

meanderings by using the word minimalism to mean, a la Lewis Carroll, exactly what the user says it means.

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Bad Apple

by Steve Lohr

STEVEN P. JOBS HAS PROVED AN elusive subject for the parade of authors who over the years have tried to fathom the corporate soap opera known as Apple Computer. A business visionary and brilliant technologist with his finger on the pulse of popular culture, or a scheming hustler who became rich and famous by happenstance? Books on Apple invariably toss in a mixture of his Jekyll-and-Hyde traits and then take a stand: hero or villain.

Michael S. Malone's *Infinite Loop* comes down, with all the subtlety of a jackhammer, in the latter camp. The villainous Jobs, according to Malone, is the central explanation for Apple's fall from grace, despite possessing superior technology for years. But Malone's explanation for Apple's travails has a few flaws. Not the least is that Jobs was not even at Apple during the company's long stretch of lost opportunities and decline from 1985 until 1997. Since his return, Jobs has led a remarkable turnaround for a company thought to have been on the verge of extinction.

Malone begins with a tantalizing opening line: "Before and after everything, companies are about character." But he never really develops the theme except to try to illuminate Jobs' lack of character by piling on anecdotes and descriptions that are often so mean-spirited they undermine the author's credibility, not Jobs'. Before he finishes page two, Malone has summed up the Apple co-founder as a "protean inconstant figure who seemed composed of nothing but charm and a pure will to power."

To give the book its due, *Infinite Loop* is a lively and detailed chronicle of Apple's origins, rise, descent and recent signs of renewal. Malone grew up in Silicon Valley, went to elementary school with Jobs, worked on one of Apple's annual reports and, as an aspiring entrepreneur, pitched a product to Apple (and was turned down). Today, Malone is the editor of *Forbes ASAP*, a technology supplement to the business magazine. He certainly knows the personal computer industry, and his book displays a confident grasp of his subject. And Malone writes well, when he's not trying too hard.

At 597 pages, *Infinite Loop* was clearly intended as the definitive Big

Book on Apple. But to achieve that status, Malone's book ought to deliver a wealth of new material or new insights—and it comes up short on both counts. There is scant evidence of fresh legwork by Malone. The book is mainly a rewrite job. Even when he offers a new inter-

pretation of events, his material is mostly borrowed. For example, he argues that the legend of Jobs' visit to Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center—where he saw the ideas (a "mouse" and point-and-click graphic icons) that would shape the future of computing and Apple's landmark product, the Macintosh—is a myth. Malone points out that the Macintosh project was proposed three months before Jobs visited Xerox PARC, apparently in late 1979. The real force behind the Macintosh, Malone asserts, was Jeff Raskin, an Apple engineer Jobs forced out.

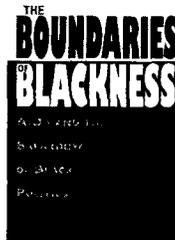
That Raskin started as the team leader for the Macintosh project and was elbowed aside by Jobs is well-known within the industry—and has been duly documented in previous Apple books. Malone goes further saying that the concept, the design, and even the words Jobs later used to describe the Macintosh were simply lifted from Raskin. But Malone's main source for this seems to be Raskin's memoirs published in 1996. The essential claims of Raskin's version,

INFINITE LOOP How Apple, the World's Most Insanely Great Computer Company, Went Insane

by Michael S. Malone
Doubleday, \$27.50

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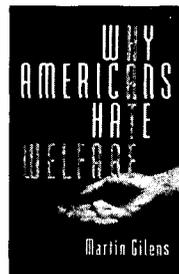
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Malone decides, "had the ring of truth."

OK, but did Malone hunt down the former PARC researchers or former Apple employees who might be able to shed light on the subject? Again, no evidence of it. Besides, the Macintosh that came to market after Jobs took over was a very different product than the one he inherited from Raskin. So Malone's interpretation comes off as much as a reflection of his anti-Jobs bias as an insight.

The author's picture of Jobs as an empty vessel is often contradicted in his own book. Malone portrays Jobs as a person without any real gift for technology. But repeatedly, Jobs displays his technical acumen, showing that he is far more than a sleazy salesman who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Even when he was working for Atari, before Apple, Jobs once flew off to the company's German subsidiary to solve a critical engineering flaw in the computer game machines it was producing. To Malone, this is an example of Jobs' cunning. "Though he had no apparent natural aptitude for electronics," Malone writes, "his mind was so quick that he could learn what he needed to know faster than anyone around him."

The real story in *Infinite Loop* has little to do with character and just about everything to do with strategy. If there is a lasting lesson from high-technology businesses, it is that if you make the big decisions right the payoff is so great it takes care of everything else—egomaniacs, wasteful management, and on and on.

The mistake Apple made again and again was its inability to see the wisdom of unbundling software and hardware. Apple had several opportunities to unleash its superior Macintosh software. For a decade, the Macintosh operating system was clearly superior to Microsoft's Windows, until 1995 with the introduction of Windows 95. As Peter Schwartz of the Global Business Network once told me, "If Apple had licensed its software years ago, the Justice Department would be suing Apple today, not Microsoft."

STEVE LOHR is the technology reporter for The New York Times.

Containing Consumerism

by Robert de Neufville

IF ROBERT FRANK HAD HIS WAY, we would have spent a lot less over the last holiday season. According to Frank, we are in the grip of "luxury fever," a kind of mania for fancy things we don't need. Echoing Juliet Schor's recent book *The Overspent American*, Frank argues that we are driven by a need to keep up with our neighbors, sacrificing time better spent with friends and family to work long hours, just so we can buy an impressive car or house which does little to make us happier. The sad consequence is that our unprecedented wealth has not brought us unprecedented happiness.

Although it has a puritanical edge, *Luxury Fever* is not a moralizing book. In fact, Frank's use of the word "luxury" suggests an indulgence he doesn't intend. The real subject of his book is not luxury, but rather what Thorstein Veblen famously called "conspicuous consumption"—any-

thing we buy primarily because of the status owning it confers. By "luxury," then, Frank means not only Patek Philippe watches and \$5,000 gas grills, but also less extravagant items like wide-screen TVs, Nike sneakers, and gourmet coffee beans. What matters is not how much something costs, but whether we are more interested in the thing itself or in what owning it says about us.

Conspicuous consumption seems superficial, but may not be something we can so easily do without. As Frank points out, our concern with status is not necessarily selfish or shallow, but often sensible: What we own helps determine what social worlds we can enter, what jobs we can get, who we can marry, and so on. An expensive suit, for example, is hardly frivolous if it makes the wearer look more pro-

fessional or competent in a job interview. Indeed, this is precisely the problem. While certain kinds of ostentation make sense from the individual's perspective, they may be tremendously wasteful from the perspective of society as a whole. The reason is that conspicuous consumption is not productive, but competitive. No matter how hard we compete, the same number of people come out on top.

The real problem with conspicuous consumption is not that it is selfish, but that it is ultimately unsatisfying. Because the Joneses are trying to keep up with us as much as we are with them, it is fruitless to expect any lasting satisfaction from gold watches and expensive gas grills. Nevertheless, Frank estimates—although it is hard to imagine how he arrives at this remarkable number—that Americans squander trillions of dollars in the attempt. This money would be better spent on what he calls "inconspicuous consumption," that is, on things we

enjoy in themselves. If we gave up our expensive cars or large houses, for example, we wouldn't have to work as hard and would have more time to spend with our families. We

could also use a greater share of the money we do earn to address pressing social issues, either by giving to charity or by accepting a higher level of public spending. As a society, in other words, we could do more to keep our air and drinking water clean, educate our children, employ the poor, maintain our roads, treat and prevent drug addiction, save for the future, and so on. Indeed, if Frank is to be believed, we already have the resources to solve almost all of our major social problems. We have only to spend more wisely than we do.

This argument seems to cut against the received wisdom of neo-classical economics that if everyone simply pursues his or her own interest, the resulting competition for profits will bring about the greatest material satisfaction for all "as if by an

