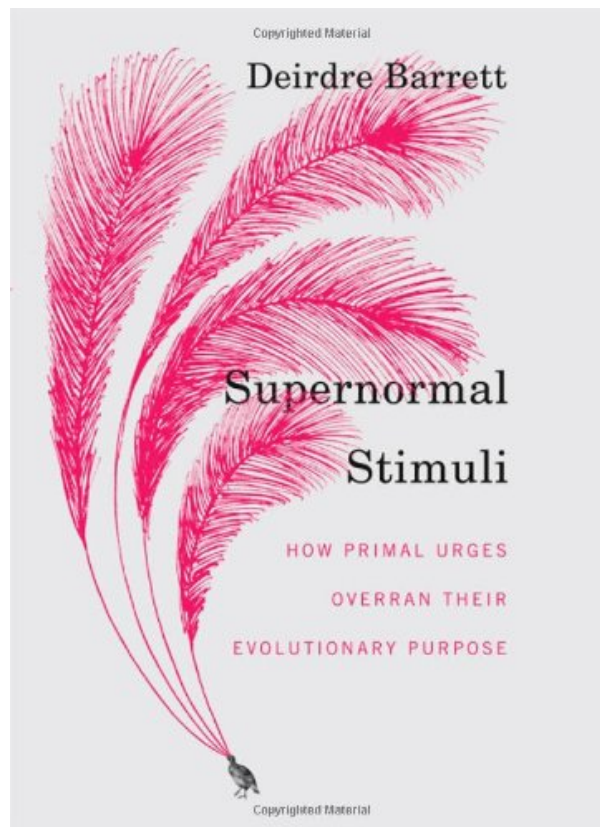
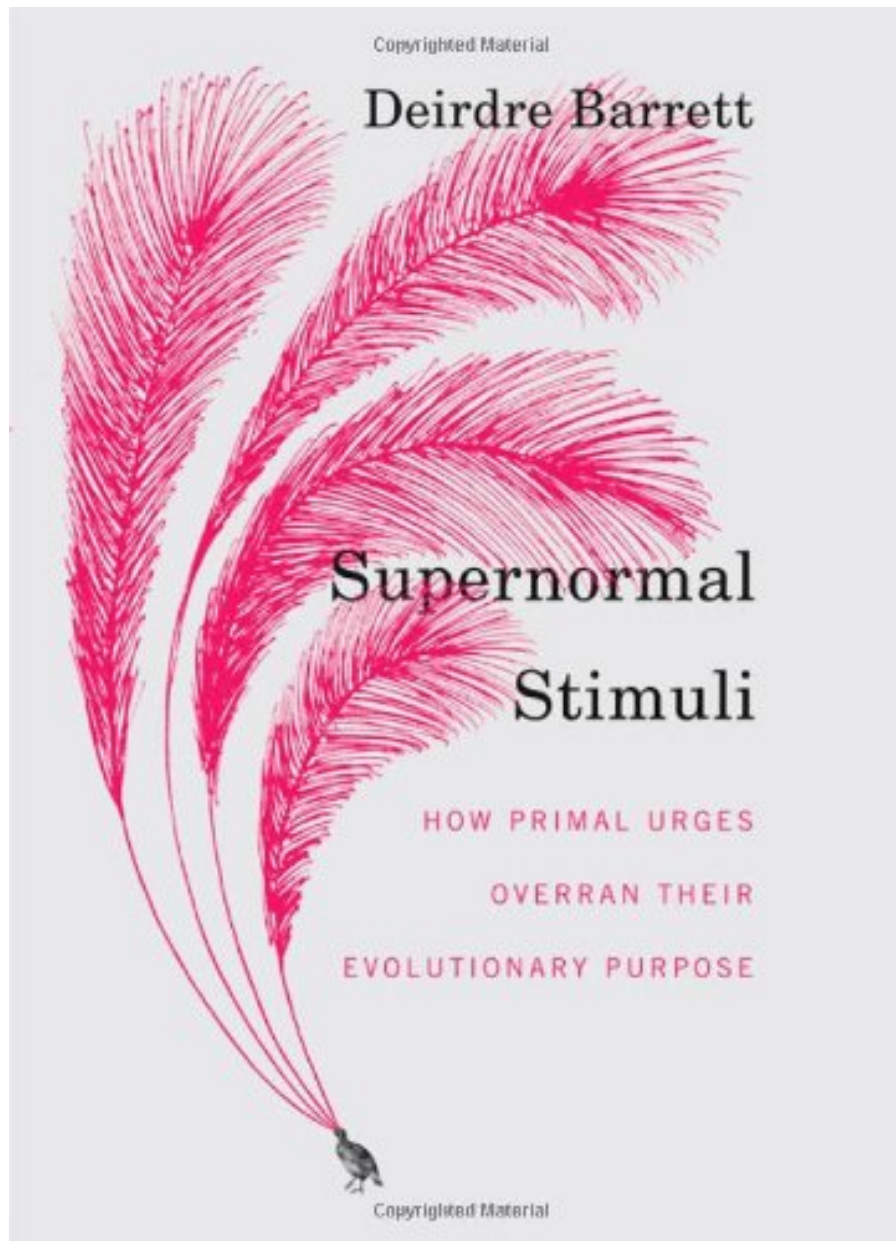


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## About the Author

Deirdre Barrett is an evolutionary psychologist at Harvard Medical School's Behavioral Medicine Program. She is the author of several books, including *Waistland*, *Trauma and Dream*, and *Supernormal Stimuli*. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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# **SUPERNORMAL STIMULI: HOW PRIMAL URGES OVERRAN THEIR EVOLUTIONARY PURPOSE BY DEIRDRE BARRETT**

## **PDF**

A Harvard psychologist explains how our once-helpful instincts get hijacked in our garish modern world.

Our instincts?for food, sex, or territorial protection? evolved for life on the savannahs 10,000 years ago, not in today's world of densely populated cities, technological innovations, and pollution. We now have access to a glut of larger-than-life objects, from candy to pornography to atomic weapons?that gratify these gut instincts with often-dangerous results. Animal biologists coined the term "supernormal stimuli" to describe imitations that appeal to primitive instincts and exert a stronger pull than real things, such as soccer balls that geese prefer over eggs. Evolutionary psychologist Deirdre Barrett applies this concept to the alarming disconnect between human instinct and our created environment, demonstrating how supernormal stimuli are a major cause of today's most pressing problems, including obesity and war. However, Barrett does more than show how unfettered instincts fuel dangerous excesses. She also reminds us that by exercising self-control we can rein them in, potentially saving ourselves and civilization. 55 illustrations

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### Most helpful customer reviews

19 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Insightful and entertaining

By Morton Schatzman

That the world we humans live in is radically different from the world our instincts evolved for is apparent to social scientists, evolutionary psychologists, and biologists. This fascinating book adds a new perspective. It argues that "supernormal stimuli" are leading us astray in many arenas: eating, sex and war, among others. Barrett borrows the title term from ethology, where it refers to stimuli with exaggerated colourings or markings or shapes that lure animals to, for instance, sit on fake eggs or mate with cardboard insects. Barrett suggests that the increasing tendency of modern society to create supernormal stimuli for ourselves exacerbates many human problems.

It's an important insight that affords an "aha" experience. It explains much self-defeating, self-destructive human behavior.

The book is both scholarly and entertaining, and here Barrett joins the top tier of outstanding scientific writers for a wide audience. She has a flair for witty analogies between animal follies and their human counterparts. The New Yorker cartoons and photos of animals and people caught in goofy acts complement the text.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to think scientifically about human behavior.

11 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

Supernormal Stimuli - fascinating book

By Amex

I'm an avid popular science pleasure reader, so I ordered this book right after hearing the author on the radio. I'm so glad I did!

It is a fascinating book, very well-written. The concepts are explained in a way that makes them easy to grasp. The animal to human metaphors are truly illuminating. The main point of the book is supernormal stimuli, which are exaggerated versions of natural stimuli to which there are existing instinctual responses. Barrett discusses how our evolved instincts are overwhelmed by technological advances, population density, and other facets of modern society. She explores how pornography, unhealthy diets, and even the quest for nuclear energy as opposed to wind or solar energy can be explained by supernormal stimuli. One reader said he liked the early chapters which are closer to standard evolutionary psychology better than the later more speculative ones. I disagree: I think the ideas in the later chapters are novel and exciting and offer ideas about how to deal with problems of our modern world that I haven't heard anywhere else. Excellent book; I recommend it highly!

23 of 30 people found the following review helpful.

Entertaining but concerned about errors

By Amazon Customer

I'm currently reading Supernormal Stimuli ... and it's a fast-moving, readable, chatty little book. (I don't think Barrett's thesis is as revolutionary as she suggests it is. I have a sense that the idea has been banging around the evolutionary psychology literature for a while ...)

Still ... only a third of the way through, I'm concerned about some inaccuracies in the book:

(1) she refers to dominant gorillas as "graybacks" where the standard term is "silverbacks" (p. 48)

(2) she offers a table of "Children Found Living with Animals 1900-2004" (p. 57) and recounts at relative length the story of Amala and Kamala (the Mindnapore "wolf girls"). Barrett is either unaware of or hides the fact that many (if not most) of the cases on her chart are suspect. The Wikipedia entry on the girls summarizes french scholar Serge Aroles's fairly solid argument that the entire Amala and Kamala story is a hoax.

(3) BTW, Barrett's account of Amala and Kamala are based on two sources ... one a chapter from McCrone's 1993 book and the other a 1966 source.

Granted, these problems don't impact her main argument. And I realize that this book is slightly outside Barrett's specialty area. Okay, fine. But ... things like this suggest to me a book that is a little too fast and loose with scholarly standards of care.

So as I continue to read the book, I'll be a little more cautious. Which is probably ALWAYS a good thing when reading popularizations of biological evolution ....

But anyone reading the book would do well to be similarly careful .....

John Wolfe

Iowa City, Iowa

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