

Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation  
Steven Johnson

This book reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet age. The facts are up-to-the-minute, the anecdotes extremely well researched. The author, Stephen Johnson, goes to some lengths to describe the computer database he uses to assemble and cross-link his references.

He stretches a little bit far for an analogy, comparing the realms of natural history and human inventiveness. One of his metaphors is the coral reef. Charles Darwin marveled at the diversity of life in the waters surrounding coral reefs back in 1836, especially in contrast to the paucity of life on the islands themselves. He then compares cities with coral reefs, noting that human inventiveness increases exponentially as those human beings live in larger agglomerations. It is an interesting point, although perhaps not strong enough to carry an entire book.

One of the surprises is how thin Johnson's biography of real books appears to be. He leans really heavily on Stephen Jay Gould and Malcolm Gladwell. Both of those guys write well and serve up provocative ideas. However, in both cases, many people, including myself, find the provocative ideas to be very frequently out in left field. In Gould's case they are driven by his left of socialist politics, and in Gladwell's by his commitment to diversity and all that that entails. In other words, these are highly flavored writers, useful to add a bit of savor to a book, but a little bit strong for a main course. In the realm of biology, Johnson would've been better off making more frequent quotes from people like Pinker, Dennett, Dawkins, Hrdy, or even Darwin himself. I suspect he would have if he had read them. He is a child of the Internet age. He does have a very extensive bibliography in the back, but all of us who have been to college know how you cook those up. You sometimes just might borrow from other people's bibliographies, or reference the book even though you only read a minor squib from it that you found on the Internet.

Johnson has an ideological point to make with regard to invention. Most modern inventions are made by groups of people with government funding, and the fewest inventions seem to be made by individual inventors motivated by profit alone. I grant this ideological point, somewhat grudgingly, because it seems to be overly labored and politically laden.

He does have a useful catalog of the major inventions of all time in his appendix. It is presumably the basis for his quadratic compartmentalization of inventions as group or individual, public or private.