Introducing Genetics: A Graphic Guide

Steve Jones
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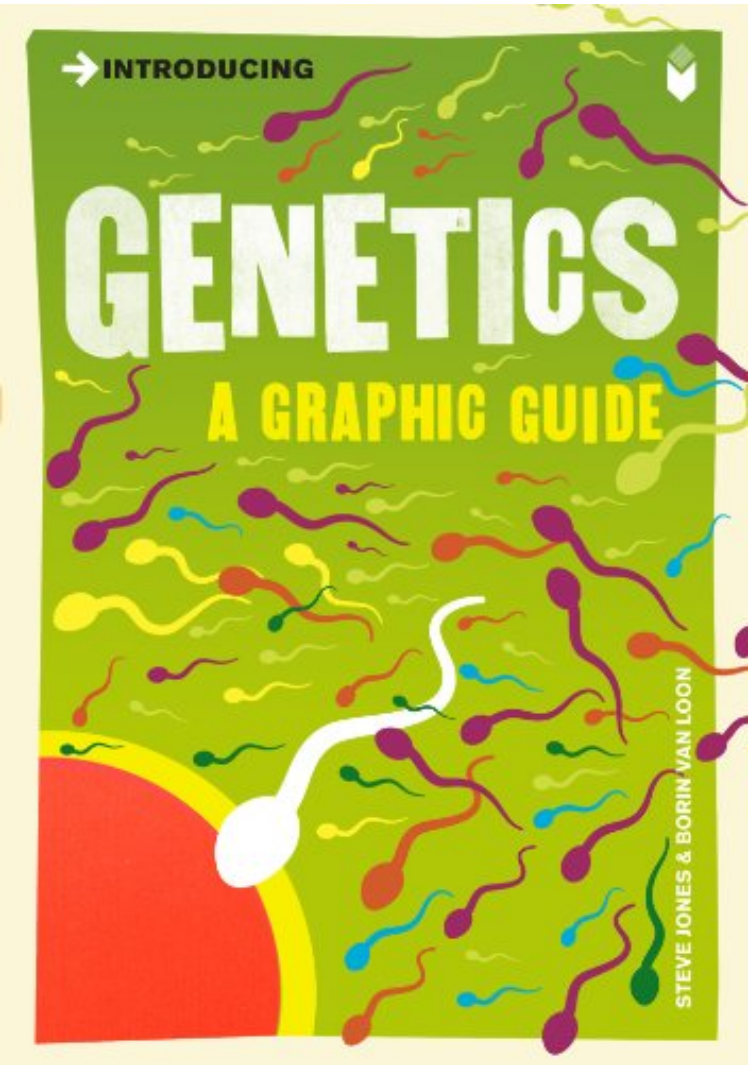

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Steve Jones : Introducing Genetics: A Graphic Guide before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Introducing Genetics: A Graphic Guide:

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2001 reprint of the original text from 1993, and one thing that struck me as I read it was that over those 8 years there appeared to have been no changes made. Not only is genetics a very modern science, its profile has risen spectacularly within the scientific community over a period of not many years, so I expect there must have been a fair amount of updating to do. Nevertheless this is explicitly a book for beginners, the approach taken is chronological in recounting the successive discoveries, the author is a leading and eminent expert who presumably would not have countenanced reprints of any statements he wished to retract, so I have to suppose that the text as I have it remains valid as far as it goes. We beginners have to begin at the beginning, this is the beginning, reviews here are almost non-existent, and it may be helpful in that case if I give my fellow neophytes some idea of what to expect, even if I am not fully up to date.Professor Steve Jones of University College London is well known, at least in Britain, from television. Everyone has heard of DNA these days even if they do not know what those letters stand for (see my caption above). We have clearly opened another Pandora's box by dabbling in this matter, and in my edition Jones concludes by touching on the ethical and political issues that our new discoveries raise. Whatever additions or amendments he may have added in retrospect, his remarks reflect his mindset, which is level-headed and humane, and his media appearances have not suggested to me that he has espoused any significantly new views in these respects.The main narrative is historical, in the simple chronological sense. Jones really starts with Mendel and his experiments on peas, having given Darwin only a cursory mention before that. Other major figures are given what I take to be their due mention, the main actors are, expectedly, Crick and Watson the discoverers of the double helix, and subsequent research is also noted in my edition up to `the 1990's'. The picture I gained was much what I would have thought - advances in research have shown the matter to be enormously more complex than even Crick and Watson, let alone Mendel, envisaged. However the basic models that these pioneers created seem to have stood the test of time and look likely to continue to. The tedious debate over creationism is mercifully ignored, although the author readily admits that the phenomenon of being alive, whereby living tissue creates new tissue, remains a mystery, at least so far. Science can now trace the processes at work in detail, but what these processes ultimately are seems unidentified.The original text is credited to not just Steve Jones but also to the illustrator Borin Van Loon [sic]. Every page from start to finish, or at least until we reach Jones's `footnote', is larded with illustrative matter, mostly cartoons. Whether some readers may find this style patronising I don't know, but if so I for one was quite happy to be patronised. For all the clarity of Jones's exposition the main text can't avoid being slightly heavy going here and there, and I found that the illustrations lightened my own going very successfully. It all seems very simple to start with, but here and there new terms creep in without prior explanation, although they are usually clarified before too long. The style is basically that of a good lecturer with a sense of how to keep the audience's attention without diluting or over-simplifying the message.Jones comments wryly that while for scientists the four letters of the genetic `alphabet' are G C T A, now that the subject has got well and truly into the public and tabloid domain H Y P E might sometimes seem to characterise the discussion better. Genetics explains much, and it opens up enormous possibilities in real life, whether these be seen as promises or as threats. In the text as I have it, he hedges his bets and does not over-commit himself to either side of the argument. However he permits himself some down-to-earth observations to the effect that whether or not genetically modified crops may be in some way dangerous, there is no `whether' about it when the food in question is cheeseburgers; and whatever may be said about human cloning the phenomenon is not new but as old as the first ever pair of identical twins.As an introduction I found this book admirable. We all have, it seems to me, a responsibility to inform ourselves as best we can about subjects as important as this is. When the matter is set out for us as clearly as it is here it is something approaching irresponsible not to take the opportunity we are given, and worse than irresponsible to promote points of view from a basis of culpable ignorance.

Introducing Genetics takes readers on a journey through this new science to the discovery of DNA and the heart of the human gene map. In everyday life, many of us increasingly have to make moral decisions where genetics plays a part. This book gives us the information to do so.

About the AuthorSteve Jones is Professor of Genetics at University College London. His hugely renowned popular science books include Almost Like a Whale and The Language of Genes.Borin Van Loon has worked on numerous Introducing titles. He is a freelance illustrator, surrealist painter and collagist.