

MARGOLIN, L. M. (1994). *Goodness Personified: The Emergence of Gifted Children*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, softcover, \$18.95, ISBN 0-202-30527-9, 181 pp.

Seeking to derive insight from *Goodness Personified* is roughly analogous to attempting to derive light from a lava lamp. While light may be associated with the curiously moving shapes of the lamp, it is not directly related to them, and the movement of the objects does not enhance the light. Arising from *Goodness Personified* are insightful questions. Yet the questions are not illuminated by either the logic of the book's arguments or the process by which it seems to have been written.

Margolin poses the question of what could possibly be gained from believing in the existence of gifted children. To answer his question, he attempts an examination of the etiology of the meaning of giftedness and the methods through which claims about gifted children have come to be accepted as true.

In capsule, the author seeks to demonstrate that (1) scholars constructed the notion of gifted children and sold their construction to a community of believers — including parents, teachers, psychologists, therapists, and the government, (2) the purpose of the notion of gifted children is maintenance of the power and privilege of the upper middle class, (3) over time, the scholars have attempted to make gifted child education more inclusive, but have done so really only as a means of masking racism and classism, (4) the scholars have variously crafted images of gifted children as vulnerable or as a national resource and then retrenched from use of those images as it no longer served the purpose of the gifted child movement to use them, (5) curriculum for gifted learners is virtually content free and seeks largely to train gifted youngsters to maintain upper middle class values, (6) the scholars reflect upon and are critical of their scholarship as a mode of protecting the core meaning of giftedness, (7) the concept of giftedness necessitates the downgrading of those not included in the category of gifted, and (8) acceptance of the construct of giftedness leads to attribution of characteristics of giftedness to virtually all arenas of life.

That the book raises difficult questions is neither new for the field of gifted education (although the author proposes that it is a field which has been little scrutinized) nor inappropriate. What makes the book frustrating is, first, the method by which it is constructed and, second, its often ill-informed arguments.

## Method as Barrier to Meaning

An author has a right to put pen to paper in whatever fashion he deems appropriate. It is not, however, the case that all approaches yield written products which are equally

sound. To Margolin's credit, he does make evident his assumptions about his work. He notes that he makes no claim that his book is scientific (it is not) or that he is impartial (he is not). Further, he asserts that he will deliberately avoid dealing with the questions of whether there are gifted children or whether the methods used in their identification are empirically valid. Absent an examination of the validity of the concept of giftedness on psychometric, empirical, observational, or educational grounds, the book proceeds with the premise that therefore no such validity is possible — handy for the author, but awkward for a reader who might want to consider more than one side of a complex issue.

A second problem of method is a lack of stated criteria for selection of sources to be used as "evidence" for the author's various postulates. The only reference Margolin makes to research conducted for the book is use of the library of the Connie Belin Center for Gifted Education. It is not clear what range of materials was in the library, what proportion he used of what was available, or to what degree he attempted to understand vs. excerpt those materials.

In fact, the book reads as though the author began with the premise that the concept of giftedness must be the product of sinister and conspiratorial minds, selected passages (often out of context) from a melange of materials to support his belief, and attempted at all junctures to suppress dialogue representing alternative explanations. Many citations which he offers as evidence of what becomes a sort of grand conspiracy theory come from the first quarter of this century, without mention of the social or educational context in which they were written. While he does sometimes cite more contemporary sources to support his assertions, there appears little attempt to understand either the range of views expressed in the literature of gifted education — or the overarching pedagogical beliefs of individuals whom he cites.

A third key shortcoming of Margolin's method is his failure to define the group to which he refers as gifted child educators. — in essence the conspirators who have (for over seven decades) perpetrated a hoax on the public. It appears that gifted child educators are whoever writes something about gifted children. For example, he explains that Henry Goddard's specialty was research and writing about those referred to during the first part of this century as "the feeble-minded," he nonetheless includes his writing (from the 1920's) as evidence of the construction of the concept of giftedness by gifted child educators. Other "gifted child educators" include Alice Miller (a psychoanalyst), Arnold Gesell (a child developmentalist), Robert Sternberg (a psychologist), and Jodie Foster (an actress and director). In addition to overpopulating the category of gifted child educators substantially, Margolin also has

# Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children

**Yi-Tong Ma**



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## **Table of Contents Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children**

1. Understanding the eBook Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
  - The Rise of Digital Reading Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
  - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
  - Exploring Different Genres
  - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
  - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
  - Popular eBook Platforms
  - Features to Look for in an Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
  - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children

- Personalized Recommendations
  - Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children User Reviews and Ratings
  - Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children Free and Paid eBooks
    - Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children Public Domain eBooks
    - Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children eBook Subscription Services
    - Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children Budget-Friendly Options
  6. Navigating Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children eBook Formats
    - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
    - Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children Compatibility with Devices
    - Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children Enhanced eBook Features
  7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
    - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
    - Highlighting and Note-Taking Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
    - Interactive Elements Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
  8. Staying Engaged with Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
    - Joining Online Reading Communities
    - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
    - Following Authors and Publishers Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
  9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
    - Benefits of a Digital Library
    - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
  10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
    - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
    - Minimizing Distractions
    - Managing Screen Time
  11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
    - Setting Reading Goals Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
    - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
  12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children

- Fact-Checking eBook Content of Goodness Personified The Emergence Of Gifted Children
- Distinguishing Credible Sources

### 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning

- Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
- Exploring Educational eBooks

### 14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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