

**T**he *Virgin Suicides* (1993), a mournful story of adolescence, death, and innocence lost, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Middlesex* (2002), a tale of gender transformation and the Greek American experience, earned Jeffrey Eugenides (1960-) critical acclaim as a writer. His third novel, *The Marriage Plot* (which we will review in our Jan/Feb 2012 issue), evaluates the notion of modern-day marriage. Despite being seemingly disparate themes, desire and the pursuit of love tie Eugenides' works together. "All my books are about people bedeviled by desire, either in love or in love with love," Eugenides told *Bookmarks*. "So I've been told, anyway. Describing one's work is a lot like describing one's personality: it's a lot more obvious to others. More concretely, my books have all been about Detroit or a place like it, and have involved young people confronting their destinies."

**EUGENIDES GREW UP IN DETROIT** and its suburb, Grosse Pointe. Indeed, the city's rise, its auto industry, its notorious race riots, and its economic decline in the 20th century figure prominently in his work, often as a stand-in for America. So, too, does Eugenides' Greek heritage (though he had to research his grandparents' customs, since his family had fully assimilated to American culture) and his schooling; he graduated from Brown University, the partial setting of *The Marriage Plot*, in 1983 and later earned a master's in creative writing from Stanford University. Although his novels have made him a literary superstar, Eugenides started his writing career with short stories that possess a "Nabokovian gift for combining the prurient with the tragic," a gift seen in his novels as well (Barnes & Noble Review). After spending several years in Berlin, Eugenides currently lives with his wife and daughter in Princeton, New Jersey, where he teaches creative writing.

## THE DEBUT NOVEL (AND MOVIE)

### The Virgin Suicides (1993)

This dreamlike, coming-of-age novel about lust, love, adolescent angst, loss, and memory originally appeared as an award-winning short story in *The Paris Review*. Set in suburban America in the 1970s, the story is told in the first person plural by a group of nosy, immature teenage boys—a Greek chorus, of sorts—who, 20 years later and middle-aged, remain obsessed with the tragedies they witnessed.

**THE STORY:** In the wealthy suburb of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, the five teenage Lisbon sisters—charismatic, mysterious, beautiful, isolated—are the objects of desire of the neighborhood boys. They are also suicidal. "On the



morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide," the novel opens, "... the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope." The first to go is Cecilia, but it's the 14-year-old Lux who takes center stage as she provokes the local heartthrob and defies her controlling Catholic mother. Permanently grounded after Lux breaks curfew, the sisters become even more reclusive as their family falls apart. Over the course of a year, the high school boys, now middle-aged men, narrate the sisters' macabre story using collected "evidence" to piece together the puzzle of their short, tragic lives. But some pieces remain missing, never to be found.

**"Their suicides become a symbol of the innocence lost as adolescents are initiated into the sad complexities of grown-up life, and the lost, dying dreams of a community that finds its collective dreams of safety spinning out of reach. ... By turns lyrical and portentous, ferocious and elegiac, *The Virgin Suicides* insinuates itself into our minds as a small but powerful opera in the unexpected form of a novel."** MICHIKO

KAKUTANI, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 3/19/93

**"Mr. Eugenides is blessed with the storyteller's most magical gift, the ability to transform the mundane into the extraordinary. ... [But he never answers] the question of why those poor girls have stayed so mesmerizing, for so long, to so many people."** SUZANNE BERNE, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 4/25/93

**THE MOVIE:** *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), directed by Sofia Coppola and starring Kirsten Dunst, Josh Hartnett, and James Woods.

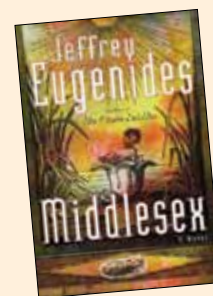
## THE PULITZER PRIZE

### Middlesex (2002)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE, OPRAH BOOK CLUB SELECTION

Eugenides based his best-selling second novel, a bildungsroman, a family saga, and an intergenerational immigrant drama, on aspects of his Greek heritage and life in Detroit. It asks spellbinding questions about genetic mutation, the malleability of gender and identity, and the re-creation of reality as the young narrator first finds herself—and then himself. As Eugenides writes, the novel is a "roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time."

**THE STORY:** "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974." So narrates Cal Stephanides ("Callie"), a hermaphrodite of Greek descent,



A black and white fashion photograph of a man with a goatee and slicked-back hair, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a patterned long-sleeved shirt under a dark vest, with a dark jacket slung over his left shoulder. He is holding a dark book or folder in his left hand. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a building.

**Jeffrey  
Eugenides**

BY JESSICA TEISCH

as he explains the condition that caused him to have feminine traits at birth. The first half of the novel relates his backstory: Greek grandparents who escape war-torn Turkey for America marry each other despite being brother and sister, assimilate, make their way in 1920s and 1930s Detroit, and have upwardly mobile children. The second half, set in the late 20th century in suburban Detroit, features a Cal born to blood relatives as he negotiates typical adolescent concerns until, at age 14, he discovers his true gender and embarks on a journey to understand his past and future in a bifurcated world.

**“Callie the girl’s childhood and dive toward adolescence is handled with such intimacy and grace that it constitutes the**

**emotional center of the novel; her crush on a girlfriend ... comes through with exquisite empathy and ease. Like those Greek-drama cuff links that Milton puts on for luck, *Middlesex* wears its tragedy on one arm and its comedy on the other, and its gender assumptions inevitably serve as metaphors of constraint as well as liberation.”** GAIL CALDWELL, *BOSTON GLOBE*, 9/8/02

**“This is a tale of Shakespearean gender bending, of dual identities multiplied until the reader is left feeling dizzy but satisfied. Cal Stephanides is an original, but a scion of Odysseus and Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield, too. ... It is a novel that challenges our preconceptions about gender and our understanding of the universal truths of growing up and growing old.”** MICHAEL PEARSON, *ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION*, 9/15/02 ■

## We spoke with Jeffrey Eugenides...

**BM: Which writers or other figures have been the greatest inspiration for your own work?**

JE: I was influenced initially by classical Roman writers such as Vergil and Catullus. They were the first writers whose work I read slowly and carefully (because I was translating it very slowly) and from whom I got a sense of the precision and dexterity that goes into writing poetry. In terms of novels, I was a big Joycean in my late teens, before moving on to other Modernists. I kept reading “difficult” writers for a long time, and loved and still love Nabokov. In my mid-20s I began reading Tolstoy, and I’ve always loved Henry James. Add in Salinger and Saul Bellow and you get the picture. Lately I’m keen on Deborah Eisenberg, Alice Munro, and Colm Tóibín.

**BM: You’ve written very different novels. Are there any common threads that tie together your ideas or characters?**

JE: Desire, probably. All my books are about people bedeviled by desire, either in love or in love with love. So I’ve been told, anyway. Describing one’s work is a lot like describing one’s personality: it’s a lot more obvious to others. More concretely, my books have all been about Detroit or a place like it, and have involved young people confronting their destinies, though I’m going to stop now because even the effort of this is forcing me to resort to clichés. I think you can tell that the same person wrote all of my books, however they might differ in terms of subject or narrative method.

**BM: What is the most challenging—and rewarding—aspect of writing?**

JE: The hardest thing is getting it right. And the most rewarding thing. What I mean is, there’s only one task when writing a book: to seize the reader’s attention and hold it as long as you can. To do that, you have to make your story both compelling and credible, you have to sand down the rough edges, edify yourself so as to edify others,

be as intelligent and clear as you can at every single minute—all of which requires cutting out all the places where you aren’t being as intelligent and intelligible as you might be. So it’s the constant reworking and rewriting that’s the most challenging and maddening, and—when and if you finally get it right—the most satisfying by far. Just the work itself, in both meanings of the term: the doing and the finished object.

**BM: What was the inspiration for *The Marriage Plot*? Are ideas of marriage really at the center of it?**

JE: The marriage plot is at the center of it—the plot that gave rise to the novel as a form, or at least the English novel. *The Marriage Plot* began in ruminations about the great novels by Jane Austen and Henry James, novels about young unmarried women in search of husbands. Social changes since the 19th century—the ease of divorce, prenuptial agreements—have made writing such novels impossible. So I asked myself how it might be done, honestly and correctly, against a contemporary setting. We don’t get married in the same way as people did in the 19th century. Our expectations aren’t the same. And women are a lot more free and independent nowadays. And yet we still dream about it, dream about finding “the One.” We’ve internalized the marriage plot, and now it plays out in our heads. Why else would Match.com exist? My three protagonists, all of whom are in their early 20s, aren’t anything like the heroines or heroes in Austen and James. Their world is completely different. But the marriage plot goes on, in a different way, and it was my job, in this book, to figure out how that might operate.

**BM: Since we’re a magazine about books, we like to hear what authors have recently read and enjoyed, old and new. Any recommendations?**

JE: Yes, Tóibín’s *The Master* and a nonfiction book, *The Wild Trees*, by Richard Preston, which is about people who discover and climb the world’s tallest redwoods. ■