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Barbara Oakley's *Evil Genes* explores how successfully sinister people succeed

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We've all run into people whose charms camouflage a Machiavellian core. Even after being burned, we somehow find ourselves giving them the benefit of the doubt. They are, writes author Barbara Oakley, "successfully sinister."

Marquee examples include Slobodan Milosevic and Mao Tse-tung, but the first malevolent individual Oakley considers is her sister, Carolyn. As the subtitle of "Evil Genes" informs us, Carolyn, despite a happy childhood, steals her mother's boyfriend.

The author believes much of the explanation for such transgressive behavior can be found in DNA -- not that genes dictate behavior, but that they combine with environment, experiences and circumstances to bring out the best or worst in any of us.

Through clear and lively prose, "Evil Genes" links new molecular research to a wide range of phenomena: the chummy jokes of Josef Stalin, the pampered ways of Paris Hilton, the criminal deeds of Enron executives, even the harems of the Ottomans.

Oakley, a professor of biomedical engineering at Oakland University in Michigan, knows something about the Machiavellian halls of academe. But she makes clear that having Carolyn as a sister motivated her to ask why this type of individual thrives in our midst.

Her research turned up an astonishing gap. Exploring the authoritative Medline database, she searches for clues to Machiavellianism, its physiology and biochemistry. Typing in "antisocial personality disorder" turns up 5,494 hits. "Borderline personality disorder" generates 3,090 meaningful hits.

But when she enters "malignant narcissist" -- a common term in psychiatry that describes the kind of malevolent, yet high-functioning personality she is researching, she gets "nothing. Zero hits. No medical studies whatsoever."

That discovery unsettles her, "like hearing that the oncologist about to operate on your father's cancerous liver actually has a degree from a diploma mill." The book is the narrative of how Oakley set out to fill in the gap.

The result is not always easy reading, especially when Oakley details brain physiology or bogs down in the taxonomy of behavioral disorders. Her research also draws on one untraditional source, Carolyn's diaries.

In "Evil Genes," Oakley moves around the various pieces of evidence like a jigsaw puzzle. Her book is provocative, but far from definitive. It is quite comfortable acknowledging how little we know. That may not satisfy some readers, but it will delight those who love science for the questions it opens more than the answers it finds.

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