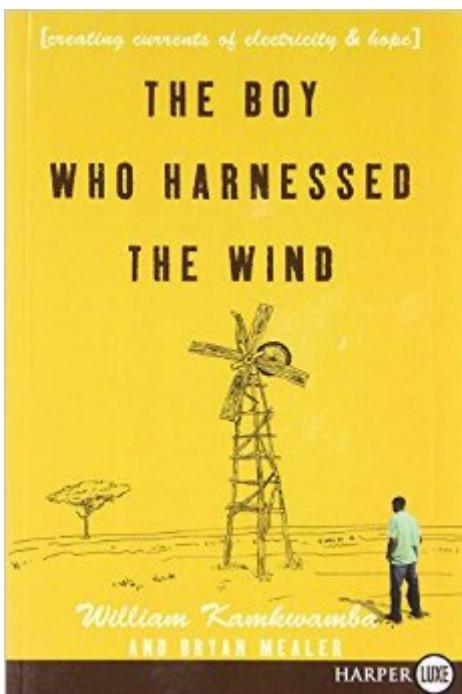


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The Boy Who Harnessed The Wind

LP: Creating Currents Of Electricity And Hope



Synopsis

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind is the immensely engaging and inspiring true account of an enterprising African teenager who constructed a windmill from scraps to create electricity for his entire community. William Kamkwamba shares the remarkable story of his youth in Malawi, Africa—a nation crippled by intense poverty, famine, and the AIDS plague—and how, with tenacity and imagination, he built a better life for himself, his family, and his village. The poignant and uplifting story of Kamkwamba's inspiration and personal triumph, co-written with Bryan Mealer, The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind has already won ringing praise from former Vice President and Nobel Laureate Al Gore as well as Paolo Coelho, internationally bestselling author of *The Alchemist*.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is the story of William Kamkwamba, a clever boy in Malawi, Africa who built his own windmill from found materials at age 14. Much of the energy of the book is that it is a very recent story, the main events taking place just in the last six years. The story is in three parts. The first part tells of William's life growing up and that of his father, giving a fascinating glimpse of the village life of subsistence farmers whose culture has changed little in thousands of years. Daily existence includes very real fears of witchcraft, shamans for healing, and strong currents of superstition. Although written in clear, simple narrative (mostly by the co-author, Bryan Mealer, an AP reporter with extensive experience across Africa), it is by no means a child's bedtime story. Malawi, an

interior country of 13 million, has minimal health care, primitive agriculture, and no free public high schools. Villagers can be killed by wild animals in the forest. In 2001 the maize crops failed, plunging the countryside into famine and near social collapse, and William loses friends to disease and starvation. The government comes off badly in this episode, incompetent, brutal against the local village chief who complains, and corrupt. William is a bright boy eager for school, but his family cannot afford the fees. He is forced to drop out. In the second part of the story, doing the best he can in spite of this disappointment, William finds an elementary physics textbook in a local library and sees diagrams of windmills - he cannot even read the English text. From this bit of information, with impressive focus and persistence he manages to build his own version from scraps of wire, an old bicycle hub, and flattened PVC pipe for blades. He has zero resources - not even a soldering iron, which would be useless in any case since there is no electricity in his household. But he is a natural engineer, and even with no guidance or help, he succeeds in making an operating windmill which powers a few lightbulbs for home and village, charges cell phones, operates a water pump - all of which make a real difference in village life. The third part of the book, just as remarkable as his technological triumph, is about William's discovery by the outside world. The hero of the discovery phase is really the Internet. William's windmill comes to the attention of an engineer working in the capital city, who blogs about it, inspiring others to take a four hour bus journey to find William, who then quickly comes to the attention of international entrepreneurs and technologists. His life quickly expands - amazingly, straight from his village he is invited to speak at an African conference organized by TED, the California organization which publicizes emerging ideas about technology and design. Taken under wing by US sponsors, he travels internationally and finds scholarships for his own education as well as funding for his village technology. He now has a website of course (just Google his name), a PayPal donation account, and a promotional video here on - more international attention within a short time than the coolest MIT Media Lab guru! There are a few technical errors in the text - malaria is not a virus for example, and the core of a transformer is a ferromagnet, not a conductor. These are minor points; William is an appealing character and the story is inspiring. But there must be millions of Williams across the developing world. What the book really shows is that the best international assistance is in response to local energy rather than top-down through an ineffective government. The tools to find those kids and offer that help are now at hand. Whereas electric windmills are not new - everything William did has been known for a hundred years - instant cheap global communication is a revolutionary innovation which can help bring the best minds of Africa and many other places into the world community.

After barely surviving a famine in Malawi (sub-Saharan Africa), 14-year-old William Kamkwamba was determined to find a way to make life better for himself and his family. What if he could somehow bring electricity to his village, to pump water for crops in times of drought? Using diagrams in an old forgotten science book called "Using Energy" that he found in a grade school library, he cobbled together a contraption out of scraps and junk that worked to power a few light bulbs -- and changed the life of his village forever. His neighbors, steeped in superstition and with little or no knowledge of science, thought him crazy. But he had a gift for mechanical things, he understood the principles, and he knew he could do it. And he did. Eventually he got a second windmill going, powering a water pump from a deep well, which is now used by all the women in the village. Today every house there has a solar panel and a battery to store electricity, too. But this is much more than a story about an African boy who built a working windmill. It's a monument to the human spirit. In fact, we don't even get to making the windmill itself until halfway through the book. In the first half, William tells us a lot about his life in Africa, the terrible famine that swept his land, how he and his family survived, and the clues along the way which eventually led to him making the windmill. Even as a little kid, he was taking apart radios to see how they worked -- with no books or training, just trial and error. Then he saw a bicycle light that ran from a mechanical dynamo -- the kind that generates electricity when you pedal. Experimenting with this, he figured out how to get it to power his radio when he turned the bike pedals. When he finally found a picture of a windmill in the "Using Energy" book, it all came together. "In my mind I saw the dynamo," he explains, "saw myself with my neighbor's bicycle those many nights ago, spinning the pedals so I could listen to the radio... The wind would spin the blades of the windmill, rotating the magnets in the dynamo, and then creating current. Attach a wire to the dynamo and you could power anything..." Sounds simple? In principle, yes -- but there is no local Radio Shack in a Malawi village for William to go get the parts. He must make do with what he can scrounge -- and that's the really amazing part of this story. Step by step, William explains what he needed for the windmill, how he adapted things he found in the junkyard, or took odd jobs to get money to buy what he could not make. Some simple tasks took three or four hours because he did not have the right tools and had to improvise. But he kept at it. All in all, he probably put a hundred or more hours into this project. Talk about determination! As I read the story, I could not help thinking how wasteful we are here in America. Over and over, I was astonished at William's creativity in finding uses for things I would have considered useless junk. That gave me serious pause for thought. One more point: I finished this book the same week as President Obama's "stay in school" pep talk to students in America (Sept 8, 2009). Here in a land where every child can get a free education, we have a 30% dropout rate, even

higher in some places. In Malawi where William is growing up, school is only for those who can afford to pay tuition, and he is desperate to study. Because of the famine, his family had lost everything and could no longer afford to send him to school, so he was forced to drop out. Yet he wanted to go so badly, he was sneaking INTO class. Eventually he does get a scholarship, thanks to the publicity generated by his windmill project. Had it not been for that, his genius might have gone to waste, and who knows what future inventions the world would miss? Perhaps this book should be required reading in American schools, so kids here will know just how lucky they are to have such good educational opportunities. I give William's book ten stars!

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