

Donor Unknown – reviewed

— *Written by John Parrot On 2nd June 2011*

Many years ago I met two university students who had paid for their long summer holiday by volunteering for medical experiments and donating sperm. After a while the clinic told them their sperm had conceived six or seven children and they were no longer allowed to donate. But what if there were no such limits on numbers of children conceived? Donation was anonymous in the UK back then, but what if the identity of donors became known?



Donor Unknown, a fascinating new documentary by [Jerry Rothwell](#) (director of the splendid *Deep Water*), looks into these questions. The film doesn't just look into the practicalities of having lots of half siblings, but digs deeper into what exactly a father is, what our genetic inheritance means, and more unexpectedly, the limits of our tolerance. These questions are handled with great subtlety, sensitivity and good humour.

Although we are introduced to a number of 'donor children' in the film, mostly the offspring of one man, the primary focus is on a pretty young twenty-something called JoEllen. Brought up between two mums in Western Pennsylvania (they split up when she was little), Lisa had always been told that she had a 'donor not a father'. None the less, she felt there were small differences between herself and the rest of her family. She walked differently and she gradually became curious about the unknown 50% of her genetic make up. Luckily, a website, [Donor Sibling Registry](#), had been set up to help donor children track down their siblings and soon JoEllen manages to track some down.

The siblings look like you'd expect brothers and sisters would – similar – and they say that they share personality traits too. Despite only knowing each other for a short amount of time, there seems to be a connection or intimacy between them. These new relationships seem uncomplicated and rewarding, but the film seems to take wing when it focuses on the man responsible for this vast brood of polite young people, Jeffrey Harrison. When Jerry Rothwell found Jeffrey, he must have thought he'd struck documentary gold.

Unlike in the UK, in California there is no limit to the number of children a sperm donor can conceive. This means that Jeffrey is reckoned to have 58 donor children. Yes, he made some very successful trips to the masturbatorium. As a virile young stud his samples were accepted by the clinic up to four times a week, for years on end. He reckons paid his rent for eight years through donations. Jeffrey's profile also proved very attractive for interested parents: he was physically active, handsome, intelligent and spiritual. What could make a better donor?

Back in the eighties Jeffrey was a ripped dreamboat, nowadays, though still handsome, he looks a bit like a less leathery version of Iggy Pop. He is a free spirit, living in a large, clapped out motor home (an RV in the US) in Venice Beach, Los Angeles – one of those Californian spots where you can really let freak flag fly. Sharing his home are two of the most relaxed dogs on earth and a pigeon with a broken wing. The low cost of running a motor home means Jeffrey doesn't have to work so hard, instead he can potter about the sea front wearing a great selection of hats.

Jeffrey is an undeniably charming and sweet chap, but he is also quite eccentric. So eccentric that at least one of his donor mothers is disappointed, it also might be an issue for his children. Not only does he live in near poverty, but he is a seeker of truth – his van is filled with pictures of saints and gods of various denominations (including Ramana Maharshi, an Indian guru who, appropriately for this film, recommended spiritual seekers to enquire 'Who Am I?'). What a weirdo! It turns out his relationship with his military, alcoholic father was complicated. Perhaps Jeffrey is in some respects damaged.

Donor Unknown finally focuses on a visit by some of Jeffrey's donor children to see their father on his home ground. There among the musclemen, hippies, homeless and tourists some light is shed on the limits and strength of the youngsters' connection to their father. *Donor Unknown* is a very entertaining journey taken by JoEllen and her donor siblings, Jeffrey and the audience towards some degree of self knowledge. Finally, Jeffrey might be laughing because his Maharshi says the answer to enquiring 'who am I?' will ultimately be "simply being oneself, not knowing anything or becoming anything." So for all the siblings' questions, they are fine just as they are.

Donor Unknown will be released in selected cinemas from June 3rd, will screen on More4 on Tuesday June 28th and will be out on DVD from June 11th.