Science lessons in wake of New Yorker Mukherjee epigenetics article

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis.

The pother over <u>the New Yorker's epigenetics piece</u> is a case study–by which I mean cautionary tale–for science writers. (Epigenetics is the study of mechanisms that change the behavior of genes without altering their DNA sequence–essentially by turning genes on and off. Broadly speaking, epigenetics is how nurture shapes nature.) The piece is a fine example of the chief science-writing challenge: How damned hard it is to explain a complicated topic without major distortion. Even for a writer as talented as doc Siddhartha Mukherjee, who won a Pulitzer for his 2010 book about cancer, *The Emperor of all Maladies*.

Response to the piece from scientists appears to be entirely horror-stricken. I haven't been able to find a single defense. The biggest complaint from the scientist-critics is that the piece focused pretty much exclusively on one epigenetic mechanism: modification of histones.

There are other, terribly important, epigenetic mechanisms that the New Yorker piece ignores, the critics point out. Transcription factors for instance, proteins that turn genes on and off. Also the many forms of non-coding RNA.

Brian Resnick's post at Vox is <u>inclined to cut Mukherjee some slack</u>, partly because the author sent Resnick an apologetic email. Mukherjee told Resnick he had erred in not emphasizing gene regulation–but also noted that the piece is an excerpt from his new book that explores the topic more.

Not having read the book, a history of genetics called simply *The Gene*, I can't say whether that's true. But even if it is, so what? A magazine piece is supposed to stand on its own.

Read full, original post: That Mukherjee piece on epigenetics in the New Yorker