



Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend

By Barbara Oakley

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Have you ever heard of a person who left you wondering, "How could someone be so twisted? So evil?" Prompted by clues in her sister's diary after her mysterious death, author Barbara Oakley takes the reader inside the head of the kinds of malevolent people you know, perhaps all too well, but could never understand.

Starting with psychology as a frame of reference, Oakley uses cutting-edge images of the working brain to provide startling support for the idea that "evil" people act the way they do mainly as the result of a dysfunction. In fact, some deceitful, manipulative, and even sadistic behavior appears to be programmed genetically—suggesting that some people really are born to be bad.

Oakley links the latest findings of molecular research to a wide array of seemingly unrelated historical and current phenomena, from the harems of the Ottomans and the chummy jokes of "Uncle Joe" Stalin, to the remarkable memory of investor Warren Buffet. Throughout, she never loses sight of the personal cost of evil genes as she unravels the mystery surrounding her sister's enigmatic life—and death.

Evil Genes is a tour-de-force of popular science writing that brilliantly melds scientific research with intriguing family history and puts both a human and scientific face to evil.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Borne out of a quest to understand her sister Carolyn's lifelong sinister behavior (which, systems engineer Oakley suggests, may have been compounded by childhood polio), the author sets out on an exploration of evil, or Machiavellian, individuals. Drawing on the advances in brain imaging that have illuminated the relationship of emotions, genetics and the brain (with accompanying imaging scans), Oakley collects detailed case histories of famed evil geniuses such as Slobodan Milosevic and Mao Zedong, interspersed with a memoir of Carolyn's life. Oakley posits that they all had borderline personality disorder or antisocial personality disorder, a claim she supports with evidence from scientists' genetic and neurological research. All the people she considers, Oakley notes, are charming on the surface but capable of deeply malign behavior (traits similar to those found in some personality disorders), and her analysis attributes these traits to narcissism combined with cognitive and emotional disturbances that lead them to believe they are behaving in a genuinely altruistic way. Disturbing, for sure, but with her own personal story informing her study, Oakley offers an accessible account of a group of psychiatric disorders and those affected by them.

Illus. (Oct.)

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Review

"A fascinating scientific and personal exploration of the roots of evil, filled with human insight and telling detail."

--Steven Pinker, Johnstone Professor, Harvard University, and author of The Language Instinct, How the Mind Works, and The Stuff of Thought

"'Scientific non-fiction' and 'page turner' aren't two phrases I'd expect in the same sentence, but for the remarkable Evil Genes, they fit."

--William A. Wulf, President Emeritus, National Academy of Engineering

From the Publisher

Foreword by David Sloan Wilson, author of "Evolution for Everyone."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Herman Ovalle:

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Maria Smith:

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