**Are some people born evil?**

By BRIAN MASTERS

**Was Hitler born evil?**

At the age of 84, America's grand man of letters Norman Mailer has lost nothing of his appetite for controversy. His latest novel, The Castle In The Forest, tackles the childhood of Adolf Hitler.

The book tells how two-year-old Adolf watched his father whip a dog with 'a look of remarkable intensity for one so small'. And how, as a six-year-old, he went into the woods by himself 'to work on the power of his voice. He would roar at the trees until his throat was sore'. Perhaps the most chilling passage is when Adolf causes the death of his younger brother, Edmund, by deliberately infecting him with measles by kissing him. But above all, the novel poses a central question: 'When did evil enter Hitler's soul?' And it provides an unequivocal answer: at the moment of conception.

This, of course, is a dotty idea. For a start, the use of the word evil - which is associated with the occult and the Devil - is pure laziness because evil implies conduct that is so bad we can never explain it. But more importantly, Mailer's novel *does* raise the issue of whether Hitler was predisposed at birth to be a genocidal tyrant. Or to put it another way, whether people can be born bad - whether it is inevitable that some individuals will turn out to be murderers or rapists or bullies or thieves and there is nothing that can be done about it.

Coincidentally, a so-called scientific study from the University of Virginia this week reached the conclusion that children may be 'born to be bad'. But I believe this conclusion to be completely misguided. And I come to this conclusion having spent a lifetime studying truly bad people - I wrote the biography of the north London mass murderer Dennis Nilsen, for example, and came to know him well.

Virginia's experts in human genetics would have us believe that character defects such as criminal behaviour, the desire to bully others and the necessity to tell lies despite all evidence that one has been rumbled are tied up in our DNA. They have little or nothing to do with influences that may bombard us in our infancy. Thus, there is precious little virtue in trying to be a good child, because the programming of your personality has decided in advance that you can't win.

Forget about the soul. It's all to do with the ingredients that were thrown in by your parents, and by theirs, and so on *ad infinitum.* The result is a soup which cannot be unmixed. Scientists seem to have spent the best part of a century gleefully promoting this idea and repudiating the Romantic notion of the 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau that 'there is absolutely no fundamental perversity in the human heart', and that all bad behaviour is the result of society itself.

Today, experts appear to take a perverse pleasure in making sure we know how irredeemably wicked we are. This week's research is just the latest in a long line of simple-minded foolishness. It is wrong because it confuses two separate categories of inquiry. One is whether children have a predisposition to behave badly; the other is *why* they behave badly, which is not at all the same thing. Of course, a child inherits traits of personality from its parents. It also learns much of its behaviour from its parents. These facts are undeniable, and manifested every day in ordinary observation.

We have all encountered terrible parents who spend all their energies in berating their offspring, shouting, forbidding, chastising, screaming their own frustrations with spitting mouths and glaring eyes at infants who are at first bewildered, and subsequently adopt the same negative behaviour patterns as their only way of dealing with the world. It is no wonder they bully in the playground and attack their peers, physically, violently, as well as verbally. The genes have predisposed them to angry behaviour and the way they have been treated by their parents has encouraged it. They seem trapped. Yet not all of them succumb to this hideous imprisonment - and this is why the scientists are fundamentally wrong. Some children break free and evolve, in contradiction to the supposed predisposition that should, say the scientists, warp their soul. In other words, the predisposition may be there; it is what you do about it that makes the difference. The fact that one child may turn into a bully or become a criminal and another not remains a tantalising mystery, and one that scientists cannot possibly explain in simple terms of DNA. That is why it is the subject of much of our drama, from the ancient Greek theatre to today. And not only drama, but real incident as well.

Consider the case of Gary Gilmore - the American murderer who killed a hotel clerk in Utah, then killed a student the following night, and was fatally shot himself a year later by a firing squad - which was chronicled by Norman Mailer in his 1979 book The Executioner's Song. Gilmore had a brother, Frank, who turned out to be as peaceable and inoffensive in character as Gary was violent and destructive. Their mother, Bessie, was perplexed, for she brought them up together. 'One son picked up the gun,' she said. 'The other did not pick up the gun. Why?' Nobody has been able to offer her a fully-inclusive answer. Similarly, Jeffrey Dahmer in Milwaukee strangled and dismembered 17 men between 1978 and 1991. Much was made of his upbringing by a self- obsessed mother and largely absent father. He inherited their lack of human warmth and inability to empathise and see the world through eyes other than their own. He was dangerously disconnected from humankind. But he, too, had a brother, David, who never did anyone any harm and who now lives quietly under another name. David had the same parents, the same start in life and carried the same cartload of genes and DNA as his brother. It is how the child learns to manage his inheritance that matters, how to shape it and restrict it when necessary. Dahmer, paradoxically, did make an effort, and spent many years grappling with the murderous monster within, of which he was all too aware. But he lost the battle. Others, like mass murderers Frederick West and Dennis Nilsen, never tried, because they did not realise that it mattered - they were, like the engineer of the Nazis' Final Solution, Adolf Eichmann, morally blind.

Nobody would pretend that it is easy to behave well, or that the influence of genes is negligible. It requires struggle. Vice is the easy option, whereas virtue denotes difficulty and sweat. As the great Roman philosopher and dramatist Seneca wrote: 'Nature does not give a man virtue, the process of becoming a good man is an art. 'The art is in using one's genetic inheritance to advantage. People such as the scholars responsible for this latest study get mixed up between aggression and hostility.

For example, if a child inherits the aggressive gene, he might transform it into ambition and enterprise, leadership, artistic creation, love, self-fulfilment, all beneficent in outcome. On the other hand, another child with the same genetic disposition to aggression might become a hooligan. It is often said that Beethoven, remote, sullen, morose, superior, driven, might have become a dangerous psychopath if he hadn't written music. Norman Mailer's suggestion that Hitler was evil at the moment of conception may be his attempt to explain conduct so bad that it defies comprehension. But in reality, it is a ridiculous notion that, if taken seriously, excuses the behaviour of perhaps the most appalling individual in history.