

Opinion

Walter Isaacson peels back the layers of Elon Musk

If you've ever read one of Walter Isaacson's books, specifically his biographies, you know why he could be considered the greatest biographer alive today.

He's written about Einstein, Da Vinci, Steve Jobs, and now, Elon Musk.

In a book whose 95 chapters cover nearly 700 pages (there are no 'short' Isaacson books), the former editor of Time Magazine and President of CNN reveals the complexity of Musk, who many believe is responsible for bringing electric vehicles and reusable rocket ships to America.

Isaacson, who said on MSNBC that Musk is a person who will both "enrage and engage you," wrote a fascinating account of a complex man who started PayPal, Tesla, SpaceX, Starlink, OpenAI (which he co-founded with Sam Altman) and, most recently purchased Twitter (now known as X, which is also the first name of Musk's young son).

When you read Isaacson's remarkably honest book (he "followed Musk around for about 2 ½ years"), you end up thinking Musk is somewhere in between an Einstein-like intellect blended with a Trump-like temperament (i.e. not always bad, but always 'on').

Musk, whose net worth is estimated at nearly \$200 billion, is one of America's great innovators.

Isaacson's book begins with a detailed look at Musk's difficult childhood, growing up in South Africa with a verbally abusive father—a father he and his brother Kimball now no longer speak to.

There are stories of the bullying the young Elon Musk took at the private school he attended including once being beaten by older boys so badly that he was still having reconstructive nasal surgery "decades later". His father, who must have been something like Conway's 'Great Santini', had berated him at home after one of those beatings.

His parents divorced when Musk was eight, as the overbearing father became abusive to Elon's mother.

According to Isaacson, Musk's childhood laid the foundation for his mercurial personality today—a personality that Musk says is related to his having Asperger's, which can greatly affect a person's socialization skills.

You will see throughout this book the two faces of Elon Musk—one that thrives on chaos with angry outbursts (Isaacson called it his 'demon' side) and another side that shows a genius-like focus in his work, a commitment to detail that enabled him to range from successfully designing rockets and human-like robots to providing satellite technology assistance to the Ukrainian military in its defense against Russia.

You will learn about Musk's relationships (both good and bad) with other high-powered CEOs,

including Oracle's Larry Ellison and Amazon's Jeff Bezos, and one particularly unusual meeting with Microsoft's Bill Gates.

Gates had wanted Musk to put some of his considerable wealth into charitable causes, but the relationship turned sour when Musk found out Gates was 'shorting' his Tesla stock, which meant Gates was betting that the Tesla stock would underperform and go down in value. Gates was wrong, as Tesla's stock soared, leaving Gates with a \$1.5 billion loss, according to Isaacson.

Isaacson writes that Musk was furious—and could not understand how Gates would be asking for Musk's help if he was betting against Musk's company. Musk said he was convinced that "[Gates] is categorically insane (and an asshole to the core)."

In return, Isaacson writes that Gates was perplexed at Musk's reaction but still respected his achievements, saying "...you can feel whatever you want about Elon's behavior, but there is no one in our time who has done more to push the bounds of science and innovation than he has."

Musk is the father of 11 children with three different women. His first child died in infancy. That memorable passage of the book showed a grief that nearly overcame him.

The book examines how his failure to achieve a work-life balance was also a major contributor to his success as one of the country's great innovators. He would often sleep in the Tesla and SpaceX factories, go down the assembly line at both companies and ask detailed questions to the engineers that they could often not answer.

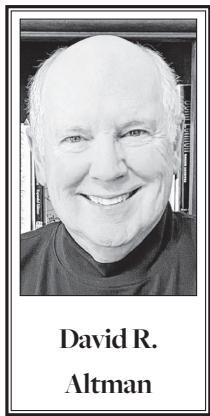
Still, writes Isaacson, Musk's net worth is around \$200 billion, much of it coming from the meteoric rise in Tesla stock. Isaacson continued, "...in October 2021, Tesla became the sixth company in U.S. history worth more than \$1 trillion. Its market value was greater than its five biggest rivals—Toyota, Volkswagen, Daimler, Ford, and GM—combined."

This is one of those rare biographies you could not put down, not unlike Isaacson's 2011 biography of Apple's Steve Jobs (Isaacson compares the two leaders and their hands-on driven, nearly dictatorial management style). After buying Twitter, one of their executives told Musk that it would take "six to nine months" to move a server facility. Musk replied, "...you have ninety days to do it. If you can't make that work, your resignation is accepted."

Musk's unpredictable personality makes for a great story—reading almost, at times, like fiction—and you will ask, "Did he really say this or really do that?").

The answer to those questions, as you will read, is always yes.

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