

THE TWIN SET

by Caroline Seebohm

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The bond that exists between twins—especially identical twins—is at the heart of Caroline Seebohm's novel, The Innocents, a story of twin sisters who join the Red Cross as nurses*



Caroline Seebohm,
author of
The Innocents

I know that I am not alone when I say that I have a strange fascination for twins, particularly identical twins. Pass them in the street, see them on TV, we invariably notice them and must struggle to resist the urge to stare, puzzled by their sameness, challenged by being unable to tell them apart, vaguely threatened by their twinness.

For scientists involved in behavioral genetics and evolutionary psychology, twins provide a delightful cornucopia of complexities. These scientists know that identical twins are the result of a single fertilized egg splitting during the first two weeks of gestation, but no one has yet come up with an explanation for why the egg splits, and thus why twins exist. Instead, even the experts are reduced to describing it as "a trick of nature." Identical twins share all their genes, have identical DNA, and in appearance are often indistinguishable. Although there are accounts of twins who, separated by many

during World War I. As Seebohm notes, her fascination with twins began in her childhood, and was an inspiration for this work, aligning her with a long literary tradition.

miles, experience the same emotion at exactly the same instant, in other aspects of their makeup, each is unique and possesses distinctive characteristics. They have different fingerprints, teeth marks, and hair growth. This odd mixture of attributes adds up to a pair of remarkable human beings who individually seem to be just like the rest of us, but as a unit are unnervingly different.

Since ancient times, twins have been a popular subject of myths and legends. From Greece we have perhaps the best known, Gemini, the twins Castor and Pollux, although they are actually only half-brothers, sharing the same mother, Leda. The twins Romulus and Remus founded Rome. Shakespeare was the father of twins and used them as a plotline in two plays. Thus there are good historical and literary precedents for a book about twins.

At my school in England, Lucy and Lettie were twin sisters. I wanted Lucy to be my

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best friend, in the way that teenage girls long for an intimate peer relationship. But even though Lucy and I were inseparable for much of the time, I could never supplant Lettie. When one sister had a serious disagreement with the other, Lucy told me, the distance created between them by the quarrel made her feel "scooped out inside." Unlike the rest of us, twins are permanently dependent on each other for their peace of mind. No one else can compete. That, of course, creates jealousy, which I experienced firsthand. I was al-

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ways aware that if there was an emergency, it was to Lettie that Lucy would run, and vice versa. Writing about twins much later, I still recall that pain and frustration of knowing that, if necessary, Lucy would betray me for her sister.

The corollary to this is, of course, that anyone who seriously attempts to come between twins, whether it is friend, spouse, or parent, must risk a serious penalty. Case studies in which twins are separated at birth and meet again many years later show startling similarities between twins: the same laugh, the same body language, the same taste in food—and the same immediate bonding with each other. "I am him and he is me," said one brother on meeting his twin for the first time after thirty years. In my book, Maurice realizes the danger of falling in love with one of the twins, and it causes him the same kind of anguish that I once felt.

In the end, twins are one unit against the world. One twin will feel devastated if she survives the death of the other. The terminal, incontrovertible separation caused by death becomes unbearable for the survivor. That is perhaps the underlying tragedy that afflicts all twins, the dark side of the intimacy they have shared since birth.

The rest of us escape that fate, but often as a child I wished I could have a twin of my own—just as some children have imaginary friends. (I once made a friend pretend that she

and I were Siamese twins, joined at the hip. The effort did not last.) Lucy and Lettie were never lonely. They were connected to each other from birth, all the time, by the power of genes and DNA. They were blessed with a personal connection that most of us yearn to achieve somehow, somewhere, sometime in our lives. "Only connect," urges E. M. Forster. Lord, how we try! Yet twins have their connection without thinking about it, or working at it, or lying on a couch to search for it.

At the end of *Twelfth Night*, one of Shakespeare's two comedies with twins, when Sebastian and Viola meet again after each thinking the other dead, the Duke observes, "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not." Precisely. ■