AOLs story--from its origins in a doomed gaming service through its early appearance as a much-dismissed startup to its current status as an often-maligned giant—is as irresistible as a heroic comedy. Kara Swisher chronicles the surprising growth of the worlds largest online service, an organization for which everything apparently went wrong. The company has run into obstacles at every step of the way--partners who failed to give necessary support or who even turned hostile, and competition from a multitude of corporate Goliaths (including Bill Gates, who declared that he could either buy AOL or bury it). Worst of all, AOL has created a cascading sequence of operational and technical blunders, often offending or infuriating the people they most need to survive; yet the company still manages to dominate the online service industry. Swisher speculates that
one main factor enabled AOL to succeed against overwhelming odds: the superior vision of marketing executive Steve Case. While other online services focused on games, shopping, and business, AOL worked on building community and interpersonal contacts. This service proved valuable enough to outweigh the company’s mistakes and misfortunes. However, it is this same focus that has also brought on many of AOL’s problems. Swisher describes AOL’s struggles with the seamier side of online life—people who use the service for criminal activities and for discussing raunchy sexual issues. Swisher also discusses the problems that come with too much success, such as the overload of users that routinely slows down or completely crashes the system, the backlash on the Internet when masses of netiquette-challenged AOLers appeared in cliquish newsgroups, and the national outrage when a technical problem brought down the entire service for many hours. With its cast of fascinating and quirky characters, including Steve Case, Bill Gates, Paul Allen, and Alexander Haig, aol.com is a captivating look at all the human, cultural, and sometimes just plain quixotic factors that created this unlikely giant. --Elizabeth Lewis

Personal Review: aol.com: How Steve Case Beat Bill Gates, Nailed the Netheads, and Made Millions in the War for the Web by Kara Swisher

Karen Swisher weaves a compelling tale of America Online, a company saga that is remarkable in the annals of American business history. She recounts at the outset of this tale how Steve Case paid proper tribute to Bill Von Meister, the founder and visionary techie responsible for AOL becoming a commercial possibility. Von Meister (VM) attracted some of the finest venture capitalists in the nation to his vision of sending video games into individual homes for a fee. While this dream did not pan out as commercially viable Von meister revealed a keen grasp of the future of the internet as long ago as the late seventies. Steve Case was not only intellectually curious when he met Von Meister, but immediately grasped the significance of his vision. Because VM was lax with his corporate spending habits while ignoring the rivers of red ink produced by a product without a market, Frank Caufield of Kleiner Perkins brought in his friend and investor in CVC, Jim Kimsey, to be his eyes and ears at the company. As CVC tanked Quantum ne Aol was begun and Kimsey fought off the creditors while Case ran the business. As the company struggled thru the 80’s Kimsey provided adult leadership while searching and finding enough capital to sustain AOL thru its bleakest times. As the microchip revolution caused a faster and more powerful computer base to grow up and around the company, Aol surpassed its resident competitors, Prodigy and Compuserve, as Case’s clever marketing ideas continued to build a virtual community online. When alex Brown took Aol public in 1992 the stock actually drifted below its IPO price for a couple of months before beginning its remarkable accent. Kimsey, who was older than Case and who had suffered more from opportunity cost than his younger counterpart, was in favor of selling out to Bill Gates in 1993. This didn’t fly well with Case who eased Kimsey out in 1995, but what a way to go. Kimsey amassed one of
the more significant fortunes in Washington DC business history and he did it largely by having the sense to know "which horse to ride", one Steve case. Case went on to perform one of the more remarkable records of business timing any of us will ever witness. This series of correct moves included adding the right executives to the mix, the ones who could lead Aol "thru the iceburgs", and culminated in his buyout of Time Warner. The timing could not have been more deft. This is a fascinating book about the best America has to offer. All aspiring businessmen should read it.

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aol.com: How Steve Case Beat Bill Gates, Nailed the Netheads, and Made Millions in the War for the Web by Kara Swisher 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!