

FIVE BEST: SILICON VALLEY

By Christopher J. Palermo

A high-tech attorney recommends accounts of the stellar rise and regular failures of the quirky people who fueled the country's technological blast furnace.

1. *The New New Thing: A Silicon Valley Story*, by Michael Lewis (1999). Ostensibly a biography of Jim Clark, founder of Netscape and Silicon Graphics, Lewis's book instead provides a cold dose of reality for any entrepreneur by tracing Clark's struggle to fund his third company – Healthon, which became WebMD – in a time of inflated expectations marked by the exponential upward arc of the first Internet boom. Despite Clark's domineering presence in the boardroom, he initially builds a company that lacks a coherent business model, is chaotic and apparently strategically rudderless; all the while Clark fritters away inordinate time pursuing one of the great follies of the *nouveau riche*, outfitting what would be the world's most complex yacht with 25 SGI workstations and myriad other electronic gadgets. Little wonder that two years later, dozens of worthless dot-com companies littered the Valley and a generation of investors suffered through a years-long retrenchment from taking risks on technology. Incredibly, though, Clark and his team righted the ship, and Healthon's IPO – just three years after founding – popped 400% on opening. Yet is this a model for the next entrepreneur? By then Clark "had ceased to be a businessman and become a conceptual artist," so that by 2001 many would have said his story marked a sharp end to surrealism in Silicon Valley business. But today's investors, checking out that "new new" mobile or Web startup, might take note of whether the business plan again looks much like a Dali painting.

2. *Accidental Empires*, by Robert X. Cringely (1996). For a gossipy, gory history of computing in the Valley, from the 1970s to the mid-90s, Cringely's chronicle of the rise of Apple, Microsoft and IBM, as well as names that now seem quaint - Compaq? - is vastly entertaining. Here are portraits of the obsessions, quirks, wildness, and genius of the ambitious nerds who drove the Valley to the peak of its first boom: Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, Mitch Kapor. Cringely, a writer for InfoWorld who was present at the creation for most of the companies he describes, occasionally comes off as smug and pedantic, but those are ego-centric traits of many Valley leaders, too, past and present. At times shocking, the anecdotes that Cringely recounts inexorably lead one to ask, "How can anyone work with these people?" But thousands do, often thriving in the process, and these are the vexing personalities that drive much of America's innovation. It's worth getting to know them – or inspired by them.

3. *Dealers of Lightning: Xerox PARC and the Dawn of the Computer Age*, by Michael A. Hiltzik (1999). The myth is that Xerox developed the mouse and the GUI at its Palo Alto Research Center, allowed Jobs to see them, and thanks to the cluelessness of the suits at headquarters across the continent, fumbled the chance to change the world. The reality, according to Hiltzik, is vastly more complex, and the world owes a debt of gratitude to Xerox for building out a world-class R&D facility staffed with incredible talent - the personalities, foibles and fights of whom become the central drama of the book. As with much in the Valley, timing is everything, and greatness comes from people, not things: Xerox assembled "a group of superlatively creative minds at the very moment when they could exert maximal influence on a burgeoning technology, and financed their work with unexampled generosity," and their brilliance is properly depicted here with grace and admiration. With Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine* (1981), *Dealers* is one of the best business histories of the computer era in the American oeuvre.

4. *Blue Sky Dream*, by David Beers (1997). Today's popular worship of New Media firms like Google and Facebook makes it easy to forget that for decades the Valley has also been a focal point - let us not say "ground zero" - for innovation in aerospace and other military systems. Thousands of Valley kids in the 1970s, like myself, had fathers who daily left at dawn for jobs at Lockheed's sprawling campus in Sunnyvale, whose private roads and drab buildings, some of them windowless, intertwined and merged with Moffett Field Naval Air Station and the "Blue Cube," the government's spy satellite control facility next to Moffett, the facilities becoming indistinguishable. Two-thirds of Beers' book colorfully reveals as much of this shadow world as can be known, and with the clarity of hindsight it seems hard to fault the civilian army of men in thin ties who toiled on the machines that were virtually never used, but essential to winning the Cold War. In the end, Beers veers into radicalism, and the book peters out into a succession of laments about the dangers of militarism. Yet along with *West of Eden*, Frank Rose's 1989 recounting of the founding and decline of Apple through the ouster of Jobs in the mid-1980s, Beers' work cautions that not all stories in the Valley end in happiness and wealth, and companies need to be judged by both their ends and their means.

5. *The Golden Gate*, by Vikram Seth (1986). The sudden appearance of an unexpected delight has propelled many a Valley company to fame, and so it was with Seth's book, as unusual in form as it is enjoyable for its characters. Seth, a Stanford graduate student mired in economics research, distracted himself by browsing bookstores where he opened translations of *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin's classic novel in sonnet form. Intrigued, Seth adopted the *Onegin* form for his tale of self-absorbed yuppies struggling to find love against the backdrop

of the 1980s Nuclear Freeze movement. Just lilted through nearly 600 stanzas of iambic tetrameter initially infuses one with a tickling sense of pride and delight, but any dissonance caused by the form is rapidly dissipated by the richness of language and the complexity of character in the six people whose lives, loves and losses are immediately relatable and relevant. And from University Avenue (Palo Alto) to North Beach, Seth travels landscapes, which, to understand the Valley, need to be known, and importantly depicts the region not as a corporate playland but no different than any other American metropolis: a place of people who often struggle and fail but are imbued with hope and the longing to love.

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