

# READING GROUP GUIDE

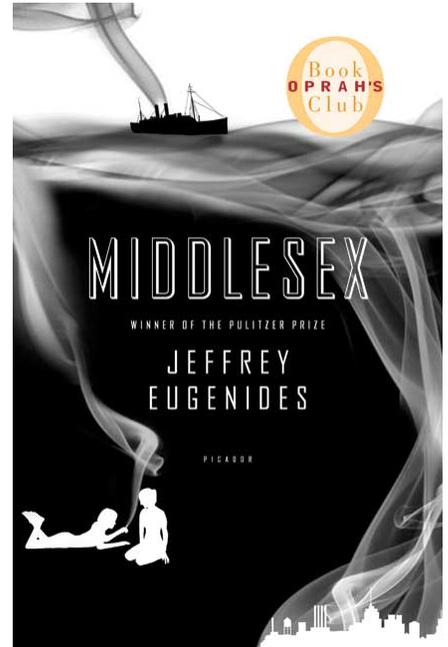
## *Middlesex*

*A Novel*

*by Jeffrey Eugenides*

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### 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 of 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 the Detroit riots of 1967 affect the Stephanides family and Cal, specifically?
17. Describe Middlesex. Does the house have a symbolic function in the novel?
18. "Everything about Middlesex spoke of forgetting and everything about Desdemona made plain the inescapability of remembering," Cal writes (p.273). How and when do

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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