

Middlesex

By Jeffrey Eugenides

This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel captures the reader in a story of incestuous relationships that eventually result in an intersex child – the “hero” of the story. Her name is Calliope. She is served first by an aging Greek doctor who has no clue what he is dealing with. Her first gynaecological exam is when she is in her mid-teens – and her appearance shocks the young doctor and his nurse.

Teenagers are remarkably able to sense what their parents and other authority figures want them to say. Calliope was raised as a girl – no one knew different, and no one even knew she was different. But she felt and looked different – Calliope always thought she should be a boy. She really didn't look like the girls she knew, and was embarrassed to be seen naked. When the gynaecologist realized she WAS different, he led her parents to Dr. Luce, who was then the leading intersex doctor in the US. Since everyone wanted her to be a girl, she lied extensively during the psychological interviews. Dr. Luce suggested (and scheduled) immediate surgery to “correct” her ambiguous genitalia.

The book starts in a small town on Cyprus, about the time the British and other world powers were ignoring the Turkish attacks and genocides on Cyprus. The town is so small that there are not enough girls for all the young men, leading to an unusual closeness between a brother and sister – Calliope's grandparents. They escape by obtaining British travel documents, then are married by the ship's captain in order to emigrate to the US, where they join a close relative in Detroit.

The story continues with Calliope's grandparents settling in Detroit and starting a business. At first all goes well, but then the twin depressions of 1929 and 1932 come along, and their fortunes erode. Their son marries a first cousin, whose family also emigrated at the end of World War I, and Calliope is the result.

Did Eugenides choose the title *Middlesex*, the Detroit suburb where Calliope grows up, with its double meanings deliberately? Few published reviews even mention intersex, and those that do cloak it in terms like “freakish” and “genetic abnormality.”

This book deserves its Pulitzer Prize.