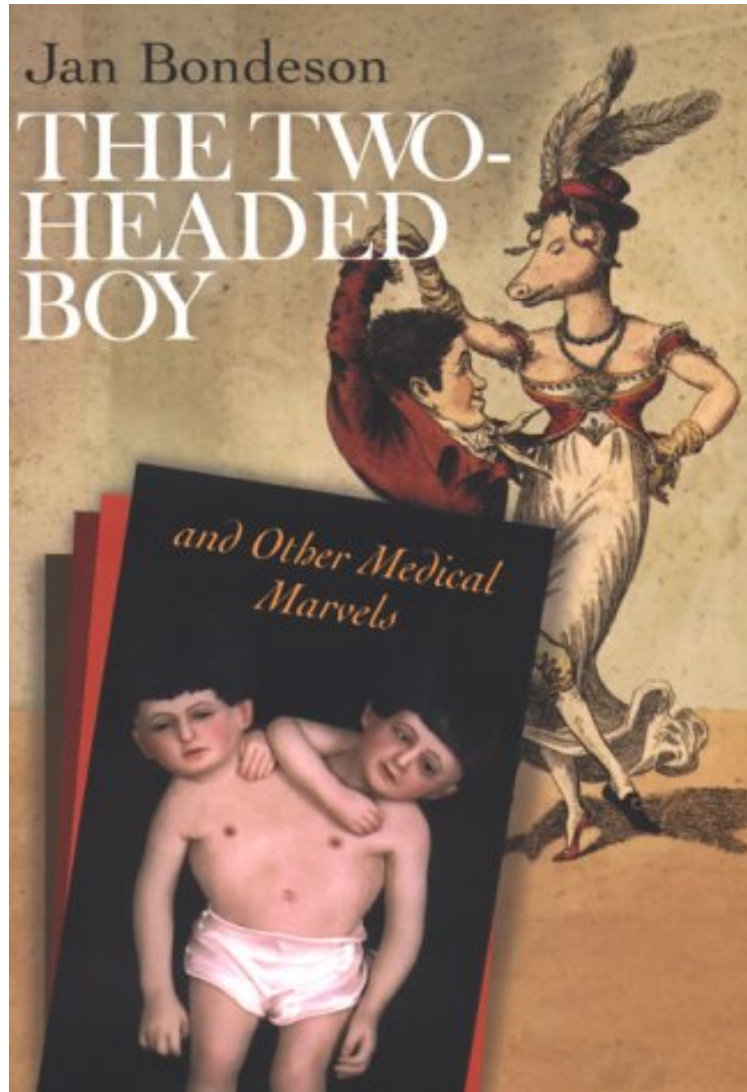


## The Two-headed Boy, and Other Medical Marvels

Jan Bondeson

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**Jan Bondeson : The Two-headed Boy, and Other Medical Marvels** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Two-headed Boy, and Other Medical Marvels:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Guilty pleasures justifiedBy Harry EagarJan Bondeson, a prolific, multilingual medical lecturer, has made a career of popularizing medical curiosities, but unlike other popularizers, he has also published technical studies of the same subjects -- some famous, some unearthed from ancient libraries -- in professional journals.Thus, he brings a dose of medical sophistication and historical rigor to a topic that is, understandably, often treated shallowly.As it turns out, not all the curiosities in "The Two-headed Boy" are medical.

At least two are psychological only -- fakes. The history of how fakes were understood before they were understood to be fakes has its own interest. Although the reader interested only in sensational freaks will find plenty of them here, lavishly illustrated, too, the presentation is likely to be offputting for the casual gawker. Bondeson himself has little use for such, whether rude yokels or elegant townies. Well, it is a dangerous thing to delve into such a field without finding scoffers to point out that the writer and/or the reviewer may be deluding himself about his higher motives. Nevertheless, as human beings with just one head (if that), our fascination for those with more than one is both very human and, if deftly handled, a legitimate exploration of social understanding as much as of organic pathology. Bondeson is deft. While it can never have been socially fashionable to grow up with two heads or covered with hair or sprouting horns, it was arguably worse to do so in premodern Europe. Almost all of Bondeson's examples come from Europe, although many of the older ones from regions where few English-speakers can navigate the libraries as well as Bondeson, a Swede, can. In the old days of isolated villages, the life of a freak could be more or less tolerable or a hell on earth depending on the attitude of those who spread the news -- whether vicious gossips, humane farmers, greedy doctors or -- probably worst of all -- preachers. Bad enough to be born disfigured without some priest deciding you (or perhaps your mother) have sinned. That we moderns are not always any more advanced is revealed in Bondeson's discussion of separating Siamese twins, the part of the book that can most easily claim the high ground. Although "The Two-headed Boy" was published as recently as 2000, it is refreshingly free of po-mo claptrap. It is a surprise, a good one, not to have to endure trivial and shallow explanations that freaks are "others" whose social status is "gendered" or colonized or whatnot. In other words, Bondeson is an old-fashioned scholar, in the best sense of the word. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Cool Book. By beatrice giovanniello Cool Book. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By T Frazier Excellent quality, price and delivery was early, too!

A successor to his popular book *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities*, this new collection of essays by Jan Bondeson illustrates various anomalies of human development, the lives of the remarkable individuals concerned, and social reactions to their extraordinary bodies. Bondeson examines historical cases of dwarfism, extreme corpulence, giantism, conjoined twins, dicephaly, and extreme hairiness; his broader theme, however, is the infinite range of human experience. The dicephalous Tocci brothers and Lazarus Colloredo (from whose belly grew his malformed conjoined twin), the Swedish giant, and the king of Poland's dwarf Bondeson considers these individuals not as "freaks" but as human beings born with sometimes appalling congenital deformities. He makes full use of original French, German, Dutch, Polish, and Scandinavian sources and explores elements of ethnology, literature, and cultural history in his diagnoses. Heavily illustrated with woodcuts, engravings, oil paintings, and photographs, *The Two-Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels* combines a scientist's scrutiny with a humanist's wonder at the endurance of the human spirit. Contents: The Two Inseparable Brothers, and a Preface The Hairy Maid at the Harpsichord The Stone-child The Woman Who Laid an Egg The Strangest Miracle in the World Some Words about Hog-faced Gentlewomen Horned Humans The Biddenden Maids The Tocci Brothers, and Other Dicephali The King of Poland's Court Dwarf Daniel Cajanus, the Swedish Giant Daniel Lambert, the Human Colossus Cat-eating Englishmen and French Frog-swallowers

.com Please, don't stare. Dr. Jan Bondeson, author of *The Two-Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels*, aims to humanize his subjects and move beyond the standard exploitation of people with extremely visible medical anomalies. Though one might say that he benefits from our undeniable fascination with the extraordinarily different, he writes brief but thorough biographies that show real, three-dimensional people underneath the hair and horns. His medical understanding rivals his historical acuity, and the reader will find the interwoven threads of science and culture breathtaking. Perhaps most intriguing is Bondeson's analysis of eccentric tales with little or no physical documentary evidence, such as the egg-laying Scotsman or the Irish gentlelady who was said to have given birth to 365 babies at once. He finds many convincing after stripping them of contemporary superstition and embellishment; this should motivate greater interest in seeking out nonmedical anomalies for deeper research. Fans of good, old-fashioned freak shows will enjoy the profuse, often charming illustrations and the final chapter on men and women reputed to eat such delicacies as stones and live animals long before Ozzy Osbourne made headlines. *The Two-Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels* will surprise those looking strictly for cheap thrills, though--the subjects are too human to treat lightly. --Rob Lightner From Publishers Weekly To this day, human fascination with so-called freaks, those unexplainable "jokes of nature," as Bondeson calls them, has not abated. Not only supermarket tabloids but, according to the author, even the Internet is "a mine of misinformation and bigoted nonsense on these matters." Here is Bondeson once again (after *Cabinet of Medical Curiosities*) aiming to historicize this fascination. Unlike his previous study, Bondeson's new work attempts to offer more than a collection of marvels. He roams with intriguing results, from literary and cultural history to medical science and back again, focusing on the development of a scientific approach to these cases. As Bondeson looks at the cases of the so-called "hog-faced women," "dog-faced boys," and "people with horns" throughout history, he shows an acute sensitivity to the nuances of historical interpretation and for the humanity of those whose lives and conditions he chronicles. The story of the medieval woman who supposedly gave birth to 365 children in one day is a gem of historical reasoning and exposition. The book makes an important contribution to the

histories of both science and popular culture. 85 bw photos. (June) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. From The New England Journal of Medicine If Wilder Penfield's classic diagram of the cerebral cortex is to be believed, we each carry within us a homunculus, a little monster whose distorted, disassembled body parts are wired into our brains and configured in proportion to our sensorimotor innervations. This manikin defines our body and guards our sense of form -- sometimes too jealously, it turns out, as we react reflexly and often monstrously to those who differ from us. The shock of such encounters fuels Jan Bondeson's book *The Two-Headed Boy*, and *Other Medical Marvels*, and might compel you to read it. This book is a follow-up to the author's *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (Cornell University Press, 1997), which it follows precisely in format and tone. In both works, Bondeson turns a modern eye to historical "freaks of nature" and views, from a physician's perspective, legends that in their own time had to be seen to be believed: children with tails, men with horns, ape-faced and swine-faced women, and all varieties of conjoined twins. *The Two-Headed Boy* adds 12 more case studies. Readers are introduced to medical anomalies such as preternaturally hairy humans and petrified children, supernaturally dysfertile women who laid eggs or delivered "as many [babies] as there are days of the year," and the Swedish Giant and the Human Colossus. For each myth or condition, Bondeson moves the reader slowly through time to the present and gives us a provisional diagnosis. In this way, we learn about hypertrichosis, lithopedia, progeria, pituitary gigantism, and more. Bondeson traveled far and wide to identify untapped primary sources, among the most interesting of which are the contemporary prints and photographs that depict these unusual people. Bondeson's stories and images are fascinating, but it is his uncritical attitude that makes the enterprise questionable. The book resembles a 19th-century medical museum and seems like an attempt to bring the past into the present on its own outdated terms. This is uncomfortable in part because our explanations of disease have moved beyond the information provided by gross anatomical distortions. In addition, we now better appreciate the costs that "entertaining" displays of people's identities, lives, and bodies may exact in terms of dignity. What might we hope from this kind of exhibition? At a minimum, we should expect an attempt to understand the experience of the people depicted and the public's fascination with these legendary figures in the context of their times. Bondeson comes closest to this standard in his discussion of men and women with hypertrichosis, whom he suggests may have been imaginary "missing links" to a public struggling to integrate Darwin's theory of evolution into their understanding of themselves and the world. Similarly, he hints that the persistently popular myths of hyperfertile and swine-faced women represented revenge taken by the poor against the upper class in an era of profound social inequities. But these are only glimpses into the deeper wells within these stories. In general, Bondeson accepts contemporary provincial voices at face value, and readers who continue reading the book soon fall in with the gapers of the past, shocked and amused by these uncommon people and their misfortunes. In Bondeson's defense, his often gentle voice would have been no small comfort to the characters in the book, many of whom suffered painful forms of exploitation and alienation. And not all the histories are grim. The Court Dwarf with progeria was indulged throughout his life in the 18th century by his benefactor, King Stanislaus of Poland, and the morbidly obese Human Colossus, who weighed 336 kg (739 lb) at his death, was by all accounts emotionally healthy and courted by London's upper classes. The Two-Headed Boy of the book's title was a pair of dicephalous conjoined twins who in early adulthood managed to escape their parents' mistreatment and live out their life with a measure of privacy and decency. Still, I could not help but think it best to rise above our "inner monsters" and leave these unfortunate people alone. Early in the book, we learn that a young man with canine facies thrilled audiences as Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy in a turn-of-the-century European tour of the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Nonphysicians and casual readers may find this book transfixing, like a trip through 12 of Barnum and Bailey's best sideshows. But now, as in their time, these experiences are a cheap thrill, and anything but uplifting. Although one noted historian hints in a blurb on the dust jacket that the book has important things to say, I imagine that most physicians, medical historians, and other serious scholars are likely to want more substance than it has to offer. After learning about Jo-Jo and the circus in the first chapter, they could well find themselves riffling through the pages looking for P.T. Barnum's most notorious attraction of all: the Egress. Michael Berkwitz, M.D. Copyright 2001 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS.