

A courageous story of hope, love, faith

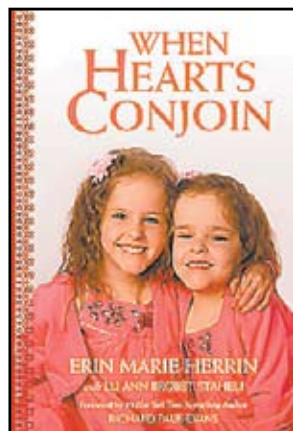
“When Hearts Conjoin”
by Erin Marie Herrin
with Lu Ann Brobst Staheli
(Richard Paul Evans
Publishing, 2009, \$12.95)

Is there a single person in Utah who does not recognize the two little girls pictured on the front of this book? I seriously doubt it. We were all glued to our television sets the day these twins went into the operating room to be separated and waited impatiently for daily updates during the recovery stage. We breathed a collective sigh of relief when we heard the operation was a success. The girls were going home. These were our babies in a sense.

If you happen to be the one person who doesn't know, Kendra and Maliya Herrin were conjoined twins who shared two legs between them (each girl actually controlled a separate leg), shared vital organs including the heart and waited four years for “Cut-Apart Day,” as they called it.

This book is one family's story — a chronicle of the constant turmoil and uncertainty that comes with the birth of conjoined twins, which are “extremely rare. Although conceived perhaps once in every 40,000 pregnancies, many abort spontaneously or are terminated, while almost all the rest are stillborn or die within 24 hours of birth. Live births occur around once in every 200,000 of all live births. ... There could be as many as 50 complete sets of separated twins alive today, and more single twins who are sole survivors of separation.”

What appeared in the newspaper and the nightly news is only a small part of what this family went through. First one has to admire the candor and courage of Jake and Erin Her-



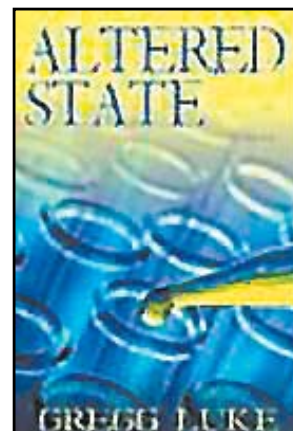
rin in telling the entire story because it isn't all pretty. Jake and Erin had actually come to the point in their marriage where they had decided to end it when Erin found out she was pregnant again. Jake had left the home and divorce papers had been filed. But then the unexpected ultrasound that revealed the conjoined nature of the pregnancy brought them back together as a couple — a miracle in itself, for events of this nature probably break up more marriages than they save.

From the beginning, both Jake and Erin were adamant they did not want to terminate the pregnancy. After the girls' birth, they both felt just as strongly that they would not willingly sacrifice one twin for the other. They did not pretend this was the right decision for everybody, but they knew it was the only decision for them. What this book brought home to me more than anything else is how complicated life is; while trying to make life-and-death decisions, life goes on with all its messiness, victories and setbacks. Time does not stand still while we ponder the right course of action; there are other pressing life issues that need immediate attention while the overriding concern and resulting decisions have a ripple effect on families and



entire communities.

Herrin does not whine about “why me,” nor does she gloss over the sometimes brutal reality of raising conjoined twins. From the beginning she has considered the girls a blessing, but because of the rarity and speculative interest in the circumstances of their birth, she does burst forth from time to time with her feelings about intrusive outside sources that reduced her darling girls to scientific specimens. For instance, in the hospital immediately after their birth, when her first glimpse of them was a picture taken by one of the doctors and when she finally got to see them, “I sat up in bed, wanting to drink in every sound and smell, explore every inch of their little body. But there were so many people, and everyone else wanted to see for themselves how the girls were joined, trying to remove the blanket wrapped around them to keep the girls' privacy covered. I didn't even get to hold them and could barely see them through the gathering of specialists, doctors, nurses and technicians. I



wanted to yell at everyone to get out of the room so I could see my babies. ‘Please don't,’ I asked, wishing for these precious moments alone with my husband and daughters. ‘Please keep them covered.’ ... I begged for the girls to be given their privacy.”

She also writes: “Of course, all of the time needed to care for the twins, on top of taking care of Courtney, meant very little sleep for both Jake and me, even though there was one good result from being forced to spend all this time working together. These little girls were bringing the two of us closer together. We discovered we were more in love than we had ever been, and a physical relationship redeveloped that would be key to saving our marriage.”

“When Hearts Conjoin” is full of pictures of the twins in various stages of their life, and I have to tell you they were — and still are — two of the most beautiful children I have ever seen. You will enjoy this book and the story of this family. You will grow to love these young parents who had decisions thrust upon them that they never could have dreamed of. You will admire their courage and tenacity, but most of all you will admire and recognize a mother's love in action.

She writes about the day

of the surgery, “I'm not sure ‘worried’ is a strong enough word to describe how I felt. Terrified might be better. My nerves were raw, my emotions ready to erupt every second. I tried to stay positive so the girls wouldn't see how upset I was and become frightened themselves. If anything went wrong today, if I lost one or both of my precious daughters, I'd never be able to live with myself.”

All proceeds from the book will be used to establish a fund for the girls' future. What a deal — for \$12.95 you can not only enjoy a great book but contribute to a truly worthy cause. Go buy it.

“Altered State” by Gregg Luke (Covenant Communications Inc., 2009, \$15.95)

Another author tried and true, Gregg Luke has appeared in this column before, and his fans will be glad to know of his latest medical thriller. His subject this time: mind control. The possibility of using medication to achieve diabolical ends makes for an exciting story. What, indeed, will some people do to enrich themselves and at what cost to others?

Luke's first two books were bestsellers; because of his pharmaceutical knowledge, wild but intriguing imagination and storytelling abilities, there is no reason to think this one will be any less successful.

Book critic Charlene Hirschi holds her master's in English from Utah State University. She is among a number of freelance writers whose columns appear in The Herald Journal as part of an effort to expose readers to a variety of community voices. Authors, readers and editors are invited to visit www.charlenehirschi.com.