

Bioethics Book Club



Annabel by Kathleen Winter *Anansi Press, 2010*

Summary¹

In 1968, into the beautiful, spare environment of remote coastal Labrador, a mysterious child is born: a baby who appears to be neither fully boy nor girl, but both at once. Only three people are privy to the secret- the baby's parents and a trusted neighbour. Together the adults make the difficult decision to raise the child as a boy named Wayne. But as Wayne grows into adulthood within the masculine hunting culture of his father, his shadow-self- a girl he thinks of as Annabel - is never entirely extinguished, and indeed is secretly nurtured by the women in his life. *Annabel* is a novel about one person's struggle to discover the truth in a culture that shuns contradiction.

Ethics Issues

- Gender and sexuality
- Patient-family relationships
- Quality of life
- Decision-making
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Rural health ethics
- Identity
- Informed consent
- Truth-telling
- Substitute decision-making

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how Jacinta and Treadway's medical decision affected Wayne's quality of life and his experience as an intersex person.
2. What values did Wayne's parents consider in order to make their difficult decision after he was born?
3. How are masculinity and femininity represented in this book? What impact do these understandings of gender have on the health care decisions that were made?
4. How do the values and constructed gender roles in the rural Labrador community (where men are "kings outside their houses" and women "queens of inner rooms and painted") influence Wayne's experiences growing up as an intersex person?
5. How do the rural and urban settings and characters' sense of place impact their values and decision-making in this story?
6. Do you think parents should choose the biological sex of intersex children or should they wait until the child can decide and give consent? What are the ethical implications of both options?
7. Discuss the aspects of the story that give rise to ethical issues related to privacy, consent, truth-telling. Would you have advised the characters to make different decisions? What decisions do you think the characters might have made in a different time and/or place?
8. Parents in Toronto are raising their child gender-neutral, which attracted media attention around the world.

http://www.thestar.com/life/parent/2013/11/15/remember_storm_we_check_in_on_the_baby_being_raised_genderneutral.html. What parallels do you see with Wayne's story?

¹ Adapted from the publisher's summary

9. Discuss the following passages in the book:

- “To Thomasina, people were rivers, always ready to move from one state of being into another. It was not fair, she felt, to treat people as if they were finished beings. Everyone was always becoming and unbecoming.” (p. 41)
- “Whenever she imagined her child, grown up without interference from a judgemental world, she imagined its male and female halves as complementing each other, and as being secretly, almost magically powerful.” (p. 28)
- “How much of his body image was accurate and how much was a construct he had come to believe? He tried to see his body objectively.” (p. 343)
- “Why would a white caribou come down to Beaver River, where the woodland herd lives? Why would she leave the Arctic tundra, where the light blazes incandescent, to haunt these shadows? Why would any caribou leave her herd to walk, solitary, thousands of miles? The herd is comfort. The herd is a fabric you can't cut or tear, passing over the land. If you could see the herd from the sky, if you were a falcon or a king eider, it would appear like softly floating gauze over the face of the snow, no more substantial than a cloud. "We are soft," the herd whispers. "We have no top teeth. We do not tear flesh. We do not tear at any part of life. We are gentleness itself. Why would any of us break from the herd? Break, apart, separate, these are hard words. The only reason any of us would become one, and not part of the herd, is if she were lost.” (p. 1-2)
- "I wouldn't call what you have a disorder. I'd call it a different order. A different order means a whole new way of being. It could be fantastic. It could be overwhelmingly beautiful, if people weren't scared." (p. 208-209)