

Foundational Books

Ada, or Ardor - Vladimir Nabokov (SAINT PETERSBURG)

FOXFIRE: Confessions of a Girl Gang - Joyce Carol Oates (NEW ORLEANS / BOISE)

Possession: A Romance - A.S. Byatt (BOISE)

Wonder Boys - Michael Chabon (EAST COLFAX)

Sun & Steel - Yukio Mishima (MORELAND AVENUE)

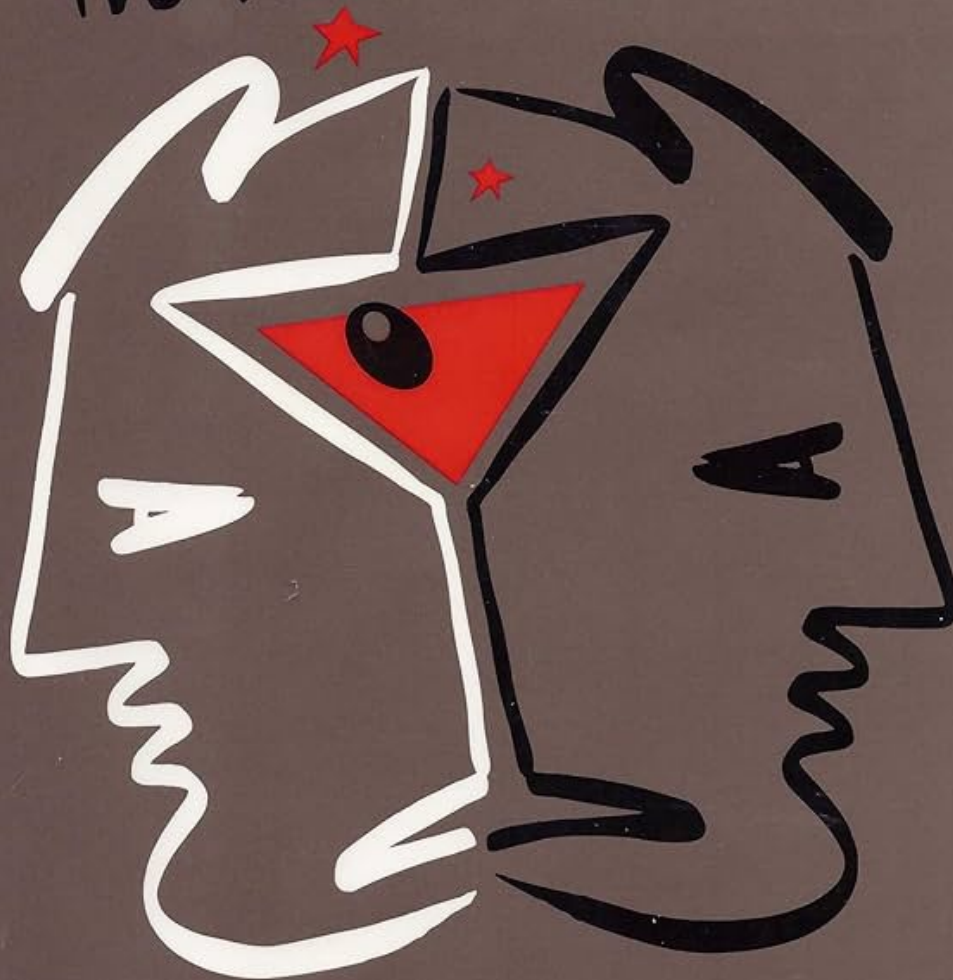
The Virgin Suicides - Jefferey Eugenides (EAST COLFAX)

CHILDHOOD: Wonder Boys & The Virgin Suicides

YOUNG ADULTHOOD: Possession, FOXFIRE

ADULTHOOD: Sun and Steel, Ada, or Ardor

Michael Chabon



Wonder Boys

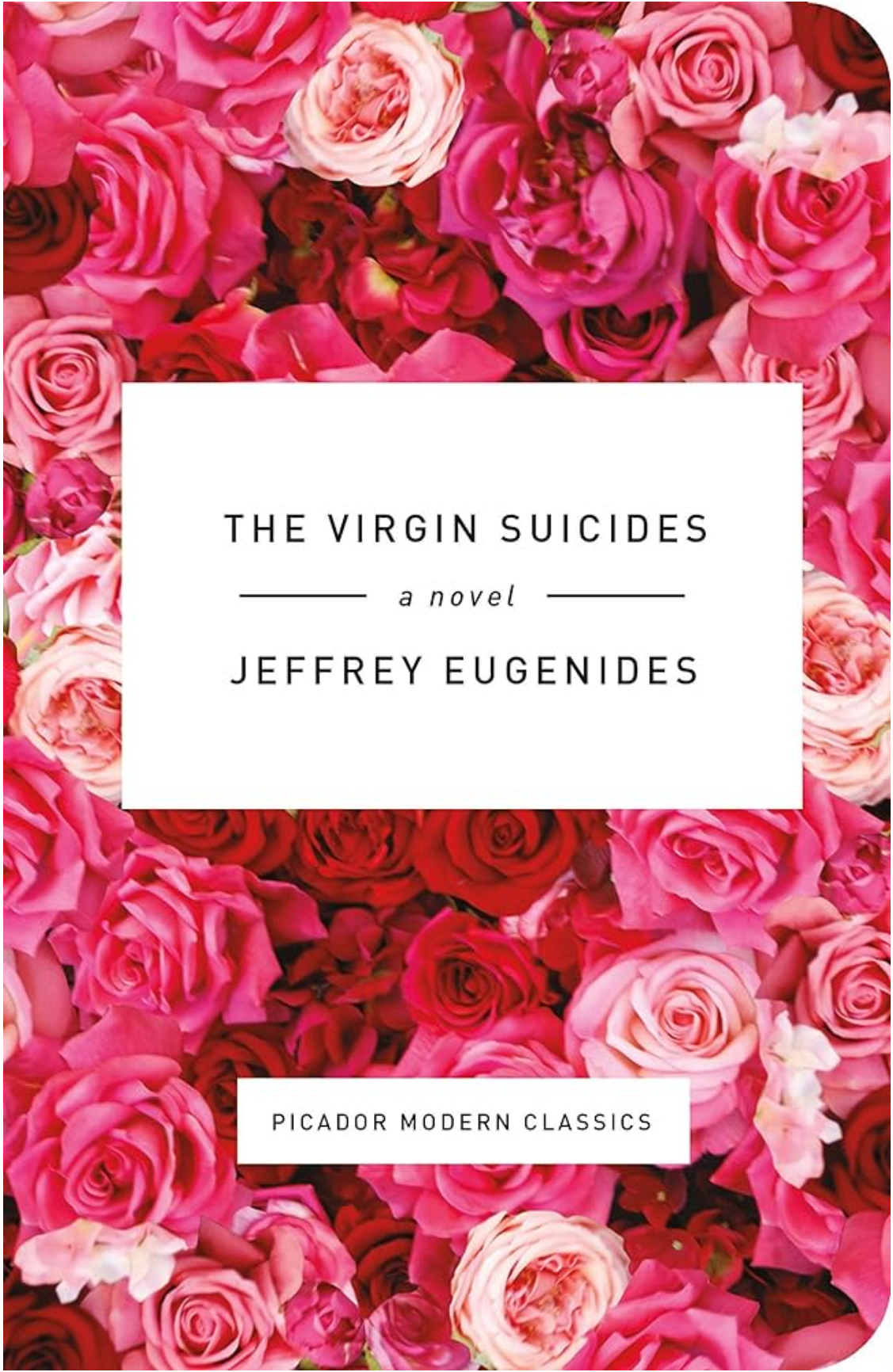
A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF

The Mysteries of Pittsburgh

April 6, 2001, DENVER: Wonder Boys & The Virgin Suicides

AGE 12

The weekend of my 12th birthday was a pretty big deal. My parents gave me money for one CD and let me have both free rentals on our family Blockbuster Card. I purchased *Is This It* by The Strokes and rented *Wonder Boys* and *The Virgin Suicides*. My mother promised to let me rent whatever I wanted, so she didn't like the title or the R ratings, she kept her word and let me rent them. We had just moved into an apartment after being homeless, and I think she was trying to make me happy and reassure herself that I was normal, and this seemed like a gesture to both of us that I hadn't been too damaged by our homelessness and my rocky start to being an adolescent. *Based on the novel* on both VHS boxes helped. Books were trustworthy. I wanted to see *Wonder Boys* more, I was already dreaming of being a writer, and even then I understood that unless I was JK Rowling level famous, I would have to have a job, a job that wasn't being a famous writer. I liked that it was about a weekend, and even now, almost 25 years away from this life destroying weekend, I prefer compacted timelines, in writing and cinema and most all art. They feel more honest. *The Virgin Suicides* was about sisters, and maybe I thought it would show me something about my future as a teenage girl with sisters. Everything was set after that weekend. My life path was decided. *Wonder Boys* was what I wanted! Sure, this guy's life is literally falling apart, but it was the first time I could look into life that I wanted and see how it worked. The mechanics and banalities of picking up other writers from the airport, parties at teachers houses. I was transfixed. I didn't understand what an MFA workshop was and I still don't, even though I am getting my MFA now. I watched *Wonder Boys* three times that weekend, changed all my usernames to WonderBoy and started dreaming about how I could become a writer, with writing friends and writing students and writing parties and dead dogs and Marilyn Monroe's jacket.



THE VIRGIN SUICIDES

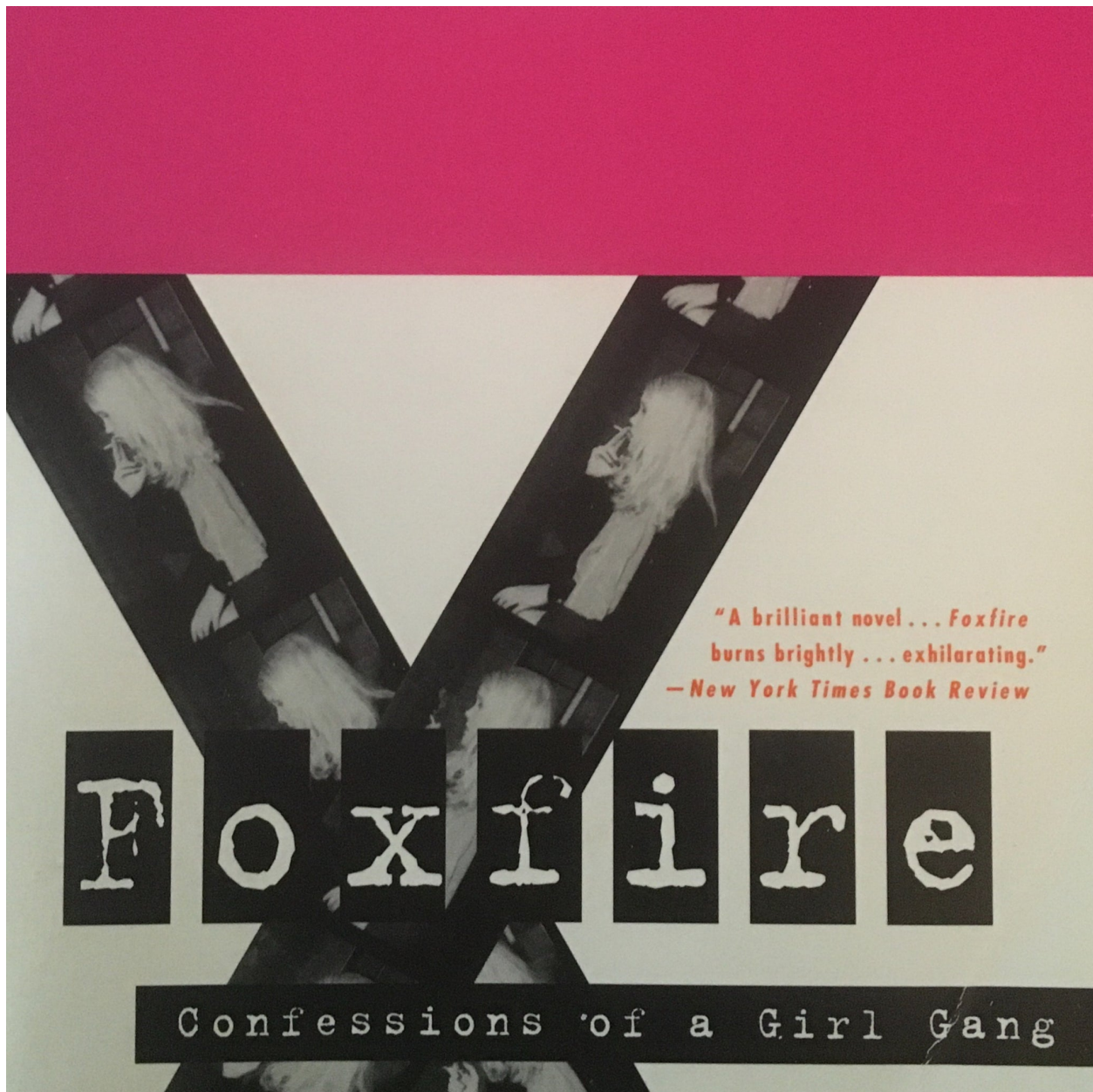
— *a novel* —

JEFFREY EUGENIDES

PICADOR MODERN CLASSICS

The effect *The Virgin Suicides* had on me was more...esoteric and difficult to pick out. It frightened me, not because suicide is a frightening aspect — talk to any eleven or twelve year old girl and she has definitely already thought about and can articulate what 'suicide' means — but that I felt very exposed. I didn't like Cecilia's little monologue about a doctor has never experienced being a 13 year old girl, because it was speaking too closely to what I already felt, that there was something happening to me that made me *different*, made me *other*, and that whatever that difference, otherness was, it was dangerous and had to be controlled.

That Monday, I took the bus after school to the library and checked out the books. *Wonder Boys* the film is better than *Wonder Boys* the book, mainly because Pittsburgh is so present in the book and I didn't like that. I didn't want to move to Pittsburgh to become a writer. My opinion about if *TVS* movie or book is better changes by the day. I haven't read *Wonder Boys* in 20 years, and maybe when I'm done with this MFA I'll pick it up with new eyes. I re-read *TVS* a few weeks ago, I have the tiny, pocket sized Picador edition, that's been perfect for airports, and the language is still too close to me now as it was back then. *TVS* is 30 years old at this point and while *Wonder Boys* will probably worm its way down to be a cult classic or "just for writers" (even though I think the movie re-release helped), *TVS* is going to continue to dominate discussions about girlhood for the rest of my life.



September 6, 2003, EAST COLFAX: Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang

AGE 14

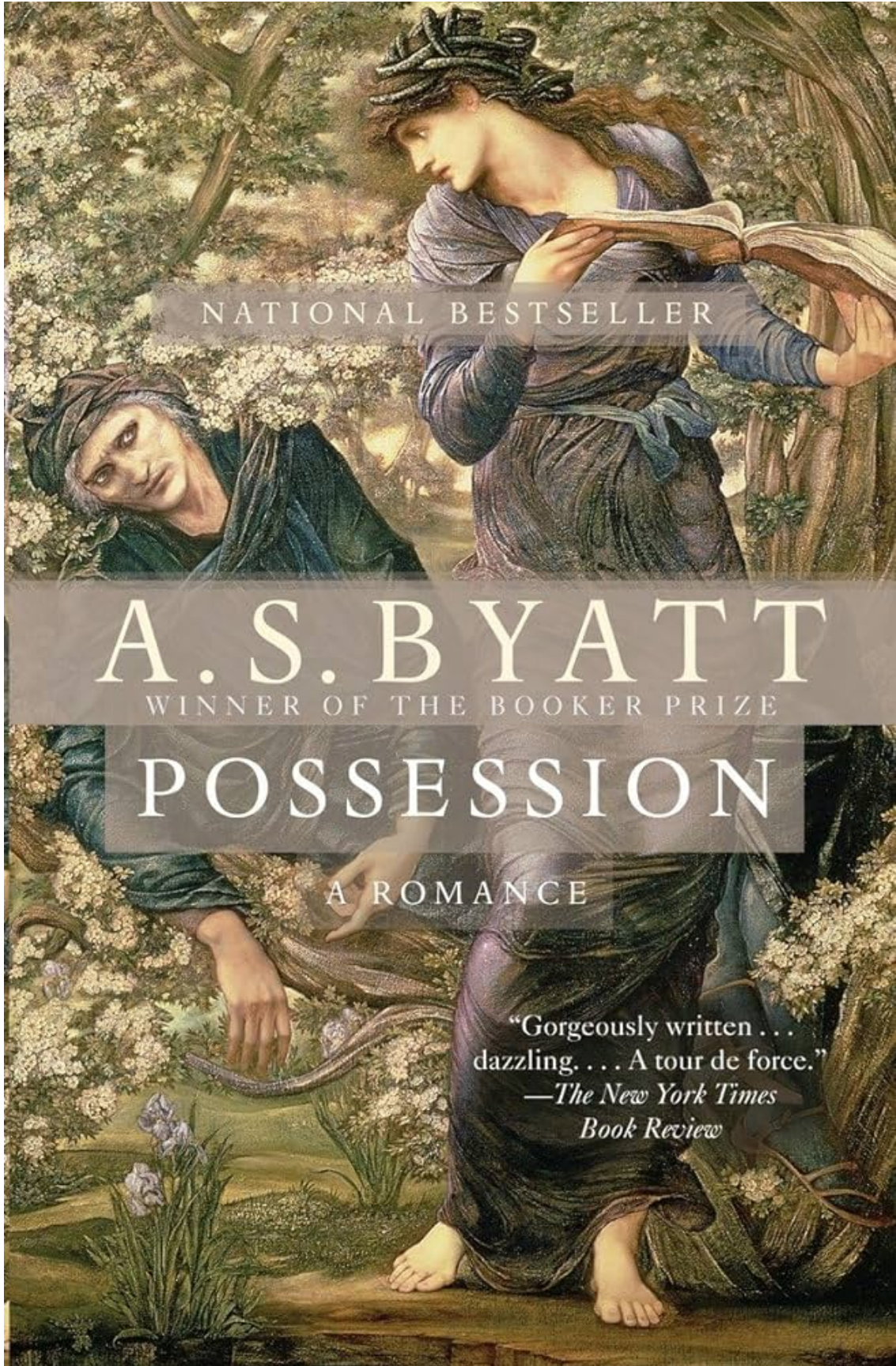
The first girl I ever really loved (and still love her to this day) gave me her copy of *FOXFIRE* when we met when I was a freshman and she was a senior in high

school. It was a courtship object back then, and an extremely suggestive and effective one. Joyce Carol Oates was someone I associated with my mother and her mysterious childhood on the East Coast, stories about women and their dead parents and their old houses they can't keep up with. *FOXFIRE* was not that, at all. This was so far away from the Lisbon girls and their suburban hell of a life from *The Virgin Suicides*, this was much more talk about the life I was living at the time. Mainly, I suppose because *FOXFIRE* is a woman writing about girls, and *The Virgin Suicides* is a man writing boys writing fanfiction about their neighbors. *The Virgin Suicides* is about the unknowable, the mystique. *FOXFIRE* is about girls working to make themselves known.

The narrator Maddy understood, even without Legs' insistence, that what they were doing was important and should be recorded, an impulse that was driving me to fill notebook after notebook, journal after journal, of the exploits of my friends C.K, D.M, E.E and I. It was hot, too hot, burning and burning. They got wins in ways that seemed astounding to me, wins that I wanted. The book was set in the 1950s, and the movie was updated to the 90s so Angelina Jolie could play Legs. The movie is terrible. It doesn't need the 1950s for its power, although the ending relies on a specific 1950s event to make sense. Teenagers are a modern American invention, and this book about the first ever teenage girls made me feel like there was such a thing as universal experience, that there was a template for my anger and rage and confused sexual desire and bodily repulsion. When Legs accomplishes a physical feat that all the local boys could not accomplish, I relished her triumph and got to relieve my own fleeting triumph over local boys at a footrace when I was younger. *FOXFIRE* gave me powerful safety, even when both Legs and I were incarcerated against our will, when Legs and I had unstable living arrangements, when Legs and I both had parents who didn't know if they were going to be together till they died or they never wanted to see each other ever again. Legs survived it, and so I could too.

I've never read any other Joyce Carol Oates and I probably won't. There is something strangely insidious about her now — does she really hate femmes *that* much? — her Twitter presence, how blasé she seems about not caring about Black people....but for fourteen year old me, Legs was the prototype for survival. If Legs could do it, so could I. That book went through Hurricane Katrina with me, and I think made it all the way to COLUMBUS / BOISE. According to the work in *The Vestal* and *The Fasces*, I left it behind with a lover when I was 18 in New

Orleans, recovered it years later, left it with another lover, recovered it, and it disappeared again, and I think it currently resides on a bookshelf on Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights. I'm not 100% sure but I am reasonably confident in this answer. This is one of the few books I can account for at almost every point since it entered my life. Legs and Maddy won't let me forget them or what they did for me when I needed them the most.



NATIONAL BESTSELLER

A.S. BYATT

WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE

POSSESSION

A ROMANCE

“Gorgeously written . . .
dazzling. . . . A tour de force.”

—*The New York Times*
Book Review

2008, EAST COLFAX: Possession: A Romance

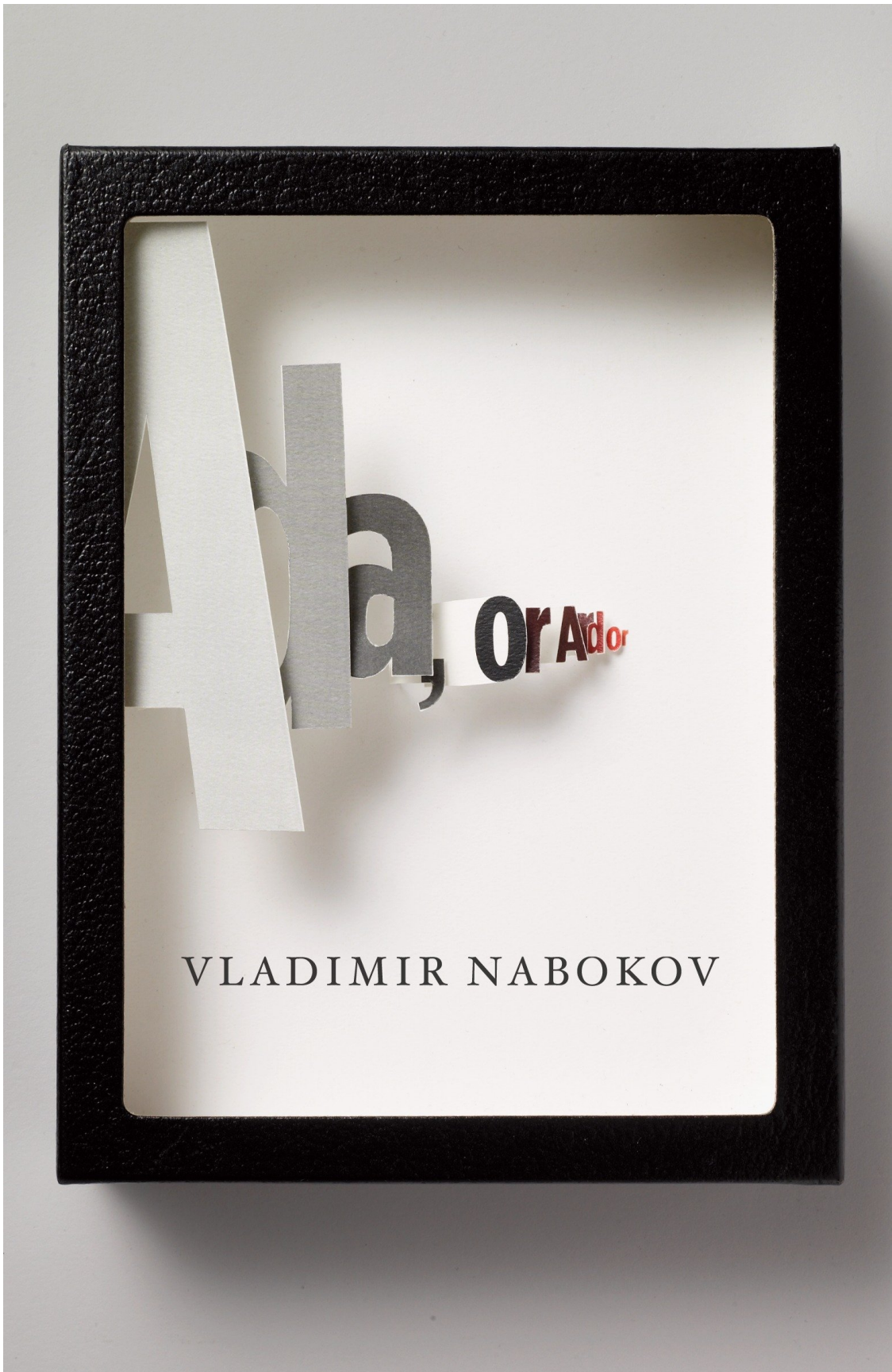
AGE 18

Like *FOXFIRE*, this is one of the few books — few anything, really — I can maintain a reasonably correct provenance over, which is a feat for an incredibly peripatetic and impoverished beginning, and the narrator discusses it in the work in *The Vestal* and *The Fasces*. This was when my stretch of life was dominated by heroin and by Barack Obama's DNC in Denver. I maintained life (sort of) on Colfax Avenue, and I had skateboarded to a soup kitchen past Alphabet City (the stretch of streets off Colfax that fall in alphabetic order, A,B, and C.) and this was in a free box. The cover was a painting, and I liked that. I still do. I don't like book covers with images, I don't like most book covers at all for many reasons, but I do like book covers that take old art and give it some other meaning.

Possession is about two love stories across two centuries, and one of them is told only through letters or other paper documents, fragments, inferred through absences, which is what it must really be like to fall in love with a fairy, even if you are the great Merlin. The language was absurd. The language was absurd! So Victorian, so Romantic, so florid. So much poetry. It's funny, the joke now is that I am a person who "hates poetry", but that's not true. Reading *Possession* did help me articulate what I don't like *now* about poetry and the industries around it, but also what poetry is for, and how people use it to make sense of their lives. The main character works at "The Ash Factory", a small group of academics who have spent their lives sorting through the works and letters of a poet named Ash. This was the flip-side to the writer life I desperately wanted in *Wonder Boys*, something vulgar, disgusting, depressing. Everything about everything in this novel is failure, settling, being a loser, living in a basement flat as a tax free lodger in some mouldering corner of mouldering England.

It was a completely failed life, on every sensual level, and it was a life of poetry, a life of romance. My life was also a complete failure, on every sensual level, but *Possession* was a welcome distraction. I had to look up words, look up sentence types in grammar books. My aunt, who was a phonetics teacher, handed this book

back to me and said "I wanted to like it, but too many dangling participles." They made this into a film as well, but I can't imagine watching it, movie star good looking people pretending like this post-doc life isn't just a pile of useless paper, a mountain of ash. If these people were failures, then my failure didn't look so bad, so traumatic. But theirs was pretty.



April 2018, SAINT PETERSBURG: Ada, or Ardor

AGE 28

I collect different editions of *Lolita*, and I think it is an example of a perfect novel. But it pales in comparison to *Ada, or Ardor* as the most important Nabokov in my life. *Lolita* was published in 1955, when Nabokov was a 55 year old college professor, and *Ada, or Ardor* was published just months before Nabokov died at the age of 78. There is so much to be said about *Lolita* and its all been said before. Old World consuming and destroying the New, obsession, the jokes, the games, the absolute standard bearer of beginning and end sentences (which I can recite, on demand, at the drop of a hat, and I have a sentence from this book tattooed on my body), the perfect ribbons around a really perfect novel. *Lolita* exposes so much of its author, I find it almost boyish in its vanity. Nabokov hates Freud and the whole of the psychiatric profession, so Humbert Humbert plays them at their own game, whenever he wants a vacation. Nabokov wrote it after taking what now seems like an excessive road trip across the country to Oregon, and each place he visits, Humbert Humbert and Dolores visit too. *Lolita* is the product of a confident writer, showing off. A writer who is *good*, and who knows it. A perfect pearl.

Ada, or Ardor is the product of a man whose brain has been on fire for decades with ideas, with no sleep (Nabokov was a severe insomniac his whole life), desperate to write about space, time, butterflies, about Russia, about Tolstoi, about things he loved, before he took his last breath. About what the Russia of his childhood could have become without October 1917, without The Great Patriotic War, without Stalin, without everything that sent Russia to where she is now.

I bought *Ada, or Ardor* on a whim (there is a thread here, that so many of these books are accidents or random selections) while I was waiting for my boyfriend to get out of surgery in suburban Atlanta, the last place on earth where there was a Barnes and Noble in the same strip mall as an outpatient center. I held on to it through some rough patches that ended with me living in New York, and then me decamping to Berlin when that didn't work out. But I read *Ada, or Ardor* while I was still trying to make New York work. So much work, and I was spending hours (hours! I've never spent hours commuting, ever, even in Atlanta) on the train, and I took *Ada* with me.

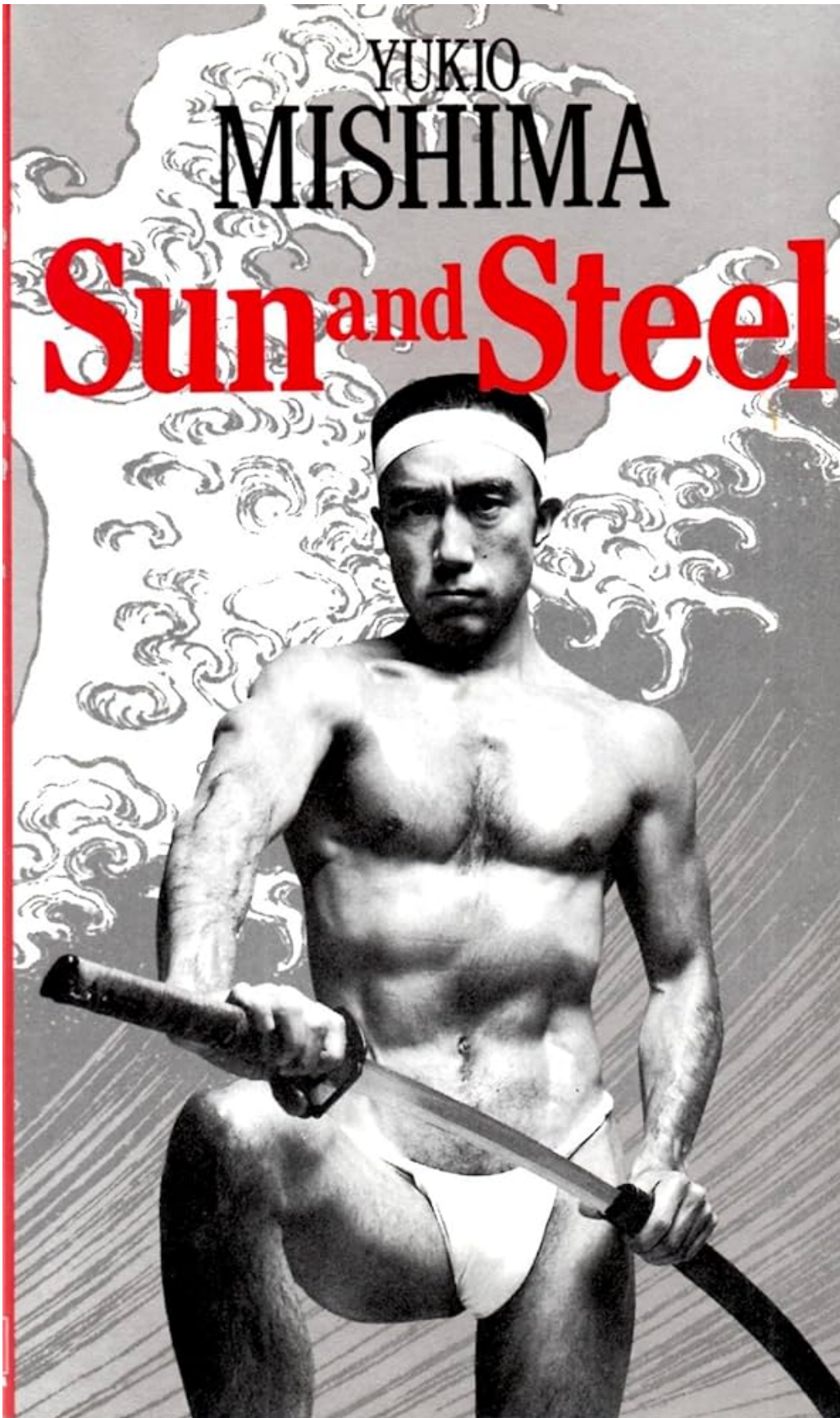
It was, and remains to this day, the most difficult book I have ever read in my entire life. Fuck *Ulysses*. Fuck *Gravity's Rainbow*. Fuck *Infinite Jest*. If you want to show me how big your dick is, tell me how many times you've read *Ada*. I can usually plow down a book in 2-5 days, and *Ada* took me nearly a month. It was the first time I had felt distinctly *punished* by an author. Not only was he making me work for it, he was hurting me. Each sentence was Napoleon at Waterloo. It would take me an hour to clear one page. It took me 13 days to get through approximately 100 pages and it was so painful and so agonizing I was nearly in tears ready to give up, when I finally hit page 125. It was better than sex, better than that first hit of heroin, it was the greatest pleasure I had ever felt. I was flying. Later, when I went looking for information about why this happened, Nabokov said he put 'guard dogs at the door' for *Ada*, because this was too important, too perfect, for the reader who I'm sure he had grown sick of, who went looking thru his books for something naughty after *Lolita* and quickly grew bored when they didn't find it.

This was the first time I had seen a writer control their readership in such a way, a way that caused me physical pain. I had never seen the exercise of such power. I was in awe. Still am. I finished *Ada* on the 3 back to my apartment, and was so hysterical, so broken, that a hasidim who recognized me from the neighborhood touched me and helped me off the train because I didn't know where I was, I was so vulnerable I was in extreme danger. If he didn't help me, I would have woken up (or not) in a ditch somewhere, clutching this book.

When *Lolita* appears in the work in *The Vestal & The Fasces*, the narrator, on her way to Russia a year after reading *Ada* for the first time, says that *Lolita* isn't her favorite book, that she prefers the Russian, the one with the "happy" ending.

YUKIO
MISHIMA

Sun and Steel



June 2020, MORELAND AVENUE: Sun and Steel

AGE 31

No need to recount what was happening, you were there and if you weren't count your blessings. Losing it. Absolutely losing it. Decided that the only way I was going to survive this was by compulsively working out and reading Mishima. Because it was something to do. I had read *Sun & Steel* before, but this was the time for it. Insane. INSANE. I felt like he was writing to me, only me, in his own blood. What is this book about? I don't even know. It's about courage, and power, and the unique cruelty of the body and its possibilities. It broke me, or fixed me. I went looking. I sent my information off to a vague posting looking for volunteers. I lifted weights, I read Mishima. I answered questions over email, and then again over the phone. I lifted weights, I read *Sun and Steel*. I answered questions in a clinic, they took my blood to answer more questions. I got so drunk I threw up. I clicked refresh over and over. I got in. I got drunk again. I got married on August 29 2020. Taking Katrina day and making it a day of love. I got my first shot on October 29, 2020. I was so sick I was afraid I was dying. I was afraid, but Mishima told me it was okay to die. That if this killed me, that I would die touching the sun, the source of all life. I got the next shot. I wasn't as sick. I lifted weights, I read Mishima. February 4 2021, they told me it worked. That we could stop the dying. I agreed to finish the trial. That I was all in, I was going to see it to the end. I got the booster, and had a heart event in Syracuse with my friends. I got a heart monitor. I went to see cardiac specialists. I didn't lift weights, they told me not to. I read Mishima. I wrote a will. I thought about death, constantly. I couldn't die. Not now, because my death would be used to kill people by sociopaths who couldn't understand the true meaning of PATRIOTISM. My husband and I joked about my death because it was the only way we knew to talk about it. I read through almost every Mishima text published in English. I kept going back to *Sun and Steel*, specifically the moment where Yukio, my darling Kimitake, in a plane on the edges of the atmosphere, reaches out and becomes one with the sun.