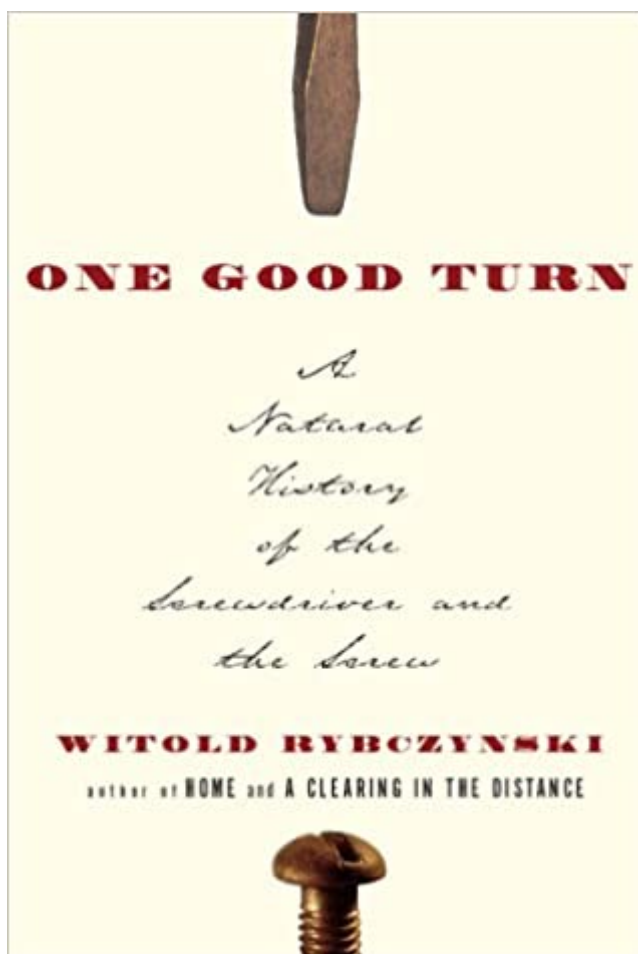


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# One Good Turn: A Natural History Of The Screwdriver And The Screw



## Synopsis

The seeds of Witold Rybczynski's elegant and illuminating new book were sown by The New York Times, whose editors asked him to write an essay identifying "the best tool of the millennium." The award-winning author of *Home: A Short History of an Idea* and, most recently, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century*, Rybczynski once built a house using only hand tools. His intimate knowledge of the toolbox -- both its contents and its history -- serves him beautifully on his quest. *One Good Turn* is a story starring Archimedes, who invented the water screw and introduced the helix, and Leonardo, who sketched a machine for carving wood screws. It is a story of mechanical discovery and genius that takes readers from Ancient Greece to Victorian Glasgow, from weapons design in the Italian Renaissance to car design in the age of American industry. Rybczynski writes an ode to the screw, without which there would be no telescope, no microscope -- in short, no enlightenment science. The screwdriver, perhaps the last hand tool in a world gone cyber, represents nothing less than the triumph of precision. One of our finest cultural and architectural historians, Rybczynski renders a graceful, original, and engaging portrait of the tool that changed the course of civilization.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 173 pages

Publisher: Scribner (September 19, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 068486729X

ISBN-13: 978-0684867298

Product Dimensions: 7.8 x 5.6 x 0.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 50 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,087,213 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #107 in [Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Home Improvement & Design > How-to & Home Improvements > Hand Tools](#) #171 in [Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Home Improvement & Design > How-to & Home Improvements > Power Tools](#) #5524 in [Books > Science & Math > History & Philosophy](#)

## Customer Reviews

In 1999, an editor of the New York Times Magazine approached Witold Rybczynski, the well-known student of architecture and urban design, and asked him to write a short essay on the best and most useful common tool of the past millennium. Rybczynski took the assignment, but when he

began to look into the history of the items in his workshop--hammers and saws, levels and planes--he found that almost all of them had pedigrees that extended well into antiquity. Nearly ready to admit defeat, he asked his wife for ideas. Her answer was inspired: "You always need a screwdriver for something." True enough. And, Rybczynski discovered, the screwdriver is a relative newcomer in humankind's arsenal of gadgetry, an invention of the late European Middle Ages and the only major mechanical device that the Chinese did not independently invent. Leonardo da Vinci got to it early on, of course, as he did so many other things, designing a number of screw-cutting machines with interchangeable gears. Still, it took generations for the screw (and with it the screwdriver and lathe) to come into general use, and it was not until the modern era that such improvements as slotted and socket screws came into being. Rybczynski's explorations into that lineage, here expanded to book length, are highly entertaining, and sure to engage readers interested in the origins of everyday things. --Gregory McNamee

Acclaimed hardware, household and landscape writer Rybczynski invites readers to see how the world got screwed and why it took so long, and how it felt. Romans had most of our hand tools, though cranks are medieval; screws and screwdrivers, however, originated when? Scottish crafts manuals from around the time of the American Revolution give screwdrivers as "turnscrews

A New York Times editor asked Mr. Rybczynski to write an article about his choice for best tool of the millennium. One would think that this would involve deciding on a tool, researching its history and uses, and writing it up. But that would be too linear. Instead, the author takes us on a rambling walk through the toolbox. We learn not only about the development of many tools and machines (adze, augur, hammer, lathe, gears and presses), but about the scientists and inventors, even financiers, who contributed to the development of the screwdriver, and the applications (early firearms and clocks) that helped (literally) shape the device. We learn about the Phillips versus the Robertson screw, and the limitations of earlier lathes, which led to the first screws being handmade. Many interesting facts like this entertain and inform. As a librarian I appreciated the author's friendly discussion of the references he found useful for his research. There are many black-and-white line drawings to help you visualize the items being discussed, as well as a notes section, a good index, and illustration credits. Weaknesses: I would have liked to have read a brief discussion of the (seven?) Simple Machines, as I think many were discussed here, and it would have been an interesting reminder of things from physics class that I've forgotten. In addition, I looked up a quote by Plutarch in the Notes section, and the citation began "Quoted by E. J. Dijksterhuis ...." with no

information about the actual source -- not much help! This was a fun read. If you are the kind of person who enjoys browsing through the dictionary or a bookstore, you will probably enjoy this little gem of a volume by this handyman-storyteller. Highly recommended.

By: RevitWithold Rybczynski: One Good Turn: A Natural History of the Screwdriver and the Screw. I can't give it enough praise. It is historically enlightening, and a totally enjoyable read. We need more like this. Early advances in making tools and machines was dependent on how pieces of metal could be held together. Brazing dates from the 13th century. Of course there are many applications where brazing would be inappropriate because early brazing techniques required heating the entire workpiece. Screws and threaded nuts or threaded holes in larger workpieces were the obvious answer. We have a record of the king of France ordering threaded screws ca. 1465 but use of them was restricted because of the high cost of making them by hand. I collect, research and write articles on antique wood and metal working tools. This terrific little book is one of the most useful sources of information and reference material on the early development of tools that I know of. I was dubious, but when the book arrived and I read it I was more than convinced. It is a gem that should be in the library of everyone who has any interest in the history of tools or the evolution of the machine in industry. As a bonus it is a very enjoyable read.

A good book on an overlooked subject, but incomplete. It goes into the history of the screw, and screwdrivers, but leaves out its relatives, the bolts and nuts, taps, and a good deal else. The definitive history of screws and hardware, together with the history of the machinery to make them, has yet to be written. Nevertheless, to give credit where due, anything that helps to make the real movers of progress in the human condition recognized is valuable. Why is Henry Maudslay less well known than Napoleon? They were contemporaries. Maudslay was arguably a greater influence than Napoleon. Without his work, our machine age would not exist. Napoleon was merely another man willing to take power by shedding the blood of other men. Maudslay made possible the relief from drudgery and helped launch machines that made machinery, making reproducibly accurate parts. Mr. Rybczynski does a valuable service in bringing to life these too unknown geniuses and benefactors of mankind. His is an easy evening's read, and worth the time.

Just read it. A wealth of sometimes arcane but fascinating information entertainingly written. If you have any interest in matters relating mechanics, machinery or industry - or even if you don't - read it! I've handed out copies right and left to all my engineering and hobbyist friends.

This could have been a fact-filled but very dry read, like Henry Petroski's book "The Pencil". However Mr. Rybczynski is an excellent writer and he presents the history as a-story-in-a-story, which keeps things moving. Highly recommended!

Well written and a quick read. History, "WHO KNEW"

I will read anything penned by Witold! I was first introduced to his work with The Most Beautiful House in the World--many, many years ago! I believe I own everything of his. I often ponder HOW certain things/tools came about; this is a fascinating history of the screw. I found it to be a real page turner.

I'm an engineer and i like knowing strange stuff like this

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