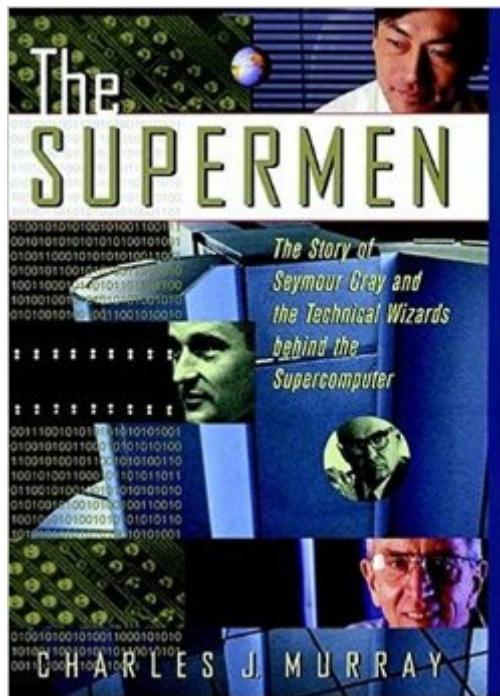


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The Supermen: The Story Of Seymour Cray And The Technical Wizards Behind The Supercomputer



Synopsis

The SUPERMEN "After a rare speech at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, in 1976, programmers in the audience had suddenly fallen silent when Cray offered to answer questions. He stood there for several minutes, waiting for their queries, but none came. When he left, the head of NCAR's computing division chided the programmers. 'Why didn't someone raise a hand?' After a tense moment, one programmer replied, 'How do you talk to God?'" -from The SUPERMEN The Story of Seymour Cray and the Technical Wizards behind the Supercomputer "They were building revolutionary, not evolutionary, machines. . . . They were blazing a trail-molding science into a product. . . . The freedom to create was extraordinary." -from The Supermen In 1951, a soft-spoken, skinny young man fresh from the University of Minnesota took a job in an old glider factory in St. Paul. Computer technology would never be the same, for the glider factory was the home of Engineering Research Associates and the recent college grad was Seymour R. Cray. During his extraordinary career, Cray would be alternately hailed as "the Albert Einstein," "the Thomas Edison," and "the Evel Knievel" of supercomputing. At various times, he was all three-a master craftsman, inventor, and visionary whose disdain for the rigors of corporate life became legendary, and whose achievements remain unsurpassed. The Supermen is award-winning writer Charles J. Murray's exhilarating account of how the brilliant-some would say eccentric-Cray and his gifted colleagues blazed the trail that led to the Information Age. This is a thrilling, real-life scientific adventure, deftly capturing the daring, seat-of-the-pants spirit of the early days of computer development, as well as an audacious, modern-day David and Goliath battle, in which a group of maverick engineers beat out IBM to become the runaway industry leaders. Murray's briskly paced narrative begins during the final months of the Second World War, when men such as William Norris and Howard Engstrom began researching commercial applications for the code-breaking machines of wartime, and charts the rise of technological research in response to the Cold War. In those days computers were huge, cumbersome machines with names like Demon and Atlas. When Cray came on board, things quickly changed. Drawing on in-depth interviews-including the last interview Cray completed before his untimely and tragic death-Murray provides rare insight into Cray's often controversial approach to his work. Cray could spend exhausting hours in single-minded pursuit of a particular goal, and Murray takes us behind the scenes to witness late-night brainstorming sessions and miraculous eleventh-hour fixes. Cray's casual, often hostile attitude toward management, although alienating to some, was more than a passionate need for independence; he simply thought differently than others. Seymour Cray saw farther and faster, and trusted his vision with an unassailable confidence. Yet he inspired great

loyalty as well, making it possible for his own start-up company, Cray Research, to bring the 54,000-employee conglomerate of Control Data to its knees. Ultimately, The Supermen is a story of genius, and how a unique set of circumstances-a small-team approach, corporate detachment, and a government-backed marketplace-enabled that genius to flourish. In an atmosphere of unparalleled freedom and creativity, Seymour Cray's vision and drive fueled a technological revolution from which America would emerge as the world's leader in supercomputing.

Book Information

Hardcover: 232 pages

Publisher: Wiley; 1 edition (January 18, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0471048852

ISBN-13: 978-0471048855

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 0.9 x 9.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (29 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #699,466 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #244 inÂ Books > Computers & Technology > History & Culture > History #345 inÂ Books > Computers & Technology > Hardware & DIY > Design & Architecture #3818 inÂ Books > Computers & Technology > Computer Science

Customer Reviews

I'm divided about this book. The average public will find it a bit dry and the above average computer scientist will find it lacking in depth. On one hand, it does provide a history of Seymour Cray, his companies, his machines, and some of the names surrounding them. There is no other single combined source for this material. Other reviewers commenting that you never get to know the man have a point. On the other hand, no details are provided about Cray's machines. How about architectural overviews from the 10,000 foot level? Or, how about zooming in, showing programming, gross datapaths, eventually to give details of his circuit designs to illustrate his published genius? Cray was a luminary for his contributions, and yet they are never really described. Material like this might also help the reader to better know Cray. Even the pictures are few and imperfectly reproduced. Yes, a Cray 1 is shown, but not a Cray 2 (a photo does not identify him as leaning on one) and not a Cray 3. In the absence of any other book about Cray, I give this a qualified recommendation.

Few biographies of computer heavyweights have moved me like this short, 232-page volume. This book is a nicely written chronicle of Seymour Cray and his supercomputing associates. The book covers Cray's entire professional career - from Cray's early days with pioneering Engineering Research Associates until his death (from injuries in an auto accident) in 1996 as he struggled to reinvent the glory days of super-computing with a new company, SRC (Seymour Roger Cray) Computers. By the way, as a native of Minnesota and Wisconsin, it was pleasant to recall that Control Data and Cray Computing made the area around St. Paul (Wisconsin is just across the river) one of the hottest technology areas for two decades. Cray was totally absorbed in computing. If you share some of his passion, you will love this. Non-tech types will not enjoy it and will wonder why he did not "get a life."

If you are into high performance computing and still think that it just sort of happened all at once and had no beginning then buy this book. We owe almost all of our computer advances to Seymour Cray and what he did for Computer Science. When you look at Chip or a computer you will always see his work in there somewhere. That's why you should get this book for your own enlightenment about CS History.

When I read a book of this type I keep a Papermate Point Guard Flair Porous Point Stick Pens, Black Ink, Medium Point, Dozen, DZ - PAP8430152 handy so that I can underline especially interesting parts while lying down. With 'The Supermen' I find that I am underlining something on every page. When I am finished, I will update this review and insert some quotes. For now, let's just say that the prototype of the CDC 1604 was built using 37 cent transistors from an electronics store, the Radio Shack of its day. Seymour Cray bought so many, that General Transistor eventually doubled the price. He had been buying their rejects, and he had bought all of their rejects! In an interview, not in the book, Cray said "And so I learned about the economy of scale!" The book said that after the price increase, they would let the salesmen from General Transistor take them out to lunch and they discovered that they would give them free samples. So until the salesmen caught on, Cray and them were building the 1604 with free transistors! When the 1604 was finished it was the fastest computer in the world.

If you have no idea what super-computer is, this is the book that you have to read, after that you will know more than just IBM the next time someone mentions about computer. This book is both chronological and narrative and at the same time concise. It makes it easy for people who know

nuts about computer or engineering to understand what went on in the computer industry when it was at an infant stage . Readers thus have a thorough understanding of the industry from its humble beginning to the present and how Seymour Cray and his engineers had contributed to the industry .To put it simply , without Cray Super Computing might have taken a longer time to emerge. This book also reveals the rivalry that went on at Cray Research that eventually led to a split in the company . You will be surprised to find that bringing out a new product takes much more than just a technological break-through.If it is that simple Cray would have beaten IBM many times.At the end , one would find Cray a rare genius who given the opportunity would have done much better .Unfortunately the circumstances he was in and his sole interest in engineering alone has limited his success . To me Seymour Cray is over and above Bill Gates and Tom Watson although he was much poorer than these two in the financial aspect . Like Nicholas Tesla , Cray was a better engineer than all his contemporaries but was bestowed with the least honours.To Cray , I salute you !

Having spent about the last 50 years designing and writing computer software for control systems and well aware of Seymour although never having used one of his systems, this was an informative look at his efforts and although I wouldn't call it a fond remembrance, It was amusing to see that he too suffered from almost constant bad management.

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