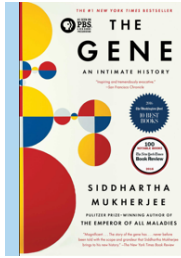


Discussion Guide



The Gene: An Intimate History
Siddhartha Mukherjee

Scribner
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592 pages
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Human Genetics
DNA & U

Summary

Framing Mukherjee's story are pieces of his own family history: His cousin and two of his uncles "suffered from various unravelings of the mind," and the specter of mental illness, presumably inherited or inheritable, haunts his family and his imagination. The books form a magnificent pair. "The Emperor of All Maladies" is, as Mukherjee notes, the story of the genetic code corrupted, tipping into malignancy. The new book, then, serves as its prequel.

1. Gregor Mendel's discovery of heredity went unnoticed for years – why do you think the scientific community was unwilling to take note of his work, and do you think this is something that could still happen today?
2. Many of Darwin's contemporaries believed there were inherent differences between races genetically, and that some were superior to others. What does *The Gene* tell us about genetics that invalidates racial categorization and racial hierarchy?
3. Mukherjee's exploration of eugenics gives us a chilling reminder of how science can be manipulated to justify evil. Do you think it would be better to limit scientific research to prevent information being used to prop up morally questionable ideas? Who is responsible for ensuring this doesn't happen?
4. Rosalind Franklin's work on the structure of DNA was vital to Watson and Crick's discovery, yet she did not receive the same level of recognition. Do you think this was purely down to her position as a female scientist at the time, or were there other factors at play?
5. The last section of *The Gene* shows us the elastic potential of genetic engineering – what do you think the future would look like if we were unlimited in our ability to alter the human genome? What would be your concerns, and the advantages?
6. The story of Mukherjee's own family is woven throughout the book, and it helps us appreciate the relevance of genetics to everyday life – how has reading *The Gene* made you reflect on yourself and your own family's story?

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