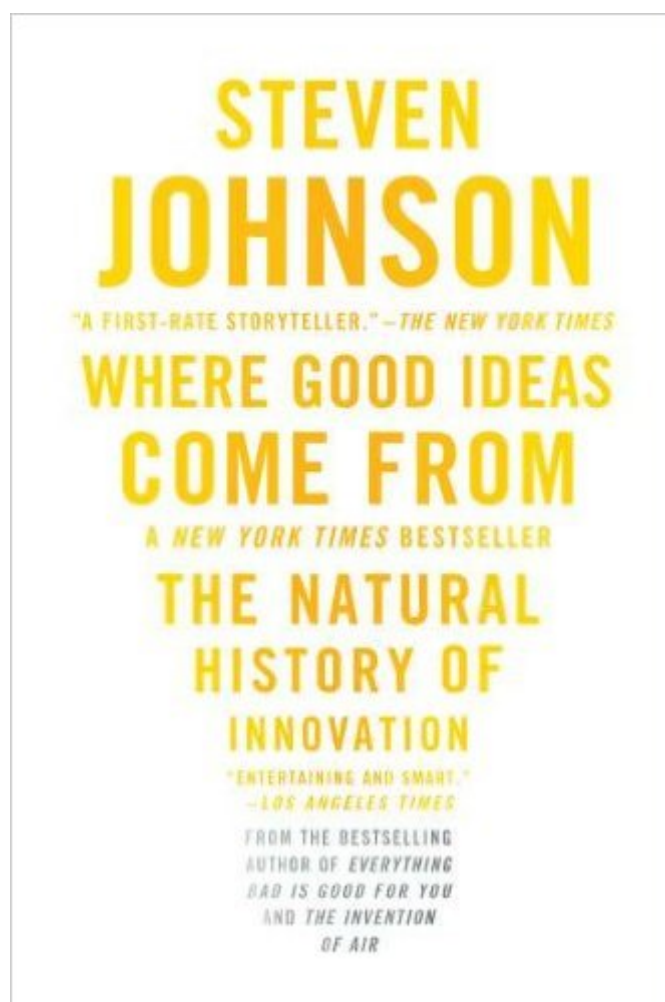


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# Where Good Ideas Come From



## Synopsis

Look out for Johnson's new book, *Wonderland*, on sale November 15, 2016. The printing press, the pencil, the flush toilet, the battery--these are all great ideas. But where do they come from? What kind of environment breeds them? What sparks the flash of brilliance? How do we generate the breakthrough technologies that push forward our lives, our society, our culture? Steven Johnson's answers are revelatory as he identifies the seven key patterns behind genuine innovation, and traces them across time and disciplines. From Darwin and Freud to the halls of Google and Apple, Johnson investigates the innovation hubs throughout modern time and pulls out the approaches and commonalities that seem to appear at moments of originality.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Working as a patent attorney, sometimes a new idea that stuns me will jump out from a patent. An elegant, innovative idea that makes me wonder how anyone thought of it. Often, my next thought, though, as I understand the idea better, is how simple the idea is. So I think, why didn't I think of that? Steven Johnson's "Natural History of Innovation" shines some light on the first question as he tells us "Where Good Ideas Come From." Johnson looks back through science history as he teases out from science history, and from natural history, seven "patterns" in which new ideas are formed. Johnson backs up with examples each of the seven groups in his taxonomy of the origins of ideas. Good examples, well told, are what make the book. Johnson writes science history well. Like in Johnson's earlier book, *The Invention of Air*, the science history he writes here reads like a

fascinating tale of adventure. Although a bit breathless at times, and sometimes drawing too much from too little, Johnson caught my attention early and held it all the way through this fairly long new book. And it's not just a history of scientists and discoveries. Johnson looks too at nature - like how reefs pack together life and promote evolution - and society - like how larger cities generate exponentially more innovation than smaller towns. On occasion, Johnson's taxonomy is a tad bit tortured. The seven patterns each get a chapter in the book. But for me, the names of the patterns and the particular examples grouped in them do not give much insight. The patterns - while interesting - seem more organizational groupings than anything else. The patterns are the skeleton. Not much flesh there. The meat in the book is in the examples.

In my years as a Wall Street strategy advisor and as a life-long student of that which propels us towards our greatest potential, I am fascinated by an interesting structural tension when it comes to personal and professional excellence. We have at our finger tips, some of the greatest knowledge, tools and processes that can help propel people and organizations towards excellence and yet despite this vast wealth of information, many people (and the organizations they are associated with) struggle. After exploring many theories over the years, I think I just realized why this is the case and I am staggered by the implications. I have just finished reading "Where Good Ideas Come From" by Steven Johnson (author of "Everything Good is Bad For You" and "The Invention of Air") and found the ideas contained within to be of staggering profundity. A Different View on Creativity With no offence intended towards well-intentioned individuals within organizations who come up with interesting ways to help us be more creative, I have often struggled with the value of some of the ideas they have come up with. Some examples come to mind, including the time I flew across the country for a mandatory, all-hands meeting where we played pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey or another time when I travelled across the country for a mandatory meeting where the primary thing that was accomplished was a competition to see who could build a toy helicopter out of Lego Blocks the fastest. When I asked people why we were doing these things, I was informed that it was to help us learn to be more creative. I learned something alright but it was not what they hoped I had learned. By the way, I won the helicopter competition, so there are no sour grapes here.

How do we cultivate innovation? Are there some ways to interact, to live, and to work that promote innovation? If so what are the fundamental drivers of innovation? In his latest book, Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation (WGICF), Steven Johnson proposes a framework for answering these questions. WGICF is divided into seven sections with each section

addressing what Mr. Johnson considers to be a fundamental factor that facilitates innovation. Unfortunately, the core of his argument is one of analogy with nature or anecdote. From nature, he looks at structures with disproportionate diversity in nature and asks how these devices and behavior can be mapped to human culture and interaction. Although this kind of analogical writing is rhetorically compelling it doesn't provide any kind of true support for the accuracy of his statements. As for the use of anecdotes, they are useful for creating narrative from data and I am well aware they are nearly a requirement for publishing in this genre of non-fiction writing. I can even recognize they are rhetorically useful for creating emotional pull but no many how many stories you tell they simply do not provide evidence to support a thesis. Now that I've made my caveats, I do think there are lots of good ideas in the book. The factors that Johnson proposes all seem believable and fit in with what I know of cognition. In particular, three topics he includes, at least based on other readings, deeply related to being a strong thinker - making errors and subsequently thinking about the error, building connections between concepts, and actively recalling knowledge. In other places these three features have been strongly tied to becoming an expert as well as to developing an agile mind.

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