

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides

Library Journal Review: /* Starred Review */ Eugenides's second novel (after *The Virgin Suicides*) opens "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl...in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy...in August of 1974." Thus starts the epic tale of how Calliope Stephanides is transformed into Cal. Spanning three generations and two continents, the story winds from the small Greek village of Smyrna to the smoggy, crime-riddled streets of Detroit, past historical events, and through family secrets. The author's eloquent writing captures the essence of Cal, a hermaphrodite, who sets out to discover himself by tracing the story of his family back to his grandparents. From the beginning, the reader is brought into a world rich in culture and history, as Eugenides extends his plot into forbidden territories with unique grace. His confidence in the story, combined with his sure prose, helps readers overcome their initial surprise and focus on the emotional revelation of the characters and beyond. Once again, Eugenides proves that he is not only a unique voice in modern literature but also well versed in the nature of the human heart. Highly recommended.

[Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ5/15/02.]—Rachel Collins, "Library Journal" (Reviewed July 15, 2002) (Library Journal, vol 127, issue 12, p116)

Kirkus Reviews /* Starred Review */ The verbal energy and narrative range of Saul Bellow's early fiction (say, *The Adventures of Augie March*) are born again in this dazzling second novel, long-awaited since *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). Narrator Calliope "Cal" Stephanides is a Greek-American hermaphrodite who eventually becomes a 41-year-old male living in Germany and working for the US State Department. But prior to that—thanks to Cal's assumed ability to "enter the heads" of his relatives and forebears—we're treated to a comic saga that begins in 1922 in the Middle Eastern port city of Smyrna, where Cal's paternal grandparents, Desdemona and Eleutherios ("Lefty"), fall into incestuous love, escape the Turkish siege of their homeland by finagling passage to America (en route to Detroit, where they have family), then, concocting new identities, marry while aboard ship. Eugenides produces one brilliant set piece after another as Desdemona grapples with lifelong guilt; Lefty works briefly at a Henry Ford factory, then prospers as a restaurateur; their son Milton, following ominously in Lefty's footsteps, marries his second cousin Tessie, becomes a hot-dog mogul, and fathers the medical miracle that is Calliope. The story is studded with superbly observed characters, including prematurely senile Dr. Philobosian, who examines, and fails to notice, Calliope's remarkable sexual configuration; Lefty's Cagney-like brother-in-law, bootlegger-entrepreneur Jimmy Zizmo; and the parade of comrades, presumptive lovers, and confidants encountered by Cal as she/he grows into gender confusion and away from suburban comfort in Grosse Pointe, survives the chaos of the late 1960s, and lights out for the territory of—what else?—San Francisco, finally making a kind of peace with her/his divided nature. *Middlesex* vibrates with wit, and shapes its outrageous premise (which perhaps owes a partial debt to Alan Friedman's unjustly forgotten 1972 novel, *Hermaphrodeity*) into a beguiling panorama of the century in which America itself struggled to come to terms with its motley heritage and patchwork character. A virtuosic combination of elegy, sociohistorical study, and picaresque adventure: altogether irresistible.

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