

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides

(2002)
521 pages
New York: Picador

ISBN: 9780312427733

Winner of the 2003 Pulitzer Prize
Oprah's Book Club selection

Summary

Middlesex is the astonishing tale of a gene that passes down through three generations of a Greek American family and flowers in the body of Calliope Stephanides.

"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."

So begins Jeffrey Eugenides' second novel, *Middlesex*, the story of Calliope Stephanides, who discovers at the age of fourteen that she is really a he. Cal traces the story of his transformation and the genetic condition that caused it back to his paternal grandparents, who happen also to be brother and sister, and the Greek village of Bithynios in Asia Minor.

In 1922, Desdemona Stephanides and her brother, Lefty, whose parents were killed in the recent war with the Turks, are living alone in their nearly abandoned village. Pulled together by isolation, sympathy, and, perhaps, fate, Lefty and Desdemona become husband and wife, and a recessive genetic condition begins its journey toward eventual expression in their grandchild Calliope.

Middlesex is a story about what it means to occupy the complex and unnamed middle ground between male and female, Greek and American, past and present. For Cal, caught between these identities, the journey to adulthood is particularly fraught. Jeffrey Eugenides' epic portrayal of Cal's struggle is classical in its structure and scope and contemporary in its content; a tender and honest examination of a battle that is increasingly relevant to us all.

Reviews

Booklist

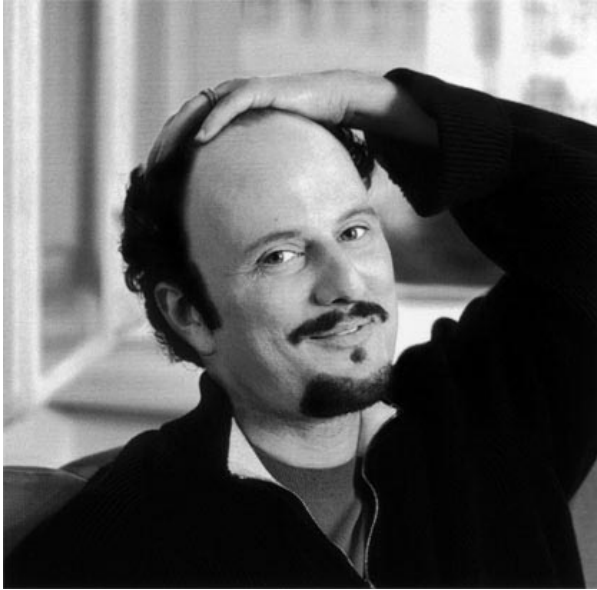
In his second novel, Eugenides once again proves himself to be a wildly imaginative writer, this time penning a coming-of-age tale, ranging from the 1920s in Asia Minor to the present in Berlin, about a hermaphrodite. Perhaps what is most surprising about Eugenides' offbeat but engrossing book is how he establishes, seemingly effortlessly, the credibility of his narrator. Cal's remarkably detailed odyssey began when his grandparents, who were siblings, married and vowed to keep the true nature of their relationship a secret; however, their deception comes back to haunt them in the form of their grandchild. With a sure yet light-handed touch, the author skillfully bends our notions of gender as we realize, along with Cal, that although he has been raised as a girl, he is more comfortable as a boy. Although at times the novel reads like a medical text, it is also likely to hold readers in thrall with its affecting characterization of a brave and lonely soul and its vivid depiction of exactly what it means to be both male and female.

Library Journal

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.

Publishers Weekly

As the Age of the Genome begins to dawn, we will, perhaps, expect our fictional protagonists to know as much about the chemical details of their ancestry as Victorian heroes knew about their estates. If so, Eugenides is ahead of the game. "Cal" Stephanides, narrates his story of sexual shifts with exemplary tact, beginning with his immigrant grandparents. Eugenides spends the book's first half recreating Detroit of the 1920s and '30s where the immigrants settled. Then comes Cal's story, which is necessarily interwoven with his parents' upward social trajectory. Milton, his father, takes an insurance windfall and parlays it into a fast-food hotdog empire. Meanwhile, Tessie, his wife, gives birth to a son and then a daughter-or at least, what seems to be a female baby. Genetics meets medical incompetence meets history, and Callie is left to think of her "crocus" as simply unusually long-until she reaches the age of 14. This is one determinedly literary novel that should also appeal to a large, general audience.



Biography

Jeffrey Kent Eugenides (born March 8, 1960 in Detroit, Michigan) is an American Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and short story writer. He is of Greek and Irish descent.

He is the third son of an American-born father whose Greek parents emigrated from Asia Minor and an American mother of Anglo-Irish descent. In 1988, Mr. Eugenides published his first short story. His first novel, **The Virgin Suicides** was published in 1993. His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Best American Short Stories*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *Granta*.

He attended Grosse Pointe's private University Liggett School, then graduated from Brown University in 1983. He later earned an M.A. in Creative Writing from Stanford University. In 1986 he received the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Nicholl Fellowship for his story *Here Comes Winston, Full of the Holy Spirit*. His 1993 novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, gained mainstream interest with the 1999 film adaptation by Sofia Coppola. Eugenides lived in Berlin Germany from 1999 to 2004.

He is very reluctant to appear in public or disclose details about his private life, except through Michigan-area book signings in which he details the influence of his high-school experiences on his writings. He lives in Princeton, New Jersey with his wife, the photographer and sculptor Karen Yamauchi, and their daughter. In the Fall of 2007 he joined the faculty of Princeton University's Program in Creative Writing.

His 2002 novel, *Middlesex*, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Ambassador Book Award. In writing *Middlesex*, Eugenides worked from Michel Foucault's *The Memoirs of Herculine Barbin*, the story of a female orphan who is reclassified as male and who ultimately commits suicide. Other influences in writing *Middlesex* include Virgil's *The Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and the fiction of Kafka, Günter Grass, and Salman Rushdie. Other writers he admires are Nabokov, Tolstoy, and the Jewish-Americans writers Saul Bellow and Phillip Roth.

Bibliography

Novels

The Virgin Suicides (1993)
Middlesex (2002)

Short stories

"Air Mail" (Best American Short Stories, Proulx ed., Houghton Mifflin, 1997)

"Baster" (Wonderful Town, Remnick ed., Random House 2000)

"Early Music" (The New Yorker, Oct. 10, 2005, pp. 72-79)

"The Speed of Sperm" (Granta, 1997)

"Timeshare" (The Pushcart Prize XXIII, Henderson ed., Pushcart, 1999)

"My Mistress's Sparrow is Dead: Great Love Stories from Chekhov to Munro" (Editor of anthology, 2008) (ISBN 978-0061240379)

"Great Experiment" (The New Yorker, Mar. 31, 2008)

Interview with the Author

From Salon.com October 2002

<http://dir.salon.com/books/int/2002/10/08/eugenides/index.html>

Which came first, the chicken or the egg -- the novel about the hermaphrodite or the Greek family saga?

Both. The book is a hybrid, as you're describing it, and the first part came with the hermaphrodite. I read a memoir of a real hermaphrodite from the 19th century, thinking this would be a wonderful story. It had a lot of things in it that appealed to me: a medical mystery, an amazing personal transformation and a doomed passion at its center. The hermaphrodite who wrote it was a schoolgirl in a French convent, and she fell in love with her best friend. In doing that, she discovered that she was a hermaphrodite. Unfortunately, it was written in 19th century convent-school prose -- very melodramatic, evasive about the anatomical details and really unable to render the emotional situation in any regard. I was frustrated by this and thought, I'd like to write the story I'm not getting from this book.

I started to do a lot of research on hermaphroditic conditions, and the one I landed on was 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome. (I always feel like a doctor when I say that.) The salient factor about it being that it only comes in isolated inbred communities. And I thought, Hmm. Isolated inbred communities? How about my grandparents being Greeks living in a small village in Asia Minor under Turkish rule? I saw how I could bring in some of my own family history in a fictional way to write this story. At that point, I realize what I had was a more epic story, a long family saga, not just about a hermaphrodite but about a genetic condition passing down through three generations of a family into the body of the girl who narrates this story of her family and what they went through as well as her own metamorphosis.

Stories about people who are sexually unusual in some way often present them as isolated. And it's true, they often have to cut off ties with their families, as Cal does for a while. But you were determined to embed her story in that of her family, it seems.

I thought of Callie's condition as symbolic of something that we all go through, which is the transformation of puberty and the process of self-discovery. I used the hermaphrodite not to tell a story that was unusual or apart from common human experience but as something that we all can relate to. To write it I drew on my memories of my own adolescence and, as they call it, locker room trauma. I thought of it, actually, as close to all of our memories and experiences.

Callie doesn't seem like a freakish character at all in this book, and that's what you were aiming for.

That's what I was aiming for. Sometimes people hear the concepts of my books -- "The Virgin Suicides": five girls committing suicide -- and they think that they are very strange and outlandish, and they get labeled bizarre or something like that. But I think when you read them, more than making reality bizarre, I tend to make bizarre things normal. I think that if you read "Middlesex," you'll see that what Calliope goes through in becoming Cal is normalized by the way I tell the story. The reason I have so much family history in this is because I wanted the character to be inside a family and inside society, to write the story of a real hermaphrodite instead of a mythical one like Tiresias.

Tiresias was someone who'd been both a man and a woman and he was questioned by the gods about which gender enjoyed sex more.

He was walking one day and saw two snakes copulating, threw his staff at them, and he was turned into a female. Then seven years later he saw the same snakes, threw the same staff at them, and was turned back into a man. The story you're recalling is an argument between Zeus and Hera over which sex has a better time in bed. Strangely, I think, Zeus thinks women have a better time and Hera thinks men do.

You don't often come across the first-person omniscient narrator. Usually the omniscient narrator is third-person. How did you decide to go with this different sort of voice?

That's what gave me such trouble and why it took me so long to write the damn book at first. It took me two years to get this first-person omniscient narrator. I was sure I needed a first-person narrator for many reasons. I wanted the story of Calliope's transformation to be intimate. I also wanted to avoid -- and this is a very practical writerly point -- to avoid the pronominal problem with he/she that we're having in this interview. I wanted it to be "I." And the point is also that we're all an I before we're a he or a she.

So it seemed important to have this "I," but in order to tell the story of the grandparents and the parents, if I remain in a first-person narrative voice, I can't go into their minds and tell you what they're feeling. It becomes very dry and voyeuristic. It took me a long time to figure out how to have a first-person that could also switch into the third-person. I had to basically give myself permission to do that, and I had a lot of scruples against doing it for the first couple of years. So I wrote the story many different ways -- sometimes all third-person, sometimes all first-person. I knocked my head until I finally realized I could have the narrator do both things and give the sense to the reader that Cal, telling the story years later, is possibly inventing things and maybe knows things that he can't but that's all right. I worried that the reader would resist certain things that Cal knows, but I've found that actually readers don't bother themselves with the details as much as I do. In general, readers don't worry about things like, how would he know this about his grandmother?

Did you know about Tiresius being a seer starting out? That almost seems too fortuitous.

I took Latin for seven years, and in 10th grade we read Ovid's "Metamorphoses" and the argument between Zeus and Hera. That was an interesting class that day -- we never usually got such information. I got to read about Tiresius early on and was interested in a figure with that kind of power and amazing experience of being both genders.

Did you feel in writing "Middlesex" that you were pushing against that tendency that people have now to think that everything is genetically predetermined?

Yes. Because I grew up in the unisex 1970s, when everyone was sure that gender role was just environmentally conditioned and that we could give little girls guns and they'd happily go shooting up each other. That's where I started,

and now I see it completely reversed, where I'll go to the playground with my daughter and sit with a mother who has a son, she'll say, "Look at my son, beating on that rock while your daughter is playing so nicely next to that rock." And it's true that kids do seem to exhibit these innate differences, but people have decided that all of our behaviors are genetically determined and we're getting a lot of very simplistic explanations of our behavior on the basis of what hunter-gatherer societies did 20,000 years ago. I'm supposed to exhibit a lot of Neanderthal attributes and you are supposed to be out picking berries.

It seemed like writing this book involved an unusual number of coincidences.

I had some incredible coincidences in writing this book. My wife had to go see an endocrinologist on the Upper West Side. We went up there, and I started asking him questions about genetics because I'd been reading all this genetics and sexology material. He said, "Are you a physician?" And I said, "No, but I'm writing this novel about a hermaphroditic condition," and I start to explain to him what it is when he swivels around and takes out this old yellowed journal, and it turns out that he was one of the original researchers of the article that I was basing my novel on.

Questions and Discussion from the Novelist database

How does the novel characterize America?

Halfway through the novel we learn that "somehow in the course of her life Sourmelina had become an American." Much of *Middlesex* tries to capture that "somehow," the ineffable shift of cultural identity (p. 280). Milton, like Sourmelina, gradually takes on the role of an American. Though he speaks Greek to his parents, he never succeeds in writing it, and eventually forgets "what even the simplest words meant" (p. 191). Later, when he takes the side of the United States, and not Greece, in political debates, he has finally crossed a line. His conservative nationalism shows up in his opposing busing, his increasing sympathy for Nixon, and in his statement to African-Americans and feminists: "The matter with us is you" (p. 246). He represents the increasingly nasty underside of American individualism, captured in the iconography of "landscapes aglow with Manifest Destiny, scenes of Indians being slaughtered" (p. 149). After the family restaurant is burned during the Detroit riot, Milton collects several insurance sums and is ready for the American Dream, symbolized in part by his new 1967 Cadillac Fleetwood. Milton's business picks up because he escapes the rule of location, location, location by championing the American notion of marketing — being everywhere at once.

In many ways, the novel suggests that being an American means looking forward. The future is the greatest real estate. But this is not true for reluctant Americans Desdemona and Cal, both of whom are stuck in the past, Cal because his genitalia will not let him move to the next step with his girlfriend, Julie, and Desdemona because her husband's death has not given her a reason for a future. "Everything about Middlesex spoke of forgetting and everything about Desdemona made plain the inescapability of remembering" (p. 273).

Callie, faced with two conflicting cultures, meets the spirit of America head on. When she realizes that she is not maturing properly, she decides to start eating more American food. The chicken pot pies, Tater Tots, and cubed Jell-O, she believes, will help her sprout with the "velocity" of mung beans (p. 303). America and what it represents seems to offer the cure for everything, evident in a peppering of products sprinkled throughout the novel —Her parents' quest to "cure" Callie typifies yet another American belief, that "everything can be solved by doctors" (p. 426). Even for Desdemona, "certain bits of her adopted country had been seeping under the locked doors of her disapproval" (p. 222). Television was the "first and only thing about America she approved of" (p. 223). But outside of the television, America is a club not easily entered. At prep school with the snobby Charm Bracelet girls, Callie realizes that America was about the "Mayflower and Plymouth Rock. It was about something that had happened for two minutes four hundred years ago, instead of everything that had happened since" (p. 299).

How does the house on Middlesex Avenue reflect the novel itself?

The nontraditional house in suburbia represents Cal's own postmodern story. Callie calls the house "sci-fi," futuristic with a sunken living room and octagonal stone blocks. It does not have regular doors or traditional stairs. Cal's maturation takes him to places he never imagined. Likewise, the Middlesex stairs took the "climber to the second floor, but on the way they took him lots of other places as well" (p. 259). The peepholes, glass walls, and views of the hallway give the climber the role of spy, a function Cal takes on in his furtive narrative as he looks into everyone's lives. The house has a power all its own, just as Cal's story is freighted with its own sense of urgency. Cal may claim to be in command of his story — and the stories of his ancestors — but the story, and history, ultimately locks him in place.

How is gender like a costume?

Callie learns that both females and males require society's uniform. The genteel women in suburbia wear "chiffon headscarves," and Tessie dresses Callie in "pink skirts, lace ruffles, Yuletide bows" (pp. 262; 224). Milton is also aware of the power of gender-specific clothes. In meeting Dr. Luce, he "armored himself with his most commanding clothes: over his plump body, a charcoal pinstripe suit; around his bullfrog neck, a Countess Mara necktie" (p. 425). As an adolescent, Callie hides inside a bathing suit: "The cups were rubberized, pointy, and beneath a towel or shirt gave me the suggestion of a bust I didn't have" (p. 343). Sophie Sassoon takes care of Callie's facial hair, and Callie and Reetika "painted" their faces in her bedroom (p. 311). "I'd been born Apollonian, a sunkissed girl with a face ringed with curls. But as I approached thirteen a Dionysian element stole over my features" (p. 294). In Berlin, after his transformation, Cal smokes cigars and wears double-breasted suits. He admits that "they're a little too much," but he needs them. "They make me feel better" (p. 41). But the costume goes beyond the layer of clothing. "Under the armor of my double-breasted suits is another of gym-built muscle" (p. 107). Even the skin of Cal's body, complete with facial hair, becomes part of the male uniform. When his former female self surfaces, "she does so like a childhood speech impediment," and the male uniform helps to bury Callie forever (p. 41).

From the Intersex Society of North America website

<http://www.isna.org>

What is intersex?

"Intersex" is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types

Though we speak of intersex as an inborn condition, intersex anatomy doesn't always show up at birth. Sometimes a person isn't found to have intersex anatomy until she or he reaches the age of puberty, or finds himself an infertile adult, or dies of old age and is autopsied. Some people live and die with intersex anatomy without anyone (including themselves) ever knowing.

So nature doesn't decide where the category of "male" ends and the category of "intersex" begins, or where the category of "intersex" ends and the category of "female" begins. Humans decide whether a person with XXY chromosomes or XY chromosomes and androgen insensitivity will count as intersex.

In our work, we find that doctors' opinions about what should count as "intersex" vary substantially. Some think you have to have "ambiguous genitalia" to count as intersex, even if your inside is mostly of one sex and your outside is mostly of another. Some think your brain has to be exposed to an unusual mix of hormones prenatally to count as intersex—so that even if you're born with atypical genitalia, you're not intersex unless your brain experienced atypical development. And some think you have to have both ovarian and testicular tissue to count as intersex.

Discussion Questions

From Reading Group Guides (and Picador)

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/middlesex1.asp>

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 of 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 Part 3, about halfway through the novel. Why did the author choose to structure the story in 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 any 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 Jimmy 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?

Discussion Questions from About.com

1. In what ways is Middlesex like stories in Greek mythology? Do you think it is a modern day myth?
2. Middlesex is divided into four books, and Cal is not even born until Book III. Why do you think he felt the need to tell so much of his grandparents' and parents' stories in order to tell about his own life?
3. Middlesex covers a lot of contemporary history, starting in 1922. Are there some historic events that you learned more about from the book? The burning of Smyrna? The founding of the Nation of Islam? The Detroit race riots?
4. Were you surprised by Lefty and Desdemona's courtship and marriage? Could you understand why they fell in love? Do you think their marriage was wrong?
5. In what ways is Callie's life as a hermaphrodite similar to her family's lives as immigrants--not quite one thing or the other?
6. Why do you think Tessie was drawn to Milton?
7. Were you surprised by Father Mike's extortion and plan to abandon his family? Were their hints about his character earlier in the novel?
8. In what ways was Callie's relationship with the Obscure Object unique and in what ways was it like normal adolescent sexual exploration?
9. Why did Callie feel the need to run away after reading Dr. Luce's report? Do you think her parents could have accepted her decision not to have the surgery? Could Callie have changed her identity if she did not go out on her own?
10. What is your opinion of Dr. Luce?

11. Do you think Cal's relationship with Julie worked out? Did he, in his adult narrator self, change during the novel?

For Further Reading (From the Novelist database)

Christopher A. Bohjalian, *Trans-Sister Radio* (2003)

Allie Banks, a schoolteacher in a Vermont town, discovers that her lover, a college professor, is a transsexual who wants to be a woman. Donning women's clothing, an act which elicits a memorable reaction in this small town, is just the beginning for "Dana" Stevens.

David Ebershoff, *The Danish Girl* (2001)

This is a fictional account of Danish artist, Einar Wegener, who in 1930 becomes the first man ever to undergo a sex-change operation. His wife Greta, also a painter, is the one who unknowingly starts the chain of events when she asks her husband to put on a dress so that she can finish a portrait she is painting of an opera singer.

Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003)

Henry De Tamble is a Chicago librarian with "Chrono-Displacement" disorder. He can suddenly disappear and find himself in the past or future. In his forties, he in fact finds himself time traveling to his wife Clare's childhood and meeting her as a six-year-old. The novel alternates in narration between Henry and Clare's points of view.

Joyce Carol Oates, *them* (1969)

Set in the Detroit of the 1950s and 1960s, *them* tells the story of Maureen Wendall, daughter of working-class parents, who struggles to overcome the economic and social straits into which she is born.

Carol Anshaw, *Lucky in the Corner* (2002)

Fern's deep affection for her dog Lucky is about the only constant in her topsy-turvy life. Her mother, who left Fern's father years ago for another woman, is now cheating on her lover. Fern's promiscuous best friend Tracy has a baby and then leaves him at Fern's. Lucky and kind, cross-dressing Uncle Harold are Fern's only sources of support as she struggles in college, works a 900-number as a psychic, and tries to wrestle with her own problems and those created by those she loves.

Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996)

Behind the Scenes at the Museum is a coming-of-age story set in York in the north of England. From her home above the family pet shop, Ruby Lennox describes comic and tragic events from the moment of her conception in 1951 until her mother's death in 1992. The story also dips back into the family past to great-grandmother Alice Barker's disappearance from the lives of her husband and six children in 1888, and family fortunes during the three great English-German conflicts of the twentieth century: World War I, World War II, and the 1966 World Cup Finals.