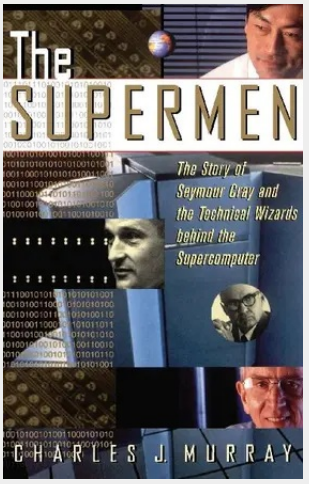
Murray

The Supermen

The Story of Seymour Cray and the Technical Wizards Behind the Supercomputer



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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.

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