



Title: Family swap
Interviewee: Jane Alison
Duration: 6 minutes, 40 seconds

About this transcript

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Introduction

By now we know that families come in all different shapes and sizes. Not so typical, though, is the family brought about when friends trade husbands.

In this Skype-recorded episode of Bookpod, Jane Alison talks about *The Sisters Antipodes*, the memoir she wrote about the "father swapping" that took place in her childhood, and that resounds in her life to this day.

Presentation

The starting point of the memoir is something that's happened when I was four years old, which was my parents were Australian diplomats, met a couple in the American Foreign Service and got along extremely well and traded partners so that two mirror families were formed. Both couples had two little girls the same ages. The younger two of the girls actually shared a birthday and almost the same name and this was my other half, my counterpart, Jenny and



myself.

So we then grew up in these mirror families. I had her father. She had my father. We lived on opposite sides of the globe for much of our younger years because of our parents' diplomatic postings.

And the story then unfolds as we grow up with this strange sense of self that is so unfixed. We get different last names. We get different nationalities. We get different accents and, of course, we have different fathers, our own father having, it seems, been able to replace us very easily. So that's the starting point of the story and it follows us and our pretty intense struggles with ourselves and each other for the loves of our fathers over the next many years.

I was trained as a classicist. So I either was attracted to ancient tragedy because of my family story or I was able to understand my family story because I happened to read so much tragedy.

In an ancient tragedy, it's a crime or it's a curse that can start the story, and that seems to be the way it worked



with my family. There was this one major thing that happened, this split that happened and it just had all of these consequences that were very logical and very dire and they had to play themselves out.

Jenny, my stepsister, was always a little bit ahead of me in things and she was the one who when we were seventeen and eighteen first started seeing our family story in terms of fairy tales. She would say that we were Snow White and Rose Red. We were these two fairy tale sisters who were stuck together and had to share everything including, you know, fathers and lovers.

And her problem ultimately turned into drugs, which take over on their own and sort of knock out any other psychological problems you have, I think. I didn't witness the whole time when she really became horribly involved in heroin.

I mean, I was a little bit more trying to turn things that are awful into something better. And she [Jenny] was, I suppose, more susceptible, into just going down into the darkness. I think that I feel very grateful that I had a mother who was just very supportive and very gentle with me



and I'm not sure that her parentage was so easy. I'm not sure I would have done well growing up with my father. I feel very lucky the way that I had ultimately just my mother.

I'm very close to her and I grew up with her and she was my closest parent and so I've heard her versions over the years. She clearly thinks that the others did it first. But I also know that that's how she would think it. And I have to be careful and separate what the story she's told herself from what the same story that the others would tell themselves, which is a totally different story.

So I can sort it out logically and imagine that it was my father and his new wife who began things for various reasons. But I also know that I don't know that and I cannot know that because they would not agree with that story.

My mother, she's very beautiful and a very charming woman and she had a lot of boyfriends who came and went. Some of whom I adored, a couple of whom I adored and who disappeared for different reasons. I guess I learned that they come and go. That's one thing that I really learned,



they do come and go and it's very hard to want to keep them, even, not so much as it is hard to keep them, it's sometimes hard to make yourself the kind of person who will be an accommodating, flexible partner.

I think my stepfather, Paul, he's the most problematic, maybe. I also think he's the most interesting, really, I mean, I think he's the most complicated of the parents. His love was conditional but when it was there it really felt like it was there. He could turn an attention on you or on me and really make you feel as if you were worth something.

And so what Paul would do was really, really helpful. It really made me feel, like, well this is a person whose respect and love, I seem to be able to win. Okay, I have to earn it, but I might be able to earn it. Whereas with my own father, it didn't seem like I ever really would.

But he also played us against each other, or it certainly felt that way in a very political man, very much in the State Department in those days. The sense I got was he would give his love to whoever earned it the most, which was pretty damaging when it comes down to his own daughter versus his stepdaughter.



I don't think that the way the parents conducted the families in the years that followed was the best way. I mean, we didn't speak to my father on the phone or see him for seven years. We exchanged letters, but it's very different than having, you know, a live voice or a live person in your life. I think that was pretty damaging.

And I think that the strange sense of competition between the two families, you know, which of the couples would come off better and which of the girls would be better and which of the two new little boys who were subsequently born, one to each family, would show that this had been done properly. I think that competition was damaging and I think they didn't handle that well. But I certainly don't think they should have not done the exchange to begin with. I don't think they could help that.

You can't take a story like this that has so much symmetry to it, these mirror families, and make it work as fiction. It's just too tidy and it's just unbelievable.

Only in the last few years, when I was trying, in fact, to write a totally different book that was non-fiction, this



family story just came back to get me. I had never been able to publish it as a novel before. It was never very good. But it's the main story I have. It's my main story. It's what sort of has been eating me up forever.

Valedictory

For more information about Jane Alison, visit janealison.com.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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