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A New York Times Notable Book for 1998 Critical acclaim for Lawrence Wright's

A Rhone-Poulenc Science Prize Finalist

"This is a book about far more than twins: it is about what twins can tell us about ourselves."--The New York Times

"With plenty of amazing stories about the similarities and differences of twins, Wright respectfully shows, too, how their special circumstance in life challenges our notions of individuality. A truly fascinating but sometimes spooky (Mengele's experiments with twins at Auschwitz figure among Wright's examples) study."--American Library Association

"Like so much of Wright's work, this book is a pleasure to read. Because he writes so well, without pushing a particular point of view, he soon has you pondering questions you have tended to comfortably ignore."--Austin American-Statesman

"Informative and entertaining . . . a provocative subject well considered by a talented journalist."--Kirkus Reviews

Twins: And What They Tell Us About Who We Are Details

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Author : Lawrence Wright

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Becky says

I found this book fascinating. I was particularly interested in Wright's take on how the results of twin studies have contributed over the last century to trends in politics, psychology, education etc. He presents this history as a sort of tug of war between behavioural geneticists and environmentalists, with both sides trying to prove stats of more than 50% influence. This book offers a very thought-provoking (albeit somewhat dated) examination of the Nature versus Nurture debate. Reading it caused me to re-assess many of my assumptions about inheritance.

Art King says

Who we really are

This is more than simply book about identical twins - something very rare. This is really a book about every one of us. Want to understand where you came from and where you are going? Here's a great place to start learning.

Kathleen says

This is a rather scholarly examination into the implications of "twin-ness" on the meaning of what makes each of us unique. While providing intriguing examples of stories of twins, it also delves rather heavily into the statistics of twin studies, which can be a tad mind-numbing. In the nature-vs-nurture debate it seems to end in a tie.

Bookchick says

Fascinating. Though the nature/nurture debate is not resolved, it is clear that we are definitely not born as "blank slates." This has important implications for parenting and for what we can - or can't - expect from ourselves and others. It has made me more gracious and accepting of friends' and family's limitations.

Kristi says

Reading this book in 2018 revealed that a lot has changed ... both scientifically and politically ... in the last 20 years. I would say that it is quite dated now. In addition, I found that the book could really use more organization, especially in the later chapters.

jenna says

This is an older book, early 90s I believe, but presents some thought provoking studies that examine the nature/nuture boundaries.

Tho current theories present the balance as 50-50, the information makes a strong case for nature's dominance over folks. As a therapist I found myself in a bit of an existential quandry! If behaviors as innocuous-seeming as the habit of pushing up one's nose, or, as life-defining as marrying a woman named Sue are pre-determined, what's left for influence?

Professionally I console myself with the thought that in my field there is room to support a person living up to their inherent potential-which may vary greatly.

On another, metaphysical plane I enjoyed considering how the near identical life courses of these separated twins may be the result of a shared meaning/spiritual journey that supercedes biology or psychology. Or perhaps an intangible connection between the twins exists, allowing parallels to take place.

It's a fun, quick read.

TK421 says

As the father of twins, this book was both illuminating in its insights and pure drivel in some of its conclusions. That being said, while some of the content is dated, this book does continue to beg the question: What does individuality mean to twins? Truly a fascinating topic that us Singletons will never fully be able to understand.

Jennifer says

I am a twin. Reading this book gave me the creeps at times. I felt a bit like a lab rat under scrutiny. Chill, researchers! We are people too!

I admit I want to bug all the singletons I know now. "The fantasized twin that we carry in our minds is not only an idealized partner in the experience of being who we are, he is also a means of escape from the life we are living." Seriously? Weird.

Overall, good questions and insight into society, biology, and nature vs nurture.

In the news: <http://www.iflscience.com/health-and-...>

James says

Interesting book, lots of info about how genes and enviornment make us what we are.

Also interesting is how biased many "scientists" are.

They decide, probably based on their personal political views, whether genes or environment are more significant, then twist the data to fit their weltansicht.

This author has written a number of good books

Joy H. says

Added 6/28/11

I read to page 60.

9/23/11 - I began reading this book about a week ago. Very interesting. I find that, by reading about how twins have inherited their traits, I can gain some insight about my own traits and where they came from.

10/12/11 - This book is due back at the library. I may get it again when I have more time to read it. I read to page 60.

Below are some excerpts which I copied from the book:

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p. 10: "... circumstances do not so much dictate the outcome of a person's life as they reflect the inner nature of the person living it."

p. 24:[B.F. Skinner] "believed that all behavior is genetically based... but he disputed the notion that there are separate traits for altruism or criminality or any other character trait." ... [Genes] "give us... the capacity to adapt to our environment."

p. 24: "Today, few on either side would argue that we are exclusively the creation of nature or the reflection of nurture."

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It's a complicated study with many statistics about the heritability of different characteristics, but at the same time it's fun to read, especially if one is interested in where our personalities and characteristics come from.

UPDATE - 7/25/16 - I read to page 111 but lost interest when the book seemed to get bogged down in statistics. Decided not to finish reading the book.

Louise says

The big take away from this book is that there have been many studies and mounds of data but not much has been resolved on the mysteries of twins. What correlates winds up challenged by the next study and politics hangs over this particular nature vs. nurture debate.

Wright presents many anecdotes (alludes to data that is not shown) of the twins raised apart. These point to genes as a determining factor in many things about their lives. Does this mean that all the efforts of parents,

teachers and communities mean nothing? Is a life determined by genes?

Since this book is from 1998, I read it along with a well linked Wikipedia article. While there are now more tools for twin researchers, it's hard for the layman to spot what progress has been made. For instance, Wright states that it was not known when twinning actually occurs; the Wikipedia article, to a lay person, seems to give the how and when.

The most interesting part was the new to me concept of the vanishing twin. In 1998, the estimate was that 1 in 13 single births began as twins. The remains of the second embryo might be found in the placenta or as an implant in the surviving embryo or just disappear. According to Wikipedia, the number is now estimated as 1 in 8.

I would like to see an up to date edition of this book, with the actual data of the most significant studies.

Nicola says

I tore through this book in a few hours. Partly – unfortunately – because it's rather a slight book, but also because it's fascinating as hell. Lawrence Wright, a journalist, not only synthesises the current thinking about twins, but also uses them as a method to discuss the ever-contentious issue of nature vs. nurture.

Wright uncovers the fact that (compared to other areas of biology) not all that much is known about why twins are born, and most of what is known remains in dispute. This is partly because the tendency, over the last century, has been to use twins to study how genetics and environment affect people in general (i.e. “if one twin is raised by a low-income family and one twin is raised by a rich family, is the rich twin's IQ higher?”). Widespread, in-depth studies that use twins to study twins have only emerged more recently.

Because this is a work of journalism, it's a fairly easy read, with scientific jargon minimized. Unfortunately, the journalistic slant means that many twin studies are mentioned, but not much detail is included. The lack of footnotes also makes my academic soul weep, because following up some of the more interesting studies is made that much harder.

Twins is a really, really interesting read – I only wish it were longer, with more detail.

Ruth says

Very readable and moderately insightful interpretation of twin data. Although this book makes a strong case for genetics (seeming to give an edge to nature in the nature vs. nurture debate), there is something that its argument fails to take into account. While it shows that genetics probably plays more of a role than environment when it comes to questions of IQ and baseline temperament, it does not take spirituality into account in the slightest. This is a serious failing, since active spiritual life has been shown to effect true and lasting change in individuals.

Melissa Dally says

If you are a parent of twins, a twin yourself, or just interested in how the whole twin thing works, you will really enjoy this book. It discusses many twin studies (including the scary Nazi ones by Menegle and the Dr from the 60's who believed twins should be adopted separately since raising twins was stressful for the parents and even, theorized that being twins was stressful for the twins themselves). I told Rainy and Iz about this and they were horrified and said it's terrible to separate twins and that they love being identical twins. Studies they've done have found all sorts of interesting things that appear to somehow be heritable. They studied twins raised together and apart and found that identical twins raised apart (no matter how different the families) as much (if not more) alike than identical twins reared together and that no fraternal twins raised together were more alike than the identical twins raised apart. So yeah, all sorts of fascinating stuff. As well as what might cause the single zygote to split (don't ask Mike his theory!), if the splitting has an effect on the two babies, etc.

Dion says

Some interesting information, ideas and conclusions. Elegant writing, a bit heavy for a pop culture kind of reader like me, but making science accessible. I would recommend adding subheadings. It's a bit limited in its opinions as it doesn't see the whole picture of intelligent design, unfortunately. Still, some great insights.
