



Someone Else's Twin: The True Story of Babies Switched at Birth

Nancy Segal (2011). New York, USA: Prometheus Books. 250 pp., US\$25.00. ISBN 978-1-61614-437-1 (also available as an e-book).

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Could it have happened to me?

In 1973 on one of Spain's Canary Islands, off the Moroccan Coast, a young mother gave birth to two girls, Begona and Delia. The infants are identical twins — in later life so similar that they are 'as alike as two drops of water' to many who meet them. What occurs next seems almost unbelievable, more plausible as the plot of a novel of speculative fiction than a real occurrence.

The hospital nursery is crowded; only two nurses are responsible for the care of 60 newborn babies. One of the twins is confused with another baby girl of almost the same age, Beatriz. The switched babies are sent home with the wrong parents, who raise them believing them to be their biological children. Incredibly, the error is not discovered for 28 years, until a chance case of mistaken identity in a shopping mall reveals the staggering truth.

The circumstances of the debacle and its harrowing repercussions are absorbingly examined in Nancy Segal's book *Someone Else's Twin*. As a professor of psychology at California State University and leading international expert in twin research, Segal was given unique access to the three young women and their parents. As a twin herself, Segal brings special empathy to her analysis of the emotional fall-out that results from the switch. She describes with sympathetic precision the confusion and trauma suffered by the participants in this real-life drama.

Through details of her interviews with those most involved we learn of their deep, persisting sense of loss. The twins lament that they have been denied the rare relationship experienced by identical twins raised together — this bond, claims Segal, though not fully understood by psychologists, is the closest of human relationships. The distress of Beatriz is described just as vividly. Her loss of her sense of belonging and identity, is made painfully real — 'Who am I, then?' she asks.

Of course, the impact of the hospital error extended beyond the three young women. Segal's reference to Shakespeare is apt. The great tragedian would have identified fully with the scale of the misery to befall all the

families' members. Segal thoughtfully lays bare the 'unconcealed bitterness' felt by Beatriz's mother, Debora. Debora 'almost went crazy' in the aftermath of the disclosure and now, estranged from both Delia and Beatriz, 'mourns' for both, 'I have lost both my daughters'.

Segal reveals that it is common in such circumstances for those involved to share the sentiments of Beatriz's disconsolate father who tells Segal, 'I would rather not have known the truth. I'd have preferred to die before finding out.'

The descriptions have true force and we begin to comprehend in a very real way the terrible cost these ordinary people have paid. Segal does not adopt a literary style in the book. This is deliberate. She appreciates that the story is compelling in its actuality. No elaborate metaphors are required to hold the readers attention, and so she wisely avoids tortuous prose. That said, for our taste, some further editing of unnecessary detail would not have gone amiss.

Someone Else's Twin is more than a reporting of the tragic consequences of a deplorable but isolated administrative error. In Chapter 2, four similar stories are told, some recognizable from Segal's book *Indivisible by Two: Lives of Extraordinary Twins*. She reveals that such mistakes occur on a far more frequent basis than one would first believe possible. As she points out, 'the faith that most people place in hospitals, doctors, and healthcare workers prevents them from considering the unthinkable possibility ...'. Reliable estimates judge that at least 20,000 babies are accidentally 'swapped' each year in the United States alone. Most cases are discovered before the infants are taken from the hospital, but frighteningly, the potential for more tragedy is very much still with us.

According to Segal, the problem stems primarily from the continued use of bracelets to connect infants to their mothers in hospitals. Although sophisticated fingerprinting and DNA-based methods are more reliable markers of identity, and are available, most hospitals still use identification bracelets. Cost measures, among other reasons, are commonly cited as justification. In a concise analysis, Segal

argues persuasively for action to reduce the significant potential for more instances of 'every parent's nightmare'.

Deserved consideration is given in the book to the circumstances of identical twins who are separated at birth. These instances cause deep personal trauma for the siblings. However, they are also rare opportunities for us to gain insight into the influences that create our personalities. In Segal's words, identical twins raised in completely different environments 'is the stuff for which science was made'. Delia and Begona's self-conscious admissions of fastidious cleaning habits adds to the list of unusual similarities of identical twins raised apart that Segal has shared

with us already in her book *Entwined Lives: Twins and What They Tell us About Human Behavior*, often drawing from the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart. Her summary that 'genetic effects are pervasive, influencing most behaviors and that a shared environment contributes only modestly to behavioral development' may be surprising to some, but is supported by these anecdotal accounts.

This book will appeal to most, not just those fascinated by twins, since 'the twins' story forces us to think, not only about who we are, but who we might have become had we grown up in a family other than our own ... could it have happened to me?

