

Eight things we learned from the Elon Musk biography

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A new biography of Elon Musk was published on Tuesday and contains colourful details of the life of the world's richest man. Musk afforded widespread access to his biographer, Walter Isaacson, the author of the bestselling biography of the Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, and the book contains a series of illuminating anecdotes about Musk. Here are eight things we learned from the book.

1. Musk's difficult relationship with his father, Errol Musk, 52, was born and raised in South Africa and endured a fraught relationship with his father, Errol, an engineer. Isaacson writes that Errol "bedevils Elon". Musk's brother, Kimbal, says the worst memory of his life was watching Errol berate Musk after he was hospitalised after a fight at school (the book says Musk was still getting corrective surgery for the injuries decades later). "My father just lost it," says Kimbal. Musk and Kimbal, who are estranged from their father, describe Errol as a "volatile fabulist". Interviewed by Isaacson, Errol admits he encouraged a "physical and emotional toughness" in his sons. Grimes, the artist who is mother to three of his 10 children, says PTSD from Musk's childhood shaped an aversion to contentment: "I just don't think he knows how to savor success and smell the flowers." Musk tells Isaacson he agrees: "Adversity shaped me. My pain threshold became very high."
2. Elon Musk has an issue with the 'woke mind virus'. Shortly before taking over Twitter, or X as it is now called, Musk told Isaacson that the "woke mind virus" – a derogatory term for progressive politics and culture – would prevent extraplanetary settlement (one of Musk's fixations). "Unless the woke mind virus, which is fundamentally anti-science, anti-merit, and anti-human in general, is stopped, civilization will never become multiplanetary," said Musk.
3. Musk gave Twitter executives short shrift. Musk fired Twitter's executive team as soon as he completed the takeover of Twitter in October last year and it had been coming. When Musk bought a significant stake in Twitter months before, he agreed to meet the CEO, Parag Agrawal. After the meeting, Musk said: "What Twitter needs is a fire-breathing dragon and Parag is not that." They soon fell out. Agrawal texted Musk to say his tweet asking if Twitter was "dying" was not helpful. Musk, on a break in Hawaii, replied: "What did you get done this week?" He added: "I'm not joining the board. This is a waste of time. Will make an offer to take Twitter private." This was during discussions about Musk joining the board. Agrawal's reply underlined the power imbalance, and Twitter's fear of Musk. He texted: "Can we talk?" Musk soon lodged an official bid for Twitter, which he tried unsuccessfully to wriggle out of, but the die was cast for Agrawal and his colleagues.
4. Sam Bankman-Fried tried to get in on the Twitter takeover. The founder and CEO of the fallen cryptocurrency exchange FTX, Sam Bankman-Fried, offered via his banker to put \$5bn (£4.1bn) into the Twitter takeover, the book claims. Bankman-Fried also wanted to discuss putting Twitter on a blockchain – the technological underpinning for cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin. A subsequent call between Musk and Bankman-Fried in May 2022 went badly, Isaacson wrote. "My bullshit detector went off like red alert on a Geiger counter," Musk is quoted

as saying. Bankman-Fried's offer to invest or to roll over \$100m of Twitter stock that he claimed he had invested, came to nothing. 5. Musk tried to recruit Rudy Giuliani as an adviser In his early tycoon career, Musk pondered recruiting the then mayor of New York as a political fixer to help him turn his PayPal business into a bank in 2001. Musk sought a meeting with Giuliani, then coming to the end of his tenure in office, because he wanted to turn PayPal – an online payments company – into a “social network that would disrupt the whole banking industry”. In 2001, Musk and an investor, Michael Moritz, went to New York to see if they could hire Giuliani to guide them through the process of turning PayPal into a bank. It didn't go well. “It was like walking into a mob scene,” Moritz says in the book. Giuliani “was surrounded by goonish confidantes. He didn't have any idea whatsoever about Silicon Valley, but he and his henchmen were eager to line their pockets”. “‘This guy occupies a different planet,’ Musk told Moritz.” 6. Musk is concerned about a dwindling human population One of Musk's reasons for founding a new artificial intelligence company, xAI, is addressing the threat of population collapse. In one face-to-face conversation with Isaacson, the multi-billionaire said human intelligence was in danger of being surmounted by digital intelligence. “The amount of human intelligence, he noted, was levelling off because people were not having enough children. Meanwhile, the amount of computer intelligence was going up exponentially, like Moore's law on steroids. At some point, biological brainpower would be dwarfed by digital brainpower.” This conversation was conducted at the Austin, Texas house of Shvon Zilis, an executive at Musk's Neuralink business who is the mother of two of his children. Zilis told Isaacson she agreed to have children with Musk via IVF after listening to his arguments about having children as a “kind of social duty”. She said: “He really wants smart people to have kids, so he encouraged me to.” 7. Musk is very concerned about AI Musk tells Isaacson that human consciousness is under threat from the prospect of super-intelligent, and uncontrollable, AI systems. He says: “What can be done to make AI safe? I keep wrestling with that. What actions can we take to minimize AI danger and assure that human consciousness survives?” 8. Musk's complicated role in the Ukraine conflict Musk's satellite communications unit, Starlink, has a key role in Ukraine's defence against the Russian invasion. When a Russian cyber-attack crippled Ukraine's satellite comms network an hour before the invasion, Musk stepped in following an appeal for help from Ukrainian officials and the country's deputy prime minister. However, the book alleges that Musk told his engineers to “turn off” Starlink coverage that would have facilitated an attack by drone submarines on Russia's navy at the Sevastopol base in Crimea. However, Isaacson has subsequently clarified this excerpt after Musk used his X platform to state that there was no Starlink coverage in that area and he refused a Ukrainian request to activate it. Musk posted: “If I had agreed to their request, then SpaceX would be explicitly complicit in a major act of war and conflict escalation.”

Elon Musk by Walter Isaacson is published by Simon & Schuster. To support the Guardian and Observer order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.