

Teenage Disconnect And 'The Virgin Suicides'

by TAVI GEVINSON

December 26, 2012 7:00 AM ET



The Virgin Suicides

by Jeffrey Eugenides

Paperback, 243 pages

Tavi Gevinson is the editor-in-chief of Rookie Magazine.

I turned 13, and then I read *The Virgin Suicides*. For one, it was about teenagers, girl teenagers, who, I was guessing, killed themselves. For another, the picture on the front cover

reminded me of these woods my mom and I always passed upon entering strip mall/motel territory in my own Midwestern suburb, the alleged setting of many adolescent escapades. Also, sex was involved — 'cause, you know, "virgin." Given the obvious logical appeal of all of the above, I delved into the story of the mysterious Lisbon sisters and the neighborhood boys who observed their brief lives.

There are no heart-to-hearts in *The Virgin Suicides*, no *Breakfast Club*-esque debunking of high school stereotypes. Instead it's about teenagers who have only ideas of each other to think about, and just from a distance, because talking to people you like is scary and hormones suck and parents get suspicious. The boys crush on the girls, we think the girls crush on the boys, and then the girls kill themselves so we'll never know for sure.

All that's left are memories of the Lisbons recalled in almost creepy detail by their now-middle-aged admirers, still struggling to piece together an explanation for their deaths. The guys' nostalgia glorifies the sisters now as much as their boyish hopes and dreams did when it all began, and the sisters, too, had their own expectations of love and sex locked up with them at home, attempting in small ways to experience the outside world their mom tried to protect them from, hoarding travel brochures and rock records, decorating their rooms with shrines to whatever at that point gave them reason to live.

If there's any teen bonding experience in this book, it exists in all the small gestures acting as placeholders for what its characters wish they could say. Notes left in bicycle wheels, code transmitted through a window with a light, records played over the telephone. *The Virgin Suicides* is my favorite teen romance of all time, either in spite or because of the fact that the characters never really talk to one another.

When I first read this book, I didn't feel like a teenager. Now, at 16, despite writing about being a teenager, editing a website about being a teenager and publishing a book about being a teenager, I still don't feel like a teenager. When I look back on my adolescence so far, my memories consist primarily of events that never took place, stories imagined from the music and movies and books I've pored over alone in my room, hopes I've had that never quite panned out but which are as vivid in my mind as any real experience. I was sure that I was doing it wrong.

I reread *The Virgin Suicides* once a year, and each time I come closer to accepting the possibility that maybe that's what adolescence is. Not making out with Trip Fontaine under

the bleachers or losing your virginity at the school dance or jumping out a bedroom window after dramatically proclaiming love to an almost perfect stranger. But that disconnect, that yearning, just waiting itself.

PG-13 is produced and edited by the team at NPR Books.



<http://rookiemag.com/2013/06/movietv-rec/2000-poster-virgin-suicides-1/>

The Virgin Suicides (1999)

I volunteered to write this recommendation, then I was like UGH TOO INTIMIDATING, GIVE IT TO SOMEONE ELSE, then Anaheed tried to find someone else, then I was like UGH WHAT ARE YOU DOING, THIS IS MY TURF, so here I am. *The Virgin Suicides* as a unit—book

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/10956.The_Virgin_Suicides) and

movie (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lxtf2oG_b44)—has

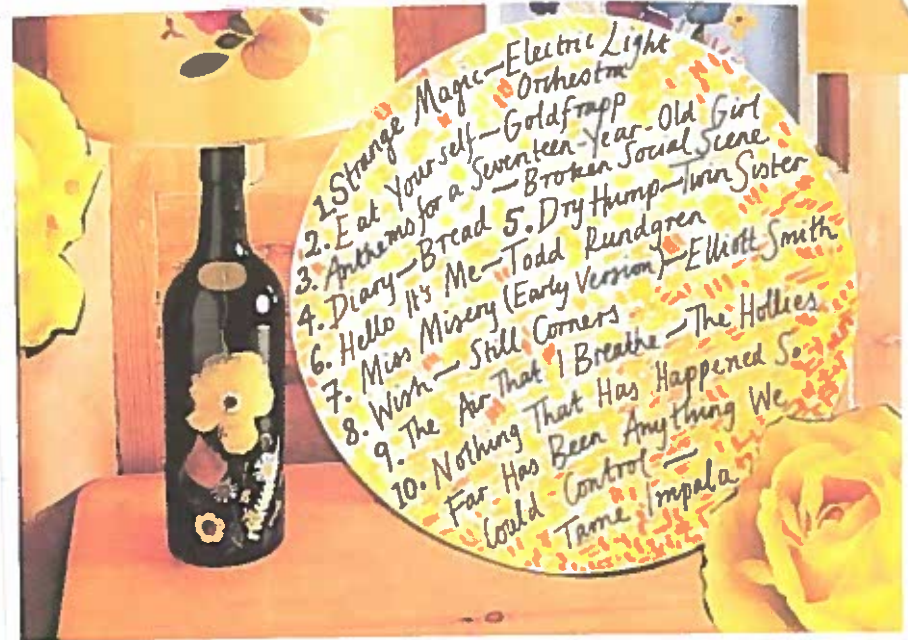
influenced the way I think more than most things in life. I have always been sentimental to a fault, so this story, which is about memories of fantasies, resonates for me as someone who gets nostalgic for EVERYTHING: that water bottle wrapper, my old desktop wallpaper, last Tuesday. I get so nostalgic for *The Virgin Suicides*' nostalgia that I have made it a personal summer tradition to reread and rewatch it every year. I have so taken to its suggestion that fantasizing is better than reality that I've grown comfortable with my lifestyle choice of being a hermit who dreams about things. The story is narrated by a pack of neighborhood boys, now all grown up, who crushed in their youth on an elusive and blond pack of neighborhood girls, the Lisbon sisters. Tragedy strikes, and these men have spent their whole lives trying to figure out why. As Roger Ebert wrote

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-virgin-suicides-2000>) about the film, by the end of it you realize it is as much about the boys as it is about the girls—it's about the combination of adolescence and desire, and how often love is a projection of our own fantasies. Sofia Coppola's movie is one of the most successful film adaptations of a book ever, IMO, and so perfectly aligns the aforementioned concept with a dreamy aesthetic that is tacky and cheesy but completely sincere in the way a 1970s teen almost-love story should be: There are montages of the girls prancing around with unicorns, yellows and pinks and suburban skies, the sounds of Todd Rundgren and Heart. OMG, both scenes that use Heart are so good, especially the makeout one. I don't even know how to express all of my love for this movie. Or tell you how many times I have tried to re-create its scenes as a coping mechanism with my own adolescence (healthily, I promise). I have made a zine about it, and written about it here (<http://www.thestylerookie.com/2011/04/shes-full-of-secrets.html>), here (<http://www.thestylerookie.com/2013/04/five-years.html>), and here (<http://www.npr.org/2012/12/26/163570963/teenage-disconnect-and-the-virgin-suicides>).

OMGGGGGG. —Tavi

Moving Images

Shows and films imbued with yearning.



1. Strange Magic—Electric Light Orchestra
2. Eat Yourself—Goldfrapp
3. Anthems for a Seventeen-Year-Old Girl—Broken Social Scene
4. Diary—Bread
5. Dry Hump—Twin Sister
6. Hello It's Me—Todd Rundgren
7. Miss Misery (Early Version)—Elliott Smith
8. Wish—Still Corners
9. The Air That I Breathe—The Hollies
10. Nothing That Has Happened So Far Has Been Anything We Could Control—Tame Impala