



Divine Fury: A History of Genius

By Darrin M. McMahon

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Genius. With hints of madness and mystery, moral license and visionary force, the word suggests an almost otherworldly power: the power to create, to divine the secrets of the universe, even to destroy. Yet the notion of genius has been diluted in recent times. Today, rock stars, football coaches, and entrepreneurs are labeled 'geniuses,' and the word is applied so widely that it has obscured the sense of special election and superhuman authority that long accompanied it.

As acclaimed historian Darrin M. McMahon explains, the concept of genius has roots in antiquity, when men of prodigious insight were thought to possess—or to be possessed by—demons and gods. Adapted in the centuries that followed and applied to a variety of religious figures, including prophets, apostles, sorcerers, and saints, abiding notions of transcendent human power were invoked at the time of the Renaissance to explain the miraculous creativity of men like Leonardo and Michelangelo.

Yet it was only in the eighteenth century that the genius was truly born, idolized as a new model of the highest human type. Assuming prominence in figures as varied as Newton and Napoleon, the modern genius emerged in tension with a growing belief in human equality. Contesting the notion that all are created equal, geniuses served to dramatize the exception of extraordinary individuals not governed by ordinary laws. The phenomenon of genius drew scientific scrutiny and extensive public commentary into the 20th century, but it also drew religious and political longings that could be abused. In the genius cult of the Nazis and the outpouring of reverence for the redemptive figure of Einstein, genius achieved both its apotheosis and its Armageddon.

The first comprehensive history of this elusive concept, *Divine Fury* follows the fortunes of genius and geniuses through the ages down to the present day, showing how—despite its many permutations and recent democratization—genius remains a potent force in our lives, reflecting modern needs, hopes, and fears.

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Divine Fury: A History of Genius By Darrin M. McMahon Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #103837 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Basic Books
- Published on: 2013-10-22
- Released on: 2013-10-22
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.63" h x 1.25" w x 6.50" l, 1.30 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 360 pages

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review The word genius used to be reserved for exceptional individuals on the order of Albert Einstein but is now used so casually that we may all have our 15 minutes of genius, according to McMahon. He traces the origins of the concept of genius to religious notions about the intermediation between individuals and God, with angels and demons seen as the source of genius delivered from on high—or low. With the Reformation came new perspectives on nature versus nurture, and the culture of genius emerged as part of a reaction to a broader concept that God and angels are not directing every minute of human life. Ever since Socrates, philosophy, religion, and psychology have debated the source of genius, the timeless struggle to determine where the divine leaves off and the human begins. McMahon details scores of geniuses among poets, artists, philosophers, military strategists, scientists, industrialists, and tyrants as the concept of genius has been democratized. He raises important questions about the nature of genius and whether geniuses can and should be identified and lauded beyond the rest. A sweeping, completely engaging look at a subject that has fascinated humans through the ages. --Vanessa Bush

Review

Lynn Hunt, author of *Inventing Human Rights*

“This elegant and probing book is about much more than genius—it is about why we think of ourselves as we do. Demons, saints, angels, poets, physicists, and generals parade through these pages, offering the reader an extraordinary series of insights into the modern tension between the cult of celebrity and a deepening suspicion of greatness.”

Mark Lilla, author of *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*

“What an illuminating book Darrin McMahon has given us. By tracing the history of a seemingly simple idea—that of the individual genius—he sheds a bright and sometimes disturbing light on how we think about ourselves and our societies today. Drawing artfully on a wide range of philosophical, religious, artistic, and scientific material, McMahon forces us to ask: why are we so eager to identify geniuses? What do we expect from them, and why? After reading his compelling story you may never use the term ‘genius’ again.”

New York Times Book Review

“[An] erudite and engaging history of genius...McMahon is refreshingly unafraid to embrace the mythic dimension of his subject as part of its true importance, an approach that offers to deepen, not undermine, our appreciation of genius.”

Wall Street Journal

“A deeply researched history of the idea of genius in the Western world.”

New York Review of Books

“A rich narrative...an intriguing story.”

Nation

“An engaging survey of the history of genius in European culture...McMahon tells the history of genius with verve, wit and insight, and his book is a pleasure to read.... *Divine Fury* makes innumerable fascinating connections and weaves many threads into a coherent narrative spanning 2,500 years. No theoretical

statement could vindicate a revived history of ideas so well as this exemplary work...a superb book that judiciously blends celebrations of genius with cautionary tales.”

Daily Beast

“A fascinating account of the evolution of the idea of genius in Western culture from its divine origins in ancient Greece and Rome to the modern culture of celebrity.”

Psychology Today.com

“This absorbing history of ideas about genius includes genius's 'intimate connection to the divine,' as well as the social construction of genius. From the ancients to today, every possible aspect of this fascinating topic is explored.... It's a book for scholars, certainly, but also for anyone wanting to get behind and beyond the way genius is discussed in popular media.”

***Booklist*, starred review**

“A sweeping, completely engaging look at a subject that has fascinated humans through the ages.”

Library Journal

“There have been many studies of the idea of genius, but a signal virtue of this new account is its comprehensiveness...[An]exceptional intellectual history...A gem of a book to be widely read by scholars in many fields, not just in the history of ideas.”

Publishers Weekly

“McMahon delivers a comprehensive look at the concept of genius in all its philosophical glory...Covering topics from science to the arts to philosophy, the book offers a densely packed, earnest look at how genius has been viewed throughout the centuries.”

Choice

“Offers an ambitious survey of genius and geniuses.... McMahon uncovers a rich metaphysical tradition associated with genius, intriguing linguistic connections, and a fascinating historical response to genius.... McMahon highlights a phenomenon that invites discussion.... Recommended.”

Buffalo News

“An exceptional work of accessibly written scholarship that seems poised to usher the history of ideas back into vogue.... A book that is bound to intrigue anyone interested in the concept of genius, especially today when it seems that anyone and everyone can be one.”

Commentary Magazine

“A work at once erudite and intellectually penetrating and immensely readable.”

Brain Pickings

“A fascinating, first-of-its-kind chronicle of the evolution of genius as a cultural concept, its permutations across millennia of creative history, and its more recent role as a social equalizer and a double-edged sword of democratization.... *Divine Fury* is excellent in its entirety.”

Samuel Moyn, Columbia University, author of *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*

“As Darrin McMahon shows, the genius is the god among men—providing one of the last connections to the transcendent that our common secular culture retains, and setting up a struggle between our desire for exceptional beings and our leveling egalitarianism. In its absorbing and remarkable way, *Divine Fury* educates and entertains, vindicating the importance of grand history told over the long term.”

Daniel Gilbert, Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *Stumbling on Happiness*

“Darrin McMahon has become one of the world's greatest historians of ideas. His analysis of genius is eye-opening and original, his insights are deep and fresh, and his prose is sparkling and subtle. Prepare to be blown away.”

Jim Holt, author of *Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story*

“Darrin McMahon has given us all we could want in an intellectual history of genius—I especially liked his sharp observations on the cult of Michelangelo and his droller ones on Einstein—in prose that is a delight to read for its elegance and lucidity.”

About the Author

Darrin M. McMahon is the Ben Weider Professor of History at Florida State University. The author of *Happiness: A History* and *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, he lives in Tallahassee, Florida.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

William Ullrich:

Do you have favorite book? Should you have, what is your favorite's book? Reserve is very important thing for us to understand everything in the world. Each guide has different aim or perhaps goal; it means that guide has different type. Some people really feel enjoy to spend their time to read a book. They are really reading whatever they have because their hobby will be reading a book. Think about the person who don't like studying a book? Sometime, individual feel need book after they found difficult problem as well as exercise. Well, probably you will want this *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*.

Timothy Grill:

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