

Twins in the World: The Legends They Inspire and the Lives That They Lead

Alessandra Piontelli (2008). *New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 272 pp, US\$26.95, ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60597-8.*

Reviewed by Naomi Wray, *Genetic Epidemiology, Queensland Institute of Medical Research, Australia*

As a mother and a researcher of twins, I think I know and have read 'a bit' about twins. But I found *Twins in the World* by Alessandra Piontelli, which describes the attitudes to twins in different cultures, to be refreshingly new. It brought home to me how lucky I am to live in a Western society, not only for the health care I received but for the attitudes of society towards both myself and my children.

Piontelli is a psychiatrist, neurologist and psychoanalyst at the Department of Fetal Medicine at the University of Milan. Her first internship was a year at a New Delhi hospital, which was likely the first step towards her many invitations for short visit and consultancies in developing countries. She has travelled around the world posing her standard question 'Are there any twins here?'. But the world has also come to her, as some of her stories are those of immigrants that attend her practice in Milan.

It seems that the birth of twins is special everywhere in the world, but 'special' is not always a good thing. In the Voodoo societies of Togo and Benin twins are believed to have a special link with the Gods. Seemingly they are more useful dead than alive and effigies of dead twins are carried by their relatives. A Voodoo priest (a very wealthy tribal king) claimed his dead twins helped him predict changes on the New York and London stock exchanges! In rural areas of nearby Cameroon, twins are living gods and as such are always well dressed and well fed. But as gods, twin babies and children should not be angered, so extreme emotional deprivation is forced upon them; they are simply ignored, so that by 4 years of age they are 'stone idols' and devoid of the

ability to interact with other people. In regions of Ethiopia, it is impossible to find twins as 'all twins are killed here', the burden of raising two children is just too great. In Indios communities of Brazil, Piontelli was told 'we do not kill them, we just leave them'. Selective infanticide of one twin probably is practiced in many communities around the world, the favored gender for survival differing between regions dependent on their local 'market value'. In rural Madagascar, twins are considered evil, transmitting their evil to their mothers. Twins and their mothers are made outcasts and are forced to live in special villages far from their home communities. In Sri Lanka, husbands believe that twins result from infidelity of their wives, with untold consequences. In Mali (of Timbuctu fame), deliberate favoritism is practiced — the same baby is always carried at the front, the mother singing to and playing with her, the other (the 'shadows') are always carried at the back and received minimal face-to-face interaction. This is just a small taste of the varied lot of twins around the world.

The style is necessarily in the first person and anecdotal, reflecting personal experiences in remote locations. It is a style I did not take to at first: the Introduction and first chapter offer personal reflections and points of view on the attitudes of modern-day Western society. At that point in the book, I was not interested in Dr Piontelli's personal opinion. To be frank, if I hadn't been asked to review the book, I wouldn't have bothered to continue. The Central Park surveys made me cringe, the flimsy pages, dense text and the occasional black and white photos did not make this

an enticing book. But the loss would have been mine. As I journeyed with Piontelli around Africa, across to the Philippines and via Brazil back to Africa, I started to realize that this was a very special person who has gained the trust of people from diverse cultures. In the last chapter, she provides outspoken opinions on a broad spectrum of issues that are close to her heart such as the role of NGOs in developing countries, anxieties introduced by prenatal psychologists, or that child abuse in Western societies is less acceptable than the infanticide practiced out of necessity in societies where medical care is nonexistent. By this point in the book, she had completely proven herself to me and I respected her opinion because of the wealth of experience I now realized she embodied. It made me wonder if a different publisher and editor would have managed the structure of the book differently.

The book is well researched, as demonstrated by the lengthy reference list, and it cites a high proportion of French and Italian works, which so often go unnoticed by the English speaking world. The breadth of content from mythology to ethnology, from Cicero to St Augustine shows Piontelli to be a true polymath. But the intended target audience is not entirely clear. The 'look' of the book could be off-putting and may only be found by those actively seeking it, rather than the browsing audience. Some severe editing and lots of glossy color photos could turn this into a coffee table winner. This book contains original and fascinating stories and I hope my review will encourage you to actively 'go seek'.