In 1999, an editor of the New York Times Magazine approached Witold Rybczynski, the well-known student of architecture and urban design, and asked him to write a short essay on the best and most useful common tool of the past millennium. Rybczynski took the assignment, but when he began to look into the history of the items in his workshop—hammers and saws, levels and planes—he found that almost all of them had pedigrees that extended well into antiquity. Nearly ready to admit defeat, he asked his wife for ideas. Her answer was inspired: You always need a screwdriver for something. True enough. And, Rybczynski discovered, the screwdriver is a relative newcomer in humankind’s arsenal of gadgetry, an invention of the late European Middle Ages and the only major mechanical device that the Chinese did not independently invent. Leonardo da Vinci got to it early on, of course, as he did so many other things, designing a number of screw-cutting machines with
interchangeable gears. Still, it took generations for the screw (and with it the screwdriver and lathe) to come into general use, and it was not until the modern era that such improvements as slotted and socket screws came into being. Rybczynski's explorations into that lineage, here expanded to book length, are highly entertaining, and sure to engage readers interested in the origins of everyday things. --Gregory McNamee

If you are curious and are of a hardware bent, then this book will assuage your curiosity about something without which it would be hard to imagine the modern world. Archimedes figured out the inclined plane. Then came this book.

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