'Stopit!' She Said. 'Nomore!'

By NATALIE ANGIER;
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THE story of the girl known by the pseudonym Genie, who spent the first 13 years of her life locked in a bedroom alone, alternately strapped down to a child's potty chair or straitjacketed into a sleeping bag, fed on baby food and beaten with a wooden paddle when she so much as whimpered, is really three stories woven together.

The first strand in "Genie: An Abused Child's Flight From Silence," by Russ Rymer, is an account of an atrocity carried out by a vacuous, unreflective and self-pitying tyrant, Genie's father, who denied his daughter the smallest mote of humane treatment through some sort of paranoid fantasy that he was protecting her. He serves as yet another reminder of how banal the most malevolent people can be.

The second is the story of scientists' attempts to make the best of an unfathomable tragedy by studying the girl for clues to the origin and unfolding of language. When Genie first showed up at a Los Angeles County welfare office in the fall of 1970, accompanied by her nearly blind and completely helpless mother, the girl was practically mute.

Raised in an almost silent setting, too segregated from the rest of the family to hear what little conversation her father, Clark, would permit, Genie had reached adolescence without having learned to talk. She could understand fewer than 20 words -- among them "Mother," "red," "blue," "bunny," and "jewelry box" -- and she could spit out a couple of self-protective phrases like "Stopit!" and "Nomore!" But she couldn't string words together into sentences, she didn't know grammar, and she clearly could not manage that central and most magical achievement of language, using familiar words to say things she had never heard anyone say -- to usher the self forward and to share it with the world.

As the subject of an inadvertent and barbaric experiment in child development, Genie thus looked like somebody who could help solve some of the more rousing questions in linguistics, particularly the degree to which the skill of language acquisition is innate, and the extent to which children must wrest it from their surroundings. Could Genie, at an age when so many of the brain's circuits are thought to be etched for life, take on the task of a 2-year-old and begin learning a mother tongue?

The third thread of Mr. Rymer's book follows the bitter and often pathetic fighting that erupted among the linguists, behavioral psychologists, social workers and others who claimed to have Genie's best interests in mind, whether that meant they hoped to teach her, to civilize her or to heal her mutilated psyche. And many of those who encountered the girl did struggle to help her, at least initially. But Genie was a challenge beyond pat solutions, at her worst a "true grotesque,"
a grown child who defecated in the wastebasket, moved in short, jerky motions with her hands before her in her characteristic "bunny walk," and often seemed as oblivious to the presence of people as she was to the furniture around her.

Yet as time progressed, her would-be white knights proved themselves to be scarcely better behaved than their charge. They sued and countersued one another, they publicly excoriated one another, they wrote scathing accusations of malfeasance, neglect and exploitation. Together they are a sorry lot, and it is largely through their combined ineptness that Genie ends up not living happily ever after, adopted by a sane and supportive family, but consigned to another sort of prison, a state institution for retarded adults.

Up to a point, Mr. Rymer, a contributing writer for Health magazine, handles all three narratives with extraordinary grace, thoughtfulness and sweep. His brief text is a rarity among popular science books, a lusciously written page-turner. It is gripping not only because the reader is driven to learn what happens next to the abused girl, whom we quickly come to care about, but because Mr. Rymer asks how the brain masters language. He deftly lays out how the brain constructs the framework that will be both cage and key to consciousness -- for language both imprisons us and is our only means of complex communication.

However, by the end the reader is left with a sense of disappointment that borders on disgruntlement. Part of that is inherent in Genie's bleak prospects. But part of the problem lies with the book itself, which attempts to do much in too few pages, introduces too many tedious bit players who detract from the fascination of Genie herself, and finally ends up undermining one of its central tenets about language development so seriously that the reader questions the entire work.

Still, there was good reason why, when parts of "Genie" appeared in The New Yorker last year, some readers could talk of little else. Genie was vividly described, and so, too, was her hellish bedroom in Temple City, Calif., with the walls painted dirty salmon, the two windows kept shaded, the only light coming from a dim overhead bulb, no visual stimulation beyond the occasional addition of a couple of plastic raincoats. "Genie was the most profoundly damaged child I've ever seen," a therapist told Mr. Rymer. "Genie's life was a wasteland."

Yet by studying this shattered creature researchers thought they could prove or dismiss core linguistic theories. Mr. Rymer introduces the towering figure of Noam Chomsky, whose seminal ideas so transformed his field that the publication of his "Syntactic Structures" in 1957 is referred to among linguists as "the Event." Mr. Chomsky argued that we don't learn the rules of language, we are born with them, Mr. Rymer says. He proposed that if prelinguistic children were confined to a desert island, their inborn language facility, or the Chomskian "organ," would ultimately produce a language.

His detractors believed that the art of learning a language could flower only in a sensorily rich setting, with elaborate, if not necessarily schematic, tutelage and feedback. "The innatists think language is acquired very fast, very easily, and that it's very much a child's responsibility," the anti-Chomskyst Catherine Snow tells the author. "We think it requires a relationship with an adult, and a whole set of cognitive abilities."

Another question centered on the timing of language acquisition. One popular theory, the critical-period hypothesis, had it that the brain is able to learn a primary language only up to the age of 12, before the onset of puberty. Related to that theory of language mastery was "the
notion that, no matter how slow or how fast children learn language, they all go through the same stages, in the same order."

So what did researchers learn by studying Genie? Not enough to satisfy the Federal agencies that initially supported research on Genie, but eventually expressed disappointment at how the studies had been carried out. And what was gleaned seemed like a snarl of contradictions. Genie did pick up many words during her training, and she could string them together into complex thoughts ("one black kitty" "little bad boy," "bad orange fish -- no eat -- bad fish"), but she never managed the rudiments of grammar, an outcome that at once vindicated and denied conventional Chomskian theory. Her syntactic abilities had been thwarted by her development, as Mr. Chomsky might have predicted; and yet if grammar is inborn, why did Genie lack the skill as a result of environmental deprivation?

Scientists also learned that Genie processed all language through the right hemisphere of her brain, rather than using left and right equally, a finding that suggested it is grammar, originating in the left hemisphere, that allows the brain to balance and organize itself properly.

Yet after discussing the various conclusions of the Genie research team, Mr. Rymer lays a bombshell on the reader: his heroine is a straw girl. Much of the book is built on the premise that Genie's is a one-of-a-kind case, a singular opportunity to delve into language evolution, but then he reveals that there are many other and far better Genies around: deaf children. "The deaf may have their first contact with [ sign ] language at 2, or at 5, or at 15 years of age," Mr. Rymer writes. "Their plight has provided linguistics with a thousand Genies, and what's better, with Genies who have not been psychologically abused, only linguistically deprived." Why, then, did scientists feel compelled to descend on her like hyenas upon a wildebeest?

The reader is also left wondering whether Mr. Rymer ever tried to meet Genie in the institution where she now lives, a demented and withdrawn woman in her mid-30's. If he did and failed, he should have said so, and if he never made the attempt, he should admit it and explain why. As it is, we see her only through the memories and impressions of others, so we end up aching for a woman we have learned to care about but never quite got to know.

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