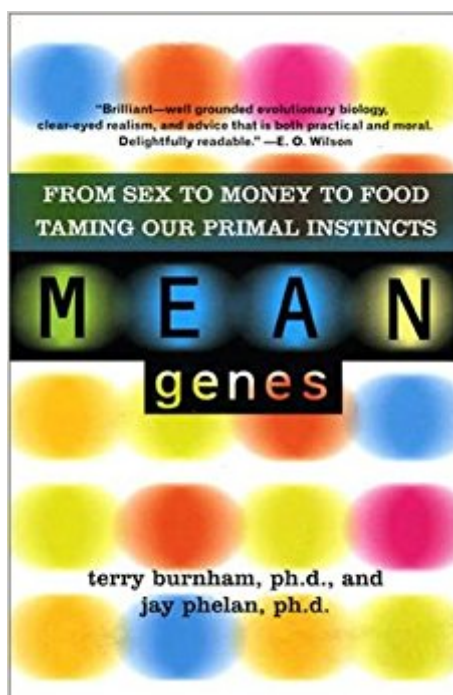


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Mean Genes: From Sex To Money To Food: Taming Our Primal Instincts



Synopsis

Why do we want—and why do we do—so many things that are bad for us? And how can we stop? In *Mean Genes* economist Terry Burnham and biologist Jay Phelan offer advice on how to conquer our own worst enemy—our survival-minded genes. Having evolved in a time of scarcity, when our ancestors struggled to survive in the wild, our genes are poorly adapted to the convenience of modern society. They compel us to overeat, spend our whole paycheck, and cheat on our spouses. But knowing how they work, Burnham and Phelan show that we can trick these "mean genes" into submission and cultivate behaviors that will help us lead better lives. A lively, humorous guide to our evolutionary heritage, *Mean Genes* illuminates how we can use an understanding of our biology to beat our instincts before they beat us.

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Customer Reviews

"Don't trust your instincts." Hardly the standard self-help fare, to be sure. Arguing that Darwin has a lot more to tell us about ourselves than Freud, *Mean Genes* is high on evolution and low on inner child. Deemed "brilliant" by E.O. Wilson himself, the book is the work of two young Wilson disciples: Terry Burnham, an economics professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and Jay Phelan, a professor of biology at UCLA. Burnham and Phelan divide life issues into 10 categories (debt, fat, drugs, risk, greed, gender, beauty, infidelity, family, and friends and foes), and then offer a two-step guide to better living. "Step 1 is to understand our animal nature, particularly those desires that get us into trouble and can lead to unhappiness. Step 2 is to harness this knowledge so that we

can tame our primal instincts." Needless to say, Nancy Reagan-esque bromides don't fit into the Mean Genes scheme of things: "Just say no" to drugs is the simplest way to kick a habit. Unfortunately, this obvious and low-cost approach is also the route most likely to fail. For example, only one person quits smoking for every twenty who attempt to just say no. Raw willpower seems like a great solution right up until weakness strikes and we light up a cigarette or mix a margarita. Instead of slogans, the Mean Genes approach to overcoming drug addiction is to first recognize that "every person has strong, instinctual cravings for destructive substances." This, coupled with a thorough scientific understanding of a given drug's pleasurable effects on the brain, offers a more realistic course of action, such as finding a less harmful substitute for achieving a similar buzz. Be it talk of weight loss, saving for retirement, or resisting the neighbor's wife, such practical, tough-love suggestions for subduing the beast within are provided throughout the book. Phelan describes how he instantly smears mayonnaise all over tempting sweets served with airline meals to keep from eating them during long flights, and Burnham writes of giving away his Internet access cable in order to free himself of a serious day-trading fixation. The authors also rely heavily on findings from the animal world in stating their case, which makes for fascinating reading, if not always for readily transferable lessons to daily life. Consider, for example, certain frog species that "continue individual bouts of mating for several months. If people mated for a similar percentage of our lives, a single round of intercourse would last almost ten years." And then there's the famed black widow spider. "Shunning the more traditional chastity belt, the male breaks off his sexual organ inside the female, preventing her from ever mating again. When the act is completed, the female kills and eats the male." Put off by all the sex and violence? Don't worry. There's also a nod to family values in the form of the Australian social spider. "Soon after giving birth to about a hundred hungry spiderlings, Mom's body literally liquefies into a pile of mushy flesh. The babies then munch on the flesh so they can start their lives with full bellies." Mean genes, indeed. --Patrick Jennings --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Genes are credited or blamed these days for more and more human behaviors and predicamentsDbut gambling, courtesy and even greed? Phelan, a professor of economics at Harvard, and Burnham, a biology professor at UCLA, focus not on the mechanisms of particular genes but on the effects of more general evolutionary patterns. In this enormously entertaining sociobiological overview, they argue that humans are well adapted to the environment in which we originated, but since we are no longer hunter-gatherers, instincts that evolved under those conditions can lead to harmful excess in today's world. Obesity, for example, occurs because early

humans faced food shortages and adapted to store fat in their bodies. Burnham and Phelan explain the evolutionary basis for such troublesome matters as overspending, gambling, drug abuse, sexual infidelity, rudeness and greed. The point, they emphasize, is not to excuse harmful behaviors, but to understand that they are part of our animal natures. This approach, they believe, enables us to find better ways to cope with these problems than mere willpower. In their view, a tactic doomed to failure since it runs counter to instinct. Burnham and Phelan cite their own amusing strategies for dealing with food and gambling problems, and insist that anyone can learn to "tame" their "mean genes." Though this book only scratches the surface of a subject considered in detail by such scientists as E.O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins and Sara Blaffer Hrdy, it is sure to generate wide popular interest. Agents, John Brockman and Katinka Matson. Author tour; 20-city radio satellite tour. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book will teach you so much about inherited behavior that it makes you want to read more.== Spoiler Alert(beginning) ==Let me give you an example of some fascinating thing you learn : You know how most of us are keen on fatty and sugary food, well the authors explained why is that so. Let's think back to our ancestors (cave men); back then, when a hunter killed an animal (let's say a giraffe) they couldn't store the leftovers and after a while the giraffe would spoil. So what would be the wise thing to do back then? Well the best to do would be to eat as much as you could and store the extra food as fat in your body (you know those love handles). Now let's see why we inherited this behavior; the cave men (and women) who wouldn't overeat (what today we consider a wise thing, with reason) would die if there was a shortage of food, while those who put up some fat for the winter would survive. Now guess what, who do you think we came from? Of course we came from those who survived, the overeaters. The problem we have now is that society has changed in the way that you don't spend 700 cal. to bring home some food, but instead about 0.5 cal. ordering a pizza through your phone. So society changed but our genes didn't!== Spoiler Alert(end) == Anyway, that was one of the many many examples of behaviors in this book!

As I take time to write this review, I find that - as of this writing - 77 others have taken their time to write a review of "Mean Genes." This book has really struck a nerve with readers. It has tickled their funny bone as well as given insight into human nature, and most importantly to us, our own behaviors. Mean Genes is a very unique book in that it provides important information on an intellectual topic but is written in such a manner that it is easily readable by the general reading

public. This one aspect has most impressed me with this book - It is not only informative, but it is also so damn entertaining! If for no other reason, this book deserves 5 stars! I am an avid reader of science books and am accustomed to reading complicated and dry material. Unfortunately, most readers will put down such a book before they actually learn anything. Mean Genes breaks this mold. These authors have used considerable skill to create a book that is a joy to read and still leaves one feeling that they have learned something useful. This is not a "self-help book" in the normal sense. It does give us insight into our own behaviors and why it is almost impossible to change some of those behaviors. Our only hope is our understanding of why things are the way they are. This offers us an opportunity to overcome our own genetic programming to some degree. And if not, we at least know why it is that way. But most importantly, this book makes the reader think. It helps us to take a second look at our own prejudices and assumptions. It provides a useful framework for examining behaviors. We get to think for ourselves about why things are the way they are and to reach insightful conclusions. A word of warning! Once you pick up this book, you will find it almost impossible to put it down.

and then fill in the blank...eating, spending money, hoarding. Ah, the power of genes...gotta love em cause you can't get away from them. You don't have to have one ounce of scientist in you to understand this clearly, well-written book.

Great book! Bought it used and it was in excellent condition. Everyone should give it a read. Funny and educating because of all the short stories both authors write about

Let's face it: life is a showdown between you and your genes. Chances are, most of you are losing. But it's your lucky day: Mean Genes is here! Mean Genes is written for anyone interested in taking better control of his/her life. (That means you.) As one would expect from a quick glance at the authors' bios, Mean Genes is a very intelligently-written book. But don't be daunted by the scientific material and the impressive degrees. Besides being highly readable, Mean Genes will make you laugh. Combining anecdotes from their own lives as well as fascinating facts from the animal world, the authors present each point such that you can easily apply it to the struggles you face every day (and overcome them!). In the fight to "tame our primal instincts," Mean Genes is unquestionably the best ammo yet!

very informative book. i learned a few things from reading it. i would recommend it to others.

Irvn DeVore said it best on the back of the book--"Warning! You will not be able to put this book down! It will change your life". Mean Genes is gripping from start to finish and yes, it has changed my life. Not a day goes by that I don't find use for some of the sage advice and insight offered up by Burnham and Phelan. Mean Genes takes a universally important (and broad) topic and translates it into bite-sized portions, which are readily digestible to all readers--not to mention witty and entertaining. The authors draw from their own experiences in demonstrating ways that we can battle our own 'Mean Genes', and live happy and fulfilling lives. Mean Genes is the best book that I have read so far this year, and most certainly one of the most influential and useful books I have ever read.

This book is so insightful. I have been interested in psychology for several years now, especially evolutionary, and this book ties together everything I've been learning. And it's fun and easy to read. I couldn't put it down! I first got a copy from the library and liked it so much I'm buying my own. It's funny, straight forward, intelligent without being at all preachy or pedantic. The format is inviting, the topics totally relatable, the examples perfectly highlighted by analogies (which I love). It explains the basis for everything my friends do--as well as myself!--and gives clear explanations for where all this crazy behavior comes from. I love it. I am a psychology doctoral student, but absolutely anyone would be able to read this and appreciate it.

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