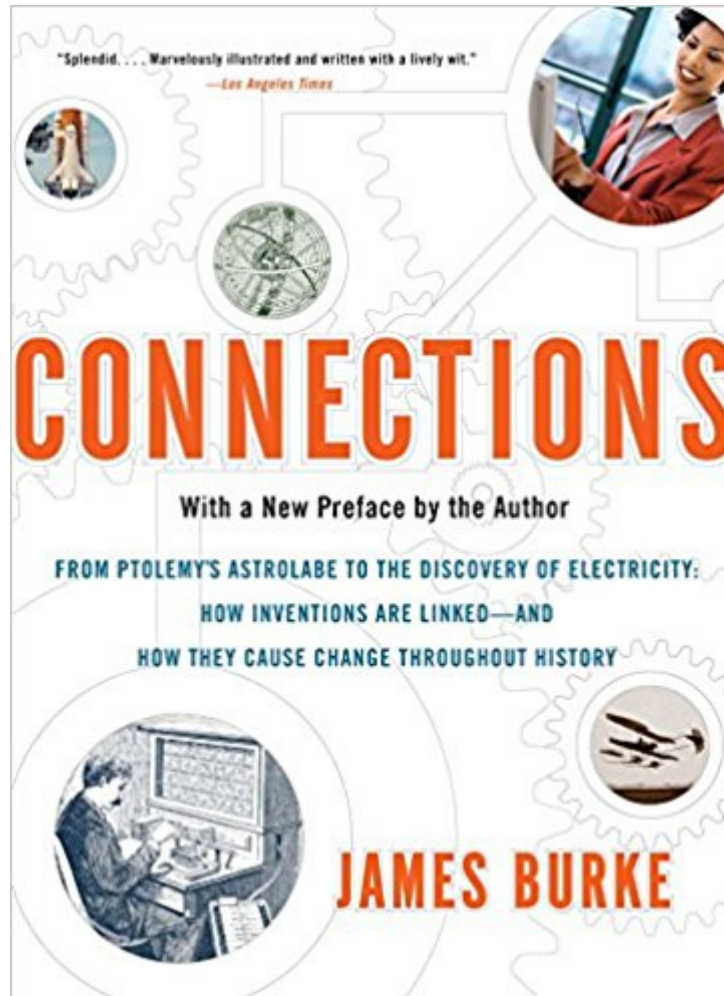




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Connections



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Synopsis

Connections is a brilliant examination of the ideas, inventions, and coincidences that have culminated in the major technological achievements of today. How did the popularity of underwear in the twelfth century lead to the invention of the printing press? How did the waterwheel evolve into the computer? How did the arrival of the cannon lead eventually to the development of movies? In this highly acclaimed and bestselling book, James Burke brilliantly examines the ideas, inventions, and coincidences that have culminated in the major technological advances of today. With dazzling insight, he untangles the pattern of interconnecting events: the accidents of time, circumstance, and place that gave rise to the major inventions of the world. Says Burke, "My purpose is to acquaint the reader with some of the forces that have caused change in the past, looking in particular at eight innovations—the computer, the production line, telecommunications, the airplane, the atomic bomb, plastics, the guided rocket, and television—which may be most influential in structuring our own futures.... Each one of these is part of a family of similar devices, and is the result of a sequence of closely connected events extending from the ancient world until the present day. Each has enormous potential for humankind's benefit—or destruction." Based on a popular TV documentary series, Connections is a fascinating scientific detective story of the inventions that changed history—and the surprising links that connect them.

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Customer Reviews

A Fun and Quirky Trip from Then to NowHistory has the tendency of being seen as static and frozen when we view it from a later time. What happened is what happened, and nothing else could have happened because, again, at that point, it is set in stone. Once upon a time, however, history could have gone any number of ways, and much of the time, it's the act of change and transition that help drive history through various eras. James Burke is one of my favorite historical authors, and I am a big fan of his ideas behind "Connected thought and events", which makes the case that history is not a series of isolated events, but that events and discoveries coming from previous generations (and even eras) can give rise to new ideas and modes of thinking. In other words, change doesn't happen in a vacuum, or in the mind of a single solitary genius. Instead it's the actions and follow-on achievements by a variety of people throughout history that make certain changes in our world possible (from the weaving of silk to the personal computer, or the stirrup to the atomic bomb). "Connections" is the companion book to the classic BBC series first filmed in the late 70s, with additional series being created up into the 1990s. If you haven't already seen the Connections series of programs, please do, they are highly entertaining and engaging. The original print edition of the book had been out of print for some time, but I was overjoyed to discover that there is a paperback version as well as a Kindle edition of this book. The kindle version is the one I am basing the review on. The subtitle of the book and series is "an Alternative View of Change: rather than serendipitous forces coming together and 'eureka' moments of discovery happening, Burke makes the case that, just as today, invention happens often as a market force determines the benefit and necessity of that invention, with adoption and use stemming from both the practical and cultural needs of the community. From there, refinements and other markets often determine how ideas from one area can impact development of other areas. Disparate examples like finance, accounting, cartography, metallurgy, mechanics, water power and automation are not separate disciplines, but rely heavily on each other and the inter-connectedness of these disciplines over time. The book starts with an explanation of the Northeastern Blackout of 1965, as a way to draw attention to the fact that we live in a remarkably interdependent world today. We are not only the beneficiaries of technology's gifts, but in many ways, we are also at the mercy of them. Technology is wonderful, until it breaks down. At

that point, many of the systems that we rely heavily on, when they stop working, can make our lives not just sub-optimal, but dangerous. Connections uses examples stretching all the way back to Roman Times and the ensuing "Dark Ages". Burke contends that they were never "really dark", and makes the case of communication being enabled through Bishop Post to show that many of the institutions defined in Roman times continued on unabated. Life did become much more local when the over-seeing and overarching power of a huge government state had ended. The pace of change and the needs of change were not so paramount on this local scale, and thus, many of the engineering marvels of the Roman Empire were not so much "lost" (aqueducts and large scale paved roads) but that they just weren't needed on the scale that the Romans used them. Still, even in the localized world of the early Middle Ages, change happened, and changes from one area often led to changes in other areas. Bottom Line: This program changed the way I look at the world, and taught me to look at the causal movers as more than just single moments, or single people, but as a continuum that allows ideas to be connected to other ideas. Is Burke's premise a certainty? No, but he makes a very compelling case, and the connections from one era to another are certainly both credible and reasonable. There is a lot of detail thrown at the reader, and many of those details may seem tangential, but he always manages to come back and show how some arcane development in an isolated location, perhaps centuries ago, came to be a key component in our technologically advanced lives, and how it played a part in our current subordination to technology today. Regardless of the facts, figures and pictures (and there are indeed a lot of them), Connections is a wonderful ride. If you are as much of a fan of history as I am, then pretty much anything James Burke has written will prove to be worthwhile. Connections is his grand thesis, and it's the concept that is most directly tied to him. This book shows very clearly why that is.

I've never seen any other book like this one. It intertwines history and technological innovation in a way that is entertaining, informative, and thought provoking. I read history, but I find very little of it as good as this. Too much is about dates, wars, and the goings-on in the ruling class. Plus they usually ignore the effect of technological innovation on history. The book, and the PBS series based on it, is essential if you want to look at history through the lens of innovation.

This was perhaps the most fascinating book I've read all year. The author takes you through a most interesting and compelling look at innovation throughout the last thousand years. The author shows how it is often surprising where one innovation will lead, in many cases to a very unrelated

discovery or invention. To see the connections between different discoveries and the how they lead to things we have in this modern world and to see how seemingly simple discoveries can radically change the very social structures and cultures they were discovered in was extremely intriguing. A VERY entertaining and compelling read.

I like this book a lot. It's not the kind of book you'd finish in one sitting (visible because it has been a while since I bought it and I'm still not finished), because, of course, it is non-fiction. And it isn't telling one "story" per say, but rather each chapter is separate "story". What I mean by "story" is that each chapter starts off with one technical innovation - the spur, say - and then follows the changes and technological innovations that cascaded on from that (in the case of the spur, it is the concept of family names). This is, quite obviously, fascinating. It's fun to just read about how some technologies came about, and also v. interesting to read how they're all related. There are a couple of problems with this too though. For one, some of the innovations - the spinning wheel, for example - well, I just didn't plain "get" how they worked, or how they really fit into the evolution. Whenever I found the explanations a bit... befuddling, or the links a bit unclear, I just assumed that the author didn't really believe in/like what he was writing. The other problem is that the chapters never start with a description about what the chapter will discuss. For example, I'd have liked them to begin with something like "Now I will discuss how the evolution of the water wheel lead to the creation of clocks". This is because, in a few of the chapters, I found it really really hard to recall where the technology began and where it ended. Each chapter, really, requires at least one re-read to realise (for me, anyway), what I'd read the first time around. But the two concerns I have are really on style - as far as content, and learning interesting tidbits to throw around the campfire, well, this book is unsurpassed, and I quite highly recommend it.

I bought his book based on how much I had enjoyed the TV series years ago. I found the book to be a wild and manic pogo stick ride through history that lacked coherence. At least that's my experience. Lots of information but lacing it together takes so serious work

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