

THE HIDDEN HABITS OF GENIUS

by Craig Wright

TEACHING GUIDE

About the Book:

Einstein. Beethoven. Picasso. Jobs. The word genius evokes these iconic figures, whose cultural contributions have irreversibly shaped society.

Yet Beethoven could not multiply. Picasso couldn't pass a 4th grade math test. And Jobs left high school with a 2.65 GPA. What does this say about our metrics for measuring success and achievement today? Why do we teach children to behave and play by the rules, when the transformative geniuses of Western culture have done just the opposite? And what is genius, really?

Professor Craig Wright, creator of Yale University's popular "Genius Course," has devoted more than two decades to exploring these questions and probing the nature of this term, which is deeply embedded in our culture. In *The Hidden Habits of Genius*, he reveals what we can learn from the lives of those we have dubbed "geniuses," past and present.

Examining the lives of transformative individuals ranging from Charles Darwin and Marie Curie to Leonardo Da Vinci and Andy Warhol to Toni Morrison and Elon Musk, Wright identifies more than a dozen drivers of genius—characteristics and patterns of behavior common to great minds throughout history. He argues that genius is about more than intellect and work ethic—it is far more complex—and that the famed "eureka" moment is a Hollywood fiction. Brilliant insights that change the world are never sudden, but rather, they are the result of unique modes of thinking and lengthy gestation. Most importantly, the habits of mind that produce great thinking and discovery can be actively learned and cultivated, and Wright shows us how.

This book won't make you a genius. But embracing the hidden habits of these transformative individuals will make you more strategic, creative, and successful, and, ultimately, happier.

About the Author:

Craig Wright is the Henry L. and Lucy G. Moses Professor Emeritus of Music at Yale University, where he teaches the popular undergraduate course, "Exploring the Nature of Genius." A Guggenheim Fellow, Wright has received an honorary Doctorate of Human Letters from the University of Chicago, is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and was awarded the Sewall Prize for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at Yale (2016) as well as the DeVane Medal for Excellence in Teaching and Scholarship (2018). He holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the Eastman School of Music and a Ph.D. from Harvard.

About this Guide:

This guide is organized into two sections: discussion questions that ask both larger thematic questions about the book as a means of allowing students to think across the entire text, as well as questions which put parts of *The Hidden Habits of Genius* in conversation with each other.

A set of writing prompts is also included; these questions can also be used for discussion.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the difference between being talented or gifted and being a genius?
2. What are epigenes? How do they help us to better understand genius?
3. Why are IQ tests, SAT tests, and grades unrealizable predictors of career success? What should we use instead to predict career success?
4. The enrollment in Wright's genius course tends to skew sixty-forty male-female. Why do fewer women tend to gravitate towards Wright's course? What does this reveal about the correlation between gender and genius?
5. What is the difference between prodigy and genius? Why do people mistakenly think these terms are synonymous? Knowing this, how might you rear your children differently?

6. “The great fame of a few prodigies—Mozart and Picasso, for example—clouds our judgment. Their lives suggest that the prodigy-to-genius journey is the norm.” (60). Why do prodigies rarely go on to become geniuses?
7. What are some of the ways that geniuses have used imagination to achieve success? Why is imagination necessary for genius to flourish?
8. What is the difference between passion and obsession? At what point does passion become dangerous and turn into an unhealthy obsession?
9. What is the correlation between genius and mental disorder? In what ways can neurological difference enable genius?
10. In what ways does risk-taking help to foster genius?
11. What is cross-border thinking? What are the benefits?
12. What are some examples of geniuses who have exploited contradictions in order to unlock their full potential to create transformative insights in science or works of art?
13. “In truth, geniuses do not spring from ... the economic extremes of society.” (192) Why do geniuses rarely arise from economic extremes?
14. What are the positives and negatives of the obsessive behavior geniuses often exhibit?

Writing Prompts

1. Wright defines a genius as “a person of extraordinary mental powers whose original works or insights change society in some significant way for good or for ill across cultures and across time.” Do you agree with this definition of genius? Why or why not?
2. “We forget that the standard for genius is based on accomplishment, not character. We fail to see that accomplishment and morality may operate independently.” Why is the bad behavior of geniuses often overlooked? What does this reveal about our society?
3. From Pablo Picasso and Marie Curie to Lady Gaga and Kanye West, *The Hidden Habits of Genius* features the stories of a number of brilliant minds past and present. Select one the geniuses featured in the book and discuss which of the fourteen principles of genius this individual demonstrates. What can non-geniuses learn from their life and behavior?

