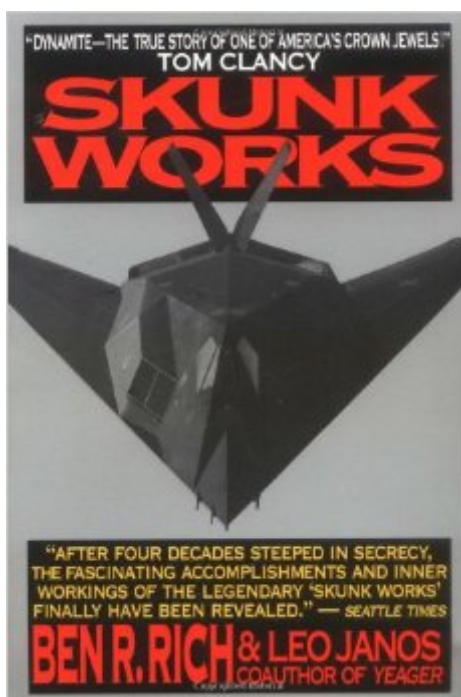


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# Skunk Works: A Personal Memoir Of My Years At Lockheed



## Synopsis

From the development of the U-2 to the Stealth fighter, the never-before-told story behind America's high-stakes quest to dominate the skies Skunk Works is the true story of America's most secret and successful aerospace operation. As recounted by Ben Rich, the operation's brilliant boss for nearly two decades, the chronicle of Lockheed's legendary Skunk Works is a drama of cold war confrontations and Gulf War air combat, of extraordinary feats of engineering and human achievement against fantastic odds. Here are up-close portraits of the maverick band of scientists and engineers who made the Skunk Works so renowned. Filled with telling personal anecdotes and high adventure, with narratives from the CIA and from Air Force pilots who flew the many classified, risky missions, this book is a riveting portrait of the most spectacular aviation triumphs of the twentieth century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a gem on many levels:1) On the history and development of spy planes: This has been covered by many previous reviews on this book. So, I won't write more here.2) On creativity: There are a lot of books on creativity. Many of them are trivial. Most are written by people who themselves have not design or deliver noteworthy innovations that are of national or international significance. This book is different. It is written by a person who has contributed innovations at, and even run Skunk Works, which has delivered innovation after innovation that are internationally significant.How does a smart scientist or engineer determine if an organization is a place of major technical inventions? This book tells you the characteristics of such organizations. How do you organize and

run a place that can deliver breakthrough innovations at bargain prices? This book gives you the principles on how to do it correctly.<sup>3</sup>) On cold war and patriotism: This book gives you a glimpse into the cold war, and the hair-triggering tension of nuclear war between U.S. and the ex-Soviet Union. Also, it shows the patriotism among the U.S. government officials, top military echelons, pilots, and civilian scientists and engineers. Even more, it shows how Skunk Works' technologies tipped the power towards the U.S.<sup>4</sup>) On biographies: This book is a partial and vivid biography of both Kelly Johnson and Ben Rich. Their personal traits, both strengths and flaws, are clearly described.<sup>5</sup>) On Navy's major shortcomings: Kelly's fifteenth principle of rather to starve than to deal with the Navy is nothing short of astonishment.

Skunk works is the true story behind the coolest, high tech, top secret, aerospace engineering division operated by the Lockheed Martin corporation. Forged by legendary U. Michigan alumnus Kelly Johnson, the Skunk Works has created the coolest planes of recent memory, including the SR-71 Blackbird (currently visible on the flight deck of the Intrepid Aircraft Carrier in NYC), the F117A Stealth Fighter, and the U2 spy plane. The F22 Raptor and the Joint Strike Fighter are also creations of the Skunk Works, but are not covered in this autobiography written by the successor to Kelly Johnson, Ben Rich. This quick read is well worth your while for a couple of reasons. First, the stories behind the creation of these planes is very interesting. For example, the Skunk Works engineers found the mathematical key to the stealth design buried within an obscure physics journal originally published in Russian. Oddly, the Russians military never capitalized on the principle, despite urgings from the article's Russian author. Furthermore, when the stealth plane was first designed and kept in a secret hanger infested with some bats, the bats couldn't detect the plane with their "sonar-like" sense, and they ended up crashing into it. The book also makes for excellent military and therefore world history. Accomplishments of the U2 spy plane and the F117-A Stealth Fighter are covered in depth and literally changed the course of world events during the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the Gulf War, and other skirmishes. Many interesting, behind the scenes (formerly classified?) missions are also revealed in this book.

For 16 years Ben Rich was the head of Skunk Works, Lockheed Corporation's secretive special projects division. In this engrossing work, he examines 40 years of aerospace innovations, including the U-2, F-117, and (my favorite) the SR-71 Blackbird. Although the book is all about incredible innovations, do not fear that this book will be overly technical; I never bogged down while reading it and found a lot of it humorous, in fact. (On the same point, it's only fair to note that if you ARE

looking for a highly technical work, this is probably not the book you want.) I must admit that I grew up playing endlessly with toy jet-fighters, and thus for subject matter alone I would have to give three stars. Rather than telling the history of Skunk Works strictly chronologically, Rich breaks the book down into chapters that focus on specific projects. This approach avoids confusion that might arise from the overlapping development of multiple aircraft. It also allows the reader to go back and read about one particular plane without wading through unrelated information. Each chapter also contains "Other Voices," short sections written by others involved in the aerospace or defense industries. Many of these sections were written by pilots and provided some of the book's most exciting passages. I thought the "Other Voices" were a great addition that expanded the scope of Rich's work. I also appreciated that this book was not propaganda for the military-industrial complex (a rut I believe Tom Clancy has fallen in). Rich is justifiably proud of Skunk Works' successes, but he also admits their failures, notably: an attempt in the late '50s to create a plane fueled by liquid hydrogen, and also a stealth catamaran ship.

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