

# See what reviewers have to say about The AM Best Business Trilogy: *The Man: A Biography of Alfred M. Best*



### BlueInk Review

One would expect the biography of the founder of an insurance rating company to be dry, if not tedious. But *The Man, a Biography of Alfred M. Best* does something remarkable: It makes the life of the businessman fascinating. It does this by deftly creating a sense of place for the action and by seamlessly weaving together the disparate components of Best's complicated life.

**Makes the life of the businessman fascinating.**

In 1899, spurred on by the prevalence of fraudulent insurance firms that "profited off the trust of others," Best devised an "insurance reporting" company. The company would study numerous factors, including an insurance firm's "financial responsibility and projected future performance," and, through reports, express "an opinion about the status of the financial strength" of the firm. Best's methodologies blossomed into the "cornerstone of today's credit rating industry."

For his start-up, Best rented a "10-by-12" office next to an elevator shaft. Best could hear the "squeal and bang of elevator cables, and the whoosh of air as the cab rose and descended through the shaft." The narrative tracks Best's business as it expands, with Best hiring employees and acquiring subscribers through the years.

The book also follows Best as he marries and has three children, buys a small farm, an expensive house, and an office building. It fully explores Best's darker periods when his finances fail and his second wife (associated with gangsters) dies under mysterious circumstances. And it describes Best's estrangement from his first wife and sons, and the suicide of the eldest son.

**It is this carefully documented presentation of the dark as well as the light that makes this biography so interesting.**

It is this carefully documented presentation of the dark as well as the light that makes this biography so interesting. Delivered in lively language and with vivid settings, the story is accompanied by copious photographs and letters, giving readers acquaintance to a bygone age.

*The Man* should capture an audience well beyond readers in the insurance trade. Its articulate and insightful presentation will make it a welcome addition to any bookshelf.

Also available in hardcover and ebook.

April 2021

### Clarion Review

*The Man* is a robust biography that pays tribute to Alfred M. Best, the founder of a credit rating business.

Put together by the company he founded, Alfred M. Best's biography *The Man* reveals him in the context of his family and other relationships.

**The Man is a robust biography that pays tribute to Alfred M. Best, the founder of a credit rating business.**

Beginning with the founder's origins, the book reveals that Best's father's business success fluctuated such that, in 1892, fifteen-year-old Best went to work in New York City instead of continuing his education. He kept learning at his jobs, though, and worked his way up in insurance companies. He eventually started his own credit rating agency.

In addition to his work, the book covers how Best sang in choral societies, and how he and his first wife, Constance, had three children and spent summers in Vermont. It reveals that, after Best bought a building for his growing business, his debts mounted. He had an affair and divorced Constance. Following the deaths of his son and second wife, he retired. He died in Vermont in 1958, having reunited with Constance.

The book is part of a trilogy put out by the AM Best company. This volume's fourteen chapters each focus on a topic specific to Best's life: his singing, children, farm, and projects are covered. Each chapter concludes with a summary assessment of Best in its area, resulting in a dry, objective tone.

Best's character is addressed through the prism of his own principles of experience, fairness, and innovation. Vignettes about business dealings and friendships mirror his business rating system, suggesting that he worked to live up to his own standards. The rating system was the first of its kind and became popular, and the book acknowledges this success. But it also suggests that Best struggled to be fair: he is depicted lending money to those who do not pay him back, in some cases leading to his own debts.

Newspaper clippings and anecdotes further enliven the scandals of Best's life, including those he was involved in during Prohibition, during when he encountered shady individuals. The question of how his second wife actually died results in some intrigue. Nonetheless, some of the book's sections are too bogged down in their archival details to hold interest.

Paintings by Best's son, Dexter, are among the most striking images in the book. They couple with photographs of the Vermont countryside to convey Best's ideals of solidity and natural tranquility, which the text said he did not always achieve. Other artifacts, including pieces of correspondence, speak to Best's busy and well-connected nature; some are included in their entirety, suggesting the book's value as a work of historical preservation, even beyond Best's story.

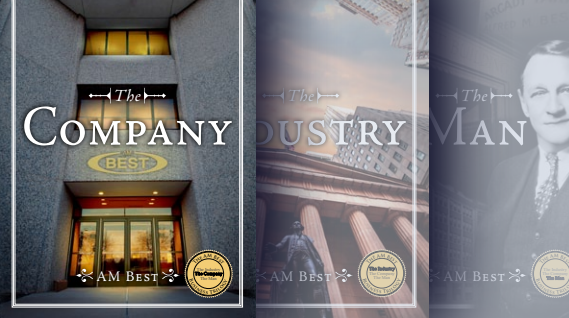
*The Man* is a robust biography that pays tribute to Alfred M. Best, the founder of the credit rating business that commissioned it.

April 2021



**Up next: *The Company: A History of AM Best***

# See what reviewers have to say about The AM Best Business Trilogy: *The Company: A History of AM Best*



### BlueInk Review

*The Company*, one-third of *The AM Best Business Trilogy*, is a massive, well-researched, intricately sourced, in-depth book with a significant number of photographs, including full-color offerings. The book explores the founding and development of AM Best, a “full-service credit rating agency, news publisher and data analytics provider specializing in the insurance industry.”

Interesting biographical information about the Best family appears throughout, starting with Irish immigrant, William Best (the father of company founder Alfred M. Best) who was likely tragically murdered, and going down through the generations. Stories are shared about how the company was nurtured from a startup in 1899 through its rise to a century-plus-old, well-established industry leader and global enterprise.

Challenges faced and opportunities seized by Alfred Best and other company officials are placed within the context of national and global events. These include more obvious ones—two world wars, the stock market crash, the Great Depression, and 9/11—but also less expected events that had a significant impact on their business: the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904, the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906, the Temporary National Economic Committee of 1938, the transition to Internet-based operations and more.

Largely chronological in structure, *The Company* contains plenty of organizational headlines and sub-headlines for easy navigation, large numbers of endnotes, and a well-formulated, detailed index. Many stories are, naturally, business-like in tone but still reasonably accessible for general readers.

**“This thoughtfully produced book would likely be appreciated most by those with an interest in business or finance, although it may also appeal to readers who enjoy learning about how events in American history impacted our country’s development and evolution.”**

from another company for chewing gum who went on to enjoy a long, fruitful career at AM Best.

This thoughtfully produced book would likely be appreciated most by those with an interest in business or finance, although it may also appeal to readers who enjoy learning about how events in American history impacted our country’s development and evolution.

Also available as an ebook.

**“...the writing style is engaging, rather than dry, and delightful anecdotes about human nature are interspersed throughout.”**

At 605 pages, the length of this book (not to be read in one sitting!) may be off-putting to some readers. However, despite the occasional inclusion of mathematical ratios, debates about credit rating formulas, and risk calculations, the writing style is engaging, rather than dry, and delightful anecdotes about human nature are interspersed throughout. Readers will enjoy, for example, the story of one man who was fired

May 2021

### Clarion Review

*The Company* is a hefty company biography, showing how AM Best revolutionized the credit rating industry.

The AM Best Foundation’s *The Company* is an in-depth look at the business that Alfred M. Best started, which became a major player in its industry.

**“The Company is a hefty company biography, showing how AM Best revolutionized the credit rating industry.”**

Best entered the insurance industry at a young age. He was struck by the prevalence of shady companies and the lack of unified rules and regulations. The AM Best Company formed because of his singular drive to “provide reliable information about the financial health of insurance companies.” Every business and personal decision he made was influenced by that principle, which lead to a self-sustaining company.

Best’s ideals became so ingrained in the company, its board, and its future employees that, upon Best’s death, the company powered ahead. His successors followed his principles, continuing to usher AM Best into a spot as a global presence, responsible for major changes in how the financial and insurance business operated. Despite his absence for the bulk of its growth, the company’s directors and employees acted like Best did, and Best’s talent within the industry and keen eye for people are said to be reflected in several of their key decisions, like adopting new technologies and moving the building’s headquarters to anticipate demand.

**“AM Best’s company story is developed through the words of those who devoted their lives to it.”**

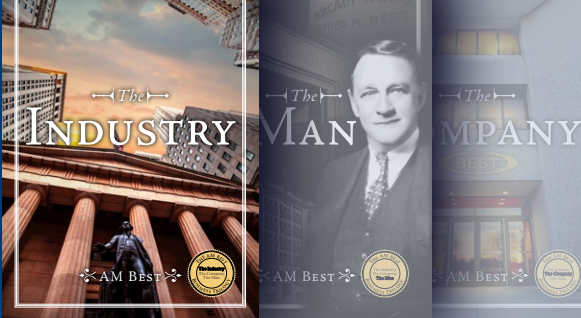
environmental changes. Throughout, the tone is dry and objective, with infrequent dramatic narrative scenes. AM Best’s company story is developed through the words of those who devoted their lives to it, including founders and leaders who worked in several departments before moving up to their management positions.

Several chapters are followed with photographs, diagrams, maps, and articles related to the time periods covered; they help to ground the narrative. Their depictions of people crucial to the company’s growth, catastrophic fires, and diagrams drawn by Best result in a deep sense of history. The most compelling materials depict Best, or record his words, as with places where he predicts the shifting financial landscape with consistent acumen. And the book’s extensive end notes result in opportunities for further research on the company, its historical eras, and the people who influenced, and were influenced by, AM Best.

With deep research and a meritorious chronological retelling of the company’s rise, *The Company* is a hefty company biography, showing how AM Best revolutionized the credit rating industry.

May 2021

# See what reviewers have to say about The AM Best Business Trilogy: *The Industry: A History of the Credit Rating Agencies*



### BlueInk Review

Today’s businesses rely on credit ratings of individuals, other businesses, and even sovereign governments to access credit worthiness of any debt these entities wish to acquire. This book, produced by insurance credit rating company AM Best, chronologically traces the history of credit rating agencies in the United States.

The introductory chapters outline the history of credit in early America, leading up to the founding of credit agencies in the early 1900s. Each of the four major companies (including AM Best) is covered. The bulk of the book focuses on the 1970s onwards, beginning with the establishment of the Nationally Recognized Statistical Ratings Organizations (NRSRO). The chapters are divided by decade, and the book ends with the passage of and initial reaction to the Dodd-Frank Act in 2010.

A history of credit rating agencies necessarily revolves around legislation pertaining to the financial industries, and economic opportunity. This book presents both subjects with sufficient depth so that readers with introductory knowledge of economics and business can understand the narrative without getting too bogged down in excessive detail. The book’s strength is that it explores what major regulations pull into their wake, and how financial industries react to changes in regulation as well as economic opportunities and threats.

The text mostly keeps jargon to a minimum. Political cartoons, photographs of politicians signing various pieces of legislation, and headlines from newspapers are included. Unfortunately, they come at the end of chapters, rather than with the relevant text.

While the narrative is well-written, a table showing the chronology of major economic events and passage of financial legislation would have been useful. Additionally, AM Best, a smaller player in the industry compared to the more dominant companies of Moody’s, S&P, and Fitch, is perhaps referenced more than necessary, a bias likely to be expected, given that it is the book’s publisher.

The book covers a specialized area of the financial industry but should be accessible for a wider audience. Readers interested in learning how credit rating agencies got to where they are today will find this a useful reference.

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May 2021

### Clarion Review

*The Industry* concerns the evolution of the credit rating industry into the present day.

AM Best’s *The Industry* chronicles the credit rating industry’s past with diligence and a wealth of insider knowledge.

Authored by the AM Best Company as part of an extensive trilogy about the sector, the firm, and the firm’s founder, this weighty and ambitious book shows how credit rating businesses developed and evolved in the United States. It starts with early settlements and the American Revolution; it is meticulous in its tracking of the industry into the present.

Covering early agencies that sought to advise investors of the credit risks of insurance companies, banks, municipalities, and emerging markets, the book is vast in its sweep. It details the development of the risk management business, including both its largest firms and its secondary companies. It contextualizes the importance of credit ratings, showing how they spread across the globe, guiding investors through economic booms and crises. Substantial background knowledge about consumer behavior, economic uncertainty, and political unrest is evinced in the punctilious narration.

The book’s chapters are subdivided to cover topics like bank loan ratings, bailouts, and junk bonds. Complex financial subjects like event risk and money market funds are explained in accessible terms. Still, some topics are rushed through; despite the book’s length, it often feels as though it’s skipping between subjects. It focuses on broad trends (shrinking sovereign debt; increased competition from South Korea; whether ratings can be bought) and the firms themselves at the expense of thoroughly covering the individual people who make industry decisions.

Battles over international markets are dramatized at length; the book lavishes emphasis on the race between credit rating agencies and the impact of congressional acts. Industry debacles, like the failure to predict the collapse of Enron, are covered as well. Still, though it works to be even-handed in its presentation, the text favors accounts of marketplace one-upsmanship over details around the industry’s shortcomings. Its later chapters devolve into recaps of news stories, cramming too much financial data into their dense paragraphs. The book’s early narrative drive dissipates as it switches to dry recountings of quarterly financial performances.

But the book includes expansive supplementary material to help with absorption, including ample end notes, an appendix, and a thorough index, while its visual features, including its black-and-white photographs, newspaper clippings, and editorial cartoons, animate its subjects, showing how industry issues were regarded at different points in history.

*The Industry* concerns the evolution of the credit rating industry into the present day.

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### Kirkus Review

A financial book offers an in-depth look at credit rating agencies in America.

This detailed history of credit ratings begins in the early days of the European settlers in America. As the book points out, most early ventures in the New World were commercial ones. It may have taken years and an eventual relaxed attitude toward usury for a sophisticated financial market to emerge, but the building blocks were there from the beginning. Fast-forward to the 19th century. Although credit (lending money) emerged as a common practice, the question became how to determine the trustworthiness of the receiver of the loan. Enter into the picture mercantile agencies. In the 1840s, these organizations formed in order to provide “lenders and investors with credit reports that detailed a company’s track record for paying its debts.” While this may seem in retrospect an obvious development, it helped lead to the world of financial products that exists today. From mortgage-backed securities to the commercial paper market and sovereign-related securities, much importance can be traced to how likely a debt is to be repaid. Today, organizations such as Moody’s and Standard & Poor’s are well known. Yet how they came to have such prominence is a long and instructive story. This series opener delivers a highly articulate look at the topic of credit and how it relates to the economy as a whole. While the volume from AM Best, a credit rating agency, is always enlightening, the finer points are often embedded in dense prose. For instance, in 1997, Standard & Poor’s “introduced its loss mitigation scoring system to assess a servicer’s effect on the performance of a

pool of residential mortgages.” Although developments such as this may be noteworthy, they can get lost in the over 700 pages of material. Nevertheless, there is much for readers to learn. Credit ratings prove to be a very serious business.

A seemingly minor rating downgrade can have extensive consequences. An inaccurate rating can lead to turbulence. Junk bonds, Enron, and that time New York City ran into severe financial problems all receive illumination here. The book ultimately offers useful information not just on credit ratings, but also on the world economy.

This lengthy work provides highly valuable insights on intertwined economic topics.

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