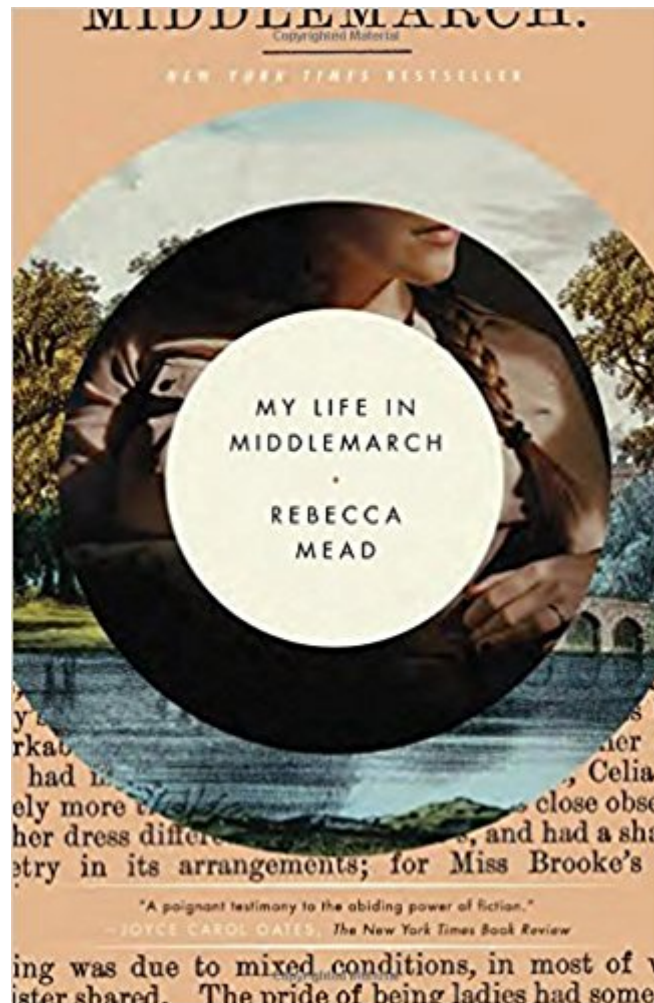




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My Life In Middlemarch



Synopsis

A New Yorker writer revisits the seminal book of her youth--*Middlemarch*--and fashions a singular, involving story of how a passionate attachment to a great work of literature can shape our lives and help us to read our own histories. Rebecca Mead was a young woman in an English coastal town when she first read George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, regarded by many as the greatest English novel. After gaining admission to Oxford, and moving to the United States to become a journalist, through several love affairs, then marriage and family, Mead read and reread *Middlemarch*. The novel, which Virginia Woolf famously described as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people," offered Mead something that modern life and literature did not. In this wise and revealing work of biography, reporting, and memoir, Rebecca Mead leads us into the life that the book made for her, as well as the many lives the novel has led since it was written. Employing a structure that deftly mirrors that of the novel, *My Life in Middlemarch* takes the themes of Eliot's masterpiece--the complexity of love, the meaning of marriage, the foundations of morality, and the drama of aspiration and failure--and brings them into our world. Offering both a fascinating reading of Eliot's biography and an exploration of the way aspects of Mead's life uncannily echo that of Eliot herself, *My Life in Middlemarch* is for every ardent lover of literature who cares about why we read books, and how they read us. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review When Mead first read George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a

“masterwork of sympathetic philosophy, as a young woman in an English seaside town, it became her polestar. A New Yorker staff writer and author of *One Perfect Day* (2007), Mead now explains why in this heady blend of memoir, biography, and literary criticism. She performs an exhilarating, often surprising close reading of the novel, which Eliot began writing at age 51 in 1870. And she takes a fresh look at Eliot’s daringly unconventional life, visiting the writer’s homes and casting light not only on the author’s off-the-charts intellect but also her valor in forthrightly addressing complex moral issues, cutting sense of humor, “large, perceptive generosity, and the deep love she shared with critic and writer George Henry Lewes and his sons. Mead injects just enough of her own life story to take measure of the profound resonance of Eliot’s progressive, humanistic viewpoint, recognition of the heroism of ordinary lives, and crucial central theme, “a young woman’s desire for a substantial, rewarding, meaningful life. Mead’s rekindling of appreciation for Eliot and her books blossoms into a celebration of the entire enterprise of writing and reading, of how literature transforms our lives as it guides us toward embracing “all that might be gained from opening one’s heart wider.” --Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

In her delicious celebration of George Eliot, [Mead] beautifully conveys the excitement of living in a novel, of knowing its characters as if they breathed, of revisiting them over time and seeing them differently. She conveys, too, not at all heavy-handedly, the particular relation one develops with an author whose work one loves. She notes the serendipitous overlaps: Mead, like Eliot, met her beloved husband in her thirties; like Eliot, she rejoices as a mother in her stepchildren; she finds that one inspiration for *The Mill on the Floss* was her childhood home of Radipole; and so on. She constructs Eliot as eminently lovable, tenderly excusing her youthful priggishness. [Mead] There is a meticulous underlying order to the book, structured to honor *Middlemarch* itself, but as in a letter, the effect is of spontaneous movement, the particular thrill of following a mind untrammelled. •Claire Messud --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

My Life in Middlemarch is a personal memoir combined with literary criticism; the biography of George Eliot; a tour of sites associated with Eliot and a personal journey all combined into less than three hundred pages of evocatively beautiful prose. The author is Rebecca Mead a London born journalist who is on the staff of the *New Yorker*. Mead grew up in a small off the beaten track area in southwestern England. She was a voracious reader from childhood who became enamored

with the considerable novel *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1819-1880) a Midlands woman who became the leading intellectual author during the Victorian era. Mary Ann Evans was born in Warwickshire before trying her literary skills in London. She is the famous author of such classic works as: *Silas Marner*; *The Mill on the Floss*; *Romola*; *Scenes of Clerical Life*; *Daniel Deronda*; *Felix Holt* and her masterpiece *Middlemarch* published in 1872. Eliot lived without benefit of clergy with George Henry Lewes a literary man following her failed romance with Herbert Spencer the famous Victorian philosopher. Eliot was a homely and large woman who was an agnostic. She called her belief "meliorism" calling upon us to live ethical and worthwhile lives. Mead identifies strongly with Dorothea in *Middlemarch* and sees Dr. Tertius Lydgate as a reflection of Eliot's love for her lover George Henry Lewes. Mead analyzes the *Middlemarch* novel which is over nine hundred pages long and has been called by Virginia Woolf one of the few English novels written for grown-ups. Rebecca Mead has a way with words and this delightful little book is a joy to read!

Mead has done a wonderful job of exploring *Middlemarch* in an absorbing, charming and insightful narrative. For those who love *Middlemarch* but may not care to embark on an extensive academic investigation, this is an accessible avenue to some insights into the book and George Eliot herself. Mead has read widely, and has a comfortable, readable narrative style and a deep love for the book. She has a rich appreciation for the themes of *Middlemarch* and the way that an understanding of a complex book can evolve as the reader grows and learns. The more personal reflections about her own life were less appealing to me, but easily skimmed. (In all fairness, the title is *MY life in Middlemarch*, so of course the author is going to share about her life!) For those who loved, or even liked, *Middlemarch*, this is a rewarding and satisfying way to reflect on the book and go back to it with new insights and questions. I enjoyed it so much, and of course it makes me want to go back and re-read *Middlemarch*, which was doubtless Mead's intent. I have to think that George Eliot would have appreciated this gift.

I absolutely loved "*My Life in Middlemarch*," and think it is a brilliant achievement. Mead interweaves scenes from the novel with biographical and critical material on Eliot, and explains how Eliot's commentaries helped Mead understand stages of her own life. (Of course, a reader has to have read *Middlemarch*.) Mead leaves no stone unturned as she explores all the George Eliot sites she can find in England, and, in addition, visits descendants of George Henry Lewes, with whom Eliot shared an idyllic union for twenty-four years. The book added a whole new dimension to my understanding of George Eliot. I did not know that she helped raise the four Lewes children as if

they were her own, and drew upon their lives for material in her novels, or that her own "marriage" was egalitarian and fulfilling, a sharp contrast to the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon!!!

After hearing Rebecca Mead speak on The New York Times Book Review podcast about her book and about George Eliot I wanted to read Mead's book so badly that I decided to read the 800+ Middlemarch first so I could better appreciate Mead's book. I hadn't cracked open a Victorian novel in a few decades, but it was all worth it. Eliot's Middlemarch is an amazingly astute psychological study (written when Freud was only about 15 years old) of a few key characters in a small town in the English countryside. Eliot writes in such a heartfelt way that the reader gets to experience the inner emotional workings of the characters (whose psychology is abundantly represented in contemporary people as well). Rebecca Mead's book is also heartfelt in the author's touching revelations of her own life and the uncanny parallels between her life and Eliot's. Mead also offers up a special treat at the end of the book that will thrill any nature lover. If you read Middlemarch first and then Mead you have a wonderful experience in store for you.

Having read and written an MA Thesis on Middlemarch, I liked this view. But it really isn't going to advance scholarship or anyone's enjoyment of the book. It is mostly research and opinion set to read like an autobiographical essay.

I had high hopes for My Life in Middlemarch and was not disappointed! Rebecca Mead writes with a lyrical and intelligent voice and brings a book closer to the reader who might have otherwise left it at the sidelines in favor of any Austen novel. I know, I shied away from it for a long time. To follow her own experiences, her own growth and development coupled with the developments in the story, her wonderful analysis of characters and plot lines is a delight to read! I had bought it as a ebook, but as a true bibliophile I will buy it as a hardcover too. Rebecca Mead is a writer I would love to sit down with over a cup of tea and chat about life, books and the many struggles we go through until we find some answers to the questions of the meaning of love and life. As always, the books which touch us the most uncover our own tender sensitivities, our own recognition of the pains and joys we ourselves have to deal with.

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