

# Torturing Geniuses

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Beth, the protagonist of the TV show *The Queen's Gambit*, is not someone you'd want as a friend. She takes money from her childhood mentor—the old janitor who taught her chess—and never pays him back, visits him or thanks him for launching her career. She treats the young men who help her improve—a group that eventually coalesces into a supportive entourage—in a similarly instrumental way. She is so focused on winning tournaments that she can barely spare a word of caution when her adoptive mother is falling into a fatal alcoholic spiral. When she loses, she is petulant and childish, unlike her opponents, who are graceful and kind. She is cruel and manipulative when—as an adult—she plays against a talented Russian child, softening to him only after she has beaten him.

Beth doesn't seem to love anyone, but viewers love her anyways, admiring the sheer force of her genius. It doesn't matter that most viewers don't play chess. The chess scenes focus our attention on her striking, wide-set eyes, her perfect figure and her manicured fingernails, as though gawking at her body were a symbolic way of appreciating some mysterious power in her brain. We are clued in to her genius by other people saying she is “astonishing,” and by their willingness to put themselves at her service.

In my own field there are also geniuses. Once a Genius asked me a question in the Q&A after my talk, and then walked out before hearing my answer. At a conference, a Genius didn't bother to move from his seat—next to the speaker—when he would answer his phone. At a dinner after a different conference, a Genius was arguing with me and became frustrated with my unwillingness to accept his point. He started touching me—not in a sexual way, and not in a violent way, but something halfway in between—putting his hand on my hand, my arm, eventually my neck to emphasize his points. He did this in full view of everyone. No one stopped him, including me. Once I invited a Genius over to my house for dinner. He came an hour late, with an entourage, and handed me a half-empty bag of popcorn he had been eating as a hostess gift. As the conversation turned philosophical, he quieted his entourage, signaling that this part of the evening did not involve them. Like so many of the people in Beth's life, they welcomed being of use to the Genius in whatever way the Genius saw fit. These are not four stories about the same person; these were four different Geniuses.

Probably you are ready to denounce the behavior of these Geniuses and of the communities that accommodate them, but keep in mind that I haven't done anything to make their genius sparkle for you; I haven't sexed up their talents, the way *The Queen's Gambit* did Beth's.



Throughout my childhood, I was convinced that I was a secret prodigy. The only challenge was to find the arena in which my talents lay. I experimented with several instruments as well as music composition; I tried ballet and gymnastics and ice-skating; I lost at math competitions, debate competitions, model UN competitions; I wrote bad

poetry; I tried acting and painting and crafts of every kind. Sometimes my extreme self-confidence and drive produced comic results, such as when my fantasies of waterskiing excellence sustained me through two months during which I never so much as stood up. (Basically, I spent a summer being dragged behind a boat.) I believe my last attempt was a summer architecture program: I was obsessed with Legos even into my late teens, and this, plus a timely reading of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, led me to suspect the presence of hidden architectural gifts. My teachers discovered none. No matter how many times I failed, I was sure that the next thing might be it; only running out of childhood ended my quest for prodigiousness.

I was a difficult child: bossy, obsessive, selfish and hard to get along with. My sister, despite being younger than me, was much better at making friends, and throughout our childhood my parents would force her to take me along on playdates. I can still remember the horrified look on some mother's face when she discovered my toothmarks in the plastic white hat of one of her daughter's Smurf dolls. (I knew it wasn't a marshmallow, but it looked *so much* like one.) My genius might have been fake, but my weirdness was real.

I had read enough books to pick up on the fact that Genius is a personality-laundering scheme, and I suspect this insight underlay my conviction of possessing it: were I a prodigy, other people would line up to cooperate with me, on my terms, and my "bad" behavior would suddenly get reclassified as charming idiosyncrasy.

Not too long ago, someone dismissed me, contemptuously, as "rude and clueless." I know from experience that in other contexts people like her embrace and applaud my "idiosyncrasies." What I now understand, but didn't as a child, is how small the difference is between those two reactions.

We praise people who insist on being themselves as courageous and independent—except when we blame them as selfish and narcissistic. Likewise, we have a positive word for people who follow the rules—"cooperative"—and a negative word for the same thing, when we don't like it: "conformist." The line between cooperativeness and conformism is often a fine one, and yet the distance between the valence of the words is massive. This creates a verbal illusion: because we have to pick a word, we're liable to overstate—especially to ourselves—our confidence regarding which side of the line we're placing the person on. The ethical gulf between the "supportiveness" of Beth's chess entourage and the "complicity" of the Genius's philosophy entourage is smaller than we are inclined to think it is.

If my idiosyncrasies disturb you in some way, if they somehow bother you or disrupt your life, do you now have a grievance against me, for being so selfish, or do I have one against you, for being so narrow-minded? The best thing about being weird is that it teaches you that there might be no answer to this question: you learn not to assume that it is always possible to locate a "real victim."

The worst thing about being weird is the loneliness. The loneliness doesn't only or even mostly come from rejection. This is what I assumed, childishly, as a child, and that is why I thought that if genius bought me tolerance, it would make me

happy. When the switch flips to “brave and independent,” and the rules get relaxed, one doesn’t magically find oneself surrounded by people with whom one experiences a real connection. Real connection requires ethical community, and ethical community requires shared rules—not the exemption from them.

Here’s the thing about tolerance: it was never meant to be an end point. Tolerance and flexibility are improvements over rejection as a way of managing the initial encounter with difference. If some people experience the customs and habits that come easily or naturally to others as arbitrary, coercive, alien or just plain confusing—and yes, some of us are like this—the answer isn’t to let us have our own way. That’s not kindness, it’s ostracism by another name. We don’t want to go off on our own. We don’t want to be left alone. No one wants to be alone.

The problem is that any steps taken beyond tolerance will be frustrating and unpleasant, because we are, in fact, hard to coordinate with. These attempts will expose the underlying issue, which is not one of ill intentions or bad guys in need of reforming. The difficulty that drove the retreat to tolerance in the first place isn’t a product of the narrow-mindedness one person could turn off, or the cooperativeness another could turn on. There is something there, something in the way, something that actually matters to the human attempt to get along. There are differences that constitute obstacles to someone’s integration into an ethical community that are no one’s fault and cannot be willed away, and there is no recipe for how to overcome them. It is easier to tolerate people than to acknowledge this; and it’s easier to acquiesce in being tolerated and supported, rather than fighting for true connection. Tolerance is an equilibrium born of exhaustion and lowered expectations.



Genius calls for more than being very good at something. It is characteristic of genius to warrant the hyper-tolerance—and utter isolation—of being put on a pedestal and surrounded with a supportive entourage of yes-men. It is characteristic of genius to lack real friends, as Beth does. Viewers don’t even notice that their attraction to Beth sidesteps the question of the kind of friend she’d be. What they admire is precisely her ability to stand alone, at the top, as though friendlessness were a kind of superpower. But is there really any person whose mind is so alien that she flourishes by being set “free” from the normative expectations that constitute community membership for the rest of us?

It is telling that “genius” is virtually synonymous with “tortured genius.” It is hard to imagine a story like Beth’s without the alcoholism, drug addiction, intense loneliness and self-destructiveness. The myth is of the genius “tortured” by some internal struggle the rest of us are not smart enough to understand, so that the best we can do is step out of their way. The real torture is the one we enact by classifying people as geniuses, to serve our own fantasies of independence. Geniuses are the monsters we make.

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