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Lifestyle

G COVER

Mother of twins chronicles terror, joy of first three years

By Karen Campbell | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 17, 2012



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“Double Time” author Jane Roper and her husband, Alastair Mook, with their now 5-year-old twins, Clio (in yellow) and Elsa, at their Medford home.

When Medford writer Jane Roper found out she was pregnant in 2006, after a year and a half of in vitro fertilization, she was thrilled. She recalls, “You go so long thinking it’s not going to happen, and when it actually does, it’s like ‘Oh my God, my body can do this!’ It’s like Christmas morning.”

But six weeks later, that delight became tinged with “terror” when Roper learned she was carrying not one precious bundle of joy, but two. “The subconscious excitement and joy lasted half a second, then it was panic and disappointment,” she confesses. “It became a higher risk pregnancy, and I was nervous.”

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On the surface, Roper’s story is not that unusual. With advancements in fertility research, multiple births have become increasingly common. In the US, twin birth rates have climbed 76 percent since 1980 according to the National Center for Health Statistics, and Massachusetts has one of the highest rates.

Roper’s husband, singer-songwriter Alastair Moock, had hoped for twins. Roper says, “We’re very career minded and lead busy lives, he pursuing career as a musician, me as a writer. He was worried we would not get around to having a second kid or get in the mind-set of not going back to dirty diapers. He saw it as efficient.”

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But Roper found herself overwhelmed by the prospect of mothering two at once. She set out to find a book that might offer a window into what she was about to encounter. “I was craving something to show me what my days and nights were going to look like, what it would be like trying to work, the challenges, the great parts about it.”

Roper decided to document her own experience. The new “Double Time: How I Survived — and Mostly Thrived — Through the First Three Years of Mothering Twins” (St. Martin’s Press) is the book she wished she’d had at the start of her journey: brutally honest, providing not just insight, but commiseration and reassurance. “There’s a lot in knowing that you’re not alone,” she says. “I wanted it to feel like sitting and bitching with a friend over coffee.”

“
It’s a different ballgame and you have to cut yourself some breaks. . . . I’ve had to learn to let go, how to manage chaos and feeling overwhelmed.’ Jane Roper, mother of twins

Roper chronicles the challenges as well as the rewards of parenting twins, including the “twin interactions” between her two daughters, Clio and Elsa, as their distinctive personalities began to manifest. The memoir is also a cautionary tale with a darker

edge, as Roper details her deeply personal story of struggling with depression, before and after giving birth.

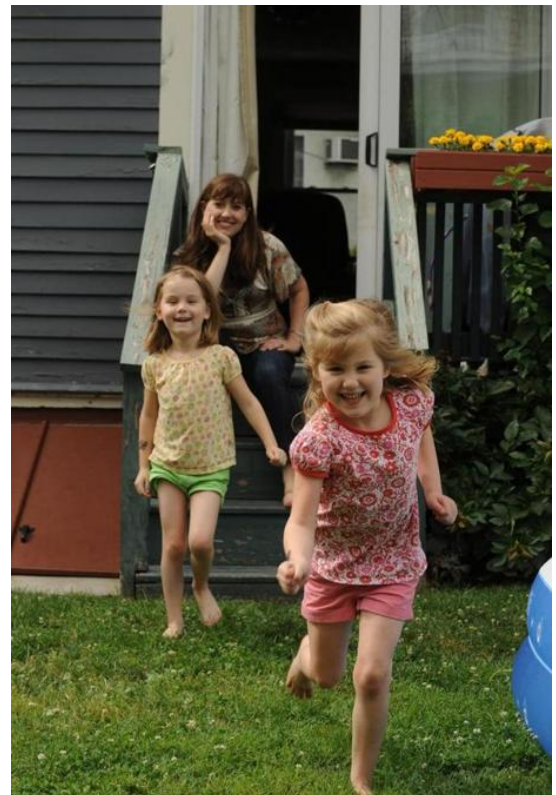
Unlike having one infant, whose sleep patterns may allow parents their own rest times, parenting twins can be a 24/7 merry-go-round of unpredictable wakings and feedings. The overnight infant care agency the Bluebirds specializes in helping parents of twins. According to CEO Kate Hall, “When one mouth closes, the other mouth opens. When one eye closes, the other eye opens. It’s something all the time. It’s important to get and keep them on the same schedule.”

Twins are often born premature, averaging 5 pounds according to Hall, and they need to be fed every two hours in the beginning. “If the mother’s breast-feeding, it takes about an hour and 15 minutes to feed both babies and get them burped and settled and changed,” Hall says. “Sometimes they don’t go back to sleep right away, then it’s time to feed them again. If the mother hasn’t got help, she’s up all night. It’s trying and exhausting.”

She advises new mothers to accept help from anyone who offers, whether to cook a meal and clean or just be supportive company to counteract the sense of isolation. Complicating all these challenges is the risk of post-partum depression, which increases with multiple births.

Surprisingly, Roper’s depression stayed under control during her daughters’ infancy. For over a year, she was more happy and content than she’d ever been, despite double-duty diaper changes, nursing around the clock, and a chronic lack of sleep.

Husband-dad Moock recalls, “Life was crazy but it was a kind of ‘fun adventure’ crazy. I think we had two really good things going for us. First, I’m self-employed, which meant we could share the workload evenly — or as close to evenly as



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Jane Roper posed with her twins Elsa, in pink, and Clio, in yellow, at their Malden home.

possible without my having boobs. And, second, we didn't have any single-baby experience to compare things to. We didn't really realize how hard those first months were until we were already past them."

But shortly after the twins were weaned, at around 13 months, Roper started experiencing severe depressive episodes. She was ultimately diagnosed as being on the bipolar spectrum, which she believes was set off by weaning — not just the physical loss of bonding so intimately with her babies, but withdrawal from the "feel-good hormone" oxytocin, which is released during nursing. "There's a definite link between hormones and brain chemistry," she says, "and when you're nursing times two, it's a big hormonal shift."

Compared with postpartum depression, weaning depression receives relatively little public attention. Roper wrote a post on her blog *Baby Squared* at *Babble.com* about her depression after weaning four years ago, and still gets thank-you comments from mothers experiencing the same thing. Roper believes that in her case, the hormonal shift "tripped a switch" for bipolar II disorder, an illness spotlighted last year when actress Catherine Zeta-Jones was diagnosed with the condition, characterized by depression, with subtle manic swings.

With a quick smile and a ready laugh, Roper says that finding balance for herself has been key to getting her life back on track. Sharing her experience through her writing as well as through talking with other parents has been cathartic and therapeutic.

She believes humor is critical as well, providing emotional release and a way of coping with difficult situations. "When things get really hard, you can sometimes see the absurdity of a situation and cling to humor for dear life." She recalls the early days of trying to nurse two infants at once, one finally attaching just as the other slipped off, or attempting to read "with a baby on my boob and the book on the coffee table, trying to figure out how to turn the pages."

Roper also believes parents shouldn't hold themselves to the same standards and expectations as their "singleton" friends. For example, she and her husband used twins as their 'get-out-of-cloth diapers free card.' She cautions, "It's a different ballgame and you have to cut yourself some breaks. . . . I've had to learn to let go, how to manage chaos and feeling overwhelmed."

With her daughters now 5 years old and heading off to kindergarten in the fall, Roper admits one of the biggest trials of parenting twins is “crowd control,” balancing two sets of needs simultaneously.

“That’s an intense ongoing challenge, and I’ve never found a way to deal with it except to accept the imperfection of it,” she says. “I know I can’t do a perfect job, I’m going to be at wits’ end, and can’t please them both 100 percent of the time. But finding time for each one separately is so important. Grocery store with mom has become a big one-on-one time.” She and her daughters make a project of creating shopping lists together, finding the items in the store, using the beeper scanner as they go.

Roper says that for her, the most surprising delight of having twins is the different relationship she has with each one. Elsa is curious and friendly, Roper says, “a bit of a drama queen, a bon vivant” who loves to eat, do new things, and dive into situations headfirst. Clio is the family comedian, silly but very thoughtful and caring. Roper says Clio has helped her learn to listen more carefully.

“I interact differently [with each daughter], appreciate each unique view on the world and nature,” she says. “I’m amazed at how different human beings are wired from birth. And God, do I love hearing the conversations they have.”

But as is the case for many mothers, there’s an undercurrent of feelings of incompetence, inferiority — and guilt. “A lot of the guilt is feeling like I’m not willing to sacrifice enough of myself, be patient enough, put my own needs and feelings and desires to the side to do everything for my children. But the reasonable side says you have to think of yourself and your own needs.” She’s convinced it’s important to set a good example by being a fulfilled, multidimensional human being.

Now 38, Roper is back at work on a new novel, and as a freelance advertising copywriter. “I’m in a good situation in familial division of labor. Both of us work kind of part time. Alastair’s at home with the girls most during the week. I find little ways to reconnect with myself, do my writing, go out to a literary event, read at night before sleep. Just accepting that the craziness of these first years will pass lets me keep things in perspective and enjoy where I am.”

Roper has been reaching out to the network of clubs for parents of twins and multiples, recently addressing the 80-member North Suburban Parents of Multiples Club. Vice president Lyndsay Dowd says the club is a way for members to support one

another, laugh, and unplug from the day-to-day rigors of parenting multiples.

Dowd recalls, “I joined when I was pregnant, just looking for ideas and information. I’d heard about troubles breast-feeding twins, napping ... all the questions were mind-boggling.”

In addition to monthly meetings, the group holds holiday celebrations, spa days, and swap meets. Roper read from her book at one of their “Mom’s Night Out” events. “There’s not a lot of information out there on what the experience [of multiples] is like and how it changes your life,” Dowd says. “That’s really the perspective she offers. And she writes about her experience with depression, how it affected her marriage and job. That’s also something we could all relate to.”

One of Roper’s key pieces of advice for parents of multiples easily applies to parenting in general. “Do the best you can to get through and don’t be a perfectionist. Letting go of that goes a long way.”

Karen Campbell can be reached at karencampbell4@rcn.com.