

One man's great expectations The Nobel sperm bank, reassessed

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The Genius Factory: The Curious History of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank

By David Plotz

Random House, 262 pp., illustrated, **\$24.95**

Robert Graham was a millionaire on a mission. In the late 1970s, already rich from his many optometric innovations and the business he built to market them, Graham turned his attention to saving the human race from pollution.

Not air pollution or water pollution, but genetic pollution. Graham believed society's worst members were its biggest reproducers, and he embraced eugenics as a way to reverse civilization's supposed reproductive decline. He would fight inferior genes by launching a sperm bank (in Southern California, of course) whose donors would be Nobel Prize winners. By harvesting and distributing the precious seed of these smart fellows, Graham aimed to leverage their reproductive capacity many times over and produce an army of little geniuses.

As David Plotz demonstrates in his winning account, "The Genius Factory," it didn't quite work out that way. The enterprise quickly became an object of derision in the media, thanks in part to the only Nobel laureate who admitted donating -- William Shockley, the father of the transistor, who was a notorious racist. Like Shockley at the time, the few participating Nobelists were too old to have useful sperm, and in fact their ejaculate yielded not a single baby, brilliant or otherwise. Demand for high-end sperm was strong, though, and the bank soon found it convenient to lower its standards somewhat. "Forget about Nobel laureates," Plotz writes. "The Nobel sperm bank was taking men you wouldn't wish on your ex-girlfriend."

If Graham's "Repository for Germinal Choice" never produced Nobel offspring, it succeeded in other ways. By the time the place closed in 1999, 215 children had been born as a result, right along with the modern sperm industry. If Graham's professed selectivity was attacked as Hitlerian at the time, now it's normal. So is donor sperm; more than a million American children have been born from it, with 30,000 new ones annually.

Plotz got caught up in the Nobel sperm bank while researching Shockley for a possible biography, and on Feb. 8, 2001, he published an article on Slate asking to hear from anyone who might know something about Graham's venture. In short order, people came out of the woodwork. "The Genius Factory," the delightful book that arose from Plotz's original posting, is a testament not just to the author's intelligence and tenacity, but to the power of the Internet as well as to our own ambivalence about the role of genetics in human destiny. The Nobel sperm bank kids, Plotz argues, "were messengers from our future. We are on the brink of an age of genetic expectations. Soon -- maybe not in five years, but probably in fifty -- fertility doctors will be able to identify and manipulate genes for 'intelligence' and 'beauty.'"

Graham's venture is compelling on its face, of course, but so are the participants whom Plotz turns up. We get only a few of these (the author says he came to know 30 of the kids, as well as some mothers and sperm donors), but the tradeoff of breadth for depth is worth it. Plotz visits with these people, has extended e-mail exchanges with them, and in one astonishing case goes along to a meeting he facilitated between a son and his donor father. This father, it quickly emerges, lied about his IQ, is an extraordinarily duplicitous serial reproducer, and was living in squalor when his sperm-bank son met him.

Whether dealing with families and donors or negotiating the ethical shoals of his sensitive subject, Plotz is an unfailingly modest and insightful guide. He is especially good on the family dynamics surrounding donor children. In donor-insemination families, he observes, "the relationships tend to be asymmetric: the genetically connected mothers are close to their kids, the unconnected fathers are distant. I suspected that the Nobel sperm bank had exaggerated this asymmetry." Bad enough you were a sterile father; now you were raising a kid whose "real" father was some kind of genius.

The book's biggest shortcoming is the author's inability to resolve his own conflicting views on just how important genes are. In general he seems to agree with Graham's detractors that a Nobel sperm bank was a dumb idea, yet he acknowledges that "study after study has demonstrated the link between genes and what's called 'general intelligence.' . . . In aggregate, the more intelligent the parents, the more intelligent the child." "The Genius Factory" might have benefited from a chapter about current science on the heritability of intelligence, and the perennially contentious issue of nature vs. nurture.

Then again, the author is hardly alone in his ambivalence. Americans tend to be uncomfortable with hereditary advantages of every kind, even as they strive to bestow as many advantages as possible (hereditary and otherwise) on their own children. Plotz, a young father, observes that we seek advantage for our kids "through drugs and classes and tutors, but we will use genes as soon as we can." If he's right, it's because we already know, as parents, how important genes can be. Perhaps the frantic ambition of middle-class parents arises not just to give their kids every possible edge, but to elicit the reassuring markers of precocious grace that the Puritans might have regarded as signs of predetermined selection.

Sperm banks nowadays don't insist on Nobel Prizes, but many administer extensive questionnaires and tests to potential donors, while allowing women customers to make excruciatingly refined choices about half their children's genetic endowment. "All sperm banks have become eugenic sperm banks," Plotz writes. "When the Nobel Prize sperm bank disappeared, it left no void, because other banks have become as elitist as it ever was."

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