

Creativity and Capitalism: 6 Books You Must Read if You're an Inventor, Innovator, or Entrepreneur



Katherina Davis CEO Agenda September 7, 2024



We all know the stereotype: an inventor toiling away in a garret, or a garage, or a lab, alone. Even today we often imagine inventors work solitarily for years experimenting and trying and failing and finally something works, and then before you know it, as if by magic, their new invention winds up on the shelves at BestBuy.

Time to put that myth to bed. A successful invention requires ambition, savvy strategy, and a business partner. Invention isn't just an endeavor. It's also a business. For anyone tasked with any kind of innovation, these six books on invention and on business are packed with lessons on what it takes to bring your idea to the world.

1. **The Things We Make: The Unknown History of Inventions from Cathedrals to Soda Cans** by **Bill Hammack Ph.D.** A book packed with surprises about the most everyday items in our lives, and it's pretty clear that Hammack, aka The Engineer Guy on YouTube, is also a superfan when it comes to the scientists, engineers, thinkers, and doers responsible for centuries of neat things. This is an enjoyable read for anyone who's ever wondered how stone arches were initially designed — without computer programs, calculators, or even modern math. Or, for that matter, gotten juice from grapes with no machinery. Or all sorts of other wonders of engineering. It will make you appreciate the human appetite for creativity and invention, and you'll never look at a soda can the same way again. And while Hammack focuses on the engineering side of things, there's a clear thru line of how business and ambition play twin roles.
2. **Reflecting on History: How the Industrial Revolution Created Our Way of Life** by **Peter H. Spitz.** **Spitz** is an inventor and chemical industrialist who holds seven scientific patents and has been on the ground floor of game-changing innovations, particularly in petrochemicals. But his passion for the vocation and business of invention extends to a wide range of arenas, and his fascination with history prompted him to take a closer look at some of the earliest inventions of the industrial age. His latest book, *Reflecting on History: How the Industrial Revolution Created Our Way of Life*, explores a number of inventions — commonplace aspects of life we take for granted now, such as plate glass, radar, fertilizer, rubber, antibiotics, computers, microwaves. Spitz traces their origins, pointing out who got them to the various stages of their development. Yes, there's some garret- and garage-dwelling, but there's also a lot of deal-making. Spitz recognizes the familiar path an invention takes even when it's 300 years in the past, and illuminates how the confluence between the creative and the capitalist side brought these conveniences to life. This is a straightforward read that will remind you how tenacious, persistent, and strategic any innovator needs to be.
3. **Secrets of Successful Women Inventors: How They Swam with the "Sharks" and Hundreds of Other Ways to Commercialize Your Own Inventions** by **Edith G. Tolchin.** While the title may be a bit unwieldy, this is a terrific book for anyone looking for guidance on how to turn an idea into a business. Tolchin covers a whole collection of women inventors working today, from the napkin sketch to the multimillion-dollar company. She doesn't overlook women inventors of the past either, which reveals more of a thru-line than most would assume. Women have been inventing great things for hundreds of years. But not only does this book focus on a very unsung and sizable portion of the innovator population, it offers realistic and proven advice from the trenches. Further, it's a fun read that taps into the Shark Tank zeitgeist of modern commerce and investment, making it feel relevant and timely as well.
4. **The Electric Vehicle Revolution: Five Visionaries Leading the Charge** by **Kenneth K. Boyer.** Definitely a book for our times, this chronicle of EV technology smartly focuses on the main players in the shift to electric vehicles. Yes, that means Elon Musk (CEO of Tesla), but he's joined by

heavy hitters you may not have heard of, including Vietnam billionaire Pham Nhật Vương; Ceer CEO Jim DeLuca; Monolith Corp cofounder Rob Hanson; and GM CEO Mary Barra. Boyer traces the fits, missteps, starts, stall-outs, scrambles, and success stories that have put electric vehicles on the map and on the market. As it becomes clear in his very well-developed narrative, the road to EVs is anything but simple.

Boyer's own acumen and knowledge of the auto industry is invaluable here: as he points out the immense technological and logistical challenges in turning the global supply chain of auto parts green, it becomes clearer why the EV revolution is happening in slow motion. There's a fascinating examination, for instance, of Honda — and why it's not quite ready for a full line of EVs. But the book also makes it clear that these five leaders (and others) are doing all they can push towards their goals, fighting for carbon-neutrality despite a market that is still in love with gasoline. As Boyer points out, the stakes couldn't really be any higher.

5. **How We Got to Now: Six Innovations that Made the Modern World** by Steve Johnson. Not a new book, but an important one. Johnson's made a fantastic career writing about innovations and ideas, and here he makes the history of inventions both inspiring and entertaining. He focuses on the mistakes, the unintended consequences, the lapses in judgment and the accidents as well as the clear wins, showing that the road to modernity isn't a straight line. This is an illustrated companion volume to the PBS series of the same name — and there's something about seeing these stories in print that really drives home the power of the human mind.
6. **The Case for a Debt Jubilee** by Richard Vague. While this book isn't directly about innovation, as Vague points out, crippling debt is stifling growth — and with it, the freedom and support needed to bring the next life-changing technologies into the world. Vague's examination of the United States of debt is both arresting and powerful, offering a policy for debt relief that is well argued, exceedingly well documented, and certainly not the norm. But as a managing partner of a VC firm, former Secretary of Banking and Securities for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a board trustee of the state's largest pension funds and a seasoned C-Suite exec, he certainly has the expertise to take on this vexing subject. His biggest point: there's not going to be a course-correction unless we make it happen, and unlocking our economy from mounting debt would bring a profound improvement to American society — and beyond.

What all these books have is a sense of optimism in their pages, no matter how complicated or circuitous or even dangerous the route. They're packed with stories and information that remind us that the quest to build a better mousetrap isn't just a cliché. It's human nature, and it's what propels us forward, hopefully, to a better future.