Author Interviews

Jeffrey Eugenides Has It Both Ways

Dave Weich, Powells.com

In 1993, Jeffrey Eugenides published The Virgin Suicides, a spellbinding novel about five mysterious sisters Michigan, and the boys whose lives they would forever change. Middlesex, the author's long awaited follow another Grosse Pointe family: the Stephanides. Reaching across generations, continents, and genders, it's a broad, comic epic, tracing the path of a mutant gene to one Calliope Stephanides. In Cal, our storyteller, that gene finds expression.

Eugenides explained in part, "I see it as a family story. I used a hermaphrodite not to tell the story of a freak or someone unlike the rest of us but as a correlative for the sexual confusion and confusion of identity that everyone goes through in adolescence."

"[A]n uproarious epic, at once funny and sad," Michiko Kakutani raved in the New York Times. "Mr. Eugenides has a keen sociological eye for 20th-century American life...But it's his emotional wisdom, his nuanced insight into his characters' inner lives, that lends this book its cumulative power."

Dave: So much of The Virgin Suicides derives from the enigma of the five sisters. To some extent, the enigmatic women in general. There's a gap of understanding that the boys telling the story can't bridge. In Middlesex, on that bridge telling the story; Cal, a hermaphrodite, straddles those two worlds. I don't know if that was a conscious decision but it's such a different perspective to take.

Jeffrey Eugenides: It wasn't conscious, but I guess that one book is the reaction to the other. The first is so male point-of-view, and the second is a point-of-view that can go anywhere it wants.

When I wrote The Virgin Suicides, I gave myself very strict rules about the narrative voice: the boys would tell what they had seen or found or what had been told to them. I think because it was my first book that helped possibilities of what I could use. It really constrained the point-of-view. Since the book was about obsession also about the things that linger in your mind from adolescence, it seemed an appropriate point-of-view — being going to constrain myself for the rest of my life.

With Middlesex, after a certain amount of trial and error, I came up with a narrative point-of-view that could want to use a hermaphrodite as the narrator. It seemed to me that a novelist has to have a hermaphroditic voice. I should be able to go into the heads of men and women if you want to write books. What better vehicle for the hermaphrodite narrator? It's sort of like the dream novelist himself, or herself, or itself — already we're into the

Dave: The first half of Middlesex is primarily concerned with events that occurred before Cal's birth. At what point to let him tell that story in detail?
Eugenides: It took me a long time to give myself that kind of freedom and permission. I wanted the book to be first-person. In many ways, the point of the book is that we're all an I before we're a he or a she, so I needed that I. For philosophical reasons, I wanted the I.

For practical reasons, I wanted the I because I didn't want that terrible situation where the character is she, then you turn the page and she becomes he — or even the more dreaded s/he. I knew that. And I also wanted to be very close to her metamorphosis, to describe it from the inside.

At the same time, it's a family story and more of an epic. I needed the third-person. I tried to give a sense that Cal, in writing his story, is perhaps inventing his past as much as recalling it. He might make claims that he has a genetic memory or that he knows things, but there are a lot of tip-offs to the reader that he's making it up. He needed to tell the whole story to explain his incredible life to himself. He knew a lot about his grandparents — and perhaps he feels he's been endowed with abilities to go into people's heads who are long dead — but, to a certain extent, he's making it up. It took me a long time to let myself do that.

Dave: When Cal remembers his father's home videos, he talks about a moment when Milton would turn the camera around to see the lens and inadvertently appear in the picture...

Eugenides: "bequeathing me my aesthetic"?

Dave: Right.

In the middle of Christmas scenes or birthday parties there always came a moment when Milton's eye would fill the screen. So that now, as I quickly try to sketch my early years, what comes back most clearly is just that: the brown orb of my father's sleepy, bearish eye. A postmodern touch in our domestic cinema, pointing up artifice, calling attention to mechanics. (And bequeathing me my aesthetic.)

Did the implausibility of Cal knowing all the stories about his parents and grandparents bequeath the self-consciousness in his narration?

Eugenides: I don't particularly like historical novels. I don't like the fraudulent omniscience of most historical novels, taking you back and saying, "This is exactly how it was." When I started doing historical sections, which is something I'd never done before, I had a lot of uneasiness about it, and I had to find a lightness of tone that could tell the story without a solemnity or a seriousness that I find unappealing. The self-consciousness was a way to avoid that kind of omniscience. It came early on.

The book has many different characteristics: some are extremely old-fashioned storytelling traits, but there are also a fair number of postmodern traits, and the self-consciousness is one.
Dave: *Middlesex* "contains multitudes," one reviewer said of its various storylines and styles. What was it like to work on such a broad canvas?

Eugenides: I wanted to write a comic epic. I started with the idea of writing a fictional memoir of a hermaphrodite. I thought it would be a shortish book of about 250-300 pages. In opposition to the way hermaphrodites have existed in literature previously — as mythical creatures, mainly, like Tiresias — I wanted to write about a real hermaphrodite. I wanted to be accurate about the medical facts.

I went to medical libraries and read a lot of books. The genetic condition that I found happened to be a recessive mutation that only occurs in isolated communities where there's been a certain amount of inbreeding. At that point, I saw the possibility to bring in some of my family's story, the story of Greeks coming from Asia Minor, and I realized I had a large epic.

Since it's about genetics, I thought the book should be a novelistic genome; that is, it should contain some of the oldest traits of writing and storytelling — it begins with epic events, old fashioned, almost Homeric ideas — and as it progresses it should gradually become a more deeply psychological, more modern novel.

Without being too schematic, my idea was to have old traits carried along into the body of the book in the same way we have ancient genes in our body combining in a different way to create different human beings. I hoped by mixing all these elements to come up with something new.

Dave: For such a smart, serious novel — and by "serious" I mean to be taken seriously — it's fairly lighthearted. If you just threw a plot summary at someone, they wouldn't expect it to be as much fun as it is.

Eugenides: In general, that's the way it is with my work. When people hear what *The Virgin Suicides* is about, they think that it won't be funny at all, and then they read it and they find out that it is. But *Middlesex* is more broadly comic.

I have a tragic-comic sensibility, I guess. I can't imagine writing something devoid of humor, yet I don't like slapstick that doesn't admit tragedy. I blend them. It's just central to the way I see things.

Dave: The families at the center of both books live in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Do you know where the Lisbons' house is compared to the Stephanides’?

Eugenides: Yes.

Dave: How long does it take to drive from one to the other?

Eugenides: It takes about five or seven minutes.
Dave: It's not unusual for an author to go back to childhood haunts, but you left Michigan many years ago now. Will you continue to set your fiction there? Granted, Middlesex roams all over the planet, but the heart of the book is in the Detroit area.

Eugenides: Was it Flannery O'Connor who said that all you need to know to be a writer you learn by the time you're fourteen? Somebody.

I have gone away for a long time, but I've seen in my novels no reason to leave Detroit. Detroit is emblematic of so many American realities that seem important to me. It's the place of American ingenuity where lots of inventions came to be — obviously, the greatest one being the automobile, the most American thing. Its cultural production is very American, from Motown all the way through Madonna, Eminem, and The White Stripes. It's a place of great industrial might, but also great industrial decay, and of extreme racial conflict that's basically destroyed the city. All these things were there, are there, in my hometown. It's a very rich place to set stories because you can get at all these things that seem to be central about America.

I have a perverse love of Detroit, by virtue, I imagine, of growing up there. I feel very connected to it emotionally and my memories are very vivid. No place stirs me quite the same way, even though I'm not often there. Perhaps because I've left I've been able to preserve it in some kind of time capsule. It remains unchanged for me while the rest of the world changes; it's sort of my laboratory. I don't know if I'll continue to write about Detroit again and again and again, but so far I haven't found that I need to leave it behind particularly.

Dave: Are there other novels about Detroit that I should know about? I'll admit to a certain amount of ignorance on this topic.

Eugenides: There aren't too many. The Detroit papers are now saying that this is "the Detroit novel." I certainly don't mind when they say that. They talk about Them by Joyce Carol Oates being another Detroit novel, but there aren't a lot, which is maybe another reason why I like writing about Detroit. Bellow has Chicago... But I don't know. I don't live there now, so it's hard to keep current with what's happening.

Dave: You mentioned earlier that novelists have to be able to write in the role of either gender. Cal describes faking the walk of a man and, in doing so, realizing that all men are faking their walk to some degree, trying to look more masculine: "My swagger wasn't that different from what lots of adolescent boys put on, trying to be manly. For that reason it was convincing. Its very falseness made it credible."

Other lines of that sort: when Cal is in the men's room, for instance:

To think that a toilet stall had once been a haven for me! That was all over now. I could see at once that men's rooms, unlike the ladies', provided no comfort. Often there wasn't even a mirror, or any hand soap. And while the closeted, flatulent men showed no shame, at the urinals men acted nervous. They looked straight ahead like horses with blinders.
I understood at those times what I was leaving behind: the solidarity of shared biology. Women know what it means to have a body. They understand its difficulties and frailties, its glories and pleasures. Men think their bodies are theirs alone. They tend them in private, even in public.

Those very particular, entirely vivid insights help to make Cal and his discoveries real.

**Eugenides:** I either invented those scenes or discovered them while I was writing. Basically, I'd try to identify with my character as much as I could. I'd pretend that I'm a girl — or a girl who's found out that she's actually a boy and is trying to be a boy — and I'd ask, *What in my experience accords with that?*

I think there's a certain amount of play-acting that went on in early adolescence when I was trying to be masculine, trying to be a man; I figured it would be the same if you were a girl trying to be a boy as it was for a young boy trying to be an older boy: acting tougher, walking different. I remember some of those things from growing up. You would notice how you were supposed to do certain things so you wouldn't be sissy or something. All that stuff I had to remember and then I used it in those passages.

**Dave:** There are scenes of great longing — and longing relieved — in both books. In *Virgin Suicides*, I think of the scene where Lux surprises Trip Fontaine in his car. In *Middlesex*, among others, there's the clarinet scene with Milton and Tessie. Something about that state of longing and the moment when it finds expression...Often in your novels the characters are sharply defined by brief little bursts of passion and creativity.

**Eugenides:** If I were an emotion, I would be longing. That is a kind of human emotion that's very close to me, and very strong from an early age, as perhaps it is in everyone. Certainly those are easy passages — or *easier* passages — for me to write. *Virgin Suicides* is almost one long longing.

**Dave:** *The Virgin Suicides* purports to be built upon an enormous body of evidence accumulated by the boys telling the story. That "evidence" creates a tremendous weight of history and sadness and confusion.

**Eugenides:** It's a record of a failed investigation, in a way. The boys go on, and they collect more and more end they find out that they haven't understood the girls at all. That's why they're left eternally thinking about

Some people have read the book and thought that it accuses the girls at the end. The boys do make accusations for leaving them, but those are meant to be seen as selfish on the boys' part, and it says as much pretty obviously in the book: "We had never known them. They had brought us here to find that out." That's as close as I come don't hold all the cards.

**Dave:** But you get the same point across in more subtle ways throughout. I love the line when the girls are through their window and the narrator, who can't quite make out what's going on behind the glass, explains, kiss, or wiped her mouth." That line really resonated for me: the futility of their attempt to connect.

I grew up in a suburb in Massachusetts, and it all seemed so familiar. Not the story, obviously, but the scene extent, are suburbs.
Eugenides: They definitely are. And they’re also villages in Europe because it resonates with them, too.

Dave: Was Father Moody a nod to Rick Moody, your college roommate, and his ancestor Handkerchief?

Eugenides: It wasn’t a nod to Handkerchief; it was a nod to Moody, himself.

When I wrote *The Virgin Suicides*, I never thought it would get published, so I was using names of some of them indiscriminately. Also, Rick Moody wasn’t very well known when I wrote this, so it didn’t leap out to anyone as more of a nod to Moody’s own religiosity than his purported ancestral religiosity.

Dave: He was purporting that even back then, years before he wrote *The Black Veil*.

Eugenides: His idea about Handkerchief Moody, as he says in *The Black Veil*, goes back to college. He knew then and talked about it quite a bit.

Dave: I read in one profile or another that there was in fact an "Obscure Object" at Brown from which you took your interest in *Middlesex*.

Eugenides: That was actually a girl that Rick and I liked. This is an amazing story, actually. She was a mystic called her The Obscure Object. Since the book has come out, we’ve talked about it again, but we hadn’t talked for years. When we were at Brown, we’d say, “Have you seen The Obscure Object?” Or, “I saw The Obscure Object.”

On the day I finished *Middlesex*, I went to have dinner at The American Academy in Berlin, and during dinner that looked vaguely familiar. I went over to her and I said, “Did you go to Brown?” And she said, “Yes.” She and I couldn’t place it. Then it hit me that she was The Obscure Object, twenty years down the line. I’d just finished using her nickname, and I met her on the day I finished. It was quite an amazing coincidence.

Dave: So many of the people you were around back then are successful, widely read. Rick Moody, Donald

Eugenides: It’s kind of amazing, actually. It surprises me. Not because they didn’t seem like they’d make it, know people who would publish books.

Dave: You’ve been in Berlin for how long?

Eugenides: Three and a half years.

Dave: What’s that been like for you?

Eugenides: As a person with a family, it’s a much easier place to live than New York, which is why we stay there. There are lots of parks there...it’s just an easier town. It’s cheaper; we have a bigger house, which my wife and I to have work studios in the house. Things like that. I think it’s always good to be outside of you to see it more clearly, and I’ve enjoyed that, but mostly it’s just been a good place to work while I was finishing the book.

Dave: Are you keeping up with contemporary fiction these days?

Eugenides: To a certain extent.

Dave: What do you like?
Eugenides: Some obvious candidates, I guess. I think The Corrections is a good book. I enjoyed it. I like [C I read Wallace with eagerness when he publishes something. I like other people that get less press like Julie Beard's The Boys of My Youth.

Dave: One reviewer said that Middlesex belonged alongside The Corrections and Don Delillo's Underworld the past ten years. That claim was interesting to me not so much because he felt that these three books bel rather that implicit in his judgment was the idea that big "epic" novels are best.

Your first novel was more structurally compact and focused; now you come along with a follow-up that's tee and storylines. Is this novel necessarily better than the first?

Eugenides: I don't know. It needed to be big because it was a big story. I did have an ambition to one day \ had lots of parts and swept you along with energy, but it's big because the story was large. I wasn't trying to the pile, or anything like that. And it's not that long. Look at The Crimson Petal — it's more than 800 pages! skimpy, if you ask me.

Dave: I don't like to read reviews or summaries of a book before I read the book, itself, but I'd read the exce New Yorker and I had a general idea of Middlesex's plot. Still, it took me by surprise. I hadn't quite expected normal, if that's the right way to put it, and so fun.

Eugenides: People hear that Middlesex is told by a hermaphrodite, and sometimes that repels them from n as a family story. I used a hermaphrodite not to tell the story of a freak or someone unlike the rest of us but \ sexual confusion and the confusion of identity that everyone goes through in adolescence.

When people read the book, I think they understand that, but sometimes, just based on the plot summary, ti emphasize that to readers because it's a difficult book to summarize, and I think people can get the wrong ik

Dave: Browsing through the press packet your publicist sent me I found a review of the book from Elle, ano Journal, and others from pretty much every type of source in between — which is unusual. You don't generate magazines and men's magazines reviewing the same book. Much less recommending the same book.

Eugenides: With a hermaphrodite book...

Dave: I know. It's the ultimate crossover book, in every way.

Jeffrey Eugenides visited Powell's City of Books on October 25, 2002.
In Brief

Sprawling across eight decades — and one unusually awkward adolescence — Jeffrey Eugenides’ long-awaited second novel is a grand, utterly original fable of crossed bloodlines, the intricacies of gender, and the deep, untidy promptings of desire.

In Detail

In the spring of 1974, Calliope Stephanides, a student at a girls’ school in Grosse Pointe, finds herself drawn to a chain-smoking, strawberry-blond classmate with a gift for acting. The passion that furtively develops between them leads Callie to suspect that she is not like other girls. In fact, Callie has inherited a rare genetic mutation. The biological trace of a guilty secret, this gene has followed her grandparents from the crumbling Ottoman Empire to Detroit and has outlasted the glory days of the Motor City, the race riots of 1967, and the family’s second migration, into the foreign country known as suburbia. Thanks to the gene, Callie is part girl, part boy. And even though the gene’s epic travels have ended, her own odyssey has only begun.

About the Author

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1960. Educated at Brown and Stanford Universities, Eugenides received an MA in English and Creative Writing from Stanford in 1986. The first of his short stories, which have appeared in The New Yorker, Paris Review and Best American Short Stories, was published two years later. In 1996 he was named as one of Granta’s Best Young American Writers.

The Virgin Suicides, Eugenides’ first novel, was published to great critical acclaim in 1993. In 1999, Sofia Coppola made her much-praised directorial debut with a film based on the novel.
Ten years in the writing, *Middlesex* won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Jeffrey Eugenides now lives in Berlin with his wife and daughter.

www.bloomsbury.com/jeffreyeugenides

**Discussion**

1. 'Not me but somebody like me might have been made that night. An infinite number of possible selves crowded the threshold, me among them but with no guaranteed ticket' (page 11). How important are both chance and fate in the novel? Does one or the other seem to be more important to Cal?

2. 'If you were going to devise an experiment to measure the relative influences of nature versus nurture, you couldn't come up with anything better than my life' (page 19). How does Cal's life illustrate this debate? Where do you stand in it?

3. "This is America," Lefty said. "We're all Amerikanidhes now." (page 99). To what extent does either Desdemona or Lefty become American? Are Milton and Tessie more American than Greek? What about Cal and Chapter Eleven?

4. Desdemona finds a refuge from her fears in both superstition and religion. To what extent do the two seem to overlap? What are Milton's views? How important is science in the novel?

5. 'What's the matter with you people?' asks Milton of Morrison who buys cigarettes from him during the 1967 race riots. To which Morrison replies 'The matter with us ... is you' (page 246). What part does race play in the novel? How does Milton interpret this remark?

6. *Middlesex* is described in elaborate detail in the chapter of the same name. What do you think the house symbolises?

7. 'Here's a question I still can't answer: Did I see through the male tricks because I was destined to scheme that way myself? Or do girls see through the tricks too, and just pretend not to notice?' (page 371). To what extent does Cal combine what are traditionally seen as female qualities with male traits? Why does Cal decide to live as a man rather than a woman? What does he find difficult about changing gender? What regrets does he have? To what extent does he become reconciled to his new identity?

8. How important is social conditioning in Calliope/Cal's gender identity? How do people react to his hermaphroditism?

9. Why do you think Dr Luce told Cal's parents one thing, but wrote an entirely different report?

10. What does the book have to say about sexuality and desire?

11. Calliope is named after the muse of epic poetry. How appropriate does this name seem to be for *Middlesex*'s narrator? How important is Greek myth and literature in the novel? Milton dons his Greek tragedy and comedy cufflinks before the final appointment with Dr Luce. Does either or both seem appropriate to the novel and why?

12. How would you describe the tone in which Cal narrates *Middlesex*? How does it change and when? Would the novel have worked if it had been written in the third person? How would it have been different?
13. In American law Chapter Eleven provides a protective shield for failing companies on the verge of bankruptcy. Why do you think Cal refers to his brother as Chapter Eleven?

Further Reading

*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* by Kate Atkinson
*Birds Without Wings* by Louis de Bernières
* Flesh and Blood* by Michael Cunningham
*James Miranda Barry* by Patricia Duncker
*The Empress of the Splendid Season* by Oscar Hijuelos
*The Iliad* by Homer
*Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne
*Genome* by Matt Ridley

Other Books by the Author

*The Virgin Suicides*

Resources

Interview on Powells.com
http://www.powells.com/authors/eugenides.html

Jeffrey Eugenides on writing *Middlesex*
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/sep/27/featuresreviews.guardianreview27

Download this reading guide
READING GROUP GUIDE

Middlesex
A Novel

by Jeffrey Eugenides


About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about Middlesex are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach Middlesex.

About the Book

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Middlesex tells the breathtaking story of Calliope Stephanides and three generations of the Greek-American Stephanides family who travel from a tiny village overlooking Mount Olympus in Asia Minor to Prohibition-era Detroit, witnessing its glory days as the Motor City, and the race riots of 1967, before they move out to the tree-lined streets of suburban Grosse Pointe, Michigan. To understand why Calliope is not like other girls, she has to uncover a guilty family secret and the astonishing genetic history that turns Callie into Cal, one of the most audacious and wondrous narrators in contemporary fiction. Lyrical and thrilling, Middlesex is an exhilarating reinvention of the American epic.

“Expansive and radiantly generous... Deliriously American.”

—The New York Times Book Review (cover review)
“A towering achievement .... He has emerged as the great American writer that many of us suspected him of being.”

—Los Angeles Times Book Review (cover review)

“A big, cheeky, splendid novel...it goes places few narrators would dare to tread...lyrical and fine.”

—The Boston Globe

“An epic ... This feast of a novel is thrilling in the scope of its imagination and surprising in its tenderness.”

—People

“Unprecedented, astounding.... The most reliably American story there is: A son of immigrants finally finds love after growing up feeling like a freak.”

—San Francisco Chronicle Book Review

About the Author

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in Detroit and attended Brown and Stanford Universities. His first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, was published by Farrar Straus & Giroux to great acclaim in 1993, and he has received numerous awards for his work. In 2003, Jeffrey Eugenides received The Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Middlesex* (Picador, 2003). *Middlesex*, which was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, France’s Prix Medicis, has sold over 1 million copies.

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 fate? Which of these forces governs the world as Cal sees it?

2. *Middlesex* begins just before Cal’s birth in 1960, then moves backward in time to 1922. Cal is born at the beginning of Book Three, about halfway through the novel. Why did the author choose to structure the story this way? How does this movement backward and forward in time reflect the larger themes of the work?

3. 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?

4. “To be honest, the amusement grounds should be closed at this hour, but, for my own purposes, tonight Electric Park is open all night, and the fog suddenly lifts, all so that my grandfather can look out the window and see a roller coaster streaking down the track. A moment of cheap symbolism only, and then I have to bow to the strict rules of realism, which
is to say: they can’t see a thing.” (pp. 110-11) Occasionally, Cal interrupts his own narrative, calling attention to himself and the artifice inherent in his story. What purpose do these interruptions serve? Is Cal a reliable narrator?

5. “I’ve never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I’ve entered my story, I need them more than ever,” Cal writes (p. 217). How does Cal narrate the events that take place before his birth? Does his perspective as a narrator change when he is recounting events that take place after he is born?

6. “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?

7. How are Cal’s early sexual experiences similar to those of an adolescent? How are they different? Are the differences more significant than the similarities?

8. Why does Cal decide to live as a man rather than as a woman?

9. How does Cal’s experience reflect on the “nature vs. nurture” debate about gender identity?

10. Who is Johnny Zizmo? How does he influence the course of events in the novel?

11. What is Dr. Luce’s role in the novel? Would you describe him as a villain?

12. Calliope is the name the classical Greek muse of eloquence and epic poetry. What elements of Greek mythology figure in Cal’s story? Is this novel meant to be a new myth?

13. How is Cal’s experience living within two genders similar to the immigrant experience of living within two cultures? How is it different?

14. *Middlesex* is set against the backdrop of several historical events: the war between Greece and Turkey, the rise of the Nation of Islam, World War II, and the Detroit riots. How does history shape the lives of the characters in the novel?

15. What does America represent for Desdemona? For Milton? For Cal? To what extent do you think these characters’ different visions of America correspond to their status as first-, second-, and third-generation Greek Americans?

16. What role does race play in the novel? How do theDetroit riots of 1967 affect the Stephanides family and Cal, specifically?

17. Describe Middlesex. Does the house have a symbolic function in the novel?

Desdemona's Old World values conflict with the ethos of America, and, specifically, of Middlesex?

19. 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?

20. "Watching from the cab, Milton came face-to-face with the essence of tragedy, which is something determined before you're born, something you can't escape or do anything about, no matter how hard you try." (p. 426) According to this definition, is Cal's story a tragedy?

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Q&A With Jeffery Eugenides

Oprah.com | June 05, 2007

What does Chapter Eleven mean?
Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

I am confused about why you refer to Cal's brother as Chapter Eleven, yet at other times you refer to him by his given name?

— Stacy S.

Dear Stacy,

Cal, the narrator of Middlesex, never refers to Chapter Eleven by his given name. Neither does anyone in the book. The nickname, "Chapter Eleven," is bestowed on Cal's brother by Cal himself, retroactively, in the act of writing the book. If you can find a place where Chapter Eleven is called something else, Stacy, let me know, but I'd be very surprised. His "given name" is something I didn't give the reader.

As for the meaning of the nickname, that's another story. The character of Chapter Eleven is introduced in the first pages of the novel but it's not until page 512 that Cal provides clues as to what this name means. There's a long passage where Cal sketches what will happen to his brother in the years to come, but, unlike just about every other Stephanides family story, Cal elects not to go into it. Still, the hints are there and include the maxing out of credit cards, etc., all of which point to a situation that might involve something known in U.S. tax law as Chapter 11.

By the way, Stacy, your question is the question I get asked most often by readers of the book. The name "Chapter Eleven" really confuses people in Europe and Asia, as you might imagine. (No one files for Chapter 11 in Japan.) In some cases, Germany, for instance, where I know the language, I've worked with my translators to come up with an alternative. In the German edition of Middlesex, Chapter Eleven is called Der Pleitegeld. This refers to the circling buzzard that presages doom, usually of the financial variety.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

How do you describe Middlesex?
Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

I have been an absolute fanatic about this book for about five years now. As a part-time library clerk, full-time second-hand bookstore owner and overtime avid reader, I am constantly recommending Middlesex to other readers—but I can't ever say what it is about because it is so epic in scope. I usually end up saying something
like, "Well, the flap copy says it is about a hermaphrodite—but it's really not..." Not the best description to get others to read it! I am curious how you explained this book (prior to its current status) to those who asked what it was about?

— Jessica F.

Dear Jessica,

I share your pain. I've always had a difficult time explaining the book in a sentence—or even a paragraph.

The best thing to do is to get people to read the first 50 pages and let things take care of themselves. If pressed, I say that Middlesex is the story of a family with a genetic mutation in its bloodline. The book is told by the final inheritor of this gene, who traces the recessive mutation down through three generations. True, the mutation in question results in the narrator's being intersex—labeled as female at birth, he later adopts a male identity. The novel itself, however, concerns a welter of events aside from his own sexual transformation. Rather, Cal's transformation makes him suited, intellectually and emotionally, to tell these other tales of metamorphosis, be they national, racial, or historical.

Middlesex is a hybrid itself: part immigrant saga, part psychological novel, part comic epic, part medical mystery. Of course, I never thought in these terms while I was writing the book. They may serve as useful handles, but any notion of genre is anathema to me as a writer. That's why the books I write are so difficult to pigeonhole.

I've had to rely on people like you, Jessica (and now, happily, on Oprah, too) who've read the book and know what it's "really" about to serve as its ambassadors in the world.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

Did you use different literary styles to reflect characters and time periods?

Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

I noticed that the form of the book paralleled parts of the characters' lives and historical time periods. For instance, the opening alludes to Greek Mythology with references to Mt. Olympus. The section on the Ford plant seemed to be written in the same mechanical style as the section on turning people into extensions of machines in [John] Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath. The section about adolescent confusion was written in the style of [J.D.] Salinger's Catcher in the Rye, and the ending of the novel was written in the magical realism style with the father's fantasies as he was about to die. Also, the end of the novel had a modern take on Greek mythology by turning mythological images into American commercialism with Hercules Hot Dogs and the Golden Fleeces Hair Salon.

Am I reading too much into this book, or did [you] mean to parallel the plot of the family's progression with literary styles that reflected literature of the various time periods?

— Carolyn G.

Dear Carolyn,

You aren't reading too much into the book, Carolyn. While I didn't always intend the precise allusions you mention, you may in many places be right. I'm a great admirer of Salinger, for instance, and a lot of my stuff borrows his influence. I didn't set out to refer to his work when writing about Cal's love for the Obscure Object, but any tale of adolescence necessarily evokes the great J.D.
What I did consciously intend was the following: Since *Middlesex* is the story of a genetic mutation, it seemed to me that the structure of the novel should represent the novelistic genome. That is, the book should contain and recapitulate various historical forms of narrative. For that reason, the novel begins with epic events (the burning of Smyrna, etc.) and gradually becomes, in its second half, a more modern psychological novel. I didn't want to get too schematic about all this. My model wasn't the "Oxen of the Sun" chapter in [James] Joyce's *Ulysses* (where Joyce recreates the evolution of the English language, parodying just about every great English writer in the process). I wanted this rather academic exercise to exist in the background of my story. For that reason, I never explicitly set about performing the imitations you suggest. My aim was to have this ghost literature haunt the book, there for alert, close readers like you to notice, but not mandatory for understanding or enjoying the book.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

**Did you study creative writing?**

**Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,**

This is the most exquisite book I have ever read; the prose, the descriptive passages! Please let us know where you learned to write. You must have always had this talent, but where, if anywhere, did you study, or did you study creative writing? Your vocabulary is immense!

— Ellie B.

**Dear Ellie,**

At the resolute age of 15, I decided to become a writer. This was partly the fault of James Joyce. I read *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that year, and, full of admiration for Stephen Dedalus and also identifying with him strongly (we were both good students, we both had "prophetic" Greek names), I decided to follow in his path and "forge the uncreated conscious of my race." I hadn't yet read *Ulysses*, a far more cautionary portrait of the artist, beginning, as it does, with Stephen Dedalus 10 years on, still living in Dublin, and totally broke. My misreading of the *Portrait*, in fact, was what made me want to become a writer. I missed the irony. I took Stephen's youthful idealism at face value, being so full of it myself at the time.

I was, however, an arty, dreamy, ambitious kid. I'd always enjoyed writing stories and, yes, my teachers claimed I showed "talent." So I set my sights on pursuing a literary life.

It was another 13 years before I published my first short story. Another five passed before my first novel appeared.

What happened in the meantime? The old joke says it best: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice." I approached writing, Ellie, the way you would any profession. First, I tried to educate myself. I went to Brown, mainly because my favorite writer at the time, John Hawkes, taught there, and I wanted to study with him. While there, I majored in the honors program in English, rather than creative writing, because the honors program required you to get the entire English literary tradition under your belt. (You had to read *Beowulf* in the original, not just Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*.) It seemed to me that anyone hubristic enough to propose adding anything to the literary tradition had best be familiar with it. So I read a lot, read all the time. I read old difficult stuff, as well as recent difficult stuff. I took seven years of Latin. My classics studies introduced me to the literary figure of the hermaphrodite in the person of Tiresias, and I credit Latin with giving me a firm sense of English grammar. I did my best to read the things I thought a novelist should read—philosophy, history, theology. Where I fell short, it seems to me, was in mathematics, chemistry and physics. My knowledge of these subjects is
Laughable. Biology I liked, and that certainly helped when I came, years later, to write Middlesex. Aside from pursuing these academic subjects, I tried my hand, in my teens and 20s, at writing fiction and poetry. I did indeed study creative writing, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student (at Stanford). Years passed, happily, in bohemian redouts. I never wanted to publish early. Wasn't at all concerned about it. Virginia Woolf said that no one should publish a novel before he or she was 30. That sounded about right to me.

Like a tennis player, I spent years practicing my strokes, developing my topspin, improving my serve, performing footwork drills and trying to move up in the rankings. Like anything else that's worth doing, writing is mainly hard work. It's dull, repetitive, impractical, often unremunerative, completely maddening, and I love it madly.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

What inspired you to create a narrator like Cal?

Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

While reading the book Middlesex, I felt quite an intense connection with the story's protagonist, who starts her life as a girl but realizes that she is quite different. As we read more, we learn that while she may be of both sexes, her story really is one that most people can relate to. Calopie's story involves many of the matters we as adolescents faced or face. Sexual identity, finding out who we really are and our true selves. What touched me most while reading Middlesex was that I read it when I was 14, so many of the character's struggles came close to home. So I will ask you this question: What inspired you to create a story where the narrator is one you wouldn't see in most books these days?

— Ben S.

Dear Ben,

For some reason I want to say, "Dear Ben," possibly because your question is intimate and so requires an intimate response, but also because your question makes me happy and warrants a proper thank-you note. Your reading of Middlesex is the reading I'd hoped people would have. It was never my intention to write a book about a "freak." I didn't see Callie as unfortunate or even unusual. Consider Greek mythology. The tales of Zeus turning himself into a bull in order to seduce Europa, or of Narcissus falling in love with his own reflection, are fanciful. But they aren't inhuman. We recognize ourselves—our impulses, weaknesses, longings—in the Greek myths. You could say, then, that Middlesex is a modern myth. It's a modern myth about adolescence. What Callie goes through is what we all go through, in the maelstrom of puberty. Her experience of the process, physically and psychologically, is merely more dramatic than our own. Callie's life differs from ours in degree but not in kind. So you saying that Callie's "story is one that most people can relate to" is exactly right. Or at least, it's precisely what I'd hoped for.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

Why is the house called "Middlesex?"

Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

Why is their house called "Middlesex?"

— Peggy N.

Dear Peggy,

The house isn't really called "Middlesex." Not, at least, in the way "Wuthering Heights" was called "Wuthering
Heights." "Middlesex" is simply the name of the street the Stephanides lived on. Cal refers to the house by its street address in the way people call The White House 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

**How did you come up with the title of the book?**

Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

How did you come up with the title of the book? Did you ever refer to it by another name?

— Meg A.

Dear Meg,

It took me a long time to come up with the title. Yes, I had other titles for the book early on, poor choices which I’d rather not remember. As I made my way along with the book, however, I reached the 1970s, and arrived at my old neighborhood: Grosse Pointe, Michigan. It hit me that we had lived in Middlesex Blvd. and that the name of our old street was the perfect title for the book. Not only did the name suggest the androgynous nature of my hero, it suggested American suburban pretensions (the Anglophilia of our street, city and county names.) Finally, Middlesex alluded to another long novel about a family and a town by an author I much admire, George Eliot. Her masterpiece, of course, is *Middlemarch*.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

**Why do you use the word "hermaphrodite"?**

Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

I have friends who are intersex and as someone who identifies as neither fully male or female and who is a friend and ally to intersex people, I am wondering why you weren’t more sensitive to terminology. Why are you using the word “hermaphrodite” in your book—a word choice that is either terribly ignorant or unforgivably callous. I admired the book so much for the humanity it gave to the central character and I was so disappointed to have it dashed by this thoughtless use of the word “hermaphrodite.” Can you please explain why you chose this?

— Reece J.

Dear Reece,

I alluded to this concern in a previous answer, but let me address it directly here. First of all, Reece, I appreciate the issue about terminology you raise. I’ve had conversations with intersex people about this very subject and, as you can see from this very sentence, I do try to use the term “intersex” when referring to actual, living persons. *Middlesex*, however, grows out of Greek mythology. The story of Hermaphroditus, the beautiful son of Hermes and Aphrodite, is one I retell, in modern guise, in two different sections of the book. The nymph Salmacis fell in love with Hermaphroditus when he took a swim in her designated pool one day. He rebuffed her advances, but she clung to him, pleading with the gods to keep the two of them from ever parting. Her prayers were answered. Hermaphroditus and Salmacis were physically fused into one being.

Why am I going into all this? Because when I use the term "hermaphrodite," I’m referring not to a person or a group of people but to a literary character. Hermaphroditus had many children: Tiresias obviously, but also Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*. Hermaphroditic figures appear in the mythology and folklore of just about every culture that exists. As a writer, I use the term “hermaphrodite” when speaking about such characters.

But you’re right. When speaking about real people, I should—and I do my best to—use the term “intersex.” One
of the first source materials I consulted when I began writing *Middlesex* was the journal *Hermaphrodites with Attitude* published by The Intersex Society of North America. The writers in the journal have co-opted the term "hermaphrodite" in the way gay men and women have reclaimed the word "queer." Is it surprising, then, that my narrator, who is intersex, might use the term at times? It's paradoxical: Cal can say "hermaphrodite" but I can't. Or shouldn't.

I don't know if this will satisfy you, Reece, but I hope it gives you some idea of my thinking on the subject and testifies to the fact that I have thought about it. As a writer of English, I resist any depredations to its marvelous vocabulary. I could never support a moratorium on the use of the word "hermaphrodite." I do entirely agree with you, however, that people should be aware that the proper term to apply today, when talking about human beings, is intersex. This distinction is getting ever more widely known, I think. Your question speeds that process along, and I thank you for it. I do appreciate the fact that you admired the "humanity" of my book and might add in my defense that anyone who reads *Middlesex* will undoubtedly respect the humanity of its narrator and central figure. Which is the main thing, after all.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

What is intersex? Watch this video.

**Why did you decide to use Cal as the narrator?**

*Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,*

Why did you decided to use Cal as the narrator and were you concerned that his/her omniscience would confuse or distract readers? How did the narrative voice of Cal affect your telling of the story (chronology, emotional perspective, tone, etc.)?

— Kristin K.

*Dear Kristin,*

It took me a long time (years, literally) to come up with a narrative voice supple, complex, and intimate enough to suit the content of *Middlesex*. On the one hand I wanted a first-person voice that could relate Cal's own life history from the inside. A first-person voice also allowed me to avoid the pronomial clutter you had to step over in your question (the his/her problem.) Much better, more truthful, and more individualistic to say "I."

The difficulty was that I also had other characters' stories to tell. This worked better from a third-person perspective. So I played around with first- and third-person, writing many drafts that never saw the light of day. Gradually, I came up with a hybrid voice, well-suited to my theme, that shifted from first- to third-person on a dime. Is it too complicated? I hope not. I took great pains to make the transitions as smooth as possible. Some time-shifts, consisting of a line or two, took days to write before I got the right rhythm and sense. I didn't want to trip up the reader. Flashlights are provided at all intersections. The reader, however, is expected to look where she's going.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

**What's your next project?**

*Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,*

Are you planning a new book? What? When?

— Michael Z.
Dear Michael,

Not just planning, actually sitting down and writing. At my usual, frenzied, leisurely pace. I don't like to talk much about what I'm working on, but I can tell you, Michael, that it's a very different book from Middlesex, more tightly dramatized. The majority of the story takes place over a few days, rather than eight decades, and so the whole thing is like a snowball rolling downhill. This, I should mention, is something I don't quite know how to do. I'll have to learn how to do it. Learning how constitutes the entire effort of this book. There are lots of characters and a great deal of dramatized action, of scene-making. It'll be finished when it's finished. I've also been writing short stories and am slowly amassing (to use a grand term for a small output) a collection.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

Did T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" influence Middlesex?
Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

As I'm sure you're well-aware, T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" has a character named Mr. Eugenides from Smyrna. Did this reference inspire you to set the beginning of Cal's family history in that region?

— Kelly W.

Dear Kelly,

Upon seeing my name on his class list, my ninth-grade Latin teacher looked at me and began to quote from "The Wasteland": "Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, bearded, with a pocketful of currants..." That was the first I'd heard of it. Since then, I've tried without success to find out who this Mr. Eugenides was. An appeal to the T.S. Eliot archives brought nothing. My relatives did come from the region and, who knows, maybe Eliot's "Mr. Eugenides" was real and, furthermore, a distant relative of mine. I don't know. I didn't consciously set the early chapters of the novel in Asia Minor because of the Eliot quotation, but it may have played an unconscious role in turning my gaze eastward. By the way, the annotated edition of "The Wasteland" suggests that this Mr. Eugenides is an unseemly character. But I was happy to find him there, at 15, in one of the last century's greatest poems.

— Jeffrey Eugenides

How did you choose the character names in Middlesex?
Dear Jeffrey Eugenides,

It's interesting how you use names in this book. Some characters have eloquent Greek names, after figures in history and mythology. Very cool. Other people are given strange nicknames that describe how they fit into the story. Their real names are not really important (like The Obscure Object). Can you talk some more about why you named characters in these two distinct ways?

— Sharon B.

Dear Sharon,

I have one requirement for characters' names: They have to help me see the character. The name has to be right or I can't conjure the personality. So I cast around, usually, trying out different names until I find one that feels right. In Middlesex, I used some nicknames to add credibility to the narrative. It seemed to me that Cal, like any memoirist, might choose to disguise certain people's identities. But mainly I liked calling The Obscure Object "The Obscure Object." That name was the open-sesame that revealed her to me.
January 1, 2003

A Novelist Goes Far Afield but Winds Up Back Home Again

By BILL GOLDSTEIN

"Middlesex," Jeffrey Eugenides's second novel, has an apt title for a book whose narrator is a hermaphrodite. But Middlesex is also the street in Grosse Pointe, Mich., where Mr. Eugenides grew up; he shares his hometown with his protagonist, Cal -- born Calliope Helen -- Stephanides.

"Middlesex" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) is a novel of metamorphoses and transformations, of "common human experiences exaggerated to the level of myth," as Mr. Eugenides put it in a recent interview.

This is a story of a "roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time," as Mr. Eugenides writes. Tracing the cause of Cal's condition, Mr. Eugenides imagines the history of three generations of a Greek-American family not completely unlike his own, as well as the rise and decline of Detroit in the 20th century. The novel has been named one of the best books of the year by publications including Entertainment Weekly, The Los Angeles Times and The New York Times Book Review, but despite the praise, sales have been disappointing.

"I wanted to write about hermaphroditism," Mr. Eugenides said. "But hermaphroditism led to classicism, classicism led to Hellenism, Hellenism to my Uncle Pete. I didn't set out to write a Greek-American novel. I used the history because it served my story."

After riots in 1967, the Stephanides family makes the same move from downtown Detroit to the suburbs that the Eugenides family also made. Mr. Eugenides, 42, said he found that "my title was waiting for me all those years on my street sign."

His first novel, "The Virgin Suicides," published in 1993, made him a literary celebrity, and since 1999 he has lived in Berlin, where he was until recently a fellow at the American Academy. He and his wife, Karen Yama, a photographer, and their daughter, Georgia, 4, will return to New York at the end of the school year.

Mr. Eugenides first contemplated hermaphroditism about 20 years ago when he read a memoir by Alexina Barbin, a 19th-century French hermaphrodite. But he became frustrated that "it was written by a convent schoolgirl, and it seemed to be written by a convent schoolgirl -- very
melodramatic, evasive about the anatomical details," he said, adding, "She was unable to describe her emotions." He decided "to write the story that I wasn't getting from the memoir."

Even earlier, in a high school Latin class he read parts of Ovid's "Metamorphoses." Zeus and Hera argue about who has a better time in bed, men or women. "I perked up at this," Mr. Eugenides remembered.

Tiresias, who had been both, says that women do. "This was pretty hot information for a 15-year-old," Mr. Eugenides said. "It goes back to then -- thinking about a character who's a hermaphrodite and what can be done with it."

In depicting Cal, Mr. Eugenides said, he wanted to be "medically accurate and realistic."

In the novel Cal writes, "I was born twice, first as a baby girl," in 1960 (also the year that Mr. Eugenides was born) "and then again, as a teenage boy."

Mr. Eugenides's research into hermaphroditism, sexology and the establishment of sexual identity amounted to what Cal and his parents go through. Mr. Eugenides consulted experts and read widely, but he has never met a hermaphrodite.

"I decided not to work in that reportorial mode," Mr. Eugenides said. "Instead of trying to create a separate person, I tried to pretend that I had this and that I had lived through this as much as I could."

Mr. Eugenides chose Cal's condition, 5-alpha reductase deficiency syndrome, because it causes "the most dramatic changes in terms of what happens to someone's body": the child looks most like a girl when young but becomes virile at puberty.

"I realized I could write a book not just about a hermaphrodite, but about a family" in which a genetic condition passes down to the narrator, he said. "The gene flowers in her body, and she tells the story of her life."

After "Middlesex," he said, he wonders: "Why is a hermaphrodite not the narrator of every novel? It's the most flexible and omniscient voice. Every novelist has to have a hermaphroditic imagination to get into the minds of men and women."

An afternoon's conversation in his publisher's office made it clear that Mr. Eugenides drew freely on his family history for "Middlesex." "I used all those things to make it real for myself," he said: he needed to research the Greek-American immigrant experience and Greek folklore as extensively as the genetics.

"I'm only half-Greek," he said. "I'm a mongrel. My mother is from Kentucky. Calliope is much Greeker than I am."
Mr. Eugenides grew up in a "very Americanized house," and had to learn Greek customs "to find out how my grandparents had lived long before I was around," also a problem for Calliope.

His father was a mortgage banker, "a man in a business suit, not a hot dog impresario," like Cal's father in "Middlesex." The author's grandfather, though, did own a bar, the Zebra Room of the novel.

The last Zebra Room that Mr. Eugenides's grandfather owned was on Jefferson Avenue in Detroit and "the street of my life," the author remembered. He continued: "During my whole life, it was crumbling and being destroyed little by little. And in a way my upbringing is just like a slow time-lapse film of everything falling apart on that street, because we would have to go down it almost every day."

Using the bar's name in the book was a "secret code of paying homage to my grandparents and my parents," he said. Mr. Eugenides's father died six years ago when the private plane he was flying crashed.

Readers who remember "The Virgin Suicides" will know that strange things happen to adolescent girls in Mr. Eugenides's fiction. In that book the five Lisbon sisters, ranging from 13 to 17, kill themselves during the course of a year. "People usually say, 'Oh, you must have had sisters, you know so much about girls,'" Mr. Eugenides said. But he is the youngest of three boys. "Adolescence was a time when, at least if you were me and you had no sisters, girls were this mysterious other."

Mr. Eugenides left the Midwest to study writing at Brown University with John Hawkes. He decided which college to attend "based on what writer was teaching there," and Hawkes's prose "intoxicated me though I had no idea what the books were about," he said, adding, "They seemed to offer some kind of world away from the Midwest and away from the world I knew in Grosse Pointe, and I wanted to find out what that world was." Mr. Eugenides did graduate work at Stanford, where he studied with Gilbert Sorrentino.

Hawkes and Mr. Sorrentino "were against order on the whole and against storytelling," Mr. Eugenides said. "Certainly Gilbert Sorrentino was very strongly opposed to narrative on a certain level." But studying with them "was useful because you had to earn your way back to telling a story," he continued, adding, "After I worked with Sorrentino, I was doing very postmodern work. I felt guilty sometimes, like someone backsliding from church to write stories."

"Our generation grew up backwards," Mr. Eugenides said. "We read Joyce before we read Tolstoy. The gods we were told about were Pynchon and high modernism. Experimentation was the norm for us. Then we found out what the modernists were rebelling against."

Mr. Eugenides is a friend of Jonathan Franzen, author of "The Corrections," whom he met about 10 years ago.
They were both Midwestern, both in their 30’s and, Mr. Eugenides remembered, both in bad relationships with the novels they were then writing. They share an editor, Jonathan Galassi, a good-natured competitiveness seemingly unstrained by the immense popularity of "The Corrections," and the view, as Mr. Eugenides put it, that "we've gone so far out with deconstructing literature that it's almost in need of being reconstructed."

Photos: Jeffrey Eugenides says that he set out to write about hermaphroditism and was led by degrees to writing a family's story across generations. (Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times) (pg. E5); Jeffrey Eugenides says he found the title for "Middlesex" on his street sign. (Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times)(pg. E1)
My Big Fat Greek Gender Identity Crisis

By Laura Miller

MIDDLESEX

By Jeffrey Eugenides.

529 pp. New York:

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $27.

EVEN before she's born, Calliope Stephanides’s gender is up for debate. Her parents, Milton and Tessie Stephanides of Detroit, want a girl, and a bachelor uncle convinces Milton, ostensibly on the authority of an article in Scientific American magazine, that if the couple have "sexual congress" 24 hours prior to ovulation "the swift male sperm would rush in and die off. The female sperm, sluggish but more reliable, would arrive just as the egg dropped." Tessie complies, despite her worries that "to tamper with something as mysterious and miraculous as the birth of a child was an act of hubris." Once Tessie is pregnant, Milton’s mother, Desdemona -- a refugee with her husband, Lefty, from a Greek village on the slopes of Mount Olympus -- dangles a silver spoon tied to a string over the belly of her daughter-in-law and pronounces the child a boy. Her son storms in to protest the divination; the baby is a girl, he insists. "It's science, Ma."

They're both right, after a fashion. Callie will spend the 1960's and early 70's, the first years of her life, as the relatively unremarkable daughter of an entrepreneurial Greek-American family, only to discover at 14, in the office of a Manhattan physician, that she is a hermaphrodite -- or, more precisely, a pseudohermaphrodite, a sufferer of 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome. "To the extent that fetal hormones affect brain chemistry and histology, I've got a male brain," explains Cal, the man Callie decides to become after she learns the truth and the narrator of "Middlesex," Jeffrey Eugenides's expansive and radiantly generous second novel. "But I was raised as a girl."

Eugenides's first novel, "The Virgin Suicides" (1993), was a dreamy, slender book about the gulf in understanding between the adolescent boys in a Michigan suburb and the five daughters of a strict Roman Catholic couple living in their neighborhood. The boys fill that gulf with romantic obsession, a beast that thrives in a vacuum, and the girls, stricken with a fatal loneliness, die by
their own hands like a bevy of unlucky fairy tale princesses. "Middlesex" may be an entirely different sort of book -- it's longer, more discursive and funnier, for a start -- but it's equally preoccupied with rifts. There's the gap between male and female, obviously, but also between Greek and WASP, black and white, the old world and the new, the silver spoon and the sluggish sperm. Finally, there is the tug of war between destiny and free will -- an age-old concern of Greek storytellers, as every college freshman learns, reborn in the theories advanced by evolutionary psychology.

Evolutionary psychology, at least in its popular incarnation -- which seems to get more popular every day -- keeps chipping away at the garden-variety humanism espoused by most novelists. That's why it's surprising so few of them (at least within the genre of literary fiction) have bothered to take notice of it. Viewed through a sociobiological lens, infidelity, the novel's favorite meat, is transformed from the stuff of betrayal and moral failing to the mere playing out of a Darwinian reproductive imperative; despair springs from an inherited defect in the regulation of neurochemicals, not from an existential apprehension of the absurdity of the human condition. The tangled parks and gardens that have long been the novelist's stamping grounds are being bulldozed to make way for sleek, sterile industrial complexes where, in cataloging each molecule in the human genome, scientists may ultimately be able to tell us which gene caused Anna Karenina to cheat and gave Oliver Twist the nerve to ask for more gruel.

Cal isn't a faithful adherent of either the nature or the nurture camp; he eventually runs away to avoid undergoing surgery and hormone treatments at the hands of a doctor who thinks that 14 years of living as a girl must count more than the male identity Cal wants to embrace. Eugenides, after all, is an artist, not a polemicist, and the truth about what shapes us may never be settled. "Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome," Cal vamps in the book's opening pages. ("Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too.") By mimicking an ancient author equally preoccupied by the tension between preordained fate and self-determination, Cal telegraphs a very modern question: Is "Middlesex" -- or any novel, for that matter -- the story of its hero/ine or the history of a particular configuration of DNA? As Cal -- sometimes -- chooses to tell it, the novel describes the "roller coaster ride of a single gene through time," how it found its twin in the mingled gametes of Desdemona and Lefty, who, it turns out, are brother and sister as well as husband and wife, able with their freshly minted American identities to consummate a union they could never have gotten away with back in their home village. Practically the whole first half of "Middlesex," like a doorstep biography run amok, takes place before Cal is even born.

If all this makes "Middlesex" sound like a novel of ideas, well, it is; but it's several other things too. It's a saga that takes Desdemona and Lefty from the burning of Smyrna through Detroit's purgatorial assembly lines, the shadow economy of Prohibition and the founding of the family's legit businesses, first a bar and then a restaurant. The Stephanideses career through the
Depression, World War II, the cataclysmic Detroit race riots of 1967, the counterculture, Watergate, the energy crisis.

"Middlesex" is also a coming-of-age story, albeit an exceptionally fraught one, as it gradually dawns on the adolescent Callie that there's something seriously odd about her body -- and that she's besotted with a female classmate. There's a bit of road novel as well, when, enlightened as to the actual state of his chromosomes, Cal hitchhikes to -- where else? -- San Francisco. And, finally, there's the sliver of a love story, as the now 41-year-old Cal, ensconced in a safely nomadic State Department career, gingerly courts a Japanese-American photographer, wondering if he can trust her with the surprise between his legs.

Eugenides pitches a big tent, but one of the delights of "Middlesex" is how soundly it's constructed, with motifs and characters weaving through the novel's various episodes, pulling it tight. The young Armenian doctor who saves Lefty in Smyrna and sees his own children butchered by Turkish soldiers becomes the aged, bleary-eyed family retainer who overlooks Callie's unusual anatomy. Middlesex, the modern house the Stephanideses manage to purchase in the exclusive suburb of Grosse Pointe (it's too peculiar and unfashionable to sell to WASPs) is "like communism, better in theory than reality." Which makes it also like the blank-slate notion of gender identity advanced by the doctor who wants to drag Cal under the knife.

And while some of the odds and ends Eugenides tosses into the mix (a disquisition on Michael Dukakis, a supporting character's bizarre connection to the Nation of Islam) don't quite integrate, far more often than not the novel feels rich with treats, including some handsome writing. When the author describes the pulchritudinous teenage Desdemona's braids as "not delicate like a little girl's but heavy and womanly, possessing a natural power, like a beaver's tail," for example, the metaphor has an elemental eroticism worthy of Hardy.

Because it's long and wide and full of stuff, "Middlesex" will be associated by some readers with books by David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen, brilliant members of Eugenides's cohort. Those writers, however, have more satirical, even self-lacerating inclinations; there can be an air of penance to their work (as there is to "The Virgin Suicides"). Here, at least, Eugenides is sunnier; the book's length feels like its author's arms stretching farther and farther to encompass more people, more life. His narrator is a soul who inhabits a liminal realm, a creature able to bridge the divisions that plague humanity, endowed with "the ability to communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both." That utopian reach makes "Middlesex" deliriously American; the novel's patron saint is Walt Whitman, and it has some of the shagginess of that poet's verse to go along with the exuberance. But mostly it is a colossal act of curiosity, of imagination and of love.

Drawing (Tim Robinson)
Mighty Hermaphrodite

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Daniel Mendelsohn

Middlesex
by Jeffrey Eugenides
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1.

Those Greeks and their hermaphrodites! Teiresias, the seer who futilely haunts so many Greek tragedies, was one. Having enjoyed the special privilege of living as both a male and a female, he was asked by the gods to settle an argument about which of the two sexes had more pleasure from lovemaking; on asserting that the female did, he was struck blind by prudish Hera—but given the gift of prophecy by Zeus as a compensation. The minor deity Hermaphroditus, of course, was another, appearing in religion (there is evidence of dedications to the god as early as the third century BC in Attica), in literature (Ovid, in the fourth book of Metamorphoses, elaborates the mythic narrative in which this son of Hermes and Aphrodite was joined in one body with the nymph Salmacis), and in art, where the opportunities for imaginative representations of this strange creature proved irresistible, predictably enough, to Hellenistic sculptors, with their penchant for the extreme. The most famous of these sculpted hermaphrodites is a Greek one from about 150 BC, which survives in Roman copies such as the one to be found in the “Hermaphrodite Room” in the Uffizi. At first glance, the figure seems to be that of a sleeping woman. She lies face down, and is quite voluptuous: her breasts, pressed against the couch on which she reclines, are full, as are her hips. Her hair is carefully, fashionably coiffed. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that this is no ordinary female. For there, peeking out of the voluminous folds of her gown, is a penis, as modest and perfectly formed as any of the unassuming members familiar from countless classical nudes. Male nudes, that is.

To this catalog we may now add another Greek, Calliope Stephanides, the heroine—and later the hero (“Cal”)—of Jeffrey Eugenides’s second novel, which is slyly entitled Middlesex. (The title ostensibly refers to the name of the street in Grosse
Pointe, Michigan, where much of the novel is set.) For adorable little Callie turns out, by the novel’s end, to be a boy—one who suffers from a rare genetic disorder that causes a type of male pseudo-hermaphroditism: although chromosomally male (she has both an X and a Y), she has no real penis, but instead a kind of extended clitoris which she will refer to as “the crocus”; she has testes, but they remain undescended. As a result of this she is misidentified at birth as being a girl and is raised as a girl by her amusingly neurotic, upper-middle-class Greek-American parents. Until puberty, that is, when her male hormones kick in and it becomes increasingly evident that she is no ordinary female. (For one thing, she doesn’t menstruate, although she tries mightily to fake it: “I did cramps the way Meryl Streep does accents.”) It is only after a road accident lands her in an emergency room that Callie and her bewildered family realize how extraordinary she really is. \textit{Middlesex}, then, is a \textit{Bildungsroman} with a rather big twist: the \textit{Bildung} it describes turns out to be the wrong one—a false start.

From Ovid to Gore Vidal, hermaphroditism and bisexuality have provided writers with irresistible occasions to comment on both nature and culture; Eugenides—whose small, nearly perfect first novel, \textit{The Virgin Suicides}, reflected a Greek tragic sensibility, with its chorus-like first-person-plural narration and its self-immolating young heroines, like something out of Euripides—is well aware of the opportunities his choice of subject has afforded. (Although in the new novel, the author’s allusions to the—his—Greek literary heritage tend to be on the jokey side, consisting of mock-epic invocations of the Muses: “Sing, Muse, of Greek ladies and their battle against unsightly hair!” and so on.) The tension between who Callie is raised to be and who Cal ends up being, between his early life as a girl and his subsequent life as a man, are obviously intended to serve as occasions for musing upon all kinds of bimorphisms and dualities.

Among these are the ironies of being a “hyphenated” American of recent vintage (“In America, England is where you go to wash yourself of ethnicity”: so observes a sardonic Callie, the big-nosed, dark-haired child of first-generation Greek-Americans, who ends up attending a Waspy private girls’ school); the horrors of racial conflict (a major set piece of the novel takes place during the 1967 Detroit race riots); and, indeed, the entire global geopolitical picture. Reminiscing about his family’s reaction to the 1974 Cyprus crisis, the adult Cal, who ends up a career diplomat stationed in Berlin, remarks knowingly that now Cyprus was “like Berlin, like Korea, like all the other places in the world that were no longer one thing or the other.” Elsewhere, he ruefully observes that both he and the once-torn city are seeking “unification...\textit{Einheit}.”
And yet Einheit is what Middlesex itself ultimately lacks. Eugenides’s novel seems itself to be composed of two distinct and occasionally warring halves. One part has to do with hermaphrodites—with Callie’s condition, and how she comes to discover what she “really” is. The other, far more successful part has to do with Greeks—and, in a way, Greekness. Far more colorful than the story of what Callie is, is the story of how she came to be that way—the story of why this child came to inherit the exceedingly rare and fateful gene that ends up defining her indefinable life. This story, an old-fashioned family saga, is as full of incest, violence, and terrible family secrets, making themselves felt from one generation to the next, as anything you find in Sophocles—a junior high school performance of whose Antigone plays, indeed, a crucial role in the plot. Needless to say, Callie gets cast as Teiresias.

Everything in Middlesex that has to do with the (to say the least) eccentric Stephanides clan is lively and original, fulfilling the promise of The Virgin Suicides nearly a decade ago. It’s a measure of Eugenides’s self-confidence that he spills the novel’s most sensational secret—that Callie’s paternal grandparents, Desdemona and Eleutherios (“Lefty”) Stephanides are actually brother and sister—early on. To his credit, if the incest theme holds your attention, it’s not so much because it’s the key to Callie’s genetic inheritance as because of the unusually understated way that the author handles it. The opening pages of Eugenides’s book, with its description of the young Desdemona’s and Lefty’s claustrophobic lives in a tiny Anatolian village near Smyrna in the early 1920s, are so tenderly rendered as to make this strange love seem natural.

Orphaned during the Greco-Ottoman violence that culminated in the 1922 Turkish massacre of the Greeks of Smyrna, the voluptuous, fiercely proper Desdemona and her jaunty younger brother (who uncomprehendingly warbles American pop tunes as he gets dressed) are left alone to tend the family’s silk farm on the slopes of a mountain overlooking Bursa, the ancient Ottoman capital. With considerable delicacy and not a little humor—Cal’s narrative voice is itself rather jaunty throughout—Eugenides explores the ferocity that can characterize the feelings that siblings living in isolated places have for each other. (“Lefty was one year younger than Desdemona and she often wondered how she’d survived those first twelve months without him.”)

The Bursa section is really the only one in which Eugenides’s efforts to tie this family’s story to that of a whole nation isn’t forced. (Two long sections about the Stephanides family’s dealings with blacks—and, by extension, about America’s race problems—come off as preachy and rather nervous. The seven-year-old Callie’s
observations that the 1967 riots are “nothing less than a guerrilla uprising. The Second American Revolution” stretch credulity to the breaking point.) As the brother and sister try to resist the storm of passion that has seized them, the storm clouds of war gather around them. Their efforts at resisting each other are, occasionally, comic: an increasingly desperate Desdemona futilely gives beauty tips to the only other marriageable girls in the village, hoping they’ll look more attractive to a disdainful Lefty, who spends his time in the brothels of Bursa, choosing girls who have his sister’s dark braids and full figure.

Here, the author recalls, not without a wry bitterness, the Greek government’s ill-fated plan to reclaim its ancient Anatolian territories (a scheme known as the Megala Idea, the “Big Idea”), which ends in disaster, with the triumphant rise of Ataturk and, in 1922, the Turkish army’s burning of Smyrna and the murder of over 100,000 of that city’s Greek inhabitants—the horrific, cannily narrated set piece for the first of this novel’s four main sections. The carnage of the Smyrna cataclysm becomes a cover for the two orphaned siblings to consummate their long-burning lust for each other, and to emigrate as man and wife.

Many of the pleasures to be had from Eugenides’s book are the pleasures to be had from any good immigrant family novel: for the first two hundred of Eugenides’s five-hundred-plus pages, you’re so absorbed in the saga of the Stephanideses’ attempt to establish themselves in their new country that you’re tempted to forget that this is all, in its way, preamble—an elaborate explication of how Callie came to inherit her special gene. These richly emotional—and, often, richly comic—pages move, in classic immigrant-novel fashion, both westward and upward. Eugenides’s dense narrative, interwoven with sardonic, fashionably postmodern commentary by the grown-up Cal, follows Lefty and Desdemona from their arrival at Ellis Island (“At least it’s a woman,” Desdemona says, warily eyeing the Statue of Liberty. “Maybe here people won’t be killing each other every single day”), to their journey west to Detroit. There, their first cousin Sourmalina, a thoroughly Americanized young woman with some secrets of her own—she was kicked out of the village after being found in a compromising position with a married woman—awaits them. She is the only person to whom they ever confess their terrible secret, using her own past as leverage.

Eugenides’s sprawling narrative continues on from the birth of Desdemona and Lefty’s son, Miltiades (Milt), who will become Callie’s father, through the Depression (Lefty’s brief career as a gangster ends when Prohibition ends and he becomes a popular barkeep). It gradually shifts focus to Milt and his youth and
young adulthood during the Second World War, lingering on his fanciful courtship of Sourmalina’s daughter Tessie, whom he eventually marries (he charms her with his clarinet-playing, and then with his clarinet itself, which he places against various parts of her body as he plays); then it shifts from the loss of Milt’s first business during the 1967 Detroit race riots to his founding—partly by means of an insurance settlement after the riots—of a successful restaurant chain that brings him thoroughly American success while invoking his ethnic past. (The chain is called “Hercules Hot Dogs.”) And so the story goes on, shifting finally to Callie herself, as she grows up and, during yet another Turkish invasion—the 1974 Cyprus crisis—discovers the mystery of her own identity.

It’s hard not to feel that the Stephanideses’ story is the story that Eugenides really wants to tell—a story of Greek immigrants as only one who has hungrily absorbed such stories from birth can retell them. This narrative is populated by memorable characters who have all the hard, unexpected contours of real people: Lefty, struck dumb by a stroke, meticulously translating Sappho every day, smoking hashish and listening to rebetika albums in his attic room while communicating with his family by means of a chalkboard; the ferocious and self-consciously “self-made” Milt, arguing politics with the Marxist girlfriend that Callie’s older brother brings home from college during the Sixties (“Well, if giving somebody a job is exploiting them, then I guess I’m an exploiter”); Uncle Mike, the Orthodox priest who’s married to Milt’s sister but loves Tessie; Tessie herself, anxious and ever hopeful that her daughter will finally start menstruating. Perhaps because they are voices the author has heard, these ring true in a way that Callie’s, and Cal’s, never do.

The author has, indeed, got a remarkably good ear for the rhythms not only of immigrant speech, but of im-migrant thought, too. The elderly, bleakly fatalistic Desdemona’s pleasure in commercials for detergents, with their “animating scrubbing bubbles and avenging suds,” tells you more about her particular brand of grim Puritanism—the prudishness of a woman who has lived most of her life burdened with secret guilt—than five pages of exposition could. You have no problem believing that this is a woman who, when vexed by a family member—as when, for instance, her son Milt decides that he won’t have the infant Callie baptized—starts fanning herself furiously with one of a very special collection of fans:

The front of the fan was emblazoned with the words “Turkish Atrocities.”

Below, in smaller print, were the specifics: the 1955 pogrom in Istanbul in which 15 Greeks were killed, 200 Greek women raped, 4,348 stores looted, 59
Orthodox churches destroyed, and even the graves of the Patriarchs desecrated. Desdemona had six atrocity fans. They were a collector's set. Each year she sent a contribution to the Patriarchate in Constantinople, and a few weeks later a new fan arrived, making claims of genocide.... Not appearing on Desdemona's particular fan that day, but denounced nonetheless, was the most recent crime, committed not by the Turks but by her own Greek son, who refused to give his daughter a proper Orthodox baptism....

It is at the baptism—for of course Desdemona eventually gets her way—that Callie, whose abbreviated, penis-like member is so well hidden by the folds of skin around her genitals that Tessie’s obstetrician thinks the infant is a girl, urinates on the priest, the stream “ris[ing] in an arc,” much to the atheistic Milt’s delight. An arc? “In all the commotion,” the adult Cal dryly remarks, “no one wondered about the engineering involved.”

2.

The engineering involved brings us to the other part of Middlesex: the hermaphrodite’s tale, the material that gives this classic immigrant saga its special, au courant twist. Ironically, this ostensibly more sensational material turns out to be the flatter, less interesting half of Eugenides’s hybrid book.

The literary interest of a novel with this subject lies, inevitably, in the author’s obligation to create a uniquely doubled, and mixed, voice. What would a voice that had been both male and female—the voice of Teiresias, as it were—really sound like? And yet the author’s feel for hermaphrodites isn’t nearly as sure as his grasp on Hellenes; throughout Middlesex, you feel that he’s evading what he should be confronting, both stylistically and intellectually. For one thing, he gets around the problem of having to invent a new kind of voice—even the problem of having to ventriloquize convincingly a young midwestern Greek-American girl—by narrating his hybrid story in the voice of the adult, and decidedly male, Cal. How much more stylish and persuasive this book would have been had the voice of the girlish Callie sounded different—interestingly, meaningfully different—from the voice of the male adult she becomes.

The result is an odd but pervasive sense of superficiality; it’s a performance more than a novel. Toward the end of Middlesex, Callie starts doing some research on terms she sees in a doctor’s report about her, and (after looking up some words in an encyclopedia) notes, with grief, that one synonym for what she is is “MONSTER.” The scene is meant to be moving—climactically moving, even—but it doesn’t work
because you’ve never really gotten to know this monster intimately; you know about her what you might have guessed anyway—and we don’t need novels to tell us what we already know. (The scrim of the narrator’s sardonic, postmodern sensibility, while fashionable among writers in their forties, doesn’t help matters.) The scene may put you in mind of another famous monster, but only briefly; Mary Shelley was canny enough to know that in order to sympathize with her creature, you had to get inside its head, let it speak for itself.

Not, indeed, that there is all that much to enter into in the case of Callie’s, and Cal’s, heads. A major problem with *Middlesex* is that there’s nothing all that interesting or distinctive about either half of the main character: one is a fairly ordinary Midwestern girl (except, perhaps, for her growing tendency to develop crushes on other girls), the other an all-too-typically sardonic, post-everything American male. But like the two parts of the novel they inhabit, neither seems to have much to do with the other; and it is of course the connection between them, the “middle” to which Eugenides’s title refers, that we want to know more about, because that’s the part that’s unusual and unknown to us.

Cal in particular has surprisingly little personality, given all he’s been through, as if having been both male and female has depleted, rather than enriched, his (as he might say) *Weltanschauung*. You finish the novel without knowing much about him, apart from his penchant for saying sardonic things about Berlin and *Einheit* and for making vaguely postmodern narrative gestures (“...which brings me to the final complication in that overplotted year”). Speaking of overplotting: a tenuous subplot, set in the present and concerned with Cal’s tentative courtship of an Asian-American artist, feels artificial, constructed solely to give an overarching shape to the novel’s four big sections.

It’s not that Eugenides can’t persuasively do unusual voices: in *The Virgin Suicides*, he invented a plural narrator to better articulate the inchoate and intense yearning peculiar to adolescence. All the more strange, then, that the lengthy section of the new novel devoted to the event that awakens Callie’s sense of being “different”—a fierce crush on a junior high school classmate identified throughout the novel as “the Obscure Object” (a moniker that the author goes on to explain, giving a plot summary of the Buñuel film)—feels dutiful rather than inspired. This may be because Eugenides—which is to say, Cal—isn’t quite comfortable in Callie’s skin. The “chorus” that made up the first book’s collective narrator was so convincing because of the poignant tension between their adult hindsight and the boyish yearning (for the dead girls whom they desired) still evident in that collective voice.
None of this textured quality emerges in Cal’s description of Callie’s infatuation with the “O.O.,” which is a pretty ordinary adolescent crush. True, efforts have been made to suggest the atmosphere of adolescent girlhood: there’s a lot about the feverish social politics of Callie’s all-girl school (the misfits, the “Charm Bracelets,” and so on). But unlike virtually everything about The Virgin Suicides, this material, like so much of what we learn about Callie, feels studied, learned.

The failure of the author to provide an authentic voice and personality for his creature presages larger intellectual failings. It’s probably safe to say that a novel whose main character—whose narrator—is someone who’s lived as both a female—and a male has to justify itself by providing some kind of rare or remarkable insight into sex and gender. Eugenides himself acknowledges as much when he has Callie observe that “latent inside me... was the ability to communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both.” And yet that special stereoscopic vision is not in evidence here—or rather, the privileged information you get from Callie and Cal never strikes you as being that special. There is, if anything, something cliché about the insights into gender that the author comes up with. When Callie finds she likes reading the Iliad, she wonders whether it’s the male hormones “manifesting themselves silently inside me”; so too when she finds herself falling in love with (as she thinks) another girl. Similarly, when she sees through a plan by a couple of boys to get her and the Obscure Object to take a walk to an abandoned cabin in the woods, she wonders whether she does so because she’s really a boy herself.

Rather than being more than usually nuanced insights into sex roles and gender behavior, as one would hope to have from a narrator who’s so pointedly identified with Teiresias, the characterization of boys as inherently oversexed and violence-loving—traits that Callie, as she becomes a teenager, finds she shares, and that appear meant to justify her feeling that she is “really” a boy—are hardly nuanced. (They’re the product of what you could safely call cultural monovision.) And to declare that “desire [for a girl] made me cross over to the other side”—i.e., to being a boy—seems awfully naive in this day and age, positing a kind of essentialism about sexuality and erotic affect that is equally unsubtle. (Why is it the case that Callie’s attraction to girls “means” she’s a boy? Couldn’t she simply be gay?) We may not know much about Callie by the end of this book, but we certainly get a glimpse into how Eugenides thinks. “Breasts have the same effect on me as on anyone with my testosterone level,” the adult Cal boasts, a claim that will surely come as a surprise to Eugenides’s (presumably testosterone-rich) gay male readership.
I suspect that Eugenides has fallen back on such unthinking clichés for the same reason that Callie and Cal remain so unformed: in the end, he hasn’t figured out what might go on inside the head of someone who’s had Callie’s experiences. This vacuum at the center of his book accounts for a general sense of deflation toward the end, when some weighty climactic aperçus start racking up. But do you really read a 529-page novel that sets out to explore the most profound realm of human experience merely to find out, in its closing pages, that “normality wasn’t normal” or that “what really mattered in life, what gave it weight, was death”?

Worse, you leave *Middlesex* with the impression that its author doesn’t really believe— in the premise to which his title so cleverly alludes—in the rich possibilities afforded by being truly in, and of, the “middle.” After the fateful automobile accident that results in the revelation of Callie’s special nature (she runs into the street while escaping the embraces of the O.O.’s amorous brother, and is rushed to the ER, where an astute doctor diagnoses her condition), the fourteen-year-old is taken by her confused and incredulous parents to a sex disorders clinic at a New York hospital. Here, she is interviewed by a renowned sex researcher, who slants the results of his research into her case in order to bolster his own view that nurture, rather than nature (i.e., genetics), determines a child’s gender.

When Callie sneaks a look at his report, which recommends reconstructive surgery on the (genetically male) teenager’s abbreviated organ in order to preserve her female identity, she runs away from the clinic, from New York, and from her—now his—parents, because he’s decided that, as he writes in a farewell note to his parents, “I am not a girl! I’m a boy.” (Like his grandparents before him, he deals with his terrible secret by going west: cutting his hair, donning boy’s clothes, he hitchs his way to—naturally—San Francisco, where he works as a freak in a sex show for a while before the novel’s final, and least plausible, bit of overplotting—a frantic car chase involving Milt, a fake kidnapping, and ransom money, the sole purpose of which is to bring the wayward Callie back home for a climactic funeral and reconciliation.) The author may think he’s writing about the unique double viewpoint, the stereoscopic sensibility, the sense of special access to two worlds at once, but the novel he’s written is, in fact, about the far less interesting search for who Callie “really” is—which is to say, one thing rather than another, instead of both things at once. It pretends to be about being in the middle, only to end up suggesting that you have to choose either end.

The unpersuasiveness and approximativeness of Eugenides’s handling of the hermaphrodite material and the questions it raises, in contrast to the verve and
authenticity of its Greek family saga, suggests that, with Middlesex, we are indeed in
the presence of a strange hybrid; it’s just not the one Eugenides was aiming to create.
There’s no way to prove it, but I have a feeling that Middlesex began its life as two
novels: a Greek immigrant story, based to whatever extent (one hopes not too great)
on the author’s family history; and a novel about the alluring subject of bimorphic
sexuality (based, perhaps, on the sensational case, much publicized a few years ago,
of a Midwestern girl who turned out, like Callie, to be genetically male). At some
point, it seems, the author had, or was given, the idea of fusing the two. But the graft
didn’t take. They may inhabit the same body, but in the end the immigrants and the
hermaphrodite have nothing to do with each other; there’s nothing about Greekness
that helps you understand this hermaphrodite, and there’s nothing about
hermaphroditism that helps you understand these particular Greeks. There’s no
reason, whether in theme or meaning, that this hermaphrodite should be Greek,
except that Eugenides makes her Greek, because he has a Greek story to tell as well
as a hermaphrodite’s story.

Here it is useful to compare Middlesex with another recent novel in which one
family’s private story is used symbolically to invoke much larger historical and
intellectual concerns: Michael Chabon’s The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and
Clay, in which a pair of Jewish cousins during World War II—one a Czech refugee,
the other a closeted Brooklyn gay youth—creates a popular cartoon character called
“The Escapist.” But in Chabon’s book, the leitmotif of escape and escapism is
deply tied to the plight of the Jews of Europe, to a sense of the meaning of popular
culture, to the gay cousin’s secret sexuality, and to many other elements and ideas. In
Eugenides’s novel, by contrast, the potential of the apparent leitmotif (bimorphisms,
dual identities, deep divisions within the self) is never realized. The author doesn’t
provide enough about the immigrant dilemma of divided identity to make Callie’s
condition a cogent metaphor for her family’s status; and because the sections in
which the Stephanides clan interacts with its black neighbors in Detroit (one none-
too-realistic subplot has Desdemona teaching young Nation of Islam acolytes how to
produce silk) feel constructed rather than organic, dutiful rather than inspired, the
connections that Eugenides seems to want to make in those scenes (between his
hermaphrodite and, say, to America’s divided self) don’t persuade, and come off as
merely portentous.

And so, in the end, Middlesex itself is stranded in the middle, somewhere between
either of the two books it might have been. Or, perhaps, it has extremes but no “real”
middle, no place where the two parts connect. Like that statue in Uffizi, it has a
surfeit of distinct characteristics that, properly speaking, belong to different realms.
Eugenides's ambitious but malformed novel may not end up shedding much light on what it means to be in that middle, but there's no question that it's a bit of a hermaphrodite itself.
Jeffrey Eugenides — winner of the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Middlesex* — was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1960, the third son of an American-born father whose Greek parents immigrated from Asia Minor and an American mother of Anglo-Irish descent. Eugenides was educated at public and private schools, graduated magna cum laude from Brown University, and received an MA in English and Creative Writing from Stanford University in 1986. Two years later, in 1988, he published his first short story. His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Best American Short Stories*, *The Gettysburg Review* and *Granta*'s 'Best of Young American Novelists'. His first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, was published in 1993, and has since been translated into fifteen languages and made into a major motion picture. His second novel, *Middlesex*, was published in paperback in September 2003 and has been selected by Waterstone's as one of their top 100 books of the last 25 years.

Eugenides is the recipient of many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and The National Foundation for the Arts, a Whiting Writers’ Award, and the Harold D. Vursell Award from The American Academy of Arts and Letters. In the past few years he has been a Fellow of the Berliner Kunstlerprogramm of the DAAD and of the American Academy in Berlin.

Jeffrey Eugenides lives in Berlin with his wife and daughter.

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*The Virgin Suicides*

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