



The Divided Twin

M. Billiter

Kyle Thomas, Contributor

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Brilliant and disturbing, M. Billiter's novel *The Divided Twin* takes a grim look inside the mind of a killer.

On the surface, Aaron and Branson Kovak are two normal identical twins juggling the demands of their final year of college. But what's inside of them sets them apart. Branson is schizophrenic; he hears voices inside that are not his own. He knew a previous voice as Trevor; now, Branson's got him under control with medication, therapy, and lots of support. But then David, who has been hiding for years, emerges. David is angry; he wants to kill someone.

The book shifts between perspectives throughout, beginning with "David and me" and the first entry in David's killer's journal. The shifts also highlight differences between the two brothers: Branson visits with a doctor and finds support in his "mellow-hippie vibe," while Aaron is lonely and adopts a cat whom he grows to despise.

Branson's work with managing his illness juxtaposes with Aaron's decision to self-isolate, with terrible ramifications for everyone involved. Meanwhile, the twins' mother battles with cancer, and her health struggles take a terrible turn. Her situation results in added stress on the twins, and one can't help but to succumb to David's terrible impulses. When the violence comes, the disparity between the brothers and their reactions makes it all the more shocking.

Billiter's ongoing depictions of the perils and possibilities of mental health struggles are undertaken with heart. Aaron and Branson's voices are also authentic to their ages, peppered with slang and social media references. The Wyoming setting is captured well, too.

The Divided Twin is a wonderful and chilling literary thriller about struggles with mental illness.

JEREMIAH ROOD (July / August 2020)

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