



The Hungry Gene: The Science of Fat and the Future of Thin

By Ellen Ruppel Shell

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Americans spend \$33 billion annually on diet and exercise programs, yet we are fatter than ever -- and it's killing us. According to a recent Surgeon General's report, more than 60 percent of Americans are overweight, including a growing number of children, all of whom face such increased, potentially life-threatening health risks as hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. The Hungry Gene takes an unflinching look at the spreading obesity pandemic, guiding readers through the ongoing quest to unravel the genetic and behavioral basis of one of the most vexing scientific mysteries of our time. Acclaimed science journalist Ellen Ruppel Shell goes to the front lines of the struggle against fat -- from the quiet facility in Maine where the first superobese mice were bred more than thirty years ago, to Rockefeller University in New York where scientists worked around the clock to isolate the gene that causes obesity. Along the way Shell looks at how medicine is dealing with the fat crisis with radical and controversial surgical techniques, what the incidence of mordant obesity among native islanders in Micronesia tells us about its evolutionary roots, and how drug companies are racing to create a pill to cure this "Trillion Dollar Disease." She also takes aim at the increasingly obesity-enabling culture that lies behind the crisis -- from the expanding suburban sprawl that has fostered America's car-centered sedentary lifestyle to the fast-food marketers who prey on the jammed schedules of today's two-income families. Weaving science, history, and personal stories, the narrative builds to a powerful conclusion that reveals how we can beat the obesity pandemic before it beats us. Gripping and provocative, The Hungry Gene is the unsettling saga of how the world got fat -- and what we can do about it. "An indefatigable reporter with a novelist's sense of character and drama ..." -- John Horgan, author of The End of Science

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The Hungry Gene: The Science of Fat and the Future of Thin By Ellen Ruppel Shell Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1749337 in Books
- Published on: 2002-10
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 1.19" h x 6.30" w x 9.52" l, .1 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 256 pages



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

More than 1.1 billion people worldwide are overweight or obese. How and why did the world get so fat? Shell, a journalist and codirector of the Program in Science Journalism at Boston University, explores the issue from many angles including the roles of genetics, pharmaceutical companies, the food industry and social class. She charts the growth in scientific research on obesity and obesity treatments in the last decade (from stomach stapling to the notoriously dangerous drug Fen-Phen), explaining the biology of metabolism that makes it so difficult to circumvent the body's appetite. Shell also explores the lifestyle culprits behind obesity, traveling to Micronesia to document the residents of the island of Kosrae, whose average life span has plummeted in recent years due to the introduction of high-fat Western food. Though she lucidly explains the physiology of fat, Shell fills the book with chatty profiles of patients and doctors ("Rudy Leibel is a small man and trim... He has a degree in English literature, and a weakness for poetry") and her prose reads like that of a glossy magazine. There is also much in the book that may be familiar to readers; the spotlights on new obesity treatments are compelling, but it will come as no surprise that too much high-fat, calorie-dense food and too little exercise trigger obesity. On the other hand, given that Big-Tobacco-style class-action lawsuits against fast food companies are under consideration, some may find Shell's arguments for the regulation of junk-food TV advertising, among other measures, timely and provocative.

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From Library Journal

This is not quick-fix diet book. It's a science journalist's study of why we are fatter than ever (60 percent of Americans should be skipping dessert today) and what is being done about it.

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From Booklist

Science journalist Shell brings science, history, and economics to bear in this penetrating look at how and why an increasing number of people in developed nations are obese and what can be done about it. Shell outlines the life-threatening illnesses posed by obesity--hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. She explores historic public and medical opinions on obesity--from attributing it to lack of moral fortitude to classifying it as a genetic disorder--and the various cures, including starvation and stomach stapling. Shell also offers a fascinating cast in the scientists, doctors, and patients who are tracking down the causes of obesity. Despite the general lack of public sympathy for the obese, the predicted profits to be made on weight reduction are fueling a growing conflict between scientific discovery and commercial interests. Readers interested in health and science will enjoy this fascinating book, although be forewarned that some descriptions may be too graphic for some readers' tastes. *Vanessa Bush*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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