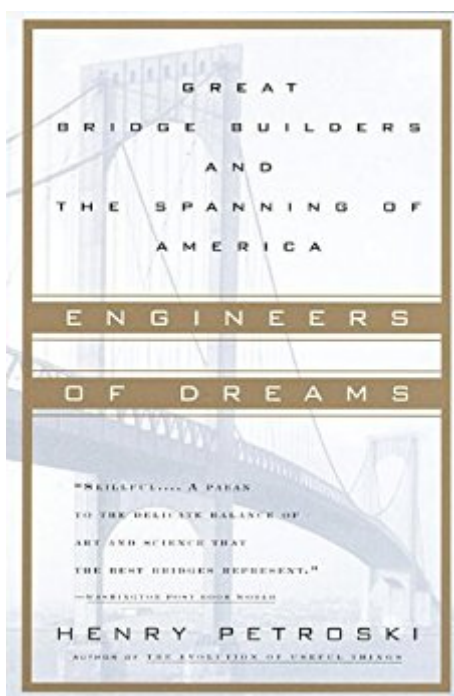


The book was found

Engineers Of Dreams: Great Bridge Builders And The Spanning Of America



Synopsis

Petroski reveals the science and engineering--not to mention the politics, egotism, and sheer magic--behind America's great bridges, particularly those constructed during the great bridge-building era starting in the 1870s and continuing through the 1930s. It is the story of the men and women who built the St. Louis, the George Washington, and the Golden Gate bridges, drawing not only on their mastery of numbers but on their gifts for persuasion and self-promotion. It is an account of triumphs and ignominious disasters (including the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, which literally twisted itself apart in a high wind). And throughout this grandly engaging book, Petroski lets us see how bridges became the "symbols and souls" of our civilization, as well as testaments to their builders' vision, ingenuity, and perseverance."Seamlessly linked...With astonishing scope and generosity of view, Mr. Petroski places the tradition of American bridge-building in perspective."--New York Times Book ReviewFrom the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

Great book with lots of detailed history. A little long on some stories, though

excellent author great book

Henry Petroski's "Engineers of Dreams" appears at first glance to be nothing more than the biographies of a number of engineers who were largely responsible for the design and building of some great North American bridges. The book is this, but so much more as well. Beginning with the first chapter, "Imagine," Petroski provides a context of what bridges mean -- all bridges everywhere -- both metal and metaphorical. He makes us aware of the gaps that would exist, in our cities and our lives, without bridges. As our experience of bridges is largely that of the "modern," i.e., bridges of iron, steel, and concrete, he chooses to concentrate on the period when many great modern bridges were first built (largely 1880 to 1940). According to Petroski, it was during this period that bridge building really evolved into a modern engineering discipline, and that the drive to build bridges (with the rise of first the railroads and later of automobiles) really took off. The modern political landscape that funded large public projects was evolving as well. Successful bridge builders had to be aware of and involved in all of these aspects if they were to have any hope of getting their "dream" bridges off the ground. Each of the central chapters of the book takes as its framework the life and work of one engineer. But rather than a dry recounting of names, dates, and places, Petroski shows us the several facets of each engineer's personality, the individualism and ambition that led them to dream of building the longest and biggest bridges in the world. Petroski fleshes out these characterizations by bringing in relevant information on the world at that time in greater detail: events and advances in Europe, other engineers and their successes (or failures), the competition and political conniving that was sometimes required to get a bridge built. The stories are not all rosy, either: some of the most enthralling tales are of bridges that collapsed, due to human error and hubris, and of how engineers collectively and individually had to find the courage to believe in their designs in spite of such failures. Petroski closes his book with a chapter called "Realize," which brings us up to the present, and the reality of how we are treating our great bridges today, our legacy in steel. The answer is: "Not well." Thousands of bridges in the United States are deteriorating because of little or no maintenance, as the government continually fails to allocate funds for repairs and upkeep. Petroski thus challenges us not only to remember but to honor the work, the artistry, and the lives that went into building our great bridges. The many photographs in this book are a plus.

As a structural engineer specializing in bridges, I found this book to be extremely informative. Petroski explores in-depth the bridge design community's heavy hitters. He artistically weaves the engineers' personal lives, their design projects, and events of the day into an entertaining story. Petroski sprinkles just enough technology talk here and there to keep the interest of those with scientific minds, but keeps it simple enough so that it is approachable to those who have a fear of math. Well written, great book, and a must read for anyone who wants to know more about how many of America's signature bridges were created.

I am a great fan of Henry Petroski, engineering professor and author of such minor classics as *The Pencil* and *The Evolution of Useful Things*. Perhaps it is because of these high expectations that I was so disappointed by *Engineer of Dreams: Great Bridge Builders and the Spanning of America*. In the end, Petroski seems much better at writing about engineering artifacts - pencils, paper clips, or, in this book, bridges - than the makers of those artifacts. Much of Petroski's "biography" here seemed nothing less than mere formula: you could almost see him filling in his computer template for "name, date and place of birth, school, mentor, etc." each time a new engineer was introduced. Further, he did not even attempt to vary the template from person to person, so that the repetitive style becomes unmistakable. This book is worth reading insofar as it provides a history of the bridges themselves, and the limits of engineering technique and imagination.

Engineers of Dreams is a book I've read several times because it involves me in the history behind some of engineering's greatest triumphs... and failures. The story of great engineers with various combinations of vision and practicality, as well as perseverance in all cases, makes for a kind of drama. In some cases, we know how the story ended, with a great bridge we can see. In other cases, the story ends with a wreck and bodies. From the story of the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the story of the first Quebec Bridge, this book itself spans a range of ability and satisfaction that is a joy to perceive.

There are very few books which deal with the detail of what it took to build some of the most useful bridges that, even though they were built almost a hundred years ago, are still used and appreciated by millions of people today. I heartily recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the subject and am not surprised, but disappointed that the book is not currently available by the publisher. I was going to purchase several copies as gifts to fellow engineers. I look forward to the second edition.

Finally, FINALLY: a recognition of David Steinman's achievements. The Mackinac Bridge has been described as a "symphony of concrete and steel". If Steinman had not been an engineer, he may have been a musician. Some structures clearly belong where they are placed. Just a few, though. Steinman had the eye for such places: Messina, for example. It was nice to see a chapter devoted to him, and the rest of the book was good, but otherwise documented.

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