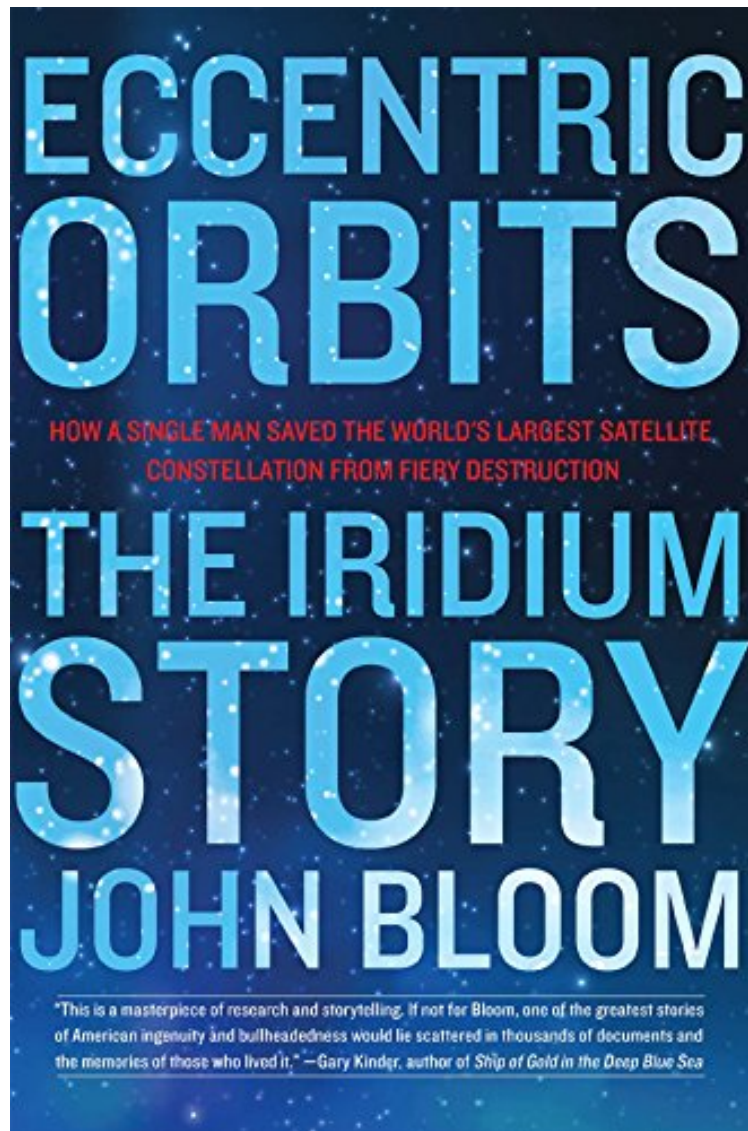


## Eccentric Orbits: The Iridium Story

*John Bloom*

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**John Bloom : Eccentric Orbits: The Iridium Story** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Eccentric Orbits: The Iridium Story:

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. A corporate death and resurrection storyBy Tech HistorianIf the story of The Making of the Atomic Bomb: 25th Anniversary Edition had been written by the NY Post page 6 gossip columnist rather than Richard Rhodes yoursquo;ll get a feeling of what yoursquo;re about to read.The good:Iridium is probably the most interesting corporate death and resurrection story of the last 25 years. Engineering and finance driven, and sucked financially dry by Motorola, Iridium simply put its head in the sand about whether customers

would actually want their product. They were literally stunned when customers didn't behave as their business plan said they should. The book tells the unbelievable rescue of Iridium by Dan Colussy and an unlikely set of allies. If even half of it is true Dan deserves a business medal of honor. (And Motorola management deserved everything that happened to them in the 21st century.)

The bad: As per the authors note, "I researched the book with face-to-face interviews, letting people tell their own stories, and then filled in the rest of the narrative with archival material. Therein lies the problem. This really isn't a business book. It's a bunch of guys sitting around (primarily Dan Colussy) telling business war stories to a writer - who never figured out how to make sense of it all. 1) Imagine a technical and business story written by a gossip columnist and yours: I'll understand the constant stream of long drawn-out biographies, anecdotes that sounded like they came after a few drinks, bizarre suppositions, and missed insights. Individually they're stories you might throw out as one-offs, but reading them page after page for no discernible purpose in the narrative made them exhausting. 2) The story would have been much better told if an editor would have insisted that the book be half or maybe 2/3rds its length. But that would have required understanding which of the stories were important and what were the lessons to be learned. Instead we get an almost daily diary of Dan Colussy's meetings, phone calls, plane flights etc. 3) Iridium was an engineering marvel, but other than stringing together boilerplate phrases and paraphrases from his sources the result is "technology word hash" - words that strung together appear to mean something but don't. The Iridium system was brilliant. The satellites were worthy of something more than the cursory description. Instead the author gets sidetracked into a content-free discussion of the choice of rocket suppliers. Unfortunately, Dan Colossi and most of the cast of characters interviewed came after the satellites were designed and built. 4) Iridium failed when the original business case for the phone didn't match the market (cellular adoption was growing rapidly, the phone wouldn't work indoors, the phone looked like a brick and was unlikely to be a status symbol,) no one seemed to blow the whistle and say, "let's pivot to a different set of customers and stop hemorrhaging money on this one." Or, instead of complaining about the enormous cash-drain Motorola was extorting from the company, why any of their CEOs didn't have the guts to threaten chapter 11 to slash that burn rate. Spending more than a few paragraphs on that would have actually made this a business book. Unfortunately, Dan Colussy and most of the cast of characters interviewed came after that debacle. 5) After 500 pages you would think there would be some insight or lessons learned from the author or any of the participants. Nope.

Summary: If you're interested in the death and rebirth of Iridium this is barely worth the very painful read. 10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Convoluted, complicated, compelling! By Dennis Koga: What a bizarre, true story! The fact that Iridium continues to exist to this day is a testament to the blood and sweat of tenacious people whose belief in the essential soundness of a basic idea allows it to endure through all sorts of trials until it can finally be proven over time to be viable. This book requires close attention be paid throughout, but the rewards are worth it: a fantastic morality story of our times, showing once again how much hubris at the corporate level can undermine instead of promote the development of ideas, and how tenacity in the form of an individual's devotion to a cause can truly make a difference if given the chance to. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Absolutely phenomenal! By Andrew Robinson: Reading through this book has been an absolute treat. It's full of details and drama and brings to life the story of the most interesting, sophisticated satellite constellation in the sky. John Bloom had done a fantastic job on the research end of things and the book paces itself in a way that isn't often achieved in nonfiction material. If you're a fan of technology and the people who focus their efforts towards doing good in the world, this book will inspire you and fill you with an overwhelming feeling of kinship and pride towards Dan Colussy and co, who poured years of their lives into keeping these birds in the sky, overcoming a seemingly endless series of unimaginable bureaucratic and political obstacles. When you cast an eye out at the modern world, it's hard to overstate how important these satellites are to our global infrastructure and how many lives they have helped save. Today there still does not exist another system with the capabilities of the Iridium constellation. The story of the people who fought to keep such a technical marvel alive in our world is worthy of reading and celebrating.

In the early 1990s, Motorola, the legendary American technology company developed a revolutionary satellite system called Iridium that promised to be its crowning achievement. Light years ahead of anything previously put into space, and built on technology developed for Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars," Iridium's constellation of 66 satellites in polar orbit meant that no matter where you were on Earth, at least one satellite was always overhead, and you could call Tibet from Fiji without a delay and without your call ever touching a wire. Iridium the satellite system was a mind-boggling technical accomplishment, surely the future of communication. The only problem was that Iridium the company was a commercial disaster. Only months after launching service, it was \$11 billion in debt, burning through \$100 million a month and crippled by baroque rate plans and agreements that forced calls through Moscow, Beijing, Fucino, Italy, and elsewhere. Bankruptcy was inevitable - the largest to that point in American history. And when no real buyers seemed to materialize, it looked like Iridium would go down as just a "science experiment." That is, until Dan Colussy got a wild idea. Colussy, a former head of Pan-Am now retired and working on his golf game in Palm Beach, heard about Motorola's plans to "de-orbit" the system and

decided he would buy Iridium and somehow turn around one of the biggest blunders in the history of business. In *Eccentric Orbits*, John Bloom masterfully traces the conception, development, and launching of Iridium and Colussyrsquo;s tireless efforts to stop it from being destroyed, from meetings with his motley investor group, to the Clinton White House, to the Pentagon, to the hunt for customers in special ops, shipping, aviation, mining, search and rescuemdash; anyone who would need a durable phone at the end of the Earth. Impeccably researched and wonderfully told, *Eccentric Orbits* is a rollicking, unforgettable tale of technological achievement, business failure, the military-industrial complex, and one of the greatest deals of all time.

Praise for *Eccentric Orbits*: Named one of the "Top 10 Nonfiction Books of 2016" and one of the "20 Books That Defined Our Year" by the Wall Street Journal; Named a Book of the Year 2016 by the Economist; A Best Book of the Month by Hudson Booksellers; Best Book of 2016 (Best Business Interest) by Engaging and ambitious . . . *Eccentric Orbits* is maximalist nonfiction, 500 pages of deep reporting put forward with epic intentions . . . a panoramic narrative, laced with fine filigree details, that makes for a story that soars and jumps and dives and digresses . . . [A] big, gutsy, exciting book." Wall Street Journal; Those with visions of vast satellite communications networks dancing in their heads would do well to read John Bloom's new book on [Iridium] . . . Bloom . . . tells this story well . . . He does a good job of explaining the technology and the importance of the inventors who made the technology possible." Washington Post; Think of Final Cut, Steven Bach's gripping account of the notorious movie disaster "Heaven's Gate," Or The Smartest Guys in the Room, Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind's chronicle of the collapse of Enron, and The Big Short, Michael Lewis's tale of the cratering of the national economy. *Eccentric Orbits* . . . is a tale of ham-fisted management that's lively enough to invite comparisons to those modern classics." Los Angeles Times; An exhaustive account . . . *Eccentric Orbits* not only offers good corporate drama, but is an enlightening narrative of how new communications infrastructures often come about: with a lot of luck, government help and investors who do not ask too many questions." Economist; *Eccentric Orbits* is a story rich in larger-than-life characters, including shady Cold War operatives and warrior-like Motorola executives . . . Bloom gives a wonderful sense of what an engineering marvel Iridium was." Bethany McLean, *Strategy + Business* (Best Business Books 2016); An inspiring history as well as an effective business thriller . . . Bloom argues convincingly that creating and then saving Iridium was one . . . desperately difficult and brilliant achievement." New Scientist; Extensive . . . Sprawling . . . A detailed and entertaining history of the rise, fall, and rebirth of Iridium." Space; A good read." Marketplace; Highly engaging . . . Check it out." News Tribune; A prize-worthy example of the investigative genre . . . [*Eccentric Orbits*] has conflict and triumph on a Wagnerian scale . . . John Bloom has achieved in *Eccentric Orbits* an admirable balance of the human and the technological in what is at heart an age-old tale of one man's triumph against apparently insuperable odds." Literary; An outstanding read . . . [An] inspiring story . . . Highly recommended." ATC Reform News; *Eccentric Orbits* does for the 1990s birth of the satellite phone industry what Tracy Kidd's *Soul of a New Machine* did for the next-generation computer business. It's a wild story . . . Funny, informative, exciting . . . A sprawling masterpiece of history and reporting." Shelf Awareness; Spellbinding . . . A tireless researcher, Bloom delivers a superlative history . . . A tour de force." Kirkus's (starred review); *Eccentric Orbits* is a remarkable work. I had known about Iridium but not about its fascinating history. John Bloom's writing style is attractive and the level of detail is astonishing. This was a page-turner for me!" Vint Cerf, Chief Internet Evangelist, Google; Interested in giant, head-scratching miscalculations by a great American company? The power of one man to rescue the world's biggest deployment of low-earth satellites? A place where genius engineering meets a total lack of common sense? Then John Bloom's book about Motorola's multibillion-dollar debacle, Iridium, is for you. *Eccentric Orbits* is both a novelistic thriller and a cautionary tale, a page-turner about a reach for the heavens and a business primer on a near-fatal fall back to the earth." Julian Guthrie, author of *The Billionaire* and *The Mechanic*; John Bloom's *Eccentric Orbits*, which tells the story of one of the most ambitious projects in the history of technology, is the most compelling book I have read in a long while. Bloom somehow coaxed the deepest thoughts and darkest secrets out of many satellite engineers, skeptical VCs, business royalty, inner-city tycoons, Italian marketers, Russian rocket launchers, Arabian princes, corporate CEOs, African leaders, Washington insiders, insurance giants, Pentagon brass, government lifers, politicians, and frustrated bankruptcy judges. This is a masterpiece of research and storytelling. If not for Bloom, one of the greatest stories of American ingenuity and bullheadedness would still lie scattered in thousands of documents and the memories of those who lived it." Gary Kinder, author of *Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue Sea*; This is a monumental piece of non-fiction, not just for the breadth and depth of the research, but for its audacity: Bloom seeks to make technology and marketing and high finance dramatic and funny and instructive of the human condition and succeeds. Until I read this, I had always assumed that my cell phone was created by something like spontaneous combustion; like one day, it just appeared between my right hand and my ear, as if it had always belonged there. Bloom has given all of us all billions of us the back story on it, and what a strange, tangled, convoluted, fairly hilarious one it is." Jim Atkinson,

Texas Monthly contributing editor "Build a better mousetrap, and the world will erect every possible obstacle to its success. That's the sobering lesson of John Bloom's book on the progress of a reliable, cheap, encrypted, worldwide mobile phone system to supermarket shelves. The exhilarating lesson is that it can be done if you have visionary geeks, hard-boiled veterans, retired capitalists, and the occasional eccentric rebellious bureaucrat determined to do it. This is high scientific journalism, exciting business journalism, and a rattling good tale. It even includes Nazis." John Orsullivan, author of *The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World* "Impeccably researched, and in smooth, easy prose, John Bloom interweaves fascinating historical trivia about the space race, satellites, and global communications with detail-filled personality snapshots and cringingly revealing, often disturbingly humorous, insights about the many ways big business can shoot itself in the foot." John Brewer, former president and editor-in-chief, New York Times Syndicate and News Service "Pacy [and] . . . worth reading, not just for the wild ride that involves secretive Saudi sheikhs, plucky terrorists, never-say-die businessmen and Bill Clinton, but also as a reminder of how vast business can be vastly dumb . . . A thrilling boom-to-boom corporate drama." Sunday Times (UK) "John Bloom's account of the Iridium satellite network is more than a ripping read, it is both a commentary on the way we do technology today and a reminder of Friedrich Hayek's observation that presumed experts and planners are the last people you want picking winners. A tale well told is a thing of delight, and John Bloom's *Eccentric Orbits: The Iridium Story* does not fail." Quadrant (Australia) "Riveting . . . I've never used the term 'tour de force' in a book review before, but if it ever belonged in one, it is this review of *Eccentric Orbits*." 800-CEO-READ