

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

Middlesex

Jeffrey Eugenides

Introduction

Cal Stephanides is a 41-year-old man who was raised until puberty as a girl, Calliope. Callie has a hereditary 5-alpha-reductase deficiency — likely the result of the fact that his grandmother and grandfather were siblings — that gives her the prepubertal anatomy of a girl. At adolescence, she begins her transformation into ambiguity, or middle-sex, then maleness, and then, gradually, masculinity. Cal, as the story's narrator, leaps into the back story to tell the reader about the orphaned siblings, his grandparents Lefty and Desdemona, who fall in love, and leave Smyrna, Greece and the crumbling Ottoman Empire. On the ship to America, they get married and make up a fictional account of their backgrounds to hide their consanguinity. The consequences of their incest haunt Desdemona till the end of her life.

In Detroit, the newlywed siblings live with their first-cousin Sourmelina and her husband, Jimmy. Both women become pregnant on the same night after going to see a production of *The Minotaur*. Sourmelina gives birth to a girl, Theodora (Tessie), and Desdemona gives birth to a boy, Milton. The same night, Jimmy is presumed dead after an accident in which his car plunges into a frozen lake. Desdemona discovers him later as Fard, a Muslim lecturer for the Nation of Islam in Detroit. Desdemona's second child is a daughter, Zoë.

The narrator, Cal, tells the reader about the Greek immigrant community in twentieth-century America, from Ford's assembly lines to bootlegging during Prohibition, through the 1967 race riots, and then to suburban life in a neighborhood called Middlesex. As an adolescent, Tessie is courted by a would-be priest, Michael Antoniou, and the religious skeptic, Milton, who joins the Navy and writes to Tessie from afar. Despite Desdemona's initial protestations, Tessie eventually chooses Milton, and they have two children, a son, whom the narrator refers to only as "Chapter Eleven," and Callie. Zoë eventually marries Father Mike. As an adolescent, Callie has strong romantic feelings for a girl referred to only as the Obscure Object. Callie's first sexual encounter is with the Obscure Object's brother, Jerome. After an accident, Callie is taken to the doctor where an examination reveals more than she bargained for. Her parents are informed of Callie's questionable genitalia, and they take her to see a sexologist, Dr. Luce, in New York. Callie eventually runs away and, briefly, becomes a performer in a sex show in San Francisco. Later, a mysterious man calls Milton, claiming to have kidnapped Callie. When Milton shows up with the ransom, he discovers the kidnapper is Father Mike. During a car chase between the two men, Milton dies. Cal finally returns home to

Middlesex as a male and makes a certain peace with his mother, brother, and dying grandmother. The novel ends with Cal in Berlin, working as a State Department employee, trying to make romance work with his girlfriend, Julie.

(*Novelist*)

About the Author

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in 1960 in Grosse Pointe Park, Mich., the third son of an American-born father whose Greek parents emigrated from Asian Minor and an American mother of Anglo-Irish descent. He completed a B.A. in English at Brown University (1983) and an M.A. in creative writing at Stanford University (1986). He later worked as a cab driver, bus boy, executive secretary for the American Academy of Poets, and staff writer and photographer for *Yachtsman* magazine. During a one-week college break, he volunteered to work with Mother Teresa in India and, at one point, considered becoming a priest. "I was so unformed in my personality and was trying on different personas; being a saint was a bit tight on my shoulders, though. At 20 you can really change your philosophy of the world by reading a single book, or by one chance meeting"

After his master's degree, Eugenides received a \$20,000 fellowship from the Academy of Motion Pictures to write a screenplay based on one of his short stories. Though this project failed to reach fruition, the fellowship gave him time to write.

Eugenides is the author of the *Virgin Suicides* (1993), the story of five teenage sisters who kill themselves one by one. An excerpt from the *Virgin Suicides* was published in the *Paris Review* in 1991 and won the journal's Aga Khan Prize for Fiction that year. A *New York Times* critic called the novel "by turns lyrical and portentous, ferocious and elegiac." His fiction has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Gettysburg Review*, the *Yale Review*, *Best American Short Stories*, and *Granta's Best of Young American Novelists*. His awards include the Whiting Writer's Award (1993), the Guggenheim Fellowship (1994), and the Pulitzer Prize for *Middlesex* (2003). He is the recipient of a fellowship from the National Foundation for the Arts and the Henry D. Vursell Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has been a fellow at both the Berliner Künstlerprogramm of the DAAD and the American Academy in Berlin.

In writing *Middlesex*, Eugenides worked from Michel Foucault's *The Memoirs of Herculine Barbin*, the story of a female orphan who is reclassified as male and who ultimately commits suicide. Other influences in writing *Middlesex* include Virgil's *The Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and the fiction of Kafka, Günter Grass, and Salman Rushdie. Other writers he admires are Nabokov, Tolstoy, Saul Bellow and Phillip Roth.

The New York Times Michiko Kakutani calls *Middlesex* "an uproarious epic, at once funny and sad, about misplaced identities and family secrets," and observes that "Mr. Eugenides has a keen sociological eye for 20th-century American life". Eugenides lives in Germany with his family and writes an occasional book review or popular-music critique. In a *Bomb* interview, Eugenides remarks that his daughter was born midway

through the composition of *Middlesex*. "Her influence shows up in the plot, not the style. There's a preoccupation with birth and fetal development in the book. There's a lot about what women go through during pregnancy, and how beside the point men feel in the process. I see my daughter's fingerprints in those details."

Though Eugenides plays with capturing voice and consciousness in *Middlesex*, blending the modern with the postmodern, the novel is more than an experiment in point of view. What is especially remarkable in *Middlesex* is not its "formal" or "theoretical" elements, but the fact that the narrator, Cal Stephanides, is a "real living hermaphrodite, not a mythical creature like Tiresias or a fanciful one like Orlando. Indeed, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* may capture several centuries of literary allusions, but the reader never sees Orlando as a real person. *Middlesex* seems almost memoir-like in comparison, focusing, at times, on the narrator's disquieting understanding of identity — and on the wakening of his historical consciousness. Eugenides reminds us that the "main purpose of literature, as it always has been, is to map human consciousness at a certain time, remembering your thoughts. Even though there's all this scientific investigation of consciousness and the brain world, the only thing that renders consciousness is actually the novel and art, not science at all."

(Novelist)

Reviews

"Although at times the novel reads like a medical text, it is also likely to hold readers in thrall with its affecting characterization of a brave and lonely soul and its vivid depiction of exactly what it means to be both male and female." – *Booklist Review by Joanne Wilkinson*

"Once again, Eugenides proves that he is not only a unique voice in modern literature but also well versed in the nature of the human heart. Highly recommended." – *Library Journal Review by Rachel Collins*

Further Reading

Trans-Sister Radio by Christopher A. Bohjalian

The Danish Girl by David Ebershoff

The Time Traveler's Wife by Audrey Niffenegger

Them by Joyce Carol Oates

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. Describing his own conception, Cal writes: "The timing of the thing had to be just so in order for me to become the person I am. Delay the act by an hour and you change the gene selection" (p. 11). Is Cal's condition a result of chance or of fate? Which of these forces governs the world as Cal sees it?
2. When Tessie and Milton decide to try to influence the sex of their baby, Desdemona disapproves. "God decides what baby is," she says. "Not you" (p. 13). What happens when characters in the novel challenge fate?
3. "All I know is this: despite my androgenized brain, there's an innate feminine circularity in the story I have to tell" (p. 20). What does Cal mean by this? Is his manner of telling his story connected to the question of his gender? How?
4. How are scientific beliefs incorporated into the lives of the characters?
5. *Middlesex* begins just before Cal's birth in 1960, then moves backward in time to 1922. Cal is born at the beginning of Part 3, about halfway through the novel. Why did the author choose to structure the story in this way? How does this movement backward and forward in time reflect the larger themes of the work?
6. What role does race play in the novel? How do the Detroit riots of 1967 affect the Stephanides family and Cal, specifically?
7. What is Dr. Luce's role in the novel? Would you describe him as a villain?
8. How does Cal's experience reflect on the "nature vs. nurture" debate about gender identity?
9. The final sentence of the novel reads: "I lost track after a while, happy to be home, weeping for my father, and thinking about what was next" (p. 529). What is next for Cal? Does the author give us reason to believe that Cal's relationship with Julie will be successful?
10. How does the house on Middlesex Avenue reflect the novel itself?

(*Novelist*) & (*Oprah.com*)