a perfect tool--one that does it well, cheaply, and reliably. This process has taken several centuries so far, and will probably continue for several more and it is a perfect vehicle for learning how technological change actually takes place through the agency of innovative men. It shows off the best side of man the engineer, questing ever to improve his lot, and that of his fellow man.

I've read Petroski before, so I was prepared for his discursive style, alternately entertaining and annoying. Almost everything you might want to know about the pencil is here somewhere--perhaps just not where you'd expect it to be. Different readers will bring different agenda to this book, and some may revel in the entire volume as written. Personally, I found the book too long, and I eventually began skimming Petroski's meandering commentary on the connections between engineering, technology, craftsmanship and entrepreneurship, which he probably deemed the ground for writing the book in the first place. Having said that, there is much to enjoy here: great stories about mining Borrowdale "plumbago," the creativeness of Thoreau as pencilmaker, the 1847 discovery by Jean Pierre Alibert of a vast deposit of graphite on the border of Siberia and China, and the trials and successes of Armand Hammer's pencil making venture for the Soviet Union. "Appendix B," a discussion of Petroski's own pencil collecting, is as entertaining as anything in the book.

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