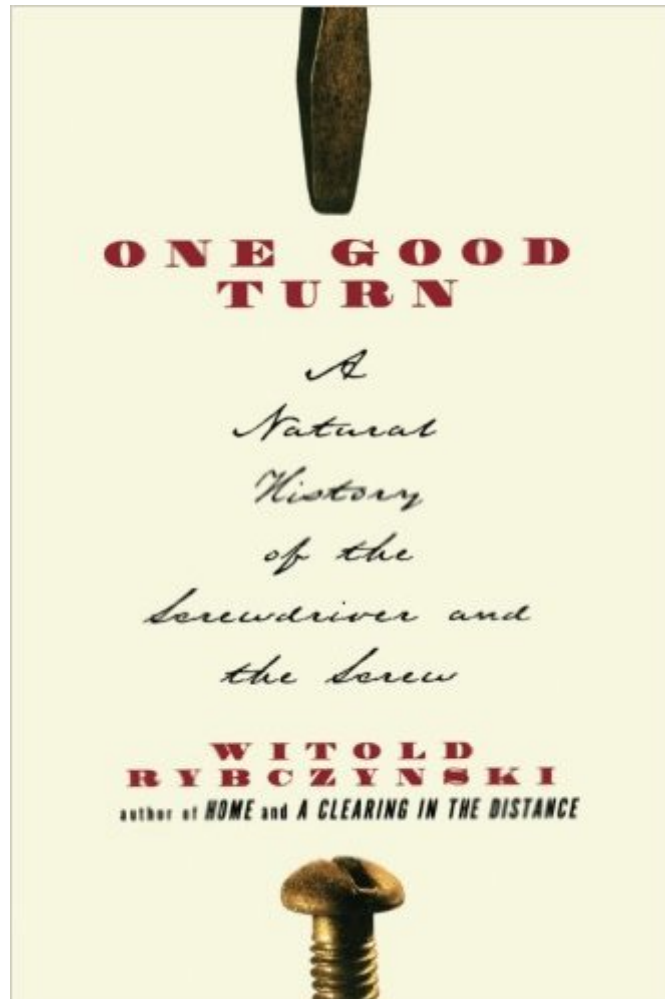


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One Good Turn: A Natural History Of The Screwdriver And The Screw



Synopsis

The Best Tool of the Millennium The seeds of Rybczynski's elegant and illuminating new book were sown by The New York Times, whose editors asked him to write an essay identifying "the best tool of the millennium." The award-winning author of *Home*, *A Clearing in the Distance*, and *Now I Sit Me Down*, Rybczynski once built a house using only hand tools. His intimate knowledge of the toolbox -- both its contents and its history -- serves him beautifully on his quest. *One Good Turn* is a story starring Archimedes, who invented the water screw and introduced the helix, and Leonardo, who sketched a machine for carving wood screws. It is a story of mechanical discovery and genius that takes readers from ancient Greece to car design in the age of American industry. Rybczynski writes an ode to the screw, without which there would be no telescope, no microscope -- in short, no enlightenment science. One of our finest cultural and architectural historians, Rybczynski renders a graceful, original, and engaging portrait of the tool that changed the course of civilization.

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Customer Reviews

Although I had no interest in screwdrivers and screws when I started this book, the text provided a pleasant reading experience and I learned more than I thought I would. All in all, it was well worth the time spent. I think you will feel that way too, unless you have no interest at all in mechanical devices and the process of innovation. My favorite parts related to the innovations. This book is composed of equal parts (1) why the author chose the screwdriver as the tool of the millennium for

his article in the Sunday New York Times Magazine (2) where you have to go to find out about screwdrivers from the past (3) how he developed the information for this history of the screwdriver and screws and (4) the geniuses who developed the key advances in the technology of these useful devices. The style is a bit rambling, much like what would happen if you were chatting about the subject over a barbecue in the back yard with plenty of time on your hands. I can assure you this must be the most complete and authoritative book about screwdrivers and screws ever, especially since the author points out the virtual absence of any prior material turning up in his research. Let me summarize the key areas. He picked the screwdriver as the tool of the millennium not because he thought of it, but because his wife told him that it was the one tool that she always kept around. After having gone through his own tool kit, he had not even thought of the screwdriver. The first place where much shows up on the screwdriver in older texts is Diderot's Encyclopedia. In those days screwdrivers were called turnscrews. To get a flavor of the screwdriver in the middle ages, when it seems to have appeared, you have to look into armor and early guns.

Let's get the main question out of the way: Can an entire book devoted to the history of the screw and screwdriver possibly be worth reading? The answer is an unqualified yes. This small book takes an unusual, almost reverential, look at the the nature of tools and the mind of the inventor and innovator. Rybczynski recounts his research into the origins of this ubiquitous tool, so it is also a tale of the research process. He tells the story in a casual, personal style, making it an easy read. The book is not tightly focused on its subject, filled with many digressions and asides which are as interesting as the main narrative. One of my favorites concerns the invention of the the shirt button. It seems like the epitome of simplicity, and could have been made thousands of years ago, yet it took until the 1300's for some unknown genius to make the "leap of imagination" and conceive of the device, which seems simple but is not at all intuitive. The author asks the reader to imagine trying to explain the the "twist and flip" motion to some one who has never used one. Its nuggets like this, which make the reader look at common items from an entirely different perspective, that makes the book shine. It turns out that one of the first uses of the screw dates back to the Middle Ages, as a method of fastening the the brutally abused armor of jousting knights, and later to secure the matchlock mechanisms of the earliest firearms. However, in exploring the concept of the helix, the basis of the screw, the author reaches much further back in time, to the ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, who understood the shape and put it to use in irrigation and wine presses.

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