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## Evil Genes the code for a 'malignant narcissist'

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**Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend**, by Barbara Oakley, Prometheus, 380 pages, \$ 28. 95.

We've all run into people whose  
endearing charms camouflage

a Machiavellian core. Even after we have been burned repeatedly, our good nature persuades us to give them the benefit of the doubt. They are, writes author Barbara Oakley, "successfully sinister." How do some people get that way, and what allows them to survive and often rise to positions of leadership? Those are the central questions of Oakley's new book, *Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend*. As her title suggests, she believes much of the explanation of those people's behavior can be found in their DNA. Of course genes alone do not dictate behavior. Environment, experiences and circumstances can bring out the best or worst in any of us. Few people with a genetic predisposition toward sinister behavior turn out like Hitler, Stalin, Slobodan Milosevic or Mao Zedong. Most live more ordinary lives, like Oakley's sister, Carolyn. Their successes turn out to be illusory, and their lives are marked by a trail of emotional scars on people who care about them. In the workplace, the successfully sinister generate turmoil and leave a trail of damaged careers in their professional wake.

Working in the notoriously Machiavellian halls of academe (she is a professor of biomedical engineering at Oakland University in Michigan), Oakley had plenty of opportunities to observe such people up close. But having Carolyn as a sister no doubt motivated her to explore those questions.

Beginning her research, Oakley found an astonishing gap. She writes about exploring the authoritative Medline database for information on the physiology and biochemistry of Machiavellianism. "Antisocial personality disorder" turns up 5, 494 hits. "Borderline personality disorder" generates 3, 090 "meaningful hits, including hundreds of imaging studies, genetic studies, drug studies, and so on."

However, she continues, "... if I type in 'malignant narcissist' — a term used by leading psychiatrists... to describe the kind of malevolent, yet high functioning people I'm researching — I get nothing. Zero hits. No medical studies whatsoever." (Emphasis in original.)

That discovery was “unsettling” to her, “like hearing that the oncologist about to operate on your father’s cancer-ous liver actually has a fake degree from a diploma mill.” The book is a narrative of how Oakley began trying to fill in the scientific details. True to its lengthy subtitle, *Evil Genes* has something to offer almost every avid nonfiction reader. The gap in Medline notwithstanding, Machiavellianism is well investigated in the behavioral and psychological literature, and Oakley is thorough in her discussion of that research.

MILOSEVIC AND MAO Machiavellian behavior, she writes, is probably closely related to borderline personality disorder, so named because it sits on the borderline between psychosis and neurosis. To illustrate its most extreme manifestations, the book devotes entire chapters to Milosevic, “The Butcher of the Balkans,” and Chairman Mao, “The Perfect ‘Borderpath,’” the coined word indicating a particularly evil constellation of borderline personality traits and psychopathic tendencies.

Oakley spends considerable time discussing how such traits might evolve in human populations. She recounts the research into the genetic basis of altruistic behavior. Given the social milieu in which humans have found themselves, people who engage in cooperation are more likely to pass along their genes either directly or through the reproductive success of close kin.

Yet every trait has a range of expression among individual members of a species. Each person falls at a different place along the cooperation-competition axis. Machiavellians lie at one extreme. At the opposite end are people who are so selfless that they are easy pickings for the duplicity of Machiavellians who seem to be cooperative while taking every advantage they can manage.

Although the evolution of a species is a slow process, the distribution of such traits within a population can change markedly in a few tens of generations. Smaller social groupings favor cooperative behavior and lead to a population of perhaps 2 percent Machiavellians.

Urban life improves the prospects for a Machiavellian, and Oakley notes that they are probably twice as prevalent in such settings. She wonders if evolution will lead to even larger numbers in future generations, and ponders what kind of societies will result.

When discussing evolution of behavioral traits, Oakley draws connections to the physical structures and chemical processes within the human brain. Difference in genes can produce considerable changes in the brain. These have significant consequences for a person’s psychology and behavior.

In the case of her sister Carolyn (who used her “dazzling knowledge of French food and wine” to displace her mother on a European adventure with an emphysemic boyfriend), Oakley concludes that genes were only partially to blame for the sinister characteristics. Polio also enters the picture.

Scientists have noted a genetic tendency favoring the development of polio into its paralytic form. The disease struck Carolyn at age 3 and progressed quickly to paralysis,

as it did in several other afflicted relatives. Treatment of polio at the time led to isolation from families.

With limited staff to attend to her, Carolyn's recovery — she was left with minor withering and paralysis of one leg — must have been more horrifying than the disease itself.

Oakley notes sparse but suggestive evidence that paralytic polio has a subtle but lasting effect on one particular brain area that is associated with borderline behavior. In addition, Oakley's family seems to carry genes that produce a tendency toward addictive behavior.

Oakley draws on that history as well as diaries found after her sister's premature death to ask this question: Could the combination of subtle brain changes due to polio, the psychological trauma of her treatment and pre-existing genetic tendencies have sent Carolyn over the edge? She weaves that mystery into the broader scientific story, producing an odd but fascinating hybrid of a book. Its prose is always clear and lively, but some readers will find it slow going in places, such as when it describes brain physiology and function in detail or when it lays out the taxonomy of psychiatric and behavioral disorders.

The text is also nonlinear: It intersperses the various pieces of history, scientific evidence and necessary background knowledge.

That may be less than satisfying for some readers, but not for those who love science for the questions it opens more than the answers it finds. Physicist Fred Bortz speculates about alien DNA in *Astrobiology*, his newest book for young readers.

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