



Becoming Nicole Reader's Guide

BY AMY ELLIS NUTT

Category: Parenting

READERS GUIDE

Fresh Air's Terry Gross in Conversation with Amy Ellis Nutt and Wayne and Kelly Maines

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Terry Gross: Amy, I want to start with you. Why did you want to write this book?

Amy Ellis Nutt: Well, when I first sat down with the Maines family nearly four years ago, my first thought was, "Wow, a book about a transgender child, I wonder what the audience is for that?" And frankly, within a couple of minutes I realized that this was an ordinary family in an extraordinary situation and that there was nothing off-putting, nothing odd, nothing secretive or furtive about this family, that they were incredibly warm and thoughtful, and they had a child that they knew they needed to nurture and protect. And I realized that it was going to be a biography not so much of Nicole as much as of the family.

TG: So, Kelly and Wayne, what were the earliest signs that your daughter, who you thought was your son when your child was born—what were the early signs that she identified as female?

Kelly Maines: She always wanted to be the girl characters when she was playing. She always wanted to wear girls' clothes. She would put a shirt on her head that would make her feel like she had long hair. Mostly those kinds of things. Then she actually started voicing that she was a girl.

TG: And Wayne, she told you at one point, "Daddy, I hate my penis." How did you respond to that?

Wayne Maines: I was scared. I picked Nicole up and put her in my arms, and I said everything's going to be okay. And I knew in my mind, everything's not okay.

TG: My impression from the book, Wayne, was that at first you were very understandably upset at this confusion that you thought your daughter was having about who she was. Did you try to talk Nicole out of being Nicole—to try to say, “You’re a boy, you’re Wyatt. You have to act like a boy. You can’t walk around in a tutu. You can’t play with -Barbies.”

WM: I didn’t say that. I tried to influence it in other ways. You meet Nicole—even at that age, extremely strong personality. I would say to her, you don’t want to be a girl, and she’d say, yes, I do. I’m a forty-year-old guy having this debate with this little kid, and I’m losing. It was hard. You have this vision of what you think the American dream is, and your family. I’ve learned more from my two children and Kelly than I ever thought possible. And I learned that everybody needs to be who they need to be.

TG: Well, let me just ask you, did you fear that somehow this reflected badly on your masculinity? That somehow it was a statement about who you were?

WM: Absolutely. And, you know, what are the neighbors going to think? I really struggled with that. And then, you know what? When people start coming after your kid, you get your head right. This is my baby. Don’t mess with my kids. That’s probably when I turned the corner.

TG: Kelly, it sounds like you took the lead in the family in saying our daughter knows she’s a daughter and not a son, that she’s a girl and not a boy, and we have to honor that. We have to respect that.

KM: It didn’t go quite that quickly. And it wasn’t that easy. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what was going on. Is she gay? Is she transvestite? Is she transgender? I honestly had no experience in understanding what any of that meant, so I ended up surrounding us with professionals who could help us make sure that we were doing the right thing by her. Back then, the popular way of proceeding was gender-neutral—try to keep her gender-neutral. But Nicole did not like that at all. I think it was about when she was seven, we had a birthday party for her and Jonas. And we gave her all the boy’s toys that Jonas would like to have and gave Jonas all the boy’s toys that Jonas would like to have, and she was very unhappy. I looked at Wayne, and I said, “That’s it. I’m not doing this anymore. It’s not working. She’s angry. She’s doubting herself. This is not healthy. She has to have a safe place here.” So we took the toys back and we got her some mermaid things and she was very, very happy with that. After that, I was like, “I just got to do what’s going to make this kid the best person she can be.”

TG: What was it like as a married couple, during the period when Wayne was more resistant and Kelly, you were more she-is-what-she-is? What kind of tension did that create between the two of you?

WM: I checked out, Terry. I didn't know how to handle it, so I went to work. I cut a lot of trees. I road a lot of bike miles, and I did what guys do. That's really one of the things that I'm willing to talk about it because so many other people, men especially—we check out. I know I'm generalizing a little bit, but I put it all on Kelly's shoulders, and it was hard.

TG: Kelly, did you feel a little abandoned during that period?

KM: Well, I was so busy and so worried that I did not spend a lot of time worrying about whether he was going to get onboard or not. I think my biggest fear then was that Wayne was going to be like a lot of men and try to divorce me and take the kids away. And then Nicole wouldn't get the things that she needed. That was the scariest part for me, because I didn't know what he was thinking. He never told me. We had very few conversations then.

TG: Amy, I want to ask you about a medical and science question. You've written about how the medical profession came to change its view of gender, and in 2013, the Psychological Diagnostic Manual changed Gender Identity Disorder to Gender Dysphoria. What's the importance of that change from Gender Identity Disorder to Gender Dysphoria?

AEN: I think the most important thing is that it changes the view of an anomalous gender identity as being somehow abnormal. It's not a disorder. The problem for transgender people isn't within, it's without. Nicole, for instance, even as Wyatt, always described herself as a boy-girl or a girl-boy. She was completely confident in who she was. She knew that she was a girl, but she also knew that people referred to her as a boy, and that she had a boy's anatomy. This was a child who was never unsure of who she was, but she knew there was a problem with how other people and the rest of the world viewed her. That's where the dysphoria comes in—when there's a mismatch between what we expect and what perhaps the sexual anatomy says, and what the brain is telling us.

TG: You report in your book that scientists are finding that sexual anatomy and gender identity are the products of two different processes occurring at distinctly different times and along different neural pathways before we are even born. How are they different?

AEN: Essentially, we all begin life asexual, and then certain genes and hormones kick in and our sexual anatomy is determined to either be male genitalia and male reproductive organs, or female. However, scientists are learning that while that happens at six weeks, it's not until six months that the brain masculinizes or feminizes—that is, that the hormones in the brain determine, is this the brain of a girl or is this the brain of a boy? And sexual orientation, they're also discovering, is a third process.

Typically, prenatally, we develop along the same lines; our sexual anatomy matches up with our gender identity. But we know that many things can influence the environment of the womb, and the environment of the womb influences the level of hormones and the chemicals that go into the development of a fetus. And so there are many things that can happen between the time that a fetus's sexual anatomy is set and its gender identity is set.

TG: And so gender identity, you say, rests not in anatomy but in the brain.

AEN: That's right. That's right.

TG: So Nicole and Jonas are identical twins. They were both born with male anatomy, but Nicole immediately identified as female and has subsequently had gender reassignment surgery. How does the science explain that identical twins would have different gender identification?

AEN: It's a good question. Identical twins obviously have the exact same DNA. What they don't have is the exact same epigenome, which means not all of the genetic switches are turned off and on in identical ways. The explanation scientists give is that in the womb, identical twins have separate amniotic sacs and umbilical cords. Therefore, they get various and different amounts of hormones and nourishment. They've discovered that even your placement in the womb can affect the ratio of hormones and nutrients that you get. And therefore it is a different environment. The environment affects who we are, our gender identity, even in identical twins.

TG: So do you think, and do scientists think, that this is happening more frequently now to people, or is it just that more people are feeling comfortable expressing the true nature of their identity?

AEN: To some extent, I think that's impossible to know. Certainly, the degree to which it's become more accepted to talk about has encouraged people to come out. But I think the science of it is also moving this discussion along very significantly. And what scientists are now telling us is that gender isn't something that's necessarily fixed—that it's dynamic, that it's fluid. I remember Dr. Norman Spack, who's the wonderful doctor at the gender clinic at Children's Hospital in Boston and Nicole's first doctor to help her make her transition, said to me, there are very few people that are 100 percent totally masculine or 100 percent totally feminine. We have traits of both. I think people are more comfortable now saying, "Yeah, I've never felt 100 percent masculine, but I'm mostly masculine." I think it's become a more comfortable society to say that in. But I think it's also because the science is now supporting that.

KG: Kelly and Wayne, explaining the so-called facts of life to children is always a difficult turning point for parents. How did you handle that with Nicole?

KM: With facts of life, I always went with the rule of thumb of, if you can ask me the question, then you're probably ready for the answer. I mean, I wouldn't go into serious detail (laughter). Interestingly, the school that Nicole was going to at the time in Orono would not allow their class to have sex education because they did not know how to answer questions that might come up about Nicole, which is pretty sad. Nicole went through a mourning period when she realized that she would not be able to have children. We can freeze sperm, but that's not what she wanted to do. It was that feeling, like any woman who was not able to have children, that you got cheated out of something. We spent a lot of time talking about that. And luckily for us, we had adopted the twins. So it's easy for me to say, "I'm not less of a person because I didn't have children. I'm more of a person because I got to adopt you. "

TG: Because our time together is limited, I'm focusing on your relationship with Nicole as opposed to her identical twin, Jonas. But I want to talk a little bit about Jonas, because this story's had a huge impact on his life. I know there was a period when he was feeling like his main identity was being the identical twin brother of a transgender girl. And he took it upon himself to be her protector. This identity was limiting, in a way, for him because I think it was maybe harder for him to figure out who he was independent of being the brother of his sister. But it sounds like he's done really well.

KM: Yeah, I think he would've struggled with that either way, because she's the alpha twin. She's very strong, very bossy. But as he got older and wanted to claim his own space--and on top of that, now she's famous, and we've got all this going on. It was hard for him. I think anytime you have a kid that has a special need that you have to do extra things for, it's hard for the other kids, because you want to try not to leave them behind, but you still got to put that extra time into the kid that needs the special services.

TG: Jonas is quoted in the book as saying, imagine what it's like when kids, teachers, adults ask you about your sister being transgender, and you're trying to explain it all with a sixth-grade vocabulary. That really made me feel for him.

KM: Yeah, and that was the period of time when the school wasn't helping. People would tease both of them. He was so angry that he even attacked the kid that caused all the issues. He was trying to protect her, but how? "I'm just a kid. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

TG: Kelly, did you find yourself asking what it meant to you to be female, watching your daughter define her own sense of gender? I don't know how you dress, but Nicole, when she was growing up, she wanted tutus and very girlish, feminine things. I don't think you doubt that you're a woman, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you like, you know, frilly dresses or high heels or some of the things that your daughter probably likes.

KM: Right. Well, that's true, I don't (laughter). In fact, I can remember when I first started school—this is how old I am. I grew up in Indiana. And the girls had to wear dresses to school. When I started kindergarten, I was so mad. How am I going to get on those monkey bars with that skirt going over my head? I was always very active, and I liked to move around, and I liked to wear sneakers, and I liked to wear comfortable clothes. And that's how Nicole and Jonas know me. So I'm like, where's she learning this stuff? (laughter)

TG: Amy, having written the book, *Becoming Nicole*, about Nicole and her family, when you think of your own identity, do you see your own self more on a sliding scale than you did before, now that you think of gender as not being binary?

AEN: Yes, absolutely. I'm someone who was the typical tomboy growing up and someone who both loves sports but identifies as female. And there were times in my life when I was uncomfortable in my own skin. Now I realize that it may not be so all-important that I feel 100 percent female. It's a sense of relief and relaxation when you realize that the identity part of it, what we call ourselves, is maybe not as important as feeling free inside of ourselves.

Listen to the full interview at [npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/10/19/449937765/becoming-nicole-recounts-one-family-acceptance-of-their-transgender-child](https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/10/19/449937765/becoming-nicole-recounts-one-family-acceptance-of-their-transgender-child).

What's It Like to Have a Book Written About Your Family?

Jonas

Five years ago, if you'd told me there would be a book written about my family, I probably would have laughed. Even once the book was in the works, I never predicted that it would be as successful as it is, not because our story isn't powerful, but because, having lived with my family for all my life, I don't think of us as particularly interesting people. Perhaps that is part of *Becoming Nicole*'s strength: our normalcy. We are as ordinary as any other family, and we have struggles just like everyone else. I could go on like this forever, saying all the usual phrases of humility and gratitude, which I truly mean, talking about everything that this story has given to me and to the world, which I truly believe, but I'd much rather look ahead than spend any more time reflecting.

As I write this, I'm entering my second semester of college. College is an opportunity to start a new chapter in my life, apart from my family. For the first time, I am not associated with my twin on a daily basis. For the first time, I have an identity that is not immediately determined by who my family is. People don't look at me as "Nicole's brother" or "Wayne's son," but simply as "Jonas."

I am planning to double major in psychology and theater arts. Writing plays has

allowed me to express my ideas and values in a way that I sometimes have trouble doing out loud. In my first play, based on the poem “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen, I tried to write a piece that would humanize soldiers, who too often during wartime are denied that humanity. Similarly, Amy humanized my family and our experiences. She saw our normalcy and our strength. She saw Wayne. She saw Kelly. She saw Nicole. She saw Jonas.

Nicole

Becoming Nicole has something, I think, for everyone, and I’m not just saying that because it’s about me. This book is more than a story about a transgender girl. It is a story about that girl, her family, and what they have gone through as a unit, which is a much bigger narrative than one person’s gender identity. That’s what’s so important to know about transgender people: We are not just trans, and our lives don’t operate in a vacuum. That is the true nature of the Transgender Experience. I do not go through life thinking, “I’m trans, I’m trans, I’m trans,” on repeat. I love bingeing on Netflix, I’m obsessed with food and video games, and I can’t stand weather below freezing. I don’t want to say my life is just like any other eighteen-year-old girl’s, though. It comes with an extraordinary community of transgender individuals who have shared experiences, both good and bad, which few others can understand: the combat arena that is public bathrooms and other people’s fixations on what’s going on in there, the cartwheel experience of being young and feeling perfectly normal until adults tell us we’re not, the all-too-familiar question “When do I tell them?,” the decision to come out, and the few seconds when you can’t breathe before they respond to you.

Becoming Nicole showcases the experiences of just one family in that community. There are so many stories out there that capture different journeys. I highly recommend that you go out and look for some of them. At the top of my list would be the novels *Almost Perfect* by Brian Katcher and *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters. I had to go stealth for my last two years of middle school, and that’s when I read these transgender coming-of-age books. They helped me so much through that time in my life. They reminded me that even though I had to temporarily hide who I was, it was still okay to be transgender. I hope this book has done the same for some of you.

Nicole recommends:

Almost Perfect by Brian Katcher

Luna by Julie Anne Peters

Wayne

Four years ago, we let Amy become a member of our small inner circle. The inner circle that, for fourteen years, had kept Nicole and Jonas safe from physical harm, strangers with agendas, and unwelcome feedback from people who fear the unknown. The easy part was handing over hundreds of family heirlooms to Amy and enjoying

each visit as she learned more about our family. It is simple to like Amy: She is kind, a great listener, and sincere in every way. I never really thought of her as a journalist or writer, just a good friend who oddly carried a small note pad, scribbling in semi-shorthand, attempting to capture the Maines family in our natural habitat. She became more than a friend: she is a cherished family member, an adopted aunt for Jonas and Nicole.

The hard part stemmed from the fact that, from 2007 to today, my family has been in the press. In the early years, we were able to hide most of the negative impact, especially disturbing Internet comments, from Jonas and Nicole. But doing so also kept the positives from being recognized. They didn't know that they were helping to teach their state and nation that gender identity and gender expression are formed at an early age. They didn't know that they were helping to define what equality means in Maine and setting the stage for change nationwide. Because of this, when we were approached about a book project, I welcomed the opportunity to see my children recognized for their hard work and struggles.

But as we moved closer to publication date and the book became real, I started to doubt my yes vote to publish our family story. The world was going to read about our most private moments and many of my most humbling failures. As Amy, our agent, Wendy, Kelly, and I sat at a large table overlooking the mouth of the Damariscotta River in Newcastle, Maine, editing and debating what to cut and what to leave in the book, I stared out the bank of windows, wishing I could just dive into the bay and swim my anxiety away, as I had done so often when the kids were younger.

When we were finally finished, we went for walk down to the water's edge. As we passed through the pine forest, Wendy asked, "Are you guys ready for this?" I paused and said, "I think so," all while knowing that once again our family was going to be placed in the limelight, where we would be judged, ridiculed, and possibly targeted by a small group of people for whom fear still clouds their minds.

Were we ready for this? Yes, because we do not want other families, schools, and leaders to experience the pain and fear that our family and others have to endure. We want all children to feel special, to be loved and be safe. The change we hope to foster is not just about bathrooms; it is about eliminating a fundamental inequality. We want to halt the behavior that allows transgender people be denied housing, jobs, and medical benefits. Unfortunately, many of our nation's leaders have the power but not the courage to do so. In my heart, I feel they are capable of changing their positions, but in my mind, I know many are bound by long-held family values and political platforms that are not easily changed. It will require wisdom and bravery to help Nicole and her friends to obtain a safe education, a good job, or a place to live.

People tell my family how courageous we are for what we have done. The truth is that we just wanted to protect our children; when we were backed into a corner, we had to fight. There are thousands of families just like ours around the world, but they do not

have the resources or support that we had to make our stand for equality. Each one of their letters, emails, and blog posts, from Maine to New Zealand, reminds me that we did the right thing. I am hopeful that *Becoming Nicole* has started a discussion that will help the transgender community live in peace and harmony, with full equality.

Kelly

What does *Becoming Nicole* mean to my family? I think its creation was a sort of healing process for Wayne, and a source of validation for Jonas and Nicole, something that made the hard times worth it. I did not expect that it would be so well received, and I am very pleased that there are so many people that gained healing and enlightenment through Amy's words and our experience.

And for me? In the years since I realized that my sweet baby was "not like the other," there has been continuous change that has allowed so many people to live their authentic lives. This book, and the incredible response to it, has helped me realize that. I thank all of you who hoped beyond hope and put yourselves out there, with no protection or safety net, causing change and paving a road for my sweet Nicole.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. The subtitle of *Becoming Nicole* is "The Transformation of an American Family." In what ways do you think the members of the Maines family transformed themselves over the course of the book? How has the definition of the "average" American family transformed over time?

2. Along the same lines, Amy Ellis Nutt asserts that "the definition, the descriptive behaviors, the look and feel and experience of gender have all changed over time." Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, how would you say these things have shifted over your lifetime?

3. How did Kelly's upbringing affect her expectations for her own children? How did Wayne's? Discuss how parental expectations can help or hurt children.

4. What was it about *The Little Mermaid* that made Wyatt/Nicole identify with the character? Were there fictional characters who particularly resonated with you as a child?

5. Discuss the power of clothes and other external gender markers. What aspects of your own appearance do you feel are most important to your identity?

6. What challenges did Jonas face in having a transgender sister? How were those similar to and different from the challenges any twin would face?

7. Nicole and Jonas went into “stealth mode” for two years of middle school. Do you think this was ultimately the right decision for the family? Can you think of other examples of “stealth mode” or “passing” in history?

8. What was the turning point for Wayne in accepting his daughter? Why do you think it was harder for him than it was for Kelly?

9. As part of his campaign to defeat Maine’s bathroom bill, LD 1046, Wayne wrote, “We have tried to live our lives privately, but the stakes are now too high to sit on the sidelines.” In what ways do you think an individual can make a difference politically?

10. The author shows that our knowledge of gender and sexuality has come a long way in the past fifty years. What surprised you most to learn? What questions do you still have?
