

# One and the Same: My Life as an Identical Twin and What I've Learned About Everyone's Struggle to be Singular

Abigail Pogrebin (2009). Doubleday, New York. 275pp. \$26.95, Hard cover. ISBN 978-0-385-52156-7.

Reviewed by Dr Susan A. Treloar, University of Queensland, Australia.

This is a very personal perspective on identical twinning, encapsulated by the book's dedication 'For Robin, For Everything'. Abigail is a journalist and writer, and the book is engaging and generally makes enjoyable reading (at least by this identical twin). Robin is her identical twin.

The book contains 12 chapters, starting from the place of Twinsburg Ohio and moves through a range of topics in a not very particular order. Chapter 2 describes twins who do not have the high profile they clearly enjoy in the United States — Tiki and Ronde Barber. This is interesting nevertheless because Abigail clearly admires their twin relationship and the twins were very articulate in their self-awareness and description of that 'model' relationship, which 'manages to combine an unquestioned primacy with a sturdy independence' (p. 47). She also describes the 'love story' between identical twins (chapter 3), which starts at least as early as 'in utero'. She illustrates this chapter with examples from other twins, with medical evidence and with personal examples from letters her twin has written to her in years past.

After this, the chapter titles become rather negative, even though the content isn't all negative. The book describes competition between twins in a chapter headed 'You Deplete Me', the risks in twin development in utero (chapter 5) entitled 'Risky Business: The Shoals of Birthing Twins', then chapter 6 on 'Twin Shock' that parents face on the birth of twins (which I am

sure just about every parent will relate to, although Abigail cites at least one who sailed through). 'Making the Break: Separation' (chapter 7) is interesting and an area where twins probably have hugely variable experiences. The book moves on to other complex and sometimes negative aspects of twinning in chapters like 'And Then There Was One', 'Splitting the Difference: When Identical Twins Differ', and especially the chapter describing the extraordinary story of identical twins who marry good friends and all (both twins by virtue of their twinning, and all by the hand of inheritance) carry the same recessive mutation for Tay-Sachs disease. Nevertheless this chapter contains insights that many who are not twins will relate to, regarding discovery of family history and about genetic testing in families. Then finally there are chapters about doubleness (e.g., artistic abilities) and sameness and uniqueness.

This is the core of the book, the idea that Abigail is exploring. It is an exploration, a seeking of meaning through the insights of others and self-reflection. The book has an underlying theme, which is something of a lament for the heights achieved in what Abigail feels was a perfect 'love story', and for what has been lost from her twin relationship with Robin, especially since their childhood days of joyous entertainment and fun. At the same time it is also a plea to her twin to 'come back' into the twin relationship. This is hard to understand, since she mentions several

times that she talks to her twin daily on the telephone, and her twin is clearly willing to share her life with Abigail to this extent. I say that her clearly stated feelings of grief and loss are hard to understand because my point of view is that of an identical twin who is quite happy seeing her twin often no more frequently than once a year (she lives a 2-hour plane flight away), talking every couple of weeks on the phone and only emailing when there's something specific to communicate about. This is the main message I took from the book — how different identical twin pairs are in their relationships and levels of closeness.

There were many things to which I related — the sharing everything, the lack of a personal relationship with parents because there was no time or the 'treat them the same' guideline got in the way, the difficulty for siblings who felt excluded by the twin relationship, the annoyance caused by constantly being compared, the insulting feeling one had when people implied we were interchangeable! These sound negative, but there was childhood fun and the feeling that there was always someone else there, so loneliness was nonexistent. No doubt other twin readers would relate more to other messages and issues and not to these at all.

'One and the Same' includes some easily digestible anecdotal reports of scientific and medical knowledge. One problem I felt with the book is where Abigail

engages with the area of twin research. I was at the same conference in Belgium that she refers to, but unfortunately didn't meet her. On the one hand her insights into the Keith twins are interesting, as are the views from other experts on the development of twins in utero. When she enters the field of behavior genetics and summarizes the state of knowledge regarding a lot of different behaviors seems to be risky, but somewhat detracts from the major purpose of the book, which is the personal journey. I can see why she has included this information, however, as it is central to questions of sameness and similarity of predisposition.

Twins generally start off as part of a pair, which attracts attention and 'star' status (hard when this disappears), and then have to face

the world as a single individual. In the end, some twins feel the struggle to be singular is a huge one, some twins manage it easily, and some don't try or give up. But the main message coming through to me in the book is that even when twins have succeeded in the view of the world as being independent with their own lives, they may still feel like (only) part of a whole. There are many aspects of sameness but also many differences between identical twins. Being singular is something that can't always be negotiated perfectly between twins in pairs, because only each individual twin (and not necessarily both members of a pair) can deal with being singular in their own individual way. Clearly each twin's psychological needs regarding the twin relationship are different.

I would recommend this book to twins in particular, but also to people who are interested in twins, including their family members and friends. It doesn't contain the scientific detail that Nancy Segal's book *Entwined Lives* does, and it is clearly much more of a personal journey, which has traces of sadness as well as joy in it. Nevertheless, it will be an enjoyable read for many and actually may be personally very helpful to twins who are having difficulties with their cotwin and other relationships. We will all take away, ponder different messages and reflect, in which case Abigail has achieved her aim. It is a very brave book in laying bare her own feelings and her own twinship. I would certainly recommend it.