

Discussion on *Her Fearful Symmetry* by Audrey Niffenegger

1. There are several parallel characters in the book, as follows:
 - Edie/Elspeth
 - Valentina/Julia
 - Robert/Martin/Jack

2. At the beginning of the book, several of the characters are imprisoned or trapped. The following explanations will make this point clear.
 - Elspeth is trapped by her death; she can't figure out how to be an effective ghost. She is also trapped by her past, as a result of switching identities with her sister.
 - Edie is trapped by her past; by switching identities with her sister, she must raise the twins as their mother, although she isn't their mother by birth, but their aunt.
 - Valentina is trapped by Julia; she is the dependent sister in the relationship.
 - Julia is trapped into being the dominant sister even though she sometimes wishes that someone would take care of her.
 - Robert is trapped in his love for Elspeth, and later in his love for Valentina. He is also unable to write his Doctoral dissertation, which is a form of writer's block (being trapped).
 - Martin is trapped by his OCD, and is literally unable to leave his flat.
 - Jack is trapped by his past, and is unable to have a meaningful relationship with Edie, or acknowledge his understanding of the relationship between Edie and Elspeth.

3. By the end of the novel, many conflicts are resolved, and the main characters are freed from their restraints, as demonstrated by the following explanations.
 - Elspeth occupies Valentina's body and is able to fulfill her desire to be a mother. She is also able to admit who she is, namely, Edie.
 - Edie is able to acknowledge that she is, in reality, Elspeth. She is able to admit her true identity to Jack, and allows herself the freedom to react emotionally to her secrets on the plane ride home to Lake Forest.
 - Valentina is freed from subjugation by Julia, and learns how to escape to the outside world as a ghost, where she is finally free.
 - Julia is able to stop domineering Valentina and finally finds someone (Theo) to care for her.
 - Robert leaves Elspeth and is freed from her emotional ties; he finishes his dissertation.
 - Martin is able to leave his flat and journey to renew his marriage with Marijke.

- Jack reveals that he knows about the Elspeth/Edie switch, although he does not know why it happened. He is freed from uncertainty and is able to start fresh with Edie/Elspeth.

4. The novel explores a number of aspects about identity, and the nature of being a twin. Among the concepts explored are:

- What is the nature of a person's being: does it involve the body, the soul, or both?
- How do twins relate to one another? Do twins have separate existences? Why or why not?
- What is the nature of submissiveness/dominance in a relationship?
- Can knowledge or lack of knowledge of a person's identity affect the way other people relate to him/her?