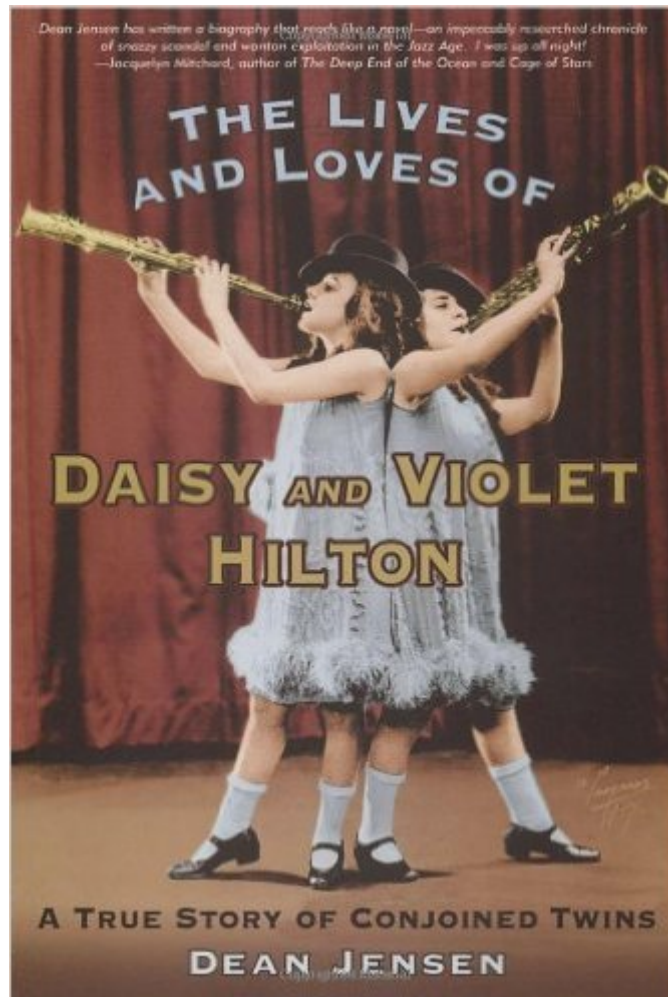


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The Lives And Loves Of Daisy And Violet Hilton: A True Story Of Conjoined Twins



Synopsis

THE LIVES AND LOVES OF DAISY AND VIOLET HILTON follows the poignant life story of twin sisters who were literally joined at the hip, set against the tumultuous backdrop of America during the first half of the 20th century. Daisy and Violet and an unforgettable cast of show-business characters come alive on the pages of this carefully researched and sensitively written biography. Reviews "Jensen's book is a testament to the fickleness of the entertainment world." -Tampa Bay Tribune "It is an affecting story, gently and honestly told without frills, without sensation. In Jensen's hands, the twins are always human, individuals, never freaks joined at the hips as the world saw them after their birth in 1908. . . Here, their story is pure." -Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Customer Reviews

Today, Daisy and Violet Hilton are probably best remembered for their brief appearance in Tod Browning's contentious film, *Freaks*. But in their heyday, the Hilton twins were household names. Genuine conjoined twins, they were born fused at the lower spine in 1908, and lucky not to be handed off to eager experimental surgeons. Dean Jensen's book is, thankfully, a traditional biography, with the sister's birth on page one and ending with their funeral on the last. Jensen has not tried to be clever, but rather let this unusual story and the numerous strange characters have all the attention. Adopted, raised and exploited by a pub owner turned raconteur and, later, a Melbourne-born self-taught showman, Daisy and Violet Hilton remain an island of near-calm in the

giddy upheaval of their lives. Dragged from their birthplace in Brighton, England, to Germany, then Australia and finally to the United States, where they tried to simultaneously rise above their affliction and take advantage of it. The girls became talented singers, musicians and dancers, with one of their signature pieces being a pas de quatre at the end of the show. Their lives touched briefly with others who were, or would go on to be, Hollywood or Broadway stars, something which the twins attempted numerous times. The book is peppered with familiar names and locations, such as a lovely snippet on the opening of Luna Park in Melbourne, Australia. The girls appeared in the park's Egyptian temple, "Pharaoh's Daughter", just after their fifth birthday, only a few months after the park was opened. They went on to tour country Australia where they met Myer Myers, a Clifton Hills born circus-runaway who would gradually become the twin's manager and guardian. *The Lives and Loves...* allows room to explore the people who surround Violet and Daisy; the characters of the freak shows and fairs and later the vaudeville circuit, their colleagues on stage, in the orchestras they used, and their business associates. With black and white publicity photos, film stills and postcards every few pages and quotes from contemporary documents and articles, as well as recent interviews, *The Lives and Loves...* has clearly been thoroughly researched. It is written in a straightforward, engaging manner, which gives the bizarre characters that populate every page of this book space to shine on their own. And it is not the more physically unusual people that are the most oddly behaved.

Dean Jensen did a great job unearthing the facts and assembling the intimate life stories of the ORIGINAL Hilton Sisters, in his book, *"The Lives and Loves of Daisy and Violet Hilton: A True Story of Conjoined Twins"*. His writing style is very easy to read and the story sucks you in early on. Although these sisters are looked upon as "freaks", the more you read about the challenges they faced, the more you see they are just two women searching for happiness and love. As the mystery is unlocked, and intimate details are exposed something surprising happens, you find yourself rooting for the twins and genuinely caring about them. This book takes you on an emotional roller coaster ride detailing their lives of coming into this world a little different, entertaining millions internationally and dying virtually unknown. By the time you read about the accounts of their death, you feel like you've lost two good friends. I was swept away in the descriptive writing of the vaudeville era, the glimpse into the sideshow life and how fickle the entertainment industry really is. It was unbelievable to learn that the twins helped the careers of many 'just starting out stars' like Bob Hope & Burns and Allen and how the great magician Harry Houdini taught them a technique to 'separate themselves'. The more you read about how extraordinary their lives were, the more you

change your perception of how you view people who are different from you. Life handed them lemons, so they made lemonade and then some. I highly recommend this book!

F. Scott Fitzgerald, perceptibly hung over, possibly still drunk, eyed the Hilton sisters over breakfast at MGM Studios. Daisy and Violet had just strolled into the commissary, taking a single empty chair across from him. Daisy picked up a menu, and without looking at her sister, asked Violet what she planned on ordering. Fitzgerald turned pea-green, ran outside, and retched. The sisters were at MGM to star in the film *Freaks*. Daisy and Violet Hilton were pygopus conjoined twins, united by a "cord of flesh" near the base of their spines. As described in Dean Jensen's biography, *The Lives And Loves Of Daisy And Violet Hilton: A True Story Of Conjoined Twins*, they were also clever, beautiful, and eminently likable women. And yet, Fitzgerald's reaction to them was uncommon only in manifestation. For something in the sister's irregular form converted even their most trivial activities into enchantments. In merely wanting breakfast, Daisy and Violet inspire our unseemly fascination, exposing us as gawkers, or moralists, or miserable, inconsiderate drunks. Born in England, Daisy and Violet were just infants when the Brighton press proclaimed the occurrence of "an extraordinary freak of nature." They were toddlers when championed by Harry Houdini. At sixteen, having conquered American midways, they attempted a transition typically blocked to "sideshow freaks": they tried to make it in Vaudeville. In their first performance, Daisy and Violet sang, played instrumentals, and charmed the crowd with tosses of brown curls. Then two young boys, dressed in tuxedos, joined them onstage. Each took a twin by the hand. Music swelled and the foursome began to glide across the stage, "locked in a pas de quatre." The sold-out crowd erupted. They stood in applause. They cried "tears of joy." They dashed toward the box office to secure tickets for the next show. Such reactions, sparked at the sight of something as natural as teenagers dancing, explain Daisy and Violet's legendary success. It also inversely illustrates the more common, less noble, response they elicited: dehumanization. Given away by their unwed, terrified mother, the twins grew up chattel to guardians whose parental interest stopped at exploitation and appropriation. Even their first memories, "the movements of the visitor's hands which were forever lifting our baby clothes to see just how we were attached," recall their tragic position: trapped between those who used them and those who wanted only to look. Their childhood was replete with threats of being sent to the "asylum for monster children." They spent most of their time confined in a room - lest someone catch a free glimpse. Years later, while in the office of the attorney who would eventually emancipate them, Daisy and Violet were recounting their upbringing when they were interrupted by sobbing. The stenographer had begun to cry. Curiously, the empathy

wrought by Jensen's faithful portrayal of Daisy's and Violet's lives is no prophylactic to the rubbernecking its details will inspire. It is easy to chastise the surgeons who wanted to saw the sisters apart, but upon the discovery that when Violet got drunk - which she often did - Daisy would get "a little buzzed," the teratologic glee is irresistible. This conflict resonates loudest in Jensen's chapters discussing the sisters' love lives. Readers will no doubt be moved by Daisy and Violet's inability to find lasting love outside themselves. They will decry the twenty-one states that refused, on moral grounds, to permit Violet to marry. They will disdain the reporters who pressed their eyeballs to the keyhole of Daisy's bridal suite. They will blame the public responsible for this media circus when her introverted husband runs off. And yet, when the reader's friends discover the Hiltons were conjoined twins, and ask the question that everyone asks, the reader will be quick to answer: Yes, Daisy and Violet had sex, lots of it. Even Jensen, unflaggingly sympathetic as he is, seems unable to resist this salacious urge, ending his story with Daisy and Violet's most enduring "trebling," a burial plot shared with a man whom they never met. Had Daisy and Violet not been conjoined twins, their biography might well resemble that of those other Hilton sisters, circa 2050. The Hiltons sought and eventually rebuked public attention. The Hiltons learned those well-worn lessons of fleeting fame and wasted fortune. Such comparisons phosphoresce in Jensen's exposition, which can, at varying times, feel either rudimentary or dispensable. Yet, Jensen avoids melodrama. He evokes the Dickensian far more than he uses it as an adjective. And he is delightfully adept with anecdotes, a skill put to memorable use recounting a world populated by the likes of pugilistic bandleader Blue Steel; "flimflam man extraordinaire," Terry Turner; and a villain who actually named himself, Myer Myers. And besides, Daisy and Violet are not those other Hiltons. They were world famous: the Royal English Twins United, made singular by a slip of Mother Nature's hand, "grown together the way tomatoes on a vine sometimes do."

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