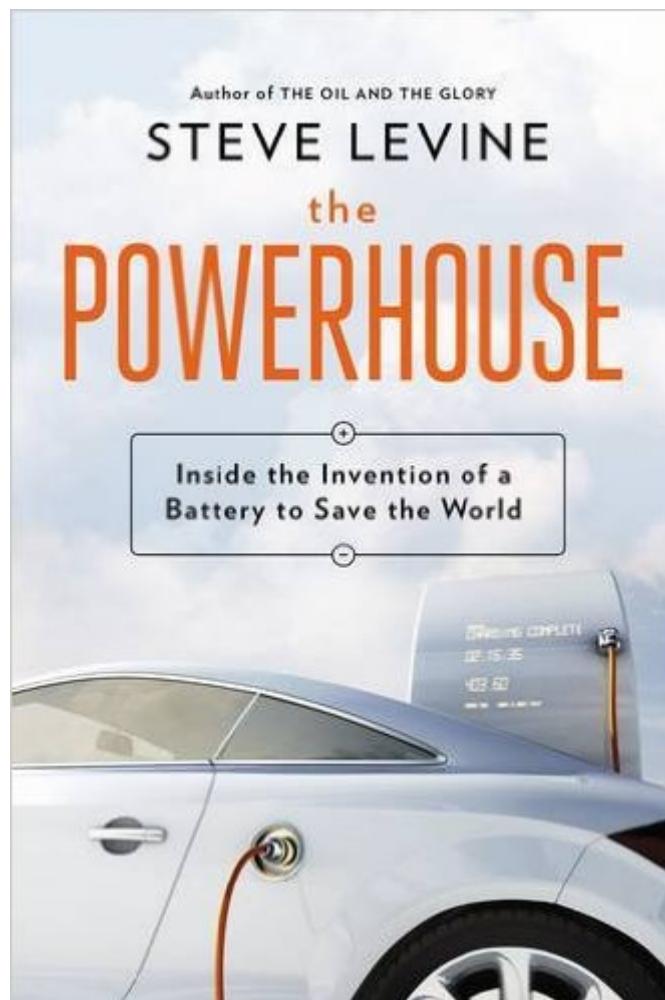


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The Powerhouse: Inside The Invention Of A Battery To Save The World



Synopsis

A Soul of the New Machine for our time, a gripping account of invention, commerce, and duplicity in the age of technology A worldwide race is on to perfect the next engine of economic growth, the advanced lithium-ion battery. It will power the electric car, relieve global warming, and catapult the winner into a new era of economic and political mastery. Can the United States win? Steve LeVine was granted unprecedented access to a secure federal laboratory outside Chicago, where a group of geniuses is trying to solve this next monumental task of physics. But these scientists--almost all foreign born--are not alone. With so much at stake, researchers in Japan, South Korea, and China are in the same pursuit. The drama intensifies when a Silicon Valley start-up licenses the federal laboratory's signature invention with the aim of a blockbuster sale to the world's biggest carmakers. The Powerhouse is a real-time, two-year account of big invention, big commercialization, and big deception. It exposes the layers of aspiration and disappointment, competition and ambition behind this great turning point in the history of technology.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Spoiler alert! This book would have been better if it were about half as long. I only made it through about 70% before I gave up. Instead I looked up Mr. LeVine's article on Quartz about the collapse of Envia. That article was a good read, but here he tried to wrap the Envia story up with the details of battery research at Argonne and make it into a fairly long book. It loses focus as it delves into needless detail on the interactions of a couple dozen major and minor players. I started to lose track

of the all the postdocs and bit players who pop in and out of the story. About 20% of the book is just about the process of writing a grant proposal, which is drudgery to do and not much fun to read about. This should be a good story. There is deception and institutional dysfunction, politics and backstabbing. However, the author is too coy while building up to the big reveal about Envia. For the part of the book that I read, everything Envia claimed is presented with complete credulity.

Ultimately, the suspense is lost. I think a lot of people who read a book about car batteries will already know the Envia story, and the way it is presented here gives no additional insight into what happened there. As for Argonne - I think we are supposed to be rooting for them, but what comes through between the lines makes the institution seem like its own worst enemy. Mr LeVine's presentation of the material is dry and fact oriented. Maybe that's inevitable, given the subject matter: a large government laboratory. It was about as exciting as reading a book about the inner workings of the post office. Finally, there is the science aspect. I'm a physicist, but I don't know anything about battery science in particular.

The Powerhouse is not foreign correspondent Steve Levine's first book on the politics of energy, but it is his first book on the politics of electric batteries. Levine has published books on Russia and oil exploration. It's a good book, but you feel the author struggle with the science throughout it. To his credit, Levine is able to master most of the scientific terminology needed for it. Steve Levine managed to embed himself with some of the best minds developing electric batteries during the course of writing this book. He's managed to give the reader an inside view into the struggles, politics and funding, the coin of front-line science. And he manages to bring it across with all the gushing of a kid with his first chemistry set. Although it does at times read like a championship season sports book. The book is broken up into 3 sections: 1) The Stakes, 2) Foreigners in the Labs and 3) Reckoning. Most of the first section is background on the labs and major players in the quest for a battery which will power an electric car. Part two lets the reader in on the current research and researchers. The last section looks at the attempts to get a marketable battery out of all the work done before. It begins with China's minister of science's visit to Argonne National Laboratory. Argonne is where much of the leading battery research is accomplished, so naturally the representative of the country where much of the batteries in the world are used wants to see what the competition is up to. From there we get a detailed history of Argonne labs: how the federal government bought the country estate of a hot dog maker to set up a research lab. Founded after WWII, the lab became a vast research center with small communities growing up around it for the scientists and workers.

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