

IN 1996, WALTER ISAACSON BECAME EDITOR OF Time Magazine. Five years later, he was hired as CEO of CNN, where he oversaw the television network's coverage of 9/11. In 2003, he joined the influential nonprofit Aspen Institute as President and CEO, a position he held until 2018.

Over that same stretch Mr. Isaacson researched and wrote 600-plus-page biographies of Leonardo da Vinci, Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein and Benjamin Franklin—all New York Times best-sellers, with *Leonardo da Vinci* and *Einstein* occupying the No. 1 positions on that list.

He also authored a collection of essays on leadership, a biography of Henry Kissinger, and yet another best-seller, *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution*.

Mr. Isaacson, who ranks among America's best-selling and best-known intellectuals today, is currently the University Professor of History at Tulane University in his hometown of New Orleans.

At a restaurant near that campus, over a dinner event hosted by Brunswick, the firm's CEO of the Americas, Nikhil Deogun, spoke with his long-time friend. Mr. Deogun opened the conversation by recalling a discussion the pair had had years ago.

"How do you have time to write as much as you do?" Mr. Deogun asked.

"I don't like golf," Mr. Isaacson said. "I go home and write."

Who wins a poker game between Leonardo da Vinci, Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs?

Steve Jobs wins because Steve Jobs is the best business mind I ever met. And he was the best business mind because he understood that he was connecting creativity to innovation. In other words, people like Bill Gates seemed smarter, but Bill Gates was making the Zune, which was a music player that, to look at, was anything but a work of art. Steve believed that beauty mattered and he had an absolute passion for it.

Although Steve Jobs wasn't a great engineer, and he didn't know anything about finance, he was the best business leader of our time because he knew that you lead with the product. He revolutionized the music business, the media business, put a thousand songs in our pocket and created the iPhone. Finally, after he resisted it, he allowed the App Store to be on the iPhone, which meant everything from Uber to Airbnb could exist.

While holding leadership positions that would mark the pinnacle of most careers, **WALTER ISAACSON** also found time to write wildly best-selling biographies. He talks with Brunswick's CEO of the Americas, **NIKHIL DEOGUN**.

WALTER

ISAACSON

What lessons can otherwise ordinary humans take from the polymath subjects of your biographies?

When I wrote *Leonardo da Vinci*, what particularly struck me was that he wasn't the smartest dude around. He was uneducated. He was illegitimate, left-handed, homosexual, never went to school, never went to college, never knew Latin, never learned algebra—a total outsider.

And yet, he is the most accomplished creative genius probably in history. And he did not have the



mental process of an Einstein. There's nobody in this world who could ever aspire to be Einstein. But every one of us can be more like Leonardo da Vinci. He just willed himself every morning to walk down the street and see how light was hitting a leaf, or whether the wings of a bird flapped up faster or down faster—which, by the way, depends on the bird. He was just more curious and more observant.

Every week in his notebooks—and we have 7,200 pages of his notebooks left—he'd make a list of all the things he was curious about. They were simple

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things: "Why is the sky blue?" All of us go outside, we see a blue sky. We don't pause to be curious. My favorite from his notebooks is: "Describe the tongue of a woodpecker." He's 29 years old and he writes that. I mean, who wakes up one morning and thinks that? What would you do to even find that out?

But that was Leonardo, every day: being curious about different things. Most of us won't have the mental processing power of a genius. But all of us can connect beauty to how things work and just be curious, relentlessly curious.

Has that affected you?

Absolutely. I now try to pause seven or eight times a day and be slightly curious about something. I'll say, "Hold on a second: Let me try to figure out what that was, let me research it." And I like that about both Steve Jobs and Leonardo da Vinci. Steve wasn't as smart as Bill Gates; Leonardo da Vinci wasn't as smart as Luca Pacioli—but you never heard of Luca Pacioli. He was a great mathematician; he was Leonardo's best friend. But you have heard about Leonardo because he was creative.

Starbucks didn't invent the coffee shop and you didn't write the first biography of da Vinci or Einstein or Franklin or Jobs. Where do you find the courage and insight to mine topics that had been regarded as mined out?

First of all, scientists have sort of become a high priesthood. They don't believe everyday ordinary people can understand things. And likewise, historians have become—especially academic historians—a high priesthood and they write only for themselves. I try to write a narrative.

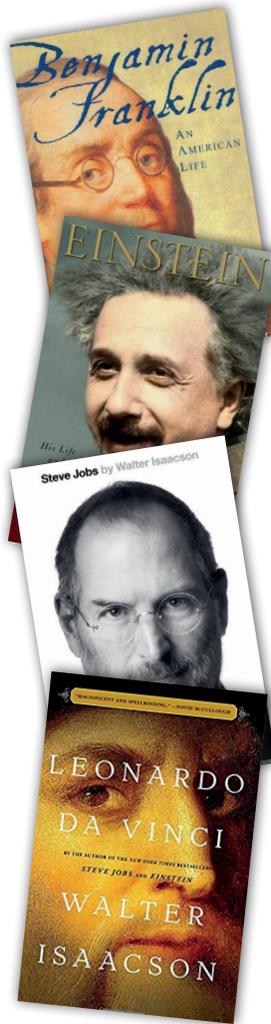
Walker Percy [the late New Orleans novelist] once said, "There were two types of people who come out of Louisiana, preachers and storytellers." And he said, "For heaven's sake, be a storyteller. The world's got far too many preachers." And what I try to do is just make it a narrative story.

I'm never going to come up with a theory of special relativity. But I can make it a narrative story of a kid who couldn't get a job teaching. Einstein's a third-class patent clerk—they won't even give him his doctorate because they can't even understand his doctoral dissertation—and he's got the task of looking at patent applications of synchronized clocks.

And all he does is start experimenting. He imagines, he visualizes: If you're going really fast toward one clock, will it look synchronized, will it be different than if you're going really fast to the other clock? I'm cutting out a few steps here, but he comes up with the notion, "Oh, I get it, the speed of light is relative depending on your state of motion." The speed of light is constant otherwise, but as you move, time gets to be relative for you. And that's a weird little concept. But he's just a patent clerk who's able to picture things. It's a great story.

What's your next book?

It's unlikely to be as popular, but it's about the race to do CRISPR, the gene-editing technology. It somewhat has to do with how women have been marginalized in science, although it didn't start this way.



Four of Walter Isaacson's best-known biographies: *Leonardo da Vinci* (2017), *Steve Jobs* (2011), *Einstein* (2007), and *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (2003).

In 1998 or 1999, all the leading men in biochemistry and biotech were on the gene-sequencing project, the Human Genome Project. The women get cut out of there. So Jennifer Doudna, now at Berkeley, and Emmanuelle Charpentier at the Planck Institute in Germany, they decide they're going to focus on RNA. And they discover a technology to use RNA, to take something called CRISPR, which is repeated sequences in a gene, and they're able to cut your gene and edit it, like you do on a Microsoft Word document. They invented this technology.

I wrote about Einstein because physics was a defining technology of the first half of the 20th century. Einstein writes four papers in 1905—quantum theory, relativity theory, $E = MC^2$ and the theory of electrons—that culminate in the atom bomb, the GPS, etc. You start then, right in the 1950s, then you've got the internet, the computer, the microchip, transistor—you have information technology.

The next 50 years, I'm convinced will be the biotech half-century. We're trying to cram it into our kids that they should all learn coding. Forget about it. Machines are going to code better than we are. But having this creativity and understanding of the humanity that we connect with it, and understanding basic biological concepts, that's going to be the next important thing.

You mentioned the focus on coding and computers. With your historical perspective, should humans be excited or worried about artificial intelligence and machine learning?

I wrote a book called *The Innovators* that starts with Ada Lovelace, who was Lord Byron's daughter. When she was growing up, her mom didn't particularly like Lord Byron—that makes sense if you know anything about Lord Byron.

So Ada's mom has her tutored only in math, thinking that'll keep her from being a romantic poet. But Ada loves the notion of what she calls poetic science, connecting the humanities and science. And she comes up with a notion that the punch cards, which all have a beautiful pattern, can make a general-purpose computer, make music, words, whatever. This was in the earlyish 1800s, by the way.

But she has what's called "Ada Lovelace's Objection": Machines will be able to do everything except be creative. Only the humans will be creative. A hundred years to the day after she writes that, in 1937, Alan Turing does this famous paper called "Can Machines Think?" And he invents the field of artificial intelligence and essentially says, "Machines will be able to replace us. They're going to wipe us out."

Ever since then, it's been a question of the Ada Lovelace school, which is the connection of human creativity to machine in a "synergistic way," as she called it, versus a Turing way, which is trying to create machines that will get rid of our jobs. Every single data point we have is that the connection of humans with machines will always be more creative than machines alone or humans alone.

And if you look toward the future, never, including right now, have machines decreased the total number of jobs. If technology were going to decrease the total number of jobs, we'd all be unemployed now. We have the lowest unemployment rate in 50 years. So I'm a strong believer that what actually Ada called the "man-machine symbiosis" will always triumph.

Which means, as I teach my students at Tulane, what you've got to learn is not how to make machines that are smarter than humans, but how to make machines that can interrelate with humans, so machines and humans can work together better. And I'm convinced at least for the next 100 years, that's the way it'll be.

Will machines finally replace us? I guess it's possible. But I'm only a historian. I'm not a futurist. But every time we have a quantum leap—and I'll call quantum computing a quantum leap—in technology, it makes a quantum leap in productivity. That's what technology is, an increase in productivity. You add productivity, you have more demand for product. So I'm convinced that in the next century humans won't become irrelevant.

You grew up in New Orleans, you worked here as a young man, you came back here late in life. Are you going to write a book about the city?

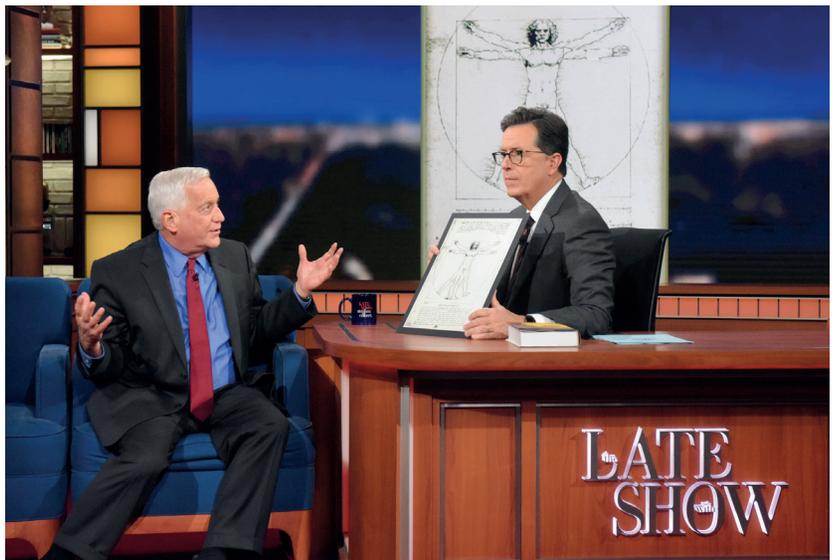
I once tried and I may do it still. This is something I don't normally confess, but I spent two years doing a biography of Louis Armstrong. He grew up in my neighborhood, Perdido Street in New Orleans. I actually heard Louis Armstrong play when I was a little kid, when he'd come to town.

Louis Armstrong is filled with the complexity of race in New Orleans. He played in blackface in 1949 and was criticized then. He went through all of these things and he helped create jazz—he's the one who brings the ragtime and the syncopated beats.

I spent two years researching and knew everything you could possibly know about Louis Armstrong, except for who he was. I couldn't figure out whether he was happy, couldn't figure out his views on race. He was a very difficult subject. Someday I would love to write about New Orleans by doing that book on

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Walter Isaacson discussing Leonardo da Vinci's famed "Vitruvian Man" drawing on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" in 2017.



Louis Armstrong. It would be my way as a biographer of getting into jazz. But I would do it probably with Wynton Marsalis or Jon Batiste, somebody who could help me figure out how to get beyond the mask.

Of all the people you've written about who you've never met, whom would you invite to dinner?

Ben Franklin. He was the most sociable guy you'd ever meet. Like Leonardo, he had the No. 1 virtue of the people you want to have dinner with: He was interested in knowing everything you could possibly know about every subject. Whether it was botany or how to balance powers in a constitution, Ben Franklin was great at it.

He also loved great wine and great beer. He has a wonderful bagatelle he wrote to his two mistresses in Paris: One was called Wine, one was called Beer, and how they're both God's way of telling us that the good Lord loves us.

Franklin even formed something called the Leather Apron Club. It was a dinner every Friday night where people got together and answered questions like, "Why does it take one day less to get to Europe than coming back?" And to answer that they'd do something like discover and map the Gulf Stream.

At one of these Leather Apron dinners, the question was, "Does immigration add to the economy in Philadelphia or detract from it?" At another they asked about an estate tax—is it a better way of doing it than an income tax? They were having the same debates we are today. But unlike us, they were doing it by saying, "Let's get together and figure out the evidence and see what's going to work the best." ♦

NIKHIL DEOGUN is Brunswick's CEO of the Americas and US Senior Partner. He was Editor in Chief and Senior Vice President, Business News, at CNBC.