

Steve Jobs

By Walter Isaacson




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Based on more than forty interviews with Jobs conducted over two years—as well as interviews with more than a hundred family members, friends, adversaries, competitors, and colleagues—Walter Isaacson has written a riveting story of the roller-coaster life and searingly intense personality of a creative entrepreneur whose passion for perfection and ferocious drive revolutionized six industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing, and digital publishing.

At a time when America is seeking ways to sustain its innovative edge, and when societies around the world are trying to build digital-age economies, Jobs stands as the ultimate icon of inventiveness and applied imagination. He knew that the best way to create value in the twenty-first century was to connect creativity with technology. He built a company where leaps of the imagination were combined with remarkable feats of engineering.

Although Jobs cooperated with this book, he asked for no control over what was written nor even the right to read it before it was published. He put nothing off-limits. He encouraged the people he knew to speak honestly. And Jobs speaks candidly, sometimes brutally so, about the people he worked with and competed against. His friends, foes, and colleagues provide an unvarnished view of the passions, perfectionism, obsessions, artistry, devilry, and compulsion for control that shaped his approach to business and the innovative products that resulted.

Driven by demons, Jobs could drive those around him to fury and despair. But his personality and products were interrelated, just as Apple's hardware and software tended to be, as if part of an integrated system. His tale is instructive and cautionary, filled with lessons about innovation, character, leadership, and values.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best Books of the Month, November 2011: It is difficult to read the opening pages of Walter Isaacson's *Steve Jobs* without feeling melancholic. Jobs retired at the end of August and died about six weeks later. Now, just weeks after his death, you can open the book that bears his name and read about his youth, his promise, and his relentless press to succeed. But the initial sadness in starting the book is soon replaced by something else, which is the intensity of the read--mirroring the intensity of Jobs's focus and vision for his products. Few in history have transformed their time like Steve Jobs, and one could argue that he stands with the Fords, Edisons, and Gutenbergs of the world. This is a timely and complete portrait that pulls no punches and gives insight into a man whose contradictions were in many ways his greatest strength.
--Chris Schlupe

Amazon Exclusive: A Q&A with Walter Isaacson



Q: It's becoming well known that Jobs was able to create his Reality Distortion Field when it served him. Was it difficult for you to cut through the RDF and get beneath the narrative that he created? How did you do it?

Isaacson: Andy Hertzfeld, who worked with Steve on the original Macintosh team, said that even if you were aware of his Reality Distortion Field, you still got caught up in it. But that is why Steve was so successful: He willfully bent reality so that you became convinced you could do the impossible, so you did. I never felt he was intentionally misleading me, but I did try to check every story. I did more than a hundred interviews. And he urged me not just to hear his version, but to interview as many people as possible. It was one of his many odd contradictions: He could distort reality, yet he was also brutally honest most of the time. He impressed upon me the value of honesty, rather than trying to whitewash things.

Q: How were the interviews with Jobs conducted? Did you ask lots of questions, or did he just talk?

Isaacson: I asked very few questions. We would take long walks or drives, or sit in his garden, and I would

raise a topic and let him expound on it. Even during the more formal sessions in his living room, I would just sit quietly and listen. He loved to tell stories, and he would get very emotional, especially when talking about people in his life whom he admired or disdained.

Q: He was a powerful man who could hold a grudge. Was it easy to get others to talk about Jobs willingly? Were they afraid to talk?

Isaacson: Everyone was eager to talk about Steve. They all had stories to tell, and they loved to tell them. Even those who told me about his rough manner put it in the context of how inspiring he could be.

Q: Jobs embraced the counterculture and Buddhism. Yet he was a billionaire businessman with his own jet. In what way did Jobs' contradictions contribute to his success?

Isaacson: Steve was filled with contradictions. He was a counterculture rebel who became a billionaire. He eschewed material objects yet made objects of desire. He talked, at times, about how he wrestled with these contradictions. His counterculture background combined with his love of electronics and business was key to the products he created. They combined artistry and technology.

Q: Jobs could be notoriously difficult. Did you wind up liking him in the end?

Isaacson: Yes, I liked him and was inspired by him. But I knew he could be unkind and rough. These things can go together. When my book first came out, some people skimmed it quickly and cherry-picked the examples of his being rude to people. But that was only half the story. Fortunately, as people read the whole book, they saw the theme of the narrative: He could be petulant and rough, but this was driven by his passion and pursuit of perfection. He liked people to stand up to him, and he said that brutal honesty was required to be part of his team. And the teams he built became extremely loyal and inspired.

Q: Do you believe he was a genius?

Isaacson: He was a genius at connecting art to technology, of making leaps based on intuition and imagination. He knew how to make emotional connections with those around him and with his customers.

Q: Did he have regrets?

Isaacson: He had some regrets, which he expressed in his interviews. For example, he said that he did not handle well the pregnancy of his first girlfriend. But he was deeply satisfied by the creativity he ingrained at Apple and the loyalty of both his close colleagues and his family.

Q: What do you think is his legacy?

Isaacson: His legacy is transforming seven industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing, digital publishing, and retail stores. His legacy is creating what became the most valuable company on earth, one that stood at the intersection of the humanities and technology, and is the company most likely still to be doing that a generation from now. His legacy, as he said in his "Think Different" ad, was reminding us that the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.

Photo credit: Patrice Gilbert Photography

About the Author

Walter Isaacson, University Professor of History at Tulane, has been CEO of the Aspen Institute, chairman

of CNN, and editor of *Time* magazine. He is the author of *Leonardo da Vinci*; *The Innovators*; *Steve Jobs*; *Einstein: His Life and Universe*; *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*; and *Kissinger: A Biography*, and the coauthor of *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made*. He and his wife live in New Orleans and New York City. Facebook: Walter Isaacson, Twitter: @WalterIsaacson

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Excerpt 1

His personality was reflected in the products he created. Just as the core of Apple's philosophy, from the original Macintosh in 1984 to the iPad a generation later, was the end-to-end integration of hardware and software, so too was it the case with Steve Jobs: His passions, perfectionism, demons, desires, artistry, devilry, and obsession for control were integrally connected to his approach to business and the products that resulted.

The unified field theory that ties together Jobs's personality and products begins with his most salient trait: his intensity. His silences could be as searing as his rants; he had taught himself to stare without blinking. Sometimes this intensity was charming, in a geeky way, such as when he was explaining the profundity of Bob Dylan's music or why whatever product he was unveiling at that moment was the most amazing thing that Apple had ever made. At other times it could be terrifying, such as when he was fulminating about Google or Microsoft ripping off Apple.

This intensity encouraged a binary view of the world. Colleagues referred to the hero/shithead dichotomy. You were either one or the other, sometimes on the same day. The same was true of products, ideas, even food: Something was either "the best thing ever," or it was shitty, brain-dead, inedible. As a result, any perceived flaw could set off a rant. The finish on a piece of metal, the curve of the head of a screw, the shade of blue on a box, the intuitiveness of a navigation screen—he would declare them to "completely suck" until that moment when he suddenly pronounced them "absolutely perfect." He thought of himself as an artist, which he was, and he indulged in the temperament of one.

His quest for perfection led to his compulsion for Apple to have end-to-end control of every product that it made. He got hives, or worse, when contemplating great Apple software running on another company's crappy hardware, and he likewise was allergic to the thought of unapproved apps or content polluting the perfection of an Apple device. This ability to integrate hardware and software and content into one unified system enabled him to impose simplicity. The astronomer Johannes Kepler declared that "nature loves simplicity and unity." So did Steve Jobs.

Excerpt 2

For Jobs, belief in an integrated approach was a matter of righteousness. "We do these things not because we are control freaks," he explained. "We do them because we want to make great products, because we care about the user, and because we like to take responsibility for the entire experience rather than turn out the crap that other people make." He also believed he was doing people a service: "They're busy doing whatever they do best, and they want us to do what we do best. Their lives are crowded; they have other things to do

than think about how to integrate their computers and devices.”

This approach sometimes went against Apple’s short-term business interests. But in a world filled with junky devices, inscrutable error messages, and annoying interfaces, it led to astonishing products marked by beguiling user experiences. Using an Apple product could be as sublime as walking in one of the Zen gardens of Kyoto that Jobs loved, and neither experience was created by worshipping at the altar of openness or by letting a thousand flowers bloom. Sometimes it’s nice to be in the hands of a control freak.

Jobs’s intensity was also evident in his ability to focus. He would set priorities, aim his laser attention on them, and filter out distractions. If something engaged him—the user interface for the original Macintosh, the design of the iPod and iPhone, getting music companies into the iTunes Store—he was relentless. But if he did not want to deal with something—a legal annoyance, a business issue, his cancer diagnosis, a family tug—he would resolutely ignore it. That focus allowed him to say no. He got Apple back on track by cutting all except a few core products. He made devices simpler by eliminating buttons, software simpler by eliminating features, and interfaces simpler by eliminating options.

He attributed his ability to focus and his love of simplicity to his Zen training. It honed his appreciation for intuition, showed him how to filter out anything that was distracting or unnecessary, and nurtured in him an aesthetic based on minimalism.

Unfortunately his Zen training never quite produced in him a Zen-like calm or inner serenity, and that too is part of his legacy. He was often tightly coiled and impatient, traits he made no effort to hide. Most people have a regulator between their mind and mouth that modulates their brutish sentiments and spikiest impulses. Not Jobs. He made a point of being brutally honest. “My job is to say when something sucks rather than sugarcoat it,” he said. This made him charismatic and inspiring, yet also, to use the technical term, an asshole at times.

Andy Hertzfeld once told me, “The one question I’d truly love Steve to answer is, ‘Why are you sometimes so mean?’” Even his family members wondered whether he simply lacked the filter that restrains people from venting their wounding thoughts or willfully bypassed it. Jobs claimed it was the former. “This is who I am, and you can’t expect me to be someone I’m not,” he replied when I asked him the question. But I think he actually could have controlled himself, if he had wanted. When he hurt people, it was not because he was lacking in emotional awareness. Quite the contrary: He could size people up, understand their inner thoughts, and know how to relate to them, cajole them, or hurt them at will.

The nasty edge to his personality was not necessary. It hindered him more than it helped him. But it did, at times, serve a purpose. Polite and velvety leaders, who take care to avoid bruising others, are generally not as effective at forcing change. Dozens of the colleagues whom Jobs most abused ended their litany of horror stories by saying that he got them to do things they never dreamed possible.

Excerpt 3

The saga of Steve Jobs is the Silicon Valley creation myth writ large: launching a startup in his parents’ garage and building it into the world’s most valuable company. He didn’t invent many things outright, but he was a master at putting together ideas, art, and technology in ways that invented the future. He designed the Mac after appreciating the power of graphical interfaces in a way that Xerox was unable to do, and he created the iPod after grasping the joy of having a thousand songs in your pocket in a way that Sony, which had all the assets and heritage, never could accomplish. Some leaders push innovations by being good at the big picture. Others do so by mastering details. Jobs did both, relentlessly. As a result he launched a series of

products over three decades that transformed whole industries.

Was he smart? No, not exceptionally. Instead, he was a genius. His imaginative leaps were instinctive, unexpected, and at times magical. He was, indeed, an example of what the mathematician Mark Kac called a magician genius, someone whose insights come out of the blue and require intuition more than mere mental processing power. Like a pathfinder, he could absorb information, sniff the winds, and sense what lay ahead.

Steve Jobs thus became the greatest business executive of our era, the one most certain to be remembered a century from now. History will place him in the pantheon right next to Edison and Ford. More than anyone else of his time, he made products that were completely innovative, combining the power of poetry and processors. With a ferocity that could make working with him as unsettling as it was inspiring, he also built the world's most creative company. And he was able to infuse into its DNA the design sensibilities, perfectionism, and imagination that make it likely to be, even decades from now, the company that thrives best at the intersection of artistry and technology.

Excerpt 4

The difference that Jony has made, not only at Apple but in the world, is huge. He is a wickedly intelligent person in all ways. He understands business concepts, marketing concepts. He picks stuff up just like that, click. He understands what we do at our core better than anyone. If I had a spiritual partner at Apple, it's Jony. Jony and I think up most of the products together and then pull others in and say, "Hey, what do you think about this?" He gets the big picture as well as the most infinitesimal details about each product. And he understands that Apple is a product company. He's not just a designer. That's why he works directly for me. He has more operational power than anyone else at Apple except me. There's no one who can tell him what to do, or to butt out. That's the way I set it up.

Excerpt 5

When Jobs gathered his top management for a pep talk just after he became iCEO in September 1997, sitting in the audience was a sensitive and passionate thirty-year-old Brit who was head of the company's design team. Jonathan Ive, known to all as Jony, was planning to quit. He was sick of the company's focus on profit maximization rather than product design. Jobs's talk led him to reconsider. "I remember very clearly Steve announcing that our goal is not just to make money but to make great products," Ive recalled. "The decisions you make based on that philosophy are fundamentally different from the ones we had been making at Apple." Ive and Jobs would soon forge a bond that would lead to the greatest industrial design collaboration of their era.

Ive grew up in Chingford, a town on the northeast edge of London. His father was a silversmith who taught at the local college. "He's a fantastic craftsman," Ive recalled. "His Christmas gift to me would be one day of his time in his college workshop, during the Christmas break when no one else was there, helping me make whatever I dreamed up." The only condition was that Jony had to draw by hand what they planned to make. "I always understood the beauty of things made by hand. I came to realize that what was really important was the care that was put into it. What I really despise is when I sense some carelessness in a product."

Ive enrolled in Newcastle Polytechnic and spent his spare time and summers working at a design consultancy. One of his creations was a pen with a little ball on top that was fun to fiddle with. It helped give the owner a playful emotional connection to the pen. For his thesis he designed a microphone and earpiece—in purest white plastic—to communicate with hearing-impaired kids. His flat was filled with foam models he had made to help him perfect the design. He also designed an ATM machine and a curved phone,

both of which won awards from the Royal Society of Arts. Unlike some designers, he didn't just make beautiful sketches; he also focused on how the engineering and inner components would work. He had an epiphany in college when he was able to design on a Macintosh. "I discovered the Mac and felt I had a connection with the people who were making this product," he recalled. "I suddenly understood what a company was, or was supposed to be."

Users Review

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