

Book Snaps™

In-depth reviews of best-selling business books.



Elon Musk

By Walter Isaacson

Walter Isaacson is the author of *The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race*; *Leonardo da Vinci*; *Steve Jobs*; *Einstein: His Life and Universe*; *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*; *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution*; and *Kissinger: A Biography*. He is also the coauthor of *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made*. He is a Professor of History at Tulane, has been CEO of the Aspen Institute, chairman of CNN, and editor of Time magazine.

A Book Review by Soundview

From Worldview to Cosmic View

During his Saturday Night Live monologue in May of 2021, Elon Musk poked fun at himself by saying, “To anyone I’ve offended, I just want to say, I reinvented electric cars and I’m sending people to Mars in a rocket ship. Did you think I was also going to be a chill, normal dude?” Walter Isaacson’s *Elon Musk* proves the profundity of that statement. In this biography, Isaacson walks his reader through Musk’s life from his earliest days under the control of his abusive father through his myriad successes and setbacks of Musk’s adulthood. Musk’s most well-known endeavors, including with Tesla, SpaceX, Space X’s Starlink, and Twitter are explored as well as some of his lesser known endeavors. A few key themes follow Musk throughout his life and propel both his successes and failures. All of these are explored by Walter Isaacson in *Elon Musk*.

Themes Throughout Musk’s Life

First among these themes is Elon Musk’s willingness to take risks. To Musk, risk is necessary. Isaacson attributes his affinity for risk-taking in part to his upbringing. Justine, Musk’s first wife says, “If your father is always calling you a moron and idiot, maybe the only response is to turn off anything inside that would’ve opened up an emotional dimension that he didn’t have the tools to deal with.” Isaacson continues this thought when he writes, “This emotional shutoff valve could make him callous, but it also makes him a risk-seeking innovator.” Isaacson further attributes his risk taking to his heritage, breeding, and the “hardwiring of his brain.” Musk craves drama, and his former PayPal partner claims he “wants risk for its own sake.” This affinity for risk helped him take high stakes chances, and at times, earn high stakes rewards.

Another key theme throughout Musk’s life is a reluctance to follow rules just for the sake of following them. He tells his employees that “the only immutable [laws] were those decreed by the laws of physics.” In all other cases, when faced with rules, regulations, and specifications, he insists that his employees question everything. He continuously wants to know why things are done the way that they are and who is responsible for instituting particular policies. At times he struggled with rules he saw as inconse-

quential but could not get around. For example, when Tesla was working on the Model S, he noticed the air bag warning label on the visor alerting the passengers of the dangers airbags pose to children. He believed this to be an eyesore, and when an engineer explained that the warning is a legal requirement, he got angry. The company tried to make their way around this rule by altering their cars so that air bags would not deploy if the passenger seat was occupied by a child, but the government continued to insist that the warnings still be included, and this would lead to numerous recalls on Teslas that do not carry the warning sticker. Musk pays attention to the small details.

Throughout the biography, Isaacson points his reader to an Elon Musk who tries to make the world better and who holds himself accountable for making it so. As Isaacson points out, Musk struggles in his relationships because he is frequently incapable of caring deeply about the emotional experiences of his partners, but this does not mean that he does not love humanity as a whole. Isaacson describes Musk's love for humanity as being more of a macro level love. This love for humanity is part of what motivates him to pursue such varying endeavors as Tesla's electric cars, SpaceX, and Twitter. It also is part of what propels him to create a fully autonomously driving vehicle because he believes research proves that many lives will be saved when human error is no longer a factor on the roads.

Business Endeavors

One of the fields Musk sought to reinvent is the automobile market. When Musk ventured into the electric vehicle market, electric vehicles were considerably less cool than they are now as they had a "golf-cart image," a far cry from the Teslas Musk would go on to create. In an essay he published on Tesla's website, Musk writes, "The overarching purpose of Tesla Motors (and the reason I'm funding the company) is to help expedite the move from a mine-and-burn hydrocarbon economy towards a solar electric company."

One problem he encountered over the years at Tesla was that design was falling behind engineering. For Musk, the car must look attractive if it is going to be a hit. At one point, he believed the cars looked like eggs. To solve this and other problems, he pushed his team to continuous design innovation. He also included numerous Easter Eggs and other innovative if possibly superfluous elements into the car. For example, he made it possible for a farting sound to emanate from the passenger seat of the car. Thinking back to the handles on old Mac computers, he wanted the handles of Teslas to be inviting. While he frequently has to forcibly bring people along with his ideas, he is often able to make his goals a reality, and he has managed to make Teslas fun along the way.

Space travel is also important for Musk because he wants humanity to be able to colonize Mars. He believes, however, that space travel should be in the domain of the private sector because competition fosters growth. He believes space travel is crucial for the future of humanity in case Earth would prove inhospitable for life. It would also allow the human race to survive should all life on Earth cease. He believes that if he personally

does not manage to move the space program forward, nobody will. This gave him the motivation to work on SpaceX which eventually not only got a rocket to space but also managed to produce reusable rockets that are able to safely return to Earth.

While Musk's SpaceX seeks to give humanity an outlet should Earth prove uninhabitable and Tesla works to make the planet less dependent on hydrocarbons, with Twitter he seeks to open up free speech and the way money is transferred online. In a well publicized move, Twitter banned former president Donald Trump because of speech it deemed incompatible with their policies. Other individuals and organizations including the Babylon Bee and the intellectual Jordan Peaterson were also banned. Musk believes that Twitter is important in democratizing information. Through a series of moves and calculations, he ended up purchasing the company, but fixing the problems he saw with free speech on the platform was not simple. This was in part because he did not believe that certain types of speech, such as those that undermine democracy or promote violence ought to be protected as free speech. Thus, he was left with the problem of figuring out how to provide an outlet for free speech without also being an outlet that promotes problematic speech. To solve some of these issues, Musk polled Twitter users and then did what the polls called for. At other times, Musk and Twitter executives decided to allow people to post certain messages to their own accounts but these messages would not be promoted throughout the site and could only be reached when searched for. While Musk tries to balance conflicting priorities, he is not free from public criticism. Some see these as shadow bans and oppose their usage.

Business Practices

Musk has certain principles that he relies on with his companies. One of these is that designers and engineers work together. He also expects his engineers and managers to work in the field so they can understand the problems their work poses. For example, he expects engineers and managers working on solar panels to actually install those solar panels.

Musk also believes in the ruthless cutting of both resources and people. He is constantly seeking to save money in order to make his ideas viable. While at one point, he did this through automation, he eventually came to the conclusion that at times automation causes more problems than it solves. This led him to walk through factories with factory workers, earmarking machines for destruction if people could do the job easier and better. He knows that sometimes when parts or equipment are eliminated, they will need to be added back in. He remains committed to the attempt however as he continuously asserts that if after cuts nothing needs to be reinserted, then enough cuts were not made. In short, he accepts failure as being part of success.

When it comes to his workforce, he is ruthless in cutting people that he does not believe work hard enough or who are not capable of taking criticism and making changes. He expects his people to devote everything to the company and has very little or no concern with work-life balance. Prior to his purchase of Twitter, the company placed a high priority on the mental health of its employees and on making the work environment as



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healthy as possible. After Musk, the company no longer prioritizes these things. While massive layoffs occurred at Twitter after he purchased the company, he decided more people needed to be cut. In order to avoid laying off more people, the company decided they would give everybody the opportunity to buy in or buy out of the company after Musk explained his stringent demands. While most people chose to stick with the company, a very sizable minority decided to take the three month severance package and leave the company.

Speed and unrealistic timetables are another one of Musk's trademarks. He frequently charges his employees to do what they believe is impossible in an equally unrealistic time frame. While these time frames are not always met, they have, on numerous occasions, forced employees to live up to the challenge and create what they previously had not believed they were capable of doing. These deadlines serve to both energize and stress his employees, with some thriving and others choosing to leave the company.

Personal Life

While Musk has high goals, he also has numerous personal demons. When asked if he has bipolar disorder, he responded that he believes he does, but he has never been diagnosed. He has fallen into numerous eras of manic behavior in which Musk works nearly nonstop. Even during the best of times, he is known to sleep under his desk. As is common with bipolar disorder, Musk also succumbs to incredibly deep depressions. These depressive episodes date all the way back to his teen years in South Africa, and they are at times so severe that he is described as being catatonic. As Isaacson writes, “He would fall into foul moods that led to almost catatonic trances and depressive paralysis. Then, as if a switch flipped, he would become giddy and replay old Monty Python skits of silly walks and wacky debates, breaking into his stuttering laugh.”

Musk's personal life has brought him as many triumphs as it has pains. Musk believes that people need to be reproducing at a higher rate than we currently are, and through the ten living children he sired through multiple different women, he has joked that he is doing his part to fix the crisis of under reproduction. Parenthood has brought Musk pain as well. The first experience with this is when his first child, Nevada, died at ten weeks old. Later he would experience heartache of a different kind when he became estranged from his transgender child, Jenna. It is said, however, that Jenna's Marxism is more the cause of their rupture than her transgender identity is. Partly as an attempt to appease Jenna, he sold much of his property and lived in other people's homes. This did not do anything to

mend the broken relationship. Musk blames Jenna's eventual turn to communism on the “progressive woke indoctrination that pervaded the Los Angeles private school she attended.” Politically, Musk considers himself somewhere in the middle, having difficulties with the extreme sides of both parties.

One of the more steady relationships in Elon's life is with his brother, Kimbal. While the two have experienced difficulties in their relationship at times, they have worked closely together for many years. Errol Musk, the boys' father, was frequently volatile and would accuse the boys of being stupid and idiots. While his sons remained in touch with Errol for many years, and Elon often sent him monthly checks to keep him from suffering too much, the abusive techniques of their father would haunt the boys for years. Elon took a break from his father after he sired a child with Jana, Errol's step-daughter, who Elon and his brother “considered a half-sister.” Despite the abuse and heartache Elon experienced at the hands of his father, Errol was not without redeeming qualities and could bring excitement to the lives of his children.

In *Elon Musk*, Isaacson provides a comprehensive biography of the man who eventually earned the title, Richest Man in the World. The novel explores his childhood in South Africa as well as his move to the United States and his various romantic, familial, and professional relationships. The book focuses primarily, however, on his business endeavors and his various philosophies. While he pushes his employees hard, some would claim too hard, he is depicted, in the book, as being a passionate but tortured man who desires to change the world for the better. Unlike fellow billionaire Bill Gates who focuses his life on philanthropy, Musk believes the best way he can impact the world is through the work of his companies. The book provides a solid foundation into the philosophies and business practices that took a young boy in South Africa to the inner rooms in political, business, and social circles throughout the world.

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