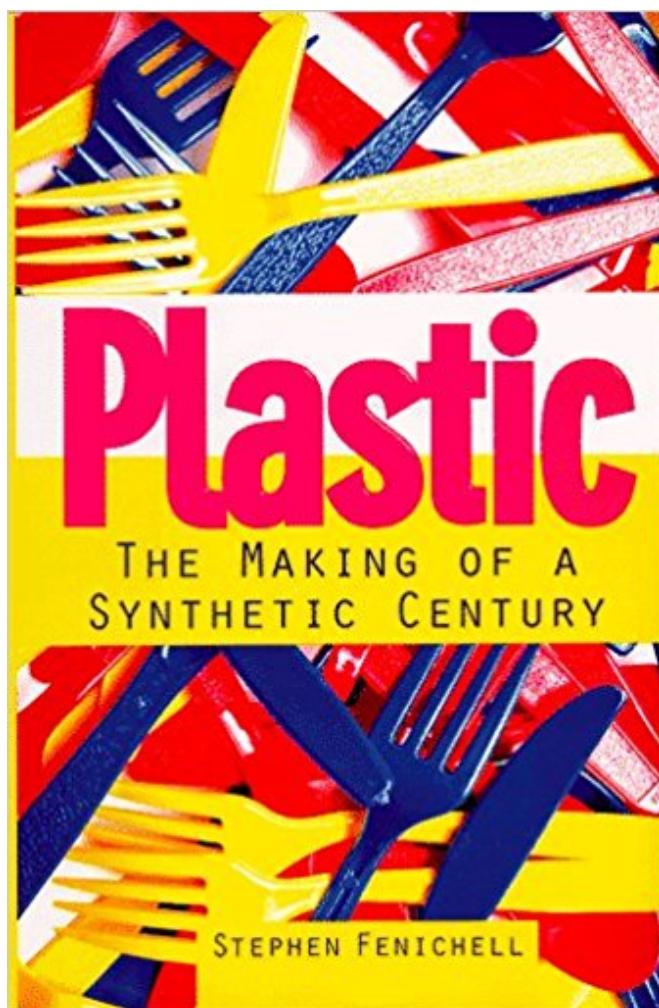


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# Plastic: The Making Of A Synthetic Century



## Synopsis

Prophylactics to polystyrene, viscose to Velcro, saran to cellophane: For better or worse, we're married to plastic. In your refrigerator, your closet, your car it's everywhere, and it's not going away. You eat with it, work with it, play with it. Often, you even breathe it. Cheap, pliable, easily made, eminently democratic, it symbolizes everything that's both wrong and right with our culture. In *Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century*, Stephen Fenichell takes a fresh, irreverent look at the substance we all love to hate. The book moves from the early astonishment at such inventions as celluloid film and waterproof clothing, to the nylon-stockings riots after World War II, to the revolutionary yet practical proliferation of Tupperware in the '50s. Fenichell's sweeping assessment of the social and economic revolutions brought on by plastic extends from the sublime to the absurd, the beautiful to the mundane, demonstrating how scientists, artists, politicians and the buying public have all molded, and also been molded, by plastic. By turns a hero and a villain, a useless fad, an essential commodity, plastic is the ideal indicator of how people think and live. With clarity, wit and deadpan accuracy, Fenichell narrates a rollicking story about the thrills, chills and accidental spills that led to the development of plastic, about the scientists and corporations who got rich (or went bankrupt) creating and selling synthetics, and about the surprising invention that has shaped our world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Perhaps Dustin Hoffman should have paid attention to that unsolicited investment advice in "The Graduate." Plastics really are the future. Indeed these smooth oil-based synthetic polymers,

available in a spectrum from rainbow-colored through raindrop transparent, are already so ubiquitous in our lives that we barely notice them. Expertly and entertainingly, Stephen Fenichell draws our attention to these shape-shifting substances; he tells us the names (do you know your polypropylene from your butadiene?), and the social history and cultural legacy of a diverse family of materials that has been given a bad rap--or maybe "wrap" is the word.

This compelling, often surprising saga of the invention of plastic and its transformation of society will rivet your attention, challenge your preconceptions and open up new vistas of science, history and popular culture. Unlike detractors who dismiss plastic as tacky, cheap or environmentally unsound, Fenichell, a freelance writer, celebrates its unsung role in modern life. Polyethylene airborne-radar insulation (which the British had and the Nazis didn't) helped the Allies win the air war over Europe. Computer discs and audio- and videotape make possible the information age, while plastic hearts and limbs prolong and improve human life. Fenichell unreels a resilient tale of scientific discovery, tragedies, rare ingenuity, serendipity. Upstate New York printer John Wesley Hyatt failed in his quest to make the perfect non-ivory billiard ball, but instead, in 1868, created the first thermoplastic, the ideal material for the coming Machine Age. Depressive Harvard chemist Wallace Carothers invented synthetic silk (nylon) in 1934, but committed suicide three years later, obsessed with his failure as a scientist. Tracking vinyl, rayon, Teflon, Bakelite, polyester and so forth, Fenichell carries the story to pop art, Tupperware, environmental artist Christo's outdoor wrappings and new biodegradable plastics used in ecologically fashionable fibers, dissolvable films and recyclable bottles. \$20,000 ad/promo. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century was written by Stephen Fenichell in 1996 as a history of the plastics business. It describes the winding path that a wide range of plastics took from the lab to the marketplace. The book is filled with many, many interesting anecdotes about the entrepreneurs who blazed that trail. The book is organized into 13 chapters arranged, mostly, in chronological order. There is the predictable, "Just one word.....Plastics" cliche from The Graduate movie used as a preface. The book begins with a late 20th century scene setting chapter. Mr. Fenichell then rolls the clock back 150 years to explain the commercialization of rubber, which he properly calls "Nature's Plastic". There are chapters about celluloid, Bakelite, and cellophane with historical vignettes about their respective titans named Eastman, Baekeland and Brandenberger. There is a dramatic account of the tragic life of Wallace Hume Carothers, the inventor of nylon. But my favorite chapter is the one entitled, "Plast-O-Rama" which highlights the ways in which post-war America

went bonkers for all things plastic. From Silly Putty and Hula Hoops to Frisbees and Tupperware and Saran Wrap, it's all in this book. Overall it thought that the Pro's of this book were: It's a good historical overview of plastic. It's loaded with facts about plastic. And I thought the only Con of this book was: The history is presented out of chronological order for no apparent reason. This book will be of interest to: 20th century pop historians, polymer chemists, plastic trivia buffs, anyone who makes their living selling or producing plastic, employees or former employees of Dupont, Rohm & Haas, Eastman Kodak, Ford Motor Company and General Electric, industrial designers, material science students, manufacturing entrepreneurs, environmentalists.

This history is probably of more relevance and importance to our modern way of life than just memorizing a list of nineteenth century presidents.

I came across this book by accident, while travelling. The colorful cover caught my eye, but soon after reading a few chapters I was hooked. It's the perfect beach book. Plastic is now a word that can conjure the idea of "cheap" or "fake" but it was not always so. Fenichell starts us at the beginning of the discovery of the various materials like man-made rubber and other things we now take for granted, and tells the story of each innovation as though we are standing there in the lab and the inventor yells "Eureka!" Stories about the inventors range from funny (you know Goodyear is going to eventually succeed because of his famous name, but he has many misadventures before success arrives) to poignant, in the stories where someone desperately wants to achieve fame and fortune but their "plastic" product fails to catch on and their name disappears into oblivion. My only criticism is the chapter on my grandfather, who plays a prominent role in the history of plastic. Fenichell simplifies and distorts some of the facts about my grandfather's company, but I forgive him in that it makes the reading light and entertaining in the end (well, a couple of chapters get bogged down by technical explanations of certain chemical processes). This is a book for anyone interested in American history, sociology, and pop psychology: plastics of all kinds make up an inextricable part of every aspect of our daily lives.

Entertaining and informative to an enquiring mind. Very readable and a good starter to anyone curious about how these materials evolved. Chemists, engineers and academic's who read this book may criticise in the light of their superior knowledge but I found the book provided a level of interest and style of writing that sustained my reading.

One would expect a history of plastic to be full of dreary minutia, of interest only to professional chemists. You couldn't be more wrong. The author is to be congratulated for taking a topic that could be dull and turning it into a historical account of how these substances have impacted our lives. Don't get me wrong, I am no lover of plastic but there are applications that require materials with the properties found in modern plastics. You just don't realize how crucial these substances are until you read this book.

This book is an engaging, easy to read modern history of plastic, roughly following the materials and their associated inventors, promoters, uses and abuses and aesthetics from the 1800s to the 1990s. There is a lot of philosophizing on the part of the narrator, but more than enough actual scientific and cultural history to make up for it. There are some black and white photos scattered throughout, and a complete index, but no bibliography, no notes or appendices or timeline of any kind. The book is laid out in chronological order, but dates and places are often only loosely given and skipped around, and no attempt is made to systematically explain the relations between the different kinds of plastic, let alone give chemical formulas or accurate production and manufacturing information. Contrast this with another more concretely informative work in a similar vein... say, "Twinkie, Deconstructed".

Fenichell is highly readable. He has appreciation for inventors who have developed new materials for the service of society. His book offers a balanced perspective, with engaging anecdotes. A mild criticism concerns organization. The book is a sequence of anecdotes about different plastics. Why one is mentioned before another is not clearly explained. As a result, the book feels like journalistic stream of consciousness in appreciating materials, their purposes and inventors. This is respectful of the subject, but it is a bit hard to put into overall context and see a big picture.

This is a scholarly, tongue in cheek, thoroughly enjoyable peon to the most despicable of substances. Histories of science and industry could learn much from Mr. Fenichell's pleasing blend of knowledge and humor. This is one of my favorite books.

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