

Editor's comment

On being a woman



BRIDGET FARHAM

ugqirha@iafrica.com

In the novel *Middlesex* Jeffrey Eugenides describes a person, Calliope, who was raised as a girl, but, at puberty, started to realise that all was not well. No breasts, no hips, no monthly blood – although to avoid a visit to a specialist ‘she’ lied to her mother about this.

The novel is about someone with 5-alpha-reductase deficiency, i.e. chromosomally male, but with genitalia so ambiguous that at birth Calliope was assumed to be a girl. For the initial stages of her life this worked. She was pretty, she thought like a girl, and generally behaved as all expected her to. However, puberty changed all that. Not only could she see that she was not made like the other girls at her all-girls private school, but she also started to become sexually attracted to girls.

A visit to a self-proclaimed gender specialist changed all that. Calliope ran away and became Cal – and started a new life as a man.

It is quite likely that Caster Semenya has a similar condition, although these enzyme deficiencies are mercifully rare. Born into a relatively unsophisticated environment, her no doubt ambiguous genitalia will have been assumed to be female. And as a child, I am sure that she looked as female

as any other little girl. However, she has apparently, since puberty, also suffered from constant queries about her gender – and her appearance is, to me at least, frankly male. In any other person lack of feminisation at puberty would probably have resulted in investigations that would have led to the discovery of her intersex condition and, it is hoped, treatment. But for this poor woman there was another route because of her athletic prowess, which is probably independent of her condition, but which has led her into a morass of political double-speak and emotional turmoil.

There are a number of issues around her case. The first and probably the most important is that her medical confidentiality has been breached in a truly appalling manner. Gender testing – in the way that it has been conducted in Semenya – is apparently no longer a feature of international athletics. The issue is one of unfair advantage. So a medical investigation into her physiology and genetics should never have been made public. The media have played an ignominious role in this, but so too have Athletics South Africa (ASA) and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF).

Given that Semenya has always been questioned about her gender and that someone, somewhere, must have known that something was wrong, it is becoming hard to believe that ASA have not simply exploited Semenya for their own end. They have consistently denied and obfuscated attempts by the IAAF to clarify Semenya’s status, and recent newspaper reports suggest that, as is all too frequent in South Africa, ASA are refusing to be held accountable for anything to do with Semenya. Politicians are having a field day – yet again raising the race card at every turn – and harping on about ‘colonialism and imperialism’.

It is likely that Semenya’s career as an athlete of international standing is over – if only because of the adverse publicity now surrounding her as a result of her country’s inability to behave in a rational manner. Quite how she is going to be able to start to deal with the issue of her intersex status and the direction that she may now want to go is difficult to envisage. One can only hope that once the medical details are clarified she is finally treated as she should be and given the opportunity to make her own decisions.