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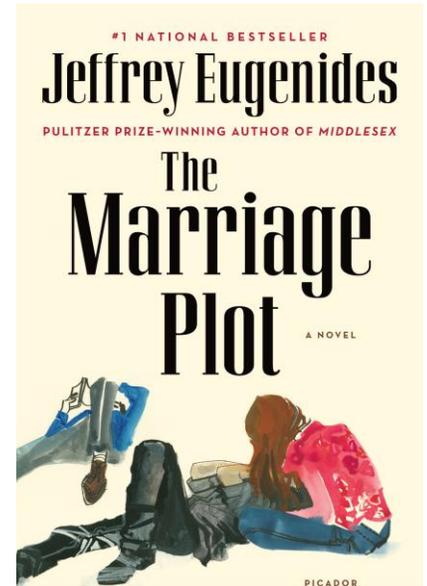
# Reading Group Gold

## The Marriage Plot

by Jeffrey Eugenides

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?

It's the early 1980s. In American colleges, the wisecracking kids are inhaling Derrida and listening to 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 studies the age-old motivations of the human heart, real life, in the form of two very different guys, intervenes---the charismatic and intense Leonard Bankhead, and her old friend the mystically inclined Mitchell Grammaticus. As all three of them face life in the real world they will have to reevaluate everything they have learned. Jeffrey Eugenides creates a new kind of contemporary love story in "his most powerful novel yet" (Newsweek).



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### Questions:

\*Questions courtesy of Farrar, Straus & Giroux

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?

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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?

## About the Author

**Jeffrey Eugenides** was born in Detroit and attended Brown and Stanford universities. His first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, was published by FSG 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* (FSG, 2002), which was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and France's Prix Médicis.



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