

IN PURSUIT OF GENIUS The dream was to create a generation of superbabies using the sperm of Nobel Prize winners. But did it deliver?

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Tom Legare was 15 years old when his mother told him that he was the son of a genius, and so predestined for greatness. It was February 2001, and the pair were bickering over Legare's future. He would shortly be graduating from high school, a year early, and stung by his casual talk of going to a pro wrestling school, Mary Legare decided to break her long-held silence. The man he thought of as his father was infertile, she explained. Instead, Legare and his sister Jessica were conceived with donor sperm purchased from a unique centre in California designed to harvest the seed of Nobel Prize winners. "And that's where you come from Thomas, " she said.

"Your dad was a Nobel Prize winner."

It is one thing to discover that the man you think of as your biological father is not. It is another to be told that your real father is a genius. As David Plotz shows in a new book, *The Genius Factory*, his account of one man's attempt to improve America's gene pool, discovering you are the son of a genius can mess you up in all sorts of ways, but the worst may be to cause you to suddenly believe in genes.

Before his mother let the cat out of the bag Legare was in control of his destiny. Afterwards he wondered if his destiny controlled him. Over the next few years he would go through a range of emotions, by turns euphoric and dejected, as he sought out the so-called genius whose genes he shared. The two would eventually meet in a decrepit and cockroach-infested house in Miami, by which time Legare was only too aware that his father was no Nobel Prize genius.

In fact he was no genius at all.

The story of how Legare found himself standing at the door of his donor father's home is a powerful reminder that the bold and warped ideas of ideologues have human consequences that rise and swell through time.

Legare was among dozens of children and mothers who responded to a series of articles on the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank that began appearing on the online website Slate in February 2001. David Plotz, the site's editor, was determined to do what many journalists had failed to . . . track down the sperm bank's donor children. Their hunger for knowledge, their sometimes desperate, sometimes wary, hope to make contact with the anonymous donors would drive much of Plotz's narrative as he criss-crossed America in search of answers. "I began with the intention of writing a book about sperm, and ended up writing a book about children, " he says. "I thought this would be about genius, but it turned out to be about families."

Plotz's own compulsion hinges on a memory from early 1980 of his father erupting over a news report that the Nobel Prize-winning physicist William Shockley, inventor of the transistor, was donating to a sperm bank for superior intellects. It was, his father explained, the kind of thing that Hitler would have tried.

For those of his generation, the dirty history of eugenics, culminating in the Nazis' ruthless experiments to cleanse the gene pool, was all too recent to allow such ideas to gain fresh credence. That way lay fascism.

It would be another 20 years before Plotz would stumble across Shockley's name again, but when he did so it immediately evoked his father's disgust. Intrigued, Plotz undertook further research, with the idea of writing a biography on the physicist-turned-white supremacist, who had spent the last 25 years of his life trying to stop poor people and blacks from propagating. It was then that he realised that it was not Shockley's story that he wanted to tell, but the story of the Nobel Sperm Bank, one of the most radical experiments in human genetic engineering in American history, and an idea that had gained fresh resonance as biological determination emerged from half a century of opprobrium.

What sort of women would want the sperm of Nobel laureates? In 1980, when the Los Angeles Times broke the story of millionaire optometrist Robert K Graham's plan to breed a generation of brainiacs, by inseminating Mensa-qualified

women with the semen of Nobel Prize winners, the reaction was swift and contemptuous. Equal opportunity was still a popular mantra, even as America began its rightward drift, and the broad thrust of education policy was to airbrush differences, not accentuate them.

The idea of breeding superior children sounded like a plotline from *The Boys From Brazil*, the 1978 movie that imagined a world populated by Hitler clones. A *New York Post* headline caught the mood: "Master Race Experiment." The Human Genome Project, which would radically alter our understanding of genetics, was still ten years away.

Nurture, not nature, was the order of the day.

Most Nobel laureates were inclined to agree. Just three volunteered to donate to Graham's grandly-named Repository for Germinal Choice, and one of them . . . William Shockley . . . was so controversial that the other two quickly dropped out. Shockley, who had outraged many Americans in the 1960s by suggesting that the government pay people with an IQ of under 100 to be sterilised, revelled in his late burst of controversy.

Hustler magazine ribbed him for "jacking off for mankind". Shockley brought disgrace upon Graham's project and by the end of 1980 the Repository was a Nobel sperm bank in theory only. Not a single woman was ever successfully inseminated with Nobel sperm.

Shockley stopped donating after being told that he was too old to ensure healthy offspring.

It didn't much matter. Intelligence, it turned out, was less important to Graham's applicants than looks. Most of all, they wanted to know how tall the donors were. Graham, who had dreamed of stimulating man's "ascent toward a new level of being" was forced to lower his expectations, concentrating on smart, athletic college graduates with high IQs.

Often he would do the scouting himself, taking donors out for dinner, then inviting them back to collect a first sample. Donor Edward Burnham, a self-made businessman, described how he emerged from a bathroom with his sample only to have Graham grab it from his hand, swab it on a slide and raise a fist. "Yes", he shouted. "You're just the man I thought you were."

It was not until April 1982 that the Repository had its first success, a story broken by *The National Enquirer* under the gaudy headline, "Mother of First Nobel' Sperm Bank baby tells her incredible story: our miracle baby could be America's hope for the future".

The story quoted Joyce Kowalski musing over her genius daughter's future . . . "What will she become? A female Thomas Edison or Einstein . . ." It was a coup for Graham, quickly ruined by reporters who uncovered some disturbing facts.

The Kowalskis were convicted felons, recently out of prison after serving a year for using the identities of dead children to apply for credit cards. Worse, they had lost custody of Joyce's two children to her first husband, who alleged the Kowalskis had bullied them into becoming prodigies.

The anecdote underlines a central tenet of Plotz's investigation: Nobel babies could never prove that genes trump nature, since the kind of parents who would actively select super sperm are likely to be pushy and demanding in the first place, determined to raise highachievers come what may. One such child, Doron Blake (who when asked if it was true that he'd read *Hamlet* at kindergarten, responded witheringly, "Good gosh, can't everybody?") would seem to be the perfect mascot for Graham's Repository.

With an IQ of 180 and a gift for maths and music, he was paraded in the media as living proof that nature trumps nurture. Except noone knew how much his mother's overreaching ambitions had played a part. Most kids grow up dreaming of being footballers or cops or actors. Blake was told he was going to grow up to be like Gandhi or Churchill. "Mum did not mean to, but she put a burden on me by making me feel like someone special," Blake once told a reporter. "I'm always hearing that I'm special. I don't want to be special."

For Tom Legare, on the other hand, the discovery that he had a secret biological father left him giddy with hope. Smart without being nerdy, he was world's apart from Blake's affected ennui. He was in a school band called *Infernal*, wrote rap lyrics about suicide, and was forever playing video games.

He was, in other words, just like every other kid in Middletown, America. Nevertheless, knowing he had genius genes inspired him to work harder at school. His grades improved, he stopped smoking pot. By the time he contacted Plotz, he was desperate to unravel the mystery of his real father. It was not easy.

Robert Graham had protected his donors anonymity by colour- coding them.

Mary Legare couldn't even remember which colour she had selected, but thought it might be Donor Green: "Professor of hard science at a major university and already one of the most eminent men in his field [with] extraordinary powers of concentration . . .

seldom loses his temper, and enjoys playing with children, folk dancing, and linguistics."

Verifying whether Donor Green was indeed Legare's father was complicated. Graham's Repository had closed in 1999, two years after Graham's sudden death, aged 90, after falling in a bathtub in Seattle. So Mary contacted Graham's widow, Marta, who directed her to a woman in San Diego, who held on to the records. It turned out that Legare's father was not Donor Green, but Donor Coral, a man described in the catalogue as "a professional of very high standing in his science" whose hobbies included writing, chess and piano. His IQ had been tested at 160 at age nine.

Plotz, who by this time was feeling like the Semen Detective, was able to put an overjoyed Legare in touch with one of his half-brothers, Alton Grant. A first-class pianist, who studied dance and was interested in marine biology, Grant did not seem much of a fit for Legare, but the two boys quickly embarked on an enthusiastic email exchange. Grant told Legare that if he had an MP3 player he could hear him play a solo piece in Italy ("I know I was rushing, but it was the last night in an eight-concert series"). Legare responded with some musical history of his own, explaining that he was in group therapy after the school found suicidal lyrics in his bookbag ("What they didn't know and didn't care to know is that I was trying to write a song against suicide because that was about a week after my friend Eden tried to commit suicide by swallowing 50 Tylenol").

Grant's mother, Samantha, would soon put a stop to the blossoming friendship. Legare, she thought, was a little too mature for her son.

Plotz would eventually uncover the real identity of Donor Coral, a doctor at the State Department in Epidemiology in Florida, whose actual name was Jeremy Sampson, but the more he discovered about him the less salubrious he seemed. After talking on the phone, Plotz was struck by the huge number of children Sampson had fathered by different women. Some of Sampson's relatives began calling. They described him as a reproductive opportunist, who bred when he chose and left the parental responsibility to someone else.

Worse, Sampson had invented his IQ score.

With demand far outstripping supply, Graham's standards had become increasingly negotiable, and the Repository never even put Sampson to the test. Although fearful of Legare's reaction, Plotz decided that his right to know who his father was outweighed other considerations.

The meeting, when it happened, was not quite a failure, not quite a success. It did, however, dispel any lingering fantasies that Legare may have entertained. When he and Plotz, along with Legare's new wife, Lana, and eight-month-old son, Darian, turned up at Sampson's Miami home they were greeted by four heavily tattooed guys seemingly high on crystal meth, neighbours as it turns out, but a sign of what was to come. Inside there were cockroaches on the floor, the furniture was falling apart, crayon scrawled on the walls.

As for Sampson, the doctor was dressed in a Hawaiian shirt open to his navel, and with boyish, raffish features that belied his age. He asked questions like, "Where would you want to live if you had a hundred million dollars?"

and congratulated Legare on finding a foreign wife, since "you can mess around with other women and then explain to your wife that cheating is the American way". At 48 years old, Sampson seemed more like a near-impoverished, overgrown adolescent than a genius.

These days Legare is sanguine, if still optimistic. He only wishes he'd known about his real father earlier. He no longer places such faith in genes, and find himself growing closer to his non-biological father, Alvin. "I used to think about genetics all the time, but after I finally met Jeremy I realised that two people can grow up with the same genetics and the exact same experiences and have two very different experiences, because there's such a thing as personal choice", he says. "Genes is just about what you're capable of. It's like a map to a city, and your experiences represent the direction you take."

Among the children that David Plotz has been in contact with, Leandra Ramm has the rare distinction of having known about her history for as long as she can remember. She says her mother told her when she was around two years old. "It was just something I incorporated into who I was, and I'm definitely very comfortable with it because it's always been a fact of my life," she says.

Attractive, bright and articulate, the 20-year-old knows what she wants to do with her life, and how to achieve it. She has just finished recording a solo part as a mezzo-soprano in a new opera based on a Thomas Mann short story that will be

issued on CD in the autumn. In three years she plans to audition for the Met Opera.

We meet for lunch in New York, and Ramm is all confidence and charm. I ask what she knows about her father, and she recites a litany of buzz words that Graham specialised in:

scientist, curly blond hair, musical talents, nice family, etc. Although curious to know who he is, she has no particular interest in searching for him, a fact she attributes to her close and nurturing home environment.

Despite that, she is fairly certain that she would be a different person if her parents had chosen another donor. "I probably would have gone into a completely different field," she says, matter-of-factly. It seems churlish to point out that at 20 many people still haven't a clue what field they will choose.

Ramm, who thinks highly of Graham, makes me wonder: was the Repository so very terrible? Plotz, who began his quest with a healthy dose of scepticism, is no longer so sure either.

As he points out, even his father, who scoffed at Shockley in 1980, has come around to recognising that identity is a combination of nature and nurture, in which case who would deny a mother the opportunity to have a bright child?

And besides, what seemed to many like science fiction 25 years ago is now common practice. Graham was simply the first to recognise that women wanted choice, and though few sperm banks will acknowledge the debt, it is his model they emulate. Knowing your donor's height and educational background, even his interests and dreams, is now par for the course.

Consumer choice: it's the American way.

In an attempt to understand what motivates sperm donors, Plotz underwent the donor application process for Fairfax Cryobank, one of the more respected IVF outfits in America, only to be quizzed on his suitability for the "doctorate programme", a premium service for mothers wanting to buy sperm from donors with doctoral degrees. Graham, you can't help feeling, would feel hugely vindicated. "The thing about Graham is that his accomplishments really changed life for the better for so many people," says Plotz. "He's a wonderful combination of mid-century scientific rationalism and comedy and racism and altruism and idealism. One of the problems with the way people have approached this subject is they start from a political position; they either think this is a great idea, therefore they're going to find good things in it, or they think it's a terrible idea and will look for the bad. I basically began from a position of curiosity."

Some 215 children were conceived with the help of Graham's super (and not so super) sperm, and of the 30 that have been in contact with Plotz he thinks most are of above average intelligence and well socialised. A few, like Grant and Blake, seem to be bona fide geniuses, although whether they will be happy geniuses is another matter. Of all the parents he talked to, only one regretted using the Repository, though Plotz tends to think most parents would have had accomplished kids with or without Graham's help, because they were the kind of people who had expectations for their children.

"The problem is if you have a mother going up to Robert Graham, saying I'm going to have a superchild, ' and Graham is nodding, and saying, Yes, you are, ' then you will have a child on whom the expectations are enormous.

"But you have to be pretty stupid to have a theoretical notion of a child, and stick to it, to assume that your child is going to be a physics genius, even when she shows no aptitude for it. You would have to be a total moron.

"I think the danger for the future is that as science becomes more sophisticated, scientists may say Well, now we can really pinpoint that gene for piano playing' and parents will start to believe it.

"That's when it becomes dangerous."

The Genius Factory, by David Plotz, is published by Scribner, priced 12.99.

[Illustration]

Caption: Journalist David Plotz with Leandra Ramm, one of Robert Graham's "donor children" Opposite page, from top: Leandra Ramm believes she is as much a result of nurture as nature; Doron Blake, a donor child who read Hamlet at kindergarten. This page, from top: Dr Robert Graham, the man behind the scheme; William Shockley, the controversial Nobel Prize winner who donated sperm to Graham

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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