

# BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE  
FOR READERS AND LEADERS

DISCUSSES JEFFREY EUGENIDES' NOVEL

# MIDDLESEX

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# BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

**Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion  
companion for Jeffrey Eugenides' novel**

## **Middlesex**

Published by Alfred A. Knopf Canada and Farrar, Straus and Giroux (U.S.A.) 2002. ISBN: 0-676-97564-X

Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the hardcover edition of *Middlesex*. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion for *Middlesex* has been prepared and written by Marilyn Herbert, originator of Bookclub-in-a-Box. Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed., is a teacher, librarian, speaker and writer. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

### **Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for Middlesex**

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

## You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

## How to Begin

**Relax and look forward to enjoying your bookclub.**

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more 'hands-on' support, feel free to contact us. (See Contact Information)

## What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

**INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.**

## **Do We Need to Agree?**

**THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.**

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences with us. You can respond on-line at our website or contact us through our Contact Information. We would love to hear from you.

## **Discussion Starters**

There are as many ways to begin a bookclub discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)

- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (not necessarily from the novel)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (not applicable to all novels)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

## **Above All, Enjoy Yourself**

# **INTRODUCTION**

**Suggested Beginnings**

**Novel Quickline**

**Key to the Novel**

**Author Information**

# INTRODUCTION

## Suggested Beginnings

1. Eugenides' goal was to write about the normal process of transformation – puberty and self-discovery – that every human being goes through. To do so, he chose the subject of hermaphroditism, a condition that is not treated as a norm of society, although it has existed since mythical times. He has stated that he wants to make the bizarre normal, rather than portray reality as bizarre.

**What are your thoughts about this choice of subject matter? Has he succeeded?**

2. A common criticism of *Middlesex* has been its portrayal of Cal's personality. For many critics, Cal didn't work – too bland, no personality, too non-committal.

**Do you agree? How does Cal/Callie compare with the portrayal of the other characters in the novel? And why do you think Eugenides did this?**

3. The opening lines to *Middlesex* may remind readers of the opening paragraph of Charles Dickens' novel, *David Copperfield*: *"To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born ... on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night."* Callie tells us that she *"... was born twice: ... first as a baby girl ... in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy ... in August of 1974."* It is a classic statement that will be remembered because we are immediately engaged.

**Compare Callie's opening words to the first lines of any number of other famous classics that you have enjoyed. What makes them memorable?**

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## More Questions

There are so many wonderful scenes in this novel.

**Which is your favorite? Is it possible to pick only one?**

**Why do Greek myths and legends still hold a powerful sway over us today?**

**Considering the fact that Callie is biased in the telling of her own story, is she a reliable narrator? Why does Cal/Callie portray herself so mildly?**

With the exception of Cal and Julie, the other characters are vibrant and dramatically interesting.

**Who is your favorite? Who is not?**

Considering Cal's comment on p.478 about free will making a comeback, discuss the nature vs. nurture debate.

**Has it been put to rest? Can it be put to rest?**

## Novel Quickline

Callie is born a hermaphrodite into a family of Greek immigrants. To understand Callie's journey, she takes us back a couple of generations to the beginning of her story, which starts with Desdemona and Lefty in Bithynios, Turkey. She follows them across the ocean, sees how they re-establish themselves in Detroit together with their children, Milton and Zoë, and how they intersect with Jimmy, Sourmelina, Father Mike, Tessie, and others. From the union of two families comes Callie.

Because Eugenides believes that everything in life and history is connected, he weaves together the story of immigration and birth. Immigrants are a combination of the old and the new, and therefore they can be viewed as hybrids. The offspring of two parents are rarely all one or the other, and they too can be considered hybrids. In fact, nature is full of hybrids and all are perfectly normal.





**Thanks for previewing this  
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

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