

Genie: A Scientific Tragedy Study Guide

Genie: A Scientific Tragedy by Russ Rymer

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Plot Summary

Genie: A Scientific Tragedy is the first book written by journalist Russ Rymer. This book explores the scientific actions taken when a thirteen year old girl was rescued after years of social isolation. Genie spent her childhood from the age of twenty months until she was thirteen strapped to an infant potty chair in a dark room of her father's house. This was done by the father in an attempt to protect what he thought was a mentally retarded child. Upon her rescue, Genie could not speak except a few simple phrases more than likely spoken to her repeatedly throughout her captivity. Genie became a celebrity in the scientific community, surrounded by scientists who wanted to study her. Somewhere along the way these eager scientists forgot they were dealing with a deeply disturbed child. *Genie: A Scientific Tragedy* chronicles Genie's life from the moment of her rescue until the moment science forgot about her, leaving the reader with a story that is both tragic and in some ways triumphant.

Genie's mother, Irene, married a man more than twenty years older than herself. At first they had a happy marriage, although it was often overshadowed by the demands of the husband, Clark's, mother. However, Clark made it clear to his wife that he did not want children. Despite this, Irene gave birth to a daughter who was left by Clark to die of exposure in the garage. A short time later, Irene gave birth to a healthy boy who survived thanks to the intervention of his grandmother. Another daughter would die from Rh blood poisoning. When Genie was born, she too suffered Rh blood poisoning but was saved by a blood transfusion at birth.

When Genie was still an infant, Clark's mother was killed by a hit and run driver. The driver was caught, but received a lenient sentence for the death. Clark was so distraught over this that he moved his family into his mother's house and shut them off from the world. When told that Genie was more than likely mentally retarded due to her blood transfusion at birth, Clark became convinced that he had to protect her from the outside world. Clark made a harness and used it to restrain Genie to an infant potty chair, left alone all day in a dark bedroom at the back of the house. Genie would be moved to a crib that was built of mesh at night, encased in a sleeping bag that was more of a straight jacket than a bedcover. Clark would often beat Genie if she made noise and would bark outside the door to frighten her into silence.

Irene, who had gone blind due to cataracts and a neurological problem, felt as though she too were a prisoner in the home because there was little she could do without her husband's help. Eventually, however, Irene convinced her husband to call her parents and allow her to leave with the children. A short time later, Irene went to ask for aid from the health department's services for the blind, but happened into the general social services office by mistake. A social worker noticed Genie's odd stance and called her supervisor, thinking she had stumbled onto a case of undiagnosed autism.

Genie was taken to Childrens Hospital in Los Angeles and placed under the care of the psychiatry department. Immediately Genie was seen by a large number of doctors, including David Rigler who would eventually become her foster father. After weeks in

the hospital, Genie was moved to the rehabilitation center associated with the hospital where she would come under the care of teacher, Jean Butler. After exposing the child to rubella, Butler would be granted temporary custody of Genie. Butler requested to become Genie's foster mother, but her petition was denied. Within days Genie would be moved into the Rigler home.

Genie came out of her family's home with only the ability to say a few simple phrases. During her time in the rehabilitation center and in Butler's home, Genie developed the ability to speak two and three word sentences. Genie, who was not potty trained when she was rescued, would learn to control her bowels in Butler's home, but lose this ability for a time in the Rigler home. In time, however, Genie would settle in well at the Rigler home and learn to control the temper tantrums and other behavioral problems that appeared to keep her from learning to speak.

When Genie turned eighteen, it became clear to all the scientists involved in her case that Genie would never learn to speak properly. The Rigers lost their grant to conduct scientific research on Genie and chose to have her returned to the custody of her mother. Within months, Irene, unable to care for Genie alone, had her placed in foster care. The first few foster homes where Genie resided proved to be abusive, causing her to be moved frequently.

In the late seventies, linguist Susan Curtiss released a book form publication of her dissertation dealing with Genie's case. Spurred on by Butler, Irene sued Curtiss, the other scientists actively involved in Genie's case, and Childrens Hospital. The case lingered for six years, finally ending without the hoped for financial reward Butler and Irene were looking for.



Chapter 1, Found

Chapter 1, Found Summary and Analysis

Russ Rymer is a journalist who heard about Genie's case in a passing comment from a linguist at the University of Illinois. This led Rymer to send an article proposal to The New Yorker. In time, despite the reluctance of the scientists to speak to Rymer, he became obsessed with Genie's story, befriended her mother, and decided to turn the article into a full length book.

It has long been a question for scientists throughout history to discover exactly how a child learns to talk. In the late seventh century BC, the king of Egypt took two children and sent them to live isolated in a shepherd's hut to find out if they would learn to speak even without hearing speech. These two children apparently learned to ask for bread in the language of the Phrygians, a language the children clearly could never have heard. This led the king to believe that children are born with an ability to speak and with a language of their own. Ever since this time, many scientists have debated the nature over nurture idea of language.

Irene was born in Oklahoma and raised by poor parents and family friends whom she calls Mamaw and Dadaw. As a young adult, Irene met Clark, a man twenty years her senior. Their marriage was a good one the first few years. However, it was often overshadowed by Clark's allegiance to his mother. As Irene and Clark settled down to a life together, he made it clear he did not want the noise and nuisance of children. Therefore, when Irene gave birth to a daughter, Clark left it in the garage where it would die of exposure. In the next few years, Irene would give birth to a son, who survived thanks to the interference of his grandmother, a daughter, who would die of Rh blood poisoning, and Genie.

Not long after Genie's birth, Clark's mother was killed by a hit and run driver. The driver was found, but was given an exceedingly lenient sentence. Convinced the world was a cruel and unsafe place, Clark moved his family into his mother's home and kept them prisoner there. Told by a doctor after a rare examination that Genie was more than likely mentally retarded due to a blood transfusion at birth to prevent Rh blood poisoning, Clark decided he must protect his daughter from the outside world. Clark made a harness and used it to tie Genie to an infant potty chair where she would remain constantly except on the rare occasions when he parents remembered to move her to her crib, which was made of mesh, had a cover, and where she was placed inside a sleeping bag that was more straightjacket than bedcover.

For twelve years Irene remained a prisoner in her husband's home with her children. Then, after one particularly violent episode, blind Irene managed to convince her husband to call her parents and allow her to leave with Genie. A short time later, Irene went to find help from the health departments services for the blind and stumbled into the general social services department. Irene had Genie with her. As a social worker



talked with Irene she noticed the odd way in which Genie walked and her inability to articulate. The social worker called her supervisor, thinking she had stumbled on an undiagnosed case of autism. Genie's parents were charged with child abuse. On the day he was to appear in court, Clark committed suicide.

Genie was taken into custody and placed in Childrens Hospital in Los Angeles. Immediately a whole host of curious doctors began coming to study Genie. Among them were the head of psychiatry at the hospital, Howard Hansen, and the chief psychologist, David Rigler. Genie was discovered to have almost no speech skills, no bowel control, and little understanding of social interaction. When a new person or object was introduced to Genie, she would study it closely and rub it to her cheek almost like a blind person would do, making doctors believe that she evaluated stimuli texturally, that she did not trust her own sight.

Jay Shurley, an expert in social deprivation, came to see Genie and tested her brain waves during sleep. When it was suggested that Genie was mentally retarded, Shurley pointed to these tests to prove that her brain functioned on a normal level. Shurley would eventually suggest that Genie be placed back in a socially isolated situation and slowly removed to minimize the trauma of her new world and experiences, but this suggestion would be passed over.

As Genie settled into the hospital atmosphere and later moved to the rehabilitation center attached to the hospital, she slowly began to come out of herself. Genie began to learn more vocabulary and to interact with the people around her. However, Genie would often become frustrated and have temper tantrums. These tantrums, however, were often silent and would cause Genie to attack herself. Genie would often scratch at her face during these tantrums, internalizing her anger and frustration as she was taught to do during her captivity. Outward expressions of any kind were often rewarded with beatings by her father.

About the same time Genie was discovered, the movie *The Wild Child* came out. The movie was about Victor, a child left to die in the forests of France and discovered when he was about twelve years old. Victor was also thought to be unteachable, but scientist Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard was determined to teach Victor to speak. Victor was submitted to multiple tests and often cruelty by Itard in an attempt to establish his intelligence and to teach him to interact with others. The movie ends on an inspiring note at a time when Victor appeared to have learned to communicate through written language. However, Victor would never learn to speak. This movie was viewed by all those involved in Genie's case the first spring after her discovery and left many involved speechless. Soon after, Rigler would submit a grant request in Genie's case to the National Institute of Mental Health, NIMH, to focus on language acquisition.

In this first part of the book, the reader learns about Genie's horrible childhood and the situation that caused her to be a teenage girl who could not speak. While Genie's childhood was horrendous, her situation created a rare case for many scientists. It is highly unusual to find a child who was never around speech and therefore never picked up speech as part of normal childhood development. Due to this rare situation, many



scientists who have fought to prove their theories on either side of the development issue, nature or nurture, had found a case in which they could essentially prove their separate arguments.

Genie became an object of great curiosity and opportunity for a great number of people who had a career to create. If Genie could be taught to speak, she would prove that speech is something that begins in nature, but needs nurturing to bring about and conclude. Scientists began arguing over Genie and her case practically the moment she came into the hospital, eager to each do their own tests. This first chapter introduces this conflict and the players who will be involved, including Genie and the many doctors who would claim to have her best intent in mind. The author wants to show the reader from the beginning how this case went wrong for Genie, but also introduced so much information that will be important for other children for many years to come. By introducing the science of the past and the beliefs of the current scientists, the author has introduced a complex problem that could have been solved with Genie if those involved had not forgotten the human factor, Genie herself.



Chapter 2, Premonitions

Chapter 2, Premonitions Summary and Analysis

Victor and Genie are only two of more than fifty children who have suffered, for one reason or another, total social isolation during the most important years of child development. However, Genie and Victor's cases most closely relate to one another because of what happened after they were found. Victor was found at a time when a shift had taken place in the treatment of the deaf, the blind, and the mentally ill. Although Victor was declared mentally retarded and rejected by other doctors as teachable, Itard took him on with a determination to prove his ability to be taught to interact with others. Itard even taught Victor how to recognize words and to write certain words. However, when Victor failed to progress to speech, interest in him was lost. Victor would live the rest of his life quietly with a foster mother, living only a few doors from the famed writer Victor Hugo in his youth, and die at the age of forty.

In the summer of 1971, the grant request from NIMH came through and money was allotted to linguist Victoria Fromkin to study Genie. Fromkin enlisted the help of doctoral student Susan Curtiss in Genie's case. Fromkin began visiting Genie weekly. Unable to figure out how to test Genie, Curtiss and Fromkin invented some of their own tests. However, Curtiss found herself simply writing down everything Genie said during their visits for later analysis. As part of her visits with Genie, Curtiss would often escort her on outings. One of Genie's favorite things to do was to shop. Genie would insist on buying many plastic toys, often sandpails. It was later determined this fascination with plastic was because the only object Genie was allowed to play with during her captivity was a plastic rain coat. Curtiss also found on these outings that Genie had a strong ability to communicate nonverbally, somehow inspiring complete strangers to buy her plastic toys or give her plastic items.

That same summer, Jean Butler, a teacher at the rehabilitation center where Genie lived, contracted rubella and exposed Genie during a visit. In a need to isolate Genie from the other students, it was decided she should go live with Butler. For several months Genie thrived in Butler's home. Butler even requested to become Genie's permanent foster parent and her application was supported by Genie's social worker. However, the Department of Public Social Services, DPSS, thought it would be better if Genie was in a home with a mother and a father. Butler's application was denied. A short time later, Genie became a foster child in the home of David and Marilyn Rigler.

This chapter begins with a comparison between Victor of Aveyron and Genie. Victor's story is equally as tragic as Genie's. Victor's throat was cut and he was left to die in the forests of France at the age of two. Found a decade later, Victor was unable to speak and he also had an inability to socialize. Victor would learn a limited amount of speech and human interaction, but he would soon be forgotten when he stopped learning. The author appears to present this story as a warning to the reader that Genie's case might end in much the same way.



From the beginning of Genie's case, some physicians and scientists have suggested that she needed a maternal figure, someone to feel close to and to receive affection from. It seems to the reader this happened when Genie went to live with special education teacher, Jean Butler. However, despite the fact that Genie clearly thrived in Butler's care, she was taken away. The reader learns that Genie was taken to the home of David Rigler, one of the primary scientists involved in her case. This appears to be a conflict of interest to the reader, a conflict that could foreshadow trouble as Genie's story continues to play out.



Chapter 3, When Singing Was All for Her Benefit

Chapter 3, When Singing Was All for Her Benefit Summary and Analysis

Genie was moved into the Laughlin Park home of David and Marilyn Rigler and their three children. The couple had a dog, but Genie was deeply afraid of it. For weeks the Rigler's introduced Genie to the dog by placing a glass door between the two, slowly removing it until the day Genie could touch the dog without fear. Also upon her arrival in the Rigler home, Genie lost some of her advances with potty training and would defecate in inappropriate places. Genie also continued to have temper tantrums that Marilyn Rigler found herself forced to help Genie with, forced to encourage the child to display her anger outward rather than internally.

Curtiss continued to visit with Genie. Curtiss found that the more Genie relaxed in the Rigler home, the more she advanced in her speech. Soon Genie was once again speaking in two or three word sentences as she had done in the Butler home and expressing emotion. That November, a year after Genie was found in the social services office, multiple doctors presented their work with Genie at an American Psychological Association convention.

Despite optimism that Genie would one day achieve full language capacity, it soon became apparent that Genie had reached the highest level she would ever reach. Most children have an explosion of speech once they reach the two or three word sentence stage, but this explosion never took place for Genie. It took years for anyone to realize that Genie would not progress any further. When it was realized, it was once again suggested that Genie was mentally retarded, but Genie passed all the cognitive test administered to her with flying colors, testing higher than any other person on some of them. Genie was clearly intelligent, she simply could not learn the essential grammar to help her achieve proper speech.

All throughout Genie's life after her rescue, her mother remained a fixture in her life. When Irene faced criminal charges for the abuse perpetrated against Genie, the hospital hired attorney John Miner to secure her release. About that same time, Miner began petitioning the court to become Genie's guardian in order to safe guard the small amount of inheritance she had gotten from her father's estate. Irene was also given eye surgery at no cost after her daughter's rescue to enable her to take a more active role in Genie's life. Irene would visit Genie often while she was in the hospital, as well as the time in which she spent in the Rigler home. However, Irene was never welcome in the Rigler home, but was forced to see her daughter in prearranged neutral locations. Over time, Jean Butler, who had married and took the name Ruch, became a close friend of Irene's, a situation that would later prove volatile for the scientists working with Genie.



When Genie had been with the Righlers for nearly four years, David Rigler wrote a grant proposal asking for more money to continue to study Genie. About this same time, Ruch had become quite critical of the Righlers and the other scientists involved in Genie's case and began a campaign against Rigler. In September of 1974, the grant proposal was refused.

In this section of the book, Genie goes to live with David Rigler, one of the doctor's who was involved in her care. In fact, Rigler was the one who wrote the grant that allowed study of Genie's case. Although Genie had thrived in the care of Jean Butler, she was moved to the Rigler home because it would be more stable for her. Arguments have been made, however, that this move was traumatic for Genie and caused her to regress rather than thrive. Genie continued to grow in her new environment, but she would quickly hit the ceiling in her speech development, a fact that her caregivers would not truly comprehend for several years.

It would appear to the reader that Genie's welfare was not always the primary concern of those around her. Genie was happy in the care of Jean Butler, at least in the eyes of Butler and Genie's social worker. The move may or may not have harmed her emotionally, slowing her progress. However, the move did create tension among a group of scientists and other professionals who should have been fighting for the best welfare of this child and were instead using her as some sort of pawn in a game few on the outside will ever understand.



Chapter 4, Lost

Chapter 4, Lost Summary and Analysis

In the summer of 1975, Gene was returned to the care of her mother. At the age of eighteen, Genie was too much for her mother to handle on her own. Irene turned to the East Los Angeles Regional Center for the Developmentally Disabled. Genie was immediately placed into a foster home where visitors were discouraged. Curtiss, however, continued to visit Genie and quickly became concerned with Genie's situation. Unhappy and abused, Genie stopped using the toilet and became constipated. The foster mother used an unconventional method to correct the situation, leaving Genie so traumatized that she stopped speaking. Curtiss urged everyone who would listen to move Genie from that home, but her pleas fell on deaf ears until finally Rigler and Miner helped move Genie to the hospital. Upon her release, Genie was sent to another foster home.

During this time period, it was discovered that Genie owned a third of the home where her mother lived. Social security decided this was an asset that had not been revealed to them and they insisted that Genie pay back over a thousand dollars that she had received in payments. A social worker on Genie's case contacted John Miner to request payment from Genie's estate and learned that Genie's bank account held only enough money to pay a bill outstanding from David Rigler. Not long after, Rigler and Miner made a complaint in court insisting the bill be paid. The judge lowered the bill, but enforced the payment of the bill. A time after that Irene took control of Genie's estate minus the amount of the judgment. Both Rigler and Miner claim they have no idea where that money went, but it is clear it never went into a trust account for Genie as Rigler claimed it was intended to go.

Also late in the seventies, Curtiss wrote her dissertation on Genie's case. In her dissertation, Curtiss touches on such subjects as nature over nurture and Genie's inability to learn to speak properly past puberty. Curtiss and others came to the conclusion that Genie was unable to learn to speak because her brain did not function like other children's. Normally the left and right hemispheres of the brain both process information, but this process tends to be dominate on one side or the other. In Genie's brain, the left side rarely processes anything, including information that is normally processed on the left side of the brain. This has left scientists with the idea that the left hemisphere of the brain is not allowed to process information dominantly until it has learned grammar. Due to the fact that Genie did not learn grammar during the years in which her brain was developing, her left hemisphere never fully took on normal function. This could also explain why Genie was never able to learn grammar after the point in which she had reached puberty.

After the publication of Curtiss' dissertation in book form, Irene sued Curtiss, the scientists involved in Genie's case, and Childrens Hospital based on the fact that information in the dissertation could only have been obtained from Irene's private



sessions with her therapist. The case dragged on for more than six years and was finally settled. Irene never received any money, but the proceeds of Curtiss' book was placed in a trust for Genie and Genie was ordered to receive continuing medical care from Childrens Hospital. Irene was also ordered to keep Genie available to the scientists on her case. Irene did not fulfill this portion of the settlement, but instead hid Genie away and moved out of the house she had once shared with her husband.

In this chapter, the reader learns that almost the moment Rigler learned he would no longer be receiving money for the research involved in Genie's case, he took her out of his home. Not long afterward, Rigler sued Genie's estate for payment of services rendered, even though these services were not documented and took place in his home. The Rigers also took money from the state for the care of Genie and Marilyn Rigler was paid from the grant for Genie's care. Not only that, but David Rigler was released from most of his duties at Childrens Hospital but retained his full salary while Genie was in his home. Even though Rigler claims money was not his motivation, it sure seems that way to the reader. The moment the money dried up, Genie was dumped out of his home without a second thought.

Curtiss, the doctoral student who worked most closely with Genie, wrote a dissertation on Genie that was later published in book form. Curtiss seems to be the most benign scientist in Genie's life. Curtiss made money from the book, but she placed it in a trust for Genie from the very start. Despite this, Irene sued her, spurred on by Jean Ruch. This makes the reader wonder if Ruch too did not have her own axe to grind in this whole process. While the reader is sympathetic with Ruch's desire to punish those whom she believes harmed Genie, it seems her energies might have been better placed elsewhere. While all these people are fighting over Genie in court, poor Genie is lost in one foster home after another, regressing so far that she has lost some of the advances she had made.



Chapter 5, The World Will Never Understand

Chapter 5, The World Will Never Understand Summary and Analysis

The author visited with the Rigers and found David Rigler defensive and reluctant to allow the author access to his papers in regards to Genie. Rigler also confesses a sadness at not being allowed to see or hear about Genie. The author also visited Jay Shurley who offers a regret in the way the case was handled and his involvement in it. Shurley also tells the author he might one day write a list of strategies in how to deal with a case like Genie's in the future. Despite Shurley's pessimism on Genie's case, the case has helped a few. A young girl with a mental condition that caused her to be unable to understand the context of her speech was helped by a doctoral student who had helped Curtiss on Genie's case who used some of the knowledge gained from the case.

A visit to Susan Curtiss showed the author the more human side of the case. Curtiss expressed regret that she had been kept from Genie for more than fifteen years and a desire to see her again, just as a friend and not a scientist. Curtiss confessed a deep love for Genie that was deeper than any scientific study could ever be. In the end, the author saw the story from the point of view of the scientists. Even though so many of these people failed Genie in one way or another, they all did the best they could with a difficult situation.

This chapter wraps up the story, showing the reader the regrets all the scientists have in regards to the case. Most of the people involved can see that mistakes were made, but many of them refuse to admit their own mistakes. In the end, there was a little girl who needed help and these people all failed to help her in their enthusiasm to study her. In the end, the little girl grew up to be an unhappy, silent adult. In the end, everyone seems to have failed despite the knowledge gained at one child's loss.

Characters

Genie

Genie was only twenty months old when her father began strapping her to an infant potty seat with a harness he made himself. Genie would sit isolated in a dark room on her chair, able to move only her fingers and toes. The only things Genie could see were the mesh cage-like crib she would sleep in when her father remembered to move her and an inch or so of the outside world outside the windows of her room. Genie would often be beaten with a stick when she made any noise at all and tormented by barking noises from her father whenever he did not feel like beating her. Genie was fed baby food and bottles of milk when they remembered to feed her at all. Genie endured all this for nearly twelve years.

Genie was discovered by a social worker when her mother accidentally walked into the general social services office as opposed to the blind services office she had been looking for. Genie was taken to Childrens Hospital in Los Angeles where she immediately came to the attention of multiple scientists. Genie's case was a rare one and it represented an opportunity to learn how a person learns language due to the fact that Genie had never learned to speak.

Genie was moved from place to place, spending four years in the home of David Rigler, her primary psychologist. For those four years, multiple scientists tested Genie and studied her, trying to encourage her to learn to speak in order to defy already established scientific theory on the development of speech. When Genie failed to progress and a grant to continue the research was denied, Genie was returned to the mother who was once accused of abusing her. Genie ended up in foster home after foster home when her mother could not care for her, living an isolated life that caused her to regress from some of the progress she had made as a child.

Irene

Irene was the child of poor parents who moved to California to attempt to change their fortunes. As a young adult, Irene met and married a man more than twenty years her senior. This marriage was happy the first few years despite the interference of her mother-in-law. However, Irene suffered from a neurological disorder that together with cataracts caused her to go blind and become completely dependent on her husband. About this same time, her husband isolated himself from the world, dragging his wife and children with him. Irene lived for more than a decade as a prisoner to her husband's control, allowing the systematic abuse of both her children, especially her youngest child, Genie. Eventually, after a particularly violent episode, Irene convinces her husband to allow her to leave the home with Genie. A short time later, Irene goes in search of help from the state for her blindness and a social worker notices Genie. Genie is then placed in the hospital and in the care of multiple scientists.



Irene remains a fixture in Genie's life. Irene visits her daughter often during her childhood and regains custody of her after Genie turns eighteen. Irene gives Genie over to foster care after deciding she cannot handle her care, but continues to be her primary guardian. When Susan Curtiss' book comes out about Genie, Irene sues the scientists and hospital involved in Genie's case. In the end, Irene moves away and refuses access to Genie by the scientist. Irene also refuses requests from media for her story, but does spend time with Russ Rymer, the author of this book.

Clark

Clark was Genie's father. Clark did not like noise and did not want children. When Irene gave birth to a baby girl, Clark locked her in the garage where she died of exposure. Irene went on to give birth to a son and two daughters, one of the daughters dying of Rh blood poisoning. When his mother was killed by a hit and run driver, Clark became so overwhelmed with grief and the idea that the world was an unfriendly place that he became a hermit in his mother's house. Clark took his family along with him, restricting their time outside of the house.

Clark was told that Genie was more than likely mentally retarded due to a blood transfusion she was given at birth for Rh incompatibility. This made Clark frightened that his child would be mistreated in the world. To protect her, Clark made a harness and used it to strap his child to an infant potty chair. For more than a decade Genie would remain strapped to this potty chair, rarely leaving it when her parents remembered to place her in the cage-like crib that shared her room. Eventually Clark allowed his wife and Genie to leave the home. Shortly afterward, Clark was charged with child abuse in Genie's case. Clark committed suicide, leaving a note that said the world would never understand.

Dr. David Rigler

David Rigler was the head psychologist in the department of psychiatry at Childrens Hospital in 1970 when Genie was first brought there. Rigler was brought in on her case immediately and was the one who wrote the grant for research funds in Genie's case based on his past experience as a grant writer for the NIMH.

When it was decided that Genie should leave the hospital environment, Rigler was given physical custody of Genie by the state. This took place after Genie had spent the summer in the home of Jean Butler, a special education teacher who worked in the hospital's rehabilitation center. Rigler would spend the next four years as Genie's foster father and primary psychologist. Rigler was paid a great deal of money each month to care for Genie and many people claim that Rigler sacrificed his family in order to be the caretaker for Genie.

When Rigler's second request for grant money in Genie's case was denied four years after his family took her into their home, Rigler returned Genie to Irene's care. A short time later, Rigler and John Miner sued Irene for payment from Genie's estate for services



rendered. This case took what remained of Genie's meager inheritance from her father. Rigler would later claim this money was to be placed in trust for Genie, but that he never saw the money or knows what happened to it.

Susan Curtiss

Susan Curtiss was a doctoral candidate when Genie was first discovered in 1970. A little more than six months later, Curtiss was invited to work on the case by Victoria Franken, her teacher. Curtiss began working with Genie on a weekly basis, writing down everything she said for analysis later. In time, Curtiss and Genie became good friends, often spending their time together shopping or singing. Curtiss documented Genie's progress with her speech as well as other progress Genie made in her time as an object of Curtiss' studies.

In the late 1970s, Curtiss wrote a dissertation for her doctorate. The dissertation was later published by an academic publishing house. When this book came out, Jean Ruch gave a copy to Irene who later hired a lawyer and sued both Curtiss, the other scientists on Genie's case, and the hospital where her daughter had been taken all those years before. The case ended with Curtiss placing the proceeds of her book in trust for Genie, something she had already done. Curtiss would not see Genie again and would always regret the loss of her friendship.

Jean Butler Ruch

Jean Butler was a special education teacher at the Childrens Hospital rehabilitation center where Genie was taken upon her release as an inpatient at the hospital. Butler and Genie became quite close and Genie would often going on outings with Butler. Butler inadvertently exposed Genie to rubella and this forced the hospital to quarantine Genie by placing her in Butler's home. Butler saw an improvement in Genie while she was in her care and applied for a permanent foster care situation. However, this was denied and Genie was placed in the Rigler home.

Butler would hold a grudge against Rigler and began a letter writing campaign against him, claiming to anyone who would listen that the scientists on Genie's case were taking advantage of her and were not giving her the emotional support she needed. During this time, Butler also befriended Irene. When Curtiss' dissertation was published in a book form, Butler pushed Irene to sue. Not long after the conclusion of the case, Butler suffered a stroke and would die two years later from another stroke.

Jay Shurley

Jay Shurley was an expert in social isolation who had worked with scientists in the Antarctica and had helped in the development of the first deprivation chambers used in therapy. When Genie was first brought to the hospital, Shurley flew in and did tests on Genie as she slept. Later, when consulted during a meeting designed to decide the



future of research in Genie's case, Shurley suggested the little girl be placed back in a similar source of isolation like her previous captivity and released slowly in order to prevent trauma in Genie's recovery. This idea was declined. Shurley would later tell the author of this book that Genie's case was dealt with improperly and that he would like to one day write guidelines on how to deal with future cases such as Genie's.

John Miner

John Miner was a lawyer with a background in psychology. When Irene was charged with child abused in Genie's case, the hospital hired Miner to defend her to the judge, securing her freedom so that she might be a part of Genie's life. Miner would later become Genie's legal guardian and would take control of her meager inheritance from her father's estate. This would later become a bone of contention when Miner would sue to force Irene to allow payment of a bill owed to Rigler for services rendered during Genie's time in his home. This money was awarded to Rigler, but both Miner and Rigler claim they have no idea where the money went.

Victor of Aveyron

Victor of Aveyron was a child who had his throat slashed and was left to die in the woods of France. Victor was found ten years later and taken to Paris where he was evaluated by several doctors who declared him retarded and unable to learn. Another doctor, Jean-Marc-Gusparid Itard would take another look and choose to take Victor under his care. Itard attempted to teach Victor language and did succeed in teaching Victor to write certain words and to recognize the picture of certain items. However, Victor never succeeded in moving beyond that point and Itard gave up on his study of Victor. Victor would remain in the care of a foster mother and would die at forty living a few doors down from the young Victor Hugo.

Noam Chumsky

Noam Chomsky is a linguist who published in 1957 a studied that would change the way many people looked at the development of language. Chomsky wrote that children are born with the ability to understand syntax. According to Chomsky, there is one sentence that all babies are born able to understand, but most sentences are not like this one. Therefore, the language learner must learn to move the sentence around in order to understand language.



Objects/Places

Potty Chair

Genie was strapped to a potty chair with a handmade harness for more than a decade that caused her to have little interaction with the outside world and left her unable to speak among other physical and mental trouble.

Wooden Stick

Genie's father kept a wooden stick in the corner of her room in order to beat her when she made too much noise.

Deprivation Chamber

A deprivation chamber is a coffin-like structure in which a patient lies and is surrounded by liquid, taking away all sense of sight, touch, and sound. This allows the patient to have increased mental concentration that can aid in types of therapy.

Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern-Day 'Wild Child'

Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern-Day 'Wild Child' is the title of Susan Curtiss' published book and dissertation on Genie's case. This book would lead to a lawsuit by Irene against Curtiss, the other scientists on Genie's case, and Childrens Hospital.

DPSS

The Department of Public Social Services is the department in California that was guardian to Genie during her childhood and ultimately decided where she would live.

NIMH

NIMH, or National Institute of Mental Health, is the organization that granted the scientists money to research Genie's case. This organization also denied a similar grant when Genie was eighteen because of a lack of progress in her case.



Childrens Hospital

Childrens Hospital is where Genie was taken after her discovery and where she came into contact with the primary scientists on her case, including Rigler.

Rehabilitation Center

Genie was taken to a rehabilitation center associated with Childrens Hospital after her initial treatment in the hospital. This is where Genie met both Jean Butler and Susan Curtiss.

The House on Golden West Avenue

Genie was kept prisoner in her father's house, a house he inherited from his deceased mother, that was located on Golden West Avenue in Temple City, California.

Laughlin Park

Laughlin Park was once a high scale neighborhood where many of the stars from Hollywood once had homes. This is where the Riglers lived when Genie came into their home.

Bicetre

Bicetre was a mental hospital in Paris where once deaf people were kept along with the criminals and mentally insane. However, about the time Victor was found in 1800 Bicetre had changed this by teaching the deaf sign language.

Institut National des Sourds-Muets or Institut National des

The Institut National des Sourds-Muets is the hospital where Victor was treated by Itard. When the author visited the institute in the early nineties it had been renamed the Institut National des Jeunes Sourds, but still existed much the same as it had in Victor's time.



Themes

Child Abuse

Genie was strapped to an infant potty chair for more than a decade, from the time she was nearly two until she was thirteen. Genie was not allowed to go outside and play. She had no toys except for a rain coat she occasionally was allowed to fondle. Genie had no one to speak to. Genie did not learn to speak, to control her bowels, to eat properly. Genie was beaten when she made noise and frightened by the sound of a barking dog when her father was annoyed with her.

When Genie was rescued from her father's care, she had calluses on her bottom from sitting in the chair so long. Genie could not eat properly and would often have to allow food to soak in her mouth for long periods of time. Genie could not control her bowels and would often defecate in odd places. In fact, Genie would hold her bowels when she was protesting the way in which she was treated, often leading to terrible cases of constipation.

Genie did not know how to behave in public. Genie could not show emotion. When people came into Genie's life, she would often treat them with disinterest, unable to show any happiness at their presence because she could not trust they would remain in her life. Genie was darkly abused by her father and neglected by her mother. As a result, scientists became greatly interested in her, but for the wrong reasons. In the end, Genie ended up living a life of isolation, moving from one foster home to another and never finding a stable person who cared enough to want to be just with Genie and not Genie, the scientific research project. In this way, Genie was abused not once, but twice, making child abuse a theme of the book.

Scientific Study

When Genie was discovered, it was learned that she had been isolated from all social interaction and was unable to speak as a normal child her age would do. For this reason, great interest was garnered in her case. Almost since the beginning of scientific study there has been a question of whether children learn to speak because they are born with certain abilities in language or because of the care and encouragement of their caregivers. Genie was a case in which scientists could finally answer that question.

From the beginning scientist had hoped to teach Genie to speak normally and that this would disprove many theories that children cannot learn past a certain age and that language is taught by the caregiver. However, the older Genie became it quickly became obvious that she would never advance beyond a particular skill level. In the end, linguist Susan Curtiss came to the conclusion that Genie's left hemisphere in her brain had not developed properly because of her failure to learn grammar before



puberty. For this reason, Genie would never be able to learn proper grammar and would never speak with proper language.

Genie's case was important and has gone on to help other children with similar, if less traumatic, defects in their speech. However, this breakthrough in scientific study came at a great cost not only to Genie, but those who loved and attempted to protect her. For this reason, scientific study is a major theme in the book.

In the Best Interest of the Child

In any case dealing with a child, it is always important for the caregivers in question to remember that everything should be done in the best interest of the child. However, in this case, the need to complete scientific research on Genie sometimes blurred this all important line.

The Rigler family took Genie into their home. They dealt with Genie's odd and sometimes embarrassing behavior, teaching her the best as they could. In their care, Genie learned to deal with her odd, silent temper tantrums and to control her bowel movements. However, when Genie's grant money ran out, so did the interest of the Rigers. Genie was returned to her mother, a mother who neglected her child and allowed her husband to horribly abuse the child.

The best interest of this child was never a primary concern except possibly to Jean Butler. However, Butler went about her protests in the wrong way, attempting to interfere with the scientists rather than proving Genie was not getting the support she needed. Butler also let Genie down in the end, for unknown reasons allowing Irene to place Genie in abusive foster homes rather than taking her into her own home as she had so desperately wanted to do only a few years previously.



Style

Perspective

The book is written by a reporter who came to hear about Genie in a passing comment from a linguist at the University of Illinois. While the writer's perspective appears to be objective, his material is such that it is often difficult to keep an emotional distance. The writer became obsessed with Genie's story when he was in Paris and visited the same institute where another wild child, Victor of Aveyron, was treated. This inspires the writer to continue on his story about Genie. Later, the writer met with Genie's mother, Irene, and made the conscious decision not to meet Genie in order to keep his view objective, at least where Genie is concerned.

The perspective of this book comes from the objective view of the reporter. The author of this book does not have a background in linguistics or any of the other professions of the scientists associated with the story, therefore his point of view is that of a layman, someone who has no scientific interest in the subject, Genie. However, this author is human and can only be as objective as that condition allows him. In the end, the subject of the book gets under the author's skin and his perspective turns to something a little more subjective. However, this perspective allows the author to present a human interest story, which appears to be his original intention, therefore it works with this book.

Tone

The tone of the book begins as a tone of impassivity. The author is presenting a story that can be somewhat dry, especially when discussing the history of linguists and the many different views of how a child comes to learn language. However, this tone changes to something close to outrage when the author discusses Genie's childhood and presents written examples from other people involved in the case, including Susan Curtiss and Jean Butler Ruch.

The tone of this book is typical to a scientific nonfiction book. This book begins with a dry, impassive book, but this tone quickly changes. The tone of the book reflects the actions being reported within the book, such as Genie's childhood and her experiences in attempting to overcome the obstacles created by that childhood. For these reasons, the tone of the book fits the overall story well.

Structure

The book is divided into five chapters. Each of these chapters is then divided into multiple numbered sections that include titles that are only available in the table of contents. The book is written with the format of a nonfiction article or report. The author

has inserted multiple passages from documents related to the story, including passages from Susan Curtiss' dissertation as well as correspondence written by Jean Butler Ruch.

The book tells two stories. The first story focuses on Genie. Genie was abused and was rescued, but that was only the beginning of her story. From there Genie became the focus of a scientific study in which researchers attempted to discover if Genie would be capable of normal speech despite the long years in captivity that deprived her of normal childhood development. The second story talks about the history of linguistics and the debate between the idea that speech is something infants are born with and something they are taught. In the end, Genie's case seems to shed some light on this issue, but in new and unexpected ways.



Quotes

"Linguistics and astronomy constitute an unlikely sisterhood, for they are both often constrained to be more observational than experimental—astronomy because its subjects are too distant to be experimented on, linguistics because its subjects are too human." Chapter 1, Found, pgs. 5-6

"He quit his job and moved his family into his mother's two-bedroom house on Golden West Avenue, where he would live out the last decade of his life as a recluse, with his family as virtual prisoners." Chapter 1, Found, pg. 16

"She showed little beyond this, and Kent reported in a 1972 symposium paper that 'apart from the peculiar laugh, frustration was the only other clear affective behavior we could discern.'" Chapter 1, Found, pg. 41

"It is one of the resonant curiosities of Genie's story that her discovery coincided with the Los Angeles premiere of Francois Truffaut's *The Wild Child*, a movie that tells the story of Itard and Victor, *l'enfant sauvage de l'Aveyron*." Chapter 1, Found, pg. 56

"After the characters were let on the screen, Itard became only more successful and famous, Victor, more forgotten." Chapter 2, Premonitions, pg. 75

"The question is: How does he figure out what his mother is saying about the room? OK? That's the story. That's bootstrapping." Chapter 2, Premonitions, pg. 87

"Another masking behavior was so ingrained as to be metabolic. Genie was slow." Chapter 3, When Singing Was All for Her Benefit, pg. 115

"At home with Genie in Laughlin Park, the Riglens, too, felt that they were dealing with an intelligence." Chapter 3, When Singing Was All for Her Benefit, pg. 127

"In the unacknowledged class war, the person with diplomatic immunity was, strangely, the one most accustomed to a semblance of wealth: Jean Butler." Chapter 3, When Singing Was All for Her Benefit, pg. 139

"Curtiss had run her finger down the string of Genie's experience until she encountered the fabled, elusive knot—the tie between language and humanity—and found that knot to be more concrete than Itard or Sicard or Condillac could ever have suspected." Chapter 4, Lost, pg. 170

"In the long run, the true costs of the wrangling over Genie's guardianship went far beyond dollars and cents." Chapter 4, Lost, pg. 184

"Genie is the most powerful, most inspiring person I've ever met." Chapter 5, The World Will Never Understand, pg. 221



Topics for Discussion

Who is Genie? Why was she abused? Describe her abuse. What was the reason for this abuse? Who perpetrated it? Was the right person punished for this behavior? What impact did this abuse have on Genie overall? What happened to Genie once she was rescued? What problems were noted with Genie in the hospital? How were these problems dealt with?

Who is Jean Butler? How does she come into Genie's life? Why does Butler attempt to become Genie's foster mother? Why is this denied? How does Butler react? Would Genie's life have been improved in Butler's care? Explain.

Who is Susan Curtiss? How did she become involved in Genie's case? What did Curtiss do with Genie? For what purpose? What were the nature of Curtiss' tests conducted on Genie? What did these tests prove? What does that say about Genie? Why did Curtiss write her dissertation on Genie? Why was it published? Should it have been?

Who is David Rigler? Why did he become involved in Genie's case? What did he hope to learn from Genie? Why did Rigler take Genie into his home? How much money did he get for this? Was money a motivation for Rigler? Why did Rigler later sue Genie's estate to get payment for services rendered? Was this justified? What later happened to the money? Is this suspicious?

Who is Irene? Why did she not help her daughter sooner? Why did Irene allow her husband to kill her first infant? Why did Irene feel so powerless next to her husband? Is this powerlessness justified? Why did Irene not spend time in jail for the abuse perpetrated against Genie? Was this justice? Should Irene have gotten Genie back? Why did Irene place Genie back in foster care?

Discuss the lawsuit against Curtiss and the other scientists by Irene. Who was behind it? For what reason? What was the desired outcome? Was it reached? How did this lawsuit fracture the last of the relationships forged during the research on Genie? Was Irene right in saying the scientists took advantage of Genie? Was Irene entitled to rewards for this? Explain.

What finally happened to Genie? Would Genie have benefitted if things had been done differently? How could they have been different? In the end, did anyone truly have Genie's best interests at heart? Discuss Curtiss' desire to see Genie again. Should this be allowed? Who has the right to decide this? For what reason?