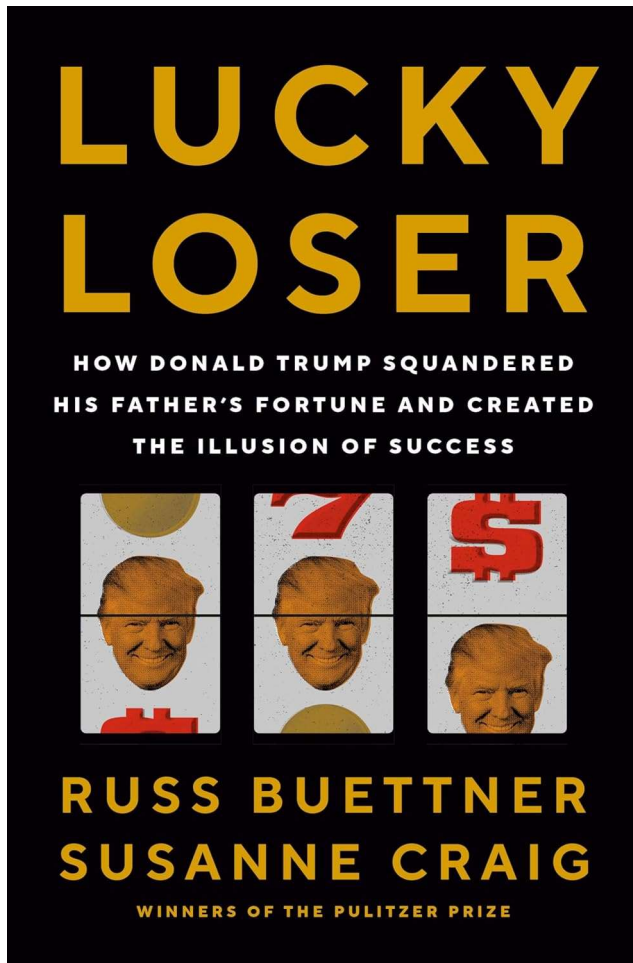


## ‘Lucky Loser’ provides a detailed portrait of Trump

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*“Lucky Loser: How Donald Trump Squandered His Father’s Fortune and Created the Illusion of Success” by Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig. New York, NY: Penguin Press (an Imprint of Random House), 2024, 528 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover).*



“Donald Trump came to be imbued with a host of attributes that speak to how we confer admiration and status in modern America,” Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig explain near the beginning of “Lucky Loser: How Donald Trump Squandered His Father’s Fortune and Created the Illusion of Success,” their new inclusive deep dive into the career trajectory of one of the preeminent political personalities of the contemporary era. “Our awe of celebrity. Our tendency to conflate the trappings of wealth with expertise and ability. Our eagerness to believe people of apparent status will not lie to us. Our inability to distinguish the fruits of hard work from those of sheer luck.”

“That is the real work of this book,” they continue. “It is a story about Donald Trump, his family, his wealth, his failures. But it is also a story about this country, and how we’ve arrived at a moment... Trump has clung to his hardscrabble fable. In his telling, his father created a ‘tiny, beautiful company’ and ‘didn’t have a great fortune’ to pass on. His father’s greatest contribution to his son was superior genes, knowledge, and a killer instinct. And from those humble beginnings he overcame a string of

jealous scoundrels and scornful doubters. He has so completely hidden the truth, perhaps even from himself, that he can erase the lucky breaks from his extraordinarily lucky life.”

“Lucky Loser” is one of the most extensively researched tomes (and clocking in at 528 pages I believe it qualifies for that designation) I have had occasion to read in recent memory. Relying on a thorough examination of his tax records combined with exclusive interviews with the principal actors who played a key role at each stage of his life, Buettner and Craig have assembled as complete a story explaining how he arrived at the present moment as has ever produced.

The authors build their case on 47 pages of source notes in exceptionally small print; virtually every assertion made in this manuscript is backed up with solid evidence. Structurally, the narrative consists of an introduction, 32 chapters arranged in four major sections, and an epilogue. Part I (The Father) is comprised of the first eight chapters; Part II (The Son) is made up of the next seven

chapters; Part III (The Everything Man) continues with ten chapters; and Part IV (Dramality) finishes up their thesis with the final seven chapters.

One of the features of the book I found notably appealing is the inclusion of an eight-page photo album midway through the text that brings the story Buettner and Craig are telling to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. Being able to see Trump evolve over the years both physically as well as professionally and personally is enlightening in and of itself. The sheer magnitude of the transformation is both fascinating and scary.

Aside from the details of Trump's debt-fueled rise to prominence on the local as well as the national scene, what I found most enlightening about "Luck Loser" was the insights into his demeanor and modus operandi the authors strategically integrate into their prose at every turn. Consider the following from "White Elephants," the twenty-first chapter that outlines the metaphorical decline of Ivana and the rise of Marla Maples in his ever-evolving personal life:

"He grew short tempered with Ivana, sometimes erupting over differences in decorating choices at the Plaza Hotel. Trump would grow angry, screaming and yelling about something Ivana had bought, and storm out of the building. He would find solace on the short walk back to Trump Tower. Tourists would flock to him, tell him how much they admired his success and wealth, and compliment him on his good looks. Some would ask for photographs or an autograph. With each new rush of adoration from a stranger, the anger would melt away, his posture would straighten again. This benefit of fame served as his elixir."

Buettner and Craig are both investigative reporters for the New York Times; since 2016, their reporting has focused on the personal finances of Donald J. Trump, including in-depth articles on the fortune Trump inherited from his father and his record of business failures hidden in twenty years of tax returns. Those articles were awarded a Pulitzer Prize and two George Polk awards. Buettner joined the Times in 2006, whereas Craig's inaugural year was 2010. Buettner previously worked on investigative teams at the Daily News and New York Newsday. Prior to her current position, Craig was a reporter at The Wall Street Journal and The Globe and Mail, Canada's national newspaper. She is a member of the Order of Canada and serves as an on-air analyst for MSNBC.

Many readers will no doubt be drawn to the re-telling of his tenure at "The Apprentice," the project that served as a lifeline to his increasingly dismal financial prospects. The book spends considerable time dissecting the surprising success of this venture. I found their description of the reasons for the show's commercial appeal and subsequent high ratings to be particularly instructive. Reflect on the following from "The Talent," the twenty-eighth chapter and one of my favorites:

"Trump's unpredictability, a vice in business, proved to be a virtue on television. The practices behind Trump's worst failures over the decades – demanding brevity over all else, shutting down complicated discussion, ignoring written material and expertise, and above all else, believing genetic superiority made his gut instinct the best course of action in all situations – had found its perfect home in a pretend boardroom. Trump's confident impetuosity lent a final dramatic twist to the contestant backbiting that filled most of the show. It made for good television."

One area where Buettner and Craig especially excel encompasses the role the media has consistently played in keeping the mythology Trump works so meticulously to sustain alive. Without news outlets willing to be complicit in perpetuating his false persona, he would not have had anywhere near the accolades that have followed him throughout his career. Moreover, the role of an adoring media in precipitating January 6<sup>th</sup> cannot be overstated. This was made explicit in the Epilogue:

“For those living in the Fox News information biosphere, support for Trump appeared endless and self-evident. It was all viewers saw all day, every day. It would seem impossible to believe he lost the vote when the television constantly tells you that everyone loves him. In that world, there would be no credence given to polls showing Trump left office with the lowest approval ratings of any president in the history of polling.”

In sum, “Lucky Loser” provides one of the most detailed portraits of Trump ever assembled in one document. The accuracy of the account Buettner and Craig present to the public is beyond reproach, and the literary style is accessible to both the academic scholar as well as the more casual reader. As they make abundantly clear, there would be no Donald Trump without the willingness of the American people to suspend reality and confer their hopes and desires on one of the most charismatic yet fraudulent charlatans in human history.

Highly recommended.

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