The Silicon Boys and their Valley of Dreams

by *David A. Kaplan*
Published by Allen &
Unwin
RRP $24.95
ISBN: 1865081566
331 pages

Another book about Bill Gates and his co-conspirators does not really promote itself as riveting reading. The reaction of 'yawn' to computer geeks and techno-babble extends to *books* about computer geeks and techno-babble. On the other hand, these guys - and they are all invariably men - have made millions, billions and maybe there is something to learn from reading *about* them - a type of 'self-help' book perhaps. Maybe this explains the proliferation of books about these 'geeks' - just browse around Amazon.com. This book is not one of those.

In the beginning there was Fairchild Semiconductor which, according to Kaplan, most of the hardware companies can trace their founders back to. Like myth, the Silicon Valley of today was born. Kaplan's book promotes itself as a cowboy-cum-computer-age memoir - read the promotional line: 'The meek didn't inherit the earth. The geeks did'. The book traces the development of the Information Technology age, from the back-yard garages of David Packard and Bill Hewlett of Hewlett-Packard fame to the venture-capitalist sponsored start-ups like Marc Anderson's Netscape. Along the road, we meet characters like Steve Jobs (Apple), Robert Noyce and Gordon Moore (founders of Intel), Larry Ellison (of Oracle), Jerry Yang (co-founder of Yahoo) etc.

Of course a computer book is not complete without Godzilla, the Death Star, Darth Vadar, the Evil Empire, that is Microsoft. No-one, without exception, in Silicon Valley likes Microsoft. It seems that the author shares that same dislike as he chronicles the rise of Gates and his small software company turned mutant beast Microsoft in his chapter called 'Godzilla'. It may be that Gates just has a big PR problem - in writing this book, the author met with and conducted interviews with many of the people, sans Bill Gates. This may be why Kaplan does not have the best impression of him. Now that the judgment in *United States v Microsoft* has been handed down, saying what others in Silicon Valley have been alleging for years, that Microsoft is in breach of anti-trust laws in the United States, perhaps a new chapter about how Godzilla was 'slain' by Big Brother with a century old tool called the *Sherman Act* can be added.

Silicon Valley also has its legends and more than anything 'ghosts'. The legends are those who have made it - their rags to riches story. The 'ghosts' are companies we will never hear of again: GO, Dynabook Technologies, Shockley Semiconductor Laboratories, to name a few. There are anecdotes of how Gary Kildall 'went flying' when IBM came knocking about his CP/M operating platform thus giving Microsoft its first big break. Or how IBM missed millions by having a PC design that anyone could copy (unlike the Macs).

What is interesting about this book is that it also tells you about the venture-capitalists like Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers who fund start-ups and rake in the

millions when these companies go public. They are part of the fabric of the Valley. Silicon Valley is a culture unto itself. Its religion, money. However, by the end of this book, one gets the feeling of nostalgia. Where once there was the passion of hacking and tinkering, now there is only the chase for money. The Valley of the past has been replaced by the soulless Computer. Poetic justice maybe. It sounds rather paradoxical that after extolling the virtues and wealth of the Valley, the book ends with a Valleyite, Bob Metcalfe (he invented the Ethernet) having had enough and moving his family to a farm as far as he could get from the bustle.

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Kaplan has a strong sense of the ironic that is reflected in his writing and makes *The Silicon Boys* an interesting read. As a newcomer to books like this, I found it light and surprisingly entertaining. It reads like a gossip magazine about the superstars of the computer age. You'll read about the three marriages of Larry Ellison, John Doerr's love of flying, Shockley's volatile temper and the eccentricities of the others. This is not a book for one who wants the definitive guide to Silicon Valley and its founders, nor for one who wants to read a *serious* computer book. This is easy reading for those who just want to know the many foibles and stories of the characters who shaped the Information Age - or just to answer the $25 question on *Sale of the Century.*

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