

YIN & YANG

Andrew & Ben Whitehouse

Identical twins Andrew, a psychiatric researcher, and Ben, a social worker, have always been fascinated by the intangible moment we become adults. Together, they have written a book about growing up.

ANDREW

WE ARE 29 THIS YEAR. I'm actually married to a twin, too. How weird is that? Mum and Dad had been trying for ages, then she had my sister and 14 months later we arrived. I think they were just so happy to have kids. Ben and I grew up in the same room so you always have a playmate, you always have someone to bounce ideas off. To an extent my sister was the one who was on the outer because of the close bond we had.

The obvious flipside is that while you have two people to celebrate, two people to have fun with, you also have two people to experience disappointment. I remember when we were 13 I made the baseball team and Ben didn't and it was just about the worst day of our childhood. There was a list on the wall and I looked for his name before I looked for mine. I remember not seeing his name and it was horrendous — it's as if the pain is as raw today as it was back then.

You like your twin so you don't mind being mistaken for them, but boy if they do something wrong and it reflects on you, then you get pissed off! Mum and Dad were very keen on us forging our own identities to the point where they forced it upon us, so Ben became the stamp collector and I was the coin collector — not that we ever showed any interest.

The watershed moment in our relationship was when I went to Oxford and Ben had gone off to Port Hedland to do social work. Once I called Ben and said, "I had a five-course dinner served by butlers! I was wearing my gown and we ate quail ..." and Ben was driving back from a community in the bush in the searing heat and he'd just been vomited on. I thought, "Oh, our lives are diverging." On a daily basis, Ben touches lives in the most understated but heroic of



Spot the difference Andrew and Ben are best mates, as well as brothers. PIC

ways — it's difficult not to be inspired.

When both of us got long-term partners, there was a hint of jealousy — I'm the person that's known everything about you and now you're going to confide in someone else.

We've always been interested in how people tell the story of their life so we had this idea to get some stories from different people and it was also an exercise in keeping in touch. Adolescence is at the very best mildly amusing and at the very worst it's horrendous. I hope people read the book and think "I'm not alone". I wish we had it when we were young.

BEN

WE WERE BORN IN 1981. I think Mum and Dad had difficulty having kids and then suddenly they had more than they knew what to do with. We looked very similar — Mum used to paint our toenails to tell us apart. We've slept five metres

away from each other right until we were about 21 so we are very close — best mates. I remember I got into a teeball team and I cried for about five days because Andrew didn't get in. It just doesn't make sense unless the other person is there.

We've always played footy and one year Andrew wore white shorts when the whole team wore black. He is perhaps the slowest runner known to mankind but he still managed to get second best and fairest that year — because of the shorts I reckon! Another time I kicked five goals in a match and then got dropped the following week and it turns out they thought it was Andrew who kicked the five goals. But the pros certainly outweigh the cons ...

In our early 20s Andrew got a scholarship to go and study at Oxford. When he left it felt like my world had fallen apart, like you'd lost your balance in a way — you had all your arms and legs and all the faculties to be able to function properly but it took a while to

be able to regain your balance, to be able to work out who you are.

I really admire Andrew, I think he's very driven to be able to help people. When he went off to Oxford I started to think that this is what growing up must be. There was no ceremony, no elaborate rite of passage — just the shock of the world suddenly being very different. We wondered how other young people in Australia recognise that they have grown up. Is it a moment? Is it a process? So we started collecting stories from other young people about an experience that they felt let them know they were now grown up.

We all struggle, we all get up, we all keep going and for Andrew and me it's wonderful — he's back in Perth and I've got my best mate back.

Out of the Frying Pan: Bittersweet tales of stumbling into adulthood, \$26.95, is out through Finch and available at bookshops or www.finch.com.au.

Interviews: Amanda Keenan