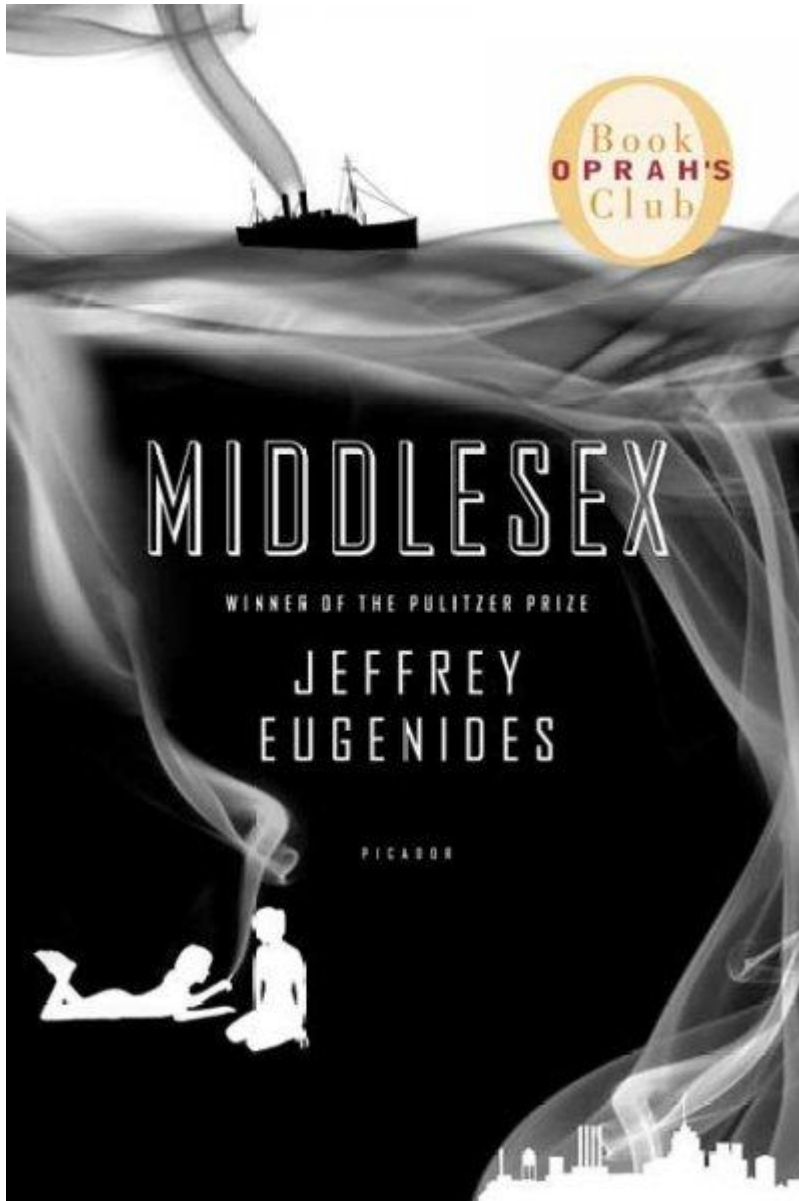


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308887>

About the Book



Calliope's friendship with a classmate and her sense of identity are compromised by the adolescent discovery that she is a hermaphrodite, a situation with roots in her grandparents' desperate struggle for survival in the 1920s.

About the Author *Source: NoveList*

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in 1960 in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan, the third son of an American-born father whose Greek parents emigrated from Asia Minor and an American mother of Anglo-Irish descent. He completed a B.A. in English at Brown University (1983) and an M.A. in creative writing at Stanford University

(1986). He later worked as a cab driver, bus boy, executive secretary for the American Academy of Poets, and staff writer and photographer for *Yachtsman* magazine. During a one-week college break, he volunteered to work with Mother Teresa in India and, at one point, considered becoming a priest. After his master's degree, Eugenides received a \$20,000 fellowship from the Academy of Motion Pictures to write a screenplay based on one of his short stories. Though this project failed to reach fruition, the fellowship gave him time to write.

His fiction has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Gettysburg Review*, the *Yale Review*, *Best American Short Stories*, and *Granta's Best of Young American Novelists*. His awards include the Whiting Writer's Award (1993), the Guggenheim Fellowship (1994), and the Pulitzer Prize for *Middlesex* (2003). He is the recipient of a fellowship from the National Foundation for the Arts and the Henry D. Vursell Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has been a fellow at both the Berliner Künstlerprogramm of the DAAD and the American Academy in Berlin.

Awards

Middlesex received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2003 (<http://www.pulitzer.org/>).

Reviews

Booklist

In his second novel, the author of *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) 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: "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." So starts Cal's remarkably detailed odyssey, which 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, Eugenides 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 * Starred Review *

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.

Kirkus * Starred Review *

The verbal energy and narrative range of Saul Bellow's early fiction (say, *The Adventures of Augie March*) are born again in this dazzling second novel, long-awaited since *The Virgin Suicides* (1993).

Narrator Calliope "Cal" Stephanides is a Greek-American hermaphrodite who eventually becomes a 41-year-old male living in Germany and working for the US State Department. But prior to that—thanks to Cal's assumed ability to "enter the heads" of his relatives and forebears—we're treated to a comic saga that begins in 1922 in the Middle Eastern port city of Smyrna, where Cal's paternal grandparents, Desdemona and Eleutherios ("Lefty"), fall into incestuous love, escape the Turkish siege of their homeland by finagling passage to America (en route to Detroit, where they have family), then, concocting new identities, marry while aboard ship. Eugenides produces one brilliant set piece after another as Desdemona grapples with lifelong guilt; Lefty works briefly at a Henry Ford factory, then prospers as a restaurateur; their son Milton, following ominously in Lefty's footsteps, marries his second cousin Tessie, becomes a hot-dog mogul, and fathers the medical miracle that is Calliope. The story is studded with superbly observed characters, including prematurely senile Dr. Philobosian, who examines, and fails to notice, Calliope's remarkable sexual configuration; Lefty's Cagney-like brother-in-law, bootlegger-entrepreneur Jimmy Zizmo; and the parade of comrades, presumptive lovers, and confidants encountered by Cal as she/he grows into gender confusion and away from suburban comfort in Grosse Pointe, survives the chaos of the late 1960s, and lights out for the territory of—what else?—San Francisco, finally making a kind of peace with her/his divided nature. Middlesex vibrates with wit, and shapes its outrageous premise (which perhaps

owes a partial debt to Alan Friedman's unjustly forgotten 1972 novel, *Hermaphrodite*) into a beguiling panorama of the century in which America itself struggled to come to terms with its motley heritage and patchwork character.

A virtuosic combination of elegy, sociohistorical study, and picaresque adventure: altogether irresistible.

Literary Criticism

Siblings of the Genus Erroneous

The Minotaur plays a small but important supporting role in Jeffrey Eugenides' second novel, *Middlesex*--he is the ostensible subject of the burlesque show that results, through the inflammatory effects of its chorus girls "in see-through shifts ... reciting strophes that didn't scan," in the conception of the parents of our narrator, Cal Stephanides. Cal is a forty-one-year-old pseudohermaphrodite who was reared as a girl and did not find out until age fourteen that--in chromosomal terms, at least--he was a boy. One of the book's most affecting moments comes at this moment of revelation, when the bewildered Calliope, armed with a few medical terms she's spotted in the notes of the specialist she's seeing, goes to the public library to look them up. She proceeds through *hypospadias* to *eunuch* to, finally, *hermaphrodite*, where she gets a heartbreaking last word on the subject: "1. Having the sex organs and many of the secondary sex characteristics of both male and female. 2. Anything comprised of a combination of diverse or contradictory elements. See synonyms at MONSTER."

The original Hermaphroditus has a cameo in Steven Sherrill's novel, as a peddler of polymorphously perverse phone sex. There's a painful moment of identification for the Minotaur when he recognizes her in the staticky haze of late-night TV: "Hermaphroditus and the Minotaur, by-products of carnality. Whore's birds. Ancient stepchildren. Siblings of the genus *Erroneous*." Cal Stephanides, too, feels the kinship. But despite these novels' shared roots in mythology, despite their similarities of subject--these lonely protagonists with their seemingly unbreachable *difference*--there are dramatic disparities of scope and tone. M is laconic; Cal is endlessly expansive and loquacious. As a result, Sherrill's novel is modest and tightly focused, a book about biding one's time, stoking one's hopes; *Middlesex* is a sprawling, boisterous epic, a book that veers with astonishing speed from wit to pathos, from comedy to tragedy. It is a hermaphrodite in the second sense: "anything comprised of a combination of diverse or contradictory elements."

"I was born twice," Cal begins: "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." But to get to the underpinnings of his story, Cal resorts to Hermaphroditus' vaunted empathetic powers and swoops in and out of the minds of his friends and ancestors. He drops back to 1922, where we see Desdemona Stephanides and her brother Eleutherios (later Lefty) driven from their village on Mount Olympus and nearly massacred during the burning and looting of Smyrna by the Turkish army. By posing as French nationals, they arrange passage on a ship headed to the United States ... and on shipboard--in an act either of triumphant reinvention or of doomed hubris, depending upon your lights--they scheme a way to be united as man and wife. Once they settle in Detroit, with their lesbian cousin Sourmelina (whose own unorthodox sexuality ensures her omertá) and her loutish bootlegger husband, Jimmy Zizmo, they are too overwhelmed--with numbing assembly-line work, with learning the new language, and so on--to dwell on their incest and its potential consequences.

Eugenides ingeniously interweaves their history with the city's: Lefty works at Ford's River Rouge plant for a while, then opens a speakeasy in his basement; when the Depression hits, Desdemona takes a job supervising the making of silk chadors for Temple No. 1 of the Nation of Islam, which was founded in Detroit in 1932 by the enigmatic mulatto W. D. Fard; the Stephanides family's fortune is made, by accident, in the Detroit race riots of 1967; and so on.

But the novel's most impressive creation is Cal, whose artful and tendentious narration--he makes no secret of his desire to see connections wherever they can be seen, and if need be to embellish or invent them--points up his extraordinary sensitivity to those who feel set apart or pinched between: the refugee, the immigrant, the mulatto, the African American, the gay person in a world of straights (and straits), and--most powerfully of all--the adolescent, with that sad creature's unshakable sense of his or her own freakishness.

The pace is fast, the prose playful, and the classical allusions are sprinkled prodigally but expertly, without false erudition or portentous to-do. But perhaps the book's most amazing feature is its high-wire act of tone, its attempt to encompass everything, its devotion in matters large and small to the cosmic Both-And. Take this passage, in which Desdemona protests her son Milton's failure to have Calliope baptized in the Greek Orthodox church:

To anyone who never personally experienced it, it's difficult to describe the ominous, storm-gathering quality of my grandmother's fanning. Refusing to argue anymore with my father, she walked on swollen ankles into the sun room. She sat down in a cane chair by the window. The winter light, coming from the side, reddened the far, translucent wing of her nose. She picked up her cardboard fan. The front of the fan was emblazoned with the words "Turkish Atrocities." Below, in

smaller print, were the specifics: the 1955 pogrom in Istanbul in which 15 Greeks were killed, 200 Greek women raped, 4,348 stores looted, 59 Orthodox churches destroyed, and even the graves of the Patriarchs desecrated. Desdemona had six atrocity fans. They were a collector's set. Each year she sent a contribution to the Patriarchate in Constantinople, and a few weeks later a new fan arrived, making claims of genocide. ... Desdemona's fanning wasn't a matter of moving the wrist back and forth; the agitation came from deep within her. It originated from the spot between her stomach and liver where she once told me the Holy Spirit resided. It issued from a place deeper than her own buried crime. Milton tried to take shelter behind his newspaper, but the fan-disturbed air rustled the newsprint. The force of Desdemona's fanning could be felt all over the house; it swirled dustballs on the stairs; it stirred the window shades; and, of course, since it was winter, it made everyone shiver. After a while the whole house seemed to be hyperventilating. The fanning even pursued Milton to his Oldsmobile, which began to make a soft hissing from the radiator.

The balance here is lovely: We're reminded of the grisly atrocities Desdemona witnessed in Smyrna, and then her fury is undermined by the preposterousness of her weapon of protest (this noted dryly, in two brief and unadorned declarative sentences) and by a reminder that she is not herself blameless. Nonetheless, we see that her protest has enough moral valence that the world, or at least her faithful grandchild Cal, bends to accommodate it. The dustballs stir; the house and its inhabitants quake. Even the Oldsmobile cooperates. The tone, as so often in this book, is of affection laced with mockery.

Milton, we're told toward the novel's end, has a lucky set of Greek Drama cuff links, one a mask of tragedy, the other of comedy, bought from a cheap souvenir shop. He wears them on the final visit to the distinguished sexologist who finally examines and diagnoses Cal's condition, and Cal finds humor even in that situation, in his mother's startled discovery in the waiting room that instead of *Highlights* or an outdated celebrity magazine, her reading material has to do with the "juvenile sexual rehearsal play of rhesus monkeys." Cal's preference in all things--and the source, finally, of his (and her) triumph--is for the complicated hybrid. As a result, his story has a changeling grace that enables it to juggle wit and pathos, tragedy and comedy.

That said, the novel through its first half has both the dazzle and the chill of the virtuoso performance. But as we get closer to Cal's fateful discovery--as the rococo sidelights and excursions into myth fall by the wayside and our attention is more and more tightly on her life, her childhood beauty fading into angular awkwardness, her breasts' refusal to bud, her delayed menstruation, her beginnings of a mustache, a nagging but not quite comprehending awareness of her strange genital bloom, "a kind of crocus ... just before flowering"--the novel

takes on new poignancy. The story of Calliope's infatuation with a red-haired classmate, The Obscure Object, and the friendship and then the not-quite-Sapphic affair (juvenile sexual rehearsal play of the American teenager?) that result, is both heartrending and funny. One rarely sees so persuasive an account of the tortures of adolescent lust, of the chaos of conflicting emotions that attend it and goad it and etch it indelibly in memory.

Inevitably, *Middlesex* will be discussed alongside Jonathan Franzen's satiric family epic *The Corrections*, and the book can certainly sustain such comparisons, but I think it more closely resembles Michael Chabon's transatlantic picaresque *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. They share a vagrant immigrant energy, a restless, uncynical optimism; Franzen's vision has an asperity, almost a ruthlessness, that one doesn't find in Chabon and Eugenides. And, too, both *Middlesex* and *Kavalier & Clay* have at their center a hymn of praise to a city. In the late 1980s Tom Wolfe wrote an essay, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," in which he claimed that American novelists (with one lone, brave exception, the author of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*) had abdicated their responsibility to write big, capacious, socially realistic novels of the nineteenth-century kind, had in particular abandoned the idea of an encyclopedic urban novel. Wolfe would not approve unreservedly of either Chabon's or Eugenides' book, but the buzzing metropolis of Chabon's New York has, I think, the kind of vibrancy whose loss Wolfe was lamenting. The same is true of Eugenides' gimlet-eyed but tenderhearted portrait of Detroit, which is exactly the kind of city Cal Stephanides is best prepared to love: raffish, troubled, heterodox, a little homely, alternating fitfully between decay and renaissance. And indomitably optimistic: a city with the motto "Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus." *We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes.*

Source: Griffith, Michael. "'Siblings of the Genus Erroneous': New Fiction in Review." *Southern Review* 39.1 (Winter 2003): 213-216. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 212. Detroit: Gale, 2006. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions Source: <http://www.picadorusa.com/>

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 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?

Multimedia

***Middlesex* Author Jeffrey Eugenides (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12485470>

A discussion of the novel with the author on NPR.

A Conversation With Jeffrey Eugenides (Video Clip)

<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2009/05/15/books/1194840219862/a-conversation-with-jeffrey-eugenides.html>

The author discussed his celebrated novels, "*The Virgin Suicides*" and "*Middlesex*," and the decline of his hometown, Detroit, with Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of the *Book Review*.

Further Reading

Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender by Bernice L. Hausman

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1118670>

(Call number: 305.3 Ha)

Her research reveals the medical institution's desire to make heterosexual subjects out of intersexuals and indicates how gender operates semiotically to maintain heterosexuality as the norm of the human body. In critically examining medical discourses, popularizations of medical theories, and transsexual autobiographies, Hausman details the elaboration of "gender narratives" that not only support the emergence of transsexualism, but also regulate the lives of all contemporary Western subjects. *Changing Sex* will change the ways we think about the relation between sex and gender, the body and sexual identity, and medical technology and the idea of the human.

The Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1078796>

(Call number: Fiction Eugenides)

This beautiful and sad first novel, recently adapted for a major motion picture, tells of a band of teenage sleuths who piece together the story of a twenty-year old family tragedy begun by the youngest daughter's spectacular demise by self-defenstration, which inaugurates 'the year of the suicides.'

The Marriage Plot by Jeffrey Eugenides

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1389845>

(Call number: Fiction Eugenides)

Madeleine Hanna breaks out of her straight-and-narrow mold when she falls in love with charismatic loner Leonard Bankhead, while at the same time an old friend of hers resurfaces, obsessed with the idea that Madeleine is his destiny.

Read-Alikes *Source: NoveList*

Lucky in the Corner by Carol Anshaw

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1190402>

(Call number: Fiction Anshaw)

Nora and Fern are just like any other mother and daughter - their relationship is tumultuous, marked by brooding silences and curt exchanges. For Nora, Fern is

an enigma - incomprehensible, unfindable. Fern has never really forgiven her mother for leaving her marriage to live with her lover, Jeanne. Their story is a contemporary one, in which mothering is a mapless journey and children are left to form themselves in the shadows cast by idiosyncratic parenting. Here, too, is the reality that perfectly reasonable people will find some way to throw a wrench into the smooth, well-oiled workings of their lives.

Behind the Scenes at the Museum by Kate Atkinson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1105047>

(Call number: Fiction Atkinson)

Ruby tells the story of The Family, from the day at the end of the nineteenth century when a travelling French photographer catches frail beautiful Alice and her children, like flowers in amber, to the startling, witty, and memorable events of Ruby's own life.

Trans-Sister Radio by Chris Bohjalian

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1167106>

(Call number: Fiction Bohjalian)

When Allison Banks develops a crush on Dana Stevens, she knows that he will give her what she needs most: attention, gentleness, kindness, passion. Her daughter, Carly, enthusiastically witnesses the change in her mother. But then a few months into their relationship, Dana tells Allison his secret: he has always been certain that he is a woman born into the wrong skin, and soon he will have a sex-change operation. Allison, overwhelmed by the depth of her passion, and finds herself unable to leave Dana. By deciding to stay, she finds she must confront questions most people never even consider. Not only will her own life and Carly's be irrevocably changed, she will have to contend with the outrage of a small Vermont community and come to terms with her lover's new body-hoping against hope that her love will transcend the physical.

Anomaly by Anne Fleming

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1272959>

(Call number: Fiction Fleming)

Set in the 1970s as the city evolved into an international hub, the novel centers around four women: two sisters, Glynnis and Carol, just coming of age, their troubled mother, Mrs. Riggs, and an elderly neighbor, Miss Balls, whose most vivid memories are of her days as a young nurse in World War II. As the two girls struggle to navigate their stormy relationship, the events of a turbulent era are reflected in the lives of all four women. Each suffers a loss of innocence - and so too does the city. Detailed, emotionally complex, and rich with exceptionally well-drawn characters, *Anomaly* is a debut novel that lives up to its promise.

Extra!

How do members of the book group identify with their own ethnic cultures? Is it a big part of your lives or is it insignificant compared to other ways you identify yourselves?

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

