



Walter Isaacson, *Elon Musk* (Simon & Schuster, 2023).

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Having been a household name around the world for several years now, Elon Musk is certainly one of the most influential, as well as polarising, figures of the modern age. As a technology entrepreneur, he has worked on launching many initiatives that have a transformative bent, along with what he argues are 'existential questions for our species.' These projects include the private aerospace initiatives SpaceX and Starlink, the electric automotive giant Tesla, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) initiative OpenAI, and technology platforms including X (Twitter) and Paypal. Given the scope of CASS's research agenda, it is clear that Elon Musk's initiatives have a striking and immediate relevance to many of those areas: emerging technologies (OpenAI and Tesla), non-traditional security (X), economics (Tesla and Paypal), and of course aerospace (Starlink and SpaceX). It is remarkable that a single individual would be key to the future of so many areas, but indeed Elon Musk is, and like him or not, his efforts are changing each of these sectors in significant ways.

It is precisely because of this consonance between Elon Musk's ambitions and these areas of research that his new biography, written by the famed Walter Isaacson, should be considered for a read. Isaacson is also famous for his biographies of Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein, Henry Kissinger, and Benjamin Franklin. He is a uniquely

erudite biographer who has straddled the worlds of think tanks (CEO, Aspen Institute), the media (CEO, CNN), and academia (Professor, Tulane). He has built fame and repute, as well as a fortune, through his previous biographies, all of which have been heavy tomes and bestsellers. His work on Elon Musk is also 688 pages long (or 19 hours as an audiobook), and this reflects the attention to detail and the time it took to write the book (roughly two years).

There are many ways to scrutinise Isaacson's work, and each of them can be touched upon briefly: core theme, style of subject portrayal, the technical vs. personal, comparisons with Isaacson's previous works, and broad lessons.

In terms of the core theme of the book, Isaacson's approach can be distilled to the following: 'Is it alright to be mean if you're smart?' This may sound as a dismissive simplification, but it really is the root of the biographer's approach. Elon is very smart, and yet he is very mean, the book proceeds to discuss at great length. Now, is one to condone or tolerate this? Aside from Elon Musk himself, many interviewees for the book were asked this basic question in one form or another, and some were more permissive in their attitudes than others (especially subordinates). But is this a particularly profound question for a biographer to even ask? Even if one revisits the Machiavellian dilemma of being either loved or feared, in this book it isn't drawn out with finesse, and is rather repeated across essentially business-school case studies of Musk's various companies. One comes about knowing by roughly the age of eight that being mean is not a good thing, even if one is really strong or really smart. In fact, it is puzzling that someone with a biographer's acumen of Walter Isaacson would choose to pursue this leitmotif at all, since it suggests that there is either a lack of profundity in Elon Musk, which many of his detractors do believe, or that it is too early to draw deeper meaning from his life. In this generous latter case, then, perhaps once he gets us to Mars or to Pluto, we will be able to appreciate his life better. For now, Isaacson's work leads us to believe that we must ponder the question of whether people can be nice or smart.

Yet in terms of the style of subject representation, Isaacson's book is extremely generous, one might even say fawning, towards his subject. In many instances where Musk's behaviour could be better characterised as frenzied (SpaceX, Twitter), Isaacson labors to rationalise it. A biographical work of quality tries to show that there are two sides to every human, with some good and some bad elements fused in constant tension. In Musk's biography, however, Isaacson instead suggests that Musk is bad *because* he is good, i.e. he is mean-spirited *because* he is brilliant, which ends up excusing much and contributing little, in the sense that popular media has already covered Musk's whimsy at great length. One therefore comes away with little in terms of nuance, and this reinforces the earlier hypothesis that perhaps it is too early to appreciate Musk's life. The excusing and fawning approach also weakens Isaacson's objectivity, and leads the reader to view the book more in light of Isaacson's other interests (think tank networking or media relations) rather than scholarly rigour.

In terms of the balance between the technical and personal, the book veers much more towards the technical than required. Much of the middle and late portions appear to be a collection of MBA case studies infused with quotes from the participants. This is unfortunate because Isaacson has previously demonstrated great prowess in balancing the technical and personal in three of his works that also dealt with scientific personalities: Benjamin Franklin, Alfred Einstein, and Steve Jobs. The personal realm might also not be sufficiently explored because it involves living persons, some of whom are antagonistically positioned towards Musk, including within his family. To scuttle any legal risks then, it is better to avoid too much intrusion, but this comes at the expense of learning for the reader, and reiterates the earlier hypothesis that it is too early for this project.

There are, nevertheless, some areas of interest that are not covered in popular media involving Musk's habits, which go against leadership stereotypes. One such habit is that Musk has always been an extreme night owl, spending time well into the early dawn working (in later life) or reading (in his childhood). Another such habit is that he honed a great many skills through incessant gaming, being a true aficionado

of strategy video games even to the present day. These two habits are not touted as stereotypical leadership habits, but they are part-and-parcel of Musk's success. A further interesting note in the book, which may slip by many readers, is the important role of Navaid Farooq, Elon's first true and lifelong friend, in maintaining a sincere camaraderie based on common interests and values. Mr Farooq is of Pakistani origin, and grew up in a household with a United Nations (UN) background. It always strikes me how cosmopolitan and well-networked our diaspora has always been. Many important personalities in the West have had close friendships with Pakistanis, and the list is, in fact, too long when one tries to put it together. This is an asset for our people that has lain dormant because we have not offered our diaspora the opportunity to channel this strength towards Pakistan. Overseas and foreign-born Pakistanis are the country's greatest asset, let us not forget.

All this said, the main lessons, for the purposes of research, are threefold. First, there are few figures in this world who span so many areas of emergent value as does Elon Musk, and therefore understanding his background, ambition, and limitations is a very prudent approach to understanding the multiple fields in which he delves. While this book may lack a depth of character, it still offers the general reader an appreciation of many projects that are worth knowing better (X, Tesla, SpaceX, etc.). Second, the breakneck pace at which changes are occurring in many fields can often overwhelm the observer, but each field builds upon existing expertise and can often sit dormant, without much progress, for long periods. This book gives an appreciation for those long periods where there was little to show for the great deal that was being quietly done. We only observe the final product, not the process behind it. Third, and as I have [previously argued](#) as well, our world is increasingly being parceled among a handful of powerful figures, who may not have our best interests at heart, and may not even be mentally stable enough to assume such responsibility. Holding the fate of the multitudes through their ownership-stake in monstrously large entities, these figures are Goliaths that can trample us on a whim. The future requires better distributions of global power that are participatory, engaging, and

empowering. Otherwise, as this book unwittingly reveals, a few egomaniacs can put us all in great jeopardy.

In sum, while the book is hardly Isaacson's best work, and seems to have been prematurely done for reasons beyond pure scholarship, the subject is one of importance, since Elon Musk's empire covers many areas simultaneously. It is therefore worth reading, but less for its exposition and more for its salience. A better book of Musk will come in due course, as his impressive and multifaceted career completes its fuller term.