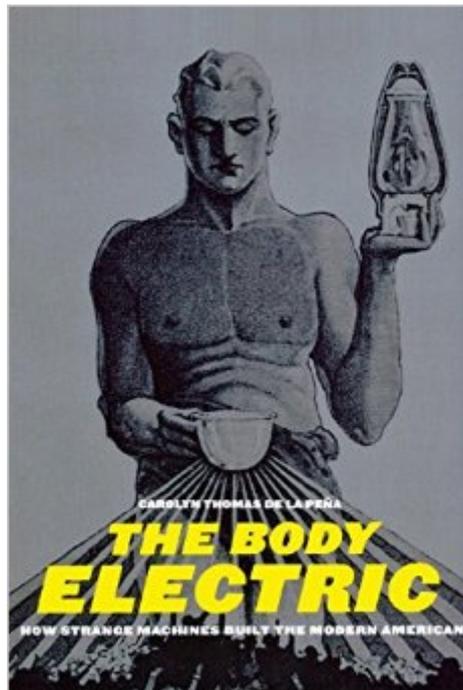


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# The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built The Modern American (American History And Culture)



## Synopsis

Between the years 1850 and 1950, Americans became the leading energy consumers on the planet, expending tremendous physical resources on energy exploration, mental resources on energy exploitation, and monetary resources on energy acquisition. A unique combination of pseudoscientific theories of health and the public's rudimentary understanding of energy created an age in which sources of industrial power seemed capable of curing the physical limitations and ill health that plagued Victorian bodies. Licensed and unlicensed physicians alike promoted machines, electricity, and radium as invigorating cures, veritable "fountains of youth" that would infuse the body with energy and push out disease and death. *The Body Electric* is the first book to place changing ideas about fitness and gender in dialogue with the popular culture of technology. Whether through wearing electric belts, drinking radium water, or lifting mechanized weights, many Americans came to believe that by embracing the nation's rapid march to industrialization, electrification, and "radiomania," their bodies would emerge fully powered. Only by uncovering this belief's passions and products, Thomas de la Peña argues, can we fully understand our culture's twentieth-century energy enthusiasm.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book shows that our current obsessions with our bodies and machines have roots as old as the rise of consumer electricity. Technology in America takes on religious forms. And Professor de la

Pena shows the extent of influence of such ideas as "electricity as therapy." This is so well written you won't be able to put it down. It explains complex technological details in clear and precise terms. Its influence should last a long time.

A delightful history of our American obsession with self-improvement and reinvention, our love affair with gimmicks and gadgetry, and our unshakable devotion to the promise of the quick fix. A font of well-researched information treated with humor and insight, this book provides a rich context for the ongoing body-image debate in present day American culture. Highly recommended!

Carolyn Thomas de la Pena has written a masterful book. In exploring the ways Americans have used their bodies to understand new technologies, she sheds light on the origins of our own interactions with modern machines. The author supports her findings with meticulously researched facts, and it is clear she spent exhausting hours in the archives, combing through newspaper articles, advertisements, and product materials. She does an equally thorough job of contextualizing her conclusions. By linking her findings to social and cultural shifts taking place at the same time people were drinking radium water or experimenting with electric belts, she strengthens her argument and is able to draw new and important conclusions about the ways Americans were using technology around the turn of the twentieth century. Her clear and concise writing style make the book a smooth and enjoyable read, besides being one that is extremely relevant to our modern lives.

As I read this book, I marveled at the way in which Ms. Thomas de la Pena explained in detail the obsession Americans have had for so long with physical fitness and weight loss techniques; the belief by many Americans that their bodies, after use of some of these documented, extreme -- to us -- measures, would emerge greatly improved. This book helps us energy-bar-eating, aerobically-charged, iron-pumping 21st-Century individuals understand how it is that we got this way!

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