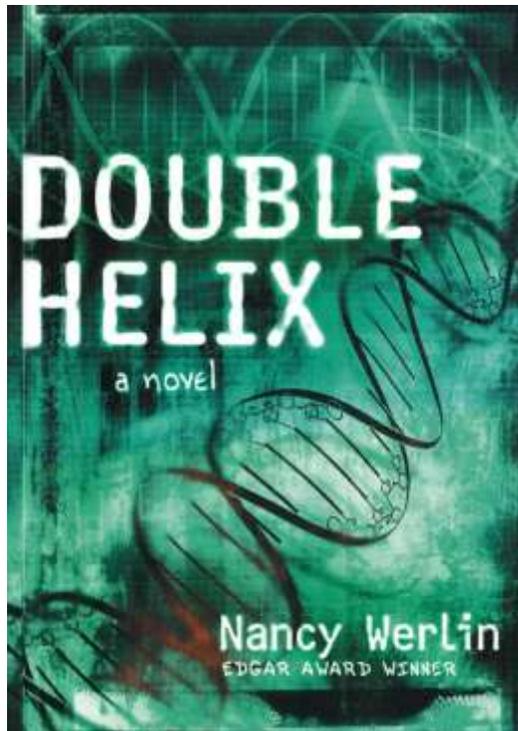


## Double Helix by Nancy Werlin

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### What's It About?

Eighteen year old Eli Samuels has just graduated from high school and lucked into a job at Wyatt Transgenics—offered to him by Dr. Quincy Wyatt, the legendary molecular biologist. The salary is substantial, the work is interesting, and Dr. Wyatt seems to be paying special attention to Eli.

Is it too good to be true? Eli's girlfriend doesn't think so, but his father is vehemently against his taking the job and won't explain why. Eli knows that there's some connection between Dr. Wyatt and his parents—something too painful for his father to discuss. Something to do with his mother, who is now debilitated by Huntington's disease. As Eli works at the lab, and spends time with Dr. Wyatt, he begins to uncover some disconcerting information—about himself.

Suspenseful and eloquent, with a hair-raising conclusion, *Double Helix* explores identity, intimacy, and the complicated ethics of genetic engineering. It is speculative fiction about current science.

- A *School Library Journal* Best Book of 2004
- An ALA *Booklist* Editor's Choice for 2004

### Inspiration

*Double Helix* is a suspense thriller set in the contemporary world of biotechnology, and it's also a love story about Eli and his girlfriend, Viv—but it's also a family story. In particular, it's a father-son story. And that, rather than in news stories about genetics, is where the novel had its start.

Originally, I imagined a triangle in which two men, Jonathan Samuels and Dr. Quincy Wyatt, struggle for the soul of the novel's hero, eighteen-year old Eli Samuels. Which man's influence will form Eli? I wondered. To whom will he pledge his future and his loyalty?

But then, as I wrote, it became apparent that the tie between Eli and Jonathan, the man who raised him (and who may, or may not, be genetically connected to him), was so strong that Dr. Wyatt hadn't a hope of interfering. Eli has many issues with Jonathan, and the anger and distrust between them as the novel begins is real—but nonetheless their bond is unbreakable. And so my

original plan for the novel had to go out the window, and *Double Helix* became in part the story of the strong and mysterious connection of love and loyalty between son and father. Genetics be damned.

And yet, at the same time, genetics were and are obviously important to the genesis of the novel. Nothing in *Double Helix* is imaginary science; the novel reflects the current state of development in human molecular biology. I believe—as Eli Samuels comes to believe—that it's our duty as human beings to pay a lot more attention to this than we have done thus far.

More particularly, I believe that we must make sure that the next generation is educated about the choices they will certainly face. I hope our children will not do as we adults have done so far, and risk leaving these decisions and choices in the sole hands of the scientists and politicians. My biggest hope, of course—and this is why I wrote *Double Helix*—is that the book might help to trigger that discussion.

## Discussion Questions

(by Dr. Joni Richards Bodart & Nancy Werlin)

- Both Kayla and Eli are gifted athletes, extremely intelligent, and unusually attractive. Discuss some of the reasons why they might share these characteristics.
- Compare and contrast Dr. Wyatt's and Dr. Fukuyama's philosophies about genetic engineering, explaining which perspective makes more sense to you.
- After spending time with Wyatt and Kayla, Eli is unable to reconnect with Viv. Explain your perception of his state of mind at that point and why he reacted in the way that he did.
- Kayla grew up with knowledge about herself that Eli's parents kept from him. Discuss how you think having that knowledge affected her life and her relationships with Wyatt and Eli.
- Discuss how Eli's life might have been different had he grown up with the knowledge about himself and Wyatt that Kayla did.
- Viv and Eli disagree about the place that trust and openness play in a relationship. Explain both perspectives and discuss which one is more likely to enhance an intimate relationship and why.
- Compare and contrast Quincy Wyatt and Jonathan Samuels, discussing their philosophies of life, their ethics, and their relationships with Eli.
- The people in this book all believe that at one time or another their actions are moral and ethical. Choose the persons who you think were the most and least morally and ethically correct or appropriate, and explain why you chose them.
- Several people in this book go to a great deal of effort to keep secrets from each other. Discuss how lives would have been changed had some of those secrets not been kept.

- Share your philosophy about the ethics of creating human life in a laboratory environment. Will humans ever become their own creations?
- Examine the relationship between Eli and his father, and discuss how it changed at crucial turning points, for instance when Eli found the letter, when he decided to work for Wyatt Transgenics, when Jonathan met Viv, and several other situations.
- Genetic manipulation can take place in many ways, for many reasons. Discuss your own opinion about what is ethical and not ethical about this process, whether it is done with animals or humans.
- Viv, Eli, and Wyatt all discuss their concepts of what a human soul might be. Summarize and compare their ideas with your own, including why you do or do not agree with any of their ideas.
- Viv tell Eli several times to “Trust the universe. Everything happens for a reason.” Explain what that means to you and whether you see life as purposeful and directed or random. Do you see life as ordered and sequential or chaotic?
- Speculate what the future will be like for Eli, Viv, and Kayla. Based on who they are at the end of the book, what will they be like and what will they be doing in five years? Ten years? Twenty?
- Choose the idea or ideas in the book that you are most interested in, that resonate with you the most, discuss them and explain why you chose them.
- This is a book that might be used in middle or high school classrooms for class discussions. In your opinion, why would it be appropriate or inappropriate in such a setting? What parts would be interesting or involving to discuss or debate? What parts would not?
- Explain why you changed and how you are different as a result of your reading this book. If you have not changed your ideas or opinions, explain why not.

## Publication Info

Age 13 and up.

First USA publication 2004.

Published by Penguin in ebook and physical book. Audiobook available from Recorded Books.

**Translations:** German.

## Awards

- *A School Library Journal* Best Book of 2004.
- An ALA *Booklist* Editor's Choice Book of 2004.
- An ALA Best Book for Young Adults, 2005.
- An ALA *Booklist* Top Ten Mystery for Teens, 2004.
- An ALA *Booklist* Top Ten Science Fiction/Fantasy for Teens, 2004.
- A Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Book Award nominee for 2005-2006.

- A Virginia Young Readers list selection for 2005-2006.
- A Texas Tayshas list selection for 2005-2006.
- A Capitol Choice list selection for 2005.
- Missouri Library Association Best of the Best list for 2004.
- Michigan Thumbs Up Award finalist for 2005.
- Indiana Eliot Rosewater High School Book Award list for 2005-2006.
- Rhode Island Teen Book award list, high school division, for 2006.
- Georgia Peach Book Award for Teen Readers list, 2005-2006.
- Kentucky Bluegrass Award, Grades 9-12 Master List, 2006.
- Pennsylvania State Library Association Young Adult Top Forty Book List, 2004-2005: "Best science fiction mystery on genetic engineering in the tradition of Michael Crichton."
- Maine "Cream of the Crop" List (Maine Regional Library System's Reading Round-Up Conference), 2005.
- Missouri Gateway Readers Award, 2006-2007.
- Michigan Reading Association "Great Lakes, Great Books" readers choice award finalist for 2007, grades 9-12.
- Washington State Evergreen YA book award finalist, 2006-2007.
- Vermont Green Mountain book award finalist, 2006-2007.
- South Dakota Young Adult Reading Program recommended reading list, 2006.
- An ALA Popular Paperback selection for 2006.
- A New York Public Library 2005 Book for the Teen Age.
- A Chicago Public Library "Best of the Best - Books for Teens" list selection for 2004.
- A Junior Library Guild selection.
- A *Horn Book* summer 2004 reading list selection.

## Reviews and Praise

- "Werlin is a mistress of intelligent, imaginative mystery writing for the YA crowd, and *Double Helix* is as good as anything she's done."  
—Elizabeth Ward, *The Washington Post*
- "Mesmerizing ... appeals to reason and love for humanity without resorting to easy answers. Brisk, intelligent and suspenseful all the way."  
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review, February, 2004
- "A riveting story with sharply etched characters and complex relationships that will stick with readers long after the book is closed. An essential purchase for YA collections."  
—*School Library Journal*, starred review, March, 2004
- "With *Killer's Cousin* (1998), *Black Mirror* (2001), and now this exciting book to her credit, Werlin has proved herself to be one of the best youth thriller writers working

today.”

—*ALA Booklist*, starred review, February, 2004

- “A suspenseful exploration of love and bioethics.... Thought-provoking, powerful, and rich in character.”  
—*Kirkus Reviews*, January, 2004
- “Emotion-packed and thoughtful ... taut pacing gives this thrilleresque appeal, the emotional intensity and contemporary plausibility will suck in even readers usually skittish about speculative fiction, and the challenging exploration of genetic ethics will definitely prompt some thoughtful discussion. Recommended.”  
—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, February, 2004
- “A tense medical thriller [that] raises fascinating ethical questions.”  
—*The Horn Book Magazine*, May/June 2004
- “Mesmerizing ... much more than a mystery.”  
—*The Sacramento Bee*
- “The pace here is fast and the problems ethically complicated. Likely to spark discussion.”  
—*The Chicago Tribune*
- “A suspenseful story that's intelligent, too.”  
—*The Orange County Register*
- “Even if the only thing you know about DNA is that it's used to catch criminals on CSI, you must pick up this book.”  
—*Teenreads.com*
- “Teenagers and adults alike will be riveted.”  
—*The Daily Star, Oneonta, NY*
- “This book is great! It really drew me in. Rating: 10 on a scale of 1-10.”  
—*Matt Nover, 15, Fort Worth Star-Telegram*
- Audiobook: “A suspenseful thriller whose seamless boundary between science and fiction keeps listeners totally involved. Read by Scott Shina, this audio version is engaging and exciting.”  
—*School Library Journal*
- Audiobook: “Scott Shina moves this thriller along with a thoughtful voice well matched to its troubled 18-year-old protagonist. He also makes solid vocal distinctions for other key characters, male and female alike, playing his voice to the building of suspense.” —  
*Audiofile*