

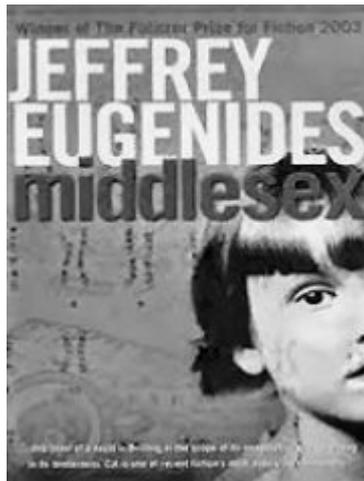
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Book Review: Middlesex

Pulitzer Prize-Winning Novel by Jeffrey Eugenides

Reviewed by Sharon

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Middlesex, by Jeffrey Eugenides.

Middlesex

by Jeffrey Eugenides
Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2002)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1897082003

The sequences in which Callie discovers his sexuality are done with humour and sensitivity.

Jeffrey Eugenides had great success with his debut novel *The Virgin Suicides*, which was filmed recently by a daughter of Francis Ford Coppola. His second novel has been a decade in the making.

The genetic condition 5-Alpha-Reductase Deficiency Syndrome (5-A.R.D.) is well suited to Eugenides' fictional intentions, which relate to cultural transformation. A baby thus marked may resemble a girl, or be raised as a girl, but is a genetic male (XY) who will usually virilise at puberty if left to his own hormonal devices. As it happens, 5-A.R.D. occurs in parts of Asia Minor long contested by Greece and Turkey, which also suits Eugenides, a Greek American by origin.

Love interests being scarce in the home village, Greek siblings Lefty and Desdemona turn to each other. They flee Asia Minor for America when Smyrna (Izmir) is sacked in 1922. In the baggage are Greek culture, a lifetime of guilt, and the 5-A.R.D. gene.

Lefty's granddaughter/grandson Calliope Stephanides is the unlucky recipient of the 5-A.R.D. time bomb. Now forty-one, he replays history from the Smyrna tragedy up to his own teenage migration across the gender divide.

Furnished with this useful set of excuses, Eugenides covers a rich and speculative canvas with bootlegging, World War II, the Black Muslims, race riots of the 1960s, Luis Bunuel, and a raft of Greek myth and customs.

Nothing is sacred, all manner of artifice is permitted. By a huge coincidence, Callie's mother spots his father-to-be Milton on a war newsreel, and promptly breaks off her engagement to a tedious priest. Kept under wraps for most of the novel, the priest is wheeled out near the end for an unlikely criminal spree. Similarly, fluky car accidents many years apart are turning points for Milton.

As a serial jokester of the classics, Eugenides invests the tiny egg that finally breeds Callie with so much cultural jesting and symbolic baggage that it ends up, as it were, the size of a football. He is quite capable of linking the indeterminate aorist tense in Greek verbs with interminable acts of window cleaning by the senescent Lefty. Thankfully, a serious edge underlies the narrative, one in which "Everyone struggles against despair, but it always wins in the end".

5-A.R.D. is very much a context, rather than the content, of the fiction. There is not the sense of earnest social commentary found (for example) in Chris Bohjalian's recent novel of transsexuality, *Trans-Sister Radio*. Eugenides is more interested in the literary implications of the problem, not least the obvious analogy between the Stephanides' continental transit and Callie's gender transit.

The sequences in which Callie discovers his sexuality are done with humour and sensitivity. When Callie finally crosses over, he wonders how he will cope with the required male gestures and mannerisms. Then he realises that all the other XYs are bluffing too.

It is not that Eugenides doesn't care to invest too much in finer emotions, it's just that he is not self-conscious about Callie's sexual nature.

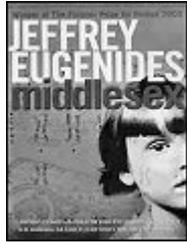
For all that, the (straight) author has done his serious fieldwork on the politics of intersexuality, which is put to good effect as required. There are plenty of real-life precedents for the deviousness of Callie's doctors.

Jeffrey Eugenides

From Wikipedia:  Jeffrey Eugenides is an American novelist and short story writer. He has written numerous short stories and essays, as well as three novels: *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), *Middlesex* (2002), and *The Marriage Plot* (2011). *The Virgin Suicides* has been filmed, while *Middlesex* received the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in addition to being a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the



International Dublin Literary Award, and France's Prix Médicis.



Middlesex

Author: Jeffrey Eugenides

Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition (2002)

I.S.B.N.-13 978 1897082003

From Amazon Books:  "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day of January 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974. My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides. My most recent driver's license records my first name simply as Cal."

So begins 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.

Middlesex is the winner of the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

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