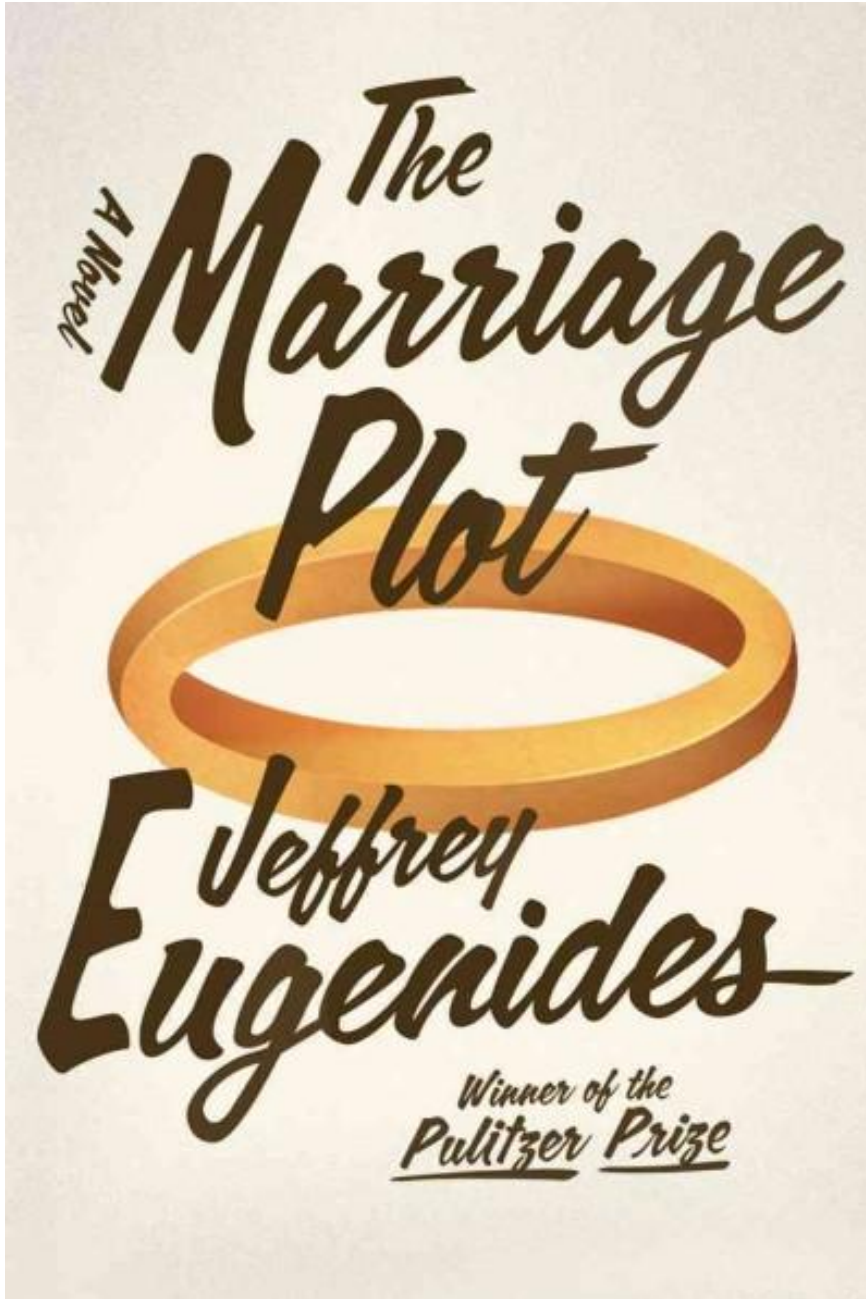


## About the book...



Does modern love have any need for romance, much less marriage? For Madeleine Hanna, an English major writing a senior thesis with the marriage plot as the

centerpiece, the question looms large. In Madeleine's favorite novels, marriage *is* the plot. But in the story line of her own life, sexual liberation and career goals have made hopeless romantics obsolete --- even while two thoroughly postmodern guys are vying for her affection. After all, it's the 1980s: she's supposed to be reaping the rewards of feminism.

As Madeleine's love triangle unfolds in the wake of college graduation, Jeffrey Eugenides brings us an exuberant portrait of contemporary relationships and the realities that sometimes drive them wildly off course. Released from the Ivy League, Madeleine and her suitors Leonard Bankhead (whom she met in a semiotics seminar) and Mitchell Grammaticus (the toga-less interloper at a freshman party in her dorm) dive into the world of adulthood. While Madeleine follows Leonard to Cape Cod, where he's accepted a biology fellowship, Mitchell travels the globe to get Madeleine out of his mind, probing the meaning of life and the existence of God throughout his sojourns.

Offering a wholly new approach to the classic love story, this is an intimate meditation on the quests --- romantic and otherwise --- that confound and propel us. The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of *The Marriage Plot*. We hope they will enrich your experience as you explore this enthralling novel of life and literature.

## About the author...



Jeffrey Eugenides was born in Detroit and attended Brown and Stanford Universities. His first novel, [\*The Virgin Suicides\*](#), was published to great acclaim in 1993, and he has received numerous awards for his work. In 2003, Eugenides

received the Pulitzer Prize for his novel [\*Middlesex\*](#) which was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and France's Prix Médicis.

## Awards

A National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist

Named a Best Book of the Year by  
*The New York Times Book Review* • NPR • *The New Republic* • *Salon* • *The Seattle Times* • *Houston Chronicle* • *The Miami Herald* • *Publisher's Weekly*

## Reviews

*Booklist Reviews*/*\*Starred Review\**/

In Eugenides' first novel since the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Middlesex* (2002), English major and devotee of classic literature Madeleine Hanna is a senior at Reagan-era Brown University. Only when curiosity gets the best of her does she belly up to Semiotics 211, a bastion of postmodern liberalism, and meet handsome, brilliant, mysterious Leonard Bankhead. Completing a triangle is Madeleine's friend Mitchell, a clear-eyed religious-studies student who believes himself her true intended. Eugenides' drama unfolds over the next year or so. His characteristically deliberate, researched realization of place and personality serve him well, and he strikes perfectly tuned chords by referring to works ranging from Barthes' *Lovers' Discourse* to Bemelmans' *Madeline* books for children. The remarkably à propos title refers to the subject of Madeleine's honors thesis, which is the Western novel's doing and undoing, in that, upon the demise, circa 1900, of the marriage plot, the novel "didn't mean much anymore," according to Madeleine's professor and, perhaps, Eugenides. With this tightly, immaculately self-contained tale set upon pillars at once imposing and of dollhouse scale, namely, academia ("College wasn't like the real world," Madeleine notes) and the emotions of the youngest of twentysomethings, Eugenides realizes the novel whose dismantling his characters examine. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: The publisher will be cashing in on the popularity of *Middlesex*, especially with public library

users, by targeting much of their publicity campaign in that direction."

*Library Journal*/\*Starred Review\*/

"The way of true love never works out, except at the end of an English novel." So says Trollope in *Barchester Towers*, one of those English novels where "the marriage plot" thrived until it was swept aside by 20th-century reality. Now Roland Barthes's contention that "the lover's discourse is today of an extreme solitude" better sums up the situation. Or so English literature-besotted Madeleine, 1980s Brown graduating senior, comes to discover. Giving in to the zeitgeist, Madeleine takes a course on semiotics and meets Leonard, who's brilliant, charismatic, and unstable. They've broken up, which makes moody spiritual seeker Mitchell Grammaticus happy, since he pines for Madeleine. But on graduation day, Madeleine discovers that Leonard is in the hospital—in fact, he is a manic depressive with an on-again, off-again relationship with his medications—and leaps to his side. So begins the story of their love (but does it work out?), as Mitchell heads to Europe and beyond for his own epiphanies. VERDICT Your standard love triangle? Absolutely not. This extraordinary, liquidly written evocation of love's mad rush and inevitable failures will feed your mind as you rapidly turn the pages. Highly recommended.

*Kirkus Reviews*/*\*Starred Review\**/

A stunning novel—erudite, compassionate and penetrating in its analysis of love relationships.

Eugenides focuses primarily on three characters, who all graduate from Brown in 1982. One of the pieces of this triangle is Madeleine Hanna, who finds herself somewhat embarrassed to have emerged from a "normal" household in New Jersey (though we later find out the normality of her upbringing is only relative). She becomes enamored with Leonard, a brilliant but moody student, in their Semiotics course, one of the texts being, ironically, Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, which Madeleine finds disturbingly problematic in helping her figure out her own love relationship. We discover that Leonard had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder during his first year at Brown, and his struggle with mood swings throughout the novel is both titanic and tender. The third major player is Mitchell, a Religious Studies major who is also attracted to Madeleine but whose reticence she finds both disturbing and incomprehensible. On graduation day, Leonard has a breakdown and is hospitalized in a mental-health ward, and Madeleine shows her commitment by skipping the festivities and seeking him out. After graduation, Leonard and Madeleine live together when Leonard gets an internship at a biology lab on Cape Cod, and the spring after graduation they marry, when Leonard is able to get his mood swings under temporary control. Meanwhile Mitchell, who takes

his major seriously, travels to India seeking a path—and briefly finds one when he volunteers to work with the dying in Calcutta. But Mitchell's road to self-discovery eventually returns him to the States—and opens another opportunity for love that complicates Madeleine's life.

Dazzling work—Eugenides continues to show that he is one of the finest of contemporary novelists.

*Publishers Weekly*/\*Starred Review\*/

Eugenides's first novel since 2002's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Middlesex* so impressively, ambitiously breaks the mold of its predecessor that it calls for the founding of a new prize to recognize its success both as a novel—and as a Jeffrey Eugenides novel. Importantly but unobtrusively set in the early 1980s, this is the tale of Madeleine Hanna, recent Brown University English grad, and her admirer Mitchell Grammaticus, who opts out of Divinity School to walk the earth as an ersatz pilgrim. Madeleine is equally caught up, both with the postmodern vogue (Derrida, Barthes)—conflicting with her love of James, Austen, and Salinger—and with the brilliant Leonard Bankhead, whom she met in semiotics class and whose fits of manic depression jeopardize his suitability as a marriage prospect. Meanwhile, Mitchell winds up in Calcutta working with Mother Theresa's volunteers, still dreaming of Madeleine. In capturing the heady spirit of youthful intellect on the verge,

Eugenides revives the coming-of-age novel for a new generation. The book's fidelity to its young heroes and to a superb supporting cast of enigmatic professors, feminist theorists, neo-Victorians, and concerned mothers, and all of their evolving investment in ideas and ideals is such that the central argument of the book is also its solution: the old stories may be best after all, but there are always new ways to complicate them.

**Discussion questions** (<http://us.macmillan.com>)

- 1.** The opening scene features a litany of the books Madeleine loves. What were your first impressions of her, based on her library? How are her beliefs about love transformed throughout the novel?
- 2.** When Phyllida fell in love with Alton, she gave up her dream of becoming an actress in Hollywood. What sustains the Hannas' marriage despite this sacrifice? How are Alwyn and Madeleine influenced by their parents' marriage? Is Alwyn's marriage to Blake a bad one?
- 3.** In Jeffrey Eugenides's depiction of Brown University culture in the 1980s, what does it take for the students to impress one another and their professors? What might Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have to say about the signs in Dr. Zipperstein's Semiotics 211 class?
- 4.** Why is Madeleine more attracted to Leonard than to Mitchell? As she copes with Leonard's instability and her



feelings of guilt, how does mental illness shape the relationship?

**5.** What does Mitchell hope to discover as a student of religion? What role does religion play in his quest to be loved? Is his ideal --- a religion devoid of myth and artificial social structures --- attainable?

**6.** What does sex mean to Madeleine, Leonard, and Mitchell? Over the course of the novel, what do they discover about fantasy versus reality and the tandem between physical and emotional satisfaction?

**7.** What recurring themes did you detect in Mitchell's trip overseas as he tries to manage his money, his love life, and Larry? Does he return to America a stronger, changed person or an amplified version of his college self?

**8.** What does Alwyn try to teach her little sister about being a woman by sending the Bachelorette's Survival Kit? What does the kit help a woman survive?

**9.** Madeleine's parents are affluent and have enough free time to stay very involved in her life. Does this liberate her, or does it give her less freedom than Leonard, who is often left to fend for himself?

**10.** In their chosen career paths after college, what are Leonard and Madeleine each trying to uncover about life? Does his work on the yeast-cell experiment have anything in common with her work on Victorian novels?

**11.** Would you have said yes to Leonard's marriage proposal?

**12.** How does the novel's 1980s setting shape the plot? Do twenty-first-century college students face more or fewer challenges than Madeleine did?

**13.** Discuss the novel's meta-ending (an ending about endings). Does it reflect reality? What were your expectations for the characters?

**14.** Eugenides's previous fiction has given us unique, tragicomic perspectives on oppressive families, gender stereotypes, and the process of trying to discover our true selves. How does *The Marriage Plot* enhance your reading of Eugenides's other works?

**15.** Who did you become during your first year after college?

## **Readalikes**

[\*The Beginner's Goodbye\*](#) by Anne Tyler

A disabled outsider struggles to come to terms with his wife's death in this moving novel from Pulitzer Prize-winning author Anne Tyler. Aaron is a 36-year-old man, with a disabled right arm and leg, who works at a vanity publisher on self-help books for beginners. Having felt ostracized his entire life and dominated by his well-meaning sister, Aaron met and fell in love with Dorothy, a simple, outspoken doctor who soon became

his wife. When a freak accident claims Dorothy's life, Aaron feels like his life becomes meaningless. When Dorothy begins visiting him from beyond the grave, Aaron slowly starts to come to terms with the reality of their marriage and the finality of her death.

[\*First You Try Everything\*](#) by Jane McCafferty

An emotional novel about love, marriage, and divorce. When Evvie and Ben were young and newly married, there wasn't anything that could divide them. They loved music, worked together at a food cart, and followed their true dreams. But over the years, the two have drifted apart and lost sight of who they really are. Ben wears a suit, takes himself too seriously, and begins plotting a future away from Evvie. She, meanwhile, fears that Ben won't be able to survive without her so she begins planning ways to delay their inevitable separation. Told from their alternating perspectives, *First You Try Everything* addresses the confusion, anxiety, disappointment, and insanity that accompanies the dissolution of a marriage.

[\*The Forgotten Waltz\*](#) by Anne Enright

An unusual snowstorm in Dublin gives Gina Moynihan time to consider the romance that transformed her life. Gina's passionate affair with Sean Vallely had played out in local hotel rooms. She believed he was the man she had been waiting for, but their intense relationship

was also flawed. Now that the winter weather has forced the world outside to pause, Gina realizes how much her life has changed. Soon Gina will be welcoming into her home the other woman in Sean's life--his adolescent daughter, Evie.

[Lionel Asbo: State of England](#) by Martin Amis

Lionel Pepperdine has had his name legally changed to "Asbo"--an acronym for Anti-Social Behavior Order. The sociopathic criminal Lionel-turned-Asbo is responsible for caring for his nephew, Desmond, who is six years younger and a relatively good person stuck in a horrendously dysfunctional family. When Asbo wins the national lottery--more than 100 million pounds--he embraces his new life, acquiring ridiculous cars, a lavish wardrobe, and a trophy wife to go along with his new persona. But underneath he is still the same low-class thug he always was. He continues to taunt his family--particularly Desmond--with his newfound money and status. When Desmond finally decides to take action and stand up to his uncle, he knows it could either be the best or the worst thing he's ever done. But either way, there's no going back.

[The Map and the Territory](#) by Michel Houellebecq;  
Gavin Bowd

French novelist Michel Houellebecq casts himself as a pivotal character in this story about an artist's

accomplishments and failings. Jed Martin makes his debut as a photographer, gaining attention for his images of Michelin road maps. He finds romance with a Russian woman and further fame when he transitions from photography to painting. As his life and career progress, he loses his lover and deals with his aging father--the architect Jean-Pierre Martin. After taking a break from his work for a decade, Jed prepares a new exhibition of portraits and secures the famous author Michel Houellebecq to write the program guide. Jed's good fortune is balanced by bad when he is asked to assist in a disturbing crime investigation.

[May We Be Forgiven](#) by A.M. Homes

Brothers George and Harold Silver grew up in a dysfunctional and abusive family, with studious Harold always feeling like he played second fiddle to George's more boisterous personality and good looks. Now adults, with Harold a professor and George a television executive, things look fine from the outside. But inside, their family is as dysfunctional as ever. The volatile and violent George terrifies his wife, Jane, who finds herself drawn to Harold despite the risk to both of them. When George is the cause of a fatal car accident, Harold wonders if it was truly an accident. Then George learns of Harold and Jane's indiscretion and commits a brutal act of violence that changes all of their lives. As Harold finds his entire world turned upside down, he realizes it's up to him to finally create the family he never had.

[The Odds: A Love Story](#) by Stewart O'Nan

Facing the threat of bankruptcy and the looming possibility of divorce, Cleveland couple Art and Marion Fowler empty the remains of their bank account and head for Niagara Falls in a last-ditch effort to recoup their finances at the gambling tables and rekindle their dwindling romance in the city where they spent their honeymoon. With little left to lose, Art and Marion gather up the last of their savings and book a room at one of Niagara Falls' most expensive hotels and hit the adjoining casino in a desperate attempt to pull themselves out of their dire financial and marital straits. While they take in the sights and sounds of the city like typical tourists during the day, they spend their nights at the tables, pinning all of their hopes for mending their fraying relationship on the spin of the roulette wheel.

[Olive Kitteridge](#) by Elizabeth Strout

A collection of 13 stories about Olive Kitteridge and her family and friends. Olive is a retired high school teacher who is married to a pharmacist and faces many challenges in her day-to-day life. Her relationship with her son is shaky, her husband isn't the same man he used to be, and a former student has recently come to Olive with a dark secret--she has no desire to continue living and wishes to end her life. The stories in this

collection include "Pharmacy" and "A Little Burst." The stories in this collection span over 30 years of Olive's life

[The Sense of an Ending](#) by Julian Barnes

Tony Webster is retired, divorced, and reasonably happy. He is on good terms with his daughter and his former wife. He believes that he leads a respectable, if not exciting, life. But the arrival of a letter from an attorney changes everything. The unexpected piece of mail brings to Tony's conscience events from the past that he had long ago forgotten or suppressed. Though his school days are far behind him, Tony must now revisit his friendship with former classmate Adrian Finn and reconsider the catastrophic circumstances that forced Adrian down a different path.

[The Stranger's Child](#) by Alan Hollinghurst

Cambridge University student George Sawle brings his friend Cecil Valance to his family's home for a visit in 1913. Valance, a poet, draws the adoration of both George and his 16-year-old sister Daphne. Before his departure, Cecil writes a verse in Daphne's autograph book, never realizing the repercussions that his actions will have. Not long after their enjoyable weekend together, World War I begins, Cecil is killed in the line of duty, and Daphne is left in possession of a poem that will become popular across the country. Many years

later, a writer who wants to tell Valance's story discovers information that could ruin the beloved poet's reputation.



*Ann Arbor District Library*