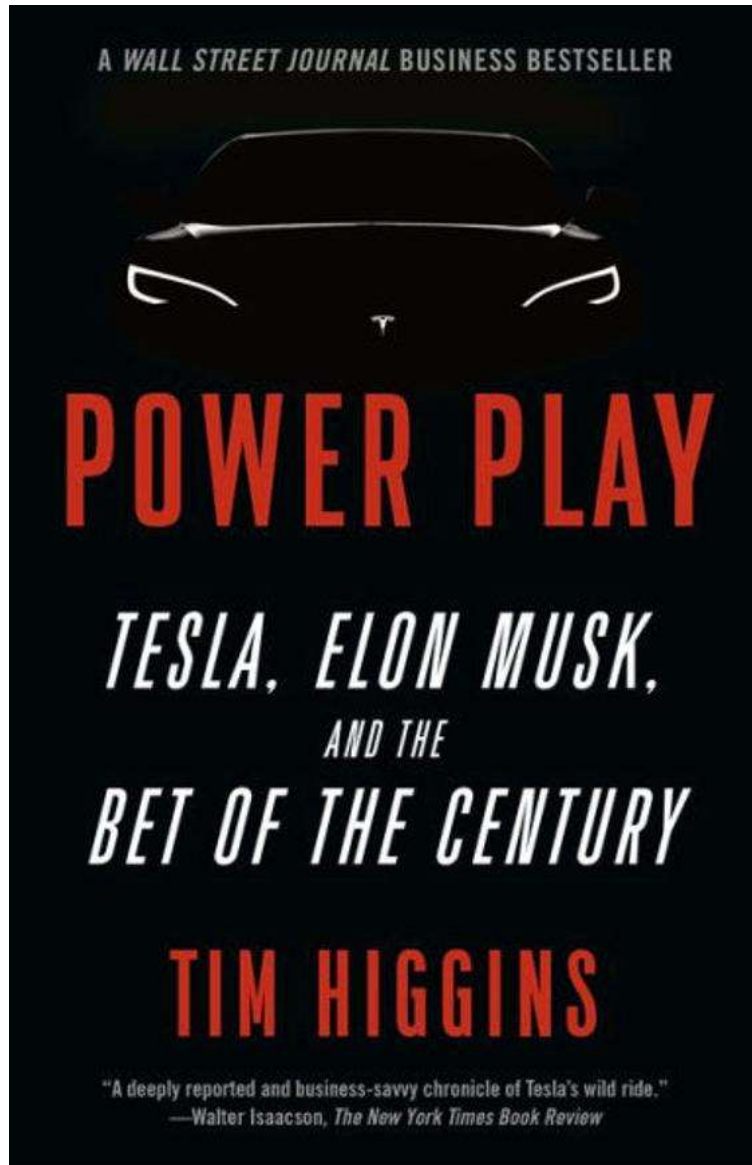


‘Power Play’ doesn’t disappoint

Posted: Sunday, January 29, 2023

“*Power Play: Tesla, Elon Musk, and the Bet of the Century*” by Tim Higgins. New York, NY: Anchor Books (a Division of Penguin Random House), 2021, 400 pages, \$18.00 (paperback).



“At the heart of Musk’s fight and Tesla’s history is a central question: Can a startup conquer one of the biggest and most entrenched industries in the global economy?” Tim Higgins asks near the beginning of “*Power Play: Tesla, Elon Musk, and the Bet of the Century*,” his comprehensive examination of a controversial visionary and his quest to beat the odds. “The automobile changed the world. Aside from the autonomy and mobility it offered individuals, and the entire swaths of modern civilization it has helped to incubate and connect, it has generated an economy unto itself.”

“Detroit helped make the middle class, establishing wealth and stability for the communities it touched,” the author continues. “It also became one of the nation’s largest industries – creating almost \$2 trillion in revenue annually in the U.S. and employing one in twenty Americans... So great are the barriers to entering the car business that the last major new U.S. carmaker to emerge that is still around today was Chrysler. That was in 1925. Or, as Musk likes to remind people, in playing up the outrageous long shot he’s taking, only two U.S. car companies have not gone bankrupt: Ford – and Tesla.”

So begins a fascinating and exceptionally enlightening foray into arguably one of the boldest entrepreneurial moves of the last hundred years or so. Say what you want about Musk – and a lot of people have, especially lately – he has few peers when it comes to sheer audacity and business acuity. Although at present he seems to be unmoored from the principles that brought him so much financial success, it would be extremely imprudent to count him out as a major player in multiple industries. And in this exquisite, multi-faceted volume, Higgins explains why.

“*Power Play*” is extensively researched, with twenty-one pages of source notes at the conclusion of the prologue, twenty-eight fairly succinct chapters and epilogue that form the main text. Structurally, the manuscript is arranged in three major sections: “Part I: A Really Expensive Car,” which is made up of the first eight chapters; “Part II: The Best Car,” chapters nine through seventeen; and “Part III: A Car for Everybody,” chapters eighteen through twenty-eight. The literary style is classic journalism mixed

with superb storytelling; the author transports the reader into the world of the main character and his associates and accomplices in a seamless and visceral manner.

At the heart of the narrative is the interplay between Musk, his supporters and detractors, and the business environment in which they all exist. The prose can venture into the weeds from time to time, so the more familiar you are with the technical aspects of developing, financing, manufacturing and marketing an automobile in the contemporary era the more you will get out of the various descriptions and interpretations presented. ‘Pushing the limits’ is definitely one of the overarching themes that defines everything Musk does. Witness the following from “Ultra Hardcore,” the fourteenth chapter and one of my personal favorites:

“Tesla didn’t want to take chances with safety, of course, but Musk was willing to let some quality issues slide if addressing them meant slowing down their schedule, which could result in costly delays. German automakers, for example, drove test cars through six million miles and two winters to find any problems that might emerge. Tesla didn’t have that time. Instead {Philippe} Chain got approval to do the equivalent of one million miles over six months, to spot potential problems and fix them. Musk’s approval for even this abbreviated run came on the condition that it didn’t affect the start of production. That meant problems discovered during testing would come to light only after work had begun on production, requiring late changes that would add cost. Vehicles already sold would need to be recalled for fixes. In many ways, Tesla was building the airplane as Musk was heading down the runway for a takeoff. And to complicate things even more, Musk was still making his own cosmetic changes to the car. A few weeks before production was to begin, he ordered larger tires to be installed; he thought they looked better.”

If you want a concise snapshot of the kind of innovator (and thinker) Musk is, reflect on that passage for a while.

Higgins is an award-winning reporter for The Wall Street Journal, where his focus is on tech companies; he appears regularly on CNBC. A graduate of the Missouri School of Journalism, he also earned an MBA from Michigan State University. This is his first book.

Like many, I have wondered how Musk has been able to accomplish all that he has given the fact that he is still relatively young. Higgins helps to answer that question by digging deep into his psyche and meticulously dissecting the various aspects of his personality that help explain why he is often able to see things much more clearly than his contemporaries. After making my way through this immensely detailed study of the man and his methods, I have a greater appreciation of where he’s coming from, and more importantly, where he is likely headed. He is still somewhat of an enigma, but the mystery of his success is less pronounced.

“Popular myth is that Elon Musk, sleeping on the factory floor, willed Tesla into being,” Higgins explains near the end of the tome. “His determination and stubbornness surely played a big part in the company’s rise and there wouldn’t be a Tesla Inc. without him. But how the company went from a rather unlikely idea in the summer of 2003 to the world’s most valuable automaker in 2020 is much more complex than one man’s moxie. This book aims to tell the story of how Tesla came to be.”

I am happy to report that Higgins does not disappoint. If you want to get a better handle on the man we see permeating the news cycles and social media outlets with his Twitter charades, “Power Play” need to be on your reading list.

Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.