

Middlesex

by Jeffrey Eugenides

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“Sidelights”

Novelist Jeffrey Eugenides received critical acclaim for his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, a tale of five teenaged sisters who one by one kill themselves. His next novel, *Middlesex*, published nine years later, won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

The Michigan-born writer had worked in various fields before graduating from Brown University, including driving a cab in downtown Detroit and working alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India. He later wrote for the American Academy of Poets in New York, and pushed to complete his opus when he learned the organization would soon terminate his position. Eugenides also wrote part of his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, while traveling down the Nile through Egypt. An excerpt from the book was published in the *Paris Review* in 1991 and won the literary journal's Aga Khan Prize for fiction that year.

The author got the idea for *The Virgin Suicides* while visiting his brother's house in Michigan and chatting with the baby sitter. The young woman said that she and her sisters had all attempted suicide at one point. When Eugenides asked why, she replied simply, "pressure." The theme of inexplicable adolescent trauma amid a placid suburban landscape gave birth to the plot of the novel. *The Virgin Suicides* is set in an unnamed affluent suburb remarkably similar to Eugenides's hometown of Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan, and is told in the collective narrative voice of a group of men who were obsessed with the girls as teenagers. Now nearing middle age, they are still trying to fathom the mysterious suicides of twenty years before, haunted by their memories of the sisters.

The Virgin Suicides juxtaposes the innocence and eroticism of early-1970s suburbia against the unaccountable force that drove the young women to their deaths. The Lisbon family consists of the five lovely daughters, an overprotective and devoutly Catholic mother, and a rather invisible father. The girls are garbed in shapeless, oversized clothes and forbidden to date. The neighborhood boys, entranced by their remoteness, spy on them and rummage through the family's garbage for such collectibles as discarded cosmetics and homework papers. The reader learns how the suicides began as the voice recounts when one of them sneaked into the Lisbon house through a sewer tunnel and peeped in on the youngest, thirteen-year-old Cecilia, as she bathed. To his horror she had also slit her wrists, and her intruder turns out to be a temporary rescuer when he notifies the police. Yet a short time later, during an unlikely party at the somber Lisbon house, Cecilia jumps to her death from a window, impaling herself on a fencepost. The death of a peer fascinates the neighborhood boys: "We had stood in line with her for smallpox vaccinations," the narrator recalls of Cecilia, "had held polio sugar cubes under our tongues with her, had taught her to jump rope, to light snakes, had stopped her from picking her scabs on numerous occasions, and had cautioned her against touching her mouth to the drinking fountain at Three Mile Park."

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Soon the girls are grounded permanently and disappear even from the normalcy of a school routine, further piquing the boys' obsession. They watch as one of the sisters, the sexually precocious Lux, fornicates on the roof of the house with mysterious men at night, while neighbors begin to complain about the family's unkempt lawn and the strange odors emanating from the Lisbon house. The boys maintain a distant relationship with the girls, calling them on the phone and signaling to them from neighboring houses. Finally they hatch a plan to rescue the girls in which they will all escape to Florida in a stolen car. In the end, however, the remaining girls commit suicide, leaving the boys to their lifelong preoccupation with the unexplained deaths.

Many reviewers praised the author's use of the wry, anonymous narrative. Tom Prince, in *New York* magazine, described the work as "a highly polished novel about the coarseness of adolescence, relentlessly mournful but also gruesomely funny." *New York Review of Books* critic Alice Truax remarked that "if anything is offensive about *The Virgin Suicides*, perhaps it's that reading it is such a pleasurable, melancholy experience--in spite of its ostensible subject matter." Commenting on Eugenides's style, Truax said "On his first page, he makes it clear that his title means what it says, and that he plans to spin a dreamy, elegiac tale from its terrible promise."

"Eugenides never loses his sense of humor," Kristin McCloy wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* Book Review. "Mordant to be sure, and always understated, Eugenides's sense of the absurd is relentless." Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* warned that unexplained elements in the novel might "grate on the reader's nerves, momentarily breaking the spell of [Eugenides's] tale." Kakutani, however, described the book's end result as "by turns lyrical and portentous, ferocious and elegiac," and noted that "*The Virgin Suicides* insinuates itself into our minds as a small but powerful opera in the unexpected form of a novel." And *People's* Joseph Olshan added that "the novel manages to maintain a high level of suspense in what is clearly an impressive debut."

Nine years passed between *The Virgin Suicides* and the publication of *Middlesex*. The author returned to Grosse Pointe to tell about a multigenerational Greek-American family through the eyes of its most unusual member: the hermaphroditic Cal (Calliope) Stephanides. Using a male/female narrator posed a challenge: "I wanted the book to be first-person," Eugenides told Dave Welch of *Powells*. "In many ways, the point of the book is that we're all an I before we're a he or a she, so I needed that I." For practical reasons, the author added, "I wanted the I because I didn't want that terrible situation where the character is she, then you turn the page and she becomes he--or even the more dreaded s/he."

In *Middlesex*, Cal's gender is the product of speculation even before conception. Parents Milton and Tessie long for a girl, and heed an uncle's advice to engage in sex twenty-four hours before ovulation; that way "the swift male sperm would rush in and die off. The female sperm, sluggish but more reliable, would arrive just as the egg dropped." After Tessie becomes pregnant, rancor builds among the relatives when grandma Desdemona, dangling a silver spoon over Tessie's abdomen, declares the child inside a boy. However, the baby born shortly after is deemed female. Calliope spends her childhood and early adolescence as what Laura Miller of the *New York Times* called a "relatively unremarkable daughter." All that changes at puberty when "she" begins sprouting facial hair and speaking in a deepening voice. It

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is discovered during a doctor's examination that Calliope is a hermaphrodite, possessing equally the physical and sexual characteristics of male and female. "To the extent that fetal hormones affect brain chemistry and histology," the narrator declares, "I've got a male brain."

The girl's horrified parents take her to sexologist Dr. Luce, who proposes a radical "final solution" to Cal's predicament: surgery to remove all outward traces of maleness, and hormonal therapy to reinforce the female characteristics. But for Calliope, that is not the answer. Instead, the character embraces his male identity, and grows to adulthood as an academic in Berlin (where the author lives). Meanwhile, he recounts a twentieth-century family saga that illustrates how Calliope/Cal came to be. He reveals, for example, that grandparents Desdemona and Lefty were brother and sister; and that Cal's own parents married as first cousins.

"Though its premise makes the novel sound as if it's either sensational or clinical--or both," Charles Matthews in a Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service review, "it isn't. That's because [Middlesex] is as much about the Stephanides family as it is about Cal/Calliope." Matthews added that "even with the element of incest, the story of the Stephanides family doesn't become weirdly titillating or turn into a sentimental problem drama about what's now known as intersexuality. Instead, it's a story based on the familiar dynamics of belonging and displacement." Lisa Schwarzbaum, in Entertainment Weekly, said the writing itself "is also about mixing things up, grafting flights of descriptive fancy with hunks of conventional dialogue, pausing briefly to sketch passing characters or explain a bit of a bygone world."

"Because it's long and wide and full of stuff," wrote Miller, the novel "will be associated by some readers with books by David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Frazen, brilliant members of Eugenides's cohort." But unlike those hard-line satirists, the critic added, Eugenides "is sunnier; the book's length feels like its author's arms stretching farther and farther to encompass more people, more life."

But Keith Gessen of Nation acknowledged that this "politically effective" novel displays "too much energy . . . expended" on "the assurance of the author's good intentions. The result is often a measured, highly adequate bloodlessness." Yet to New Republic contributor James Wood, the author showcases just the right intentions. "Eugenides's charm, his life-jammed comedy, rescues the novel from its occasional didacticism," he wrote. "One can put it this way: a novel narrated by a hermaphrodite comes to seem largely routine, as if Calliope were simply fat or tall. A fact that might scream its oddity, and that might have been used again and again heavily to explore fashionable questions of identity and gender, is here blissfully domesticated."

Comparing the two Eugenides novels, Mark Lawson of Europe Intelligence Wire found that while *The Virgin Suicides* "reflected on connections between sex and death, its successor considers the links between sex, life and inheritance." Lawson also found it strange that "in a novel with such a long gestation, occasional phrases seem hasty." In ten years the novelist had produced only two books, though both well-received; Rachel Collins, in *Library Journal*, said "it is Eugenides's dedication to his stories, his characters, and, yes, even his readers, that compels him to spend years on a manuscript." As for his 2003 Pulitzer Prize-winner, Eugenides told Collins that *Middlesex* "really is Cal's" book, "and I think there is



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nothing ugly about his life. In fact, it's as close to a triumphant story as I'm ever likely to write."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born c. 1960, in Grosse Pointe Park, MI; son of Constantine (a mortgage banker) and Wanda Eugenides; married, wife's name Karen (an artist); children: a daughter. Education: Brown University, B.A. (magna cum laude), 1983; Stanford University, M.A. (creative writing), 1986. Religion: Greek Orthodox. Addresses: Agent: Lynn Nesbit, Janklow & Nesbit Associates, 445 Park Ave., New York, NY 10022.

AWARDS

Aga Khan Prize for fiction, Paris Review, 1991, for an excerpt from the *The Virgin Suicides*; Writers Award, Whiting Foundation, 1993; Henry D. Vursell Memorial Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters; Pulitzer Prize in fiction, 2003, for *Middlesex*; recipient of fellowships from Guggenheim Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Berlin Prize fellowship, American Academy in Berlin, 2000-2001; fellow of the Berliner Kuenstlerprogramm of the DAAD.

CAREER

Writer. *Yachtsman* magazine, photographer and staff writer; American Academy of Poets, New York, NY; various positions including newsletter editor, beginning in 1988. Has worked as a cab driver, busboy, and a volunteer with Mother Teresa in India.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *The Virgin Suicides*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (New York, NY), 1993.
- *Middlesex*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (New York, NY), 2002.

Contributor to periodicals, including Paris Review.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

The Virgin Suicides, a film adaptation written and directed by Sofia Coppola, was released by Paramount Pictures, 2000.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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PERIODICALS

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- New Republic, October 7, 2002, James Wood, "Unions," p. 31.
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- New York Review of Books, June 10, 1993, Alice Truax, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 45-46; November 7, 2002, Daniel Mendelsohn, "Mighty Hermaphrodite," p. 17.
- New York Times, March 19, 1993, Michiko Kakutani, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, p. C23; September 15, 2002, Laura Miller, "My Big Fat Greek Gender Identity Crisis."
- People, April 19, 1993, Joseph Olshan, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 27.
- Spectator, October 5, 2002, Sebastian Stone, "Putting It All In," p. 43.
- Time, September 23, 2002, Richard Lacayo, review of Middlesex, p. 78.
- Times Literary Supplement, October 4, 2002, Paul Quinn, "In the Centre of the Labyrinth," p. 24.

ONLINE

- Bomb, <http://www.bombsite.com/> (April 9, 2003), Jonathan Safran Foer, author interview.
- Powells, <http://www.powells.com/> (April 9, 2003), Dave Welch, "Jeffrey Eugenides Has It Both Ways."
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