

BOOKS

# SO YOU WANT TO BE A GENIUS

*The label is exclusionary, inconsistently applied, and a license to behave badly. Why can't we give it up?*

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Helen Lewis's "The Genius Myth" traces the archetype of the Silicon Valley savant to ideas advanced by the Romantics and early race scientists. Illustration by Miguel Porlan

**L**... test—call it the T.I.Q.—is developed to measure one’s ability to rotate brushes three-dimensionally inside holes. Kids who score highly are trained for the Toilet-Cleaning Olympiad, meant to keep the citizenry battle-ready and internationally competitive. Eventually, the world crowns a toilet-cleaning champion—not surprisingly, someone with an off-the-charts T.I.Q. This person is the very best at a skill that is crucial for the survival of humanity. Are they a genius?

The question is hard to answer because our definition of genius is so inconsistent. Generally, we want geniuses to be good with their minds rather than with their hands, but we can make an exception for a surgeon or a chef. We expect them to discover new realms of knowledge; alternatively, they can be very good at an automatable skill like chess. Their talent should be incomprehensible to the masses, unless they’re a politician. We have recognized genius in the physical mastery of a bathroom staple like marble (Bernini) and even in an innovation involving a toilet (Duchamp). So why not in this champion cleaner? Is the difference simply that only one of these fields is associated with working-class, racialized women?

In “The Genius Myth: A Curious History of a Dangerous Idea” (Thesis), Helen Lewis, a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, argues that what we call genius depends on the norms of a given period, “on what our society *values*, and what it is prepared to *tolerate*.” Lewis does not take a hard stance against the very existence of genius; she grants that Shakespeare might have been one. Her issue is more with the license given to genius, and the resulting admiration of traits that are not all that admirable. The nineteenth-century Romantics, for example, liked their geniuses boyish, naughty, in the late stages of tuberculosis, and, best of all, dead by suicide. They believed that

genius was a natural, childlike quality, and that too much education could corrupt an otherwise promising case.

A competing theory of genius was advanced by an early statistician named Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton studied a set of English judges and tallied their “eminent” relations, doing the same with members of the clergy and professors of classics at Cambridge University. He concluded that genius ran in families, that it was more likely to be found in Europeans than in the “lower races,” and, as Lewis puts it, “that although genius was carried in the female line, it did not show up in women.” (Galton published these conclusions in 1869, the same year that a small group of British women were, for the first time, allowed to take a university entrance exam.) Despite the obvious silliness of his methodology, which, among other issues, does not separate the advantages of nepotism from those of talent, Galton’s theories remain influential; students taking the modern MCAT, more than half of whom are women, are expected to be familiar with his work.

Galton wanted to rebrand genius as the picture of respectability and health. He took special issue with the Romantic conception of inspiration, which harked “perilously near to the voices heard by the insane”—a particular problem for him because insanity appeared also in the “lower races.” Today, we’ve reached a compromise on the idealization of madness: all kinds of people can hear voices, but it’s a sign of genius only among those who are unlikely to be shot by the police during a psychotic episode. The novelist Ottessa Moshfegh claims to take dictation from her narrators: “I just write down what the voice has to say.” John Nash, a Nobel Prize-winning creator of game theory who was forcibly hospitalized for schizophrenia, once told a colleague, “The ideas I had about supernatural beings came to me the same way that my mathematical ideas did. So I took them seriously.”

If mental illness is compatible with the modern-day myth of genius, it is often not compatible with getting good work done. Nash, who wrote in an essay on the occasion of his Nobel Prize that his return to apparent

rationality was “not entirely a matter of joy,” nevertheless dismissed his twenty-five years of “partially deluded thought” as a “gap period” from scientific productivity. The artist Karen Green, who was married to David Foster Wallace when he died by suicide, has spoken against the idea that Wallace’s depression was helpful to his art. “People don’t understand how ill he was,” she told a reporter. “It was a monster that just ate him up. And at that point everything was secondary to the illness. Not just writing. Everything else: food, love, shelter.” Perhaps, like the Romantics, we want geniuses to kill themselves. (Think of the Twenty-seven Club.) If we admire them, we can read it as a final act of self-mastery. If we resent them, we are reassured that those who fly so close to the sun will see their wings melt.

Lewis calls this the “deficit model of genius,” the possibly unconscious desire for the “precious gift” to extract a “human price.” Recent books, as varied as Benjamin Labatut’s feverish portrayal of physicists in “When We Cease to Understand the World” and Michael Lewis’s indulgent tale of the tech fraudster Sam Bankman-Fried in “Going Infinite,” continue to gild the portrait of the flawed white-boy wonder—young, arrogant, lonely, careless, sensitive, misunderstood, and frequently, if forgivably, cruel. We think of these defects as the products of intense specialization. John Watson once had to explain to Sherlock Holmes that the Earth revolves around the sun, a fact Holmes then insisted he would forget, so as not to clutter his mind with useless trivia. Bankman-Fried famously opined that all books should instead have been six-paragraph blog posts.

Because geniuses tend not to specialize in things like picking up after themselves, the human price is often paid by a long-suffering partner-secretary—wifely figures like Véra Nabokov, Sophia Tolstoy, and Alice B. Toklas, or the occasional husband like Leonard Woolf. Albert Einstein once told his cousin, who was also his mistress, that he treated his wife, Mileva Marić, “as an employee whom I cannot fire.” Several years before he published his general theory of relativity, he wrote a letter to Marić:

You will make sure:

that my clothes and laundry are kept in good order;

that I will receive my three meals regularly in my room. . . .

You will not expect any intimacy from me, nor will you reproach me in any way;

You will stop talking to me if I request it.

In 1996, this letter was part of a bundle that sold at a Christie's auction for almost nine hundred thousand dollars. The demand for the ephemera of genius might be viewed as an update on the medieval crowds who flocked to the (various) churches that claimed to have the foreskin of Christ. Both pursuits satisfy our craving for signs of humanity in a being thought to be divine. If we have long granted humanlike immortals the license to do bad things—Zeus, for example, was a sort of Harvey Weinstein of Olympus—Lewis argues that we wrongly extend the same license to apparently godlike mortals. The goal of her book, she writes, is to “demolish” the idea that some people are members of a “special and superior class.”

**T**he history of “scientific genius studies” is, to a large extent, the history of race science. Galton—who, among his other contributions, coined the word “eugenics”—was a pioneer of both, and genius hunters ever since have attempted to classify racial groups by intelligence. The psychologist Lewis Terman, who popularized I.Q. tests in the United States, asserted that people of “sub-normal intelligence” were to be found “with extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes.” His seminal *Genetic Studies of Genius*, which sought to identify future geniuses by testing the I.Q.s of California children, undersampled these communities and, according to one critique, missed an estimated twenty-four to forty per cent of the kids who might have qualified.

Among the children whom Terman did test but who were determined to have insufficiently high I.Q.s were two boys who would go on to win Nobel

Prizes in Physics. In “The Genius Myth,” Lewis dedicates a chapter to one of them, William Shockley, who is known for his work on the transistor, a semiconductor used in most modern electronics. Shockley was a self-promoter and a jerk; he once asked a house guest, “What law of nature have you discovered?” By middle age, he had become almost impossible to work with. When he started his own company, a group of his employees mutinied—some went on to found Intel—and Shockley turned to less scientific pursuits. He claimed that there was a direct relationship between a person’s percentage of “Caucasian ancestry” and their I.Q. He advocated for the sterilization of those with low I.Q.s. He donated to a sperm bank for Nobel laureates and other luminaries, even as he publicly complained that his children had failed to live up to his intellectual standards. (It was their mother, he said, who hadn’t been smart enough.) By the time he died, in 1989, Shockley was largely viewed as a crank, a second act common enough among his fellow-laureates that it has been given a name: Nobelitis.

Lewis, in her discussion of race and I.Q., acknowledges that measurable biological differences among groups need not be permanent. She points out that average I.Q. scores in the U.S. have risen by about three points per decade since 1930. (The mean test-taker in 1930 would now be classified as “borderline impaired.”) But she does not delve into the impermanence of our social definitions of race, or the imprecision of using race as a measure of genetic similarity. (A Mayflower descendant like Shockley, for example, may well be more closely related to a Black American than that Black American is to, say, a Zimbabwean.) She seems less scandalized by Shockley’s bad science—she claims that many geneticists considered his “questions” to be “provocative” but “legitimate”—than by the self-destructive tendency that led him to say such “uncomfortable” and “inflammatory” things out loud.

Lewis takes a more vigorous axe to the sexism that has long driven notions of intelligence. In the “Genius Myth,” she breezily mocks Elon Musk for retweeting the claim that “only high T alpha males” who are capable of defending themselves can make the kind of “objective” and fearless decisions

that allow them to participate in a democracy. But Lewis, who is probably best known for her part in bringing British-style trans-exclusionary feminism to the United States, is not averse to a little high-T essentialism herself. In a recent article applauding a British court ruling that will make it possible to exclude trans girls and women from women's sports, bathrooms, and shelters, she suggests that trans women seem to retain "biological male" patterns of "criminality." (Evidence for this, she admits, is "limited.") The trouble for an avowed feminist like Lewis is that she can't have it both ways. Either we make choices about social and political participation based on the presumption that female and male behavioral capacities are permanently and consequentially different or we don't. Anyone who can write a book like "The Genius Myth" should have no doubt as to which approach has historically been better for women.

If Lewis doesn't quite exert herself to demolish the idea that geniuses come from a genetically superior social class, she is more diligent about tearing down the idea that geniuses operate outside of society. She summarizes a research paper from 1922 that points out that many discoveries and inventions—including derivatives, telephones, typewriters, and the existence of Neptune—were made at the same time by researchers working independently. This suggests, she writes, that scientific progress depends less on one uniquely beautiful mind and more on the ripe social conditions constructed by previous breakthroughs. She cites the notion of "scenius," an "alchemical space of collective achievement" in which a concentration of related talents provokes rapid advances. Shockley, for instance, worked at Bell Labs, a mid-century hub that invented the modern solar cell and the first portable operating system. Nine people won Nobel Prizes for the work they did there, though this undercounts the number of people involved in these efforts—as Lewis points out, the prize can be awarded to only three people for a given discovery.

Lewis links our veneration of individual genius to the popularity of the Great Man theory of history. "We find it intuitively easy to understand human-

sized stories, where *someone* does *something*,” she writes, “whereas vague wafts of social change driven by multiple factors might get academics excited . . . but tend to leave everyone else bored to tears.” Having identified the use of individual “morality tales” as a potent factor in the mythmaking of genius, she nevertheless chooses the same form for her book, which proceeds via chatty, chapter-length biographies of representative figures, from Shakespeare to Musk.

The advantage of these case studies is that they make it almost impossible to ignore the way certain tropes of genius have recurred throughout centuries. Musk, for example, lays claim to both the Romantic theory of the visionary, eccentric, self-harming genius and the Galtonian theory of quantifiable excellence: he is the richest person in the world, so he must also be the smartest. You can sometimes see the blending of the golden boy and the holy fool in real time. When relations between Donald Trump and Musk were at their rosier, the President described his adviser as “a seriously high I.Q. individual. He’s got his faults also.”

The disadvantage is that Lewis falls victim to a kind of inverse hagiography—an Annoying Man theory of history—in which she fixates on the individual defects of supposed geniuses rather than on larger trends provoked by the ideology of genius. On seven different pages, she criticizes Musk for the frequency of his online posting, for being an “emotionally dysregulated lover of lame jokes,” for “getting high on his own supply,” for “pumping out brain farts,” and for “passing on memes that a teenage boy would find unsophisticated.” One wishes there were a little bit less of this and a little bit more on the part Silicon Valley has played in the resurgence of theories of race and I.Q., and how this has poisoned our politics.

If the world really can be divided, biologically, into people destined for great things and people doomed to menial labor, there’s no reason not to abolish the Department of Education, as Trump has said he will, and to distribute the savings to the pet projects of the billionaires who got him elected. There’s

nothing objectionable about the fact that the world's fifty richest people have the same total amount of wealth as the four billion poorest. Any efforts to bridge the gap between these groups—universal pre-K, immigration, income tax, foreign aid—well, that's just D.E.I.

Ultimately, Lewis's intervention is not to demolish the idea of genius as much as to narrow its definition. She suggests that, because someone might be a genius in one area and not another, we should stop thinking of the trait as a "transferable skill." She asks that we refer to someone like Musk not as a genius but merely as someone who has performed "acts of genius." (Her example is that he has "made owning an electric car seem cool rather than an act of penance.") Neither of these suggestions is particularly disruptive to the idea of a "special or superior class of people." The myths of genius enthusiastically agree that geniuses are good at some things and bad at others. And a focus on an act does not remove the presence of an actor. Electric cars presumably did not make themselves cool.

A better inoculation against the idea of special people may be simply to abandon the idea of genius and its underlying assumption that, at a certain point, an unusual talent transfigures into something more mystical. What really separates the hundred-metre sprints of Noah Lyles and Kishane Thompson in last year's Olympic final, for example, is not the 0.005 seconds by which Lyles bested Thompson—a margin that on another day could have gone differently—but the title of "fastest man in the world." Lewis acknowledges that genius can be an "arbitrary, manmade category." She just believes that we need this magical kind of thinking, that "we will always yearn for the transcendent, the extraordinary, the feathers of the phoenix." And yet you don't have to think that a very skilled person is singularly transcendent to enjoy their greatness. People who read a lot might view their favorite writers not as phoenixes but, rather, as talents along a continuum of other talents, each pleasurable and discerning in their own way. Once you start thinking like this, you care less about what Zadie Smith has called "gongs from Sweden." You can just enjoy being inside somebody else's

head. ♦

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