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Why We Make Things And Why It Matters: The Education Of A Craftsman

WHY WE MAKE THINGS
AND WHY IT MATTERS
The Education of a Craftsman

PETER KORN

READ BY TRAVIS BURNS • UNABRIDGED



Synopsis

In this moving account, Peter Korn explores the nature and rewards of creative practice. We follow his search for meaning as an Ivy-educated child of the middle class who finds employment as a novice carpenter on Nantucket, transitions to self-employment as a designer and maker of fine furniture, takes a turn at teaching and administration at Colorado's Anderson Ranch Arts Center, and then founds a school in Maine: the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, an internationally respected nonprofit institution. Furniture making practiced as a craft in the 21st century is a decidedly marginal occupation. Yet the view from the periphery can be illuminating. For Korn the challenging work of bringing something new and meaningful into the world through one's own volition - whether in the arts, the kitchen, or the marketplace - is what generates the meaning and fulfillment that so many of us seek. This is not a how-to book in any sense. Korn wants to get at the why of craft in particular and the satisfactions of creative work in general to understand their essential nature. How does the making of objects shape our identities? How do the products of creative work inform society? In short, what does the process of making things reveal to us about ourselves? Korn draws on four decades of hands-on experience to answer these questions eloquently, and often poignantly, in this personal, introspective, and revealing book.

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Customer Reviews

Why We Make Things is a book of introspection, history, scholarship, and enlightenment. Peter Korn deftly weaves stories of self, others, craft, and minds into a compelling and riveting narrative. In light of today's widespread "Maker Movement" most of it centered on

digital tools—“it is illuminating to return to physical making for insights into craft as a form of self-fashioning wherein each of us, through human effort and creativity, can put our own personal spin on tradition and, in turn, transform tradition, ourselves, and, perhaps, society as well. The claims in the book about mind and meaning are all empirically well supported in current research, though Korn does not belabor this fact. However, the book goes beyond facts that are true to discuss facts that matter. In the end, the book exemplifies something that scholarship is only now coming to realize: mind, emotion, values, and the self all merge and reinforce each other in the act of mindful making. The book is artfully written and is a fully engaging read. In my own view, we live today in the midst of many crises because we have forgotten—“often in the pursuit of greed and ideology—that the world *talks back*—when you act on it and that failing to listen to it with respect is dangerous for body and soul. *Why We Make Things* lovingly shows how we can listen to things to become better people.

Peter Korn poses an intriguing question: "Why do we choose the spiritually, emotionally, and physically demanding work of bringing new objects into the world with creativity and skill?" This book is his extended response to that question. After completing his academic assignments for the University of Pennsylvania, he embarked on what became a journey of discovery during which two epiphanies occurred. (More about them later.) "My intuition from the first day I picked up a hammer was that making things with a commitment to quality would lead to a good life." In this book, he retraces the steps of his journey "with reference to larger frameworks - historical, sociological, psychological, and biological - to discover how and why that intuition turned out to be valid." His readers tag along with him from Nantucket Island to Frederick (Maryland) to New York City and then Philadelphia before relocating (again) to the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village (Colorado) for which he served for the six years as Program Director before finally founding (in 1992) the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport (Maine). Along the way, he published *Woodworking Basics: Mastering the Essentials of Craftsmanship* (Taunton Press, 2003) and *The Woodworker's Guide to Hand Tools* (Taunton Press, 1998). *Why We Make Things and Why it Matters* is his third book. And along the way, he was stricken by cancer and struggled with personal losses best described by him, "With regard to the aforementioned epiphanies, the first occurred in November (1984) when he had been hard at work on a cradle: "After three days of intense focus, cold, and solitude, the cradle is complete -- a miraculous birth in its own right. I have somehow transformed benign intent into a beautiful functional object. This is my moment on the road to Demascus. I am overtaken by the most unexpected passion." (Page 28). The second epiphany

occurred in 1991 during his sixth year at Anderson Ranch. By way of background, he explains that he had previously composed an artist's statement, one that included a sentence that brought his emerging ideas into focus. It read: My own values became clear when I eventually realized that the words I used to describe my aesthetic goals as a furniture maker -- integrity, simplicity, and grace -- also described the person I sought to grow into through the practice of craftsmanship." (Page 102) That sentence was his second epiphany. While re-reading the book in preparation to compose this brief commentary, I was again reminded of similar experiences that James Joyce describes in several of his letters and short stories as well as in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Of course, I have no idea whether or not Korn had Joyce and his work in mind when sharing this especially significant moment during his own development. Be that as it may, his transition from carpenter to craftsman is near complete, with details best revealed within the narrative, in context. What's my take? Of greatest interest and value to me is what Peter Korn has to say about how he "found his way in the world" by committing himself to (as Richard Sennett expressed it) "doing something well, for its own sake." Consider this brief excerpt from *Creativity* in which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi observes: "To achieve the kind of world we consider human, some people had to dare to break the thrall of tradition, Next, they had to find ways of recording those new ideas or procedures that improved on what went on before. Finally, they had to find ways of transmitting the new knowledge to generations to come. Those who were involved in this process we call creative. What we call culture, or those parts of ourselves that we internalized from the social environment, is their creation." For Korn, these "essential" observations by Sennett and Csikszentmihalyi ring true: "There is great satisfaction to be found in work that engages one as an end in itself." His experiences can be described in many different ways. He found his calling, he found himself, he found his True North...all quite correct. For me, the key to understanding the experiences that Korn discusses, many of which resemble our own, is to think of how he created a good life as well as a successful career. He and countless others have learned through their own experiences that what they love to do, what they most enjoy, is probably what they do best, despite challenges and setbacks along the way. "And so it is. As a maker you put one foot in front of the other and you own the journey. Finding creative passion that governs your life may be a curse as well as a blessing, but I would not trade it for anything else I know." One final point: It will come as no surprise to those who are already familiar with Peter Korn's art and craftsmanship that he complements his lean and effective prose with preliminary sketches and then photographs of some of his creations, illustrations that are of superior quality. They bring his story to life in ways and to an extent words alone cannot. Bravo!

I enjoyed the memoir part of this book in which the author describes his improbable discovery of furniture making and his growth into competent craftsman and designer. I didn't appreciate the half or more of the book in which Korn elucidates, or tries to, his theory about why we make things. I won't be a spoiler and tell you what the theory is but I will reveal that I was unpersuaded by it, though it may explain why Korn made things, also why he quit making and started teaching. I read the whole book but I never got why its author thinks it matters that we hand make elements of our world. Fortunately, there are many good reasons that are set forth tellingly, poignantly, in other books.

I was really looking for a book that talks about what craftsmanship is and how to cultivate it. I also want to learn why making things matters. the book is very biographical and not really in an interesting way.

Both honest and inviting, *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters*, is a book worth stopping long enough to read. Korn's memoir of how his craft has shaped him has wide applicability to other fields and lives, including my own field of urban education. When work is a vocation rather than a career, there are endless possibilities for growth in attending to the most minute, seemingly mundane interaction. A book for us all.

I read this book based upon the rave reviews it got. I was sorely disappointed. Not only is his writing rambling and repetitive, but the title is totally misleading. It should read "Why I Made Things and Why it Mattered to Me." There is no inclusive discussion whatsoever. I also found his uncritical discussion of his own work out of place. I have seen much better furniture design with much less fanfare on the artist's part. If the piece should be able to speak for itself, then let it do the talking.

This is really a memoir of Peter Korn whose importance as a craftsman escapes me. Every time I thought he was going to say something significant about design or craftsmanship he would whicker off about his business dealings. More unanswered questions than answered ones. I'm afraid I don't find Peter Korn as interesting as he finds himself.

If you are looking for how to or are put off by someone thinking deeply about himself and his work you won't like it. If that interests you then it's a great book. I highly recommend it but I AM a nerd so . . . It is very well written, thoughtful, careful, not dismissive of the reader. But he's not trying to

convince you of anything or sell an idea or philosophy- at least I didn't read it that way. If you are into craft and thinking about it it's a good read.

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