

'Virgin' no

'Suicides' scribe Jeffrey Eugenides follows hit debut with an odd tale of a hermaphrodite

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Writer Jeffrey Eugenides worked for so long on the follow-up to his 1993 debut, "The Virgin Suicides," that it's no surprise he wrestled with the proper title for years.

"For a long time I didn't have a title," said the 42-year-old author from his home in Berlin, where he lives with his wife and 4-year-old daughter (both of whom came into his life after he began working on the book).

"Or rather, I had many I threw away. But then I started thinking about [my childhood] and I realized the title had been on the street sign all those years: Middlesex Boulevard."

That detail from his past proved just right for the author: "Middlesex" tells the tale of Callie, a hermaphrodite.

Eugenides' book begins with a Greek brother and sister who flee the Turks and emigrate to America as husband and wife. They give birth to healthy children, one of whom will sire a child — Callie — that their aging family doctor fails to realize has a significant

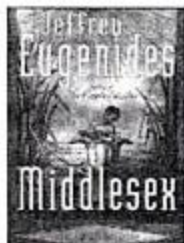
anatomical abnormality.

"I knew that I was writing something far from my own experience — not outlandish but certainly uncommon," said Eugenides, whose first book sold more than half a million copies around the world, garnered rave reviews and inspired a hit film debut from Sofia Coppola.

"In order to make it real for myself and the reader, I wanted to ground it in as much specific detail as I could. All of the framework was factual and everything inside [it] was made up."

Like Callie/Cal, Eugenides grew up in Detroit, moved to Grosse Pointe after the riots in the 1960s and lived in what seemed an extremely futuristic house (for the neighborhood). Also like Callie, he felt a particular unease at school.

"Certain things were completely analogous. I found the locker room a place of great emotional trauma, as many people do,"



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laughed Eugenides. "There was a time when I was still a boy and my friends were turning into men. You can easily switch that to the story of someone whose friends are turning into women and you're turning into someone else."

Inspired by the memoir of a 19th-century French hermaphrodite (Eugenides loved the account but was frustrated with the story because he felt the writer hadn't done it justice), he intended to write a simple book about a similar character in modern times.

But as the story percolated, it grew stranger and more epic, until it began long before Callie was born and included Greek immigrant grandparents toiling in Detroit's auto factories, running an underground speakeasy and working for a Muslim mosque.

By the time the reader first meets Callie — about halfway through the book — he knows too

more

much about her parents and grandparents, about the world waiting for her arrival, to think of her as simply a hermaphrodite.

Callie becomes real because the world she's born into is already real.

Throughout, Eugenides offers up bravura passages that utilize the language of movies to reverse the action, create a montage or show a time lapse image — in one case, of a character suffering in bed for years on end.

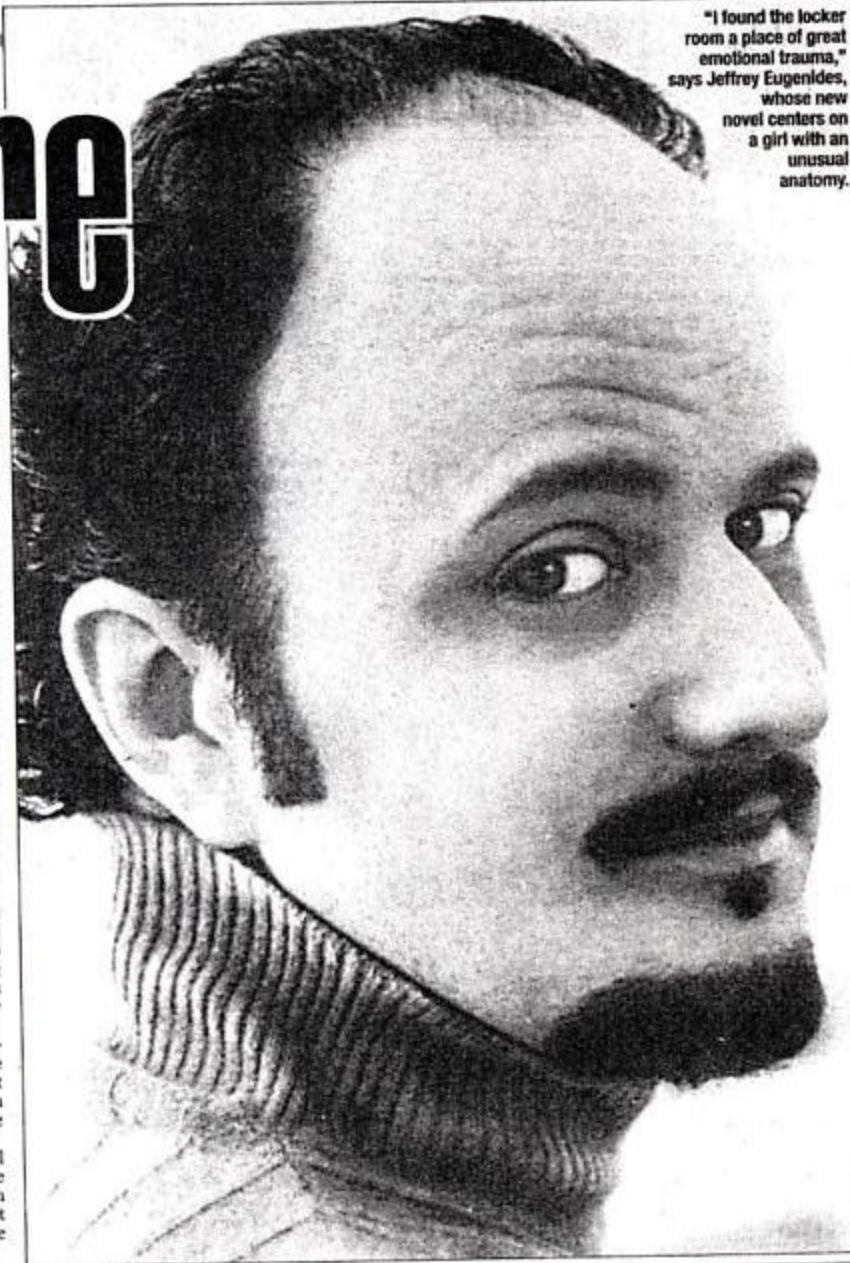
It's not a shock to learn from the author that the silver screen has made a strong impression on him. He recalled puzzling out how movies told their stories by asking his mother lots of questions.

"The earliest movie that I remember was about a doughnut factory," said Eugenides. "This was one they showed us in school, a strange sort of civics class movie that was meaningless but had a great narrative."

"They were making doughnuts in a small town in New England and somehow they poured in too much batter and more and more doughnuts were made. It was slightly fantastic but also very homespun."

Of course, the odd subject matter of "Middlesex" makes the inevitable questions about whether movie rights have been sold (they haven't) a little more compelling.

"When people ask me if it [will become] a movie," he said, "I joke that it might make a good Finnish miniseries. Or they could put music in it and it could be like 'Yentl'."



"I found the locker room a place of great emotional trauma," says Jeffrey Eugenides, whose new novel centers on a girl with an unusual anatomy.