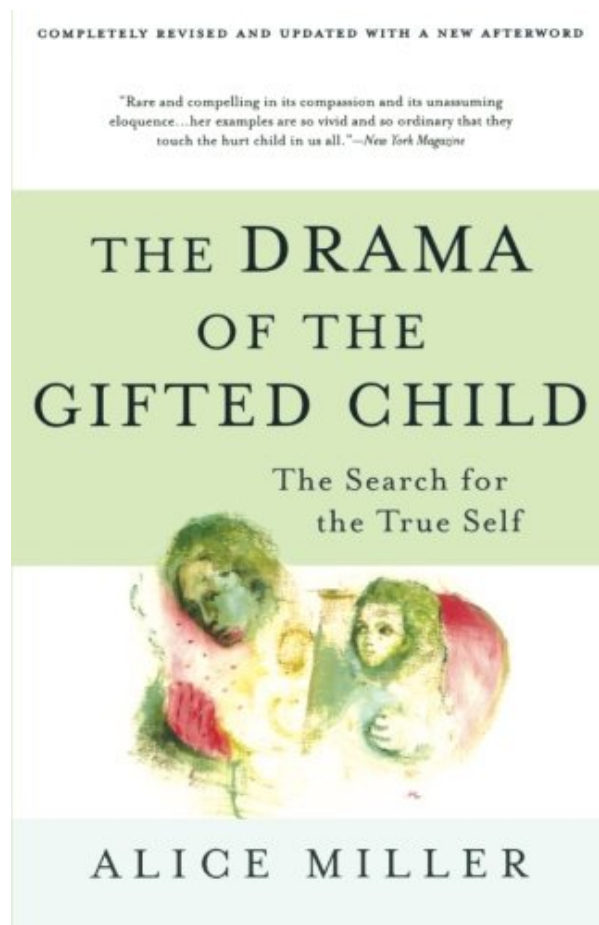


# THE DRAMA OF THE GIFTED CHILD: THE SEARCH FOR THE TRUE SELF, REVISED EDITION BY ALICE MILLER



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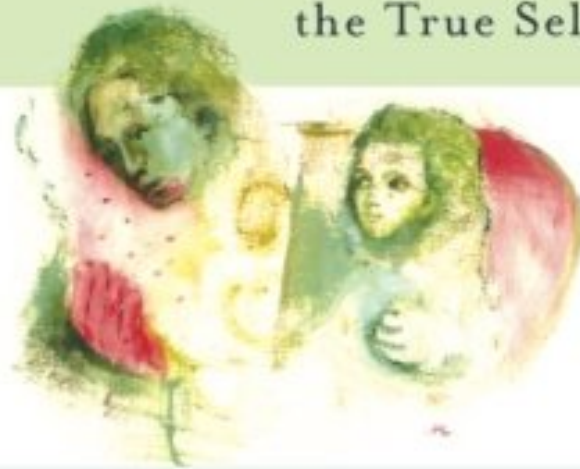


COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

"Rare and compelling in its compassion and its unassuming eloquence...her examples are so vivid and so ordinary that they touch the hurt child in us all."—*New York Magazine*

# THE DRAMA OF THE GIFTED CHILD

The Search for  
the True Self



ALICE MILLER

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## Review

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## Language Notes

Text: English (translation)

Original Language: German

## About the Author

Alice Miller has achieved worldwide recognition for her work on the causes and effects of childhood traumas. Her books include *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, *Banished Knowledge*, *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, and *For Your Own Good*. She lives in Switzerland.

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Why are many of the most successful people plagued by feelings of emptiness and alienation? This wise and profound book has provided thousands of readers with an answer—and has helped them to apply it to their own lives. Far too many of us had to learn as children to hide our own feelings, needs, and memories skillfully in order to meet our parents' expectations and win their "love." Alice Miller writes, "When I used the word 'gifted' in the title, I had in mind neither children who receive high grades in school nor children talented in a special way. I simply meant all of us who have survived an abusive childhood thanks to an ability to adapt even to unspeakable cruelty by becoming numb... Without this 'gift' offered us by nature, we would not have survived." But merely surviving is not enough. The Drama of the Gifted Child helps us to reclaim our life by discovering our own crucial needs and our own truth.

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544 of 555 people found the following review helpful.

**A Wise & Perceptive Book That Changed My Life!**

By Jana L. Perskie

Alice Miller's "Drama Of The Gifted Child," was originally published as "Prisoners Of Childhood; The Drama Of The Gifted Child," in 1981. I read the book over 20 years ago, and recently reread it. I find that it is just as relevant, wise and perceptive today as it was then. Ms. Miller was a practicing psychoanalyst, who

gave up her work with patients to write books, for the layperson, primarily dealing with early childhood abuse. In a new Forward, Miller continues to disavow psychoanalysis. Although I am not in agreement with her on this, she continues to be one of my heroes.

Ms. Miller, who writes an elegant and easily understandable prose, discusses here the issue of children raised by a narcissistic parent(s). She explains that this book is not about high I.Q. children, but about those who were able to survive an abusive childhood because they developed an adequate defense system. At a very early age the child intuitively apprehends the parent's needs. Since the parent, especially the mother, is the child's soul source of survival, the child strives to please, fearing disapproval, or abandonment. Thus, the child sublimates his needs for the parent's. Roles reverse and the child frequently takes on the parent's responsibility as emotional caregiver. This impedes the growth of a child's true identity, and a "loss of self" frequently occurs. The child adapts by not "feeling" his own needs, and develops finely tuned antennae, focusing intensely on the needs of the all important other. Ms. Miller writes, "An abused child, (emotionally), does not know it is being abused, and in order to survive and avoid the unbearable pain, the mind is provided with a remarkable mechanism, the 'gift' of 'repression,' which stores these experiences in a place outside of consciousness." Although, later in life, these "prohibited" feelings and needs cannot always be avoided, they remain split off and the most vital part of the true self is not integrated into the personality. The results are often depression, and tremendous insecurity.

Alice Miller makes her readers aware of the unexpressed sufferings of the child and the tragedy of the parent(s) own illness. As she frequently states, "any parent who abuses a child," knowingly or otherwise, "has himself been severely traumatized in his childhood, in some form or another."

Gifted children are often the products of emotional abuse by a narcissistic parent. However, if the child's great need for admiration is not met, for his/her looks, intelligence or achievements, he/she falls into severe depression. Miller says one can only be free from depression "when self-esteem is based on the authenticity of one's own feelings and not on the possession of certain qualities."

Children need a great deal of both emotional and physical support from the adult. According to Miller, this adult support must include the following elements in order for a child to develop to his or her full potential: "Respect for the child; respect for his rights; tolerance for his feelings; willingness to learn from his behavior."

Miller also writes about the "origins of grandiosity as a form of denial and its relationship with depression." Another interesting chapter deals with the "process of parental derision" and how it results in humiliation and possible psychic trauma of the child.

Alice Miller's extraordinary book, along with consistent psychoanalytic psychotherapy, enabled me to understand my past, modify behavior, forgive, and finally, best of all, to heal. I cannot recommend "The Drama Of The Gifted Child" highly enough.

928 of 957 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent but painful - not to be taken lightly

By A Customer

Miller has created a work that reaches into the soul and guides the reader through innermost (sometimes forgotten) memories and details of early life. By showing very clearly how gifted children are often relegated to that back burner of the family because of their own innate self-sufficiency, she paints a vivid picture of unconscious, conditioned manipulation and a common lack of emotional maturity in the part of the parents. The child is essentially denied a self of its own, as the needs of the parent are always paramount.

**WARNING:** This book is powerful and extremely insightful, but not the informational or educational manual you might expect from the title--it is very personal, and is likely to evoke unexpectedly strong emotions. Several people saw me with the book over a course of a few months, and immediately thought it would be for them: "Oh, I should read that--I have three gifted children!". I found myself almost discouraging their interest, as they clearly were looking for validation of this statement, not actual insight. The content of this book is extremely powerful and can be a painful experience, especially for a reader who finds himself

relating to the content but not ready to face their own reality. Although it is certainly a classic, it is not a book to be offered capriciously to friends and acquaintances--a casual recommendation may be detrimental to your relationship with the unsuspecting victim.

In my case, my role as peacemaker and surrogate caregiver in the family left me with an overall sense of personal worthlessness and confusion about my own reactions to the events of my adult life. Not having been allowed true feelings of my own through my childhood, I found myself lost in a sea of immature emotions once separated from the needs of both of my parents.

Miller herself has identified one of the basic problems of her approach: she views the mother as the most probable source of this type of emotional manipulation, as the mother is traditionally the primary caregiver in very early childhood. But if read with a deliberate awareness that both parents (present or not) are involved in the panorama of childhood experience, a more balanced reading will yield surprisingly sharp images and a keener understanding of one's formative years.

I found myself reading it in small bursts, as some sections resonated so keenly that I had to put the words away for a while to ruminate. But I always came back, as it helped me examine closely some things about myself that I truly had not realized, and has helped me resolve some issues that have caused me continued anger and distress. The work inspired by this book has left me feeling more capable of identifying my true feelings in times of stress, and I feel that the insight into my true self will help me as I continue to grow.

505 of 534 people found the following review helpful.

Who am I, really?

By Boris Bangemann

When I read this book (which was originally published in German in 1979) for the first time in the early eighties, it completely swept me off my feet. Here was an analysis that explained why I was in search of my 'true self', why I felt my achievements were 'empty', why I felt empathy for others and antipathy for myself. The idea proposed by Alice Miller, in a nutshell, was that there are children who are able to feel and ease the emotional insecurity of their mothers (the 'gift' of the title), thus gain her love but in the process deny their own desires. These children grow up to become helpers in various roles, including therapists - like Alice Miller herself. They develop sensors for the subconscious signals of the needs of others. The problem is, they subconsciously deny themselves the pursuit of their own needs, and consequently cannot become who they 'are'. Which makes them prone to the illnesses which, according to the Freudian theory, go with suppressed desires - depression and grandiosity (the latter being just a way of keeping depression at bay).

Alice Miller's ideas are based on her experiences as a psychotherapist who practiced for 20 years, and her own self-analysis. Her reasoning draws on some basic Freudian ideas: if the subconscious is brought to consciousness, the illnesses caused by the suppression can eventually be contained; the life of a person is rooted in her childhood and childhood experiences shape who a person 'is'. In the last part of her book she adds a theory derived from her work experience: when children whose needs have been denied in their childhood grow up and have children of their own, they can 'get rid' of their pain by inflicting the pain on their own children. She calls it the vicious circle of disdain, and the handing down of destructive attitudes from one generation to the next like a chain reaction.

How do I see 'The Drama of the Gifted Child' almost 20 years after reading it for the first time? I continue to be convinced that the general argument is true. Alice Miller captures very well the emotional consequences of denying one's own desires in the service of a person whose love is so overpoweringly important that it demands the sacrifice of one's 'true' self. Hermann Hesse's life and works provide her with excellent examples to illustrate this, by the way. On some cornerstones of her argument, however, I have my doubts now. Firstly, the idea of a 'true self', chiseled in stone if you so want, does not sit very well with me any more. Secondly, her thesis completely omits the role of fathers (quite un-Freudian, by the way), and what I saw as a refreshingly new point of view 20 years ago, looks like a major shortcoming to me now. Thirdly,

having read up on some developmental psychology, I do not believe any longer that early experience inexorably shapes our lives. Finally, I think humans are so complex that there can not be a simple mechanism such as a handing down of certain attitudes: there are just too many exceptions from the rule.

'The Drama of the Gifted Child' is a powerful book and it is worth reading even after 20 years. It is not a scientific book in the sense that it contains testable findings, it presents a practitioner's conclusions gained from personal experience. You may call it an informed speculation, or an interim report from 'the search for the true self' as it is subtitled.

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