

The Patent Files: Dispatches from the Frontiers of Invention

David Lindsay

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Honestly, now, haven't you mused at one time or another that the world would be a better place if only someone would invent a circular cycle with pedals for eight riders? Or a personal air purifier consisting of a helmet containing potted plants that would emit oxygen as the wearer exhaled carbon dioxide? Or a male contraceptive utilizing a washer-shaped ring that somehow would be inserted into ... well, never mind.

Okay, so most of us don't lie awake nights dreaming up such contraptions. But there exists a little-known subculture where life revolves around conceiving, producing and marketing inventions for every imaginable purpose. From 1993 to 1998, journalist Lindsay gave readers of the weekly New York Press a peek into the fascinating world of these occasionally brilliant, always eccentric would-be Edisons. The Patent Files is a sampling of his more than two hundred columns about inventors, their creations and the quirky ins and outs of the patenting process.

The writer and his assignment clearly were meant for each other. Although he has no formal scientific background, Lindsay is at ease discussing everything from properties of DNA to the mystery of cold fusion. Mercifully, he does so in everyday language with a breezy, humorous style that can engage even the reader with little interest in the subject at hand. It also helps that he's apparently something of an oddball himself and has taken his own cracks at inventing. (He forked out \$6,000 in a failed effort to patent "vanity laces" for shoes; turned out others had beaten him to the idea). A concluding essay chronicles his tongue-in-cheek quest to patent himself.

Lindsay introduces us to the fellow whose claim to have built a perpetual motion machine was rejected by the U.S. Patent Office (an obvious conspiracy, the man huffs). Then there's the inventor of a mirror that produces a "non-reversed reflection of the human face." And the guy so annoyed by the arbitrary nature of the calendar that he created his own—along with an "astrological clock" whose hands run backward, marking a twelve-hour day.

Lindsay occasionally ruminates on weighty matters such as the nature of knowledge, yet he seldom strays from the lighthearted, irreverent tone that makes his pieces delightful to read. The Patent Files will be of particular interest not only to pop-science buffs, but also anyone drawn to tales of offbeat personalities and endeavors.

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