



# The purpose of higher education

## “What’s the matter with that kid?”

*The narrator remembers her older brother’s first year at university, in the 1970’s.*

The hug I had given Chapter Eleven<sup>1</sup> in the summer of ’72 turned out to be a kind of farewell, because when he returned home from college after his freshman year my brother had become another person. He’d grown his hair out (not as long as mine, but still). He’d started learning the guitar. Perched on his nose was a pair of granny glasses and instead of straight legs he now wore faded bell-bottom jeans. The members of my family have always had a knack for self-transformation. While I finished my first year at Baker and Inglis and began my second, while I went from being a seventh-grader to an alarmingly tall eighth-grader, Chapter Eleven, up at college, went from science geek to John Lennon look-alike.

He bought a motorcycle. He started meditating. He claimed to understand *2001: A Space Odyssey*, even the ending. But it wasn’t until Chapter Eleven descended into the basement to play Ping-Pong with Milton<sup>2</sup> that I understood what was behind all this. We’d had a Ping-Pong table for years, but so far, no matter how much my brother or I practiced, we had never come close to beating Milton. [...] But that summer, something was different. When Milton used his extra-fast serve, Chapter Eleven returned it with a minimum of effort. When Milton employed the “English” he’d learned in the Navy, Chapter Eleven counter-spun. Even when Milton smashed a winner across the table, Chapter Eleven, with stupendous reflexes, sent it back where it came from. Milton began to sweat. His face turned red. Chapter Eleven remained cool. [...] “Go!” I cheered him on. “Beat Dad!” 12-12. 12-14. 14-15. 17-18. 18-21! Chapter Eleven had done it! He’d beaten Milton! [...]

“What’s the matter with that kid?” I heard my father ask my mother through the wall separating our rooms. “Now he’s talking about dropping out of engineering. Says it’s too boring.”

“It’s just a stage. It’ll pass.”

“It better.”

Shortly thereafter, Chapter Eleven had returned to college. He hadn’t come back for Thanksgiving. And so, as Christmas of ’73 approached, we all wondered what he would be like when we saw him again.

We quickly found out. As my father had feared, Chapter Eleven had scuttled his plans to become an engineer. Now, he informed us, he was majoring in anthropology.

As part of an assignment for one of his courses, Chapter Eleven conducted what he called “fieldwork” during most of that vacation. He carried a tape recorder around with him, recording everything we said. He took notes on our “ideation systems”<sup>3</sup> and “rituals of kin bonding”. He said almost nothing to himself, claiming that he didn’t want to influence the findings. Every now and then, however, while observing our extended family eat and joke and argue, Chapter Eleven would let out a laugh, a private Eureka that made him fall back in his chair and lift his Earth shoes<sup>4</sup> off the floor. Then he would lean forward and begin writing madly in his notebook.

As I’ve mentioned, my brother didn’t pay much attention to me while we were growing up. That weekend, however, spurred on by his new mania for observation, Chapter Eleven took a new interest in me.

Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (2003)

**1. Chapter Eleven:** the narrator’s brother’s nickname

**2. Milton:** the father

**3. ideation systems:** how ideas are formed in a given community

**4. Earth shoes:** developed by yoga instructor designed to mimic walking barefoot in the sand; part of the “casual revolution” started on campuses in 1970s