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It was the most radical human-breeding experiment in American history, and no one knew how it turned out. The Repository for Germinal Choice–nicknamed the Nobel Prize sperm bank–opened to notorious fanfare in 1980, and for two decades, women flocked to it from all over the country to choose a sperm donor from its roster of Nobel-laureate scientists, mathematical prodigies, successful businessmen, and star athletes. But the bank quietly closed its doors in 1999–its founder dead, its confidential records sealed, and the fate of its children and donors unknown. In early 2001, award-winning columnist David Plotz set out to solve the mystery of the Nobel Prize sperm bank.

Plotz wrote an article for Slate inviting readers to contact him–confidentially–if they knew anything about the bank. The next morning, he received an email response, then another, and another–each person desperate to talk about something they had kept hidden for years. Now, in **The Genius Factory**, Plotz unfolds the full and astonishing story of the Nobel Prize sperm bank and its founder's radical scheme to change our world.

Believing America was facing genetic catastrophe, Robert Graham, an eccentric millionaire, decided he could reverse the decline by artificially inseminating women with the sperm of geniuses. In February 1980, Graham opened the Repository for Germinal Choice and stocked it with the seed of gifted scientists, inventors, and thinkers. Over the next nineteen years, Graham's "genius factory" produced more than two hundred children.

What happened to them? Were they the brilliant offspring that Graham expected? Did any of the "superman" fathers care about the unknown sons and daughters who bore their genes? What were the mothers like?

Crisscrossing the country and logging countless hours online, Plotz succeeded in tracking down previously unknown family members–teenage half-brothers who ended up following vastly different paths, mothers who had wondered for years about the identities of the donors they had selected on the basis of code names and brief character profiles, fathers who were proud or ashamed or simply curious about the children who had been created from their sperm samples.

The children of the "genius factory" are messengers from the future–a future that is bearing down on us fast. What will families be like when parents routinely "shop" for their kids' genes? What will children be like when they're programmed for greatness? In this stunning, eye-opening book, one of our finest young journalists previews America's coming age of genetic expectations.

From the Hardcover edition.

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

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From Reader Review The Genius Factory: The Curious History of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank for online ebook

Mara says

Dutch optician/astronomer/naturalist, Nicolaas Hartsoeker's *Essai de Dioptrique* (1694) contains one of my favorite illustrations in the history of science (sorry Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* might have to take a back seat for once). What could possibly oust the masterful engravings of volumes of infinitely greater consequence? ***The homunculus*** . For those of you who don't *parlez français*, you needn't fear- the picture pretty much says it all.

Yes, Hartsoeker peered through the microscope and, seeing those squiggly little suckers below the lens, helped bring unto the world the ***panspermist*** theory of ***preformationism*** featuring tons of tiny, fully-formed humans ready to burst forth in every wad of *cough* semen.

Though Hartsoeker's vision had been cast aside long before the ***Repository for Germinal Choice*** (aka the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank) was conceived, the "spirit" of it (a little tiny sperm-person spirit) was (is?) alive and well when, in 1980, the bank was founded by ***Robert Klark Graham*** (seen below admiring a sample with such reverence). Sure we've fancied up the science a bit- tossed in some friar's pea plant and a helix or two, but Graham and co. churned up a consumer public who very much believed that the bits and pieces of a great human could be locked inside someone's "little swimmers."

The Bank's Beginnings and the Shock Factor
In all likelihood, you aren't familiar with Graham himself (though you have him to thank for shatterproof eyeglass lenses). However, you might have heard and *most definitely* have reaped the technological rewards of physicist, inventor, Nobel laureate and completely racist a**hole, ***William Shockley*** .

Yes, the transistor is a pretty big deal. and Shockley *was* one of the forefathers of Silicon Valley. He was one of the Repository's biggest champions and was certainly its biggest liability. Without getting into the nuances of scientific (mis)understanding of genetics at the time, let's just say that Shockley was the vocal proponent of every aspect of eugenics that makes people squirm. In a very ***Fred Phelps-esque*** way, Shockley basked in every bit of attention that came his way. When students were protesting outside his Stanford office and their megaphones broke, Shockley came out and *fixed them* before retreating to his den.

Genius Babies
Bad PR did not stop demand for the sperm of brilliance. Graham and co. (which consisted of a couple other oddball characters) couldn't court donors fast enough. And, to clarify, it *was* all about "courting" the donors. I'm going to skip the parts about just how far from the "Nobel Laureate" ideal the Repository had to stray, but nevertheless they were always looking for "good seed."Graham would literally take guys out to dinner, tell them about his project, then try to get them to go back to his hotel with him to "produce a sample" on the spot.

Author ***David Plotz'*** ongoing journey (*"An Experiment in Long-Form Cyberjournalism"* with the help of his employer, *Slate*) is a good chunk of the book. Personally, I didn't find the "genius babies" (all the children of married - or now divorced, white women) and donors uncovered to be all that interesting, but it's all in there. So, you know, read the book.

The Growth of the Sperm Sector
Though the Repository for Germinal choice did not, itself, produce all that many children, it did reveal a huge market for not just donated sperm, but information and choice about the donors (Sperm Banks are unlikely to make the walk-by donor ATM switch anytime soon). Is this a slippery slope towards Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*? Probably not. However, the "industry" has embraced the inherent weirdness of it all with fervor.

Plotz, ever the good reporter, goes in deep- finding the process of becoming a donor to be a matter of intense vetting, and lots of kitsch (e.g. sperm mouse pads, and references to *masterbatoriums*). While the ATM might be a pipe dream, the delivery of spooge by ***sperm bike*** is not! (Lucky denizens of Copenhagen and Seattle can see them rolling down the streets already- more on that here).

How was the book?
It was fine. I'm glad I didn't pay for it (libraries are pretty awesome), and would likely have found Plotz' series of *Slate* articles sufficient to sate my curiosity (the "Seed" series link appears to be no more, but you can get started with *"The 'Genius Babies,' and How They Grew"*.

Steve says

David Plotz's book covers a lot of ground over it's brief span. The story of a man who wanted to create a sperm bank using only Nobel prize winning men and and Mensa-level women transitions into the history of eugenics in America, the interference of one of Silicon Valley's most influential (and wildly racist) men, and personal stories of so-called "test tube babies" looking to meet their donors. It sounds disjointed, but thanks to Plotz's clean, funny, self-effacing prose, it all hangs together, and becomes a surprisingly moving exploration into the makings of a family.

Gwern says

Millionaire Robert Graham’s Repository for Germinal Choice (1980-1999) sperm bank was founded as a form of positive eugenics in order to encourage sperm donation by gifted men (initially Nobelists) for use in the nascent field of artificial insemination. Launched to instant infamy, it turned out to have actually struck a major chord among women seeking sperm, who were generally treated extremely shabbily by the medical establishment which when doing as it pleased, casually chose donors largely at random and denied the women any kind of choice or information about the donor (Plotz notes the first recorded case of artificial insemination involved abruptly chloroforming the woman and using a random medical student). However, it encountered perennial troubles in obtaining sufficient supplies, as artificial insemination (*not* necessarily/usually IVF, as I assumed for most of the book until I finally realized my mistake) used up large

quantities of semen before a successful pregnancy, so the lack of Nobelist participants (between the rigorous medical testing and the notoriety) immediately forced a switch to less distinguished donors; further, fees charged to women never came close to covering the operating expenses of recruiting those donors and schlepping all the semen around, even as other sperm banks adopted the Repository's innovation of stringent health examinations & forcing Graham to sustain the Repository himself, and while he arranged for millionaire Floyd Kimble to take over funding the Repository when he died, that millionaire then soon died himself without having made any further provisions! Graham's family was happy to see the sperm bank die, and that was that.

Around 2000, journalist David Plotz began a 13-part *Slate* investigative report describing the positive eugenics background, history of the sperm bank, and trying to find donors/mothers/offspring - succeeding in reaching a small fraction of them. The online series includes some of their personal reactions to their experience, beliefs about the harm, some of them being reconnected with each other, descriptions of their current circumstances etc.

The first question about this book is, is it worth reading if you've already read the *Slate* articles and are interested in learning more? Yes. The background on Graham, Shockley, and modern sperm banking is much more extensive in the book, and it goes into substantially more detail about the donors/mothers/offspring. For example, the *Slate* series has one 2001 post focusing on "Donor White", who had not been found by that point; but White showed up afterwards, was interviewed extensively by Plotz (much of the book is in the first-person), and interacted a great deal with Beth/Joy over the following years, all of which is in *The Genius Factory* but not the *Slate* articles. He also corrects/updates a number of assertions (eg how exactly the Repository closed, with the online version concluding vaguely that it must have shut down because Graham somehow just didn't bother to put anything in his will and his relatives didn't support it, while the book version fixes this by bringing in Kimble and explaining what went wrong; apparently none of these corrections have been added to the *Slate* versions, checking back).

It's interesting seeing how disparate peoples' reactions to the sperm bank are, ranging from (the proper) indifference to considerable curiosity to almost neurotic obsession. I also appreciated the book expanding on the descriptions of the offspring and their successes even in trying circumstances, and the modern sperm banking industry, which is hard to get a read on because it's so private (eg Plotz quotes Repository staff noting that, as long suggested, prospective mothers value highly height and health; leafing through the catalogue, everyone is a positive eugenicist), and the issue of where the unrelated fathers stand (in a very difficult one, and at least for the women who contacted Plotz, in a generally untenable one, although he notes the selection bias). So I enjoyed much of the book and read it in one or two sittings.

Much of this is relevant to anyone thinking about the current prospects for embryo selection on traits. The estrangement of fathers emphasizes how naive it is to hope that merely offering some sperm of better genetic quality would be enough to encourage en masse usage: genetic relatedness is far too important to almost everyone, and giving up relatedness for better traits is inherently insulting to the cuckolded father; egg/sperm donors are always a last resort. (This is something the iterated embryo selection & genome synthesis approaches must grapple with; who will use your optimized eggs/sperms if it means the child will be 50% or 100% unrelated to the birth-parents? On the other hand, regular embryo selection & CRISPR preserve relatedness almost entirely.) The lure of greater intelligence turns out, surprisingly, to not matter as much to the mothers as does height/athleticism/health and avoiding below-average outcomes. So mothers prize

physical attributes as much or more than mental ones, and are risk-averse; suggesting the importance of doing selection on multiple traits of which intelligence is only one and perhaps not even the most important one and of emphasizing that we have excellent height polygenic scores which right now would allow height increases of <4 inches, and of framing it in terms of reducing the chance of a low outcome rather than its equivalent increasing the mean.

What's bad in the book? Plotz comes off, as a little snide & anti-intellectual; he seems to take an attitude in slightly disliking almost everyone in the book and it bleeds through unavoidably. He lacks any kind of sympathy. This slight disdain extends from the people to the core topics. Though he can't deny the power of genetics when even the briefest meeting or description of the sperm donors shows their resemblance to their offspring, he is an orthodox liberal in doing his best to deny it. (Which lends some passages surreal qualities; having just described how successful a bunch of kids were or how they resemble their donor or conceded that intelligence is indeed heavily genetically influenced, he'll then invoke the shared environment or epigenetics as the explanation of everything and move on. I am reminded of the story that Bertrand Russell, seated next to a Christian at dinner, asked what he thought would happen to him when he died: "Oh, well, I suppose I shall inherit eternal bliss, but I wish we wouldn't talk about such an unpleasant topic.")

He also makes a number of errors or questionable claims or perpetuates things he should know better. I noted down a few while reading:

He notes that the press hyped the Repository as the "genius factory" or the "Nobel Prize bank" or calls them "superbabies" or "genius babies", and then he goes on and routinely uses those hyperbolic phrases himself and indicts the Repository as a failure for producing no geniuses, even after having correctly noted that the 'genius babies' would not have been anything of the sort because they would get only half their genes from the sperm donor:

> What were the kids like? Had the genius genes created genius babies? Were Repository prodigies now skipping their way through America's best private schools, prepping for Harvard, intent on curing cancer and reinventing physics? Were there lots of little Shockleys out there, hot-wiring the latest Intel chips to work double time?...Graham thought his donors would supply a massive intelligence boost. In fact, the genetic improvement was probably minuscule. Nobel sperm would give modest odds of slightly better genes in the half share of chromosomes supplied by the father. And even then Graham would be operating on only the nature side of the equation: he had no control over nurture-schools, upbringing, parents. This was a formula for a B-plus student, not the "secular savior" Graham hoped to breed.

This is problematic because, aside from putting words in Graham's mouth who reasonably expected "a few more creative, intelligent people", he is judging the method fundamentally flawed when the results, as far as Plotz's mini-census is able to uncover and Graham himself believed based on early reports (but was unable to confirm due to non-cooperation from the mothers), are consistent with what the simplest application of

genetics would have predicted. At no point does Plotz figure out what the results *should* have been So I will do it for him. The adult heritability of IQ is ~0.8 now, increasing during childhood, because schools/upbringing/parents just don't matter that much. The donors listed range in gifts, but an IQ of 130 seems like a reasonable guess given their general education and often scientific success (at least two donors should've been excluded by the Repository, but in both cases they are clearly well-above-average anyway). So they would be expected to yield a boost of +12 IQ points. The mothers themselves range from below average to perhaps 130s themselves, we'll guesstimate 110. The offspring will be half-related to the donor and to the mothers; so their total expected adult IQ would be 30*0.8*0.5 + 10*0.8*0.5 = 16 or ~116 with the usual 15 SD; their childhood IQs would tend to be a bit lower. What would we expect from such a group? Well, we would expect them to do well in school, be healthy, athletic, a number of them at the top of their class and MENSA level - in short, we would expect what Plotz shows us, and we expect them to basically resemble a group of Ashkenazi children given mean Jewish IQs of ~110! (Incidentally, an especially high-scoring child, such as Doron Blake would be expected to regress back to 116 due to the major instability of childhood IQ; even if Doron Blake had scored at 160 or something, very early childhood IQ correlates r=0.5 or less with final adult IQ, so Blake would be expected to end up somewhere around (160-116) * 05 or 138 IQ.) A marginal +12 IQ points is no joke; that's worth many thousands of dollars in annual income, increases the odds of graduating college, etc; and from an eugenic perspective, this is a gain that can accumulate over multiple generations. The world would look very different if each generation was 12 points smarter. (To put that in a global perspective, a mean of 12 points takes you from the UK or USA to somewhere like subsaharan Africa.)

Plotz's timeline is hopelessly pessimistic when he writes

> The Nobel sperm bank kids, I realized, were messengers from our future. We are on the brink of the age of genetic expectations. Soon-maybe not in 5 years, but probably in 50-fertility doctors will be able to identify and manipulate genes for "intelligence" and "beauty."

Indeed, not in 5 years from 2005, but he knew full well that PGD existed in 2005 since he covers it in the book and was being actively developed, and had probably heard about the 'Moore's Law for sequencing'. It didn't take 50 years, it took 8: the publication of Rietveld et al 2013 would make the identification & manipulation of intelligence genes possible, and PGD was already waiting for it. It can be done now if anyone wants to.

Describing Galton's work:

> Successful fathers had successful sons. This, Galton claimed, proved that God-given abilities were passed from one generation to the next. (It did not concern Galton that in Victorian England, advantages of birth, wealth, and education might have given the sons of famous men a career boost.)

Wrong. Galton was well aware of the issue and tried to figure out the effect of such environments, inventing

the adoption study, and finding - exactly as subsequent studies using a variety of designs have also found - that the ‘advantages of birth, wealth, and education’ didn’t count for much. Sloppy axe-grinding.

On applications of eugenics:

> The American eugenicists’ most important cause was sterilization. How they longed to cut! They thought practically everyone should get the knife: the “feebleminded,” alcoholics, epileptics, paupers, criminals, the insane, the weak, the deformed, the blind, the deaf, and the mute-and their extended families. Of course, most of the purportedly genetic ailments developed by eugenicists were not, in fact, genetic in origin.

Wrong. All of those are highly heritable and many genetic variants for them have been found, particularly alcoholism, insanity (presumably schizophrenia), and deafness. (Plotz’s arrogance is particularly offensive here as even in 2005, hundreds of deafness genes had been identified.)

> Oddly, another trait that doctors sometimes tried to match was religion, as though it had some genetic component.

Religious attitudes are heritable.

On speed of eugenics:

> And even if they had been genetic, sterilization would have been a hopelessly bad cure for them. It would have taken literally thousands of generations of mass sterilization to significantly reduce the incidence of genetic diseases. But eugenicists didn’t stop to do the math.

Likewise wrong. I have no idea where Plotz got this claim of ‘thousands of generations’ as he doesn’t cite it, but where to start… Non-disease traits respond extremely quickly to selection, which would justify eugenics on its own quite aside from diseases; the commoner diseases could be substantially decreased within a few generations (I calculated that after 20 generations, schizophrenia could be halved, which is more effective than any other anti-schizophrenia treatment currently in use…); while it might take ‘thousands of generations’ to *completely* wipe out a particular disease, that will be because it had already diminished to a great extent and as it becomes ‘harder’ to wipe out that becomes ever more unimportant; eugenicists did stop

to do the math because eugenicists like R.A. Fisher *invented* the math.

the timeline of behavioral genetics is quite bizarre:

> late 1970s. At the time, sperm collection was practically the only widely available fertility treatment that worked. Social science research was beginning to show that intelligence was at least partly heritable.

Well before then.
Plotz cites uncritically both empirically falsified Gardner's "multiple intelligences" and epigenetics
many of Plotz's criticisms make no sense or are self-contradictory; he lambasts the Repository for the idea of focusing on Nobels, and then writes "Graham wouldn't have known what to do with an oddball like Einstein." Um, no, I think Graham would've known exactly what to do with a Nobel Prize winner like Albert Einstein, since you just wrote an entire book on that topic.

a deeply disturbing anti-intellectualism trend surfaces in his descriptions of Shockley. I was particularly struck by

> Shockley himself didn't seem like much of a provocateur. He discussed incendiary topics in a bizarre manner - exactly as if he were summarizing the latest advances in semiconductor research. He was the iceman. He didn't exude hatred for blacks - he didn't have any. He didn't exude sorrow - he didn't have any of that, either. Shockley's critics assumed that his racial anxiety stemmed from some personal experience, some deep trauma, but it probably didn't. He had no particular feelings for blacks one way or another. He hardly knew any blacks. To him, his racial conclusions were simply the logical outcome of a train of thought. As far as he was concerned, once he started to address human quality, he would follow its logic wherever it took him. In his mind, his conclusions had nothing to do with any actual black person; he was simply making an irrefutable point.

One might think that in discussing a highly controversial and highly important topic, being dispassionate, having no personal grievances, and attempting to hew strictly to the science and logic would be laudable. Apparently not. Apparently if you care about it, you're a racist; if you are scientific and unbiased, then you're 'bizarre' and the 'iceman' and still a racist. This total lack of sympathy or interest in understanding Shockly's points leads Plotz into another genetics blunder:

> Shockley thought he could prove to blacks that whiteness led to intelligence. Shockley proposed to do this by measuring the percentage of "white" genes in blacks: he would show

> that the “whiter” the black person, the smarter he was. (Not that he had any real idea of how to test for “white” genes.) He asked NAACP leader Roger Wilkins to help him collect blood samples from members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other celebrated blacks, on the grounds that these accomplished people would surely prove to be significantly white. When Wilkins rejected him furiously, Shockley suggested that Stanford blood-test its five hundred black students. You can imagine how well that went over on campus.

Extracting racial ancestry and ‘white genes’ is hardly as difficult as Plotz makes it out to be, and Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza was busy doing just that at the time; ‘admixture studies’ have been extensively used throughout medicine to help pin down disease-causing variants which differ by race, and - just as Shockley proposed - have been used in the debate since then.

more overvaluation of shared-environment:

> The more I thought about it, the less surprising the maternal resemblance seemed. Most of these children had been raised only by their mothers. Their “social fathers” tended to be emotionally distant, and their biological donor fathers were out of the picture. So of course they were tied tightly to their moms. The mothers were women anxious for children, so motivated that they had chosen a genius sperm bank. Not surprisingly, they had become driven mothers. They spent more time with their kids than most parents did, certainly more than I did with mine or than my wonderful parents had with me. Was it any wonder their children grew up to be like them? I got the feeling that Samantha could have taken sperm from the dumbest player on the NFL’s worst team and would still have raised a brilliant boy. Her good genes would have helped, but so would the stimulating world she created around her. Any child would have fallen under that spell.

Plotz ignores that he spends much more time with the mothers than the donors in his quest to rescue shared-environment.

Greg says

It is essential to read the non-fiction, (stranger-than-fiction) 'The Genius Factory: Unravelling the Mysteries of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank' before reading 'My Uncle Oswald' by Roald Dahl. 'My Uncle Oswald' is not a children's book, definitely not. It is an hilarious dark satire, which Dahl wrote inspired by the enterprise in America in the 1970s and '80s of the genius sperm bank which lasted about ten years.
It is imperative to read The Genius Factory first, to appreciate the context in which Roald Dahl wrote My Uncle Oswald, a work of sheer brilliance. This novel alone is testament to Dahl being one of the 20th century's great writers, considering the events which inspired it.

Reading My Uncle Oswald in 2018 without the understanding of the context could give a misreading of the novel.
The Genius Factory is a great work of investigative journalism.

Stephen says

This looks like a popular science book, or another instalment in the endless nature/nurture debate. But in fact it's a very moving story of children plentiful and their parents and vice versa. What actually struck me the most is that intelligence doesn't make you happy-unless it is of the emotional kind

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Sarah Clark says

Part history of eugenics, part history of fertility treatment, and a heaping mystery/catfish story to uncover how this "Nobel Prize Sperm Bank" came to be and what happened to the promise of genius children. People had told me this book was funny, which it was in places, so I was surprised how wrapped up I got in the plot. Eugenics in the 1980s? Sperm banks before federal regulations? Yikes!

And then there is the philosophical, human stories that are really the base of the book. How do our genes determine who we are? What makes for family? What is a life well lived?

Overall, a quick fascinating read, even if some of the early 2000s references to CD players and old search engines give it a coating of dust.

Deborah says

So easy to read, and so much pertinent information for people interested in the role genes play in our development.

The history of eugenics was informative, and the stories of the sperm bank children anecdotal but really worth hearing.

There were bits in the middle I found a little dull, but overall, I was fascinated, and finished the book within three days.

Plotz lands firmly on the nurture side of the nature/nurture debate. Which seems to be fortunate, given the 'achievements' of the Sperminators.

MikeFromQueens says

Kind of interesting in that I was new to this subject. Probably not the best way to learn about an actual "nature versus nurture" research project, though that wasn't the purpose of the sperm bank, but it fed some of my suspicions. I found it interesting in a weird kind-of way.

Leah Lucci says

Spoiler alert: not a single baby was born from a Nobel Prize winner thanks to this bank.

The bank, which started as a very thinly-veiled eugenics project, only used white sperm to inseminate heterosexual, married white women. The book goes into the history of eugenics, the weird people who made the bank a reality, and the stark contrast between the initial plans and the disappointing reality.

The author met a lot of the donors as well as the "genius babies," their mothers, and their families. In some cases, he helped reunite the donors and their offspring, in a mix of charming and anticlimactic results.

This sperm bank, though an innovator in its time, was a total Icarus project. This was a really interesting book about a little B-side of history. It's a good read with the inevitable "it's not about your genes, but the choices you make" message.

Maayan K says

I picked this up from my gentleman-friend's house out of sheer boredom (we have very different taste in books), because I recognized David Plotz, the author, as one of the hosts of the Slate Political Gabfest, a podcast that I favour.

I'm honestly not sure why I read the whole thing - this is usually a topic I would devote a piece of journalism to perhaps but not a whole book. In fact, it did start as a series of articles by Plotz on Slate (he later went on to be the editor of the magazine).

Learning about the history of eugenics in America and the birth of the modern sperm bank industry through the lens of the so called "nobel sperm bank" was pretty interesting. The details of the various people that ran the bank and donated to it was a bit tedious at times, but what actually kept me going were the stories of the children, moms, and donors that end up connecting with each other through Plotz. These stories were touching, and the subjects are treated both critically and compassionately by the author.

The conclusion is basically no, the nobel sperm bank didn't produce a crop of geniuses. Moreover, the women that used it weren't interested in that at all - yes, some of them wanted smart kids, but most of them wanted well-rounded, healthy, and athletic ones too. Most of all they just wanted information about the donors, which the nobel sperm bank provided much more of than other options in 1980. What started as a Malthusian eugenics project ended up simply creating a model for the type of customer-focused sperm "shopping" experience we all take for granted today. There are several more layers of irony: that the three nobel prize winners who donated ended up never producing a child. That producing brilliant scientific minds wasn't really the priority of the bank's customers. That the most prolific donors weren't particularly brilliant or admirable people - merely a special brand of narcissist obsessed with spreading their seed. That the kids ended up more similar to their moms than anyone else.

The book is exhaustively reported and punchily written. Recommended, but only if you're curious about the intersection of politics, science and fertility.

Jason Fernandes says

David Plotz says in his book The Genius Factory – Unravelling the Mysteries of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank that it was not uncommon for people to respond to the subject of his book with the assumption that it was a novel. It is not. The 'Nobel Prize Sperm Bank' was real. In fact it only closed operations in 1999.

To be fair, we should make clear from the beginning that it was the media that dubbed the enterprise 'The Nobel Prize Sperm Bank'. It's official name was 'Repository for Germinal Choice'. Although it's founder, Robert Graham, was no doubt pleased with the name conferred upon it. He claimed to include at least three Nobel laureates amongst it's donors. In reality, it's donors were much more varied. This was partly due to pragmatic reasons - Nobel laureates are an awfully small group to stock a sperm bank with, and they are mostly older men whose sperm quality may be less than adequate. They also represent a very limited racial mix (especially at that time).

It may be more correct to describe the aspirations of the endeavour as a high-achiever sperm bank. Donations came, not just from those with high intelligence, but those who were successful entrepreneurs for instance. This was not always the case. One prolific donor (not just to the ‘Nobel’ bank but to several) does not seem to have had much to recommend him other than the fact that his father was a Nobel laureate! Another seems to have greatly exaggerated his intelligence and accomplishments, yet also fathered a number of children through multiple sperm banks.

As time went on, and suitable donors became hard to come by, the standards the facility set for it's donors fell dramatically. Whatever the 'Nobel Prize Sperm Bank' sought to achieve, it seems to have lacked the organisation and competence to pursue it.

If the very idea of a Nobel Prize sperm bank sounds elitist, and well, a little fascist, the author has news for you. Elitism is inescapable in the reproduction industry. Every bank practices it to some extent, largely in response to their customers, and the ‘Repository for Germinal Choice’ was very influential in the development of the industry. The demand is great, about 30,000 donor babies are born in the US each year, and customers want good options to choose from. Depending on their priorities, that may mean high intelligence, a clean medical history, career success, etc. If you are under 5'9" you are unlikely to be chosen as a donor (at least in America). You may also need a family history largely clear of heritable illness. While not necessarily essential, they will also prefer you to have at least begun post-graduate study. The elitism is an inherent and inescapable part of the nature of the industry. One can only imagine the bar continuing to be raised.

While we should not confuse the reproduction industry with a eugenics program, one cannot escape the fact that the effects of competition and consumer choice mean that selection is inevitably based on a perception of preferred stock. It is problematic to criticise such choices when, even with natural reproduction, we all have criteria for characteristics of the ideal mate and mother/father of our children. Both natural and artificial insemination is not random but is selected with a perception, rational or otherwise, of desired characteristics.

Mention eugenics and most people immediately think of Nazi Germany. It pays to recall that such ideas at the time were not only present in other countries but often had considerable support. One hopes that our distaste for such ideas today is owing to the lesson of history and our (relatively) more enlightened age. Although one can't help but suspect that much of our abhorrence is due to a biased interpretation - painting everything associated with Nazism with the same broad brush. What I was unaware of, until reading this book, was that such 20th century movements had their origins in America of the late 19th century. It was the largely white-protestant population's response to their concerns over freed slaves and increased immigration, particularly of Jews and Catholics, from Europe. Combined with neo-Darwinism, such concerns became manifest in eugenic ideas to preserve a racial heritage. Influential books were written. The author of one

received a fan letter from Hitler who called the book his “bible”!

Plotz is a journalist, not a doctor, scientist, economist or moralist and is more concerned with the ‘human’ story

The basic concept of breeding outstanding individuals though is as old as civilisation. Plotz's telling of the history of eugenic ideas, artificial insemination, donor insemination and the reproduction industry is one of the more interesting parts of the book. I especially enjoyed the bizarre story of what is believed to be the first donor-provided artificial insemination.

However I wanted more. I wanted to know more about the scientific validity (or otherwise) of such ideas. At one point Plotz mentions that if we were to institute a policy of sterilising people with ‘undesirable’ characteristics, it would still take “thousands of generations of mass sterilisation to significantly reduce the incidence of genetic disease”. Such facts are terrible interesting but are largely absent in this book. This leaves the reader in no better possession of facts to hold a view of their own.

There is also little discussion about any facts as to the heritability of intelligence, (or other desired qualities) which you would think would be central to the topic at hand. I also would have liked more discussion on the logical strengths and failings of the views of those who support such a project as the ‘Noble Prize Sperm Bank'. Plotz does highlight one serious flaw in one common argument - if it is true that the world is increasingly populated by 'slackers', living and out-breeding in a comfort provided by the work of scientists, inventors and entrepreneurs, then surely an effort to increase the portion of scientists, inventors and entrepreneurs, will only increase the effect. Again such arguments are terribly interesting to the uninitiated reader but are not explored in any depth.

Plotz does give more space to some of the ethical and moral dilemmas of the industry, particularly concerning children's rights to know the identity of their genetic fathers. Again, I would have liked to hear about more concerns and in more depth.

Plotz is a journalist, not a doctor, scientist, economist or moralist and my disappointments above are probably a reflection of this. One could also argue that such areas may be beyond the scope of this particular book and could only be covered briefly. Plotz is more concerned with telling the 'human story' - the story of the individuals involved - the bank's creator Robert Graham, William Shockley – the only Nobel laureate to confirm his donation – and the few donors and children he was able to track down.

(I am eagerly looking forward to reading the highly-praised book; The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot, which I hope does not suffer such shortcomings)

The influence of the ‘Nobel Prize Sperm Bank’ is felt throughout the industry

Telling the 'human story' in parallel with the historical aspect also creates a dichotomy within the book. For the most part, the 'human story' is a personal, subjective narrative, including the author's own experience as a donor. The rest is a mostly objective look at the history of artificial insemination, eugenics and the 'Nobel Prize Sperm Bank' in particular. I say 'mostly objective' because there were some passages where I sensed judgement on the part of Plotz. To be fair we are talking about some distasteful characters here. Robert Graham, the eccentric multi-millionaire who founded the bank, certainly held a racist outlook. However, from the information provided his racism was complex, contradictory and malleable and I suspect it was mostly the result of his upbringing and limited experience and viewpoint rather than something endemic. William Shockley, the Nobel laureate for the co-invention (or theft, depending on your interpretation of the events) of the transistor on the other hand seems to have been a racist by conviction and a thoroughly distasteful character. However we must be wary of dismissing opinions or ideas simply because we dislike the individual who espouses them. This is why the book needs thorough discussion on these ideas and the

scientific and logical rationale behind them, or rather the lack thereof. As I say, I sensed judgement on the part of Plotz where the personal and historical narratives get confused, and would have preferred he delivered the facts - separate from own opinion/interpretation - and left any judgement in the hands of the reader.

Similarly, there is a passage where Plotz describes an unproven (in humans) scientific theory and then discusses his own anecdotal evidence (oxymoron!) in support of it! His point may have been only to say that the heritability of characteristics is complex and we cannot make assumptions, but his observations come across as an assumption just as baseless. To be fair, he later reminds us that his small, biased sample could never be used to support any conclusions.

The bank was hardly a success. When it closed operations in 1999 it had produced only 215 children in 19 years, none of whom came from a Nobel Prize winning donor. However, it's influence is felt throughout the industry, particularly their policies of donor choice, donor-testing and high-achieving donors. For all his personal, ideological and public-relations failings, as a businessman Graham understood that he needed to understand the needs of his customers. For example, the 'Repository for Germinal Choice' was one of the first banks to put their prospective donors through medical tests and provide customers with the donor’s medical history. It appears, from what we know, that many of the women who sought semen from the 'Repository for Germinal Choice' did so because of this information rather than any impulse to breed highly intelligent children. Many of the women worked in the health industry - doctors and nurses - who gave the health characteristics of any donor a higher priority.

Today, artificial insemination is more than an industry. It is a necessity for many couples. Plunging fertility rates will only increase the need for it's service. The risk of accidental incest amongst donor children has become very real. Such concerns, and the issue of donor anonymity, will increasingly be addressed in the public forum and the public will be better informed thanks to the interest generated by books like David Plotz's. I found it an accessible, enjoyable and interesting read. However to be truly well-informed, it would be best to supplement this book with something that goes into the issues with greater depth and the information in greater detail. These areas are probably beyond the scope of this book and beyond the reach of it's author.

Peter says

The story of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank, created by a rich entrepreneur who thought that the human genome was being forever compromised because the less intelligent were still allowed to breed. Goes beyond that initial wackiness, however, to explore the children resulting from the sperm bank, what they had become as teenagers, and how they felt upon meeting their biological fathers. Brings up all kinds of complex ethical conundrums surrounding sperm donation and the children brought into this world because of it.

Jane says

Non-fiction. Plotz, a reporter, tells the story of Robert Graham’s plan tell “improve” the human race through superior breeding – using sperm from Nobel prize winners! This seems almost too weird to be true. What makes this account truly fascinating is that Plotz interweaves the stories of Graham, the sperm bank, some of the donors (almost all were not Nobel winners), and some of the children. I wonder what medical ethicists think of the encounters between the children and their donor fathers

Melki says

At first it doesn't seem like such a bad idea, trying to ensure a smarter populace. Then words like "racism" and "eugenics" raise their ugly heads. People become specimens, and a whole lot of crazies begin to emerge from the woodwork.

In 1980, Robert K. Graham, a multi-millionaire who made his fortune inventing shatterproof plastic eyeglass lenses, dreamed of a race of super geniuses; the sperm of Nobel prize winners + the eggs of Mensa women = an improved human race. And voila, the Repository for Germinal Choice was born. Highly controversial from the get-go, the facility closed in 1999 after gracing the world with 215 "genius" babies.

From the start, the center had trouble attracting donors. Graham, an unabashed conservative and fan of "big bidness" supplemented his supply with sperm from business men, scientists, college professors, and medical students - basically the same juice that's up for grabs at run-of-the-mill sperm banks.

By now you're probably brimming with questions like:

*** Did they give the brainy donors centerfolds of Margaret Mead and Marie Curie to get them in the mood?
*** Graham claims there was no "inspirational literature", though many donors produced their samples at home and called for pick-up.

*** What about the kids? Are they super smart?
*** The answer to that one is NO. Like the children of Lake Wobegon, they are above average, but most were raised by intelligent, single mothers who pushed them to achieve. In the contest of nature vs nurture, the hyper-involved moms nudged the needle into the latter category.

*** What kind of a man donates sperm?
*** The range varies from men who genuinely want to help a stranger conceive to creeps you wouldn't want sitting next to you on a bar stool.

Which brings me to "Michael", one of the donors who is also the son of a Nobel prize-winning scientist.

Michael, I learned, was a man of little renown. It was not clear whether he had a job.
He referred to sperm donation, unironically, as "work." He was the only person I have ever heard of - outside the porn industry - who thought of masturbation as labor. ...he called it "work" because it was the most productive activity in his life.
As we talked, he ticked off his employers on his fingers.
"Oh, there were probably half a dozen doctors I worked for, plus two or three sperm banks." All in all, he had spent fifteen years masturbating. It had, he admitted, been exhausting.

Michael was now fifty, and sperm bank age restrictions prevented him from donating anymore.

...but Michael's eagerness to reproduce had not faded with age.
He wanted to give away the samples himself.
He was hoping to find a woman who would let him stay in touch with the child. Not that he intended to financially support the kid or be a father - he just wanted to check in when it was convenient.

When asked why he had spent the better part of his life donating sperm, Michael began to channel Charlie Sheen:

"...this is what evolutionary biology is all about. Winning is passing on your genes, and losing is failing to do so.
And I wanted to win!" He spoke this last sentence with a smug grin. It was just about the creepiest thing I have ever heard anyone say.

There you have it, folks. AND, there are at least 50 lil' offspring running around sportin' this guy's genes. *shudder*

The good news is that not every donor was like this jerk. We also meet "Roger" who is curious about his children, yet does not wish to interfere in their lives. He speaks eloquently about fathering children he has never seen:

"Fathering children anonymously is somewhat akin to producing paintings that to you are beautiful and priceless, but doing this with the understanding that when they are finished they must be given away and likely never seen again."

Plotz does an excellent job covering this unusual subject matter. His conversational tone keeps things light, and his sense of humor cracked me up several times - a photo of some sperm captioned, "Who's your daddy?", his habit of referring to reproductive opportunists as "The Inseminators", and this quote by a sperm bank employee, "He had so much sperm, and it was so active."

And oh yeah, I learned plenty, including things I didn't really want to know such as the possibility of donor's children committing "accidental incest." Stuff like that...

This book was surprising, outrageous, and occasionally quite touching. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested in science, biology, or genetics. Or anyone who was once a baby.

Beverly Hollandbeck says

This was really interesting. A racist eugenicist decides he can save America by creating superior children, and to that end he establishes a sperm bank that advertises sperm from Nobel prize winners. The Nobel part doesn't pan out too well, but only white, intelligent, athletic types of males are accepted as donors. Reading about the history of such an endeavor might sound dry, but in interviewing the women who availed themselves of his product, the children conceived by the process, and a couple of donors, an emotional, sometimes heart-breaking story emerges. And we are not talking about a long time ago. The sperm bank closed in 1999.
