

## Jeffrey Eugenides



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[My Mistress's Sparrow Is Dead](#)  
[Middlesex](#)

### Name Pronunciation

**Jeffrey Eugenides:** yu-GIN-e-dees

## Biography

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1960. He graduated magna cum laude from Brown University, and received an M.A. in English and Creative Writing from Stanford University in 1986. His first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, was published to acclaim in 1993. It has been translated into fifteen languages and made into a feature film. His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Best American Short Stories*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *Granta's* "Best of Young American Novelists." In 2003, Jeffrey Eugenides received The Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Middlesex* (2002).

Eugenides is the recipient of many awards, including fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, a Whiting Writers' Award, and the Henry D. Vursell Memorial Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In the past few years he has been a Fellow of the Berliner Künstlerprogramm of the DAAD and of the American Academy in Berlin. After spending some time in Berlin, Eugenides now lives in Chicago with his wife and daughter where he is on the faculty of Princeton University's Program in Creative Writing. In January 2008 he published an anthology, *My Mistress's Sparrow Is Dead: Great Love Stories from Chekhov to Munro*, the proceeds of which will go directly to fund the free youth writing programs offered by 826 Chicago which is part of the network of seven writing centers across the United States affiliated with 826 National, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting students ages 6 to 18 with their creative and expository writing skills, and to helping teachers inspire their students to write.

This biography was last updated on 02/04/2008.

## Watch the book

### In brief

In a quiet American suburb an ambulance arrives outside a house where five sisters live. Watched by a group of adolescent boys, the paramedics carry thirteen-year-old Cecilia Lisbon to the ambulance, her slit wrists bound. Twenty years later, the boys, now men, are still in thrall to the Lisbon sisters, all five of whom took their lives that year.

### In detail

*The Virgin Suicides* tells the story of the five Lisbon sisters and the effects of their suicides on their small suburban community. Jeffrey Eugenides explores the heady territory of adolescent sexuality through the collective narrative voice of the young boys, now men, who fell under the sisters' spell. As they look back with a mixture of humour, melancholy and wistful yearning they remain haunted by questions still unanswered after twenty years.

For some time the Lisbon sisters have intrigued the neighbourhood's teenage boys. They watch the girls from a house across the street, longing to catch their most intimate moments. When the most daring finds a way into their house he discovers thirteen-year-old Cecilia in the bath, her wrist slit. Although Cecilia's first suicide attempt fails her second, a gruesome plunge on to a fence below her bedroom window, succeeds.

Already confined by their mother's draconian strictness, the girls find themselves under lock and key after the adventurous Lux returns late from Homecoming after taking off with Trip Fontaine, the school heartthrob. The boys dedicate themselves to observing the sisters, searching out and savouring evidence of their lives, from scraps of their hair to their discarded underwear. As time wears on Lux is seen making love on the roof, Bonnie comes to the door most mornings clutching her pillow, Mr Lisbon loses his high school teaching job and the house begins to fall down around their ears. Under the boys' watchful eyes, the girls seem to fade into shadows of themselves.

When the sisters eventually contact them in a bid to escape, the boys, eager to help, are ready. But the girls have another sort of escape in mind and soon the ambulance is at the door again leaving the boys endlessly speculating, quizzing anyone who will speak of the suicides, still asking why twenty years later.

## About Jeffrey Eugenides

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1960. Educated at Brown and Stanford Universities, Eugenides received an MA in English and Creative Writing from Stanford in 1986. The first of his short stories, which have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review* and *Best American Short Stories*, was published two years later. In 1996 he was named as one of Granta's Best Young American Writers. *The Virgin Suicides*, Eugenides' first novel, was published to great critical acclaim in 1993. In 1999, Sofia Coppola made her much-praised directorial debut with a film based on the novel. Jeffrey Eugenides now lives in Berlin with his wife and daughter.



## NovelQuest

Publisher: Weekly

'Eugenides's tantalizing, macabre first novel begins with a suicide, the first of the five bizarre deaths of the teenage daughters in the Lisbon family; the rest of the work, set in the author's native Michigan in the early 1970s, is a backward-looking quest as the male narrator and his nosy, horny pals describe how they strove to understand the odd clan of this first chapter, which appeared in the *Paris Review*, where it won the 1991 Aga Khan Prize for fiction. The sensationalism of the subject matter (based loosely on a factual account) may be off-putting to some readers, but Eugenides's voice is so fresh and compelling, his powers of observation so startling and acute, that most will be mesmerized. The title derives from a song by the fictional rock band Cruel Crux, a favorite of the Lisbon daughter Lux—who, unlike her sisters Therese, Mary, Bonnie and Cecilia, is anything but a virgin by the tale's end. Her mother forces Lux to burn the album along with others she considers dangerously provocative. Mr. Lisbon, a mild-mannered high school math teacher, is driven to resign by parents who believe his control of their children may be as deficient as his control of his own brood. Eugenides risks sounding sophomoric in his attempt to convey the immaturity of high-school boys; while initially somewhat discomfiting, the narrator's voice (representing the collective memories of the group) acquires the ring of authenticity. The author is equally convincing when he describes the older locals' reactions to the suicide attempts. Under the narrator's goofy, posturing banter are some hard truths: mortality is a fact of life; teenage girls are more attracted to brawn than to brains (contrary to the testimony of the narrator's male relatives). This is an auspicious debut from an imaginative and talented writer.'

## Library Journal

'Eugenides's remarkable first novel opens on a startling note: "On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide... 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." What follows is not, however, a horror novel, but a finely crafted work of literary if slightly macabre imagination. In an unnamed town in the slightly distant past, detailed in such precise and limpid prose that readers will surely feel that they grew up there, Cecilia—the youngest and most obviously wacky of the luscious Lisbon girls—finally succeeds in taking her own life. As the confused neighbours watch rather helplessly, the remaining sisters become isolated and unhinged, ending it all in a spectacular multiple suicide anticipated from the first page. Eugenides's engrossing writing style keeps one reading despite a creepy feeling that one shouldn't be enjoying it so much. A black, glittering novel that won't be to everyone's taste but must be tried by readers looking for something different.'



## Some suggested points for discussion

- 📖 *The Virgin Suicides* is narrated through the collective voice of a group of boys who fell under the spell of the Lisbon sisters twenty years ago. Why do you think Eugenides chose this unusual method of narration? What effect does it achieve? How would you describe the tone of the narrative?
- 📖 What does the book say about adolescence and in particular, what does it say about the attitudes of adolescent boys to young women? How would you describe the feelings of the collective narrator towards the sisters? How accurate a portrayal of adolescence do you think this is? How do other characters see the sisters and how does Eugenides convey these views? How different are those views from those of the boys?
- 📖 'They weren't all that different from my sister' Kevin Head says after Homecoming. What is it about the Lisbon sisters that sets them apart from other young girls in the community and so intrigues the boys? How have the lives of the boys been affected by the sisters and what happened that summer?
- 📖 How would you describe the Lisbon family and the relationships between its various members? We learn a great deal about Cecilia and about Lux but very little about Bonnie, Therese or Mary. Why does the narrator concentrate on these two sisters?
- 📖 What effect does Cecilia's suicide have on the community? How do people try to cope with it and how do their reactions change? How do their parents, their neighbours and their classmates treat the surviving sisters?
- 📖 Several characters come up with an explanation for the suicides, including Ms Perl, Dr Hornicker, Mr Hedlie and the narrator. Which one do you find most credible and why?
- 📖 We know from the first paragraph that all five of the Lisbon sisters will take her own life. How did this affect your reading of the book? Are there other examples where Eugenides tells us what is about to happen? Why do you think he chose this structure and what effect does it achieve?
- 📖 As the novel progresses it becomes clear that the boys have conducted an investigation of the circumstances surrounding the girls' suicides. How well do you think this works as a narrative device?
- 📖 'Wry and voluptuous with glittering black jokes carried along like seacoal by the smooth melancholy swell' was one reviewer's description of the novel. How would you describe Eugenides' use of humour? Were there particular passages that you found amusing and if so what were they? Why do you think he chose to treat such a serious subject in a humorous fashion?
- 📖 At first the novel's title appears straightforward but given Lux's promiscuity, what do you think Eugenides means by the title?
- 📖 If you have seen Sophie Coppola's film based on the novel, how well would you say the two compare? Are there particular themes or devices in the novel which lend themselves to film?



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## < 'The Virgin Suicides': Inspired By Detroit's Woes?

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Heard on All Things Considered

text size A A A

June 14, 2009 - GUY RAZ, host:

Welcome back to ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Guy Raz.

There's a line right near the beginning of the film, "The Virgin Suicides," when the narrator captures the eventual trajectory of metro Detroit.

(Soundbite of film, "The Virgin Suicides")

Unidentified Man #1 (Actor): (As character) Everyone dates the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls. People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped-out elms, the harsh sunlight, and the continuing decline of our auto industry. Even then, as teenagers, we tried to put the pieces together. We still can't.

RAZ: The dialogue and language in Sofia Coppola's film came directly from the novel on which it's based. When Jeffrey Eugenides wrote that novel, he set out to capture the weird and repressed world of 1970s suburbia. That it took place in suburban Detroit and tracks the decline of a family and then a neighborhood might be seen as an allegory.

"The Virgin Suicides" came out in 1993, and it's just been re-released in paperback. Since the original release, Eugenides has managed to win critical acclaim and sell a lot of books. And in 2003, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his second novel, "Middlesex."

Jeffrey Eugenides is in Princeton, New Jersey, where he now teaches. Mr. Eugenides, welcome.

Mr. JEFFREY EUGENIDES (Author, "The Virgin Suicides"): Hello.

RAZ: Where were you in life when you wrote "The Virgin Suicides"? What was going on?

Mr. EUGENIDES: I was working at the Academy of American Poets as an executive secretary and earning a very small salary and living out in distant Brooklyn. And I, you know, I decided to become a writer when I was fairly young, 16, 17 years old. And by this time, I was almost 30 with only one publication to my name. So, I was in a state of increasing anxiety as I began to get older with nothing to show for myself and began writing "The Virgin Suicides" some time in that period. And I had started other novels before, but for some reason, this one was the one I was able to finish.

RAZ: How long did it take you to write?

Mr. EUGENIDES: It took about three years. And I used to - I had a nine-to-five job, so I worked at night, two hours every night and four hours on the weekends in a pretty regimented way, and about three years. I was also - I got fired in the midst of writing it. So, I had to publish it because I was collecting unemployment. Otherwise, I probably would still be working on it.

RAZ: And of course, it's about 10 years since the film of your book by Sofia Coppola came out, a film that really - it's really loyal to the book. It's almost as if you wrote that book in a way where it could very easily be translated onto film.

Mr. EUGENIDES: I certainly didn't think about that. I did pick up on the line you quoted from the book and from the voiceover in the film about the auto industry. There was a time in the '90s when the U.S.



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auto industry seemed to be booming where I thought I had written that line, and it was now out of date. And of course, now it seems even more pertinent than ever. But that whole feeling of growing up in Detroit, in a city losing population, and in perpetual crisis really was the mood that made me write "The Virgin Suicides" in the first place.

I was unaware when I was writing the book that that's really the impetus for the entire book. This idea of a family and a collection of girls being suicidal actually came out of the experience of growing up in Detroit.

RAZ: You know, we all know what's going to happen to the Lisbon girls in this book because of the title, just like all of us have sort of been watching the city of Detroit decline for so long. Both of your novels obviously have a Metro Detroit flavor. What do you make of your city today? I mean, Detroit is at the top of the headlines, and...

Mr. EUGENIDES: If I can inject a note of optimism, which is what Detroiters always do in the midst of gloom, the flag of Detroit -Detroit burned down in the 1800s, and the motto on the flag says it will rise again from the ashes. We will see better days. And I was recently back in Detroit on the day that Chrysler went into bankruptcy, and of course, things are terrible there, everyone knows about that. But I was surprised downtown to see how much life there was at night.

A lot of the abandoned buildings, and I'm talking about skyscrapers, sometimes 16-floor buildings are empty. They're being rented out, the lobbies, and techno parties are being thrown in them. And these parties move around from place to place, and it reminded me of Berlin in the early '90s. So, there is some kind of life pulsating in Detroit still, and I was gratified to see that.

RAZ: And Berlin had the benefit of once again becoming the capital of Germany and receiving federal subsidies. And Detroit's in a very different position. Do you think Detroit will be a major city in 20, 30, 40 years?

Mr. EUGENIDES: I think, actually, they should make Detroit the new capital of the nation. NPR could move the offices there.

(Soundbite of laughter)

It's difficult to say. The Renaissance Center was built when I was in high school. It opened 1975 or '76. And of course, that was supposed to bring back the city. So, most of my life, and any Detroiters of my age, we've been waiting for the Renaissance of this city that has not arrived. We remain hopeful about it. But as the years pass, there are periods where I begin to despair about the city coming back.

RAZ: In "The Virgin Suicides," the story of a group of boys, which is observing these angelic, beautiful, blonde sisters, the Lisbon girls, from the house across the street, there's a moment in the book where these boys call up the girls, and they're just playing records to them over the telephone. Today, it would be different. I mean, they would be Skyping or text messaging or...

Mr. EUGENIDES: It's true, it's true. And a lot of people are talking about how new technologies will change fiction and movies. What do you do? How is it going to affect dramatic plots when you can constantly contact the different people?

If you watch television, sitcoms and things, people are always coming over to someone's house to tell them something because they need the next scene, like in "Seinfeld," Kramer - you know, Kramer wouldn't have to do that. He could just send an e-mail now. So, there's a kind of artificiality embedded in dramatic scene-making now. I still can avoid it by setting my novels in the '70s or '80s, but I will have to deal with it at some point.

RAZ: Why does this story - almost 16 years after it was originally published and 10 years since the film was released - why do you think it's still interesting to people? I mean, people are buying this book.

Mr. EUGENIDES: There's a book by Cyril Connolly called "Enemies of Promise," which in fact I was reading while I wrote "The Virgin Suicides." And in that book, he has an idea. He calls it the theory of permanent adolescence. His idea was that the experience of adolescence is so indelible that people in adulthood remain essentially adolescents, especially he was talking about British political figures. But I think it applies to all of us. I think when you read "The Virgin Suicides," it appeals to teenagers because it's actually their own experience. But the rest of us remember that time, and I think we are, in many ways, an adolescent nation.

RAZ: Jeffrey Eugenides is the author of "Middlesex" and the recently re-issued "The Virgin Suicides." He joined us from Princeton, New Jersey. And Mr. Eugenides, thanks so much.

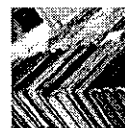
Mr. EUGENIDES: Thanks for having me.

(Soundbite of song, "Playground Love")



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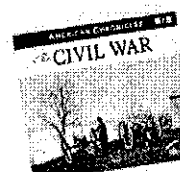
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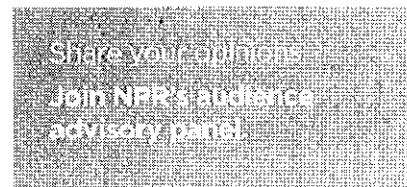
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## Jeffrey Eugenides

Top

[Home](#) > [Library](#) > [Miscellaneous](#) > [Wikipedia](#)

### Jeffrey Eugenides



<b>Born</b>	March 8, 1960 (age 51) <a href="#">Detroit, Michigan, United States</a>
<b>Occupation</b>	<a href="#">Novelist</a> <a href="#">Short story writer</a> <a href="#">Teacher</a>
<b>Nationality</b>	<a href="#">American</a>
<b>Genres</b>	<a href="#">Fiction</a>

#### Influences

[John Hawkes](#), [Philip Roth](#), [Vladimir Nabokov](#),  
[Saul Bellow](#), [Gabriel Garcia Marquez](#), [George Eliot](#), [Henry James](#), [Virgil](#), [Euripedes](#), [John Cheever](#)

**Jeffrey Kent Eugenides** (born March 8, 1960) is an American [Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist](#) and short story writer. Eugenides is most known for his two acclaimed novels, *[The Virgin Suicides](#)* (1993) and *[Middlesex](#)* (2002).

#### Contents

- [1 Life and career](#)
- [2 Novels](#)
- [3 Short stories](#)

- [4 References](#)
- [5 External links](#)
  - [5.1 Online Short Stories](#)
  - [5.2 Interviews](#)

## Life and career

Eugenides was born in [Detroit, Michigan](#) of Greek and Irish descent. He attended [Grosse Pointe's private University Liggett School](#). He took his undergraduate degree at [Brown University](#), graduating in 1983. He later earned an [M.A.](#) in Creative Writing from [Stanford University](#).

In 1986 he received the [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Nicholl Fellowship](#) for his story "Here Comes Winston, Full of the Holy Spirit". His 1993 novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, gained mainstream interest with the 1999 film adaptation directed by [Sofia Coppola](#). The novel was reissued in 2009.

Eugenides is reluctant to disclose details about his private life, except through Michigan-area book signings in which he details the influence of [Detroit](#) and his high-school experiences on his writings. He has said that he has "a perverse love" of his birthplace. "I think most of the major elements of American history are exemplified in Detroit, from the triumph of the automobile and the assembly line to the blight of racism, not to mention the music, Motown, the MC5, house, techno."<sup>[1]</sup> He also says he has been haunted by the decline of Detroit."<sup>[2]</sup>

Jeffrey Eugenides lives in [Princeton, New Jersey](#) with his wife and daughter. In the fall of 2007, Eugenides joined the faculty of [Princeton University's Program in Creative Writing](#).

His 2002 novel, *Middlesex*, won the [Pulitzer Prize](#) for fiction and the [Ambassador Book Award](#). Part of it was set in [Berlin, Germany](#), where Eugenides lived from 1999 to 2004, but it was chiefly concerned with the Greek-American immigrant experience in the United States, against the rise and fall of Detroit. It explores the experience of the intersexed in the USA.<sup>[3]</sup> Eugenides has also published short stories.

Eugenides is the editor of the collection of short stories titled *My Mistress's Sparrow is Dead*. The proceeds of the collection go to the writing center 826 Chicago, established to encourage young people's writing.

## Novels

- *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) ([ISBN 0-446-67025-1](#))
- *Middlesex* (2002) ([ISBN 0-374-19969-8](#)) - [Pulitzer Prize for fiction](#)
- *The Marriage Plot* (October 2011)



## Short stories

- "Air Mail" (*Best American Short Stories*, Proulx ed., Houghton Mifflin, 1997)
- "The Speed of Sperm" (*Granta*, 1997)
- "Timeshare" (The Pushcart Prize XXIII, Henderson ed., Pushcart, 1999)
- "Baster" (*Wonderful Town*, Remnick ed., Random House 2000)
- "The Ancient Myths" (*The Spatial Uncanny*, James Casebere, Sean Kelly Gallery, 2001)
- "Early Music" (*The New Yorker*, Oct. 10, 2005)
- "Great Experiment" (*The New Yorker*, Mar. 31, 2008)
- Editor, *My Mistress's Sparrow is Dead: Great Love Stories from Chekhov to Munro*, (anthology, 2008) ([ISBN 978-0061240379](https://www.amazon.com/My-Mistress-s-Sparrow-Dead/dp/9780061240379))