

Becoming Nicole Book Study

Wednesdays at 4:30 pm starting August 10

Reading for August 10

I. Prologue & Beginnings

The first section of the book introduces the Maines family and follows the lives of Jonas and Wyatt from their biological mother's pregnancy to the end of elementary school. We see Wyatt gradually transition from a toddler who likes to wear pink sequin tutus to a rising fifth grader who identifies as a girl and uses female pronouns. Kelly Maines recognizes and accepts that Wyatt is transgender from an early age, while Wayne avoids dealing with his feelings about his son's feminine inclinations. Wyatt's twin brother, Jonas, supports Wyatt's gender identity and often feels responsible for protecting him. Section I focuses on the Maines's family dynamics as well as Wyatt's experiences at school and his personal struggles.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to be an outsider? Have you ever felt like an outsider? How do you think our congregation welcomes "outsiders"?
2. Before Wyatt was born, "Wayne imagined all the things he'd be doing with his first male child—playing catch, shooting baskets, firing deer rifles." Later, Wayne refers to Wyatt's friend Leah as his girlfriend. What assumptions do adults make about gender and sexual identity in babies and children? What influence do you think this has on the children as they grow up? How can we be more aware of our own biases around gender?
3. Wayne worries about what strangers think of Wyatt. How does it feel to be judged by others? How can the reactions of strangers welcome or ostracize those who are different? What power do we have to affect those around us?
4. When Kelly first hears the term transgender, she avoids using it because she doesn't want to label or pigeonhole Wyatt. But on Wyatt's seventh birthday, Kelly finally embraces the term and allows herself to buy him the toys he really wants. Do labels limit people or liberate them? Do we need gender labels?
5. At the school Christmas concert, Wayne presents Wyatt with a bouquet of roses. Nutt writes, "A transition had begun and no one even seemed to notice." What does she mean by this? How can we participate in other people's transitions in a way that is affirming?

Reading for August 17

II. The Sexual Brain

The second section of the book begins with three chapters that explore the history, beliefs, medical practices, and scientific understandings that surround gender and sexual identity. The rest of the section follows the Maines family on its journey as Wyatt transitions into Nicole from the beginning of fifth grade to the end of high school.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Define and differentiate the terms agender, bigender, pangender, genderqueer, and androgynous. Use each other and online resources as needed.
2. Kelly and Wayne make an assumption about the judge at the county courthouse based on his appearance. In what ways does a person's appearance affect our expectations of what a person is like? Does this impact the way in which we treat the person? Should it impact the way we treat a person?
3. After reading chapter 20, think about who is responsible for protecting vulnerable students at school and how that informs the way a congregation is responsible for protecting vulnerable people at church and in their other communities.
4. As an ONA congregation, are we called to create safe spaces in our church only? Are we called to do justice in the community to protect and support LGBTQ+ folks? How might we do that and maintain respect and positive regard for those who disagree with us?

Reading for August 24

III. Gender Matters

Section III begins with a chapter about the scientific underpinnings of being transgender, and Nutt explores the idea of gender as a spectrum rather than discrete categories. This section digs deep into bullying, violence, and civil rights as the Maines family is forced to move out of Orono for Nicole's safety and go stealth in their new community in Portland. The family emerges from "the closet" as a force for change and wins a Supreme Court case against the Orono school district.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Nutt writes that "the binary view of male/female and the pathologizing of anything that doesn't conform to these expectations is stubbornly entrenched." We have seen how the binary view of gender shuns transgender people like Nicole. But what repercussions might it have on cisgender people? Does the binary view limit the interests and opportunities of all people?
2. What leads Nicole to go stealth in chapter 28? Think about the many events and experiences that contribute to the family's decision. Do you think it is Nicole's best option?
3. Nicole experiences bullying at school and they use different approaches to deal with it. What seem like the healthiest ways to both protect the victim of bullying as well as bring about transformation of the bully culture? Can we work for reconciliation between parties? What might that look like?
4. Contrast the culture at King Middle School, where students know that they will be labeled if they open up to others with the culture at Waynflete, where Nicole is openly transgender. To which is the culture does our congregation seem to belong? What about the larger community in Angola? What can be done to improve culture locally?

Reading for August 31

IV. Breaking Barriers & Epilogue

The last two chapters and epilogue describe legal and cultural changes happening in our country surrounding transgender issues as well as intimate emotional and physical changes happening to Nicole as she undergoes gender confirmation surgery at age eighteen. We see Nicole and the world around her transform.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Wayne's acceptance of his transgender daughter comes in large and small moments throughout the story. What does this show us about being in relationship and taking our time to understand one another? What do you think a healthy pattern of acceptance and growth looks like between one person's identity and another's acceptance?
2. How might our congregation better support families and individuals to move through a healthy path to inclusion and acceptance?
3. Becoming Nicole is a series of triumphs, heartbreaks, and accomplishments. Which part(s) of the story did you find the most interesting, moving, or important?
4. Why does Nicole's story matter to people who are not transgender? How does holding up the stories of transgender people help us to better live our lives as Christ followers, no matter what gender or sexual identity we may have as individuals?

Discussion Guide adapted from this website:

<https://www.penguinrandomhouseaudio.com/teachers-guide/231789/becoming-nicole/>