

A portrait of Michael Vlismas, a man with dark hair and a slight beard, smiling. He is wearing a black jacket and a patterned scarf. The background is blurred.

MICHAEL VLISMAS

ELON RISKING IT ALL MUSK

A portrait of Elon Musk, smiling and looking slightly to the right. He has dark hair and a light beard. He is wearing a dark jacket over a patterned scarf. The background is blurred.

MICHAEL VLISMAS

ELON
RISKING IT ALL
MUSK

Elon Musk

RISKING IT ALL

Michael Vlismas

Jonathan Ball Publishers
Johannesburg • Cape Town • London

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‘The questions are always more important than the
answers.’

– Ernest Shackleton

‘Sometimes the questions are complicated and the
answers are simple.’

– Dr Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel)

Introduction

ELON Musk, the richest man on planet Earth, is doing everything he possibly can to leave planet Earth.

His journey from Pretoria boy to billionaire entrepreneur appears destined to end, as he describes it, ‘out there among the stars’. Space does indeed seem to be the final frontier for Musk, and even its vastness appears not enough to contain one of the greatest geniuses of our age, one who is determined to make human beings an interplanetary species.

This is the future towards which Musk has been moving ever since the age of five, when he first realised that not everybody has a million new ideas exploding in their brains all the time, and that people thought he was strange, and that he might be locked away because of it.

The boy who grew up reading science-fiction novels and comics became the man who brought much of what he read to life. He built electric cars and space rockets. ‘Science fiction should not be science fiction forever,’ he has said.

From South Africa has emerged one of the greatest minds of our time, and a man shifting the entire focus of humanity with his vision. A man who has made it his life’s mission to turn human beings into a multiplanetary species in the interests of conserving that rarest and most precious thing that appears not to exist anywhere else in the universe – consciousness.

The greatest challenge in writing a biography of Elon Musk is that he does not sit still. He is a moving target. A rabbit warren of ideas, theories, arguments and counterarguments. His life is a wild journey, much like the rockets he sends soaring into space. Trying to condense Elon Musk into one

book feels a bit like trying to capture the expanse of the Drakensberg on your camera phone.

So I have tried to provide the story of Musk's life, and the golden threads that run through it, as a starting point for readers who want to know more about one of the most significant people of our time.

Although it is not a requirement for an unauthorised biography of this nature, I did reach out to Musk for his thoughts. He did not respond. I also reached out to his mother, Maye, who politely declined to provide input. I first reached out to his father, Errol, in May 2021. I finally received a response in February 2022. His response was as puzzling as the popular portrayal of him: 'Good day. It is not clear to me how someone who does not know Elon can write a biography on him. Elon spent his entire childhood and youth with me. I am aware of all his affairs from day one to present. Jonathan Ball Publishers were not interested in a series of articles I wrote called "Raising Elon". The matter is very confusing to me. Without any input from me any biography is pointless. Walter Isaacson (author of Steve Jobs and various biographies) is busy with the supposedly definitive biography on Elon. Isaacson asks me daily on Elon's life. Without me Isaacson is lost.'

It was a confusing response on a number of levels. First, Errol Musk has repeatedly said he has been misrepresented in the media and by his ex-wife Maye in her book. Now, given the opportunity to correct these perceived slights on his character, he does not take it. In my response to Errol, I explained that it was for precisely this reason that I had reached out to him – to get the story from his perspective.

I know nothing about the supposed Walter Isaacson biography, and Jonathan Ball Publishers did not regard the 'Raising Elon' articles Errol says he proposed to them as publishable in book form. I also explained that much like any biography of great men long dead, a personal relationship

with the individual is not a prerequisite for a biography and proper research on the subject.

Errol never responded.

For my research, I went to the world that Musk inhabits – the digital space. Sifting fact from fiction was an exhaustive process, and so much of what has been written about Musk is simply perpetuated through an ongoing news cycle that just builds on the current narrative.

It is for this reason (and others) that I did not read Ashlee Vance's 2015 biography, *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future*. I was determined to go into this without any preconceived ideas about Musk, and rather to form my own opinions through my research on the man.

Where necessary I spoke to people around him, especially those who knew him and his family in their early days in Pretoria.

The world of Elon Musk is quite a journey.

And it's a journey that began in Pretoria, where a young boy full of ideas first opened up a science-fiction comic book – and immediately saw our future.