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Daring to be Different

Imagine a world with no set standards or preconceived notions of what it means to be normal. There would be no outcasts because there would not be a traditional idea of normal. Individuality would be accepted instead of ostracized. This kind of world can only be imagined because it cannot exist; the human race constantly exhibits judgment, prohibiting the creation of a completely understanding society. Jeffery Eugenides and Jonathan Safran Foer expand on the idea of what it means to be unique in a conformist world in their books *Middlesex* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The authors introduce characters that society labels “different,” and unravel their struggles to find a happy medium between being an oddity on display and hiding behind a façade. Callie Stephanides begins her story as a seemingly average girl, and ends it as Cal, a worker for the state with a complicated and fully documented past. She lives the life of a hermaphrodite; undergoing gender identity crisis, lying, and yearning for acceptance. Just like Callie, Oskar Schell battles to fit in with his surroundings. Oskar experiences a tragedy with the death of his father on September 11, 2001. Along with his grief, Oskar possesses the brain of a person years ahead of him, always teeming with new inventions. Both Callie in *Middlesex* and Oskar in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* believe they must hide their differences and conform to what those around them deem normal. Their unusual identities force Callie and Oskar to choose between their happiness and society’s approval. As they confront their unique circumstances, Callie and Oskar learn that in order to be happy, they must disregard society’s idea of normal.

Growing up in the 1960s, Callie Stephanides lives an ordinary life. She regularly attends school, helps out around the house, and spends time doing normal activities with her similarly normal friends. Among these friends, Callie has always been the pretty one. With her dark hair, olive complexion, small frame, and sharp features, Callie does not worry about anything. But as author Francois de la Rochefoucauld wisely states, “The only thing constant in life is change.” As Callie grows older, she begins to notice the differences between her body and those of girls her age. As soon as she turns twelve, Callie envies her peers with “filled out” bodies. Sitting by the pool at camp one summer, Callie cannot help but compare her flat chest and boyish figure to the quickly maturing girls around her (*Middlesex* 283). Callie’s desire to fit in with her friends blinds her to reality. She begins questioning herself and nature as to why she does not feel what she considers normal: “‘Remember me?’ she says, to nature. I’m waiting. I’m still here” (*Middlesex* 286). Callie does not understand why the girls around her get to transform into women while she remains a little girl. She only wants to be like everyone else, and through her desperate attempts to conform, Callie loses sight of her happiness.

When teenagers mature physically, they also experience psychological development. As young kids grow to adolescents, crushes begin to form. But while her girlfriends try to impress the boys, Callie’s mind focuses on someone else, “the object.” At fourteen years old, Callie thinks she feels love. When Callie and “the object” meet, they experience an instant attraction to each other. Despite their mutual feelings, neither girl wants to feel the disapproval of society, so they cover up their desires. Callie decides she needs the comfort she thinks will come with being normal. To achieve this normalcy, Callie has sex with “the object’s” brother. This painful experience leads Callie to realize

that she does not fit the criteria of neither a girl nor a boy, but something in-between. Because Callie does not know the medical word to describe her particular situation, she simply considers herself a freak (*Middlesex* 375).

Callie's parents, Milton and Tessie, take her to New York to meet with Dr. Peter Luce, a world-renowned contributor on ideas pertaining to hermaphroditism as well as a leading researcher on gender identity (*Middlesex* 409). Gender identity and socialization has been thoroughly researched for decades and an advance in that research occurs in the 60s, right before Callie enters this seemingly unexplored territory. Ph.D Karl Bryant states, "Gender socialization is the process by which individuals are taught to learn the values and norms associated with women's and men's roles in society... individuals are born with a sex, but they must learn their gender..." (*Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* 363). This quote touches on an extremely controversial topic: the difference between sex and gender. Sex can be defined as the biological aspects of a man or a woman; most people enter the world as either one or the other. But as people mature in society, they may develop stereotypical characteristics of the opposite sex, eventually impacting gender. Gender can be changed without a surgical procedure, sex cannot. Callie; however, is born with two sexes as opposed to one. She has secondary male characteristics, but at birth they seem female. Her entire childhood, Callie views herself as a girl. But throughout her growth into her surroundings, Callie begins to acquire male traits. She learns her gender through her feelings toward others as well as how her peers treat her. By falling in love with "the object," another girl, Callie assumes she is not normal, and that society views how she feels as "wrong." Callie now second-guesses her up bringing along with any knowledge she has absorbed pertaining to men

and women. Callie does not know her sex, but she is certain about her gender: male.

The first time Callie openly opposes conformity in attempt to find happiness occurs after her visit to Dr. Luce. Callie's speculation that her particular situation defines "freak" becomes reality. By listening to and analyzing Dr. Luce's words, Callie wholeheartedly believes a hermaphrodite is the scientific term for a monster, and she knows that society will never accept a monster (*Middlesex* 430). Callie concludes she has two options: undergo surgery and blend into society, or to run; she chooses the latter.

The instant Callie leaves her parents at their hotel in New York, she becomes Cal. Cal stands firmly by his choice to flee, yet still fears the future. When thinking about his decision, Cal remarks, "I was becoming a new person...I didn't know what would happen to me in this new world to which I'd come" (*Middlesex* 443). Despite his unawareness of his next steps, Cal knows he would rather be taking risks and be happy, then stuck in an unsympathetic world. He makes his way across the country and ends up in San Francisco, where Cal thinks he can finally be himself and happy simultaneously. Living alone in Golden Gate Park, Cal can trust no one (*Middlesex* 470-471). Older men attack him and when one man tries to sexually assault Cal, he becomes disgusted by what he sees: "It's a fucking freak... Crawl back into the hole you came out of, freak" (*Middlesex* 477). Cal's attackers, along with most of society, can never accept Cal for his true self. So again Cal must make a choice: remain in one place lying about his identity, or find somewhere that he can enjoy living life in his natural form. Cal chooses happiness when he decides to leave the real world and enter a world of other "freaks" just like him.

Cal joins a freak show: "Octopussy's Garden." For four months of his life, Cal earns a living by putting himself on display for the public to gawk at. He feels no shame;

on the contrary, he flaunts his unique body with pride. After taking part in this show, Cal notes, “The monster feeling was fading,” and on top of that, his shame and self-loathing began to heal (*Middlesex* 494). The end of Cal’s conformity brings about the start of his happiness.

Living away from his family for quite awhile, Cal finally calls home and learns of his father’s death. Chapter 11, Cal’s brother, is the first person to see Cal’s transformation from Callie to Cal. Chapter 11’s relatively calm response shocks Cal, and he credits that response to the generation in which Chapter 11 grew up. Thanks to the ample amount of LSD he consumed in the 60s, Chapter 11 has a numb and open mind (*Middlesex* 514). Cal’s openness about himself to his brother lets him concentrate solely on the death of his father, without worrying that Chapter 11 will judge him for his figure. During the trip from San Francisco to their home in Michigan, Cal and Chapter 11 have plenty of time to catch up. They acknowledge the strange nature of Cal’s peculiar situation, but still have the ability to joke around and treat each other as the siblings they have always been (*Middlesex* 516).

The last time Cal had been home to Grosse Pointe, Michigan, he had Callie’s body. He knows his friends and family all remember him as a young girl, and he enters his hometown terrified to see their reactions. Not only did Cal avoid conformity, he ran away from those who loved him most. He does not like being ostracized or judged by anyone, but he especially dreads the reaction of his family. Even so, Cal remains true to himself. Returning home, Cal does not put up a façade or lie about any of the occurrences beginning after New York. He tells the truth about San Francisco and because of his honesty, the weight of the world rises from his shoulders. Cal realizes that his family, the

people who really matter, love him regardless of his differences. After the initial shock of his drastic change in appearance passes, Cal's family begins to understand that "contrary to popular opinion, gender was not all that important" (*Middlesex* 520). Cal still has Callie's kindness and generosity, only now those traits rest under boyish clothes and a short haircut. Although tragic, Milton's death gives Cal a reason to go home. Despite the loss felt by the Stephanides family, Cal cannot be happier about how they handle his transformation.

Cal takes these memories with him far into adulthood. He never forgets how he felt when he remained true to himself in Grosse Point with his family. As an adult in society, Cal knows that in order to be happy with himself, he must accept his body as his family does. He took the transformation he made as a teenager to the next level by not only dressing like a man, but by functioning like one. He no longer has to think about what a boy would do in certain situations, he acts as one naturally. Other than his not entirely male body parts, Callie has completely become Cal. He meets his girlfriend, Julie, who both accepts and appreciates his uniqueness (*Middlesex* 513). Throughout *Middlesex*, Cal tries his best to find a happy medium between conforming and completely standing out. By the end of the novel, he realizes that in his particular situation, happiness and conformity cannot co-exist.

All human beings have character traits that make them different from the rest of the world. That being said, some differences stand more predominately than others. Like Cal, Oskar Schell in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* does not fit into society's idea of normal. Written by Jonathan Safran Foer, the book follows Oskar on his search for answers pertaining to his father's tragic death on September 11, 2001. After 9/11,

America as a country grieves. The United States becomes one victim, as opposed to the inordinate number of separate individuals who lose loved ones. In order to move past this horrific event, Americans want to grieve together. Knowing that the entire country feels the same pain serves as comfort for the suffering. Oskar; however, does not naturally grieve the way society expects him to. Not wanting to draw attention to himself, Oskar blindly wades through life, doing what his mother and the rest of his community thinks he should be doing. Starting at the impressionable age of nine, Oskar attempts to conform to society's standards.

Directly after his father's passing, Oskar's mom insists that Oskar undergo weekly therapy. Against his wishes, Oskar abides by his mother's desire, not wanting to disappoint her. Therapy; however, does not help Oskar. He lies about his feelings and says what he thinks his therapist wants him to say, instead of how he actually feels. He leaves every session feeling more confused and depressed than when he walks in. When experiencing the death of a loved one, it is normal if not expected for individuals to seek professional help. Oskar tries to make it work, wanting to appear as a normal young boy, but therapy can never make Oskar happy (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 200).

Oskar finds comfort in doing conventional things in unconventional ways. Like the vast majority of humanity, Oskar grieves. The idea of grief has been studied for years, and through endless research the stereotypical "five stages of grief" came to be. An article in *Skeptics Society and Skeptic Magazine* suggests, "When a tragedy makes the news, newscasters and alleged experts recite the DABDA model of grieving. Medical and mental health professionals and the general public accepted the theory without ever investigating its provenance or validity" ("From Dying to Grief" 37). DABDA stands for:

denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Many different words exist to explain the stages of grief, but DABDA covers the basics. The problem with these stages lies in the fact that not everyone experiences the same emotions. Oskar, for instance, never denies the death of his father. He knows it happened, and he knows that his father will be gone forever. The stages of grief allow people to find common ground with others mourning, comforting those who feel alone. But DABDA serves only as an outline; a blueprint for what many people go through (“From Dying to Grief” 38). Oskar does not fit in with those many people. He has a similar grieving process; he gets angry and depressed, but Oskar uses his own techniques in order to cope.

Oskar needs the ability to escape reality in order to get through life and he has three different ways of doing so. The first of which being his book, “Stuff that’s Happened to Me.” When Oskar hits a wall in life or cannot think clearly, he writes about it in this book. He comments about events ranging from encounters with his mom to how he feels on certain days (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 172). When that does not work, Oskar experiences momentary serenity when physically taking out his anger on himself. Expressing one’s pain and self-loathing through writing both seem relatively normal when experiencing intense grief. These two stereotypically conventional ways of dealing with grief temporarily relieve some of Oskar’s pain, but they by no means make him happy. In order to make progress in his grieving process, Oskar must stray from the “normal” grieving techniques.

Oskar, like Cal, can only find happiness in non-conformity. The third technique Oskar uses to escape reality is inventing. Due to the death of his father, Oskar’s developing mind must process situations that no nine-year old boy should have to

consider. Because of this, Oskar's inventions greatly differ from those of most kids his age. Oskar does not invent because he wants to, he invents because he has to:

"I started inventing things, and then I couldn't stop, like beavers, which I know about. People think they cut down trees so they can build dams, but in reality it's because their teeth never stop growing, and if they didn't constantly file them down by cutting through all of those trees, their teeth would start to grow into their own faces, which would kill them. That's how my brain was" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 36).

Oskar's uncontrollable desire to know the true origin of his dad's death in the terrorist attack holds his mind hostage, disallowing Oskar to ever feel peace. His brain constantly works on hyper-mode, inventing anything and everything that could have either saved his dad or explain exactly how he died. On the second page of the book, Oskar says, "...There are so many times when you need to make a quick escape, but humans don't have their own wings, or not yet, anyway, so what about a birdseed shirt?" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 2). This thought represents one of the many ways in which Oskar tries to save his father, even after his death.

With Oskar's inventions come philosophical questions about life that the average nine-year old would never consider. During a school play when Oskar feels anger toward the world, he ponders, "I wondered, for the first time in my life, if life was worth all the work it took to live. What exactly made it worth it? What's so horrible about being dead forever, and not feeling anything, and not even dreaming? What's so great about feeling and dreaming?" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 145). People think about the meaning of life and similar concepts all the time, but they tend to have lived for much longer than nine years. Even before his father's death, Oskar contemplates ideas that most children would never understand. When talking to his dad, Oskar thinks, "...I got

incredibly heavy boots about how relatively insignificant life is, and how, compared to the universe and compared to time, it didn't even matter if I existed at all." (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 86). Oskar gets heavy boots when he feels extremely depressed, and he often gets depressed when thinking about ideas that seem larger than life. But when Oskar talks to his dad, regardless of the topic, he exudes happiness. In regards to his father, Oskar recalls, "Being with him made my brain quiet" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 12). He does not have to pretend to be the ignorant nine-year old the world expects of him. Oskar and his father had a relationship that allowed Oskar to be intelligent and unorthodox without ever doubting himself:

"When dad was tucking me in that night, the night before the worst day, I asked if the world was a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise. 'Excuse me?' 'It's just that why does the earth stay in place instead of falling through the universe?' 'Is this Oskar I'm tucking in? Has an alien stolen his brain for experimentation?' I said, 'We don't believe in aliens'... '...Why am I your son?' Because Mom and I made love, and one of my sperm fertilized her eggs.' 'Excuse me while I regurgitate.' 'Don't act your age'" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 13).

This conversation between Oskar and his father demonstrates Oskar's extreme depth of thinking and awareness of the world, which makes him different from the average young boy.

Oskar uses his intelligence as a tool to stay connected to his dad. When looking through his father's old things one day, Oskar discovers an envelope inscribed with the name "Black" containing a key. After trying all the locks in his apartment as well as every place he thinks his dad may have gone, Oskar decides to take a new approach (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 51). He befriends an elderly man in his building, and with his accompaniment Oskar scours through the boroughs of New York. Oskar

hopes that by opening whatever this lock may protect, he will also unlock the answers to all his questions regarding his dad. Oskar searches for eight months straight, going to every home occupied by a person with the last name “Black.” Oskar remarks, “Every time I left our apartment to go searching for the lock, I became a little lighter, because I was getting closer to dad” (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 52). After losing a loved one, people want to stay close to them. Oskar compares to these people in a sense; however, most nine year olds do not have the ability to persevere for eight months in the hope of finding something that will not necessarily be found. With all its unconventionalities, spending over half a year searching for a lock makes Oskar happy.

Both *Middlesex* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* came out after 2000. Because of this, critics have not yet written a surplus of pieces pertaining to these books. What they have written; however, has been almost entirely positive. About *Middlesex*, *The New York Book review* reads, “...the book's length feels like its author's arms stretching farther and farther to encompass more people, more life... Eugenides, after all, is an artist...” (Laura Miller). Eugenide’s ability to attract readers of all ages and personalities by not strictly focusing on one race, gender, or stereotype caused the success of *Middlesex*. Like *Middlesex*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* has received much praise since its debut in 2005. Matthew Mullins wrote, “*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* celebrates differences while emphasizing community... [It] possesses an unbreakable bond both within as well as between nations based on the common experience of trauma... Americans are connected through traumatic solidarity...” (“Boroughs and Neighbors”). Foer does an awe-inspiring job at demonstrating how people embrace different views on the same tragedy. The attack on

September 11 in particular effected different people in different ways, but regardless of the magnitude of the effect, everyone felt the impact. Along with his appreciation of the novel, Mullins comments on the story's main problem: "...the crux of the problem with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* for reviewers seemed to be the inability or unwillingness to buy Oskar as a nine-year old" (Boroughs and Neighbors). Mullins makes a valid point. Due to the extreme maturity in his thoughts and actions, Oskar's believability as a nine year old decreases. That being said, Foer gave Oskar these qualities with the intention of showing that sometimes children know more than adults, because they have not yet been brainwashed by societal ideals. Eugenides and Foer's stories have been well received and celebrated by readers everywhere. Their acknowledgement toward the "different" people of the world caused extreme success for both books.

Now imagine again, a world of complete acceptance. People can act as "different" as they want without others passing judgment. Picture Callie and Oskar in a place where they can be open to themselves in society while still being treated with equality. If a world like that existed, Callie Stephanides and Oskar Schell would not have to choose between being happy and being outcasts. Callie tells her story in the 60s, when being somewhat different becomes the new craze, but being both a man and a woman could never be condoned. People mock her, doctors prod her, and no one even attempts to understand her. Oskar tells his story after the attack on September 11, and although 2000 marks the start of a new millennium, society does not make a new change concerning tolerance. Oskar loses his father and simply because he deals with his grief uniquely and has a brilliantly mature mind for his age, society ostracizes him. In 2011, six years after

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close came to bookshelves nation-wide, much of the world still lacks the compassion and understanding to allow people like Callie and Oskar to feel safe. The human race feels uncomfortable with different. Different does not belong; it is unknown, threatening. It would be easier to put different in a corner, in the back, or in an institution. Right up front, in our face would mean taking responsibility and most frightening, probably seeing pieces of us in these so-called outcasts. Oskar and Callie, and other seemingly different people just want to be considered normal. As unrealistic as it may seem now, if “normal” did not exist, this problem would not exist. For Oskar and Callie, life can be described as a math problem; happiness and conformity are inversely related. If only humanity could understand that great minds do not think alike; if they did they would not be great. Different should not be feared; it should be celebrated. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men- that is genius” (*Self Reliance*).

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