Walter Isaacson’s “Steve Jobs” is the new work in American Studies to read. As the authoritative biography of one of America’s most innovative and successful entrepreneurs, “Steve Jobs” offers a profound case study of the sort of enterprising spirit that Americans see as a definitive element of their country’s history and identity. Jobs’ trajectory, from messing around with wires and circuit boards in his father’s garage to redefining the world’s interaction with technology, is undoubtedly an incredible success story. Yet it is more than that. From the original Macintosh to Pixar to the iPad 2, Steve Jobs revolutionized culture, not only in the United States, but around the world. One only has to walk down the street to see people listening to their iPods, snapping photos to upload to Instagram, and navigating with their mobile devices. Jobs’ innovation went beyond responding to the desires of consumers; he predicted consumer needs before the consumers themselves, creating the very desires that would drive buyers around the world. Steve Jobs did not just create successful products, he created culture itself. For scholars of American Studies, that is something worth studying.

When Steve Jobs approached Walter Isaacson in 2004 and asked him to write his biography, Isaacson was hesitant. He had recently published a biography of Benjamin Franklin and was working on one for Einstein, and his first thought was wonder if Jobs saw himself as the logical next step (Isaacson xvii). He did not know, at the time, that Jobs was dealing with a cancerous tumor in his pancreas, a fact which Jobs had kept secret from all but a few trusted
friends. By 2009, when Isaacson agreed to become the official biographer, Jobs’ cancer had grown severe. He knew he did not have much longer to live, and it fell to Isaacson to accurately capture the innovator’s life and legacy.

The author accomplishes this task masterfully, allowing the reader in to “the roller-coaster life and searingly intense personality of a creative entrepreneur whose passion for perfection and ferocious drive revolutionized six industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing, and digital publishing” (xx-xxi). Isaacson stresses the fact that Jobs had no oversight over the book’s content. The innovator wanted an unbiased account that did not hide his drawbacks, such as his irrational fits of rage that could result in blunt and even brutal treatment of his employees. Isaacson suggests that Jobs’ obsession for control and his tendency to be cold and unfeeling towards his co-workers, friends, and family might have resulted from his abandonment by his biological parents. Yet it was Jobs’ almost pathological need for control and perfection, along with his intense ambition and drive, that led to Apple’s astounding success, making it one of the most powerful corporations in the world.

With the clean and methodical precision of an accomplished journalist, Isaacson takes us through the various stages of Jobs’ life. The spark of innovation was kindled when he and his college friend, Steve Wozniak, invented the Blue Box, a device which enabled people to make long-distance calls for free. Wozniak was the brains behind the technology, but it was Jobs who figured out how to make the device attractive and user friendly, and it was he who began selling it for a tidy profit to other students. Before long, Jobs dropped out of college to form Apple, which began as a two-man show in his father’s garage. Wozniak’s programming skills, along with Jobs’ passion for design and business savvy, soon led to the creation of the Apple II, one of the first highly-successful microcomputers to be mass-produced. By the time Apple went public
in 1980, Jobs was only 26 years old, and his company was expected to have profits of $600 million (Isaacson 107). Apple sales only increased under Jobs’ leadership, especially after the creation of the first Macintosh, with its famous and staggeringly successful 1984 advertisement.

When Jobs was removed from leadership at Apple in 1985, due to company in-fighting, he was furious. But as he would describe at the Stanford University Commencement ceremonies in 2003, getting fired proved to be one of the best things that happened to him. Without the security of success, Jobs attacked his work with a new zeal, founding NeXT and Pixar. As Apple sales declined, Jobs applied his creative energies in new fields. When Apple brought him back in 1996, he spearheaded a number of revolutionary projects, such as iTunes, the iPod, Apple Stores, the iPhone, and the iPad. Jobs’ obsession with aesthetic perfection and seamless, end-to-end integration were manifested in his products. It was because of Jobs that Apple managed to stay on the cutting edge of technological innovation, revolutionizing world culture in the 21st Century.

Isaacson’s biography is informative, funny, and at times moving. His extensive interviews with Jobs’ family, friends, and coworkers allow for a thorough and balanced account of a genius who could be both intensely loving and frigidly cruel. By smoothly and methodically chronicling the important developments in Jobs’ career, as well as his fierce rivalry with Bill Gates, the author offers us a profound look into the accomplishments of one of the world’s most revolutionary entrepreneurs. So for anyone who has used an Apple product, listened to digital music, or read a New York Times article on a tablet, Walter Isaacson’s book is a must-read. “Steve Jobs” shows us what it means not only to influence, but to produce, consumer culture, by telling us the story of one of the most influential innovators of our time.