

Geniuses R Us

You know a lot of geniuses. You should meet some stupid people once in a while. You could learn something.

—Woody Allen to Diane Keaton in Manhattan

"DID YOU KNOW," ASKS LIZ SMITH IN THE NEW YORK DAILY News, "that Mr. [David] Brown is the genius who invented *Cosmopolitan* for his wife?" No, we did not, but we're sufficiently humbled now.

"Marketing genius" Chris Whittle, who thought a good way to sell detergent would be to develop a magazine for maids, has been praised for his "evil genius," which was the press's pet name for Ted Bundy.

Critics are fond of using the term "minor genius." Minor genius? Like a minor act of God?

"Is genius too big a word?" wonders Clive Barnes in a review of Eric Bogosian's new show. "Depends," he quibbles sagely, "on how promiscuously you use it."

Promiscuous ain't the half of it. Cruising for genius may just be the come-on of the nineties.

Once upon a time, genius (or at least the nerdy, quantifiable kind of genius with ballpoint-pen stains on its breast pocket and spectacles like shot glasses) could be reckoned by the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test. Then, in 1969, Arthur Jensen published his findings suggesting that certain races scored higher in basketball than on traditional IQ tests, a discovery that made liberals squirm (and their offspring major in macramé) until they realized that Asians tested better than whites. They needn't have worried for long. Just ask Marilyn! Because *Parade* columnist Marilyn vos Savant, who claims the highest test score in the world (while others swear she simply has the world's worst personality), is ample proof that an IQ of 228 may sound great, but you can't dance to it. Sistine Chapel? Let's hear it for "The Chapel of Love."

Today, *genius* is an Equal Opportunity Appellation. At a trendy downtown magazine that one could think of as Allan Bloom's Revenge, a writer comes up with a headline and shows it to the editor in charge. She shakes her head, stunned with disbelief, then smacks herself and gasps: "It's... it's... it's... it's genius!"

Uptown, a woman asks a friend to recommend a hairdresser. She already knows his reputation—he's come up with a look that's part early Rose Kennedy, part late B-52's—but feels compelled to ask, Is he really any good? Her friend replies emphatically: "Good? The guy's a genius."

One might argue that a decent hairdresser has more of a purchase on genius than, say, Tama Janowitz, who could use one. Or that the pure geometry of a good cut has the elegance of a workable equation. But if your hairdresser is a genius, where does that leave Faulkner? Can you imagine Einstein flogging amaretto?

Welcome to the New Renaissance. The membership of Mensa in the Greater New York area is a mere seventeen hundred—probably because they hold their get-togethers at places like Bob's Big Boy right off Exit 40 on the Long Island Expressway. But on any given night at 150 Wooster you can rub elbows with all manner of genius—from "promotional genius" Donald Trump to Madonna, "a kind of genius." Just don't rub too hard. Genius has learned how to dress. Gone the Rex Harrison threadbare cardigan. All hail Armani, who I'm told has a genius for fit.

Genius. Comes as a noun, goes on like an adjective. It has a leaner, meaner ring than *fabulous*. It's put a human face on *state of the art*. But genius nowadays is even more useful than hype; it's a kind of euphemism, a prettifier—like calling garbage men sanitation engineers. Which may explain why it is used so commonly to describe those who traffic in body parts or functions of alimentation. Plastic surgeons "on the cutting edge." Chefs, those venerable "Prousts of the pudding." Performance artistes with a penchant for vegetables.

Consider the tale of the opera buff and the dental student at a performance of *Turandot*. Standing in the lobby at intermission, the enthusiast was pointing out, for the edification of his companion, the various luminaries who passed their way. "That's Lily Pons..." he said. "There's Pavarotti's mother."

The student, spotting someone, added in a confidential tone: "That's Doctor X. He's a genius with saliva."

Truman Capote was one of the few who had the wit to call himself a genius; Roseanne Barr was stupid enough to believe she was one. But the evil geniuses of genius-mongering know that calling someone else a genius can only reflect well on you. This is known as the Peggy Noonan Effect.

When speech writer Noonan looked into the vast emptiness called Ronald Reagan, did she see a great man or just an opportunity to bask in the immensity of her own self-importance? Noonan is nobody's fool. She knew that:

Reagan redefined genius as 58.4 percent of the vote.

Noonan authored a goodly percentage of Reagan.

The people are never wrong.

Q.E.D. Peggy Noonan is a genius.

Q: How many geniuses does it take to screw the country?

"Who should define the style of the nineties?" HG asked Fran Lebowitz, who, forced to punt, replied: "I would like to see a genius."

Wouldn't we all. And if we did, what would we call him? Egalitarianism may have put a spin on social intercourse, but it's put the language to sleep. *Genius* is the very thing to say when you don't have anything to say at all. And *Garbage* is a much better name for a magazine than *Smart*. ●