Discussion questions

_Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family_ by Amy Ellis Nutt

1. What are some of the differences between the Maines twins? When did those differences begin to emerge?

2. Was Wyatt/Nicole’s feeling that she was a girl influenced by her upbringing or other external factors? What evidence is there, if any, that she was born transgender?

3. How did Wayne and Kelly Maines deal with Wyatt/Nicole’s emerging transformation? How difficult is it for any parent to acknowledge a child’s profound divergence from expectations? Did Wayne and Kelly react appropriately?

4. Did Kelly’s upbringing influence her decisions as a mother and her relatively early acceptance that one of her twin sons identifies as a girl? If so, how?

5. What obstacles made Wayne uncomfortable with having a transgender child? How did his upbringing and background affect his attitude, if it did? How did Wayne finally accept Wyatt/Nicole’s desire to be female? What were the turning points on his journey to this mindset?

6. Jonas says he always realized he had a sister, not a brother. Why did he immediately and constantly accept Wyatt/Nicole’s assertion that she was a girl?

7. Did Jonas receive equal treatment from his parents, or did so much attention revolve around his sibling that he remained somewhat on the sidelines?

8. The author writes of transgender people:

   “If there is an inner distress ... it arises from knowing exactly who they are, but at the same time being locked into the wrong body.... The dysfunction arises not from their own confusion, but from being made to feel like freaks or gender misfits.”

   Is this an accurate assessment?

9. Most of the twins’ classmates and friends accepted Wyatt/Nicole’s assertion of being a girl without question. Why was this so?

10. While the teachers and the counselor, Lisa Erhardt, at Asa C. Adams Elementary School are portrayed as supportive of Wyatt/Nicole’s gender expression, the administrators — Principal Bob Lucy and Orono School District Superintendent Kelly Clenchy — are shown to be hostile to Wyatt/Nicole’s desires to fit in and to Kelly’s attempts to ameliorate the situation. Why was that so? Was it a matter of personality or different responsibilities and roles in regard to students?

11. Why did Paul Melanson fight to bar Wyatt/Nicole from the girls’ bathroom at the middle school? Did his grandson, Jacob, act based on his own feelings or was he influenced by his grandfather, with whom he was living at the time?

12. What, if any, legitimate protections and/or rights should transgendered individuals expect from society?
13. While there have been strides forward for transgender rights in the past several years, including the decision resulting from the Maines’ lawsuit, there is also resistance to granting this population equal rights and protection from discrimination. How much has general acceptance of transgendered people changed in the last five to 10 years (if it has)?

14. Does the book have a message about individual rights, the role of communities and activists in changing (or maintaining) laws and policies, and the “correct” way to raise a child? If so, what does the book say on each of these matters?

15. How did the chapters on scientific research into the causes of being transgender add to the understanding of Wyatt/Nicole’s feelings?

16. What was the impact of the accounts of other transgender individuals and how/if they were accepted and treated?

17. Wyatt/Nicole writes in a letter to the universe:

   “... isn’t this the same argument that we have been having for years now? First it was African Americans, then it was Jewish people, now it’s the LGBTQ community. Really I think people just want something to complain about, so they target minorities.”

   Are there parallels between the Civil Rights movement, the Women’s Rights movement, movements for religious tolerance, the Gay Rights movement, and the current push for greater rights for transgender people? How do these movements differ and how are they similar?

18. What factors, other than the support of her family and friends, give Wyatt/Nicole (and her family) courage during her youth and transition?

About the author

Amy Ellis Nutt was born in 1956 or 1957 in Staten Island, N.Y. She holds a B.A. from Smith College. She initially wanted a career in academia but changed her focus to journalism, working as a fact checker at *Sports Illustrated* magazine and earning a Master of Arts degree in journalism from Columbia University.

She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2011 for her *Newark Star Ledger* feature series “The Wreck of the Lady Mary,” about the 2009 sinking of a fishing boat off the New Jersey coast. She is currently a health and science writer at the *Washington Post*.

She is also the author of the non-fiction books *Shadows Bright as Glass: The Remarkable Story of One Man’s Journey from Brain Trauma to Artistic Triumph* (2011) and *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family* (2015), and the co-author with Frances E. Jensen, M.D. of *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults* (2015).

Nutt was a Nieman Fellow in Journalism at Harvard University, a Ferris Professor of Journalism at Princeton University, and an instructor of journalism at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. She lives in Washington, D.C.