

Twins in the Family: Interviews with Australian Twins

Tom Shapcott

(2000). Melbourne: Lothian Books. AUD\$24.95 (paperback) ISBN 0 7344 0282 1

Shapcott and his own cotwin Jack provide the theme that unites the stories, some brief, some detailed, of about 50 twin pairs who contribute to the book. Tom and Jack are fraternal (non-identical or dizygotic) twins, and Tom's personal view of their relationship is fascinating, because it is too easy to minimize the impact that twinning has on twins who do not look at all alike (or are of different sexes). One gets the sense that this is a personal journey for Shapcott, an evaluation of how his experience of being a twin compares with that of other twins. This is not a book of facts, although the book begins with a double page of snippets with some very useful information about twins, such as the difference between identical and non-identical twins. From time to time he introduces rich sources of mythology into his story telling, for example Castor and Pollux, adding depth to the book's richly human anecdotes, but twins and their families and friends will love even the most commonplace of stories.

Some well-known twins, like the Waugh twins, feature in the book, but others are just ordinary twins who have often-fascinating anecdotes and perceptions to share about their lives, their reference and relationships with each other. It is interesting, for example, to read about some who even as adults could not bear to be separated and not see each other, while others felt that they needed to

establish their own identities in different States or even countries.

The book has a clear association with The Australian Twin Registry, the national volunteer registry currently with over 30,000 twins of all ages enrolled (see <http://www.twins.org.au>). Shapcott was commissioned to write the book by the Registry. The Foreword by Professor John Hopper, the Registry's Director, summarizes and applauds the enormous contribution made by Australian twins to health and behavioral research. The respect for these twins, who often bare most personal aspects of their lives to researchers, comes through absolutely and unconditionally. The book ends with an invitation for twin readers to join the Australian Twin Registry. It is the willingness of twins to tell their stories that makes this book shine — and this is the part of the “twin” experience that research does not capture.

There are many insights from twins that are affirming in the light of our own experience — the feeling of never being “alone”, the annoyance caused by lazy or ignorant people (like certain teachers at school) who simply called us “twinnie”, the personal meaning of being “first-born” or “second-born” twin. Some revelations are unfamiliar, suggesting that being a twin has a different meaning for each pair, and importantly for each twin in a pair. This in itself is a useful insight. Other insights abound, such as the meaning of being a twin for those

whose twin has died, the “shadow” experience. An interesting perspective is offered on the large number of “singletons” who were developed for some time in utero as twins, or twins who were originally triplets, in the book.

There are some immensely sad stories about breakdown in twin's relationships with each other, where they are twins in fact but not in reality. On a positive note there are also some hilarious stories from twins who, through circumstance or personality, are able to thoroughly enjoy their twinship in an uninhibited and uncomplicated way. *Twins in the family* concludes with an amusing account of various twins Shapcott meets at the Twins + Picnic in the Park held in Melbourne. The book is easy and very entertaining reading — it is neither “academic” nor didactic. Parents and siblings of twins will enjoy it. Indeed, anyone who is interested in what it is like to be a twin (the most common question asked of twins) could read the book and save themselves being told off or “actually I don't know what it's like *not* to be a twin!”. It goes without saying that this book would make a great present for twins, but as this is a modestly priced volume, perhaps you might ask whether they would like one each, or whether they would prefer to share.

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