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EVIL GENES

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EVIL GENES

WHY ROME FELL, HITLER ROSE, ENRON FAILED,
AND MY SISTER STOLE MY MOTHER'S BOYFRIEND

BARBARA OAKLEY



Prometheus Books

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Inquiries should be addressed to
Prometheus Books
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228-2119
VOICE: 716-691-0133, ext. 210
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PROMETHEUSBOOKS.COM

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To My Family

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I would like to take this opportunity to point out that the excerpts from Carolyn's diaries and letters are virtually verbatim, with only a few slight emendations to disguise the individuals in question, for brevity's sake, or to clarify personal shorthand.

There's a glossary in the back if you've set the book down for a day or two and want to refresh your memory about something. And if you're not a science type, don't worry—I'm on your side. I've written the book so you can skim over the sections that might not be your cup of tea.

—Barbara Oakley, Rochester, Michigan,
July 8, 2007

“He is a man with tens of thousands of blind followers. It is my business to make some of those blind followers see.”

—Abraham Lincoln on the covertly proslavery,
and amoral, Stephen Douglas¹

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FOREWORD

The natural world includes millions of species that evolved to survive and reproduce in different ways. These species have long been admired for the sophistication of their bodies—the shape of the bird’s wing, the speed of the cheetah, the insect that looks exactly like a leaf. Only recently have we begun to appreciate the sophistication of their *behaviors*. For centuries and millennia, we have prided ourselves as being set apart from the rest of life by our intelligence. Yet, tune into any of the wonderful nature documentaries that are so widely available today, and you will see animals from insects to primates behaving amazingly like . . . us.

If we are set apart from the rest of life, it is primarily in our behavioral *flexibility*. We can adapt to new problems in ways that other species cannot. It is this ability that enabled our ancestors to spread over the globe, displacing other hominids and many other species along the way. Our cultures and individual behaviors are so successfully diverse that humans are more like an entire ecosystem than a single species.

Yet, our unique flexibility has an implication that is only just

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dawning upon us. If we are more like an ecosystem than a single species, *then human cultural and behavioral diversity can be understood in the same way as biological diversity*. We have not escaped evolution, as so commonly assumed. We experience evolution in hyperdrive.

Explaining human diversity from this perspective is so new that it is like the earlier days of exploration. Instead of perilous voyages on ships and encounters with strange tribes on foreign shores, there are voyages to academic disciplines that have been largely disconnected from each other throughout their histories and whose members are often as fierce toward outsiders as any “primitive” tribe. Evolutionary theory can transcend disciplinary boundaries for the study of our own species, as it already has for the biological sciences.

In *Evil Genes*, our evolutionary explorer is Barbara Oakley, as colorful a character, in her own way, as Indiana Jones. An Air Force brat, she moved ten times by the tenth grade and enlisted as a private in the army before entering college on an ROTC scholarship to study Slavic languages and literature. After four years as a communications officer in Germany, she moved to Seattle and alternated between getting a second college degree in electrical engineering and serving as a translator on Russian fishing trawlers, which led to her first book, *Hair of the Dog: Tales from Aboard a Russian Trawler*. She met her husband during a stint as a radio operator in Antarctica and settled down to a more normal life, working in industry, having two children, and inventing a popular board game called *Herd Your Horses* along the way. After her children were old enough, she earned her PhD in engineering and as a professor has won teaching awards and performed research on noninvasive pressure sensing and the effects of electrical fields upon cells. As she recounts, Oakley’s inquiry that led to *Evil Genes* was initially sparked by her own family history. If her academic pedigree appears unorthodox, the new evolutionary explorers come from every conceivable background and their discoveries must be evaluated on their own merits. I would not underestimate the abilities of an engineering professor/army officer/Russian translator/game inventor/author/wife/mother. In fact, it’s doubtful that someone

coming from a standard academic perch could have crossed so many disciplines—and perspectives—to develop such an encompassing, thought-provoking thesis.

Biological ecosystems include the full spectrum of relationships among species, from ruthless exploitation to obligate mutualisms. The human ecosystem is much the same. My own work on altruism, morality, and religion emphasizes the cooperative end of the spectrum. It is gratifying how often goodness succeeds as an evolutionary strategy. It does not always succeed, however, leaving room for the human equivalent of predators, parasites, and competitors. The more ruthless strategies of this segment of the population might succeed for the individuals and groups that employ them, at least over the short term, but at a massive cost to others and society as a whole over the long term. It is on this end of the spectrum that Barbara Oakley concentrates in *Evil Genes*.

As the humorous subtitle implies, exploitation can take place on any scale, from a single family (Barbara's sister, who stole her mother's boyfriend), to major corporations (Enron) and whole nations (the Fall of Rome and Rise of Hitler). In addition to the scientific merits of her thesis, you will be entertained by the many stories from her personal life and academic explorations. The main title, *Evil Genes*, might lead you to expect a simple scientific story about genes that directly code for evil behaviors. Nothing could be further from the truth. Oakley is remarkable for the degree to which she appreciates the complexity of the story—replete with genetic, developmental, and environmental interactions—and conveys the complexities in a way that remains entertaining and enlightening. Just as Darwin's books were read by all sectors of the population, not just other scientists, *Evil Genes* deserves to be read by everyone from high school students to the most distinguished professors. Through this book, you, too, can ponder the big questions about nature and human nature.

David Sloan Wilson

Author of *Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin's Theory
Can Change the Way We Think about Our Lives*

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PREFACE

The Wizard of Oz said loudly to Dorothy and her friends:

“I am Oz, The Great and Terrible! Pay no attention to the small man behind the curtain.”

Imagine what would have happened if Dorothy had obeyed the wizard. Would she ever have made it back to Kansas? Instead of obeying, she continued to think and observe, leading herself and her friends toward their goals.

You face a similar challenge in reading this book: you’ll have to be courageous. Go ahead, buy it; it’s important. It’s also quite entertaining.

Why is a psychiatrist writing this preface? Well, you see, although

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many people think psychiatrists can “read people’s minds,” we cannot. Instead, the principal value of a good psychotherapist is to enable people to ask dangerous questions and *tolerate the answers*, while maintaining a sense of hope. Since Dr. Oakley’s book asks some very dangerous questions, my goal in the next few paragraphs is to prepare you to tolerate the information she presents and the implications, while maintaining your own sense of hope.

First, as you read this book, you must remember that on the whole, humans are remarkably good. This is not just a wishful statement. Sophisticated brain science (the type Dr. Oakley so superbly displays in this book) shows how deeply our tendency to trust and cooperate with others is rooted in brain anatomy and function—even when such behaviors place us at direct personal risk. For example, a research team at the Center for Neural Science at New York University recently conducted a remarkable experiment examining the natural willingness many people have to trust others. They showed that this tendency is rooted in the brain circuits we use for learning through trial and error, a region called the caudate. Even when subjects were repeatedly being taken advantage of, their caudate continued to respond in a trusting manner, *if* they had been led to believe they were working with a “good” person. (If they thought they were working with someone neutral or “bad,” they figured out what was going on quickly.) This caudate response, and their trusting behavior, persisted even when the subjects *understood* the error they were making! Their brains appeared to be *wired* for cooperation. At times you may find yourself quite disturbed by the implications of this book, which describes some very opposite research results, applying to a minority of humans. So please remember: most of us are surprisingly good.

A second source of hope is especially important when “belief”—certainty in one’s knowledge, often wearing the robes of religious faith or walking the halls of politics—has so actively challenged scientific thought. This hope springs from the value of true understanding. Accurate information, on its own, is never dangerous. What we think of it, and what we do with it, can indeed be potentially very harmful.

But obtaining accurate information, and thinking clearly about it, can only be helpful to us. The more we avoid trying to understand what is really happening around us, because it makes us uncomfortable or does not fit with our existing beliefs, the worse off we will be. Instead, when we use a rigorous scientific method to ask important questions and then think clearly about the implications of the research results, we are more likely to live free and prosperous lives. This book is a testimony to that process.

Some psychiatrists could quibble about the way in which borderline, antisocial, and bipolar disorders are treated herein, but these conditions are highly related and overlapping and not inaccurately treated here. However, I suspect there will indeed be screaming about this book. “You want to label people, even before they are born!” “This is the beginning of a slippery slope, which leads to genetic screening and sterilization; this is a return to eugenics!” True, there is a great risk that we will use genetic information wrongly, driven by our “us versus them” tendencies, our inclination to stereotype people who are not like us and make them “enemies.” You can almost see it coming: “evil genes” will be thought to be more common among groups whom we are inclined to hate and used as a justification for striking out at such peoples. As you know, this kind of thinking has even led to efforts to completely eradicate some ethnic groups. And yet, as Dr. Oakley shows in this book, such societal insanity is more likely when the leaders themselves possess antisocial traits. Perhaps the world will be safer if we watch for these traits among leaders and anticipate their behaviors (although trying to solve that problem by invading their country has not recently seemed to be the best way to approach things, one might argue).

We should not fear this book. We should fear the implications of what Dr. Oakley describes, but the more we understand about “bad behaviors,” the better equipped we will be to deal with them. Therefore you will find it useful, as well as important, to read all the way through this book. Fortunately, Dr. Oakley has written it as a combination of personal narrative and science story. The result is not unlike

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The Wizard of Oz: an entertaining story in which one encounters some very nasty characters. Remember to take with you the Lion and the Tin Man; that is, remember that *most* humans are remarkably kind and generous and brave. One simply has to learn one's way around the kingdom, with eyes wide open.

Jim Phelps, MD

Author of *Why Am I Still Depressed?:
Recognizing and Managing the Ups and Downs
of Bipolar II and Soft Bipolar Disorder*

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INTRODUCTION

“My mother’s obsession with the *good* scissors always scared me a bit. It implied that somewhere in the house there lurked: the evil scissors.”
—Tony Martin, *The Late Show*

“**B**ack to the real world after panic attack. Must ease Jack out. Can’t tolerate the smoke or the late night ‘sloppies.’
He is still a good friend to have.”

There they are: Carolyn’s last written words, directly from the diary found lying on her bed stand after her death. Words mattered to Carolyn. Did she suspect what was about to happen?

I knew who Jack*—the “good friend”—was. He and my sister Carolyn had lived together on and off for years, beginning soon after Carolyn had decided to move up from southern California to Sequim, Washington. Sequim rhymes with “swim.” As the T-shirt says: “Sink or Swim in Sunny Sequim.”

*Names and identifying details of Carolyn’s friends and acquaintances have been changed, as have similar details of several other individuals for the sake of privacy.

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Sequim is an oddly bipolar town, crouched in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains. Mount Olympus, less than thirty miles west near the coast, gets nearly seventeen *feet* of rain a year. But by the time the air travels over the mountains to Sequim, a paltry seventeen inches a year is all that's left—not much more than what Tucson gets. The same air then continues over Puget Sound, picking up moisture again to drizzle up to a yard a year in Seattle. Wedged between two mother lodes of rain, Sequim is actually a postage stamp desert weirdly laced with irrigation ditches, streams, and rivers, all of which funnel rain-water and snowmelt from the Olympic Mountains down toward the sea. Living in Sequim is like living in a vortex. You can look up nearly every day and see bright blue skies overhead. But often as not, the town is surrounded by a ring of ominous storm clouds, kept at bay as if by some awesome force.

Retirees often move to Sequim, attracted by the unusual juxtaposition of mountains, sea, sunshine, and mild winters. They build huge homes on bluffs and hillsides overlooking the ocean—virtual villas with lovely gardens and masses of windows to take in the scenic vista. But after a year or so, some retirees discover that their chirpy realtor had inflated the average temperatures for the area by ten degrees. Newcomers expecting the climate of Tucson often find temperatures closer to those of Juneau. It's never exactly cold in Sequim, but it's never exactly warm, either. Year-old villas are often for sale in Sequim.

Both my parents were living separately in Sequim, each for different reasons, at the time my sister moved to town. My father reveled in the outdoors. After being a veterinarian for thirty years, he spent his retirement days happily felling trees in the National Forest and hauling them home to peel and insert in his ever-growing complex of log structures: log cabin, log storage shed, log garage, log guesthouse, log pantry buildings, log woodsheds, log sauna, log bridges, log greenhouse, and even, for reasons only he could explain, a three-story log water tower with a thousand-gallon tank and a panoramic view of the jutting peaks of the Olympics. The entire complex was nestled in a private forest of soaring Douglas firs, graceful hemlock, and spidery madrone.

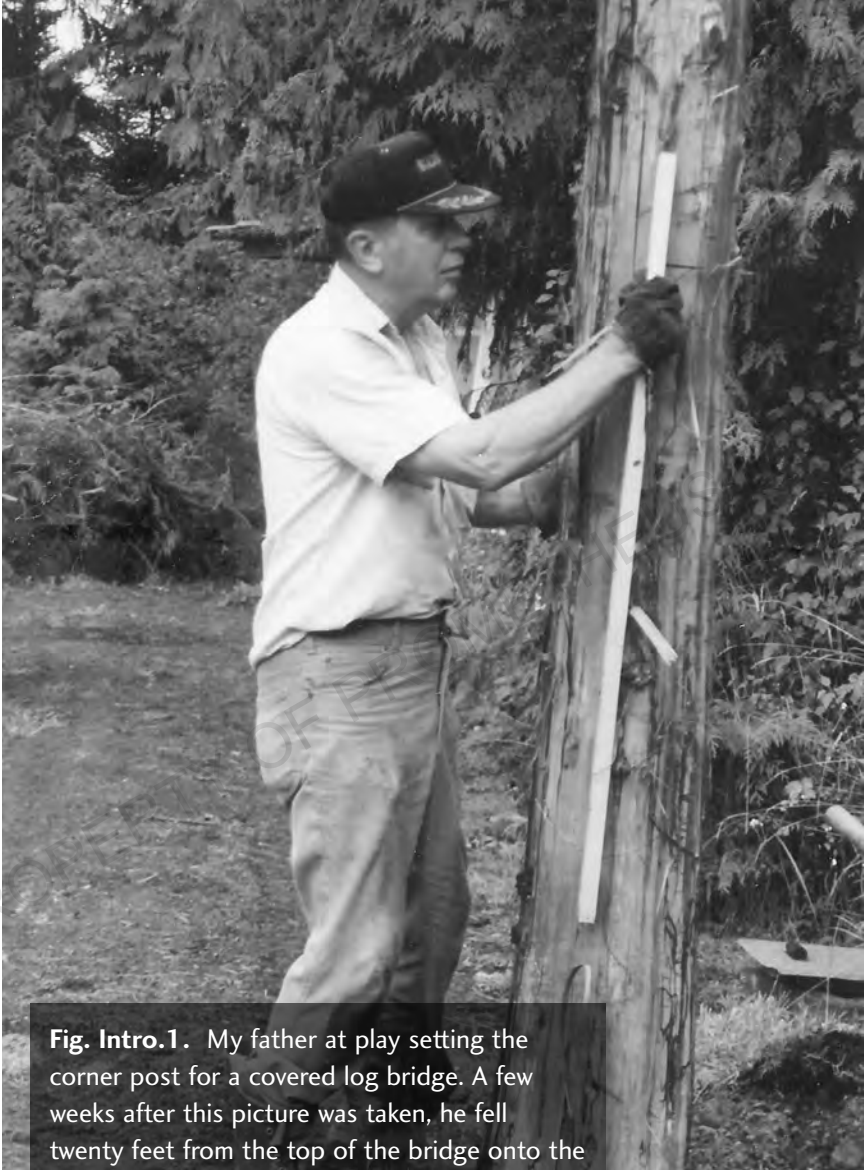


Fig. Intro.1. My father at play setting the corner post for a covered log bridge. A few weeks after this picture was taken, he fell twenty feet from the top of the bridge onto the stone creek bed. Swelling from the resulting concussion, egged on by his genetic predisposition, led to the peculiar gene-environment mix that probably caused his death.

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My mother, on the other hand, reveled only in my father, which was a little creepy, all things considered. Long after their divorce, she had tracked him down and moved about three miles away to a small apartment near Sequim's slightly bedraggled downtown, across the street from a dusty field of quackgrass, wild barley, and a gaggle of Garry oaks. Despite the proximity to my father, it took years before my mother finally realized that merely extricating herself from alcohol and acting nice wouldn't resurrect her ruptured thirty-year marriage. So she lived a lonely life serving as a hostess in a Mexican restaurant. Gradually, as the owners realized her skills, she became the restaurant's bookkeeper and, ultimately, a manager.

Carolyn, like my mother, had moved to Sequim for a reason.

About a decade after my parents' divorce, my mother had begun dating a wealthy emphysemic—a wheezy fellow named Ted, who planned to take her and his oxygen tanks on an extensive trip through Europe. Ted and his breathing apparatus were perhaps no great catch, but he was good company for my mother, as she probably was for him. And in all the years of our family's moves around the United States, my mother had never before been overseas. I remember listening to her talk about her upcoming trip to Europe with Ted, her breath coming quick and eyes sparkling as she wondered about the food in France—was it as good as they say?—the cathedrals, and even the width of the streets. It was the first time in years I'd seen her show any real animation or enthusiasm.

When I saw my mother again several months later, rather than discussing baguettes and béchamel, she told me how her Mexican restaurant made vegetables look greener by taking the lid off the steaming pot. She was mum about her social life, so only much later did I find out the particulars. Apparently, about a month before departure, my mother had mentioned her pending European adventure during a rare, probing telephone call from Carolyn. A few days after the phone call, Carolyn had pulled up her Southern California stakes and abruptly moved to Sequim. One leg still limp from her childhood bout with polio, my sister tucked herself and her crutches up beside the less-

than-active Ted while my mother pitched in to get her situated in her new apartment. Carolyn had a dazzling knowledge of French food and wine. She paused frequently in her connoisseur's conversation—each pause just long enough to catch Ted's eye.

Soon Carolyn was comfortably ensconced beside Ted's oxygen bottle on a flight to Paris. Just another underhanded episode in a lifetime of such episodes. My mother never did get to see Europe.

THE SUCCESSFULLY SINISTER

Prompted by my sister, even as a child I used to wonder about subtly nasty characters—the ones who get really close to you so the knife goes deeper. I read about the alluring but sometimes sinister wives and concubines of the Roman emperors and Ottoman sultans. Were these women perhaps like my sister? I learned of the evil machinations of Count Romulus, some two thousand years ago in North Africa; his legendarily malevolent nature has passed down to modern culture in the naming of *Star Trek* Romulans. I shivered over stories of China's dowager empress Cixi, famed for her beauty, charm, love of power, and utter ruthlessness.¹ She was accused of killing her own grandchild to retain her hold on the throne—her narrow-minded policies undoubtedly set the stage for China's gruesome self-immolation during the twentieth century. Like tens of thousands of other children my age, I read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and wondered at how the horrific policies of a single demented leader could resonate in an echo chamber of banal evildoers and result in the deaths of millions.

As I grew older, I noticed literature, movies, TV shows, video games, and comics that brimmed with quirky, evil antagonists: Shakespeare's sinister Iago; *David Copperfield*'s servile Uriah Heep; *The Lovely Bones*' pitiful serial killer, George Harvey; Glenn Close's psychotic book editor Alex in *Fatal Attraction*; *Silence of the Lambs*' Hannibal Lector; Nurse Ratched of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*; Captain Hook; manga's twisted gang girl leader Mitsuko Souma;

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Batman's Joker; Seinfeld's Soup Nazi. Entertainment, it seemed, could hardly be entertainment without a bad guy (or gal) smiling through the duplicity.

Real life, of course, is much worse. Hitler, Mussolini, Pol Pot, Nicolae Ceausescu, Rafael Trujillo, Slobodan Milosevic, Anastasio Somoza, Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin—the twentieth century's list of monstrous leaders grows longer the more you look. Altogether these bloody despots were responsible for policies that caused the murders of well over one hundred and fifty million people during the twentieth century alone—that's about fifteen hundred families for each word in this book.

And each of these ruthless dictators shared a similar devious expertise in manipulation and control. The subtly deceitful Stalin, for example, was prone to tricks such as having newly promoted field marshal Grigory Kulik entertained in the office above the cell where the marshal's wife, the beautiful Countess Kira, mother of an eight-year-old daughter, was being tortured after having been kidnapped on her way to the dentist. This was Stalin's way of ensuring that his people toed the line. (One month later, the countess was coldly executed with a bullet in the head; Kulik himself was quietly shot a decade later.) Millions died during Stalin's grisly purges, which assigned quotas for executions by the thousands; millions more died during his enforced starvation policies in the Ukraine.*2

In China, Mao followed Stalin's lead. Rather than sending hapless millions to the gulags to suffer and—if they were lucky—die, Mao turned all of China into an über-gulag. Using gullible Western writers, Mao created a legend for himself as a Chinese Robin Hood who won the respect of all those he led. The reality was that he ruled by savage

*Robert Conquest's monumental work on Stalinist horrors, *The Great Terror*, earned enormous animosity upon its initial release in 1968—its graphic descriptions of the horrors perpetrated in the Soviet Union under Stalin's direction were felt by many to be false in virtually every particular. The opening of the Soviet archives and later verification by a host of Russian historians not only supported Conquest's findings, but showed the Stalin's "model state" had been even worse than Conquest had originally outlined. When *The Great Terror* was re-released in a post-glasnost 1992 edition, Conquest was asked if he would like to give it a new title. His terse response was: "How about, *I Told You So, You Fucking Fools*."

caprice, willful incompetence, and messianic egotism. Ultimately, he was responsible for the deaths of over seventy million Chinese during peacetime alone. Mao also set the example for Pol Pot, who espoused a radically revised Maoism that resulted in the “killing fields” that depopulated much of Cambodia.

When I read accounts of these tyrants, I shuddered. But something always baffled me, just as it baffled all of the tyrants’ careful biographers and their readers, and just as it must have baffled those victims cognizant enough to know the ultimate source of their needless suffering. How did these seeming psychopaths get to the top? Shouldn’t people have noticed these tyrants were a little, well, odd before they ascended to power? How could they fool and manipulate people so easily? And, in this new era where dictators like Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein are caught and tried rather than butchered on the spot, it’s disconcerting to watch these caged mini-Hitlers face the overwhelming evidence of their atrocities and—*poof*—pretend it didn’t happen, or wasn’t that serious, or was someone else’s fault. I can’t help but wonder, what is going on in these people’s minds?

Compared to people like Mao, Stalin, and Milosevic, my sister’s many devious manipulations and deceits were small potatoes indeed. But for my parents and the many people she affected through her mysteriously foreshortened life, the pain of her purposefully malign actions was real and devastating. I thought a lot about my sister as I grew older and learned more about her ability to deceive. I thought about her wit, her intelligence, and her uncanny ability to charm.

While working as a Russian translator on Soviet trawlers during the cold war of the early 1980s, I studied the avuncular picture of “Uncle Joe” Stalin on the captain’s wall. I knew all about Stalin’s loathsome policies and personality, yet I still couldn’t help but speculate—would I have known what Stalin was really like if I’d naively met him at his wedding cake-shaped mansion, or at a well-lubricated

*Psychopaths might best be described as “predators who use charm, manipulation, intimidation, and violence to control others and to satisfy their own selfish needs. Lacking in conscience and in feelings for others, they cold-bloodedly take what they want and do as they please, violating social norms and expectations without the slightest sense of guilt or regret.”

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Kremlin dinner party? After all, even Winston Churchill, a man who clearly had Hitler's number, was fooled. I read with interest how Churchill was charmed and dazzled by Stalin, "that great man," with whom he shared cheerful drinking bouts and similar paternal adoration of their redheaded daughters.⁴ Stalin was a gifted organizer who was capable of working prodigious hours. But, as Stalin's most perspicacious biographer, Simon Sebag Montefiore, discovered, the "archives confirm that his real genius was something different—and surprising: 'he could charm people.' He was what is now known as a 'people person.' While incapable of true empathy on the one hand, he was a master of friendships on the other. He constantly lost his temper, but when he set his mind to charming a man, he was irresistible."⁵

Near the little town of Rochester, Michigan, not far from Detroit, where I now live with my family, I often drive by the site of the old Machus Red Fox Restaurant—the last place Jimmy Hoffa was seen alive. Hoffa was the dark mastermind who created an enduring image of Teamsters as bullies who achieved the same thuggish levels as their managerial opponents; Hoffa's unresolved disappearance that lazy summer day in 1975 fixed a stain on his legacy that will never be erased.

What is it about some men that makes them willing to sign a pact with the devil?

At universities, I've watched the machinations and manipulations of a small pool of academicians—strange, deeply power-hungry professors who terrorize students and drive the staff insane but who earn kid-glove treatment from administrations. Scanning the news, I read about the widespread pedophilia of the Catholic Church and how it was condoned by leaders who set the perpetrating clergy loose again and again to molest tens of thousands of children. I watched as Enron became a buzzword for executive skullduggery, and read of the horrific private lives of business executives like Chainsaw Al Dunlap, who liked to liven things up by telling his soon-to-be ex-wife how he liked to torture children.⁶ One image consultant Dunlap tried to hire noted: "He was the most unpleasant, personally repulsive businessman I ever met in my life."⁷

“There are two ways to rise to the top,” says my business executive husband, with his hypersensitive bullshit detector. “One is to be the cream. The other is to be the scum.”

Ever since the early fascination with my sister’s many devious successes, it is the scum who have long held my interest.

SLEUTHING WITH THE SCIENCES

My early engineering studies led in a spiraling path toward research in bioengineering—a relatively new discipline that integrates biology and medicine with engineering to solve problems related to living systems. Indeed, the scope of bioengineering is immense, covering many disciplines. One such discipline is genomics, which involves figuring out exactly how the molecular building blocks of DNA have been stacked to build genes, what each gene does, as well as where each gene is placed among an organism’s chromosomes. Understanding how both normal and rogue genes work can lead to improved detection, diagnosis, and treatment of disease—potentially including the intractable conditions underpinning personality disorders. A related field is proteomics—a sort of molecular geography describing the location, interactions, structure, and function of proteins. Advances in proteomics have encompassed discoveries about a variety of cellular processes, including those crucial for understanding the cascade of molecular relay systems underlying human thought and emotion. Bioengineering also explores imaging and image processing that allow us to “see” inside the human body. And bioengineering involves understanding the warp and woof of neural structures in human beings, allowing us to build devices that can help the paralyzed to walk, the deaf to hear, and the blind to see.

How do you apply all this knowledge to the study of sinister people? How would you begin a search of the literature for people who have tried? What keywords would you even use to do a search?

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<Manipulative>?

<Duplicitous>?

<Evil>?

Medline, a standard medical search engine, doesn't provide any relevant answers.

How about <Machiavellian>? It means charming on the surface, a genius at sucking up to power, but capable of mind-boggling acts of deceit for control or personal gain.

Machiavellian, in fact, hits the jackpot for keywords. It turns out to describe an entire field of study—one that takes the ideas of Renaissance Florentine statesman Niccolo Machiavelli, author of *The Prince*, and builds them into a sweeping—and often unsavory—portrait of humankind.

A REVOLUTION IN RESEARCH

Over the years, I've learned that much of what's known from psychological, psychiatric, and neuroscientific studies related to Machiavellians or deceitful, manipulative people isn't easily accessible. Often, it's because the findings are relatively new—they haven't had time to chew their way through academic leather straps and into the public domain. Occasionally, it is because the implications of the research findings are controversial and in conflict with other long-held beliefs. The public sometimes catches glimpses of important study results—a hint of information about offbeat neural images related to psychopaths in this science magazine, another tidbit about the effects of genes on impulsivity in that newspaper article. It's as if all the growing pieces of information about the “successfully sinister” (which I use as a synonym for *Machiavellian*), are lying about disassembled. These pieces are waiting for someone to tie them together to hold up a new model to the light—one that goes far beyond the crude label of psychopath. This new model contains surprises—among them, that evil may be unavoidable and that it can even have an unexpectedly good flip side.

Researching the topic as the years have gone by, I've also found intriguing oddities. Hitler, for example, has been diagnosed with dozens of different disorders, including narcissistic, borderline, and antisocial personality disorders; schizophrenia; psychopathy; syphilis; encephalitis; paranoia; malignant narcissism; moral cretinism; Parkinson's disease; hubris-nemesis complex; "enfeebled and unformed self"; "destructive and paranoid prophet"; "a constitutional left-side weakness that allowed his right cerebral hemisphere to exert a strong influence on his thought and behavior"; and, believe it or not, "sibling rivalry."⁸ On the other hand, sifting carefully through the two main psychology databases, I find no articles at all about Pol Pot, who was responsible for the deaths of some two million Cambodians—perhaps a quarter of the Cambodian population. Current research on malevolent dictators, I discover, consists of a hodgepodge of contradictory and missing studies.

I type the subject term for one of the most commonly studied psychiatric conditions, "antisocial personality disorder," into Medline, one of the world's most comprehensive sources of life sciences and biomedical bibliographic information. It pops up, virtually instantaneously, with 5,494 hits. The subject "borderline personality disorder" gets 3,090 hits—meaningful hits, including hundreds of medical imaging studies, genetic studies, drug studies, and so on. On the other hand, if I type in *malignant narcissism*—a term used by world-class psychiatrists like Otto Kernberg and Jerrold Post, along with hundreds of thousands of Googled others, to describe the kind of malevolent, yet high-functioning people I'm researching—I get nothing. Zero hits. *No medical studies whatsoever.*⁹

It is unsettling to discover this kind of omission—like hearing that the oncologist about to operate on your father's cancerous liver actually has a fake degree from a diploma mill. Where's the science here?

The limited interaction between biology and psychology regarding the study of malevolent but high-achieving individuals is evident in the recent article on dictators "Why Tyrants Go Too Far: Malignant Narcissism and Absolute Power" in the prestigious journal *Political*

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Psychology. Key neurological factors such as neurotransmitters, the hippocampus, or amygdala—all of which have been profoundly implicated in the kind of impulsive, antisocial behavior often seen in despots—are not even mentioned.¹⁰

It turns out, however, that if you're willing to peer directly into the witches' cauldron of research results, this first decade of the new millennium is an extraordinarily lucky time to be focusing on Machiavelianism. Neuroimaging has progressed well past the point of simply determining the shape and structure of the human brain—now we can watch the molecules of emotion scurry about the cells as they complete their neurological chores. Neuroinformatics is allowing researchers to access libraries of data about thousands of different brains to see what is usual and what is unusual. Brain atlases—images of what a normal functioning brain looks like—are providing detailed roadmaps to help guide research efforts.

Underlying the images we see of the brain's structure and functioning are the genes that help serve as neural operating instructions. Since the completion of the human genome project in 2003, researchers have dived even deeper to understand not only where genes are located on the human chromosomal framework but also how those genes are structured and what they do. Microarray chips give indications about which genes are turned on or off at any given time. This provides information crucial for understanding how genes and proteins communicate within and between cells. The upshot of all this? The entire field of biology is now undergoing a genome-based revolution.

A new field is that of systems biology, the “science of everything”—everything living, at least. This new discipline looks at the piecemeal information that has been found related to genes and knits it together with other research to form a big picture describing how cells signal each other and how neurons interconnect. Ultimately, this helps us to understand how slight molecular and genetic differences can result in dramatic changes, not only in how a person looks, but in his or her temperament. This, then, is where we need to look to ulti-

mately understand Machiavellian—unscrupulous, self-serving, often deeply malign—behavior.

Perhaps surprisingly, the more I've learned about Machiavellians, the more I've discovered how fascinated people in general are by the latest scientific breakthroughs in studying them. After all, the social achievements of clearly disturbed individuals such as rapacious pedophile priest John Geoghan, quintessentially greedy Enron CFO Andrew Fastow, or sadistic leaders such as Saddam Hussein can be mystifying. Even more mystifying are the occasional successes of malign individuals who people know personally: colleagues, supervisors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, pastors, or elected officials. Surprisingly often, a successfully malign example turns out to be a family member whose sinister characteristics, often confusingly combined with more lovable traits, have kept the family walking on eggshells for years.

And once we start wondering about the successfully sinister, more questions abound. Do hereditary aristocracies tend to attract those, like Princess Diana, with certain dysfunctional personality traits? Could a propensity for these traits be passed down from generation to generation, leading to the decay of empires? What happens when the successfully sinister take a prominent role in religions? Are Machiavellians skilled at using neurologically based tricks to disable the thinking of those who might oppose them? Should the successfully sinister be despised for what they do to others? Or, like sharks, should they be warily respected for the perversely successful roles they play?

PUTTING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER

This book describes my own attempt to outline results from various fields of research that describe why seemingly evil people exist and how they can function in and even rise to the top of many types of social structures, including government, religion, academia, industry, the everyday workplace, and the ordinary family. The book also explores interesting sociological patterns related to the rise of these

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malign individuals—patterns that can be observed in social structures as different from one another as Enron, Chairman Mao’s China, and the Roman Empire.

For me, a touchstone of this research has always been my sister Carolyn and her life, so I share some of that knowledge. This includes insights gleaned from Carolyn’s life story, as well as from her letters and diaries. Although some might expect this book to contain only a traditional objective translation of research findings, I think that just looking at academic papers can result in losing sight of the human picture of what this research means in our lives. And so I describe not only my sister and her relationship with others but additional instructive experiences—a bit of late-night partying on Soviet trawlers; the compulsive collecting of obscure teapots in the far corners of China; drama in a German *kaserne*.

As background for this book, I’ve interviewed and communicated with psychologists, psychiatrists, imaging specialists, geneticists, immunologists, biologists, lawyers, historians, philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists, and have read extensively in the research literature of many of these fields. I’ve tried to distill these multifaceted findings and also give some sense of the struggle dedicated researchers have faced as they’ve tried to find a new framework for what was previously unknown about the successful sinister people among us.

My doctoral training in systems engineering—a unique field of study that provides training in understanding the big picture patterns of diverse disciplines—provides a handy vantage point. It’s far enough from any of the schools of thought I’m looking at to help keep me from being blinded by the unwitting side effects of each school’s perspective.¹¹ Yet this training underlies many of the cutting-edge techniques used now for medical imaging and genomics—techniques that are providing stunning revelations about how genes are organized and how our brains work. By putting hard-won insights gleaned by researchers in the physical and biological sciences together with extraordinary related results from the social sciences, I hope to provide a look at sinister people with a fresh perspective.

After all, the successfully sinister affect virtually everyone sooner or later. We obsess about trying to reach closure about hurts we've experienced, even if our closure is only vicarious. We have a gut-level need, even in fiction, to see slimy, smiling antagonists get what they deserve. It's why we can't help but follow newspaper, Internet, and— heaven help us—even *National Enquirer* articles about the latest senator caught in a payoff scandal or the most recent holier-than-thou televangelist caught in bed with a prostitute.

But if there's one thing we are even more fascinated with, it's wanting to know *why*. Why would anyone spread such malicious gossip? Why would anyone ever use a publicly owned company as a private piggy bank? Why would anyone knowingly starve millions of his own people? Psychology, with explanations founded on “defense mechanisms,” “countertransference,” and “acting out,” can go only so far. Neuroscience is fleshing out the field nicely, but unfortunately, popular hard science-based books about the successfully sinister are rarer than frequent flyer mile seats to Hawaii at Christmas. It appears we'll have some time to wait before we start seeing popular books with titles like *He Really Is Driving You Crazy: Understanding Theta Wave Activity*, or *Bitch: The Science behind the Savagery*.

But genetics is as important as neuroscience in understanding the successfully sinister. Groundbreaking books such as Judith Rich Harris's *The Nurture Assumption* and Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate* have served as fulcrums to help swing researchers off their centuries-long love affair with the idea that people are naturally good.¹² Under this well-intentioned ideology, “evil” people were believed to be created and shaped solely by their environment. The advantage of this belief is that it gives researchers the comfort of thinking that humans have direct control over evil—that by somehow reengineering the social environment, human evil can be eliminated. The disadvantage of this belief is that it is wrong—there are rafts of studies supporting the conclusion that human personalities are shaped as much by their genes as by their environment. But despite the overwhelming evidence, many academicians today have held so

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close the belief that people are naturally noble creatures who go astray only because of poor early nurturing that it is sometimes difficult for them to come to grips with the implications of modern research findings.* All of this has meant that over the last decade, ever since neuroscience hit its stride and the human genome has been sequenced, there has been a gap in communicating the implications of scientific findings about the successfully sinister. People have been left largely unaware of how science is beginning to provide answers to some of their most compelling questions: Why are there evil people, and why are they sometimes so successful?

Evil Genes was written to help answer those questions.

*One brilliant psychology professor I know provided feedback after she had read the first few chapters of an early draft of this manuscript. The paraphrased essence of her thoughts was: Even if you're right about genes influencing behavior, it's impossible to change, so what good can come of telling people about it? While you cannot control the whole environment, you can put people on notice with regard to their behavior.

In responding, I kept myself from pointing out the obvious ineffectiveness of, for example, putting career criminals on notice about their behavior. Instead, I pointed out that good parents who receive an unlucky shake of the genetic dice and happen to have a psychopathic child might want to hear that their child's behavior isn't directly their fault. Certainly mothers of autistic children, told for decades that their child's autism was directly due to their cold parenting style, have benefited from recent research revealing the strong genetic component involved in the disorder.

But my friend didn't respond to my comments—I'd already lost her. Like a fundamentalist discovering she'd been roped into reading an evolutionary screed, she read no further.