

17 May 1993

Editor
The New York Times Book Review
229 West 43rd St
New York ,NY 10036

Dear Editor,

We feel we must respond to Natalie Angier's review of Russ Rymer's book, *Genie. An Abused Child's Flight from Silence*, which appeared in The New York Times Book Review section on April 25, 1993. The Angier review aids and abets the misrepresentation of the facts regarding both personal and scientific aspects of the Genie case and puts forward an anti-science philosophy which we assume reflects the book she is reviewing. We spent many hours with Russ Rymer after his articles about Genie in The New Yorker and had hoped that the inaccuracies and misinformation which were in the articles would have been corrected in the expanded book version. It appears from Angier's review that this did not happen.

While we cannot hold Angier responsible for Rymer's book, we would have expected "a science reporter" to check the (mis)information which she presents as fact, thereby preventing a disservice to her readers, to science, and to Genie, herself. We are two of the scientists who worked with Genie almost from the very beginning of her 'emergence' from her isolation. One of us wrote a book detailing Genie's linguistic and cognitive development and discussing both the scientific and human aspects of the case. We are probably as knowledgeable about this tragic story as anyone, and are thus appalled by the inaccuracies in the review which are too numerous to mention in this forum. We offer but a few examples.

Angier writes that there was "bitter and often pathetic fighting that erupted among" the scientists. The truth is that the scientists who worked with Genie respected and liked each other, never "publicly excoriated one another," and never "wrote scathing accusations of malfeasance, neglect, and exploitation."

Speaking at least for the linguists, we worked together as a team, and continue to hold each other in the highest regard as colleagues and friends. Moreover, to our knowledge, none of us "sued and countersued one another". Angier should have checked to see who were the suers and who the sue-ees. Nor is it the case that Genie "is consigned to another sort of prison, a state institution for retarded adults."; in fact Genie now lives in a small board and care home with only two other women. A final example of a most trivial inaccuracy of Rymer's is his contention that "the publication of [Chomsky's] Syntactic Structures in 1957 is referred to among linguists as 'the Event'." This is repeated by Angier despite the fact that a query to the LINGUIST E-MAIL list after the review appeared, which asked if anyone had ever heard of this reference, did not get a positive response from any one of the 3,000 linguists throughout the world on the network. We would also like to set the record straight regarding funding support for the linguistic work on the case. We are very grateful to the federal agencies (the National Science

Foundation in particular) that provided support for the linguistic research, which we believe has contributed to our understanding of the nature of human nature and its biological basis.

Given the need for increased support for and interest in science, it is indeed disappointing that someone in a position to bridge the gap between science and the non-scientific community would foster an antisience attitude by harshly and inaccurately characterizing the intent and conduct of the researchers and misrepresenting the research and its findings. As only one of many examples, Angier perpetuates a misrepresentation of a Chomskyan view of language development regarding the importance of the linguistic environment and the interaction of the language faculty with other mental faculties. Angier asks: "if grammar is inborn [as Chomsky claims] why did Genie lack the skill as a result of environmental deprivation?" We know of no 'Chomskyan' linguist who does not understand and appreciate that normal language development requires direct experience with language to 'trigger' the inborn ability to acquire grammar. Nor do we know of any linguist who denies the fact that language acquisition engages a number of nonlinguistic cognitive abilities. Moreover, the results of Genie's language learning exhibit exactly the pattern a 'Chomskyan' view of language development would predict. Grammar (that part of our linguistic knowledge which linguists refer to as syntax), based on neurological and cognitive mechanisms which are maturationally constrained, will be the most vulnerable and 'unlearnable' aspect of language for someone beyond the 'critical period' or appropriate developmental state. While Genie accomplished what Angier considers "that most central and magical achievement of language, using familiar words to say things she had never heard anyone say", she developed little grammar. This was one of the important findings of the study.

In an ongoing effort to avoid exploiting the human interest aspects of the case and to protect Genie and her family's right to privacy, the professionals involved in Genie's case purposely kept it out of the public media for almost 20 years, despite persistent interest and (at times potentially lucrative) offers from the media to "tell the story" It is with some considerable regret that we find this effort has been undone.

Sincerely,

Susan Curtiss
Professor of Linguistics

Victoria Fromkin
Professor of Linguistics