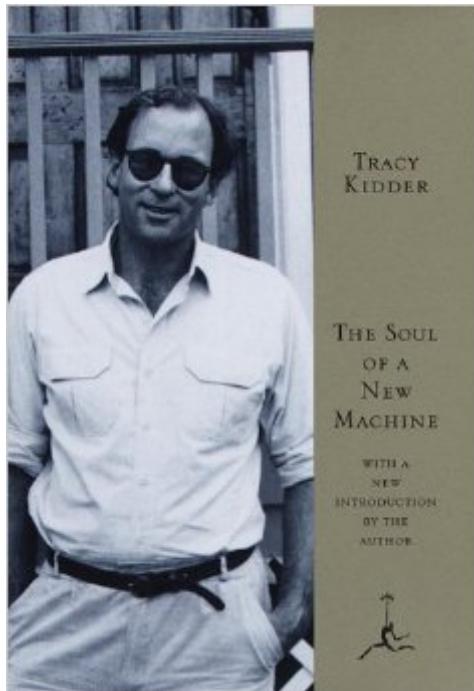


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The Soul Of A New Machine (Modern Library)



Synopsis

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." The Modern Library has played a significant role in American cultural life for the better part of a century. The series was founded in 1917 by the publishers Boni and Liveright and eight years later acquired by Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer. It provided the foundation for their next publishing venture, Random House. The Modern Library has been a staple of the American book trade, providing readers with affordable hardbound editions of important works of literature and thought. For the Modern Library's seventy-fifth anniversary, Random House redesigned the series, restoring as its emblem the running torch-bearer created by Lucian Bernhard in 1925 and refurbishing jackets, bindings, and type, as well as inaugurating a new program of selecting titles. The Modern Library continues to provide the world's best books, at the best prices. Tracy Kidder has written a new Introduction to this Modern Library edition.

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Customer Reviews

‘The Soul of a New Machine’ is a landmark journalistic book-length essay by then ‘Atlantic Monthly’ writer, Tracy Kidder exploring the development of a new computer in those pre-microcomputer days of 1978. I am delighted to find this book issued as a ‘classic’, as I have read it many times and have been meaning to do a review of it for some time. I cannot think of a better occasion than with the release of this new edition. When it was first published, the book was a narrative of what was then ‘modern’ technology, where the central processing units (CPU) or ‘brains’ of commercial minicomputers and mainframe computers were built up on large circuit boards from individual, specialized integrated circuit chips, with each chip integrating dozens or hundreds of discrete components. This compares to today’s microcomputers where the entire CPU is placed on a single chip incorporating tens of thousands of discrete functions, all taking up no more room than the average credit card. Now, the book is more a history of how this technology was developed, and yet its picture of how people work in teams developing technological projects will probably never go out of date. The irony of this book is that the computer being developed by the team described in this book, a 32 bit Eclipse computer developed by the Data General corporation, a competitor to the larger and very successful Digital Computer Corporation (Digital), did not really achieve any major breakthrough in technology. While it was intended to compete with a new generation of Digital VAX machines, it ended up being just barely faster than VAX’s in a few special tasks.

In *The Soul of a New Machine*, Kidder accompanies a team of young engineers tasked with building a new computer for Data General. The project is led by a curt manager with a methodology he calls mushroom management (keep them in a damp, dark place, and feed them shit) that would be impossible to instate in any sensible company these days. The project is of highest significance for the company, and everything is due yesterday, everyone working in a frantic pace to get the computer out the door before their rivals within the same company beat them to it. The pressure and the intense pace of work is tangible all through the book; especially in the chapters on the debugging of the computer, one gets a very solid sense of how difficult it should be to fix horribly complicated hardware bugs under such intense pressure. *Soul of a New Machine* hails from a time when the

separate parts of a computer were actually built and tested by hand; a time when the CPU and the ALU resided on separate boards, a computer was debugged using oscilloscopes, and when finished, occupied three cabinets. For people of later generations who grew up with computers that came simply within a shiny black box, the story of these engineers provides a nice perspective of where the computer industry came from, and how the computer market could have developed in many other directions. The bigger question Kidder is after is what drives young, talented people to spend most of their waking hours on a new computer. The engineers he follows all have successful academic studies behind them, and are technically inclined, having broken and fixed electrical devices since their childhood.

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