

# Michael Lewis: Everything Elon Musk does feels sick and false

The author of *The Big Short* talks about his new book, which puts him on a collision course with Donald Trump and Elon Musk, and the tragic loss of his teenage daughter four years ago

**T**rump's America moves fast and breaks things, including careers.

Eighteen months ago the Washington Post asked Michael Lewis, the great American storyteller and illustrious business journalist, to conjure up a series of lengthy features on federal government personnel. He would write two of them, six other distinguished writers the rest. This almost ruthlessly unsexy commission delivered the glad tidings that the government is manned by decent, hardworking employees, some of them near-geniuses. The series featured, among others, the Department of Labor man who has spared miners' lives by inventing safer pillars for coal-face tunnels, the military cemeteries chief devoted to ensuring no American hero lies unburied or unmarked, and the woman at the National Archives who meticulously unearths and cherishes the country's history.

To the surprise of everyone, not least Lewis, the pieces proved among the Post's most read features of last year. Having now collected them into a book, *Who Is Government?*, Lewis, who regards himself as habitually lucky, has the mixed fortune of finding himself holding both a hot property and a hot potato. Those the book celebrates are now living in fear of the chop from President Trump's proxy, [Elon Musk](#), the axe man who regards civil servants as monsters from an infinitely drainable swamp.

“I do think that there is this kind of bigotry about civil servants,” says Lewis, the 64-year-old author of *The Big Short*, from his writer’s cabin in the garden of the home overlooking San Francisco Bay where he lives with his wife and two children. “For whatever reason, people will accept a false portrait of them. In the same way they accept a false portrait of immigrants and trans people. The Trump administration has identified that you can put into the same bucket with immigrants and trans people, civil servants. You can beat up on them relentlessly, say whatever you want to say about them and people will kind of nod their heads.”

At the premiere of *The Big Short* in 2015 with his wife, Tabitha Soren, and, from left, children Dixie, who died in a car crash in 2021, Walker and Quinn

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This is a significant shaft of pessimism from a writer whose journalism can cast a withering eye but is personally noted for his sunniness. His optimism, after all, survived the scandals of Salomon Brothers, where he had worked in the Eighties and whose obnoxious culture he colourfully depicted in *Liar’s Poker*, and the great homes-destroying crash of 20 years later (as featured in *The Big Short*, which like many of his books became an unlikely but compelling feature film). It also survived two divorces before he happily married Tabitha Soren, a former MTV reporter, in 1997. And it remains, as he will later explain to me, even after the awful death of his daughter in a car crash four years ago this May.

But he is thinking first today of the civil servants celebrated in his book and how many will survive the cull by Musk, the tech oligarch whom Trump has anointed leader of his new [Department of Government Efficiency](#). What for instance will happen to Heather Stone of the Food and Drug Administration, whose above-and-beyond diligence saved a young life? As Lewis relates in his chapter, Stone rescued a little girl with an extremely rare brain disease by pushing through the emergency permissions needed for her parents to treat her with an antibiotic normally used on urinary tract infections. Stone, who had been contacted by her mother, had to do this herself because the app she had invented for doctors to pool their experiences of obscure diseases was

hardly used. And why was that? “In part,” Lewis writes, “because it doesn’t pay, but in part because it was created by the federal government.”

Unfortunately for Stone and the people whose future lives she might save, Trump’s new head of the FDA, [the vaccine-sceptic](#) Robert F Kennedy Jr, has issued a memo ordering the organisation to get out of the infectious disease business. “She thinks,” Lewis says, “her notice is coming soon. I don’t think she’s got it yet. I’ll find out in the next few days what has happened to all these people. I suspect about half of them will have lost their jobs.”

• [The Big Short author Michael Lewis on his climate change struggle](#)

I ask him to let me know.

The danger with the book, I say, is that the pieces are hagiographic rather than investigative. Lewis promises me that had his writers come back with stories of corruption or laziness he would have run them, but they did not. There are too many eyes surveying everything for corruption to flourish, and where there is waste it is unexciting, probably down to the way contracts are drawn up. Were I to ask him to find a story about waste, fraud, corruption and abuse, he would head for high finance and Wall Street, not a federal agency and DC. “It’s funny that there’s this idea that waste, fraud and abuse happen just in the government. It’s much more common in the private sector.”

In that case, why does America resent the federal government so?

“I think there’s a long answer and a short answer. The long answer is that, as a people, we’ve never been particularly rule-following,” he says, and I suppose he means the Boston Tea Party and all that. The shorter answer begins, he believes, in the Ronald Reagan era and the small-government movement. “The recent history of it is: the government is very, very bad at telling its story. And there is an incentive for politicians to be very negative about government [bureaucracy] because you can then blame the government for anything that

goes wrong: ‘These people did it, not me.’ But if it goes well, you take the credit.”

So good news about federal government workers fits the ancient definition of news — that it is not “dog bites man” but “man bites dog”?

“That’s exactly right, isn’t it?”

He doesn’t take it seriously when Trump reads out a list of social security benefits going to the long dead?

“I may be wrong about this [he is not], but this has already been debunked. It’s not even true.”

‘I can’t drag a reader along on a ride I don’t want to be on’

The Anglophile LSE graduate and once-upon-a-time London bond salesman first prowled the grey corridors of federal power in 2017 for his book *The Fifth Risk*. In it he reported the disinclination of the incoming Trump administration even to staff Washington. It is different this time round, he says — last time, any old dog could catch the federal bus and fill a vacancy. “Now the dog thinks it can drive the bus.”

With Brad Pitt, star of *The Big Short*

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And the dog is called Doge (the Department of Government Efficiency), led by Musk? “That’s right. This is different. The dog has come on board with intent.”

Since Musk’s name punctuates our conversation, I ask Lewis whether he regrets that a rival author from New Orleans, Walter Isaacson, got to write the entrepreneur’s biography — published in the same year, 2023, as Lewis’s [Going Infinite](#), about the crypto-fraudster Sam Bankman-Fried.

“I remember hearing about his reporting trips and thinking, ‘I’m glad I didn’t have to do that.’ I just don’t think I’d have the stomach for it. I’ve had characters that I’ve started to spend time with and realised I just don’t want to be with them. And if I don’t want to be with them, the reader’s not going to want to be with them. I can’t drag a reader along on a ride I don’t want to be on. It’s not like I can’t tolerate darker characters — Sam Bankman-Fried is a darker character — but I’ve got to, at some level, enjoy it. I find Elon Musk so not enjoyable. Everything he does, everything he says, it feels sick, false, tinny.”

‘What do I value in people? I value givers’

If a through-line connects Lewis’s writing, it is the question of how societies value worth. From his stint at Salomon Brothers between 1985 and 1988, when he was paid hundreds of thousands for his uninformed guesses about which stocks and bonds would rise or fall, he concluded that capitalism was terrible at doing this, and certainly in his case. The theme was elaborated in 2010 in *The Big Short*’s examination of the sub-prime mortgage crisis, in which billions of dollars of debt proved worthless, and before that by 2003’s *Moneyball*, which argued that the traditional ways of assessing baseball players’ monetary value were flawed. Obviously *Who Is Government?* finds value in people who are neither particularly well remunerated nor, as a group, esteemed.

So how does Lewis judge people’s worth? He offers an example.

“I have one very close friend who has failed at everything. He’s mentally ill and he’s close to homeless and unstable. I value him because he’s got a big heart, but the world wants me to dismiss him. The people we know in common all want to make fun of him and dismiss him. So I do make a point of insisting on his value.”

In contrast, when a prominent entertainment billionaire offered to host a party at which Lewis would talk about his current podcast on sports gambling, he declined on the grounds that the billionaire was “a bad dude”.

“What do I value in people? I value givers, even if I’m not particularly one myself. I’m not a taker but not a giver either. I’m sort of in the middle. But I value givers. I value heart in people — people who care about other things, things other than themselves. And I value interest. My children would say this is a vice. They would say, ‘Being interesting is not the only thing, Dad.’ It’s that kind of thing.”

‘I’ve incorporated my daughter’s death into who I am’

The only reason any journalist would not value Lewis would be jealousy. It is, however, far less easy to envy him since 2021, the year his second daughter, Dixie, died aged just 19. She was being driven by her boyfriend one afternoon when he inexplicably swerved to the wrong side of the road and a head-on collision killed them both. Great storytellers make sense of life, but what sense could be made of this? And what did it do for Lewis’s sense of himself as a lucky, happy person? Can those labels even still apply?

“They do. I mean, this is horrible to say, but my personality is so formed that I don’t feel knocked off who I am by her death. I feel more that it’s worked to incorporate her death into who I am. Whoever I am, it’s like a chemical thing. I wake up happy. I just can’t help it. And I default to that feeling. So as traumatising as it is, as sad as it is and, you know, as much as I loved her — and I loved her as much as a dad could love a kid — it has more proved the point of who I am because even this happens and I still feel myself. I still feel lucky and I feel happy. I feel filled with gratitude every day.”

But he cannot have woken up feeling that the morning after.

“No, I didn’t wake up the next morning thinking, ‘I’m just still me.’ I remember feeling exhausted. We move through life assuming it’s going to be a certain way, more or less the same going forward as it was behind us. We build in changes we can anticipate, like the death of a parent. One day your parents are going to die and you’re sort of slowly preparing yourself for it as they age. When it happens, you have incorporated it into your reality already. Dixie’s death was a complete shock to the mental picture I had of the world. And it was exhausting reassembling the world into any coherent picture. But I did it pretty naturally. More and more I have incorporated her death into who I was before. It’s not that I’m unchanged. I am kind of deepened by it, is how it feels. It’s given me access to emotions, to other people’s experiences, that I didn’t have before.”

• **[Sam Bankman-Fried trial: diabolical schemer or shambolic oddball?](#)**

Before she died, Lewis wrote an audio book about the big business of youth sports in which Dixie, a talented schoolgirl softball player, was the protagonist. He can hardly now watch a game, but the storyteller is considering ways of addressing her death and his grief. It won’t be a self-help book. It might be a play. “Perhaps use an actor, someone coaxing an audience into the journey, the experience.”

I had asked Lewis to tell me, when he knew, how the stories ended for the federal employees in *Who Is Government?*. A few days later he emails me. There will not be a follow-up piece on what happened to Heather Stone’s job and those of all the others in the book and that is because they are no longer talking. “The subjects who remain in their jobs fear the exposure,” he writes to me. “Welcome to our times.”

**Who Is Government?: The Untold Story of Public Service, edited by Michael Lewis (Allen Lane, £25), is published on March 18. Order from [timesbookshop.co.uk](http://timesbookshop.co.uk) or call 020 3176 2935. Free P&P on online orders over £25. Discount for Times+ members**