

THE GENIUS IN ALL OF US: NEW INSIGHTS INTO GENETICS, TALENT, AND IQ BY DAVID SHENK

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The Genius in All of Us

Why Everything
You've Been Told
About Genetics,
Talent, and IQ
Is Wrong



by the author of *The Forgetting*

David Shenk

Read by Mark Deakins
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Amazon.com Review

Louann Brizendine Reviews *The Genius In All of Us*

Louann Brizendine, M.D., author of *The Female Brain* and *The Male Brain*, is a diplomat of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and the National Board of Medical Examiners, and is clinical professor of psychiatry at UCSF. She is founder and director of the Women's Mood and Hormone Clinic and the Teen Girl Mood and Hormone Clinic. After receiving her medical degree from Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, she completed an internship in medicine and neurology at Harvard Medical School's Brigham and Women's Hospital, and a residency in psychiatry at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center of Harvard Medical School. She sits on the boards of many prestigious peer reviewed journals and is the recipient of numerous honors and awards. Read Brizendine's guest review of *The Genius In All of Us*:

In *The Genius in All of Us* Shenk beautifully explains why the nature-nurture debate is dead. It is not just the genes we are born with, but how we are raised and what opportunities are open to us that determine how smart we will become. Nurture and experience reshape our genes, and thus our brain. Shenk argues that the idea we are either born with genius or talent, or we aren't, is simply untrue. The notion that relentless, deliberate practice changes the brain and thus our abilities has been undervalued over the past 30 years in favor of the concept of "innate giftedness." Practice, practice, practice (some say 10,000 hours or more) is what it takes. Shenk argues that it is just some fantasy that effortless, gifted genius is born and not made. He marshals evidence to show that genetic factors do not trump environmental factors but rather work in concert with them. Shenk notes that by the sweat of our brow we can train ourselves to be successful--even if we are born with only average genetic talent. Scientists know that how we are raised and how we are trained affects the expression of our genes. If you think you've reached your talent limit, think again, Shenk says. It's not just in your genes, he says, but in the intensity of your motivation. Ambition, persistence, and self-discipline are not just products of genes, but can be shaped by nurture and environment. Certainly it is important to have good genes, but that determines at most only 50 percent of your talent. He underscores the point that intelligence is made up of the skills that a person has developed--with an emphasis on "developed"--through hard work. Encouraging ourselves and our children to work hard requires being surrounded by others also

wanting to achieve striving for excellence. Moreover, Shenk gives the hopeful message not just for kids, but also for adults. Happily for us, the human brain remains plastic, changeable and trainable well into old age. So no matter how old you are, if you'd like to be smarter--get to work! --Louann Brizendine

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(Photo © Alexandra Beers)

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"David Shenk freshens and transforms a familiar subject to reveal all the interacting forces and factors that make us who we are. Development is a tricky business and Shenk understands this. By focusing his considerable writing talents on this terribly important topic, he has provided parents, policymakers, and educators with a book that will help them cut through the noise and make sense of every child's development."

-- MARK. S. BLUMBERG, Ph.D., F. Wendell Miller Professor of Psychology, University of Iowa; editor-in-chief, *Behavioral Neuroscience*; and author, *Freaks of Nature: What Anomalies Tell Us about Development and Evolution*

"The importance of David Shenk's book is that he has made accessible to a wide audience the advances in the understanding of how each person develops. I congratulate him." -- SIR PATRICK BATESON, FRS, Emeritus Professor of Ethology, Cambridge University; former Biological Secretary of the Royal Society (UK); and co-author, *Design For A Life: How Behaviour Develops*

From the Hardcover edition.

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With irresistibly persuasive vigor, David Shenk debunks the long-standing notion of genetic “giftedness,” and presents dazzling new scientific research showing how greatness is in the reach of every individual.

DNA does not make us who we are. “Forget everything you think you know about genes, talent, and intelligence,” he writes. “In recent years, a mountain of scientific evidence has emerged suggesting a completely new paradigm: not talent scarcity, but latent talent abundance.”

Integrating cutting-edge research from a wide swath of disciplines—cognitive science, genetics, biology, child development—Shenk offers a highly optimistic new view of human potential. The problem isn't our inadequate genetic assets, but our inability, so far, to tap into what we already have. IQ testing and widespread acceptance of “innate” abilities have created an unnecessarily pessimistic view of humanity—and fostered much misdirected public policy, especially in education.

The truth is much more exciting. Genes are not a “blueprint” that bless some with greatness and doom most of us to mediocrity or worse. Rather our individual destinies are a product of the complex interplay between genes and outside stimuli—a dynamic that we, as people and as parents, can influence.

This is a revolutionary and optimistic message. We are not prisoners of our DNA. We all have the potential for greatness.

From the Hardcover edition.

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"David Shenk freshens and transforms a familiar subject to reveal all the interacting forces and factors that make us who we are. Development is a tricky business and Shenk understands this. By focusing his considerable writing talents on this terribly important topic, he has provided parents, policymakers, and educators with a book that will help them cut through the noise and make sense of every child's

development."

-- MARK. S. BLUMBERG, Ph.D., F. Wendell Miller Professor of Psychology, University of Iowa; editor-in-chief, Behavioral Neuroscience; and author, Freaks of Nature: What Anomalies Tell Us about Development and Evolution

"The importance of David Shenk's book is that he has made accessible to a wide audience the advances in the understanding of how each person develops. I congratulate him." -- SIR PATRICK BATESON, FRS, Emeritus Professor of Ethology, Cambridge University; former Biological Secretary of the Royal Society (UK); and co-author, Design For A Life: How Behaviour Develops

From the Hardcover edition.

Most helpful customer reviews

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Love the Content; Not fond of the Format

By DoubleM

Content and Context: David Shenk's *The Genius in All of Us* gives the reader the (compelling) opportunity to act upon Socrates' quote "The unexamined life is not worth living" by examining his/her own life and the lives of his/her parents and children. In non-scientific language Shenk presents interesting and informative data which lead the reader into arenas of self-exploration of "how did I become who I am?" Scientists admit they do not know all the answers, but do present theories which are plausible and those ingesting their "facts" are allowed to determine their own interpretation.

Format and Structure: The paperback edition is 348 pages, the first 166 pages contain *The Argument*; pages 167 through 348 contain *The Evidence* (Chapter Notes). In the first part of the book, Shenk used five footnotes, which appeared in the good old-fashioned way: on the same page of the reference. However, nowhere in the body of the work is there a reference to the Chapter Notes. Only after I finished the main content did I realize the latter portion of the book was as informative as the former, without reference thereto. Perhaps I missed something when I earned my Masters in English, only having been required to follow APA or MLA protocols (neither of which did I entirely agree with). Reading this book would have been more enjoyable had the two (split) portions been integrated/collated so that the details of *The Argument* and *The Evidence* could have been read and absorbed together.

Recommendation: Notwithstanding the above comment, I really enjoyed this book and will keep it for reference as I continue to expand my mind which is composed of GxE.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

How and why "genetic influence itself is not predetermined, but [rather] an ongoing process"

By Robert Morris

Whereas in Denise Shekerjian's book, *Uncommon Genius*, the focus is on 40 recipients of the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship grant (often referred to as "the genius grant"), David Shenk's focus is on how and why, "dynamic development," greatness of achievement "is something to which any kid - of any age can [and should] aspire." If not in all of us, there is potential genius in most of us. "I am arguing that few of us ever get to know our own true potential, and that many of us mistake early difficulties for innate limits. I am arguing that genetic influence itself is not predetermined, but an ongoing process."

Shenk has done his homework, citing in his 25-page bibliography eight seminal articles published by K.

Anders Ericsson and his associates at Florida State University. For almost four decades, they have conducted research on the process of achieving peak performance. Their influence on Shenk soon becomes evident: He names Part One, Chapters One to Six, "The Myth of Gifts." The Ericsson research leaves little (if any) doubt about the importance of (on average) 10,000 hours of "deep, deliberate practice under strict and expert supervision. Natural talent ("gifts") and luck can also be factors. For example, when members of youth sports teams are grouped according to calendar year birthdays, those born during the first six months have an advantage and those born in January-March have a significant advantage.

Shenk suggests another factor to consider, also. "The genius-in-all-of-us is not some hidden brilliance buried inside of our genes. It is the very design of the human genome - built to adapt to the world around us and to the demands we put on ourselves. With humility, with hope, and with extraordinary determination, greatness is something to which any kid - of any age - can aspire."

These are among the dozens of observations of special interest and value to me, also listed to indicate the scope of the book's thematic scope. All but the first and last are Shenk's.

- o "Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our physical and mental resources...Stating the thing broadly, the human individual lives far within his limits." William James)

- o "Contrary to what we've been taught, genes do not determine physical and character traits on their own. Rather, they interact with the environment in a dynamic ongoing process that produces and continually refines an individual." (Page 15)

- o "Intelligence is not an innate aptitude, hardwired at conception or in the womb, but a collection of developing skills driven by the interaction between genes and environment. No one is born with a predetermined amount of intelligence. Intelligence (and IQ scores) can be improved. Few adults come close to their true intellectual potential." (34)

- o "Child prodigies and superlative adult achievers are often not the same people. Understanding what makes remarkable abilities appear at different phases of a person's life provides an important insight into what talent really is." (84)

- o "The old nature/nurture paradigm suggests that control over our lives is divided between genes (nature) and our own decisions (nurture)). In fact, we have far more control over our genes - and far less control over our environment - than we think." (115)

- o "It must not be left to genes and parents to foster greatness; spurring individual achievement is also the duty of society. Every culture must strive to foster values that bring out the best in people." (144)

- o "We have long understood [believed to be true] that lifestyle cannot alter heredity. But it turns out that it can..." (155)

- o "Evidence for the contribution of talent over and above practice has proven extremely elusive...[In contrast] evidence is now emerging that exceptional performance in memory, chess, music, sports and other arenas can be fully accounted for on the basis of an age-old adage: practice makes perfect." David Shanks (171) However, Ericsson and his colleagues have concluded that there are many different types and degrees of practice that produce different types and degrees of result.

As indicated, David Shenk's approach in this book is to review the situation: misconceptions about individual differences in talent and human intelligence; identify the problem: very few of us ever get to know or are even aware of our human potential; offer a solution in the form of an argument: use dynamic development to "tap into the genetic assets we already have"; and then present 178 pages of evidence in support of that argument.

Those who share my high regard for this book are urged to check out Shekerjian's aforementioned Uncommon Genius as well as Doug Lemov's Practice Perfect: 42 Rules for Getting Better at Getting Better, Geoff Colvin's Talent Is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else, Daniel Coyle's The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How, and Malcolm Gladwell's Outliers: The Story of Success. All of these authors express their substantial debt to Ericsson and his pioneering research. If you really want to put some white caps on your gray matter, read Gerald Edelman's Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On The Matter of The Mind.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Is it possible

By Amazon Customer

This book could show us the potential genius in all of us. Is possible to develop the talent. Yes. Are their gifted child that can do it. In my option yes. There are to many unknowns can't be explained. The big question is are you born with it. Or you develop it.

If your parents are geniuses that you are highly intelligence to. That is what we were lead to believe this idea. Why if you fail your Iq tests. And you didn't prepare, or you couldn't worth it get a study guide. Or you had physically or mentally problem. It doesn't matter. You were stamped, processed and filed as low academic value. Which means you were educated to the level your academic classified you as.

It does mean that if you do better, or improve your still low-value. You don't halve potential to do better. While if you are lucky and done better in those test it would be different.

Side note: the IQ tests were never designed to measure the intelligences of a person. But you find the strengths and weakens of the person.

See all 94 customer reviews...

THE GENIUS IN ALL OF US: NEW INSIGHTS INTO GENETICS, TALENT, AND IQ BY DAVID SHENK PDF

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Amazon.com Review

Louann Brizendine Reviews The Genius In All of Us

Louann Brizendine, M.D., author of *The Female Brain* and *The Male Brain*, is a diplomat of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and the National Board of Medical Examiners, and is clinical professor of psychiatry at UCSF. She is founder and director of the Women's Mood and Hormone Clinic and the Teen Girl Mood and Hormone Clinic. After receiving her medical degree from Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, she completed an internship in medicine and neurology at Harvard Medical School's Brigham and Women's Hospital, and a residency in psychiatry at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center of Harvard Medical School. She sits on the boards of many prestigious peer reviewed journals and is the recipient of numerous honors and awards. Read Brizendine's guest review of *The Genius In All of Us*:

In *The Genius in All of Us* Shenk beautifully explains why the nature-nurture debate is dead. It is not just the genes we are born with, but how we are raised and what opportunities are open to us that determine how smart we will become. Nurture and experience reshape our genes, and thus our brain. Shenk argues that the idea we are either born with genius or talent, or we aren't, is simply untrue. The notion that relentless, deliberate practice changes the brain and thus our abilities has been undervalued over the past 30 years in favor of the concept of "innate giftedness." Practice, practice, practice (some say 10,000 hours or more) is what it takes. Shenk argues that it is just some fantasy that effortless, gifted genius is born and not made. He marshals evidence to show that genetic factors do not trump environmental factors but rather work in concert with them. Shenk notes that by the sweat of our brow we can train ourselves to be successful--even if we are born with only average genetic talent. Scientists know that how we are raised and how we are trained affects the expression of our genes. If you think you've reached your talent limit, think again, Shenk says. It's not just in your genes, he says, but in the intensity of your motivation. Ambition, persistence, and self-discipline are not just products of genes, but can be shaped by nurture and environment. Certainly it is important to have good genes, but that determines at most only 50 percent of your talent. He underscores the point that intelligence is made up of the skills that a person has developed--with an emphasis on "developed"--through hard work. Encouraging ourselves and our children to work hard requires being surrounded by others also wanting to achieve striving for excellence. Moreover, Shenk gives the hopeful message not just for kids, but also for adults. Happily for us, the human brain remains plastic, changeable and trainable well into old age. So no matter how old you are, if you'd like to be smarter--get to work! --Louann Brizendine

A Q&A with David Shenk

Question: Your book is called *The Genius in All of Us: Why Everything You've Been Told About Genetics, Talent, and IQ is Wrong*. That's a big claim. Everything and how so?

David Shenk: It is a bold statement, and it reflects how poorly the public has been served when it comes to understanding the relationship between biology and ability. The clichés we've been taught about genetic blueprints, IQ, and "giftedness" all come out of crude, early-20th century guesswork. The reality is so much more interesting and complex. Genes do have a powerful influence on everything we do, but they respond to their environments in all sorts of interesting ways. We've now learned a lot more about the developmental mechanisms that enable people to get really good at stuff. Intelligence and talent turn out to be about process, not about whether you were born with certain "gifts."

Question: In *The Genius in All of Us* you state that the concept of nature versus nurture is over. Scientists, cognitive psychologists, and geneticists are moving towards an idea of 'interactionism.' What does this mean? If the battle of genes versus environment is over, who has won? Which is more important?

David Shenk: They both won, because they're both vitally important. But the new science shows us that they do not act separately. Declaring that a person gets X-percent of his/her intelligence from genes and Y-percent from the environment is like saying that X-percent of Shakespeare's greatness can be found in his verbs, and Y-percent in his adjectives. There is no nature vs. nurture, or nature plus nurture; instead, it's nature interacting with nurture, which is often expressed by scientists as "GxE" (genes times intelligence). This is what "interactionism" refers to. A vanguard of geneticists, neuroscientists, and psychologists have stepped forward in recent years to articulate the importance of the dynamic interaction between genes and the environment.

Question: You describe genes and environment as a sound board. How so?

David Shenk: In the past, we've been taught that each distinct gene contains a certain dossier of information, which in turn determines a certain trait; if you have the blue-eyed gene, you get blue eyes. Period.

It turns out, though, that the information contained inside genes is only part of the story; another critical part is how often genes get "expressed," or turned on, by other genes and by outside forces. It's therefore helpful to think of your genome as a giant mixing board with thousands of knobs and switches. Genes are always getting turned on/off/up/down by hormones, nutrients, etc. People actually affect their own genome's behavior with their actions.

Question: How do these new findings affect the concept of the "The Bell Curve"--that we live in an increasingly stratified world where the "cognitive elite," those with the best genes, are more and more isolated from the cognitive/genetic underclass? Is that idea now completely obsolete?

David Shenk: Yes, it is obsolete. The idea that there is a genetic super-class that has a corner on high-IQ genes is nonsense. This comes out of a profound misunderstanding of how genes work and how intelligence works, and also from a misreading of so-called "heritability" studies. I am not saying that genes don't affect intelligence. Genes affect everything. But by and large I think the evidence shows that people with low intelligence are missing out on key developmental advantages.

Question: Lewis Terman invented the IQ test at Stanford University in 1916. He declared it the ideal tool to determine a person's native intelligence. Are IQ tests accurate? What are the benefits and fallout of the IQ test?

David Shenk: IQ tests accurately rank academic achievement. That's quite different from identifying innate intelligence, which doesn't really exist. Tufts intelligence expert Robert Sternberg explains that "intelligence represents a set of competencies in development." In other words, intelligence isn't fixed. Intelligence isn't general. Intelligence is not a thing. Instead, intelligence is a dynamic, diffuse, and ongoing process.

The IQ test has valid uses. It can help teachers and principals understand how well students are doing and what they're missing. But the widespread belief that it defines what each of us are capable of (and limited to) is disabling for individuals and society. People simply cannot reach their full potential if they honestly believe that they are so severely restricted.

Question: How do we go about finding the genius in all of us? What steps we can take to unlock latent talent?

David Shenk: Find the thing you love to do, and work and work and work at it. Don't be discouraged by failure; realize that high achievers thrive on failure as a motivating mechanism and as instruction guide on how to get better.

(Photo © Alexandra Beers)

From Booklist

Starred Review Intent on burying the concept of inborn genius, Shenk uses the 128 pages of "The Argument" to drive home how mistaken the notion of being genetically destined at birth to be a Mozart or a Michael Jordan is. For genes aren't the inalterable essences that environmental effects merely help out; rather, genes and environment interact to realize a person's potential in a constant and complicated process that Shenk attractively exemplifies through the athletic life of Ted Williams, who began hitting practice at age six and, equally important, never gave it up; also, considered to have magically sharp sight, he tested only high normal upon entering naval aviation—the thing was, he developed himself to, as Ty Cobb said, "see more of the ball than any man alive." En route to the startling revelation that Lamarckism (variation by inheritance, not Darwinian natural selection) has truth in it, after all, Shenk corrects common knowledge about what twin studies and IQ tests really show; clarifies the arguably most misunderstood genetics term, heritable; and scientifically revives faith in not just practice and determination but also parenting and lifestyle as crucial factors, along with genes, in the realization of talents. Since this flies in the face of a century of genetic determinism, Shenk employs the equally engrossing 141 pages of "The Evidence" to cite, quote, paraphrase, and comment upon the sources for virtually every assertion in "The Argument." --Ray Olson

Review

"[Shenk] tells engaging stories, lucidly explains complex research and offers fresh insights in the nature of exceptional performance,,,such efforts have resulted in a deeply interesting and important book. David Shenk may not be a genius yet, but give him time."-- New York Times Book Review

"Inspired...The Genius in All of Us has quietly blown my mind."--Salon

"...a welcome new book...you'll find [Shenk] a fluid, easy writer...The Genius in All of Us is a quick, compelling read."

– The Boston Globe

"Empowering...myth-busting...highly readable...entertaining."

-- KIRKUS REVIEWS

"Intent on burying the concept of inborn genius, Shenk uses the 128 pages of "The Argument" to drive home how mistaken the notion of being genetically destined at birth to be a Mozart or a Michael Jordan is. For genes aren't the inalterable essences that environmental effects merely help out; rather, genes and environment interact to realize a person's potential in a constant and complicated process that Shenk attractively exemplifies through the athletic life of Ted Williams, who began hitting practice at age six and, equally important, never gave it up; also, considered to have magically sharp sight, he tested only high normal upon entering naval aviation—the thing was, he developed himself to, as Ty Cobb said, "see more of the ball than any man alive." En route to the startling revelation that Lamarckism (variation by inheritance, not Darwinian natural selection) has truth in it, after all, Shenk corrects common knowledge about what twin studies and IQ tests really show; clarifies the arguably most misunderstood genetics term, heritable; and scientifically revives faith in not just practice and determination but also parenting and lifestyle as crucial factors, along with genes, in the realization of talents. Since this flies in the face of a century of genetic determinism, Shenk employs the equally engrossing 141 pages of "The Evidence" to cite, quote, paraphrase, and comment upon the sources for virtually every assertion in "The Argument."

--Booklist, starred review

"An inspiring and liberating book. It's a powerful antidote to the genetic determinism rampant in the Age of the Genome, and an instructive guide, grounded in science, to living a more enriching life."

--STEVEN JOHNSON, author of *The Invention of Air*, *Ghost Map*, *Everything Bad is Good for You*, *Mind Wide Open*, *Emergence*, and *Interface Culture*

"This book, both rigorous and accessible, is a close study of the idea of genius, an investigation of popular misconceptions about genetics, and an examination of the American virtue of self-determination. It is written with assurance, insight, clarity, and wit." -- ANDREW SOLOMON, author of *The Noonday Demon* (National Book Award Winner, 2001)

"A great book. David Shenk handily dispels the myth that one must be born a genius. From consistently whacking the ball out of the park to composing ethereal piano sonatas, Shenk convincingly makes the case for the potential genius that lies in all of us." -- RUDOLPH E. TANZI, PH.D., Joseph P. and Rose F. Kennedy Professor of Neurology, Harvard Medical School; Director, Genetics and Aging Research Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital

"David Shenk sweeps aside decades of misconceptions about genetics -- and shows that by overstating the importance of genes, we've understated the potential of ourselves. This is a persuasive and inspiring book that will make you think anew about your own life and our shared future." -- DANIEL H. PINK, author of *Drive* and *A Whole New Mind*

"In clear, forceful language, backed up by a boatload of science, David Shenk delivers a message that should be read by every parent, educator, and policy-maker who cares about the future of our children. The Genius in All of Us convincingly debunks the "genes are destiny" argument when it comes to human talent, and will force you to rethink everything from IQ tests and twins studies to child-rearing practices. Shenk's book turns

Baby Mozart on his head, and will give pause--a hopeful, empowering pause--to parents who wish to nurture excellence in their children."

-- STEPHEN S. HALL, author of *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience*

"David Shenk freshens and transforms a familiar subject to reveal all the interacting forces and factors that make us who we are. Development is a tricky business and Shenk understands this. By focusing his considerable writing talents on this terribly important topic, he has provided parents, policymakers, and educators with a book that will help them cut through the noise and make sense of every child's development."

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