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Dear Ken,

I like THE THIRD TWIN a lot - a real page-turner, with good characters and strong thematic interest. It's already very effective and exciting at first draft stage!

I can't think of anywhere the drive and tension flag. Only the finale seemed to me a little flat, though I think you're right it should be the press conference. An obvious way of turning up the heat would be to have Harvey get loose in the hotel, obsessed with getting revenge on Jeannie. He can plan to create mayhem in the Regency Room, an idea the reader has been prepared for by Dennis's cinema jaunt and Harvey's own locker-room pranks. Whatever he does - create a bomb scare, turn on the fire sprinklers, fart into the air conditioning - the media can be counted on to stay on the scene, while Berisford and cronies attempt to get the conference rolling again and sign the papers. Alternatively, if you prefer not busting up the conference, Harvey could meet Jeannie as she's escorted out after her defeat. Either way, he grabs her and takes her to a hotel room where he threatens her with something more psychopathic than his previous attempts on her (his thing about shaved and pierced pussies comes to mind - if he searches the bathroom and comes out with a razor and a bottle of aftershave, that alone should have many female readers not knowing whether they want to sit or stand). Jeannie not only has to face foiling this nice plan, but also dragging Harvey back to the media as proof of her statement about Genetico.

Harvey might detract from the tension of Jeannie's own attempt to disrupt the signature event, so I would beef this up (I would anyway). The preparations the night before felt a bit sketchy to me. No one can believe that getting Harvey to the conference is going to be easy, which should make getting at least one other clone there all the more vital. Perhaps Jeannie should think more about how to persuade the clones, but I'll come back to this. The press handouts feel like an afterthought; I suggest Lisa brings a portable inkjet with her powerbook, and the three of them work on these handouts before Berisford calls. I also think Jeannie's actual speech at the conference needs more urgency, seeing as she does that Steve is not there and everything now depends on her. She's been misdirecting her aggression since the beginning of the story, let her pace it just right now, so the reader gets caught up in the feeling we're really socking it to the bastards without going over the edge. But of course the odds are all against Jeannie, and she feels bitterly frustrated (along with the reader) as she's laughed out of court. This is when Harvey might pull his stunt, whatever it is. Proust would leave, freeing Steve to search for Jeannie and help her escape from Harvey's clutches, and as the two of them drag Harvey back they might see a media cluster round Lisa and the clones. (Sounds like a name for a group).

At least that's one way of looking at the finale. In any case, given the length of the book, this part could easily be twice as long as in the first draft, and the overall effect would be more satisfying.

Another point I felt unsure about was the treatment of the heredity/environment theme. This is of course vitally important and extremely contemporary, and I think it's a very good idea to write a thriller round it. You state it clearly early in the book, and in such a way not many readers can go by without catching on. But I didn't have the feeling at the end that the theme had been completely rounded out.

Perhaps this is because of the nature of the evidence. Twin stuff captivates people because it seems to prove something. It's much easier to conclude that the fact that twins scratch their noses the same way at age fifty means that we are wholly genetically determined, than to try to understand the immensely complex interplay of environmental stimuli with individual volition. In terms of the book, it's easier to pick up on how the clones are similar than on how they are different. This doesn't mean you don't go to some lengths to show they are different, just that your job is much harder on that side than on the other.

Part of the problem is that you need the clones' psychopathic tendencies to keep the tension humming, particularly when the reader isn't sure just how many of them are flitting about assaulting women. Here they have to be interchangeable. Steve, however, is the main counter-example, and I suggest he might be deepened a bit. The more he learns about his cloneness, the more he might worry about his own nature - he did almost kill someone once, and probably he can recall other occasions when he had a job controlling himself, and he may feel guilty about sexual fantasies. Is his outer niceness a veneer? You sketch this in, but I'd make more of it, so there's a debate within him. P 401, for instance, it's fine having him be against Proust and Co because of their racism, but I should think he'd also hate their guts for having made a potential psychopath of him. Then the scene with Marianne (p 408) can really reassure him: he behaves spontaneously so decently that Marianne recognizes the difference (important) through the similarity (secondary). I realize that's why you put the scene there, but as it stands the point doesn't go home.

You could also make more of the three remaining clones. Thinking of how to get them to Baltimore, Jeannie might say: Shit, there's something at stake here, and try to put it to them in a nutshell. When they show up, we could briefly learn why, and find they didn't all have the same motives. At least one of them might have reacted to Jeannie's appeal in an altruistic way. Then she can think: It's true, they're not all the same. (The more I think about this, the more it seems important, because she's actually going to marry a clone!)

Less importantly: though Jeannie's terrific, I thought a couple of problems cropped up in her professional and family life. Professional: someone who writes software that impresses the Pentagon and the FBI doesn't have computer hassles quite like Jeannie's. It's unlikely she'd be communicating from her office only by modem; she'd also be plugged in to the Psychology Department's local area network, at least, if not more. When she's fired, her access to information would be shot down by the thought police, just as security changes the code on her office door. Donna won't be able to access her files either. The trouble is that Berisford is most likely to want to, to find out how much she knows, and he can do what he likes. The plot problem is how to keep that FBI file on ice for a day or so without either Berisford or Jeannie being able to get at it.

If I were Jeannie, finding that file in my E-mail, knowing my friend had put her ass on the line to upload it to me, I'd save it to floppy immediately and wipe out anything my superiors might get at on the LAN. I might even feel like hiding the floppy, or writing SHOPPING.LST* on it. Then I might find myself shut out of my office with the floppy inside.

Which is where Daddy comes in. I found him imagination-stretching. Long-term jailbirds don't have nice wives who grow old and dotty, they have divorces, and they surely don't have tennis-ace daughters who land research jobs. He may be a way of showing heredity isn't everything, but the point isn't really made. I'd be afraid of him being too criminal for some readers. Couldn't he be toned down a bit - say, alcoholic, unreliable, footloose? He might know about burglary from having worked in a security firm for the longest Jeannie can remember he held a job down (perhaps motivated by helping her through university, even if he didn't make it all the way). Now he appears from Tucson or New Orleans, and rips off her stereo etc to satisfy his thirst. He then owes Jeannie his security know-how for retrieving her floppy, and things go ahead as you've written them (much more exciting and televisual than someone hacking into a computer, I agree).

That's about it. The story may recall THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL, and I thought you might avoid the villains talking about the clones as 'the boys' as they sometimes do.

I'm sending this as soon as I can, but your parcel arrived late due, not to strikes, but a two-week Jet Services cock-up. I'll return the MS separately, and will very soon be sending you SKEINS (really!). Still nothing, by the way, from S. King.

Very best wishes for 1996 to you, Barbara, and everyone,



* This is nit-picking, especially as I know you're not writing for Tom Clancy fans, but the operating system Jeannie's likely to be using in an American university is more likely to be UNIX than DOS, and the filename syntax isn't the same. I'm sure you know someone who can give you fuller info. than I can, if it's worth it...