



Fresh Complaint

Jeffrey Eugenides

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The first collection of short fiction from the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jeffrey Eugenides

Jeffrey Eugenides's bestselling novels have shown him to be an astute observer of the crises of adolescence, self-discovery, family love, and what it means to be American in our times. The stories in *Fresh Complaint* explore equally rich—and intriguing—territory. Ranging from the biting reproductive antics of “Baster” to the dreamy, moving account of a young traveler’s search for enlightenment in “Air Mail” (selected by Annie Proulx for *Best American Short Stories*), this collection presents characters in the midst of personal and national emergencies. We meet a failed poet who, envious of other people’s wealth during the real-estate bubble, becomes an embezzler; a clavichordist whose dreams of art founder under the obligations of marriage and fatherhood; and, in “Fresh Complaint,” a high school student whose wish to escape the strictures of her immigrant family lead her to a drastic decision that upends the life of a middle-aged British physicist.

Narratively compelling, beautifully written, and packed with a density of ideas despite their fluid grace, these stories chart the development and maturation of a major American writer.

Fresh Complaint Details

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From Reader Review Fresh Complaint for online ebook

Sharon says

I've loved Eugenides' novels--Middlesex is a lifetime fave--but reading this story collection on the heels of work like *Difficult Women* and *Her Body and Other Parties*, the stories just feel tame, safe, predictable, and somewhat short on meaning. The Gay and Machado stories are so wild and raw and fearless and pull the very soul of of you for you to examine, while these are perfectly nice, well-written, mildly contemplative stories. Glad I read it, doubt I'll think of it again.

Erin says

2.5 stars. To anyone who knows my reading life, it's not a secret that I usually don't care for short stories. But Jeffrey Eugenides is such a good and interesting writer, that I couldn't resist trying this collection out. I had my doubts going in - this is a collection of 10 short stories and all but two of them were published in various periodicals ranging from the 80s to a few years ago. Theoretically I think it's a good idea, because it allows an artist to make money for work they've done throughout their career, but in a practical sense the end product is often uneven. That was definitely the case with this collection - *Interpreter of Maladies* it is not.

In several of the stories, an otherwise interesting situation becomes glib and borderline sexist when viewed through the eyes of the clueless male narrator - for example, in the story "Find the Bad Guy" the somewhat interesting tale of the rise and fall of a greencard marriage becomes unbearable when filtered through the corny dialect of the alcoholic macho Texan husband. The worst story of the collection "Baster" is basically unreadable, rendering men and women to their worst stereotypes.

There's also two crossover stories - "The Oracular Vulva" featuring the doctor from *Middlesex* and "Air Mail" featuring Mitchell from *The Marriage Plot*. Both stories are so deeply inferior to the longer novels that they feel incredibly unsatisfying. During most of the collection, I could hardly even tell this was the same author. Punchline: If you're interested in some Eugenides, skip right over this and go to one of the novels.

Meike says

"No one knew what the original music sounded like. You had to make an educated guess and do the best you could. (...) Sometimes you thought you heard the music, especially when you were young, and then you spent the rest of your life trying to reproduce the sound. Everybody's life was early music."

This collection of ten short stories covers almost three decades of Eugenides' writing career, from 1988 to the present, and it is interesting to see how certain topics remain at the center of the author's interest while his approach to them keeps shifting. "Fresh complaint" is a legal term, meaning that the victim of a crime, especially a sexual offense, reports the incident to someone in a position of trust, like a friend or a policeman, shortly after it happened. Clearly, fresh complaints are advantageous for criminal prosecution as possible evidence might otherwise get lost and memory tends to fade or distort the past. But Eugenides also applies the term in a more literal sense: His stories' protagonists are all struggling with events that shaped their lives in unfortunate ways, and yes, some of them indulge in complaining. What further connects the short stories in this collection is that they contrast the idea a person has of him- or herself in her own mind

with the outside reality or perception – and Eugenides excels at exploring these contrasting images, as he has already shown in *Middlesex* and *The Virgin Suicides*.

Two women who support each other when the older one, 88-year-old Della, starts to suffer from dementia, both of them taking courage from their favorite book *Two Old Women: An Alaskan Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival* (“Complainers”);

A backpacker (Mitchell Grammaticus from *The Marriage Plot*) on a tropical island in the Gulf of Thailand who is trying to find enlightenment through fasting (“Air Mail”);

A man who is hurt by the fact that his former girlfriend rather wants to have a child with a sperm donor than with him (“Baster”);

A clavichord player trying to provide for his family and deeply regretting the choices he made (“Early Music”);

An elderly man who loses his fortune and tries to start a new business so his sons can have an inheritance (“Timeshare”);

A man ruminating about his marriage that has fallen apart (“Find the Bad Guy”);

A sexologist (from *Middlesex*) whose major findings are contested on the same day he is awarded a lifetime achievement award and who travels to Irian Jaya (now Papua) to prove his critics wrong (“The Oracular Vulva”);

A divorced man trying to seduce a young backpacker who gets interrupted by an old friend, the backpacker’s travel companion, and a number of misperceptions (“Capricious Gardens”);

An editor giving up on his long-held beliefs and trying to defraud his boss in order to benefit his family (“Great Experiment”);

An American-Indian girl who is afraid she has to enter an arranged marriage and takes extreme measures (“Fresh Complaint”) -

all of these stories are full of telling details, little hints that give way to new associations and thoughts. The character depictions and the level of empathy Eugenides employs are simply stunning: Even when he writes about terrible people (and there are a lot of dubious characters in this book), the reader cannot help but feel with them.

A really nice collection!

Terri Jacobson says

This superb collection of short fiction by Jeffrey Eugenides includes stories written between 1988 and 2017. The stories were all new to me. (I’ve enjoyed Eugenides long fiction and was unaware he wrote stories as well.) The writing in this collection is terrific and the themes are hard-hitting and intense.

In *Baster*, a woman has a party to celebrate her insemination with donor sperm. The ending in this story, as in many, is powerful and somehow so appropriate. *Find the Bad Guy* is a story about a husband whose

family has taken out a restraining order, so he is watching them secretly. *Great Experiment* showcases a publisher whose house puts out only 5 titles a year. The protagonist, Kendall, is working for a wealthy man who is stingy and penny-pinching, and Kendall finally has enough. One of my favorite stories is *Early Music*. Rodney is an expert in the early composers of classical music, and he has an expensive clavichord that is being repossessed. He thinks about his career:

No one knew what the original music sounded like. You had to make an educated guess and do the best you could. For whatever you played there was no indisputable tuning or handwritten schematic, and the visa you needed in order to see the Master's keyboard was always denied. Sometimes you thought you heard the music, especially when you were young, and then you spend the rest of your life trying to reproduce the sound.

Everybody's life was early music.

Eugenides is a skillful writer and I love his images. He can evoke a mood or feeling with a phrase. (*The smell of his wife was everywhere, rose from armchairs when he sat in them, made him remember days of bright scarves and impeccable sheets.*) In this collection of 10 stories there was only one that kind of missed the mark for me. *Fresh Complaint* is a fine collection of short fiction. 4.5 stars.

Thanks to Lit Hub's First Readers' Club and Farrar, Straus and Giroux for ARC. *Fresh Complaint* will be published October 3, 2017.

Erin says

So disappointing. I found the last story to be just insulting. I expected better.

Larry H says

I'd rate this 3.5 stars.

Ever since Jeffrey Eugenides burst on to the literary scene in the early 1990s with *The Virgin Suicides*, he's proven himself to be an expert commentator on the foibles of the human condition, sex, adolescence, relationships, family dynamics, and, at times, the often-mundane challenges of everyday life. He further cemented that reputation with *Middlesex* and *The Marriage Plot*, so when I heard that he'd finally be coming out with a short story collection, I was excited to see if he'd be able to capture this same kind of magic in short form.

The verdict? His stories, some of which were written as early as 1996, definitely demonstrate his talent for creating memorable characters and vivid dialogue. Some have a dreamier quality, while others are more moving and poignant. The challenge is, not all of the stories are that interesting, so while you can savor Eugenides' storytelling ability, you might find yourself wondering what the point was in some cases.

Among my favorites in the collection: "Baster," about a woman in her 40s who decides it's time to use a somewhat unorthodox way of getting pregnant, and how that decision affects a former boyfriend; "Complainers," which chronicles the decades-long relationship between two women, and how one responds when the other's infirmities start impacting her independence and her spirit; "Air Mail," the story of a young man's observations as he searches for enlightenment while traveling the world; "Find the Bad Guy," about a man trying to rebuild his marriage; and the title story, about a young girl's desire to escape her immigrant

family's customs, so she makes an impetuous decision which turns a British physicist's life upside down.

At their best, Eugenides draws you into the stories from their very first sentence, creating tension and empathetic characters whose lives and situations you become invested in. When the stories didn't work for me, they just didn't quite capture my attention (one seemed like an excerpt from *Middlesex* or an early outtake), or I didn't quite understand what he was trying to say. Fortunately the good stories outnumbered the weaker ones, but some of the weaker ones made the collection feel a little bogged down.

Eugenides is one of those authors who tends to take a while between novels. I hope that since *Fresh Complaint* was mostly a collection of previously written material, we won't have to wait much longer for a new book. (*The Marriage Plot* was released in 2011.) Still, these stories are a nice way to tide you over until the next book comes along, if you're one of those who could use a Eugenides fix.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo...>

Beth says

These were undeniably well-written, but had an undercurrent of misogyny that I didn't like--it's the same feeling I get when reading Updike (see especially: *Early Music*, *Baster*, and *Fresh Complaint*). I also would have preferred if the stories were in date order.

Sofia says

Με εξαΰρηση την πρῶτη και την τελευταΰα ιστορΰα, οι υπΰλοιπες μου ΰφησαν χλιαρΰς εντυπΰσεις . Μια μΰλιστα την βρΰκα ιδιαΰτερα ενοχλητικΰ. Κΰποιες στιγμΰς φλερτΰρα με την ιδΰα να το αφΰσω αλλΰ εΰπα να δΰσω μια ευκαιρΰα σε ΰναν τοσο γνωστΰ συγγραφΰα που δεν ειχα ξαναδιαβΰσει. Συμπΰρασμα :Το ΰνστικτο μας 9 στις 10 φορΰς εχει δΰκιο.

Staring-Girl says

Complainers 5/5

Air Mail 3/5

Baster 5/5

Early music 5/5

Timeshare 3/5

Find the Bad Guy 5/5

The Oracular Vulva 5/5

Capricious gardens 5/5

Great experiment 4/5

Fresh Complaint 5/5

* * *

Elyse says

Audiobook....

I like Jeffrey Eugenides. I enjoy his writing - I loved "MiddleSex"
and I like "The Marriage Plot" much more than most in my local book club.

But - I'm so-so about these 10 short stories. I was taken in right away with the first story: "Complainers" — Della and Cathy are friends. Della is much older and married. Della's husband runs into financial problems after making some risky investments which failed after he insisted that moving to Florida was the right move.

Cathy was angry with Della for even listening to her husband make all their decisions- which created tension in their friendship. But when Della's husband dies...she and Cathy get closer again. The story keeps moving - held my interest from beginning to end - every word.... from the assisted living quarters Della moves into - to her dementia- aging - friendshipetc. I thought about both Cathy and Della a lot....

andI enjoyed "Timeshare"...A father buys an old broken down resort in Florida that he's going to re-design. Upscale - no students allowed "piss on them"....
with his bad back and all....

And other stories — "Early Music" - is pretty good"Find the Bad Boy" ... and the last story "Fresh Complaint".... the title story....was also pretty good...

But overall these stories are a mixed bag -and overall lukewarm.

3 Stars....

*PERSONAL SHARE: (again) ... healing at home ... 2 more surgeries are scheduled beginning Nov. 3rd...I'm in no pain.... but due to the worse fires in California history.... as I look out the window this very moment - the sky is black... we smelled the fire in our house last night. The closest fire to us is 2 1/2 hours drive away... it seems everyone around here knows somebody who is lost their home. Our favorite get-a-way town- Calistoga is not on fire - but the entire town did need to evacuate... so we are watching closely.

Our county- Santa Clara county sent out alert warnings for people to stay inside as much as possible. Children are not going to school. No walking outdoors. The air quality is 'that bad' - It's even worse in San Francisco. It's really sad. We've never seen anything like this.

So many natural disasters lately... Mother Nature seems to be having an awful temper tantrum!
My thoughts - and best hopes - to all those directly affected by these fires...wishing the members - here on Goodreads in the local vicinity of the fires are safe and well!

Melissa says

I was in Austin this past weekend doing a panel for Nasty Women: Feminism, Resistance, and Revolution in Trump's America, but I had the first day of the festival all to myself. One of the big events I'd been dying to attend was the panel with Jeffrey Eugenides and Claire Messud. It's a six hour drive from South Texas up to Austin, and I used the opportunity to finish listening to *Fresh Complaint*, a collection of stories written between 1988 to 2017. With the exception of the title story, most of the stories had been previously published in other places.

Early in the panel, Eugenides bemoaned a common description he'd been seeing in reviews of his book: it's about depressed middle-aged men. "It's not just about that," he protested. "There's a story about two older women, and there's a story about a Pakistani teenager."

Yeah. About that.

Most of the stories indeed feature depressed, aging men. And aside from a couple of stories, I thought the collection was mostly unremarkable. I often found myself drifting off and fighting to stay focused, but the last story, "Fresh Complaint," brought me back to reality. In a book featuring a whole lot of white people, the sudden, specific inclusion of an Indian-American teenager named Prakrti demanded my attention. My antennas perked up, and not in a good way.

Prakrti, you see, is a seventeen-year-old who's being pushed by her mother to start talking to the upstanding Indian guy who's set to one day become her husband through an arranged marriage. But Prakrti is just a normal American girl. She doesn't want an arranged marriage.

In a seemingly different timeline, a pretty girl in a college sweatshirt approaches a brilliant, middle-aged astrophysicist at a book signing. She manages to seduce the poor fool, and the two meet in a clumsy encounter in his hotel room. She changes her mind and leaves before he's able to penetrate her, and he goes back to his married life in England, confused about the whole thing.

That girl is Prakrti, and she's not nineteen. She's still seventeen, and now she's crying rape. Because clearly if she's not a virgin — not by her choice, of course — no one will want her for an arranged marriage.

At this point in the audiobook, I literally started screaming "JEFFREY. WHAT THE FUCK?" in my car.

Yup. There's one story featuring a woman of color, and her cultural traditions drive her to ruin the life of an innocent white man. If that ain't tone deaf, especially considering the current #metoo backlash ("Everyone is crying rape now, UGH. What happened to innocent until proven guilty?"), I don't know what is.

People of color do make the occasional appearance in other stories. In “Air Mail,” white dudebro backpackers visit Asia to do douche-y things like find enlightenment, only to come down with a nasty case of dysentery. And the story Eugenides mentioned in his panel about the two older women? They were inspired to take charge of life by a novel about Native American women. Speaking of Native Americans, “The Oracular Vulva” features a doctor (the same one from *Middlesex*, apparently) who goes to study an isolated indigenous tribe where pedophilia is a valid thing. Really.

Basically, people of color exist in this book only to serve as catalysts for white people’s character arcs.

Here’s the thing: Eugenides has always been a white-male-gazey author. For the most part, I’ve been okay with that. (Full disclosure: I actually have signed copies of all of his books. Except this one, because fuck that.) *The Marriage Plot* works for me because he writes white privileged academia so well. And I have issues with *The Virgin Suicides* — the Lisbon sisters are flat, existing entirely in the boys’ male gaze — but even then, I’m kind of meh about the whole thing.

But *Fresh Complaint*? There’s no excuse. If this is his attempt at diversifying his writing, I’m totally okay with him ignoring brown people and sticking to depressed white men from now on.

This review was originally published on my book blog.

Sub_zero says

Desperdigadas a lo largo de 30 años de carrera, las diez historias recogidas en *Denuncia inmediata* constituyen un cuerpo heterogéneo que da buena cuenta de la capacidad de Eugenides para profundizar en la sórdida complejidad del ser humano.

En «Quejas», relato que abre la colección, Eugenides disecciona la entrañable relación de Cathy y Della, dos amigas unidas por la literatura y el mal gusto a la hora de escoger marido que se verán reflejadas en una leyenda atabascana sobre mujeres abandonadas por su tribu. En «Correo aéreo», un joven llamado Mitchell registra en tono entre alucinatorio y místico sus aventuras en una isla indonesia mientras lo consume una agresiva diarrea. En «Jeringa de cocina», probablemente uno de los relatos más impactantes y maquiavélicos de *Denuncia inmediata*, una mujer entrada en la cuarentena se dispone a recolectar esperma de sus exnovios con el fin de quedarse embarazada. «Música antigua» narra las hazañas de un clavicordista frustrado que trata por todos los medios de compaginar la práctica del instrumento con las agobiantes e interminables responsabilidades familiares mientras las presiones económicas comienzan a treparle por el cuello.

En «La vulva oracular», donde Eugenides siembra ideas que acabarían germinando en la aclamada *Middlesex*, un eminente sexólogo —conocido principalmente por sus revolucionarios estudios en materia de género— se une a un grupo de expedicionarios que pretende estudiar las insólitas costumbres sexuales de una remota comunidad indígena. En «Huertos caprichosos», dos chicas que se encuentran en Irlanda de vacaciones acaban alojándose en una casa rural con un par de desconocidos, una pareja de amigos recién divorciados que acusarán la elevada carga de erotismo y tensión sexual presentes en el relato. Con «Magno Experimento», publicado en pleno estallido de la crisis económica de 2008, Jeffrey Eugenides pone a prueba la resistencia de la honradez y los buenos propósitos en un hábitat poblado por todo tipo de depredadores bursátiles. Sin duda, la catadura moral de los personajes es una variable que Eugenides prefiere observar en situaciones límite. Este postulado alcanza su máxima expresión en «Denuncia inmediata», cuando una ambiciosa adolescente de origen indio urde una retorcida trama para escapar de un matrimonio concertado, aunque ello suponga arruinar la vida de otra persona.

De premisa más o menos llamativa, mejor o peor resueltas, estas diez historias confirman a Jeffrey Eugenides como uno de los mejores analistas de la sociedad norteamericana contemporánea. Meticuloso y concienzudo tanto en la descripción como en la exploración de los personajes, Eugenides ahonda en el vacío existencial de la clase media estadounidense, promovido en gran parte por una absoluta carencia de escrúpulos y un ímpetu casi suicida por medrar en la esfera financiera. Los personajes que habitan las páginas de *Denuncia inmediata* quedan frecuentemente aplastados por el peso de las expectativas ajenas o incluso de las propias. La consecución de sus metas va emparejada al regusto amargo de no haber logrado más que una victoria pírrica. Eugenides aprovecha tales circunstancias para plantear candentes debates sobre cuestiones tan pertinentes como incómodas y reflexionar asimismo en sus diversas ramificaciones. A veces, la moraleja queda sepultada en algún punto intermedio del relato, provocando cierto aire de inconcreción o falta de contundencia. No obstante, esto no impide en ningún momento disfrutar del fenomenal regreso de Eugenides al terreno de juego. Su vuelta, aunque lejos de apoteósica, consigue calmar la sed de sus admiradores durante unos períodos de sequía que, esperemos, sean cada vez menos longevos.

Kathleen says

My review for the Chicago Tribune: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifesty...>

Jeffrey Eugenides' new collection may be called "Fresh Complaint," but the stories themselves are less fresh and more retrospective. The book consists of an array of material ranging from 1988 to 2017, including "Air Mail," which was selected by Annie Proulx for the 1997 edition of "The Best American Short Stories" and "Capricious Gardens," which began as part of his master's thesis.

Better known for his long-form fiction, Eugenides is the author of three novels, including 1993's "The Virgin Suicides," which was made into a movie by Sofia Coppola, and 2011's "The Marriage Plot." He won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003 for "Middlesex," his novel about an intersex protagonist, Cal (sometimes "Callie") Stephanides, coming of age and grappling with the American Dream and gender identity in 20th century Detroit.

A couple of the 10 pieces here contain crossover characters from his longer works, notably "The Oracular Vulva," which features Dr. Peter Luce, the sexologist from "Middlesex" and the aforementioned "Air Mail," whose protagonist, Mitchell, also appears in "The Marriage Plot." Each story includes the year it was written at the end, instructively calling attention to the development of Eugenides' approaches and themes across the decades.

This collection contains flashes of what makes his longer work a pleasure to read — fraught situations, keenly observed behaviors, and senses of complicated humor and empathy — but on the whole, it feels uneven. In the opening story, "Complainers," about the lengthy friendship of two elderly women named Cathy and Della, he writes of Della's experience of reading: "Since her last reading, she's forgotten enough of the book that the story seems new again, yet familiar. Welcoming. But it's mostly the act itself that brings relief, the self-forgetfulness, the diving and plunging into other lives." One could do worse in terms of an explanation of the appeal of fiction, yet too few of these stories offer that sense of depth, skating instead on the surfaces of the lives they depict.

"Baster," for instance, offers a glib take on a somewhat hackneyed situation: the woman who seemingly has it all — "a great job as an assistant producer of CBS Evening News with Dan Rather ... a terrific, adult-size apartment on Hudson Street ... good looks, mostly intact ... an IRA kicked up to \$175,000" — but who "wanted a baby." In the absence of a husband, as the title suggests, she artificially inseminates herself. But Eugenides holds this story and so many others at arm's length, filtering it through the sexist first-person

narration of Wally Mars, an ex-boyfriend who asserts that "Men like being objectified."

Similarly, in "Find the Bad Guy," he takes on the clichéd absurdity of a green card marriage, telling the story from the perspective of the husband, originally from Michigan, but who speaks in a corny pseudo-Texan style. "Got to talking this way on account of living down here for so long," he clunkily explains, interspersing the tale with cartoonish sentences that angle for cheap laughs: "I look up at my house and cogitate some — I don't rightly want to say what about."

In the strongest stories, particularly "Timeshare" and "Capricious Gardens," Eugenides comes across as bemused by — but not mocking or contemptuous of — his characters. In too many others, his tone condescends and dismisses, as when he writes of the aging hipster protagonist of "Great Experiment" that "Kendall had never wanted to live like his parents. That had been the whole idea, the lofty rationale behind the snow-globe collection and the flea market eyewear."

Hit or miss as the stories are, they do contain some gems of insight, as when the married Matthew, on a college campus to give a physics lecture, decides to reply to a flirtatious text from an underage girl and thinks, "It was like skiing. Like the moment when, at the summit, you first lean downhill and gravity takes hold, sending you flying." Or when the largely odious Wally Mars notes: "But in eliminating some regrets you create others." One regrets this collection's lack of consistency, but it is worth a read as one waits for Eugenides' next novel.

Corinna says

This collection of stories was very hit or miss, but mostly miss. The misogynistic overtones were disappointing from an author whose work I've really enjoyed in the past.

Andrew Smith says

I'd really enjoyed the author's novel *Middlesex* (where I discovered a dictionary's worth of words I previously had no knowledge of) so the opportunity to read a bunch of short stories from the hand of this gifted scribbler was something I wasn't going to pass up. All of these stories have been previously published in magazines in the period 1989 – 2013. I wouldn't say there's a common theme, though a sense of dissatisfaction with life or circumstance - a desire for something that is absent - seems to loom large in most of the tales.

All of the stories grabbed me quickly, were well paced and maintained sufficient energy to keep me interested throughout. I also liked the fact that there was a good dose of humour sprinkled around, even when the story was otherwise somewhat dark (e.g. *Timeshare* and *The Bad Guy*). These snippets of life are widely varied and although some grabbed me more than others I think each has something interesting to offer. My personal favourites are *Early Music* where a man suffering a personal financial crisis finds escape playing his clavichord (a keyboard on which he taps out ancient and obscure tunes) and *Air Mail* where a young man contemplates life whilst suffering from a prolonged bout of diarrhea on a distant beach.

As always with these short, window views I was often left with the thought that I'd like to see more of a particular character or to have been allowed to see a scene play out to a broader conclusion. Well, the good news is that Eugenides has provided this opportunity – it appears that the character featured in *Air Mail* can be found in his novel *The Marriage Plot*. And that's where I'll be off to next.

My thanks to HarperCollins UK and NetGalley for providing a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.
