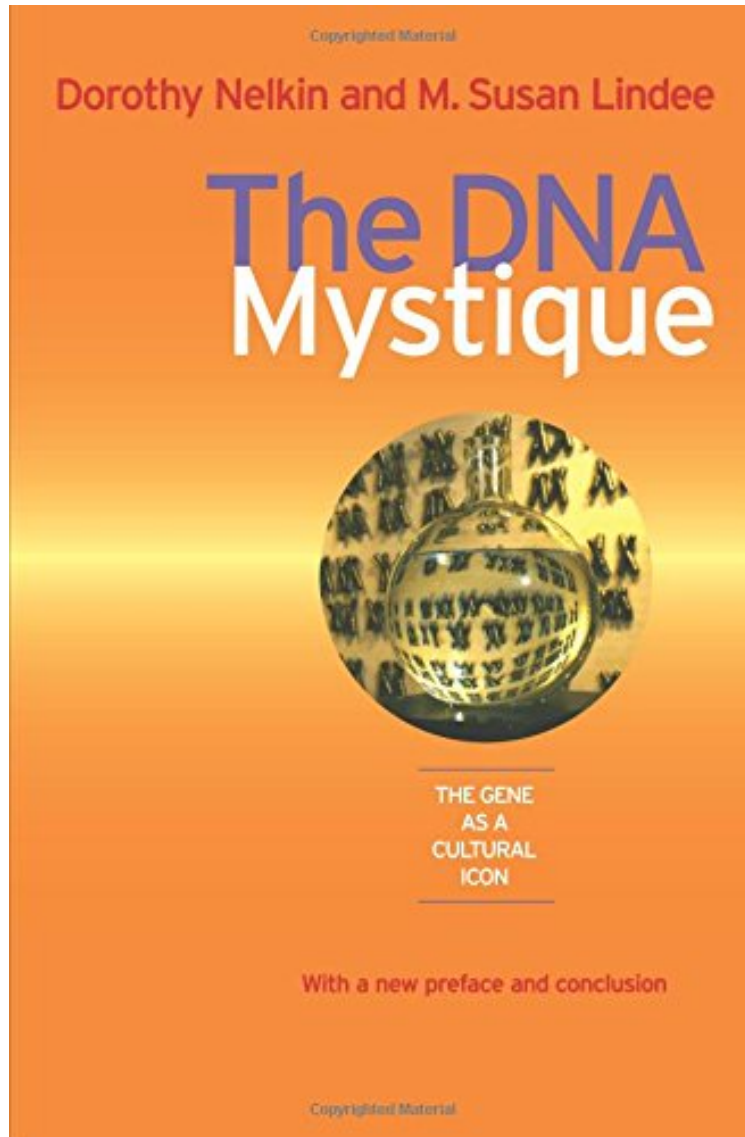


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Dorothy Nelkin, M. Susan Lindee
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Dorothy Nelkin, M. Susan Lindee : The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon (Conversations in Medicine and Society) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon (Conversations in Medicine and Society):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A well-written, broad review of the culture of genetics By Richard Stowell Nelkin and Lindee explore the way DNA has seeped into so many crevices in the popular culture, and how the

cultural reflection of DNA science affects our expectations of the science. It is very much a book about public presentations and interpretations of science. It is, when it comes down to it, a cultural report. Drawing on dozens of cases from popular media, Nelkin and Lindee trace the variety of ways that DNA and the gene has been used as a metaphor a stand in for ideas about humanity--family, race, intelligence. The everyday, "uncritical" material is their main object of study: from Star Trek to TIME. But they do not shy away from the sacred, either as metaphor or artifact. "Habitual images and familiar metaphors...provide the cultural forms that make ideas communicable" (p. 12). I couldn't agree more, and such a realization is helpful when approaching anything scientifically. Much of what is familiar in our world touches on the religious, an aspect of the book that I found captivating. The idea of collecting DNA relics is interesting, especially compared to the collection of Christian objects. Ostensibly doing so serves the purpose of getting to know something better, to forge a connection. Ironically, one of the beauties of Christian doctrine is that someone can know Christ spiritually without the help of physical contact. Exploring the secular, the analogy with Lincoln relics is also insightful. We know a fair bit about him, but we want to know more and with more certainty. We hope DNA can give us that certainty. But science never brings us certainty about the esoteric truths. To the authors, DNA, too has become "an object to think with," and they explain how different groups have put it to use toward their own ends (p. 16). I also like their analysis of the rhetoric used to describe infertility on page 63. Life as lottery underscores some of the tensions that genetics and culture create. Genes themselves are rhetorical devices (p. 124). At the heart of the story is that tension, and science "becomes a way to empower prevailing beliefs" (p. 100). It raises a question about whether science is a headlamp guiding our way through the universe only a reflection of we want to see. I guess that is the ages-old question, but *The DNA Mystique* does a good of bring it to the fore in a contemporary way. In the main, their work is top notch. It's even handed and broad. One complaint is that it is sometimes too even handed, given each side of the report without a counterpoint. I struggled with this because I like objectivity, and I'm not arguing for taking a side, by any means. But I think by reporting the facets of debate, the authors assume the debate matters. I'm not convinced that it does. For instance, they quote a William Sadler as saying that in 330 years everyone in the country will be a "raving maniac." Of course they probably believe it's nonsense. But the debate here is about what effect the public discussions of science has on society. Maybe none. Or none that we can measure. But humanity goes on despite. A major theme in *The DNA Mystique* is freewill. Much of their discussion, I realize, is not to debate whether genetics can predispose someone to some behavior like criminality (though they never answer that themselves). Nobody seems to have asked if criminal's parents exercised freewill? Or were they fated to do evil as well? I bring up freewill because it is often absent these scientific debates. This caught my eye, as it appeared in one form or another on multiple occasions: Many observers worry that "the next generation won't be fit to cope with the world" (p. 174). But it will be their world. They will cope with it, somehow. Humanity is not an epic battle between people and their environment. It is the story of how people struggle to cooperate, to build up institutions and extend themselves into new endeavors. A big part of that story has been competition and war. That will probably never change. And those who think we are at some cusp of a breakthrough that science can help to secure are deluded. Now, individual societies may crumble based on demographics, environment, failure to adapt, or bad policy, but that is a different matter. The latest work done by Charles Murray (who is a social and political scientist, not merely a "conservative critic," as Nelkin and Lindee refer to him almost dismissively) is about how American society is rending along lines of marriage and class. But that has little to do with genetics; those are matters of choice. Murray would probably be the first to assert that policy and culture have much more of a profound effect on those trends. But that brings us to some interesting political implications of *The DNA Mystique*. Historian Daniel Keyes "expects that a new eugenics will not recur, blocked by the democratic nature of our social institutions." Democracy is no more a guarantor of an outcome than culture or genes are. His is only a guess. Science can be seized by advocacy groups to advance any number of policy objectives. Often, and especially, in a democratic society, when such groups can't convince majorities by traditional means, they resort to science. Also, give the vast regulatory apparatus in the US, science-based policy can be implemented without consulting the public in any meaningful way. Conservatives and liberals alike, I'm sure, can find examples. Moreover, the most populated nation on earth, China, has a restrictive birth policy that is not too far afield from the scenario that Keyes describes as implausible. It could be that the nature of our social institutions is irrelevant in the long run. Finally, this book touched me in a way that others have not. As a father, I worry about the determinism of genetics. At conception, those things are locked in. But I am convinced that our upbringing has a lot to do with it (how could I not be?). Even if all the scientific data in the world told me that my sons' genes determined their outcome in life, I would still do everything I could to provide them with the type of nurturing environment to overcome their predispositions. Those scientists who had almost opposite view of nature-nurture in the 1980s and their counterparts in the 1990s weren't stupid. You can always find a scientist who believes something. Consensus is always in flux, though I know Prof. Lawson would caution against putting too much into that claim. Nevertheless, the bounds around a consensual understanding of anything are always blurry. Yet, in our society we put so much stock into what is "fashionable" (a term Nelkin and Lindee used more than once) at any given moment. In fact, popular culture is all about what is fashionable.

"The DNA Mystique is a wake-up call to all who would dismiss America's love affair with 'the gene' as a merely eccentric obsession."--In These Times" Nelkin and Lindee are to be warmly congratulated for opening up this intriguing field [of genetics in popular culture] to further study."--Nature

The DNA Mystique suggests that the gene in popular culture draws on scientific ideas but is not constrained by the technical definition of the gene as a section of DNA that codes for a protein. In highlighting DNA as it appears in soap operas, comic books, advertising, and other expressions of mass culture, the authors propose that these domains provide critical insights into science itself. With a new introduction and conclusion, this edition will continue to be an engaging, accessible, and provocative text for the sociology, anthropology, and bioethics classroom, as well as stimulating reading for those generally interested in science and culture.