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Kathryn Vogler

Parallel Transitions of American Towns and Families

Taking a walk back in time, one would see large farm families, small towns, cheap gas, and churches and bars on every corner of Main Street, USA. Although some towns changed over time, some may be stuck in the “olden days.” There, like a scene from the 1984 version of *Footloose*, one would see church conquer state, the Friday night homecoming football game as the most important event of the year, and required family Sunday brunch. However, times change, and expected conformity has also changed. Families with multiple cars, cell phones, and Amazon are all things that two hundred years ago were nowhere in the picture of daily life. In parallel, families change, as well. Daily life has changed what it means to be a family and how family members interact with one another.

Throughout Amy Ellis Nutt’s *Becoming Nicole The Transformation of an American Family*, family is a main theme. The novel follows an average family comprised of a mother, father, brother, and a sister all living in a college town that is conservatively run. Like all families the Maines parents are not the most “hip.” They, like families now, have to deal with the constant complex issues that are inserted into the daily lives of children. No longer is life just doing chores and waiting for the one cute boy to ask you out for the sock hop. Instead, it is filled with diverse issues coming to light for youth: anxiety, depression, and the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity. Wyatt and Kelly Maines are stuck in the middle of this whirlwind when they must deal with the fact that their son Wyatt wants to be their daughter, Nicole.

The average American family a hundred years ago, fifty years ago, heck, even sometimes now, would ignore, “convert,” or abandon a childlike Nicole. However, the Maines family is transitioning like towns have. With the growth of a city there is a more liberal viewpoint expressed, and as Wayne and Kelly’s hearts grew for their two adopted children, so did their acceptance. The Maines parents grew to accept both of their children for who they truly are. They transformed from what could have been a former average American family to the new age average American family. Their cultural instincts were laid aside for their parental protective instincts. They didn’t let their love for their children have exceptions. Instead, they “just wanted to protect [their] children” (Nutt 292). This isn’t to say that all current average American families have transgender children in them, but instead many families have changed into fostering a more open environment where they let their children have their own thoughts and experiences.

This isn’t only seen in Kelly and Wayne’s acceptance, but the openness of Nicole. At age three Nicole (then Wyatt) announced that, “...I hate my penis” (Nutt 23). This is at an age when there is no filter so it can’t be taken as courage. However, this continues on for quite some time because what Nicole feels in her heart is not what her anatomy affirms. Years ago, this feeling would be suppressed. Wyatt would have been expected to conform as it’s not quite “appropriate” dinner table talk. However, Nicole never let that bother her because now average American families listen to the problems of their children and are more open to them. This transition can be seen through towns, as well. When the Maines family lived in Maine this more liberal approach to parenting was not accepted. Instead of letting a child make their own decisions, ideas were forced upon them like that of Jacob Melanson whose grandfather was stuck in the more controlling older days and causes the town and school to be stuck in it as well.

This is different than that of Portland, the city the Maines family moved to after the Melanson incident. Here the town mirrors the Maines family as accepting and in the “now.” They allow people to be open and want them to find who the person in the mirror truly is. This is seen through Jonas’s transformation of finding out who he is other than just “someone else’s brother.” Jonas goes from being “the other child, the other twin, the one without the unusual story” (Nutt 216) to having “an identity that is not immediately determined by who [his] family is” (Nutt 289). This took time and came with its own tribulations, but this final realization and acceptance of Jonas’s “who-ness” and Nicole’s courage to embrace her true identity are what *Becoming Nicole* is all about, and what a current average American family is: an accepting family who believes in a parenting style that lets their children grow and learn to be who they truly are... an individual.

Works Cited

Nutt, Amy Ellis. *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family*. Random House, 2015.