



Elon Musk, the C.E.O. of Tesla and SpaceX, in 2021, before he acquired Twitter and renamed it X.

EIGHT QUESTIONS

Daddy Issues

The Steve Jobs and Leonardo da Vinci biographer Walter Isaacson reveals what drew him to Elon Musk—and how a rare conversation with Musk’s father shed light on the billionaire entrepreneur’s erratic (to put it lightly) behavior

BY JIM KELLY

SEPTEMBER 13, 2023

READING TIME: 6 MINUTES

One of the enduring mysteries of the literary world is how Walter Isaacson has become one of its most successful and versatile biographers while holding down jobs

that would consume anyone else's days (and nights!). He has run *Time* magazine, CNN, and the Aspen Institute, and he is now the Leonard Lauder Professor of American History and Values at Tulane. At the same time, he has written best-selling biographies of Henry Kissinger, Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, and Leonardo da Vinci. Not to mention the books *The Innovators*, *The Code Breaker* (about [Jennifer Doudna](#), the biochemist who shared the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2020), and *The Wise Men*, which he co-authored with his good friend and fellow historian [Evan Thomas](#). His secret is surely due in part to his wonderful wife and daughter, who in ways large and small have helped and inspired him.

His latest book, on Elon Musk, is a remarkably vivid and revealing biography of a man who is undoubtedly a genius and is arguably nuts. The headline-grabbing scoop was that Musk had turned off Starlink, the satellite Internet system run by his company SpaceX, to Crimea so as not to allow Ukraine to attack the Russian fleet there. But as Isaacson clarified this week, Musk had only declined Kiev's request to extend coverage to Crimea. There was nothing to disable, since Starlink had never been enabled to reach there in the first place.

I had the pleasure of working for Walter at *Time*, and who knows, someday I might write a biography of him. Spoiler alert: he is a generous and supportive boss, though by his own admission he is not a morning person!

JIM KELLY: Albert Einstein, Elon Musk, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Kissinger, Steve Jobs, Leonardo da Vinci. If this were a party game and you had to name the one person in the group who does not belong, well, I know my answer. Why were you so attracted to Musk?

WALTER ISAACSON: When I started working on this book, Musk had become one of the most consequential innovators of our time. He had helped bring us into the era of electric vehicles, revived American space travel, and was tackling artificial intelligence. But as I was reporting, he decided to buy Twitter, which made the story more complex, controversial, and fascinating. I liked the fact that he was such a risk-taker. But I began to see his dark strands as well. The book tries to show how they are woven together. As Shakespeare teaches us, we are molded out of faults. I wanted to understand the faults and the demons ingrained in him and how he turned some of them into drives.

J.K.: You write about how Musk was mercilessly bullied in the playground when he was younger, and by buying Twitter he now owns the playground. But hasn't he become a bully himself, responding, for example, to Senator Bernie Sanders's comment about the rich paying their fair share of taxes, "I keep forgetting that you're still alive."

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W.I.: Yes, Musk can be a bully and overly pugnacious. As a scrawny and awkward kid, he went to a wilderness camp in South Africa, where he was beaten up regularly. When he went back the second time, he was bigger, and he said he had learned to punch anyone who challenged him as hard as he could in the nose. Ever since, he has been at times very confrontational and juvenile when challenged. He does not filter his responses. It's gotten him into a lot of trouble and made him a lot of enemies. It also makes him addicted to Twitter/X, a playground that overly rewards pugnacity.

J.K.: Was there an aha moment in your reporting when you said, That's it, that's the key to understanding Musk?

W.I.: It's when he got emotional and started talking about his father. He said his father took the side of the kids who beat him up and would regularly make him stand still for hour-long torrents of verbal abuse. And then I spent time talking by phone with his father. His father has a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality.



Musk at three years old, in Pretoria, South Africa.

Elon developed the same. He can be light and jovial and brilliant at times, and then he can go cold and dark and be both brooding and mean. Musk's occasional girlfriend Claire Boucher (known as Grimes) calls that "demon mode." She says demon mode is very frightening, but it is effective in getting things done. Musk's mother, Maye, told me that the danger for Musk is that he becomes his father. In some ways the story is the epic quest of a man-child still standing in front of his father, trying to resist the dark side of the Force.

J.K.: You grew up in New Orleans, and now you live there and teach at Tulane. How much did growing up there shape you as a person, and given the fact that you have the means to live anywhere in the world (Did I mention Paris? Or Rome? Or Tahiti?), what made you want to return?

W.I.: Unlike Musk, I had a charmed childhood. I grew up with loving parents and kind friends in a magical place, New Orleans. So I have always, even as I've traveled in the realms of gold, felt a tug pulling me back home. When I served on the recovery authority after Hurricane Katrina, I got a place down here and knew I would want to

move back. There is a certain comfort that comes from being with friends who've known me ever since I had really big ears in grade school. Plus, New Orleans has many challenges as well as beauties. If you're deeply grateful to a place for nurturing you, you want to help make sure that you pay it forward as best you can and help the town nurture a new generation that will relish its magic.

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J.K.: I know Walker Percy was a friend, and he famously said, “There are two kinds of people that come out of Louisiana: preachers and storytellers.” Besides Percy, were there any other writers or books that influenced you at a young age?

W.I.: Faulkner, of course. Too much so. I read *Absalom, Absalom!* when I went north to college and pretended to be a Quentin Compson, which was not very authentic.

On a more substantive note, the first major biography I read was T. Harry Williams's *Huey Long*. He begins with Long making up a story on the campaign trail, and he lets the reader decide whether Long is a lovable rogue or an incorrigible liar—or both. In all my books, especially this one, I try to let the narrative be driven by stories and anecdotes that let the reader decide what to make of a person.

J.K.: You obviously are a first-rate storyteller, but you are also a bit of a preacher, in the sense that you believe in the power of science to change lives for the better, and that to survive as a nation America must find its common ground. Both ideas are in peril, given the strong number of anti-vaxxers in this country and our rampant partisanship. Give us a reason to be optimistic about 2024 and beyond.

W.I.: In communities around this country, from Austin to New Orleans to Chattanooga, there are a lot of people being entrepreneurial and innovative and creative. They are not infected by ideological passions or resentments that drive our national discourse. If the fever is going to break in this country, it's going to come from local communities where people are more practical and less driven by ideology.

J.K.: A.I. is as much a threat to the human race as it is a boon. True or false?

W.I.: We are always trying, as the *Oppenheimer* movie reminds us, to make sure our moral-processing power keeps up with the advances in our technology. That's why I wrote *The Code Breaker*, which is about Jennifer Doudna and gene-editing tools. I think we have to figure out the moral consequences of being able to edit our DNA.

Artificial intelligence can of course be a great boon. But I'm now more in the camp that it could be a threat. This is especially true if we treat it like we do social media and do not make sure that the creators of a chatbot or A.I. system can be held accountable for what it does.

J.K.: Finally, I surely can not be the first person to suggest you would have made a terrific politician. You are very social, you know the issues, and you would have made the right compromises to get legislation passed. Has the thought ever occurred to you, and what has stopped you, at least so far?

W.I.: That's nice, but one of my shortcomings is that I am more comfortable being an observer and chronicler than a person in the arena. Perhaps I'm not as much of a risk-taker as I should be. I'm at the other end of the spectrum from Musk.



Elon Musk, by *Walter Isaacson*, is out now from *Simon & Schuster*

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