

**Tracy Kidder, *A Truck Full of Money*,
Random House, 2016.**

Many historians of computing will know Tracy Kidder's name from his second book, *The Soul of a New Machine* (Little Brown, 1981), which featured engineer Tom West managing a small group working on a tight deadline within a substantially antithetical Data General corporate culture. Kidder's career consists mostly of books in the genre of "narrative nonfiction" or "literary journalism" that delve into a topic area by featuring the activities of a person or small group of people at a particular time and place. In this, his 11th book, Kidder returns to the world of computing with *A Truck Full of Money*. Kidder's featured character is Paul English, who is most known for cofounding the Kayak travel website, which was sold in 2012 to Priceline for \$1.8 billion, with English personally receiving more than \$100 million.

Paul English (currently in his early 50s) comes from a working class background in one of Boston's neighborhoods. He discovered the joy of hacking computers at Boston Latin High School (an exam school), created a successful minor computer product while barely out of high school, and attended college at the University of Massachusetts Boston¹ while supporting himself through more or less full-time work. At UMass, he fell in with a bunch of highly skilled computer programmers in the sphere of a computer science faculty member who consulted to industry. This experience led English to a job at Interleaf, which produced a high-end desktop publishing system. English was good at programming and good at product concepts and design and, surprisingly, soon was leading the company's engineering and product marketing organizations.

With some of his Interleaf team and other computer software people, he successively started several companies, some not successful. He did sell one for tens of millions of dollars, and later made the large Kayak sale. In other words, Paul English is a "serial entrepreneur" (to use the current popular jargon). He is also a brilliant and driven man (who is sometimes a little hard on the people around him), but he is fundamentally a good man and other highly capable people follow him wherever he goes. He is conflicted about the money he has made—hence the line on the front of the book (not part of the book's title): "One Man's Quest to Recover from Great Success."²

Anyone interested in the worlds of computer programming, technical leadership and product development, venture capital and entrepreneurship, and philanthropy circa 1990–2015 (the Web era to date) should find the book interesting. It is an easy read (all of Kidder's books compel the reader along) about a guy with a good number of eccentricities, so the book will also be fun for general readers who enjoy accounts of interesting personalities. I have been telling my friends and relatives about the book, and some will get it as a present this coming December.

I also recommend the book more specifically to *Annals* readers. For current historians of computing, it's a better written and more comprehensive view of a slice of contemporary computing (Web commerce, apps) than what you read in the newspaper and popular business and technology magazines. For readers of the *Annals* from the practitioner world (many of whom are perhaps past their days of doing computing development), this will be fun reading about some of what is happening in computing today and maybe make one wonder (again?), "Why didn't I try to start my own company?"

Given English's success in the commercial website world and Kidder's interest in the contemporary software world, I think it is interesting to note that as I wrote this review (a month before the book's publication date), the book was selling well on a preorder basis on Amazon.com: second in kindle and fifth in hardcopy in the category of venture capital, it was also in the top 75 in the scientist biography and e-commerce business categories. This is one more example of how computing (and people like Paul English) are changing business. Also because of the Web era in which we live (and which Paul English exploits), there are side sources to *A Truck Full of Money* available online for the Paul English story.³

Because *A Truck Full of Money* is a commercial effort, I don't want to telegraph too many details of the author's story in this review; people and libraries need to buy the book. Therefore, I'll end by touching on another topic.

The uproar in the computing-history-writing world about Walter Isaacson's 2014 book *The Innovators* and Jane Smiley's book on John Vincent Atanasoff a few years before, leads me to think for a moment about how Kidder's craft of writing narrative nonfiction has some similarities, but some differences, from how I see professional historians approaching their work, especially since Kidder has spoken

publically about his practice of writing, for instance, in a Harvard Writers-at-Work conversation⁴ and in his book *Good Prose*.⁵

Kidder writes books about more or less contemporary practice for which he interviews participants and talks to experts that perhaps no historian has spoken to before, so there is little to critique about his historical accuracy. (He did speak to Donald Knuth about writing beautiful programs.) He also reports what he has heard and seen over a relatively narrow period of time, without putting forth any overall themes, interpretations, or arguments—nothing like Isaacson's themes that computing is advanced by teams and women played a key role, or Smiley's theme that Atanasoff invented the computer.

Like a professional historian, Kidder must read and interview people as part of trying to find a general topic area of interest to him and hopefully to the greater world, and then he must struggle through drafts, rewrites, and rethinks to find a specific story within that topic area that he can manage to tell in an understandable fashion. However, in contrast with an academic historian, Kidder doesn't spend as much of his research time looking for evidence in document archives; he is not writing for an audience that demands such authority, and he is not as explicitly trying to contribute to the historiography of the topic area. However, even without providing detailed evidence, Kidder has said, "the non-fiction writer's fundamental job is to make what is true believable."⁶ Like professional historians, Kidder also has the problem of finding an accepting audience. That is, the professional historian must put forth a document appreciated by his or her peers (who may be highly critical judges), whereas Kidder must put forth a document that sells enough copies so he can make a living (in the face of professional and Amazon amateur reviewers saying how he should have written the book they wish they had written). Unlike the typical historian, Kidder writes stories that haven't ended yet, so it is unclear what will happen to the main character next (for example, in 2016 English is starting a new company with, to my mind, a problematic chance of success) and also unclear whether ultimately the lead character will have had much impact on the world and will end up worthy of being written about. Nevertheless, there is a saying that journalism is the first draft of history, and I am guessing that Kidder's long form of journalism in this book will remain interesting to future historians as

they look back at our current Web-and-mobile-app era.

I should disclose that my name appears in a long alphabetical list of acknowledgements in the book. I met Tracy Kidder at a computing user group conference in 2014 that he was attending as part of his research, answered a few questions about computer programming, and recommended a couple of computing history books for his background reading. What we talked about isn't in the book, and my predisposition to like the next book by Tracy Kidder existed before I met him.

References and Notes

1. As the recipient of a BS and an MS in computer science, Paul English is not another example of having great success while being a college dropout.
2. The *Boston Globe Magazine* issue of 28 Aug. 2016 had an excerpt from the book regarding English's excursion into philanthropy; see <https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2016/08/23/you-made-million-what-would-you/VvRMVeb9SemivUavpfWp7J/story.html>.
3. P. English, "The Way I Work," *Inc.*, 1 Feb. 2010, www.inc.com/magazine/20100201/the-way-i-work-paul-english-of-kayak.html; J. Nanos, "Is Paul English the Soul of a New Machine," *Boston Globe*, 12 May 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2016/05/12/drives-uber-helps-haiti-and-may-revolutionize-how-travel-paul-english-soul-new-machine/R2vThUDvRMckM5KoPljVKK/story.html>.
4. "Tracy Kidder in Conversation with Darcy Frey, Part 1: 'Anyone who writes for a living and doesn't admit to being very lucky is almost certainly insane,'" *Nieman Storyboard*, 21 Oct. 2010, <http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/tracy-kidder-narrative-nonfiction-darcy-frey-harvard-writers-at-work-part-1/>; "Tracy Kidder in Conversation with Darcy Frey, Part 2: 'I write as fast as I can to prevent remorse for having written badly,'" *Nieman Storyboard*, 22 Oct. 2010, <http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/tracy-kidder-narrative-nonfiction-darcy-frey-harvard-writers-at-work-part-2/>.
5. T. Kidder and R. Todd, *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*, Random House, 2013.
6. T. Kidder, "Facts and the Nonfiction Writer," www.snreview.org/kidder.pdf.

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