



## Middlesex

*Jeffrey Eugenides*

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## **Middlesex** Jeffrey Eugenides

*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 moving 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.

## **Middlesex Details**

Date : Published September 16th 2003 by Picador USA (first published September 4th 2002)

ISBN : 9780312422158

Author : Jeffrey Eugenides

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## From Reader Review Middlesex for online ebook

### Arah-Lynda says

*ex ovo omnia: everything comes out of an egg.*

Yowsers, there are over twenty thousand reviews of this book on this site alone, so no, cannot say that I've read them all, but it does get me to thinking .....

I enjoyed this book way more than I expected. And yet my expectations were misinformed by assumptions, most of which were my own, not the least of which was about the title.

Sometimes when reading I feel compelled to slow down, take my time. Such was the case with this book.

It's a marathon, not a sprint and I was fine with that. I felt comfortable with the pace and manner in which Eugenides chose to tell this story.

This story affected me deeply.

It is funny and tragic

Rich and abundant

Tender and expansive

In fact I love what Andrew O'Hehir said:

"A heart breaking tale of growing up awkward and lonely in 70's suburbia."

It is as much a historic and social novel of Detroit as it is about immigration and assimilation on a much grander stage and it is narrated by one of the most complex, engaging and memorable characters I have ever encountered. I will not soon forget you Cal.

Some would say that this is an American story.

And it is.

It is also a very human one.

*Psst book junkies*

*I found this at one of my city's used bookstores in the downtown core. It is a beautiful hard cover, with a magnificent jacket. Love the cover design and, and, and, it is in pristine condition. Definitely leave laying about worthy!*

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### Trina says

I got off the bus from Bumpershoot around 1 AM, exhausted. Convinced that even the cars speeding past my window couldn't keep me from this night's rest, I opened the door to a stench of exceptional vileness. Not a dead stench, or a spoiled food stench. This was the stench of sewage. From a spot in the center of the living room I surveyed the apartment and discovered the source: the commode and the area around it were covered in yuck. I dialed up the landlord. The exchange went something like this:

“There’s shit on my floor.” Why mince words?

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“I want you to fix my toilet, so there won’t be shit on my floor.”

“Have you tried a plunger?”

“What do you think?”

“And that didn’t work?”

After 20 minutes of this verbal badminton, I realized the man wasn’t going to get out of bed without a signed act of congress. He told me there was an all night Denny’s down the street should I need a toilet during the night.

So it was that at 2 AM, after multiple rounds of cleaning and yakking, I found myself seated in the kitchen on a kibble-filled bucket, a can of beer in one hand and Middlesex in the other.

“There was a place halfway between consciousness and unconsciousness where Tessie did her best thinking.”

I’d had two weeks to kill awaiting the arrival of all my worldly possessions. Plenty of time to determine that the kibble bucket was ergonomically preferable to the floor or my sleeping bag. With my front door situated not five feet from a four-lane road and one block from a strip bar whose patrons seemed to enjoy loitering in front of my building, the noise was like steel wool on my nerves, which were already shot from a marathon cross country drive with three cats, a dog, and a friend who was hitching a ride to her father’s funeral in St. Louis all crammed into my car. With no job, no friends, no furniture and now, apparently, no plumbing, this move was beginning to look like a profound error in judgment. The story of a 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodite proved a likely escape.

“When you travel like I did, vague about destination and with an open-ended itinerary, a holy-seeming openness takes over your character.”

I’d only brought one book on my trip west. Considerable thought went into the choice—it had to be an author with a proven ability to hold my interest. It had to be long enough to cover the duration of the journey. And it would need to stand up to multiple readings in the event of the delay of the moving truck or my inability to obtain a library card. As a creative writing major, I’d read *The Virgin Suicides* and marveled at the rotating first person narrative, the subtlety of the prose, and the fine edge between humor and poignance. Middlesex seemed a safe bet.

The book was my constant companion. After a day of fruitless job interviews, I could go home to Callie Stephanides and her family, safe in the knowledge that there were over 200 pages to go before I’d need to find a new distraction. But the new distraction had already found me. I hadn’t written anything longer than a grocery list in 8 years. With all the time in the world and a good book as your muse, aspirations can get pretty lofty.

“Even back then, the Great Books were working on me, silently urging me to pursue the most futile human dream of all, the dream of writing a book worthy of joining their number...”

I won’t say that Middlesex turned me into a writer or anything lofty like that. The first time I saw Singin’ in the Rain, I nearly concussed myself trying run up a wall. When I reached the last word, I closed the book.

Waited five minutes. Began again:

“I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974.”

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## **Cecily says**

This is a book about transition.  
Transition from child to adult to parent and grandparent.  
From native to immigrant.  
From brother and sister to husband and wife.  
From rural dweller to urbanite.  
From modest affluence to poverty and up again.  
From loving language to losing the power of speech.  
From geek to hippie.  
From war through peace to civil unrest.  
From belief to unbelief.  
From rescued to rescuer.  
From moral probity to corruption and crime.  
Oh, and one character transitions from female to male.

The last of those is the book's USP, but don't let that fool you: it's no more limited to those with niche interests in intersex conditions than it's limited to those of Greek heritage. It is an unusual story, but with universal themes, told by a wonderfully engaging, lyrical, narrator.

Few of us fit neatly into binary categories. We all go through many transitions in our lives; the final one is "only another kind of emigration". This book speaks to everyone, not just those like Cal's family who "have always had a knack for self-transformation".

## **Plot**

The family originally raised silkworms, so metamorphosis and long threads are at the heart of their lives as well as the story.

No fear of spoilers: the key aspects are summarised in the opening paragraphs, starting with: "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl... and then again, as a teenage boy." The rest of the book brings two strands together: Cal's grandparents, Lefty and Desdemona, fleeing the Turks in 1922 as siblings, and arriving in the US as husband and wife, and how that meant Cal ended up with a recessive intersex condition, and is now telling his story. He sometimes addresses the reader directly (shout outs to deus ex machina, Checkov's gun etc).

In many respects, it is a conventional sweeping family drama, of the ups and downs of the American Dream: building (and rebuilding) businesses against the backdrop of the Vietnam war and civil rights movement, but with an extra dose of teen angst about puberty (or lack thereof).

However, the final few chapters strike an oddly different tone. Octopussy's Garden is partly to hammer home the parallels with Greek mythology (and echo a passage in the middle where Cal muses on the transformations of puberty, using sea creatures as an analogy), but the final intrigue and chase felt very off-key, compared with the rest of the book.

There is also "an innate female circularity to the story", perhaps because Greeks believe "that to be happy you have to find variety in repetition; that to go forward you have to come back to where you began." This is compounded by some reversal (like Amis's execrable "Time's Arrow"): in old age, Lefty's mind and memories go into reverse, and in an early section, Cal describes his birth like a film on rewind.

### **Destiny: The Known and Unknown**

Cal is omniscient, not just when he remembers things he wouldn't be able to recall (including being a foetus), but also in terms of how much he knows about other people's inner thoughts and private actions. On a few occasions, it feels a little weird (the erotic significance of the grandmother's corset, for instance), but it's how he makes the more extraordinary aspects of the plot credible: he has already conjured believable characters the reader cares about.

Nevertheless, the lack of knowledge often displayed is staggering - yet just about plausible. The most significant examples are that Desdemona and Lefty get away with their relationship, and that no one realises Calliope (as he originally is) is not a girl. There are others, though, such as teenage fumbleings and more, at which point Cal "clearly understood that I wasn't a girl but something in between", though the boy involved did not.

Some of the ignorance is cultivated. When Desdemona and Lefty fake a courtship on the boat, "Lefty never discouraged any speculation. He seized the opportunity of transatlantic travel to reinvent himself... Aware that whatever happened now would become the truth... Playing out this imaginary flirtation... they began to believe it... it wasn't other travellers they were trying to convince; it was themselves."

Forgetting also matters: "Everything about Middlesex [the house] spoke of forgetting and everything about Desdemona made plain the inescapability of forgetting."

There are echoes of Greek mythology throughout, which gives a certain weight and tone to how Cal tells it. For instance, "An infinite number of possible selves crowded the threshold" as Cal's parents prepare to conceive him, and it's no coincidence that his childhood church was the Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, and that they later move to Middlesex Boulevard. It also creates an additional layer of foreshadowing. Cal's father is conceived after his parents see a play about a hybrid monster, and at a significant medical appointment about Cal, Milton (Cal's father) wears traditional Tragedy and Comedy masks as cufflinks: which way will it go?

### **Sex**

Sexual identity is key. Desdemona is obsessed with predicting the sex of unborn children, and Cal himself was only conceived because his parents really wanted a girl (they already had a son) and believed they had found a way to improve the odds of that.

He was born at the women's hospital and "It was all around me from the beginning, the weight of female suffering, with its biblical justification and vanishing acts." Nothing unusual was noticed by the elderly doctor, so "Five minutes old, and already the themes of my life - chance and sex - announced themselves."

There is relatively little about Cal's adaptation to living as a man (though there is a sweet sideline in learning how to date women, the perils of what to tell them when etc). Most of the story leads up to that realization: the agonies of not developing when her friends do, then growing oddly tall and awkward, struggling with infatuation with girls etc. However, there are glimpses of the adult issues: "I'm not androgynous... when Calliope surfaces, she does so like a childhood speech impediment... It's a little like being possessed. Callie rises up inside me, wearing my skin like a loose robe... But then, just as suddenly, she is leaving, shrinking and melting away inside me". Cal is currently in Berlin and "This once-divided city reminds me of myself." A childhood trip to Cyprus was cancelled by annexation "Cyprus was being cut in half... like all the other

places in the world that were no longer one thing or the other."

It is incest that causes Cal's condition, but there is no rancour in the telling of the story, perhaps because it's not just Desdemona and Lefty. Other cousins married each other (Cal's parents are cousins, conceived on the same day, who grew up together), and even some couples who are not related by blood have a rather incestuous aspect: a much older husband who treats his wife - in some ways - like a daughter; an engaged couple who split, only for the spurned man to marry the sister of her new boyfriend; one sibling suggesting another experiment with masturbation; a first sexual encounter with a best friend's brother, followed by intimacy with the friend. But none of it's salacious.

A quiet irony is that the English test at Ellis Island is about eunuchs.

### **Desdemona**

Cal's grandmother is central to the book. In many ways they have very contrasting lives, but there are surprising parallels too. After an initial coldness, there is a special bond between them: Desdemona disapproved of Milton and Tessie marrying, of trying to choose their sex of the baby, and was then upset when her prediction of a boy was wrong. However, she was quickly won over, at which point, Cal "gave Desdemona back her original sin".

She had been an innocent village girl, surprised by developments of her own body as well as her heart (and that of her brother). Her "body was a constant embarrassment to her. It was always announcing itself in ways she didn't want to sanction...[her] body was still a stranger to its owner", which applies just as much to Cal.

Similarly, just as Desdemona had to reinvent herself as wife instead of sister, and forge an identity in a new country, Callie becomes Cal, "Like a stroke victim [as Lefty was], I was having to learn all the most simple skills" and "I was like an immigrant" to the world of men.

### **Diagnosis and Treatment: What Determines Gender?**

"From my birth when they went undetected, to my baptism where they upstaged the priest, to my troubled adolescence when they didn't do much of anything and then did everything at once, my genitals have been the most significant thing that ever happened to me."

Gender is not always clearcut, "determined by a variety of influences: chromosomal sex; gonadal sex; hormones; internal genital structures; external genitals; and, most important, the sex of rearing." The last is the belief of the doctor, who saw it as "like a native tongue... imprinted in the brain during childhood." Cal, raised as a girl, proves otherwise.

Cal's father looks to medicine to "fix" her problem, and both parents react differently: "Milton heard the words that were there. He heard 'treatment' and 'effective'. Tessie, on the other hand, heard the words that weren't there. The doctor hadn't said my name... He hadn't said 'daughter' either. He didn't use any pronouns." Cal is left "poised between the print of genetics and the White Out of surgery." But "we're all made up of many parts."

### **Controversy: Appropriateness and Sensitivity**

Some question Eugenides' right to write a book like this. He is Greek-American, but does not have any intersex condition and is not a trans person. Furthermore, Cal (and his doctors) uses the term "hermaphrodite", which many find offensive when applied to people.

As a straight cis woman, with no medical background, I guess I am not really in a position to defend against such criticisms. Nevertheless, I think those who actually read it would find it hard to take offence at the sensitive and insightful way this aspect is portrayed.

As for the H word, I expect it's what doctors in the 1960s would have used and there are still places where 5-Alpha-Reductase Deficiency is described in such terms. Eugenides has said: "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." and "I'm referring not to a person or a group of people but to a literary character." (From <http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/M...>)

For me, one of the bigger issues is the focus of mid-teen Cal's desires, "The Obscure Object". Calling a girl or woman an object can't be good, can it? Yet it doesn't come across as objectifying in the usual sense. It's more a way of preserving anonymity and distance, reflecting her special, idolised, position in Cal's life. More troubling is the the issue of consent. (view spoiler)

## Chapter Eleven

Cal's brother is only ever referred to as Chapter Eleven (a US statute relating to business bankruptcy); we never learn his real name. This is different from some other characters who are referred to by a nickname, but whose real names are stated.

## Quotes

- \* "His shortness had a charitable aspect to it."
- \* "A sick person imprisoned in a healthy body."
- \* "She'd spend a decade in bed trying with vitality to die."
- \* "You used to be able to tell a person's nationality by their face. Immigration ended that. next... footwear. Globalization ended that."
- \* "Sparks fly across the city, inseminating every place they land with a germ of fire."
- \* "Motorcars parked like giant beetles... smokestacks rose everywhere, cannons bombarding the atmosphere... stacks in regimental rows or all alone puffing meditatively away."
- \* The Ford factory, "that controlled Vesuvius of chutes, tubes, ladders, catwalks, fire, and smoke known, like a plague or a monarch, only by a color: 'The Rouge'."
- \* African-American area of Detroit in the 50s, "The gloom of front porches and apartments without electricity seeped out into the streets and the thundercloud of poverty... directed attention... toward... forlorn, shadowless objects."
- \* Joining the Nation of Islam, "Women exchange the maids' uniforms of subservience for the white chadors of emancipation."
- \* "A group of boys whose main bond was their unpopularity."
- \* "There is no evidence against genetic determinism more persuasive than the children of the rich."
- \* "In the cedar swamp, verticality wasn't an essential property of trees... everywhere the grey skeletons of trees."
- \* Tranquillizers provide "a kind of viewing platform from which she could observe her anxiety."
- \* "San Francisco, that cold, identity-cleansing mist."

Apparently German is bad for conversation because the verb is at the end of the sentence, which means you can't interrupt (wouldn't that make it **good**?!)

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## Review from 2008

Pulitzer prize winning story of a Greek-American hermaphrodite! Evokes sympathy for the most unlikely things (incest) and plausibly documents Callie/Cal's coming to terms with growing up and then discovering her/his true nature. When telling the family history, Cal sometimes uses the first person, and sometimes

her/his name at the time, paralleling her/his feelings of empathy or detachment. Although close to her/his family in some ways, s/he more often refers to them by name (Milton, Tessie) than relationship (father, mother). Takes a slightly unexpected turn towards the end.

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## Andrew says

This would have been better as an NPR story or an episode of "This American Life" than a novel. Or maybe if someone other than Eugenides had written it. An interesting idea, and a few engrossing sex scenes (I like the "crocus" and the peep-tank, and the whole long flirtation with The Object drew me in completely), and a nice two pages toward the end when Julie accepts Cal for what he is. But the prose was awful: frequent maneuvers like "And me? That's simple. I was . . ." are really unacceptable. And "Sing, Muse, of Greek ladies and their battle against unsightly hair!" is about as funny as poop.

Except for the incest, the long family-history plot was like a mashup of immigrant dramas from cable TV: Greek family barely escapes home country to make it to the United States, where they wander through 20th century history in a dull procession of unmotivated Gumpy forays into Wikipedia that have no effect whatsoever on their character development. (Now we'll shove these characters through Prohibition! mass production! the Detroit race riots! The partition of Cyprus! San Francisco hippies! the tragedy of Michael Dukakis's helmet moment! and . . . the founding of the Nation of Islam!)

The incest part of the story was good in the beginning -- the early love scenes between the grandparents are wonderful -- and then impressively tedious (Desdemona feels guilt! and then . . . she feels guilt again!). The metaphors are embarrassingly bad: Cal lives on a street named Middlesex, and eventually finds reconciliation of the two sides of himself in Berlin after reunification. Why not have Desdemona live on "I Feel Guilty For Sleeping With My Brother Boulevard"?

Cal remains completely undefined as a character, except in terms of his understandably tough time figuring out his own identity; "confused" isn't much of a character. Everyone else in the book fails to exist at all. Jimmy Zizmo turns out to be the founder of the Nation of Islam? Eugenides says self-importantly that "you've probably guessed" that -- no! Not only did I not guess it, it doesn't make any sense, logical or emotional, and it's completely uninteresting. Why not have him turn out to be Richard Nixon? Uncle Mike turns out to be a psychopath who extorts his own family? Why? Who cares?

Cal's lack of voice or character is the worst thing: if your book aims to show readers what it's like inside the world of an intersex person, you should show us that world from the inside in a way that makes sense, or at least a way that's interesting. Cal has no voice, no face, no identity. What voice there is is completely inconsistent with his behavior -- the current Cal is reticent, shy, depressed, lonely, and retiring; our narrator is open, boisterous, discursive, ironic, omniscient for no particular reason, and irritatingly jokey.

And the book no more has ideas about sexuality than it does about Cal's character. As one reviewer said, the most disappointing thing about the book is it ends up reinforcing stereotyped, dumb ideas about gender (like "Breasts have the same effect on me as on anyone with my testosterone level" -- as if there were no gays). Callie's pursuit of The Object doesn't make her question categories, it just convinces her she's a boy. There is no middle sex here; there's no middle ground; it's more gawking than Tiresias-like insight.

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## Jacob says

April 2012

Goddammit, *Middlesex* is beautiful. It's epic. And it's roughly 500 pages too short. That's right--too short. As a sweeping, three-generation epic novel that covers the lives of Calliope's grandparents, parents, and her own childhood before she became Cal, it's a damn near perfect novel. As the story of Cal, post-transformation, it's...sadly lacking. The last quarter of the book is rushed and unsatisfying. It's beautiful anyway, but a few hundred extra pages wouldn't have hurt...

It also feels like something John Irving could've written, which just shows that I don't read nearly enough contemporary literature. Help me fix that!

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## F says

I like books with family stories but it was very dull at some parts.

For me the start was really exciting with the grandparents.

The when they got to America it dragged for me. Over abundance of information.

Picked up towards the end again when it was more about Cal's discovery.

I HATED Jeffrey Eugenides other book about the sisters but I really enjoyed this one.

Heartbreaking and so brave.

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## Jason says

Alright, it's high time I review this hermaphroditic little masterpiece.

Being a pseudo-biochemist (pseudo in the sense that I only *pretend* to be a biochemist, whereas in reality I write scientific development reports and other documents that no one will ever read but which I've convinced myself are just as fulfilling as doing real science), I find the premise of this novel to be incredibly interesting.

5 $\alpha$ -Reductase deficiency is an autosomal recessive disorder; autosomal meaning that the gene coding for 5 $\alpha$ -Reductase is *not* located on a sex chromosome (X or Y), and recessive meaning that one would need *two* copies of a mutated form of the gene in order to express the disease trait. Since we as a biological species inherit one copy of every gene from each of our parents, it would not be enough to have only one mutated form of this gene because a single "good" copy is all that's required for proper function. Because of this, the proper-functioning gene is considered to be *completely dominant* over the mutated form in terms of phenotypic expression.

Here is a Punnett square showing basic concepts of Mendelian genetics:

**Each form of the gene is called an allele: "B" represents the dominant allele, or the healthy gene form; "b" represents the recessive allele.**

If both parents are phenotypically "normal," the only way they would be able to have any offspring with this disease is if they were both carriers, meaning they each have one dominant and one recessive allele. In this

way, they are said to be heterozygous for this trait, the genotype of which is represented as “Bb.” For any child they conceive, there would exist a 25% chance of that child inheriting two recessive alleles. This is referred to as being homozygous recessive, the genotype of which is represented as “bb.” Only homozygous recessive children will express the disease.

Since the protagonist of this novel has unluckily inherited both recessive alleles, one from each of his parents, he ends up with the disorder. So what *is* this disorder, exactly? The 5 $\alpha$ -Reductase gene codes for an enzyme which converts testosterone into a potent sex steroid called *dihydrotestosterone*, or DHT, which plays a fundamental role in the formation of the male sex organs. Since disease subjects do not have the ability to convert testosterone into DHT, they end up with too much testosterone and not enough DHT, which in some cases leads to the formation of ambiguous genitalia.

These ambiguous genitalia form one of the many, but probably the most interesting, subjects of the novel. The author begins by tracing the history of these recessive alleles back through the family lineage before elegantly leading us to the budding of the protagonist’s crocus: his ambiguous little penis stub (yes, you should click there; and yes, you should see that movie). Perhaps not surprisingly, the historical tracing reveals some ancestral inbreeding, as well. And since the protagonist is still genotypically male (even though he doesn’t know it and neither do his parents or anybody else), the real fun begins when he enters puberty.

When I met with my book club to talk about this fantastic novel, a few pronoun choices were used for describing the protagonist: he, she, he-she-it, etc. But all joking aside, the protagonist is male. He is male by genotypic definition (he has two healthy sex chromosomes, one of which is a Y), and he sexually identifies himself as male which is consistent with other real-life sufferers of 5 $\alpha$ -Reductase deficiency.

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## Taylor says

Mr. Eugenides can do everything, or at least I am convinced of such after reading *Middlesex*.

I passed on this book for a long time. I kept picking it up in bookstores and putting it down. I've seen quotes from it everywhere, all of which were beautiful, and kept hearing wonderful things about it from friends. To be perfectly honest, what kept me from picking it up in the subject: a hermaphrodite. I think of myself as someone with an open mind, but the thing is that I just wasn't sure if I'd be able to relate to much in this story. I made a very foolish assumption, and I'm quite embarrassed about it.

*Middlesex* is a slow burner (my new favorite term). It begins with the story of Cal/Calliope's grandparents, which seems unnecessary in the beginning, but which makes more sense with each passing page. The story then passes on to the parents, then Cal.

A couple pages in, Eugenides describes a rather gruesome scene, and this was my signal that this is a no-holds-barred kind of author. He *goes there*. (This isn't to say that the book is filled with gruesome moments, just that he's not afraid to use them when he must.)

To address the smoking gun, so to speak, yes, the main character is a Hermaphrodite. Though the reader knows it throughout the book, the main character doesn't know until they're older. It seems incredulous, but Eugenides makes it work, and makes this believable. He was smart to do things this way, because I was on the edge of my seat waiting for Calliope to discover the truth. And, most likely, he keeps a lot more not-so-open minded readers this way.

There's a very frank beauty about this book - he doesn't gloss over anything, but despite the many struggles

of the three generations, he doesn't feel it necessary to make his reality very bleak, either. Even when the book is at its darkest, most depressing, you're filled with sadness, but also with hope.

The other great thing about *Middlesex*, aside from its incredible cast of characters is how well it captures society in history - first in Detroit in the '20s (a more bleak picture than '20s of *The Great Gatsby*), then the '60s. The '20s are focused on the invention of the automobile - the people putting them together as opposed to the people driving them, and the impact that being part of an assembly line and big business had on people, and of course, prohibition. With the '60s, Eugenides tackles race so marvelously - the chapter about the Detroit riots is probably the best in the book, for all of the anxiety and imagery that he evokes. This book is really just as much about middle class America and family ties as it is about sexuality.

Don't make the mistake that I made by continually passing on this book - read it!

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### Michael Finocchiaro says

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides is a surprising and wonderfully written story about the life of Calliope/Cal Stephanopolis who in the opening lines "was born twice: first, as a baby girl...and then again as a teenage boy." The subject of hermaphroditism or intersexuality is addressed throughout as the book as a running theme as the cinématographique narrator Cal looks back at his childhood as Calliope and explains his complex incestuous family history from the origins of her grandparents as Greeks fleeing Smyrna as the Turks invade to Detroit from the 20s up to the 70s.

The narrative time shifts between his life as a 41 year old man Cal to this running family history written in a witty, humorous style which I found fun and engaging. The text ingeniously woven together from history and science with many recurrent themes (silkworms, Greek orthodox beliefs and practices, guilt and redemption, etc). I couldn't put this book down. This is the only Eugenides book I have read but it will definitely check out his other books.

An interesting sidenote: trying to explain the book "daddy is reading" to my 7yo daughter and my 10yo son, I was able to painlessly explain why brothers and sisters cannot get married (a very common kid's question) and even reproductive functions in a painless and intuitive way: since Callie has organs of both sexes but the penis ("zizi" in kid's French) is inside her vagina ("zezette") she cannot have babies and will never menstruate ("clean the house where the baby can live"). She also has too many male hormones to develop breasts which happens about the same time or just before menstruation. This deformation was the improbable result of the union of a brother and sister two generations back. Nature wants to ensure a varied gene pool and thus it is better to seek love outside one's own family. This explanation seemed to satisfy both of them :)

UPDATE: Great recent article at good housekeeping.com: <http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/...>

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°°°.°..°-°.\_. ????? Ροζουλ? Εωσφ?ρος .\_-°-°.° .°°° ★.~.~.★ ?????? ???????  
?????? Ταμετο?ρο Αμ says

?ρωμα και μν?μη.

Το Middlesex ε?ναι σελ?δες γεμ?τες με ιστορ?α, πο?ηση, κωμωδ?α και τραγωδ?α.

Είναι ένα ταξίδι με ακυβέρνητο καρβί, ο νστός ενς ελαττωματικό γονιδίου, στο οποίο οφείλεται η ρευστότητα του φλού. Χρωμοσώματα, καρνύτοι, γενετικές ανωμαλίες, σνδρομα ταυτότητας φλού παραδοχς γνους, σγχυση αρσενικν και θηλυκν χαρακτηριστικν και πολυκεντρικη απδοση της ασυνθιστης προσωπικς ανπτυξης ενς μοναδικου χαρακτρα.

Ο ερμαφροδιτος αφηγητς και πρωταγωνιστς του βιβλου ( σως δεν πρεπε να ειναι τσι, σως νας πιο αποστασιοποιημνος αφηγητς να μας εξιστοροσε γεγοντα που θα μποροσε να ζει, να θυμται, να αναβινει, να αποκαλπει, απο ουδτερη οπτικων, πιο ψυχρ, πιο ρεαλιστικ, πιο ανθρωπα) επικαλεται λες τις αισθησεις και το συναισθηματικ του βθος για να μας παρουσισει την οικογενειακη ιστορια της εκτοπισμνης του φσης ως αδιαμφισβτητη πραγματικτητα.

λα αρχζουν σε να χωρι της Μ. Αςας, λγο πριν την καταστροφ της Σμρνης απο τους Τορκους και τελεινουν, πολλη χρονια μετ, κπου στο Βερολνο, μιας εξσου ερμαφροδιτης Ευρης.

Στη Μ. Αςα γνωρζουμε το γονδιο της μετλλαξης, να κρυμνο απο ντροπη γονδιο στα σκοτδια της δεισδαιμονας επανρχεται στο προσκνιο και φανερνει τις ιδιτητες του χρη στο πλετο φως που του ρχνει η αιμομικτικη αγπη ανμεσα σε δυο αδλφια.

Η οικογενειακη ιστορια γενεν συνεχζεται στην Αμερικη, την βιομηχανοποιημη Αμερικη της πολλαπλης κρης. Οι λληνες μετανστες προσπαθον να ενταχτον στην κατασπαραγμηνη πειρο χιλιδες νειρα μακρι απο την πατρδα τους.

Ο Ευγενδης, στνει με απστευτη λεπτομρεια και πειρα χρματα το σκηρικ που εξελσεται ο εκτοπισμς και η ηθικη ανγκη της «διαφορετικς» οικογνειας.

Στο πεδο ενς επικου μυθιστορηματος απεικονζονται οι κοινωνικς, πολιτιστικς, φυλετικς, σεξουαλικς, θρησκευτικς και πολιτικς αναταραχς στα μσα του 20ου αινα.

Μσα σε λα αυτη τραγικη ποιητικη κωμωδα του Middlesex.

Οι χαρακτηρες στην πλειοψηφη τους ριστα δομημνοι. Αγωνζονται για τις επιλογς τους και τηρον τα βιολογικη θιμα της σεξουαλικς γιορτς, στω κι αν η φση παρεκκλνει απο το κοινς αποδεκτο.

Ακμη κιταν παρεκκλνει απο τους δικους της νμους, πντα υπερισχει, πντα επιβλλεται, για να προκαλσει και να αποκαλσει «?διο» καθετ «διαφορετικ?».

Προφανς δεν μιλμε για κποιο αριστορημα της νετερης λογοτεχνας, υπρχουν αρκετα σημεα που επιδχονται επικρσεις σως και διευκρινιστικς αλλαγς.

Ωστσο ο συγγραφας πληρνει το τμημα της διαμαρτυρας και μπορε να ισχυριστε πως η λεπτομερειακη περιγραφη και η πολυπλοκτητα που κπως διασπον την αναγνωστικη συνοχη, μετατρπουν το ργο του απο ιστορια μυθοπλασας σε τχνη.

Καλη ανγνωση.

Πολλοὺς ἀσπασμοὺς.

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### **Fabian says**

Exactly the flawless masterpiece you've heard of. I've read hundreds of novels in my day, & this is in the top 3 (On equal shelf with "A Confederacy of Dunces" and "Blonde." (My own personal trifecta perfecta: THE THE the best novels of ALL TIME!)) I will never stop lauding this book. Unbelievable, mythic; the stuff from the Gods to anyone with an eye & brain to receive from the way-up up up heights.

This is LIFE AFFIRMING literature that's meant to be treasured for the rest of your life. The main character will stay with you until you die...

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### **Cassy says**

This isn't so much a review as an embarrassing story. I gave the book four stars for a reason. The writing is beautiful. I would recommend it. Now onwards to my shame.

So Brooke and I were standing in line to meet Eugenides. Please understand it was a really long line after a similarly long day at work. We passed the time chitchatting about this and that at our workplace and life in general. By the time the organizer offered post-its\* to our segment of the line, we were getting silly and joked about all the crazy names and titles you could request. Instead of sticking to your name, you could put down "Boo-Bear" or "Sunshine Sally". Just imagine: you could have an autographed book with some outrageous inscription like "To the best unicorn, Jeffrey Eugenides".

Throughout the course of the night, I had been trying to persuade Brooke to visit a bookstore I thought she would enjoy. She was reluctant for unknown reasons. Under the influence of a bizarre mixture of exasperation, exhaustion, and silliness, I proposed a bet. I had already written my plain-ole name on the post-it. If she promised to accompany me to an event at the bookstore, I would add "baby" under my name. She quickly agreed.

As we waited thereafter, I began to second guess the stunt. But before I could request a new post-it, the line betrayed me. While it had moved at a glacial pace initially, now it swept me forward.

When I handed Eugenides my book, he stared at the post-it for a second and then looked up at us. He asked, "Who is Cassy Baby? Is that you?" I was mortified. Utterly mortified. I tried to quickly explain the promised bookstore visit, but I think in actuality I just pointed at Brooke and mumbled something like, "She made me."

Looking back, the whole episode could be construed as a power struggle. Could a literary nobody force a Pulitzer Prize winner to write something stupid? If he refused, he might seem like a jerk. His best option was probably to play along and, bless his heart, he did. Perhaps he thought it was amusing. I doubt it. So, here it is:

[image error]

Who was the real winner out of this mess? Brooke. Allow me to list the ways. (1) She was witness to my shame. (2) She did visit the bookstore – although she ditched for me the promised event and went on her own later. (3) As I suspected she would, she became a fan of said bookstore. (4) And this is the cherry on the top: Eugenides inscribed her book to “Brooke Baby”.

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\*If you want your book personalized, the host will generally hand out post-its. You write your name on the post-it and place it on the title page where the author will sign. This way the author doesn't struggle to spell your name correctly.

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## Trevor says

"When I told my life story to Dr. Luce, the place where he invariably got interested was when I came to Clementine Stark. Luce didn't care about criminally smitten grandparents or silkworm boxes or serenading clarinets. To a certain extent, I understand. I even agree."

I agree too. This quote comes from page 263 and is really where the story picks up and gets into the subject the book promises--Cal's life as a hermaphrodite. Honestly, while the first 263 pages were interesting and had some important developing points, it could have been distilled a great deal. Eugenides is a great, fluid writer--very witty. But dang, he's wordy. I guess after reading several books by Cormac McCarthy I'm bound to get distracted by verbosity. I'm not saying I don't like long--my favorite book is *The Brothers Karamazov*--I just don't like all the superfluous words.

Still, the book is compelling so far. I'm not as driven to read it as I think I should be, but I don't find myself putting it down after every paragraph to check my email either.

UPDATE: I have finished the book. In the end, I felt like it didn't deliver. I see a lot of connections Eugenides is making about identity, but they didn't seem developed. In fact, there were many symbols throughout the book that were very clever but ultimately seemed to be only that--a device used to show cleverness and not to really further the plot. Another problem I had with the book was the fact that Eugenides tells too much about his characters and yet I still feel like it is underdeveloped. For example, he has great characters in mind and some great episodes to show how they feel, but then he simply runs through the story and then tells you how the character felt--I wanted to feel how the characters felt.

I enjoyed two things about the book. First, the Forrest Gump-like trek through American history. There are really some fascinating episodes in this book. And Eugenides does an excellent job elaborating on them. Sometimes I felt like he should have written an essay on American history rather than this novel. The second thing I enjoyed was Eugenides sly, clever writing. I know that above I said that some things seemed to be there just to showcase the author's wit, but some of those things were really clever and enjoyable. The writing kind of reminded me of Jim Carrey's acting: at moments it was brilliant, hysterical, and spot on; but at other moments it was just too much, needed to be toned down, better controlled.

As I said, this book didn't deliver for me. I liked it because of its promise. The idea is fascinating. However, as talented as Mr. Eugenides is, a little more control would be nice.

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## Candi says

*"Some people inherit houses; others paintings or highly insured violin bows. Still others get a Japanese tansu or a famous name. I got a recessive gene on my fifth chromosome and some very rare family jewels indeed."*

Let me say first that Jeffrey Eugenides is an extraordinary storyteller! Why I've waited so long to read one of his books is beyond me.

**Middlesex** is an epic multi-generational saga of a Greek family with one of the most engaging narrative voices I've come across in quite some time. It's also the story of said narrator, Cal, and what might be considered a rather unconventional topic – that of hermaphroditism. *"I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974."* I have to admit that I picked this book up ages ago and set it aside. At the time I thought there was no way I could establish any kind of connection to the main character given the fact I had never had any kind of exposure to persons with this condition. There is an incestuous element that made me run the other direction as well. Now of course I've matured a bit since that time and realize that there are a myriad of ways to connect to any human being. The skillful pen of Eugenides helped a bit too, of course. This time, I was hooked from the start and simply couldn't help but be charmed by Cal. The author takes us into some places that are uncomfortable - those shadowy places that could get quite dark if handled differently. Instead we are taken there with a voice that is often humorous while still managing to be sensitive and respectful – an admirable accomplishment!

I'm not going to go into any further detail about this book – there are thousands of other reviews and my goal is to catch up on mine before summer slips away. I've failed to mention that this book is also rich in historical detail, and I'm always a sucker for that. Eugenides manages to weave so much history throughout and he does so quite seamlessly. Motor City, the Detroit race riots, Asia Minor conflicts, immigration issues, and family dynamics are all explored. But **Middlesex** is much more than that. It's also a drama about the human condition that is so compelling that you will feel an attachment to Cal even if you never thought it possible! If you can set aside any feelings of uneasiness and just allow yourself to get swept away with Cal's story, then you are in for a real treat. A 5-star book that I highly recommend!

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## Peter says

Don't judge a book by its cover.

I'd seen this book on the shelves of a number of friends and in the arms of a number of travelers, so I decided to pick it up. The title, "Middlesex", suggested English countryside to me. On the cover was what looked like a steamship, and a quote on the back began "Part Tristram Shanty, part-Ishmael..." So I came to the foolish conclusion that this was some 19th century English seafaring novel. (Typical.)

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Middlesex is the story of a hermaphrodite who grew up as Calliope but discovered in her adolescence that she is actually more Cal than Calliope. More specifically, Middlesex (the title takes on a new meaning now) is the story of three generations of a Greek family and the incestuous genetic and social history that enables the existence of Cal, who narrates the story.

The novel is epic. It spans nearly a century and traces the Stephanides family from battle-torn Greece and Turkey in the 1920s, across an Atlantic voyage, from the street corners of Detroit, through World War II, and out to the suburban haven of Grosse Pointe, Michigan. The novel incorporates details upon details from all different spheres of life, dropping name brands from different time periods and regions and incorporating specialized jargon from a wide range of fields--Jeffrey Eugenides must have done an immense, *immense* amount of research during the writing process.

And the scope is as broad as the focus is often narrow. Over the course of 20th century, the Stephanides family responds to and participates in political, social, and cultural movements, and through them, we feel not only the sweep of a small Greek enclave, but also the sweep of a nation's growth as it engages Prohibition, World War II, the idealism of the 50s, the revolutions of the 60s and 70s, and more. The story is as much about the conflicts within a country as it is about a family trying to face its secrets, past and present.

Through it all, Cal, as a narrator, is clever and endearing. A story about a hermaphrodite sounds unfamiliar to most at first, and there are moments in the novel when Cal faces the visceral or fearful reactions that arise in those prone to fear. But, from page one, Eugenides clears the air, setting us on a fresh foundation, and we discover a character who faces familiar childhood and adolescent trials and tribulations--we discover the humanity of a character one might otherwise find alienated elsewhere.

*Do I recommend it?* Yes. It's a good tale for the modern age.

*Would I teach it?* Not likely. At 527 pages, it's just too long.

*Lasting impression?* Epic. I'll remember it for the incredible depth and breadth of knowledge it demonstrates. This novel impresses upon me the amount of research that an author must do to prepare for a serious work.

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