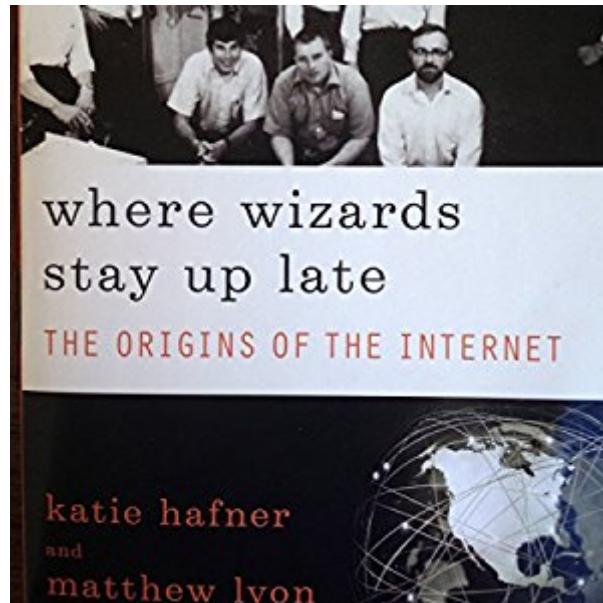


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Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The Origins Of The Internet



Synopsis

Twenty-five years ago, it didn't exist. Today, 20 million people worldwide are surfing the Net. Where Wizards Stay Up Late is the exciting story of the pioneers responsible for creating the most talked about, most influential, and most far-reaching communications breakthrough since the invention of the telephone. In the 1960s, when computers were regarded as mere giant calculators, J.C.R. Licklider at MIT saw them as the ultimate communications devices. With Defense Department funds, he and a band of visionary computer whizzes began work on a nationwide, interlocking network of computers. Taking listeners behind the scenes, Where Wizards Stay Up Late captures the hard work, genius, and happy accidents of their daring, stunningly successful venture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When I started working at an ISP (Internet Service Provider), I did a lot of reading to bring myself up to speed on a variety of subjects. Whether the book's topic was routing, software, or even AOL, the first three paragraphs were always, "A Brief History of the Internet." Inevitably there was too little information, too general to be of any use. Well, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* does a great job with its subject matter. Pioneering names like Frank Heart, Vint Cerf, and J. C. R. Licklider all come to life. The book does cover some technical ground, but all on a very palatable level. Two things made the book so enjoyable: first, the authors do a good job of describing the brilliance of the Internet's creators. I was amazed that the basic concepts of networking were developed in a day and age when it took entire

rooms to house the computing power of today's calculators. Second, the book does a good job not getting bogged down in the details. Instead, Hafner and Lyon concentrate on the people behind the ARPANET's creation, their quirks, collaborations and occasional conflicts; there's a lot of humour captured along the way. This wouldn't be the sole book I'd recommend as a purely technical history of the Internet; however, as a history of the underlying forces that brought the Net into being, such as BBN, the Dept. of Defense, and so many universities, I can't think of another book that's anywhere near as descriptive. Or interesting.

Where Wizards Stay Up Late is a competent, if slightly dry, account of the development of the ARPANET. I live for this kind of stuff, but Hafner fails to ever really engage me in the story - I found that I was plowing through the text as opposed to devouring it. As a history text, though, I was impressed with the even-handed, no-hype account. Too regularly do authors of computer history suffer from hero-worship and "religious" dogma - their personal opinions coloring the story, till its credibility is at best strained (if not broken). Hafner does not fall into this trap - if she worships anyone or holds any personal religious leanings, none of it shows in the account. The writing is clear and technical without being unreadable by a layperson. Overall, there is a lot to recommend this book. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, I found the story to be dry and frequently bogged down. Hafner may actually have overdone the evenhandedness of the account - I felt little passion for the subject, and consequently was not drawn into the text. At the end, I felt more knowledgeable about the subject, but not any more interested. A good historical account, but a less-than-enjoyable read.

"Wizardry" is an apt term to describe the work of the many who laid the foundation for what we now know as the Internet. Katie Hafner and Matthew Lyon weave together the talents, personalities, idiosyncrasies, obstacles, and triumphs into a compelling and -- given the complexity of the Internet's development -- intelligible history. Hafner and Lyon tell of the work of engineers and researchers of Bolt Beranek and Newman (BBN), a Cambridge-based computer company backed by the Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), which ultimately connected computers across the country. Readers of this book are spared excessive technical jargon and are instead kept amused by the many lighthearted moments in the midst of perfectionism and high pressure to produce. This book gave me the context for understanding the hard work behind and rationale for distributed networks, packet-switching, and TCP/IP. I was intrigued by the "accidental" start of E-mail, which is one networking function I cannot do without. I was also inspired by the teamwork, passion and work ethic displayed by those involved, particularly

because their intense focus often flew in the face of many detractors and disinterested parties who failed to appreciate the possibilities and usefulness of a distributed network. The authors also describe the open culture that resulted from the collaborative work, which we see today. In contrast, the reluctance of BBN to release the source codes of the Interface Message Processors (IMP) was a harbinger of the intellectual property issues that would emerge in decades to follow. So many players were involved in the creation of the Internet, that I found myself needing to back track to keep each person and his (all were men) contribution straight. Not a problem, though. The information in this book was fascinating. I found myself wanting to take my time to absorb as many of the details as possible.

This book gives you the complete story behind the conception and birth of the internet. The story focuses on the work done by BBN to pioneer and develop all of the protocols and designs that are the internet. The book does a good job of laying the foundation of where the state of computing was when these initial developments were being made and what outside social and economic trends effected and encouraged the internet's development. The authors do a very good job of focusing on the personalities, anecdotes and larger issues without getting bogged down in minutiae. At 265 pages, the book is packed and makes for a very quick read. The writing style of Ms. Hafner and Mr. Lyon is outstanding, which greatly increases the quality of the book. There are some very interesting aspects of the development that are related. I was very interested in the origins of BBN, their background in acoustics, and the zeal with which they pursued the original DARPA contract. Of equal interest was the method in which the teams were managed, and the way that the development was not pursued with large teams and brute force, but rather with smaller teams that were headed by the best possible people and given all of the resources that they needed. The creation of the internet is an awe-inspiring event, and the text offers several subtle management lessons that are too important to be overlooked. The book also does a splendid job of showing some of the theory that was used in the development of the necessary software and how the developers did such a good job of bridging theory and practical engineering development. In this light the book does a much better job discussing theory than two other recent books on the history of the Computer, "Engines of the Mind" by Shurkin and "Computer" by Campbell-Kelly and Aspray. These are just some of the interesting stories told, the whole text is packed cover to cover with similar stories. I highly recommend this book.

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