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## **Relative Values: twin sisters and headteachers Jenny Brown and Jane Lunnon, 48, on sibling rivalry**



Head to head: Jane and Jenny at Wimbledon High School  
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### **Jenny**

Four weeks before Mum gave birth, she was told she was having twins. It was pre-scans, 1969. Who knows whether the shock induced her, but we were born six weeks early, at Barnet General in Finchley.

I'm 15 minutes older and tend to do things first: I was the first to become a teacher, to get married, the first to have a child. I don't think we're competitive, but if you look at the facts, we're doing the same job so perhaps we are.

Our parents were English teachers, and books were at the centre of our lives. Mum had tomes like *Twins: How to Parent ... How to Manage This Nightmare!* She planned to go back to work soon after — teaching was what she was put on the earth to do — but twins put paid to that.

Parenting wasn't a verb in those days. We were allowed out into the world and told: "Be back for dinner." We bossed the local kids around, put on plays for our neighbours — lucky them — wrote newspapers, made toast over candlelight. School was formative, a place where debate was encouraged and we loved it.

I went on to read English at Oxford, Jane went to Bristol.

We fell in love at university. My first boyfriend was intellectual, earnest and thoughtful. Jane's was dashing and wealthy. They were very different expressions of ourselves.

After university, I worked in publishing. Then, at the age of 22, I decided I would try teaching and got a job at a lovely boarding school in Cranleigh. In some ways teaching boys is easy because they do not want to be made to look silly in front of a young female teacher. They were supremely keen to please, like puppies, so that was in the toolkit. It's important boys see strong women teaching them.

Jane, meanwhile, was at a boring office market research job. A year later, she had followed me into teaching and got a job at Wellington College. I recall its headmaster, Anthony Seldon, saying the idea of both of us in a room would disrupt the delicate balance of the universe.

We have great fun. For a laugh one day, Jane came to my school and took a lesson pretending to be me. She managed 10 minutes. The problem was I'd given her homework to hand back, which meant her wildly searching around the room with books, calling out, "Timothy...?"

I got my job as head teacher at St Albans High School for Girls in December 2013 and Jane got hers the following Easter. Mum said: "How many parents can say that of their daughters?"

There is a straight line between the independence we were given as kids and the people we became. As a society, the overprotection of our children puts us in danger of stopping them becoming fearless. Not that I am entirely fearless, of course. I don't see myself as ambitious, either, and never have done. I didn't have ambitions to be a head teacher, although I love every minute of it.

## **Jane**

My parents lovingly considered the name Jenny for their unborn daughter. When they heard I was coming too, they ran to the bookshelves, saw a Jane Austen novel — and voilà.

At the risk of sounding like Pollyanna, we had an incredibly lucky childhood. Behind our house were playing fields, a brook that ran through the garden and woodland up to the train track. It was a wonderland in London.

Jenny is great company. We're very alike and as kids we'd get on brilliantly until we'd lose it, then it was the Third World War. Watching Jenny get into Oxford, when I didn't, was horrid. It was the first time I had materially failed at something I set out to do, and particularly difficult given both our parents read English at Oxford. I did better than Jenny at A-level and GCSE. Just saying!

Her letter came the day before mine — a whole 24 hours of waiting. I remember opening it and seeing "We are sorry". It was Christmas and I had an awful couple of months, but I got into Bristol and I made friends for life, so something good came out of an enormous amount of pain and rejection. I say to my girls at Wimbledon High School that failure is so important. I try to teach them to be kind to themselves, to fail and fail better, and keep believing.

After university, Jenny and I were applying for jobs in publishing, media and marketing. We had a humiliation gallery of rejection letters stuck on our wardrobes. We even had a competition to see who got the most (her) and who got the most humiliating (me) — for a letter that began "Dear Barbara..."

We both said we would never be teachers like our parents, but it was running before the tide. Jenny went first. I got a job at a marketing company in Islington, where I worked for two years: early 1990s, heels, shoulder pads. My sister phoned one Friday lunchtime. She said, "I've got to teach King Lear in half an hour. Any thoughts?" I talked to her for 20 minutes, and when I put the phone down I thought, "My God, she's being paid to do that."

At lunchtime, I bought a copy of the Times Educational Supplement. There was a position for an English teacher at Wellington College; I wrote a letter that evening.

I worked incredibly hard, moving up to head of English, and deputy head. Working with Anthony Seldon was one of the great professional privileges of my life — incredibly difficult as well. He doesn't suffer fools lightly, but he showed me that if you have high expectations, people do miraculous things. I like to think I've taken that advice. Not that I'm texting people at 2am, like he did.

The world is a pressured place and parents aren't immune. They want the best for their kids and in the independent sector they're paying for it, so they expect results. The biggest worry is parents who care so much, they focus on every detail of their sons' and daughters' lives. Children need space to find out who they are.

The best thing about being a twin is the sense of being understood. The worst thing is the sense of being understood; it inevitably makes you competitive. I use the phrase pathologically competitive, which Jenny disagrees with, but I do always think: “Is she doing this better than me?”

## **STRANGE HABITS**

- **Jenny on Jane** She buys mad presents, like the camper van that tooted every time the wheel turned right and never really left the hard shoulder
- **Jane on Jenny** She swims in freezing water all year round. As a “wild swimmer” she has been known to break the ice for her early morning swim