



## The Marriage Plot

*Jeffrey Eugenides*

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## **The Marriage Plot** Jeffrey Eugenides

With devastating wit and an abiding understanding of and affection for his characters, Jeffrey Eugenides revives the motivating energies of the Novel, while creating a story so contemporary and fresh that it reads like the intimate journal of our own lives.

It's the early 1980s - the country is in a deep recession, and life after college is harder than ever. In the cafés on College Hill, the wised-up kids are inhaling Derrida and listening to the Talking Heads. But Madeleine Hanna, dutiful English major, is writing her senior thesis on Jane Austen and George Eliot, purveyors of the marriage plot that lies at the heart of the greatest English novels.

As Madeleine tries to understand why "it became laughable to read writers like Cheever and Updike, who wrote about the suburbia Madeleine and most of her friends had grown up in, in favor of reading the Marquis de Sade, who wrote about deflowering virgins in eighteenth century France," real life, in the form of two very different guys, intervenes. Leonard Bankhead - charismatic loner, college Darwinist, and lost Portland boy - suddenly turns up in a semiotics seminar, and soon Madeleine finds herself in a highly charged erotic and intellectual relationship with him. At the same time, her old "friend" Mitchell Grammaticus - who's been reading Christian mysticism and generally acting strange - resurfaces, obsessed with the idea that Madeleine is destined to be his mate.

Over the next year, as the members of the triangle in this amazing, spellbinding novel graduate from college and enter the real world, events force them to reevaluate everything they learned in school. Leonard and Madeleine move to a biology laboratory on Cape Cod, but can't escape the secret responsible for Leonard's seemingly inexhaustible energy and plunging moods. And Mitchell, traveling around the world to get Madeleine out of his mind, finds himself face-to-face with ultimate questions about the meaning of life, the existence of God, and the true nature of love.

Are the great love stories of the nineteenth century dead? Or can there be a new story, written for today and alive to the realities of feminism, sexual freedom, prenups, and divorce? With devastating wit and an abiding understanding of and affection for his characters, Jeffrey Eugenides revives the motivating energies of the Novel, while creating a story so contemporary and fresh that it reads like the intimate journal of our own lives.

## **The Marriage Plot Details**

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## From Reader Review The Marriage Plot for online ebook

### Whitney says

I'm convinced this is what happens if you combine a Whit Stillman script, Franny and Zooey, and a whole lot of beige. There's some beautiful writing here, unfortunately there's equally lot of bland writing. It doesn't help that the characters are dull either. At times, I couldn't believe that this was nine years in the making...yet at the same time I could. Let's just say the writing has a certain over-wrought feel to it.

Madeleine, the main heroine is a snooze. She's basically a stock dream girl - to quote one passage: *"She may have looked normal on the outside but once you'd seen her handwriting you knew she was deliciously complicated inside"*. Uh, how about no.

I'm not sure if this was something on the authors part to show us how much Mitchell (the third corner of the love triangle) romanticized her, but the author doesn't seem to make this clear (what he does make clear though is that she's VERY attractive). There doesn't seem to be any real life in her, as Eugenides seems to tell rather than show how allegedly interesting and brilliant she is. It's unfortunate and the book definitely suffers because of it.

Her suitors, Mitchell and Leonard seem to have a little more to them, Leonard more so - his section is where the book finally gets going. He's as vulnerable as he is flawed, and we begin to see why Madeleine is obsessed with him. Yet there's also a point where his motives become downright scary. He's pompous, but unlike the other two, he's at least somewhat interesting. Unfortunately he's given only one section of the book.

The third protagonist, Mitchell, is an intellectual religious studies major from Detroit, so there's a bit of Middlesex-like feel to certain parts of his character, as he also has a Greek background. But Mitchell has the terrible distinction of being "the nice guy" of the story. It doesn't help that he seems to be plagued with the smarmy blandness that Madeleine suffers from. In the end, I really couldn't bring myself to care whether or not these two privileged, neurotic intellectuals would ever find true love with each other.

There's also a lot of references to books and authors, like Barthes and Derrida. At times I felt as if I were reading a dissertation or a meditation rather than a book with a plot - which considering the subject matter, I suppose is intentionally ironic, but still tedious. Overall, I can't help but feel this is something only an English major could love. Definitely a disappointment from Eugenides.

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### switterbug (Betsey) says

Kafka said, "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us." Stories that bore holes, blasting through the ice and earth rather than piling more on top of a parched, idle field, has the capacity to alter the reader, produce a chemical reaction and transgress the space that has already been traversed.

Eugenides' revolutionary novel THE VIRGIN SUICIDES blew the dust off the languid spines of literature shelves and, although the context wasn't new (suburbia, Baby Boom generation), his Greek chorus of narrators and laconic treatment of shocking and tragic events allowed the reader a lot of space to interpret and experience the inscrutability of the feminine mystique. He allowed questions to be more meaningful than

answers. Although the five blonde virgin girls were archetypal, he bent the very signifier of archetype with great irony and paradox.

MIDDLESEX, a Pulitzer winner in 2003, brought intersex issues to the forefront. Rose Tremain (among others) had tackled this previously, but the acclaim and mainstream success of Eugenides' novel was unprecedented. The context of a Greek immigrant family's history (Eugenides is also Greek) and the polarized male/female dyad was praised for its social commentary, penetrating prose, and androgynous style of narration.

THE MARRIAGE PLOT is not groundbreaking or unpredictable. Eugenides makes familiar, even prosaic pit stops in this largely phallocentric, chick lit love triangle (but a loose triangle) set in 1982 on the cusp of graduation at Brown University, an academic institution which embraces postmodernism. Over-familiar themes get a boost because of the textual discussion of semiotics and Eugenides' renegade, rogue prose style and levity, making the scholarly concerns accessible and thought provoking. The best parts of the book were the academic digressions.

The story explores the thesis of deconstruction, attainment, and illusion, pursuing (that overwrought theme of) romantic love and individuation while coming-of-age within a specific social construct—in this book, the 80's and on the continuum of feminism. Derrida and Barthes et al flood the pages and add the most exuberant boosts to a long-winded, sometimes stagnant storyline of Cupidity. The narrative and plot reduce romance to the banal, and to Jodi Picoult territory, but from a misogynistic window (however shrewdly disguised).

Eugenides taunts the slings and arrows of hearts and broken hearts with such lyrical, fetching effusion that the journey is deceptively captivating, even while it ambushes you to a pre-ordained destination. He also explores the conundrum his female protagonist, Madeleine, faces in trying to reconcile feminism with her taste for Victorian love and literature, and her dependent tethering to a man-- her object of desire, Leonard. I was disappointed in the lack of new insight here, even though it was gussied up to parallel a formal construct of the title's origin--18th and 19th century novels by Austen, Eliot, Henry James, and the Brontë sisters.

Madeleine Hanna, an intelligent and exceptionally beautiful protagonist, is an archetype that doesn't really stray from the time-honored territory, so as the story progresses, she is more watered down and reduced to making stock choices. Leonard, her lover, is bipolar, an often treatable disease, with complications-- the illness seduces its hostage into grandiose self-doctoring.

However, Leonard's narcissism, a personality disorder, wasn't addressed philosophically or otherwise. His mood disorder was hammered relentlessly, though, and left nothing for the reader to imagine, which made it difficult to comprehend his charm, or relate to his illness, which eventually became stale. If the author purposely propelled us toward exhaustion with the illness (in order to illustrate its effect on others), he did a bang-up job. But, Eugenides, at the end of the day, condescends to the feminine mystique. This was one of Madeleine's epiphanies (she is talking about Leonard's male anatomy):

“...almost a third presence in the bed. She found herself sometimes judiciously weighing it in her hand. Did it all come down to the physical, in the end? Is that what love was? Life was so unfair. Madeleine felt sorry for all the men who weren't Leonard.” She also referred to Leonard's endowment as “Mr. Gumby.”

A shopworn and not terribly gifted “aha” moment, considering Eugenides' talent. Eugenides overindulges in the shock and awe, blow by blow plight of Leonard's illness, considering the 500 or so pages of text, so that Leonard drifts into caricature. Madeleine's insights, far from dawning, felt rehearsed by the author, even

fusty. Moreover, Leonard's bandana-wearing, manic, tobacco-chewing, intellectually doddering self appears to be a smarmy take on David Foster Wallace, but not very convincing, outside the superficial attributes.

Mitchell Grammaticus, the seeker, journeys to Europe and India to find some answers to his Gnosticism and inculcate the mysticism he desires; his unrequited love to Madeleine is supplanted by his ability to mine and discover the self independently, something Madeleine's character doesn't evoke for herself. Still, there is little that Mitchell says or thinks that hasn't been carved out before, although Eugenides does it with panache, as he is a first-class prose artist. There are also tendrils of his peer, Jonathan Franzen, in his style.

Just about every choice Madeleine makes is in response to men, not guided by anything individual. That may be realistic, in this story, and in Eugenides' eyes, but when I think of outstanding literature, Kafka's statement comes to mind. Eugenides' latest has been so preliminarily lauded and celebrated that it is already a sacred cow, and risky to criticize. FSG rented a billboard in Times Square, something stationary and ingrained for motorists and pedestrians to pass every day.

Hailed as iconic, as well as iconoclastic, Eugenides' achievements precede this book. For this reader, he was skating on slick and thin ice, without cutting or boring through, but with an urgent velocity that leaves you breathless and warm on the one hand, constricted and cold on the other. 3.5

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## **B the BookAddict says**

For anyone who has attended college, this will make you think of those days; the exams, lectures, life on campus, study, relationships, parties etc. The stress of preparing a senior thesis...makes me exhausted just to remember it. The scope of this novel is wide. While I loved this novel, I found writing a review is tough because it's a story of many parts; coming of age, a love triangle, college life, drama, 'privileged/underprivileged students', manic depression, travel, religion. This is all expressed with Eugenides' exemplary style, his flowing sentences and incredible insight.

Mitchell loves Madeleine and Madeleine loves Leonard - a conundrum especially since Leonard suits Madeleine in certain ways and Mitchell suits her in others. The story starts at Brown campus in 1982 and all three are due to graduate. Madeleine is waiting for acceptance into Yale etc, Leonard for a fellowship and Mitchell has work with a professor in India lined up. Madeleine is writing her senior thesis on the marriage plot Victorian novels of Austen/Eliot/James, she is financially privileged, socially comfortable; her life hasn't encountered many problems so far. Then she falls for Leonard who is brilliant, witty, a science major struggling to make ends meet. But who she soon realises has manic depression, something he has kept hidden under the glittering persona he presents on campus. Mitchell is gentle, a deep thinker who finds that religion and theology is where his interest lies. The three embark on life after college, they all discover life is very different in the 'real' world.

There is very little I can say beyond an enthusiastic 'You must read this book'. I was smitten by Eugenides' prose from the first page and missed the characters and the story long after I finished the novel. 4.5★

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## **Al says**

I'm afraid that I don't know enough about the old marriage plot novels (Austen, Elliot, James, etc.) that this one references to really "get" everything Eugenides is trying to do here. For example, I initially found Madeline to be fairly thinly rendered in comparison to the more fully fleshed out intellectual and emotional lives of her male counterparts, but by the end I thought that might be part of the point (ie. that she exists on the page only as an ideal mirrors the way she exists to her suitors). There were other things I found a little disappointing that may also be explained away, such as how the semiotic/deconstructionist thread of the first act is dropped for the remainder of the book, though the entire work itself clearly intends to fit that category. Maybe that doesn't sound like a 5 star review, but I did find it extremely well crafted and written, and the problems I have with it are more those that raise questions than just this-or-that was done poorly.

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## **Mindy says**

While there are passages that are beautiful in only the way Eugenides can write, they act more like flashes of brilliance in an otherwise dull and lazy novel.

The first part of the book shoves Semiotics into your brain and reads like the most terrible and awkwardly pretentious college courses that no one should ever have to suffer. And throughout it all, I kept feeling like this book was only for English majors (and maybe Philosophy majors), and had an agenda that did not involve telling a good story. And really, why read fiction if not to read a good story?

But the biggest flaw for me, that I just absolutely can't forgive, is how falsely Eugenides portrays "manic depression." You'd think a writer of his caliber and fame would have taken the time to research it--and god forbid, actually talk to and spend time with someone who is bipolar. Hell, Wikipedia even has an accurate enough description of the disease that Eugenides could have gone from that and not failed as epically as he did.

Furthermore, Madeline is the flattest female character I've read of late. She's spoiled and from a well-off family, which would be tolerable if Eugenides gave readers a reason to care about her. But he doesn't. We're told in the beginning she's a romantic and loves books, and while we see her bookshelf and the authors she takes comfort in, that's the end of her development as a character. Eugenides spends the entire novel yanking her to and fro, and it isn't until the second half of the book that he finally figures her out and gives her some roundness (most notably through a sort of personal in-joke in reference to the "Madeline" children's books). The one character who may have some depth is Mitchell, who is so clearly the only character that most closely resembles Eugenides in personality and experiences.

And what's up with the ending? (view spoiler)

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## **James says**

3 stars to Jeffrey Eugenides's The Marriage Plot. My book club selected this a few years ago, given they had all previously read Middlesex and The Virgin Suicides before I joined. I've since moved and not with that book club anymore, but I keep in touch with many of them. I hadn't read either book, but I did watch the movie "The Virgin Suicides" and I drove through a town called Middlesex in NJ, whenever I would go back

and forth to college in Pennsylvania. I suppose that doesn't count for much, nor do I know if it's even about that town... but I dove in and read "The Marriage Plot."

What a fun title... I had expectations of a funny romance, some secret side-action, a mystery or two over why someone wanted to get married. And some of those things were included in the book, but it's not exactly what I thought it would be. That said, it wasn't a disappointment... it just felt rather...

Part of the issue was the characters were just "so so" for me. I didn't dislike them, but I didn't attach myself to them as much as I should have. The plot was good. And there are lots of lessons and thoughts you'll get from reading this one. All stuff I enjoyed reading. But I just walked away from it thinking "Glad I read it... I think I like the author... very different from what I saw in the movie I had watched based on one of his other books... not sure where to go next."

Some people loved it. Seems a lot were just OK with, like I was. I still want to read Middlesex. Sorry I'm not of much help on this one... but I wouldn't tell you not to read it. It was clever enough to get into it and have some curiosities over how it would end up. And his language is always great. And his views on topics, or I mean the character's views on topics... oops... definitely prompt you to think a lot.

### **About Me**

For those new to me or my reviews... here's the scoop: I read A LOT. I write A LOT. And now I blog A LOT. First the book review goes on Goodreads, and then I send it on over to my WordPress blog at <https://thisismytruthnow.com>, where you'll also find TV & Film reviews, the revealing and introspective 365 Daily Challenge and lots of blogging about places I've visited all over the world. And you can find all my social media profiles to get the details on the who/what/when/where and my pictures. Leave a comment and let me know what you think. Vote in the poll and ratings. Thanks for stopping by.

[polldaddy poll=9719251]

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### **Linda says**

I am enjoying the marriage plot. Set in a college town in the Eighties, it appeals to those of us who majored in literature or did post grad studies. Madeleine's love life is often hilarious, sometimes sad. Eugenides writes great satire. Here is an excerpt:"Reading a novel after reading semiotic theory was like jogging empty-handed after jogging with hand weights. What exquisite guilt she felt, wickedly enjoying narrative! Madeleine felt safe with a nineteenth century novel. There were going to be people in it. Something was going to happen to them in a place resembling the world. Then too there were lots of weddings in Wharton and Austen. There were all kinds of irresistible gloomy men."

I enjoyed the book as it portrayed the dilemma of choosing between two men who provide different companionship. One is rather like Heathcliff, the other is Mitchell the better choice. Madeleine has to make this discovery herself. I enjoyed Mitchell's visits to Paris and India in search of himself.

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## **Gary the Bookworm says**

To compare this to *Middlesex* is a mistake akin to comparing grand opera to an intimate chamber piece. This book succeeds because it takes the structure and theme of a nineteenth century novel and turns them upside down. The love triangle which drives the plot reminds me of the Freudian view of self.

At its core is Madeleine(ego), who has spent her time consuming stories about love without absorbing their lessons about life. She falls hard for Leonard (id) and enters into a permanent relationship with him despite strong objections from her WASP parents and a nagging doubt about his sanity. Mitchell (super ego) thinks that only he understands-and deserves-Maddy even though he has never attained the status of boyfriend to her.

These three travel the world and try to sort out how they feel about each other and, more significantly, themselves. It is a funny-and sad-comedy of manners for the twenty-first century. Henry James would approve. (view spoiler)

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## **Tatiana says**

**Pretentious.** I try to stay away from this word reviewing books, because too many of my favorites literary novels have been called that and it hurt. But *The Marriage Plot* is pretentious. And also pompous, elitist, privileged and self-important.

I just can't quite believe that the author who managed to make stories of 5 suicidal girls and a Greek hermaphrodite so compelling, could come up with something like *The Marriage Plot* and think it a worthy tale to tell. A rich, freshly graduated from Brown, English major girl waffling about reading Austen and trying to get laid/fall in love/get married? Really? No amount of references to English lit, semiotics and philosophy can elevate this story from its triteness.

I mean, truly, who can relate to this novel about rich people's mundane dilemmas? All these people do is show off their sophistication and education in front of each other (and us, readers) and going through some kind of existential crises while being utterly removed from real world problems. Someone on goodreads has compared *The Marriage Plot* to *Eat, Pray, Love*. Right on the money, if you ask me.

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## **Megan Baxter says**

It's hard to follow *Middlesex*. Practically anything that came from Jeffrey Eugenides' pen or computer or whatever was going to pale in comparison. And indeed, this isn't as good as *Middlesex*. But don't mistake that for not being good. *The Marriage Plot* may not reach those lofty heights, but it's still a solid read.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the recent changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

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## Grace Tjan says

BookFiendUSA: So, how was it? My GR friends' reviews are all over the place on this one. How does it compare to *Virgin Suicides* or *Middlesex*?

SandyBanks1971: It's...OK. Not badly written at all, but nothing incredible either. I can't compare it with Eugenides' earlier works, as I have never read anything by him before.

BookFiendUSA: Seriously? You've never even seen the Sofia Coppola movie?

SandyBanks1971: Nope. But I've read the synopses of the earlier books, and I can tell you that there are absolutely no virgins, suicides or hermaphrodites in this one. Instead, we get a manic-depressive, a wannabe Christian and an English major.

BookFiendUSA: No hermaphrodites?

SandyBanks1971: No. But there is a Marriage Plot.

BookFiendUSA: Explain.

SandyBanks1971: It's a common plot in 18th and 19th century literature. Typically, there is this girl --- the heroine --- and she has to choose between different suitors, and there will be all sorts of hijinks (pride, prejudices, misunderstandings, madwomen in the attic, etc.) before the nuptial payoff. Austen, Eliot and the Brontes used it extensively in their books.

BookFiendUSA: It's a romcom!

SandyBanks1971: Something like that. The heroine in this book, Madeline, is an English major ("English was what people who didn't know what to major in majored in.") who is steeped in these books and has to choose between Leonard, the brooding, brilliant manic depressive, and Mitchell, the earnest, spiritually inclined sensitive guy. I looked forward to how Eugenides is going to use this sort of plot in a modern setting and how he is going to resolve it. As one of Madeline's professor muses, "What would it matter whom Emma married if she could file for separation later?" "How would Isabel Archer's marriage to Gilbert Osmond have been affected by the existence of a prenup? ... Where could you find the marriage plot nowadays?" I'm also curious about whether the central romantic triangle is based on any particular 19th century novel (Franzen recently did this in *Freedom*).

BookFiendUSA: So ---?

SandyBanks1971: Eugenides does use the marriage plot, but the ending is a sort of a deconstruction of its traditional form. After all, in an age of gender equality and easy divorces, how could the Marriage Plot still matter? Leonard is obviously the Heathcliff type, and Mitchell is maybe a mix between Linton and St. John Rivers. Madeline is --- actually I don't quite know *who* she really is, especially compared to the male protagonists. Eugenides gives her a pretty extensive biography, and an intermittent ambition to go to grad school and write for literary reviews, but other than that, she seems to be merely a flimsy foil for her suitors. Early on, we are told that she loves Austen and James, but unlike Mitchell and Leonard, whose lives are

transformed by the books that they read, there seems to be hardly any connection between her and those books. In a pivotal moment, she reflects on...*Madeline*. Yes, this *Madeline*, the little convent schoolgirl from Paris.

Leonard ruminates on Nietzsche and Mitchell has his Thomas Merton inspired epiphanies, and Madeline thinks deeply about *Madeline*? Why can't she reflect on *Wuthering Heights*? Or, I dunno, *Middlemarch*? Or *Persuasion*? We never learn about what Madeline really thinks of the marriage plot --- and the obvious parallels to her private life --- either (her thesis is, after all, titled: "I Thought You'd Never Ask: Some Thoughts on the Marriage Plot"). If *The Marriage Plot* is meant to be a modern reworking of an Austen or Bronte novel, this lack of development of her character is big minus.

BookFiendUSA: Okay, so the major female character is lame. I get it. I'd rather read a ton of *Madeline* books than a Henry James, though. Now, some people think that this novel is terribly pretentious, with its Ivy League setting, WASP characters and lengthy Barthes quotations. Do you agree?

SandyBanks1971: Not necessarily. I mean, he's writing about life in an Ivy League campus --- is there going to be an egghead or two, trust-fund babies, and academic egotists on steroid? You bet. To be fair, some of the kids are wealthy WASP types, but Leonard needs financial aid, and Mitchell is Greek and strictly middle class. There's lots of name-dropping, but in most cases, they're followed by sufficient exposition. The quotes are necessary to understand the characters' mindset, as they live in books as much as in the real world. And Eugenides is actually poking fun, wryly, at some of the faddish academic theories:

"Madeline had a feeling that most semiotic theorists had been unpopular as children, often bullied or overlooked, and so had directed their lingering rage onto literature. They wanted to demote the author. They wanted a *book*, that hard-won, transcendent thing to be a *text*, contingent, indeterminate, and open for suggestions. They wanted the reader to be the main thing. Because *they* were readers."

BookFiendUSA: Anything else that you like?

SandyBanks1971: I like how he writes about being in your early twenties, just out of college with your whole life stretching ahead of you. Grappling with issues, intellectual or otherwise. How everything seems to be of looming importance. How stuff happens, sometimes casually, that determine how you life the rest of your life. I think he captures that well, and can be quite eloquent about it. So I guess I'll check out the suicides and hermaphrodites.

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### **JSA Lowe says**

Okay, fine, Jeffrey, you win. You made me care about these twenty-something white college kids despite myself. Setting certain crucial sections in a) the psych unit and b) a hospice in India was probably what saved you, as well as a loopy last-five-pages accelerando during which you niftily dump the marriage plot device on its head. Also some unvarnished sex scenes and more than one wincingly convincing young-couple argument. But you know what? I still hold you to those first 200 pages of REALLY shamelessly clunky prose, and you can't get around it by having your main character reflect piously on how refreshing it is to hit a smooth passage of Tolstoy after wading through pages of notes on agrarian reform. Quit trying to

Wharton yourself, and just be Eugenides. I should probably give this two stars but I'm in a pleasant insomniac hypomanic mood, so you're lucky. No Pulitzer, though.

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### **Ed says**

Having been a big fan of Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, it's needless to say that his latest, *The Marriage Plot*, immediately went on my virtual to-read-list. But despite making many a year-end best-of list and literary award-nominated, it almost as quickly tumbled down my list as heard very mixed things about it (including the inevitable "not as good" as *Middlesex*). It only made it back up my list when it was announced as one of the #1 seeds in the Tournament of Books competition. I am glad it did. Despite it being only February, it will no doubt be one of my favorite reads of 2012.

The novel gets its name from a Victorian novel literary device: which one of two suitors will the lady end up with? At its very simplistic core, *The Marriage Plot* is the journey of a love triangle... but with modern/revisionist twist... and a satire of academia, as well as the 1980s... with healthy doses/passages on literature, philosophy, theology, biology and more. It is a very literary, very smart work. In other words, others will (and do!) find it pretentious, snooty, elitist... and will (and do!) find the tone and characters unbearable. Others might get frustrated with the back-and-forth, push-pull nature of the narrative, but for me it was intricately crafted with Eugenides painting wonderful overall scenes and going back to fill-in/touch-up with nice detail to really bring it all together.

The novel reminded me of other recent-ish reads... romantic comedy elements and a real deep affection for the principal characters of *One Day* (a book I loved, others despise)... the physical and spiritual journey of *Eat, Pray, Love* (some folks are really running for the hills now!), and very much so of another acclaimed novel from last year, *The Art of Fielding* with the academic setting, the coming-of-adult-age tale, and the exploration of love/sex/relationships. *Fielding* was dubbed "Eugenides-lite" and I certainly agree with that assessment as Eugenides is a master class vs. these other works (all of which I very much enjoyed).

Yes, it's not *Middlesex*, but I'd offer up that *The Marriage Plot* is a far richer and more ambitious work, but surface-wise slyly disguised as something quite generic. This will not work for everyone, but for me it was an evolution for Eugenides where I didn't think there was a whole lot room for improvement in the first place.

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### **Teresa says**

I loved *The Virgin Suicides* for its style, imagery and voice. I loved *Middlesex* for its 'epic' storytelling, its characters and a lyrical flight of fancy near the end that I think I'll never forget. Because of the lofty standards the author's previous works set for me perhaps it is inevitable, despite the trademark humor and intelligence evident in this novel too, that this one couldn't live up to the others. Perhaps it's just that the elements I liked in this novel didn't add up to a cohesive whole for me.

Early on I wasn't too sure about it, but continued on because of my love for his other novels. I was glad I did because I ended up enjoying it while reading it for the most part. JE's prose is compulsively readable and his characters are well-developed and interesting, especially when he's inside Leonard's head. I was thinking perhaps JE wouldn't speak from Leonard (but hoping he would) as it took a while to get to him; later, I

wished for at least one more section devoted to Leonard. The intensity in Leonard's voice was, at times, almost hard to read; but I think it was the best part of the book, though perhaps not as essential to its theme.

I was reminded of Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, though the parallels are not exact, of course.

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### **Andrew Smith says**

I'd loved the author's tour de force *Middlesex* and had recently worked through his anthology of short stories, *Fresh Complaint*, where I came across a tale that really interested me – well, in truth, it spooked me a little too. The story, written in 1996, is called *Air Mail* and it concerns a young man called Mitchell who is suffering badly from a bout of diarrhoea whilst temporarily staying at a remote beach in Thailand. The ending of the story is ambiguous – did he just die? I just didn't know, and it played on my mind. Then I discovered that Mitchell also featured in another work from the same author – this novel – and I had to get my hands on it. It would help me unravel the fate of Mitchell whilst giving me another opportunity to appreciate the fine prose of this outstanding writer.

*The Marriage Plot* tells the story of three young people who studied at Brown University in the early 1980's:

Madeleine Hanna – the daughter of Waspish parents and a lover of Victorian novels is studying semiotics (a subject quite hard to grasp, but in essence it concerns the study of signs which can help a reader to look for clichés in language and the structure of novels).

Leonard Bankhead – a manic-depressive science prodigy and philosophy student came to Brown having survived a tough upbringing.

Mitchell Grammaticus – a softly spoken and thoughtful religious scholar from a Greek-American family.

The heart of the story is the relationship between these three: in essence, meditative Mitchell loves beautiful Madeleine but Madeleine loves the energetic and engaging Leonard. But then there's a fourth person in the room in the shape of Leonard's mania, which becomes an ever growing part of the the story as it works through. Can he control his disorder through his daily doses of lithium or will it ultimately control him and drive his destiny? And can Madeleine cope with his periods of frantic activity followed by phases of deep depression? It's a roller coaster ride, both for the characters in the book and, I found, for me as I became ever more engaged in the lives of this group.

We follow their development as they leave Brown and start to experience life beyond its confines: Madeleine accompanies Leonard to Cape Cod, where he's accepted a biology fellowship, and Mitchell sets off in the general direction of India, with the aim of working in Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying. As the story played out, I confess I failed to warm to Madeleine who I found to be weak and indecisive but I grew to like the amiable, reflective Mitchell a lot. Most of all though, I enjoyed Leonard in his manic moments. When he's 'up' he's funny and quick and clever I could fully see why Madeleine fell for him. But when he's down it's a totally different story.

There are numerous literary references sprinkled throughout this novel and there's barely a moment when at least one of the three isn't reading, ruminating on the worth of a book or discussing an aspect of a book's content with another. It can feel like quite heavy going, but, for the most part, I enjoyed the academic debates

and verbal jousting. I learnt quite a bit too - I don't think I'll be reaching for a book by Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida anytime soon... but there might just come a time.

It's a clever and heartfelt study of three people seeking love and enlightenment and on this level alone it works. But throw in the opportunity to feast on literary references, ponder over the merits of various religious groups and learn of the reproductive qualities of yeast and you have a book like few others. There's no doubt a significant autobiographical element to this book too, given the similarities to the author's own family background (Greek-American, like Mitchell) and his studies at Brown, also in the early 1980's. If you've the time and the patience, I'd thoroughly recommend spending some time with this book.

**Footnote:** I was pleased to discover that Mitchell didn't, after all, die floating in the sea off a Thai beach – he survived that episode. It's not mentioned directly in this book, written some 15 years after *Air Mail*, but I was able to pinpoint the approximate point it would have featured in Mitchell's travels.

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### **H says**

I only finished a quarter of this book before I had to return it to the library (express check-out). I think it should have been called The Marriage Plop. Granted, I'm no literary genius, just some schmuck with a science degree, so I don't get all the references, but beyond that I found each character hideously irritating and didn't really care how the story progressed or ended.

The book club consensus was as follows: Some of us liked it, most of us didn't, but EVERYONE was disappointed.

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### **Gerald says**

Masterful on many levels. At first I wasn't drawn to any of the three characters in the love triangle - Madeleine, Leonard, and Mitchell. Each seemed deeply flawed, and they are. Except you read along and find that Eugenides thinks we all are, just as deeply in our unique ways, and are none the lesser for it. That's the way people are, and the way life goes. We stumble through it, thinking we are somehow in control, and it's what happens nevertheless while we are furiously busy making other plans, or simply fretting about making up our minds.

This is a literary novel, in the best sense, and I was surprised to read some critics cramming it into the diminutive genre "campus novel." That would be like classifying *Pride and Prejudice* as a rom com, which is not as irrelevant as it sounds. The marriage plot, you see, is the genre form of which that work is representative. Eugenides wants to know whether the marriage plot is dead as a meaningful literary form, now that marriage seems hardly worthy as the ultimate goal of youthful aspirations.

Then there's the theme of semiotics. I studied with Roland Barthes (yes, I'm that old) and back then I don't think the term semiotics even existed. At least, I don't recall his ever having used it. But he talked incessantly about structuralism, that a novel is a long sentence spoken by its author, a literary construct waiting to be parsed. Understand, I didn't get any of this from him back then, just from what others, including Susan Sontag, have written about him since. His lesson plan was built around Balzac's short story "Sarrasine," which is the engrossing tale of a man obsessed by an opera star who turns out to be both a castrato and the

"kept woman" of a powerful priest. But why Barthes chose that story for his criticism totally escaped me at the time, and I can only surmise now what his intentions were.

But back to Eugenides. The characters meet in a semiotics class at Brown, and the author gives a lot of detail about the subject and its impact on their personal thoughts. Semiotics claims, for example, that humans would not experience love as we have come to understand it unless we had read about it (or seen movies about it) first. There's a similar concept in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, in which the narrator comments that peasants in the French countryside cope with life less well than the sophisticated citizens of Paris, who have all read novels that give them models for how to act in society.

Ultimately, this is a novel about perception, what we make of reality as it is happening to us, and our inability to make meaning of events in time to control their outcome. Things happen or they don't. Things work out or they don't. They mostly don't, and we move on.

Perhaps significantly, the character in this book who understands himself best is the one whose grasp on reality is most tenuous, because he has to work at staying sane. In his acknowledgements, Eugenides credits several experts and sources for genetic research (another theme), but he thanks no one for his extensive detailing of bipolar disorder and its treatment. So naturally I wonder how he came by this information, and at what personal cost.

Cross-posted on [www.boychiklit.com](http://www.boychiklit.com)

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### **Sarah says**

This was the first book that I read in my first house I bought late last year. I saw Eugenides (one of my favorite authors ever) speak and received an autographed copy, which had a dust jacket that my dog Franny chewed his face from. I loved the Fresh Air interview where he spoke about this book, as well. And I had been waiting for this book for soOOOoo long. I was VERY excited to read it once it was finally in my hands.

This book was a major letdown, truth be told. I really love and admire *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*. They are both such different books but they are in love with metaphor and simile and imagery and maybe all those devices made me love him. It was like he spent days on each sentence (which is probably why it takes him a bajillion years between novels.) I didn't get that with this book. The language was much more straightforward. But even so, it was pretty good, being written by Pulitzer Prize winning Jeffrey Eugenides, after all.

Maybe it was the protagonist. Madeleine wasn't my favorite character. An audience member told him that she didn't love the protagonist, either, and asked if he did that on purpose. He assured her that he liked Madeleine just fine and then the audience girl seemed embarrassed and apologetic. He was funny about it, though. I agree with her! I have faced the sorts of situations Madeleine goes up against and I still didn't sympathize with her. I wanted to love it, though, like I loved his other two, and I didn't. Super sad face!

I did sort of love the ending, though. Did any of you read it, yet? Make me love it! Convince me. Please.

### **Fabian says**

“The experience...was like plowing through late James, or the pages about agrarian reform in “Anna Karenina”, until you suddenly got to a good part again, which kept on getting better and better until you were so enthralled that you were almost grateful for the previous dull stretch because it increased your eventual pleasure...”

But this particular novel, thank goodness, isn't at all like this. Its thoroughly affecting and modern, smart and hella funny—it has very few of those moments of nothingness, of the reader just exhaling in deep confusion, exasperation. What is the marriage plot and why does it have such a tiny relevance in today's modern society? Read “The Marriage Plot” and find out.

Not every novel can be “Middlesex,” that most perfect, most ambitious of ALL modern reads (the other two being “The Feast of the Goat” by Vargas Llosa & “The Human Stain” by Roth). But reading Eugenides involves becoming hyper-aware of just how much pretentiousness exists in all other modern novels. Eugenides is the most unpretentious of the modern masters: he writes like a river that flows evenly, that contains only the purest of sentences—he's stylistically uncomplicated. This time around, leaving behind those manic depressive virgins and poignant hermaphrodites of yesteryear, Eugenides manages to find the poetry in the minutiae which writers like Dave Eggers or Jonathan Franzen could only dream about. Eugenides is both the literati's best friend and the casual reader's companion. Although it is a gamble to introduce yet another love triangle to the literary sphere, the Pulitzer winner obviously pulls it off—giving his audience pretty much what they've wanted for years (that is, something less heavy than his last two novels of adolescent despair, for one that's more optimistic about modern love while still remaining authentically moving).

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### **Rekha says**

I am trying to decide if I really liked this book so much because I really liked it so much, or if I really liked it because it made me feel smart without really having to do anything. I fear it is the latter, but check back with me later on that. That said, the story is about the relationship between Mitchell who loves Madeleine who loves Leonard. I never figured out who Leonard loves. It's basically an intellectualized, sort of depressing rom-com, if that even makes any sense.

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