

Twinkind: The Singular Significance of Twins

William Viney

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Researcher William Viney's dazzling, illustration-rich book compiles scientific knowledge about, and cultural representations of, twins throughout history.

Assisted reproductive technologies like in vitro fertilization increased the incidence of twins, Viney notes: there are 1.6 million pairs born each year, and the frequency varies by geographical region. There are towns in India and Nigeria with a higher than average rate of twin births. Twinsburg, Ohio, hosts a popular annual Twins Days Festival. And while a set of twins is a group all its own, Viney says, there are also wider communities of support.

Viney is, himself, a twin. His brother, George, lived with him in London when they were in their twenties. He opines that the very existence of twins "challenges folk wisdom and scientific expertise in equal measure." He therefore devotes a similar amount of page space to the science and cultural importance of twins, with disparate topics including medical studies on twins, advances in technology, myths and legends, the entertainment sector, and the paranormal. And the book bursts with images from antiquity to the present, including engravings, statues, mosaics, paintings, and photographs, with subjects of inquiry including nature versus nurture and patterns of autism, divorce, and homosexuality.

In mythology, Viney discovers, twins are "often a product of transgressive contacts between gods and humans." Twins are sacred or taboo in different cultures, thus "not valued equally" worldwide. They have, however, made perennial cameos in literature and visual media. William Shakespeare and Mark Twain built plots around twins. Twins have been used to advertise plays and products, and even appeared as sideshow curiosities, as with Chang and Eng, the original "Siamese twins." The public imagination is still captured by twins' potential for mischief and paranormal experience.

Twinkind is a fascinating, wide-ranging compendium of facts and stories about twins through the centuries and around the world.

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