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### Q. & A.

#### Stuck in the Middle

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This week in the magazine, Jeffrey Eugenides publishes "The Obscure Object," a short story about a young hermaphrodite, taken from his forthcoming novel, "Middlesex." Here, Eugenides talks with Bill Buford, the literary and fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, and discusses the novel, his previous work, and his recent life as an American expatriate in Germany.

#### **BILL BUFORD: What is your interest in a character, a hermaphrodite, who partakes of both genders?**

JEFFREY EUGENIDES: My interest took conscious form at least fifteen years ago when I read Michel Foucault's "Memoirs of a 19th Century French Hermaphrodite." Foucault found these memoirs in the archives of the French Department of Public Hygiene. I thought they would be a great read. The hermaphrodite in question, Herculine Barbin, was a student at a convent school. She was tall, thin, flat-chested, and scholastically gifted. She fell in love with her best friend and they began a clandestine love affair. These were the facts of the case, and I was eager to read the memoirs because they contained a lot of elements that stirred my imagination: an amazing personal metamorphosis, a hothouse passion, and a medical mystery. There was only one problem: Herculine Barbin couldn't write. Her prose was wooden. Exclamation marks ended every second sentence. She was given to melodrama and, worse yet, she skipped over the important parts. "Middlesex" began as an urge to fill in those gaps, to tell the story Herculine Barbin couldn't. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to write about a real, living hermaphrodite. Hermaphrodite characters in literature have been either mythical figures, like Tiresias, or fanciful creations, like Virginia Woolf's Orlando. I wanted to be accurate about the biological facts.

#### **Why does the question of gender interest you?**

It's not just me. It interests lots of people. It has interested humanity for a very long time, which is why hermaphrodites appear in so many classical epics and creation myths. Plato claimed that the original human was



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hermaphroditic. These two halves were sundered and now must go eternally in search of each other, which is apparently why it's so hard to get a dinner reservation on Valentine's Day.

I also grew up in the unisex seventies, at a time when gender roles were being rejected. Everyone was convinced that personality, and especially gender-specific behavior, was determined by rearing. Now everything is reversed. Biology and genetics are considered the real determinants of behavior. So we have these pat evolutionary explanations for the way we are now: Men can't communicate because, twenty thousand years ago, they had to be silent on the hunt; women are verbal because they had to call out to each other while gathering the nuts and berries. This is just as silly as the previous "nurture" explanations.

The question of gender, or the formation of gender identity, brings up a larger philosophical issue. Are we free? Or is everything about our character—and, following Heracleitus, our fate, too—determined? The life of my narrator plays out this debate.

**Your novel is also the story of a Greek family coming to America. Is this, in some way, your family story?**

I never intentionally set out to write a family story. As I said, at first I just wanted to write a fictional memoir of a hermaphrodite. But this led me to other literary hermaphrodites, like Tiresias. Hermaphroditism led to classicism. Classicism led to Hellenism. And Hellenism led to my Uncle Pete. What I mean is this: In doing research for the book, I came across a hermaphroditic condition known as 5-alpha-reductase-deficiency syndrome. An individual with this condition usually appears to be female at birth, and subsequently virilizes at puberty. It's a very dramatic metamorphosis. The syndrome is caused by a recessive genetic mutation. It occurs in inbred communities. When I discovered that, my thinking about the book changed. In order to tell the life story of my hermaphrodite, I would have to tell the story of her genetic inheritance—and that brought in family. The first half would be the story of the transmission of this gene (the story, in other words, of the grandparents and parents) and the second half would be a fictional memoir of Cal—née Calliope—Stephanides. I knew then that the book was going to be, as my father would have said, a real whopper, my own personal Greek-American epic. But you're right. With a name like Eugenides, what do you expect?

**Let's stay on the gender issue for a minute. It has certainly interested plenty of writers, but it does seem to be a special interest of yours—gender boundaries, where one sex blurs into another, and the moments when our received understandings about what a boy is, and what a girl is, are confused. I'm thinking for a start of the last few stories that you've published**

here.

Literary preoccupations arise so naturally that they're almost like one's own personality. They are there before you recognize their qualities. I've been working on "Middlesex" for a number of years, and the pieces that have been published in *The New Yorker* have been very directly concerned with gender identity. Why this material intrigued me, why I wanted to explore it in narrative terms—well, I could try to answer that with biographical information, or sociological, or historical. I'm not sure if that would clarify anything, and I'm quite sure it would be reductive. My hunch is that I liked the idea of having a hermaphrodite narrate the book because the nature of the novelist is already hermaphroditic. You're supposed to get into the heads of both sexes and to travel back and forth with ease. This movement between genders operates in "The Virgin Suicides," too. Male readers tend to identify with the collective narrator of adolescent boys. Female readers, so they tell me, often identify with the sequestered, doomed Lisbon girls. I'm sure there are other readers who feel claims made on them from both genders. What I'm saying is this: the act of reading that novel puts the reader into a state of gender confusion. You move back and forth from the male realm to the female. This wasn't something I was conscious of at the time I wrote "The Virgin Suicides." I see it now only in light of "Middlesex."

**The question of the suburbs is also an interest of yours, and once again an interest at work in your fiction. Why do the suburbs as a subject figure so large?**

I don't know the actual figures, but I suspect at least seventy per cent of the American population lives in the suburbs. Given that, it's only natural that people are writing about them. Writers always write about where they grew up, and I grew up in Grosse Pointe. So shoot me. Nabokov went butterfly hunting in the Crimea? I sailed Flying Scots on the Detroit River. It's nothing new, either. Updike and Cheever were setting stories in the suburbs long before I did. "The Virgin Suicides" takes place almost entirely in the suburbs. But "Middlesex" covers a lot more ground than just Grosse Pointe. Parts are set in Asia Minor, of course, plus Berlin and San Francisco. And for that matter, the book, to my mind, is more about the city of Detroit than the suburb of Grosse Pointe. Henry Ford, the founding of the Nation of Islam in Detroit in 1931, the race riots of 1967—all these figure prominently. So I'd say "Middlesex" is urban as well as suburban, and European as well as American.

**If Cal had been born in Europe rather than suburban America, would she have had a different life?**

I tend to think that the contingencies of Cal's genetic condition would trump those of any other

affiliation. But certainly America has always been the land of self-transformation. For that reason alone, Cal's life story follows the national imperative.

**You've been living in Berlin now for a couple of years. And you've been an expat while you've been writing about America. Has your view of the States changed from the perspective where you're sitting?**

It should and it has. I thought George W. was supposed to be a patrician. If so, then where's the famous inconspicuous consumption? In Grosse Pointe, the richer the people, the duller their automobiles. My feeling is that the U.S., as the only superpower in the world, should act in a way so as to provoke the least envy, the least notice. There should be less arrogance and more subtlety. We should be Rome but seem like Canada.

**So, has your view become more negative?**

I haven't become anti-American. In fact, certain European columnists, especially in Britain, make my blood boil. One writer this week claimed that the biggest terrorist state in the world was, you guessed it, America. Living over here hasn't made me go that far. But the distance has given me a new perspective on my country. Certain things look quite terrible from this side of the pond. The hundreds of detainees arrested in the United States on suspicion of terrorist connections, held without being charged, and with their identities concealed—this looks, and is, very bad. It contravenes the justice that is the hallmark of the American system. The failure to sign the Kyoto Protocol, the sheer wastefulness of the U.S., where no one seems to have ever heard of lights with timers—these things look very bad from over here. As do adult men in shorts and baseball caps.

At the same time, I've lost any feeling of cultural inferiority in relation to Europe. They actually don't make better films or write better books here. I do have more intelligent conversations, on the whole, with Berliners than with New Yorkers. There is time to think here. Maybe this is because everybody is always on vacation. It's pleasant here, it's humane, but Europe's cultural moment is long over. I have a hunch that America's is, too, or nearly so. But we have nothing to be ashamed of. Our cultural expression during the last century has been astounding.

America seems more efficient than Europe. More efficient than Germany, even. The Germans are not as efficient as is popularly believed. We have bought five German clocks in three years and every one is kaput. Why do you think the word "kaput" has gotten around as much it has? Also, Europeans like to castigate the U.S. for its racial problems, but on the whole Europe remains mired in racial stereotypes to a degree most Americans would find amazing. They ridicule us

for being P.C., but they could use a little P.C.  
over here. It wouldn't hurt. ♦

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