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The Nudist on the Late Shift and Other Tales of Silicon Valley (review)

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**THE NUDIST ON THE LATE  
SHIFT AND OTHER TRUE  
TALES OF SILICON VALLEY**

by Po Bronson. Random House, New York, 1999. 248 pp. ISBN: 0-375-50277-7.

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If one mentions Silicon Valley, people invariably picture wealth beyond imagination in a fantasy-land where every other resident is a computer geek with

a billion-dollar idea, a Bill Gates in waiting in the valley of dreams. Silicon Valley now rivals, maybe surpasses, Hollywood as a magnet for those with talent, initiative and a good idea. They come from near and far, eager to share in the Gold Rush of the information age.

Po Bronson, a graduate of Stanford University (which is in Silicon Valley), knows the physical terrain of this ill-defined area south of San Francisco well. However, he realizes that the search for a single place that encapsulates or explains the Valley experience is fruitless and that insight is built up over time, in many layers, by many small hints. For the follow-up to his novel *The First \$20 Million Is Always the Hardest*, Bronson returns to Silicon Valley to give us the real story in this collection of essays.

To Bronson, there are two principal problems in attempting to portray Silicon Valley: that there is “very little there, there” and that the real business of the Valley, the creation of tomorrow’s technology, proceeds behind a forbidding legal firewall policed by some of the world’s most expensive lawyers. The tightest of non-disclosure agreements and strictest of employee contracts preclude the escape of even the most trivial of whispers, that is, until a product is ready to ship, when the publicity flood gates are thrown open.

Bronson does not focus on big names known to every man in the street but turns instead to the less famous, endeavoring to find out what makes them tick. The impetus for Bronson’s approach was a Valley rumor—the rumor that somewhere, after dark, an eccentric programmer works in his cubicle and very little else. Bronson’s determination to validate this urban myth forced him to conclude that money was not the only motivator in Silicon Valley, just as nudism relegates materialism in favor of self-expression.

In his quest to discover the nature of Valley life, Bronson sees through the veneer of money without being distracted or envious. He does not ask the obvious questions asked by those who cannot see through the dollar signs. Rather than asking David Filo, co-founder of Yahoo, about the feeling of being worth five hundred million dollars, he asks him if he still sleeps under his desk and observes that he is wearing an Excite T-shirt.

In the 1848 California Gold Rush, it was not starry-eyed prospectors making the real money, but entrepreneurs selling picks and shovels. This is echoed today in

the successes of the likes of Microsoft, Oracle, Cisco and Novell—they may not be glamorous, but they are certainly profitable. Opportunities also exist for smaller players to share the spoils.

Among the unusual trades exposed in the book, the most opportunistic is that of the “cubicle guy,” who buys used cubicles from faltering or failed businesses in order to refurbish and sell them. This trade is as ruthless as any in the Valley, with much competition and keen prices; a used cubicle sells for little more than half that of a new one. The cubicle guy’s success is due to his awareness of the first signs of business failure—faltering share prices and redundancies—and his speed of action. Ambulance-chasing lawyers have nothing on this character. His trade, however, can be seen as a microcosm of the computer industry in the area where a good idea, vigorous research and rapid implementation are essential precursors to success. The recycling of cubicles also parallels the recycling of staff, where the rapid rate of re-employment of employees gives the Valley a near-zero unemployment rate.

Bronson does not look to answer the question of how Silicon Valley became what it is, where it is. He instead uses the differing perspectives of his subjects to emphasize that Silicon Valley is a state of mind perpetuated by an evolutionary culture. To quote the nudist himself, “work today has to be half work, half play. We spend our whole lives at the workplace.” Bronson takes us into this melting pot of innovation and high finance and engagingly portrays this new culture. This book leaves one fascinated by the irresistible draw that Silicon Valley poses to the highly talented and highly ambitious, lured not just by money but by the drive to realize ideas and make a difference.