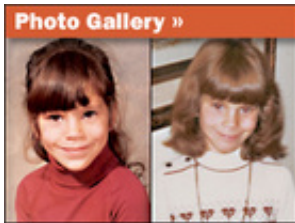


'Identical Strangers' Explore Nature Vs. Nurture

by JOE RICHMAN OF RADIO DIARIES



Paula Bernstein (left) and Elyse Schein are identical twins who were separated as infants and adopted by different families.

[Explore the lives of 'Identical Strangers'](#)

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text size **A A A**

What is it that makes us who we really are: our life experiences or our DNA? Paula Bernstein and Elyse Schein were both born in New York City. Both women were adopted as infants and raised by loving families. They met for the first time when they were 35 years old and found they were "identical strangers."

Unknowingly, Bernstein and Schein had been part of a secret research project in the 1960s and '70s that separated identical twins as infants and followed their development in a one-of-a-kind experiment to assess the influence of nature vs. nurture in child development.

Now, the twins, authors of a new memoir called *Identical Strangers*, are trying to uncover the truth about the study.

More on the Twins

Strangers Become Sisters as Twins Reunite
Oct. 25, 2007

'I Have a Twin'



Elena Seibert

Paula Bernstein (left) and Elyse Schein were reunited in 2004, when they were 35. They are authors of a new memoir, *Identical Strangers*.

[Read about how Elyse Schein began the search for her birth mother that led to her twin sister.](#)

In 2004, Paula Bernstein received a phone call from an employee of Louise Wise Services, the agency where she had been adopted. The message: She had a twin who was looking for her.

The woman told Bernstein her twin's name.

"And I thought, I have a twin, and her name is Elyse Schein," Bernstein says.

Schein, who was living in Paris at the time, had been trying to find information about her birth mother when she learned from the adoption agency that she had a twin sister.

The two women met for the first time at a cafe in New York City — and stayed through lunch and dinner, talking.

"We had 35 years to catch up on. How do you start asking somebody, 'What have you been up to since we shared a womb together?' Where do you start?" Bernstein says.

Separated at Adoption

Soon after the sisters were reunited, Schein told Bernstein what she had found out about why they were separated: They were part of a study on nature vs. nurture. It was the only study of its kind on twins separated from infancy.

Neither parents nor children knew the real subject of the study — or that the children had been

separated from their identical twin.

"When the families adopted these children, they were told that their child was already part of an ongoing child study. But of course, they neglected to tell them the key element of the study, which is that it was child development among twins raised in different homes," Bernstein says.

A 'Practically Perfect' Study

Peter Neubauer, a child psychiatrist, and Viola Bernard, a child psychologist and consultant to the Louise Wise agency, headed up the study.

Lawrence Perlman, a research assistant on the study from 1968 to 1969, says Bernard had a strong belief that twins should be raised separately.

"That twins were often dressed the same and treated exactly the same, she felt, interfered with their independent psychological development," Perlman says.

Lawrence Wright is the author of *Twins*, a book about twin studies.

"Since the beginning of science, twins have offered a unique opportunity to study to what extent nature vs. nurture influences the way we develop, the people that we turn out to be," Wright says.

Wright notes that the Neubauer study differs from all other twin studies in that it followed the twins from infancy.

"From a scientific point of view, it's beautiful. It's practically the perfect study. But this study would never happen today," Wright says.

Finding the True Story

The study ended in 1980, and a year later, the state of New York began requiring adoption agencies to keep siblings together.

At that point, Bernstein says, Neubauer realized that public opinion would be so against the study that he decided not to publish it. The results of the study have been sealed until 2066 and given to an archive at Yale University.

"It's kind of disturbing to think that all this material about us is in some file cabinet somewhere. And really for ourselves, we had to figure out what the true story was," Bernstein says.

The sisters attempted to reach Neubauer, a distinguished and internationally renowned psychiatrist who serves on the board of the Freud Archives. Initially, he refused to speak to them.

No Remorse, No Apology

Eventually, he granted the women an unofficial interview — no taping or videotaping allowed.

Bernstein says she had hoped Neubauer would apologize for separating the twins. Instead, he showed no remorse and offered no apology.

Neubauer has rarely spoken about the study. But in the mid-1990s, he did talk about it with Wright, the author of *Twins*.

"[Neubauer] insisted that at the time, it was a matter of scientific consensus that twins were better off separated at birth and raised separately," Wright says. "I never found anything in the literature to support that."

The author also says Neubauer was "unapologetic" about the study, even though he admits that the project raised ethical question about whether one has a right to or should separate identical twins.

"It is very difficult to answer. It is for these reasons that these studies don't take place," Neubauer told Wright.

Wright says that no such study will ever be done again — nor should it. But he acknowledges that it would be very interesting to learn what this study has to teach us.

'Different People with Different Life Histories'

As for Bernstein and Schein, getting to know each other has raised its own questions.

"Twins really do force us to question what is it that makes each of us who we are. Since meeting Elyse, it is undeniable that genetics play a huge role — probably more than 50 percent," Bernstein says.

"It's not just our taste in music or books; it goes beyond that. In her, I see the same basic personality. And yet, eventually we had to realize that we're different people with different life histories."

As much as she thinks the researchers did the wrong thing by separating the twins, Bernstein says she can't imagine a life growing up with her twin sister.

"That life never happened. And it is sad, that as close as we are now, there is no way we can ever compensate for those 35 years," Bernstein says.

"With me and Paula, it is hard to see where we are going to go. It's really uncharted territory," Schein says. "But I really love her and I can't imagine my life without her."

Neubauer declined to be interviewed for this story. Of the 13 children involved in his study, three sets of twins and one set of triplets have discovered one another. The other four subjects of the study still do not know they have identical twins.

Excerpt: 'Identical Strangers'

ELYSE SCHEIN and PAULA BERNSTEIN

CHAPTER ONE

ELYSE:



Identical Strangers

by Elyse Schein and
Paula Bernstein

Hardcover, 288 pages

List Price: \$25.95

My mother, my adoptive mother, my real mother, died when I was six, but throughout my childhood I believed she watched over me from above. I held the few images that remained of her in my mind like precious photographs I could animate at will. In one, she sat before her dressing table, lining her charcoal eyes, preparing to go out with my dad one Saturday night. The scent of her Chanel No. 5 is enchanting.

I can still see her. She catches a glimpse of me in the mirror and smiles at me, standing in the doorway in my pajamas. With her raven hair, she looks like Snow White. Then, after her death, she seemed to simply disappear, like a princess banished to some far-away kingdom. I believed that from that kingdom, she granted me magical powers.

When I jumped rope better than the other girls in my Long Island neighborhood, I knew it was because my mother was with me. When I went out fishing with my dad and brother, my mother helped me haul in the catch of the day. By sheer concentration, I could summon her force so that my frog won the neighborhood race.

Since I wasn't allowed to attend my mother's funeral, her death remained a mystery to me. When other kids asked how she had died, I confidently announced that she had had a backache. I later learned that her back problems had been caused by the cancer invading her spine.

Along with my mother's absence came an awareness of my own presence. I remember standing in complete darkness in front of the bay windows in our house shortly after her death. Alone, except for my reflection, I became aware of my own being. As I pulled away from the glass, my image disappeared. I asked myself, Why am I me and not someone else?

Until autumn of 2002, I had never searched for my birth parents. I was proud to be my own invention, having created myself out of several cities and cultures. In my ignorance surrounding my mother's death, I amplified the importance of the few facts I had accumulated — she was thirty-three when she died, which I somehow linked to our new home address at 33 Granada Circle. It was probably no coincidence that when I reached the age of thirty-three, after one year in Paris, the urge to know the truth of my origins grew stronger. Turning thirty-three felt the way other people described turning thirty. I felt that I should automatically transform into an adult.

I had recently starting wearing glasses to correct my severe case of astigmatism, which had allowed me to see the world in a beautiful blur for several years. All the minute details I had been oblivious to were suddenly focused and magnified. But even if it meant abandoning my own blissful vision of the world, I was ready to face the truth.

I was working in the unlikeliest of places, as a temporary receptionist in a French venture capital firm in the heart of Paris's business district. Of course, the desire to eat something other than canned ratatouille for dinner had played a part. I assured myself that I wasn't like the suburbanites who commuted every day in order to pay for a satellite dish and a yearly six-week vacation to the south of France.

Initially I had amused myself by observing French business decorum. As the novelty wore off, I

entertained myself with the front desk computer. Assuming a businesslike pose, I sat for hours alternating between answering the phone and plugging words and topics into various search engines. I typed in old friends' names and discovered that my classmates from SUNY Stony Brook were now philosophy professors and documentary directors. One had even edited the latest Jacques Cousteau film.

Meanwhile, bringing espressos to hotshots in suits, I was beginning to doubt that my particular path would somehow lead me to realize my own dream of directing a cinematic masterpiece. After college graduation, I had migrated to Paris, leaving New York and my boyfriend behind to pursue the life I imagined to be that of an auteur film director. My Parisian film education consisted of regular screenings at the cinématèque and the small theaters lining the streets near the Sorbonne. Sitting in a dark cinema, I returned to the safety of the womb, united with an international family of strangers.

I wanted to go far away, to become someone else. In the French tongue, my name, "Stacie," sounded like "Stasi," the word for the East German secret police. Wanting a name that could be pronounced in any language, I took Elyse, my middle name. I couldn't change my name entirely, though, for as far away as I wanted to wander, I always wanted to be easily found.

My family still called me Stacie, but not in person because I hadn't seen them in four years. My schizophrenic brother could barely leave his house, much less get on a plane. My absence was convenient for them. I criticized their überconsumerism, while they couldn't understand my reluctance to join them in civilization. Though they would have bailed me out if I couldn't pay my \$215/month rent, I wouldn't ask them to. My relationship with my father and my stepmother, Toni, consisted of a biweekly call to Oklahoma, where we had moved when I was eleven.

"Is everything okay?" they would ask.

"Yeah. Is everything okay?" I would echo back. "Everything's okay. The same." The same meant that my nephew was still causing mayhem. My family adopted my nephew Tyler as an infant, when my brother, Jay, and his then girlfriend abandoned him. Struggling with the onset of schizophrenia, Jay and Darla, a seventeen-year-old high school dropout, were in no position to raise a baby. Though I never saw them do drugs, I'd heard rumors that Darla sniffed paint while she was pregnant. Since the moment I snuck into the hospital room and watched Tyler enter the world, I have felt like his guardian angel. I even considered smuggling him into Canada to raise him as my own. Now the child in whom I had put so much hope had become an ornery teenager. The apple had not fallen far from the tree: Tyler had begun to use drugs. Disagreeing with my parents on how to handle him, I was excluded from his life.

The hum of the computer filled the silent office. Monsieur Grange had ordered me not to disturb him in his important meeting, so I was able to hide behind my polite mask while making contact with the outside world via the Internet. On a whim, I typed in "adoption search" and the die was cast. Countless sites appeared. I sorted through them until I found what seemed to be the most reputable, the New York State Adoption Information Registry. Unlike some states and other countries where adoption records are open to adoptees, New York seals adoption records; they can only be opened by petitioning the court. The Adoption Registry allows biological parents, children, and siblings to be put in contact, if all parties have registered. Maybe my birth parents were simply waiting for me to register and I would soon be reunited with the mysterious and formidable characters who had shadowed my life. Perhaps, after searching for many years, they

had been unable to find me. On the other hand, as a temp, I certainly was not at the pinnacle of my minor artistic success, and the thought of disappointing these imaginary figures was daunting. Maybe they would reject me again. Or perhaps they wouldn't be fazed at all, having come to peace with their decision years ago. I would be a hiccup in their reality. The scenarios and possible repercussions of my inquiry multiplied infinitely in my mind, a million possible futures.

I filled in a form requesting identifying and nonidentifying information about my birth parents and sent it to the registry in Albany.

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