



# Origins: How the Nine Months Before Birth Shape the Rest of Our Lives

By Annie Murphy Paul

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What makes us the way we are? Some say it's the genes we inherit at conception. Others are sure it's the environment we experience in childhood. But could it be that many of our individual characteristics—our health, our intelligence, our temperaments—are influenced by the conditions we encountered before birth?

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That's the claim of an exciting and provocative field known as fetal origins. Over the past twenty years, scientists have been developing a radically new understanding of our very earliest experiences and how they exert lasting effects on us from infancy well into adulthood. Their research offers a bold new view of pregnancy as a crucial staging ground for our health, ability, and well-being throughout life.

Author and journalist Annie Murphy Paul ventures into the laboratories of fetal researchers, interviews experts from around the world, and delves into the rich history of ideas about how we're shaped before birth. She discovers dramatic stories: how individuals gestated during the Nazi siege of Holland in World War II are still feeling its consequences decades later; how pregnant women who experienced the 9/11 attacks passed their trauma on to their offspring in the womb; how a lab accident led to the discovery of a common household chemical that can harm the developing fetus; how the study of a century-old flu pandemic reveals the high personal and societal costs of poor prenatal experience.

*Origins* also brings to light astonishing scientific findings: how a single exposure to an environmental toxin may produce damage that is passed on to multiple generations; how conditions as varied as diabetes, heart disease, and mental illness may get their start in utero; why the womb is medicine's latest target for the promotion of lifelong health, from preventing cancer to reducing obesity. The fetus is not an inert being, but an active and dynamic creature, responding and

adapting as it readies itself for life in the particular world it will enter. The pregnant woman is not merely a source of potential harm to her fetus, as she is so often reminded, but a source of influence on her future child that is far more powerful and positive than we ever knew. And pregnancy is not a nine-month wait for the big event of birth, but a momentous period unto itself, a cradle of individual strength and wellness and a crucible of public health and social equality.

With the intimacy of a personal memoir and the sweep of a scientific revolution, *Origins* presents a stunning new vision of our beginnings that will change the way you think about yourself, your children, and human nature itself.

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