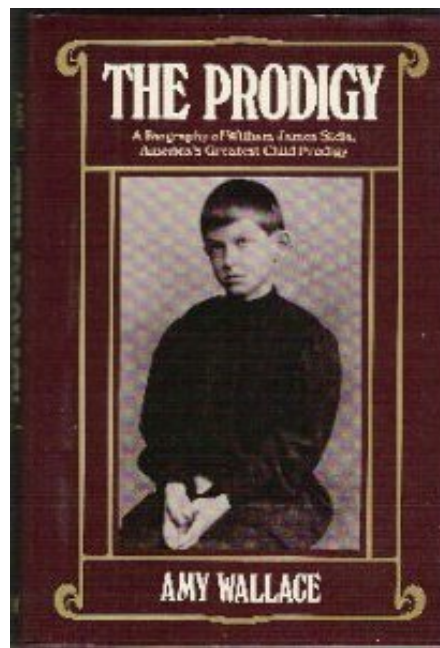




The Prodigy: A Biography of William James Sidis, America's Greatest Child Prodigy

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From Reader Review The Prodigy: A Biography of William James Sidis, America's Greatest Child Prodigy for online ebook

Mick Pletcher says

This was an excellent book. It is well worth the read and has many extraordinary stories about Sidis and his failure with society. It goes into much detail about his family and how they used him for popularity. I had never heard of his father Boris before this book and did not know he was ranked beside Freud for a while as one of the most prominent psychiatrists. What was even more interesting was that Sidis helped set precedence in law with two of his lawsuits against the media. He was no doubt an extraordinary human that was sadly driven to isolation due to society's rejection of him, even among intellectuals who were even vastly less intelligent than him.

Jesse says

William James Sidis was born to a pair of immigrant autodidacts. And though they were mostly self-taught, both parents did obtain degrees in medicine (mom from Boston U, dad from Harvard). Boris Sidis, William's father, was an early proponent of psychoanalysis, engaging in a transcontinental word war with Sigmund Freud. Boris is also to blame, along with William James (Henry James's brother) with the oft quoted idea that we only use ten percent of our brains. James and Sidis espoused the idea of "reserve energy" which could be harnessed through specific educational techniques. Exhibit A of their theory: William James Sidis (who was named after his godfather, William James, and will be called Billy from here on out). Despite the evolutionary illogic of this idea, Billy's feats were so extraordinary that rejecting them out of hand was a risky undertaking. And ahead is the standard list of Billy's precocious accomplishments: reading the New York Times at 18 months; teaching himself Latin with a simple primer and Caesar's Gallic Wars at 5 years – and all as a birthday present for his beloved father; being accepted into Harvard at age 9 (he wouldn't attend until he was 11); created his own language before the age of 10; and so on and so forth. His mental acumen was a thing to behold. My favorite story from his biography, "The Prodigy" by Amy Wallace (no relation to DFW) really highlights Billy's uniqueness. His mother Sarah would always answer any question Billy asked (part of their teaching techniques) - usually by going to the encyclopedia together and finding the answer. One day Billy asked his mother a question and - before she could reply - he said, "wait, you're just going to say let's go look it up, and I can just look it up myself". This was the last lesson his parents ever gave him. He was five.

As a biography "The Prodigy" is rather spotty, full of caesurae, second-hand tales, and extrapolations of motive. This weakens what could have been a phenomenal book. Intelligence, parenting, mental illness, and media - all of these things converged in Billy's life, molding him into a shunned recluse: an anti-social man searching for perfection. He never really had a chance. His parents raised him with a theory in mind; that is, any child - regardless of genetics - could be made into a prodigy if the parents followed simple guidelines. What are these guidelines you ask? Here is a sampling: answer ALL of your child's questions; never say "don't" to your child; try and discuss things just before bedtime when your child's brain is most receptive to ideas. These are all good and valid ways to try and encourage your child's natural curiosity, but the Sidis's believed that their child's precocity was the exclusive result of training and not genetics. This is somewhat laughable in 2011, but fin de siècle brain studies were in their infancy (if they were born at all). And the idea of an untapped reservoir of brain power just waiting to be unlocked was intoxicating in its allure. Of course contrasting with this is the idea that every human – whether prodigious or prosaic – is just a composite of genetics and environment. This was seen as dictatorial: a personally limiting concept, a sober slap in the face of sovereignty. And Boris Sidis did not believe he, nor his phenomenal progeny, should be limited by such

genetic tyranny and thus presented his case for “reserve energy” in his book “Philistine and Genius”, using his son Billy as evidence for the validity of his theory. Sadly, this opened Billy up to the press, turning him into a “public figure” - a status which would haunt him for the rest of his life. Billy’s childhood became an instructive example in how knowledge has many different faces. Billy could learn a language in a day or two, but couldn’t teach himself (or maybe didn’t want to teach himself) how to manipulate the press to his advantage. The man who could say marriage a million ways couldn’t find relief in a woman’s companionship and intellect (interesting factoid: Billy’s one true (unrequited) love was Martha Foley, who co-founded *Story* magazine and served as a series editor for *The Best American Short Stories*). His parents introduced him to knowledge and the wondrous world of discovery, but because of his advanced development he never socialized with peers, never learned to code-switch, or fraternize, or (god forbid) enjoy a sporting event. These are all skills that could have soothed Billy’s transition from boy wonder into adroit adult. But Billy’s parents disdained the quotidian, relishing in Billy’s myriad mental accomplishments, all while using the specious argument that they never “pushed” Billy. But this is sophistry at its finest. One of the Sidis’s other parenting rules was always use “desire to please” over “fear of failure”; thus, Billy’s prepubescent feats were mostly done out of a desire to please his father. How Boris failed to realize this as “pushing” is beyond me – or maybe he did realize it, but shied away from the thought that he was emotionally manipulating his son. I can’t help but think that Billy himself realized this later on: as an adult he never spoke of his father; and of his mother, had only baleful things to say. This was after Billy’s bitter split from the family. The events surrounding this are vague, as both Billy and his mother never spoke of the split in any published sources. What’s known is this: Billy was part of a socialist protest on May Day in Boston that turned violent. He was arrested and sentenced to 18 months under the Sedition Act of 1918. All Billy did – as he testified in court – was march at the head of the protest while holding a piece of red silk. Although sentenced, Billy never served any time. His father (presumably) got his charges nol-prossed under the condition that he and Sarah take Billy under their care, and reform him at the sanitarium that they ran. The Sidis Sanitarium - which was located on a large farm in Portsmouth, NH - was operated according to Boris’s ideas about psychoanalysis. It admitted mostly rich, whimsical patients - allaying their neuroses through nature, fellowship, and an early form of talk therapy. But for Billy’s psychic issues it aggravated rather than allayed. Every summer he would go live on the farm with his parents, and the media would sensationalize: reporting a mental breakdown and a trip to a sanatorium. It seems both parents were oblivious to this and after the last “kidnapping” (as Billy called it), his parents moved to California, taking Billy and his sister with them (his sister is a whole other story that shows the psychic abuse Sarah Sidis could wield). It was in the Golden State that Billy finally left his family for good, livid with their manipulation of his criminal charges which forced Billy to live with them. He never spoke with his mother again. When his father died a few years later, he only showed up to collect the inheritance, skipping the funeral altogether.

After Billy’s death, most newspapers proclaimed him to be a flame-out, with headlines such as “Prodigious Failure” littering the nation’s dailies. They blamed his limited mature output and desire for mindless occupation on the pressures that Billy’s parents (of course no one in the media noted their own role in increasing this pressure) put upon him. But despite refusing to take a mentally challenging profession – he worked as a comptometer operator his whole life – Billy’s intellectual life was anything but infertile. He published one book under his name, titled “*The Animate and the Inanimate*”, in which he adduced the existence of an object very much like a black hole. This was in 1925, six years before Chandrasekhar’s calculations, and arrived at in total isolation from any institution or peer support (he graduated from Harvard in 1914 at the age of sixteen). His book was published to apathy and silence. The press only cared about Billy’s failures not his successes. Unfortunately, this treatment pushed Billy further from the fields of math and physics (which along with linguistics were his strongest areas) and he never again published anything in these fields, even claiming later in life that the mere site of equations made him physically ill. And yet, Billy didn’t cease from publication all together. He released numerous books, magazines, and newsletters, all under semi-humorous pseudonyms (Frank Falupa, etc.); he even founded a new hobby: peridromiphily, you might know it as trainspotting (and no, trainspotting is not recreational drug use).

Sidis’s biography, and really his life as a whole, raises questions about the ethics of trying to raise your

progeny as a prodigy. There are large trade-offs that are made, a fact that most of these parents try intensely to ignore. For example, it's hard to be socially graceful when you've been thinking about the fourth dimension all day long. This is made exponentially more difficult when you are eleven years old. And it was Billy's social failings that made him such a target of the press. That, and the fact that at the age of eleven he was smarter than all of the journalists who were writing about him: this tends to engender jealousy. I sometimes like to think there is a special place in hell for people who - in the klieg lights of the national press - so gleefully try and tear down an already fragile, and somewhat exploited child. After all, that's what he was when they began running articles about the young professor and all his eccentricities. The Houston university press in particular will receive a spot right next to the furnace for their unique southern brand of vitriol. And while Billy's proclivities were the ostensible reason, the real reason for the press's vicious schadenfreude was the desire to always beat down those who stand out (see the magazine rack at your local supermarket if you would like to see this in action). Later in life, Billy attempted to sue "The New Yorker" after they ran a Where-Are-They-Now article that pilloried Billy for his lowly lodgings and lack of mainstream academic success. He argued that he had long since stopped being a "public figure", and thus his privacy should be respected by the magazine. This case dragged on for years, with Billy using his legal acumen to contribute to his lawyers' formulation of the case (he attended Harvard Law School but left just before graduating). This case went all the way to the Supreme Court which stated, "once a public figure, always a public figure" - thus Billy was forced against his will to remain a public figure open to published ridicule and humiliation. The injustice of this being that his parents made him (without his consent) a "public figure" when he was a five-year-old boy: inviting journalists into their home. Now I don't wholly disagree with this ruling in a strictly legal sense, but from an ethical perspective "The New Yorker" and James Thurber - who pseudonymously wrote the condescending article that reinserted Billy into the national consciousness - are wholly in the wrong. Billy eventually did settle out of court with "The New Yorker", for a few hundred dollars. And when Billy died, his sister found the settlement money in his account, untouched, as a symbol of his only and small victory over the media.

Billy's life can be read in many ways. But I prefer to read it as a man who overcame shoddy and incomplete parenting, rancorous reporters, and a mind-blowing mind, to create an isolated yet self-satisfying life. He maintained friendships with people who were committed to respecting his privacy. He taught a small cadre of students his idiosyncratic, yet wholly original, ideas about Native Americans and their contribution to the formation of America, past and present. He also found unparalleled ways to challenge his mind: memorizing street train routes for hundreds of cities, knowing the day of the week for any date, inventing his own language, so forth and so on. However, he was also incredibly normal in that he attempted to pursue his own brand of personal happiness. And this, despite being overwhelmingly different in that his genetics and upbringing - and the subsequent skyscraping intellect they produced - made him into a living experiment to some people: with his every eccentricity and perceived failure being magnified and used as evidence for the failure of Boris's theories (the only vestige of these theories being that damn 10% of your brain crap, that people keep repeating). But Billy owed society not a thing; and great intellect doesn't mean great insight into how to use that intellect. Or, even more so, how to navigate an envious world that covets and condescends simultaneously. There's a great line from the book "Memories of the Future" about the sun shining on credit. How we are given gifts, artistic and otherwise, and we owe it to the sun - here a metonym for society - to do our darndest to repay its largess. It's similar to the ideas explored in Lewis Hyde's "The Gift". Thus, some might see Billy as a dead-beat debtor where the sun's concerned, but I don't: I see Billy as an exploited child, who somehow found happiness in his own way.

adversus solem ne loquitor

Ian says

Biography of William James Sidis, brilliant child prodigy. Media darling til the press turned hostile and hounded him into obscurity.

?Misericordia? ~ The Serendipity Aegis ~ ?????? ✨❤️ says

I hate to see how Sidis's life was portrayed in this one. He was a genius, who by 9 wrote 4 academic books, which is more than most of us do in all our lifetimes. The guy predicted black holes, was interested in logistics of intercity transfers and knew a bunch of languages by the time he was 7. This is more than most people do. Ever. And this biography makes some kind of walking disappointment of him. I think it's unfair, to put it really mildly.

A horrible book on a beautiful subject: human mind, a brilliant one. William Sidis's life, I could grade it 1000. This book, gives a very sensationalistic angle of it, containing no debate on all the controversial things we know and probably lots that we just don't.

Dina says

William Sidis entered Harvard when he was 11, and as adult purportedly spoke over 40 languages and theorized about 4th dimension. Its a good descriptive book, but i expected more. Children savants are always a fascinating read, especially those that chose to not to pursue their genius due to parental and society pressure.

Ricardo Laredo says

i want read it

Janis says

Such a remarkable person, but so sad. Who knows what would have happened, how his life would have gone, with other parents.

Michael Connolly says

William James Sidis was an extraordinary child prodigy. But he was also a shy, gentle and sensitive soul, and all the attention he received frightened him. He felt that he was seen as a freak or curiosity, rather than as a human being. Instead of pursuing a career as a scientist or linguist, he withdrew from the world. We should be concerned with the emotional development of precocious children, not just their intellectual development.

Not that our current system of public education devotes many resources to any kind of extra help for gifted children. Sidis reminds me of a current shy genius, Grisha Perelman. Fortunately, Grisha managed to avoid the spotlight until after he completed his great achievement, the proof of the Poincare Conjecture.

Tim Hulsizer says

Perhaps I expected something more from this book than I got and if that is the case, it mirrors the expectations America had for William James Sidis. Born in 1898 to educated immigrant parents, young William's mental acrobatics quickly surpassed their wildest expectations. He supposedly spoke 8 languages by age 8 and even invented his own, Vendergood. He entered Harvard at age 11 and famously lectured to adult scholars on the subject of 4-dimensional bodies. Eventually he would swear off mathematics entirely and he spent his adulthood obsessed with radical politics, ticket transfers for public transport, and New England (particularly Boston) history, even going so far as to write books about Native American tribes of the area.

As with many child prodigies, he was in a pressure cooker from an early age, hounded by reporters and paraded by his parents to their dinner guests. Questions abound regarding what is fact and what is fiction in William's life. Certainly he was incredibly gifted and no doubt achieved much of what was said, but despite Ms. Wallace's best efforts, it never feels like she gets to the truth behind it all. She is hampered by decades having passed and much of the original paperwork missing when she wrote the book.

What is apparent from her surprisingly tender, protective portrait of the man is that he suffered that most horrible of fates which befall the vast number of young prodigies: the struggle to live up to expectations as they mature. The natural human inclination is to expect a superior intellect to produce superior work, and we think these young men and women will push forward the human experience in some way. But this is not only an unreasonable expectation, it often includes an invasion of privacy and deprives them of living a "normal" life out of the public eye.

The book makes it quite clear that William suffered much of this in his all-too-brief life of 46 years. Indeed, he was so damaged by the tribulations of his youth that he shunned the public eye in adulthood and did his best to make people think he had no extraordinary mental gifts. It's difficult to tell how unhappy or lonely he may have been. At times the book makes it seem like his brain was above that type of emotion, then brief passages make him seem very sad indeed.

We will likely never know the entire truth about what was in his head or if he was indeed the smartest American child prodigy who ever lived. It certainly doesn't answer the big question looming over the proceedings: was he always destined to be a uniquely intelligent young man or (as his parents claimed) was their upbringing responsible? I recommend this book for the curious, just don't expect it to bring the man fully into focus when there simply isn't enough extant information to achieve that aim.

Dodey says

I'd never heard of this guy, but guess it proves the theory of nature versus nurture. Kind of sad story.

Avis Black says

Sidis comes across as a sympathetic character out of step with his cultural times. Oddball tidbit: he was the cousin of Clifton Fadiman. A good read.

b bb bbbb bbbbbbbb says

Disliked: The biographers slightly irritating personality intrudes a little too much.. A passable treatment of an interesting subject (effects of an intrusive public on a child prodigy & co).

Patricia says

Extremely interesting. Dragged in parts but glad I read it and learned about this interesting genius family

Kiof says

tells the story it promises to tell, so 5 stars. It's an unforgettable story, too. Get it in a double bundle pack with The Man Who Knew Infinity.

Richard says

I was disappointed. There seemed to be too little information about the man himself, his psychology, etc., at least in the form that I was expecting. I don't remember what it is that she did write, but it was boring enough that I gave up on it. Also, this book costs around \$70.
