

The Virgin Suicides  
Jeffrey Eugenides

“There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that.” —Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

I can't imagine a more appropriate quotation with which to begin this review. Like absurdist French philosopher Albert Camus, *The Virgin Suicides* is obsessed—or at least, for the sake of the reader, feigns obsession—with solving the unsolvable riddle that is suicide. The story, set in a suburb of dilapidated 70s Detroit, is told from the collective perspective (a rare, stunning case of first-person plural narration; this alone makes the book worth reading) of a group of boys who are infatuated with the mysterious Lisbon girls: 13-year-old Cecilia, 14-year-old Lux, 15-year-old Bonnie, 16-year-old Mary, and 17-year-old Therese.

All of whom, as you learn on page one, kill themselves.

Cecilia is the first to go; she throws herself out a window and is impaled on the fence below, thus beginning “the year of the suicides” and turning the Lisbons into a puzzle that everyone and their mother is intent on deciphering. Why did Cecilia kill herself? Was her death inevitable? Infectious? The Lisbons are poked and prodded and pulled to pieces, and the boys are at the head of the investigation. We as readers, meanwhile, remain conscious of the impending suicides of Cecilia's sisters—a dark promise that lures us, like fish on a hook, towards the end of the novel and the impossible possibility of a catharsis in logic.

A highlight of the novel is its use of metaphor, which, while not always subtle, never feels out-of-place or unnatural. I took note of a significant scene in which the Lisbon girls protect a tree that they have associated with Cecilia after her death; readers may recall the seventh circle of hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where those who have committed suicide are transformed into trees and tortured eternally by voracious harpies (a discomfiting connection, although somewhat muddled in its implications). This feeds into a broader theme: the relationship between the natural (death) and the artificial (life).

The Detroit backdrop, almost heavy-handed in its symbolism, literalises the ebb and flow between these two extremes—like the Lisbons after Cecilia's death, the city is descending slowly into ruin. It is a return to the natural from the artificial, an epitomization of one of the novel's central themes: disintegration. The story is mired in the negative connotation of the word, but Eugenides' prose bears an underlying weariness that suggests, perhaps even encourages, a more favorable perspective on dissolution—a gentle unraveling that relieves the crafted tension of the material world.

*The Virgin Suicides* bears that singular quality of great art: it haunts. I am writing this review roughly a year after reading the book, and in all that time I have scarcely managed to get it out of my head. There is one line in particular that has stayed with me, a description from within the Lisbon household: “A half-eaten sandwich sat atop the landing where someone had felt too sad to finish it.” Has a more heartbreaking sentence ever been written in the English language? (I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that there hasn’t.) This is a novel that, regardless of whether you like it or not, is extraordinarily difficult to forget.

While far from a perfect book, *The Virgin Suicides* is a beautiful mess that struck a chord in my soul. I keep combing through the story in my mind, looking for clues, trying to find some reason or rationalization that would explain the Lisbon suicides. I’ve come up empty so far. Of course, that’s the whole point: Eugenides recognizes that inherent human desire for answers, the need to “explain away,” and refuses to let that desire be satisfied. People are not puzzles. People are not riddles. No amount of observation or dissection will ever give you a complete picture, will ever allow you to make sense of a human life. That’s not how it works. We cannot decipher one another. But the question remains—is it really so wrong to try?

Reviewed by Aaron Larson