

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

By Terry Burnham, Jay Phelan

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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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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
"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*

From Publishers Weekly

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 willpowerDin 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.)
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From Booklist
In this brassy popularization of evolutionary biology, the authors dissect a range of human behavioral maladies: addiction, obesity, infidelity, avarice, power-tripping, and more. Economist Burnham and biologist Phelan argue that such behaviors are genetic inheritances from humanity's hunter-gatherer days: whatever then kept an individual one step ahead of the leopard, we descendants embody in our genes. The authors alight on such a plethora of aspects of being human that their tour is constantly stimulating, whether discussing people's propensity to overeating or their relentless optimism about the future, even under horrible circumstances. Burnham and Phelan are continually provocative as well, and readers will discover themselves objecting to one or another of their assertions, until the authors conversationally trundle up some experiment in support. Far from raising the white flag in our battles with instincts, the authors advance tactics of self-control for our next temptation, be it a sundae, stock tip, or pretty face. A delightfully readable presentation of the evolutionary, as distinct from the moralized, appreciation of human nature. *Gilbert Taylor*
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Users Review

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