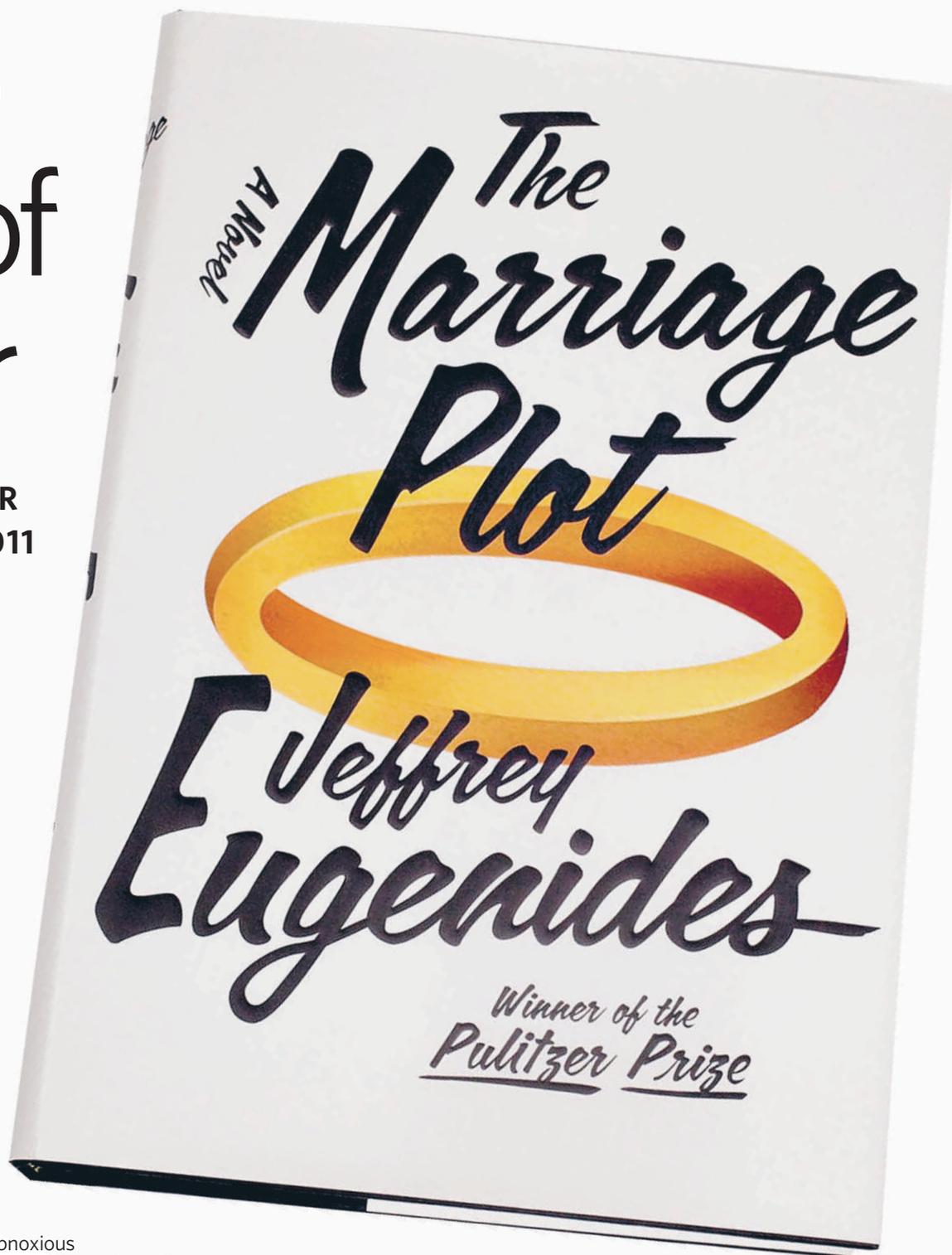


The top stories of the year

OUR CRITICS SHARE THEIR 11 FAVORITE READS OF 2011

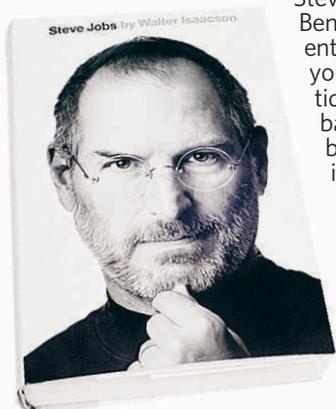
1 THE MARRIAGE PLOT by Jeffrey Eugenides

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
If there's one book that I recommended this year, without reservation, to almost anyone who asked, it was this funny, moving, beautifully written novel. What's it about? Well, a trio of young people, graduating from Brown in the early '80s, finding their way in the world . . . somehow my description sounded a little uninspiring. But the marvel of "The Marriage Plot" is that Madeleine, Leonard and Mitchell so engage us that their concerns — literature, spirituality, love (requited and un-), mental illness and, yes, marriage — become ours. There are deliciously sly passages — satire of the vogue for opaque literary theory, Mitchell's hapless experiences volunteering for Mother Teresa in Calcutta — and there are passages — such as those that depict Leonard's manic depression — that are unbearably poignant. Whatever it is or isn't "about," this is novel writing of the very highest order. — TOM BEER



2 STEVE JOBS by Walter Isaacson

(Random House)
Believe the hype: The life of the amazing and obnoxious Steve Jobs as told by the biographer of Ben Franklin and Albert Einstein is entertaining and enlightening. Even if you've already heard all the bizarre tidbits about Jobs' personality, the back story on the gizmos that have become so integral to our daily lives is not to be missed. Jobs spent hundreds of hours with Isaacson until just weeks before his death and allowed him unrestricted access to those he manhandled on his way to the top. This makes for a 360-degree view of both the extraordinary plumage and pimplly underbelly of one very rare bird. — MARION WINIK



3 BIG GIRL SMALL by Rachel DeWoskin

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
If you like "Glee," this is its literary counterpart and then some. Pretty, blond and 3-foot-9, Judy Lohden braves the dwarf jokes (actually, she makes most of them) to enroll in an ultracool arts high school. Never taking her eye off the social royalty — particularly the beautiful, groggy Jeff Legassic — Judy finds her place in the pecking order and her spot in the vocal ensemble. But as it so often does in the presence of a video camera, love turns to degradation and Judy tells her story from a hideout at a seedy motel. How she finds her way back to the land of the living is an inspiration. — MARION WINIK

