





True to form

Lee Anne Litzsinger investigated how birth order plays out in 19th-century British novels. No matter how you dress it, a first-born sister is a first-born sister in any century.

Story by Sarah Garber

Photo by Rob Hill

BEING A SISTER, Lee Anne Litzsinger is interested in how female siblings interact. Being an English major, where better to look than in novels?

Litzsinger is about to start her first year as a library science master's student. She spent her undergraduate years at MU earning a bachelor's degree in English with minors in history and journalism. During her senior year, she conducted an independent research project under the guidance of Professor Julie Melnyk. The project was part of the Undergraduate Research Mentorship Program.

"I was interested in the role of sisters in 19th-century British novels," says Litzsinger, BA '08, of Chesterfield, Mo. "As a sister myself, I wondered whether modern studies

of the significance of birth order could be applied to these novels, and what the similarities or differences might tell us about their cultural context."

Litzsinger examined 11 novels published between 1811 and 1887. "I found out that, in almost every case, sisters in these novels fit with what modern-day birth order research has discovered. Not only is this an interesting lens through which to read these books, but it also helps explain our fascination with, for example, Jane Austen's work, because so many of the relational and family dynamics are the same," Litzsinger says.

Litzsinger, the eldest of three girls and one boy in the Nick and Marty Litzsinger family, provides an example: George Eliot's *Middlemarch* follows Dorothea Brooke and her younger sister, Celia. Dorothea fits the stereotype of an older sister perfectly, Litzsinger says. She is scholarly, a natural leader and feels comfortable being in control. In addition, "she has not only the virtues but also the faults of an eldest born,"

Litzsinger says, noting Dorothea's stubbornness and tendency to diminish her younger sister. "I can also sometimes diminish my younger sister," Litzsinger shares. "The book rings true to life. When you realize that, it gives you a new respect for the text, what it can show you and how it impacts your life."

For Litzsinger, a bona fide speed-reader, the undergraduate research experience ultimately convinced her to pursue work in library science, which means she can reserve reading novels for pleasure.

"I realize that there's a place for this kind of research, but if I did it for a living, I wouldn't enjoy the novels anymore," Litzsinger says. "I had the chance to work in an English academic setting and I loved it, but I'm OK with the fact that I don't want to do that for the rest of my life." ■■

More: <http://undergradresearch.missouri.edu>

Lee Anne Litzsinger's research on how birth order plays out in the sisterly relationships of 19th-century British novels taught her a lot about her own first-born characteristics. The experience also sent her in a new direction for graduate school.

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