

Rebecca Mead. *My Life in Middlemarch*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-307-98476-0. Price: US\$25.00.

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In charting her experience of reading and re-reading *Middlemarch* (1871-72), Rebecca Mead draws repeatedly on the language of sympathy, which carried a particular set of meanings in the Victorian imagination: “when Eliot and her peers used the word, they meant by it the experience of feeling with another person: of entering fully, through an exercise of imaginative power, into the experience of another” (158). The great strength of Mead’s book lies in how it performs this kind of sympathy while also figuring it as a key legacy of George Eliot’s novel. “This notion—that we each have our own center of gravity, but must come to discover that others weigh the world differently than we do” (159) is, Mead argues, central to *Middlemarch*. Her own text offers a meditation, delivered via the narrative of successive readings at different stages of her life, on how each experience of reading *Middlemarch* likewise has its own center of gravity, and how those shift over time as one “gr[ows] a little older with the book” (163). By recreating and drawing parallels between individual histories, Mead produces a text that draws on Eliot’s legacy of sympathetic engagement to offer a fuller appreciation of one of the most important Victorian novels.

Mead’s impetus for the project is described as two-fold: “to think about what George Eliot might have sought, and what she might have discovered, in writing *Middlemarch*” (9) and at the same time to “consider how *Middlemarch* has shaped my understanding of my own life”

(10). This orientation directs both the book's content and its structure. Readers are offered an overview of both Eliot's life and of Mead's own. Pulling from Eliot's biography, Mead highlights particular experiences which she sees as having potentially informed the writing of *Middlemarch*. These may be quite specific: for example, Mead gives detailed consideration to whether Eliot's friendship with Mark Pattison, the Rector of Lincoln College, influenced her development of the character of Casaubon. At other times, she looks to more general themes that influenced Eliot's perspective and found their way into her fiction, such as questions of faith and considerations of how to balance domestic and intellectual life.

While the connections she draws are thoughtful, what enlivens this discussion is the structure of Mead's analysis: she will most often describe a particular facet of Eliot's life, suggest how such experiences could have informed the writing of *Middlemarch*, and then offer a meditation on how her own experiences have allowed her a deeper understanding of these questions. She draws parallels, for example, between Eliot's experience as a stepmother-figure to the sons of George Henry Lewes, Eliot's comments figuring *Middlemarch* as something akin to a child, and Mead's own experience of becoming a stepmother. Likewise, she pairs her discussion of Eliot's experience of meeting Lewes in middle life with a consideration of how love is figured differently in *Middlemarch* among individuals of different ages, and how this notion resonates with Mead herself, who met her partner somewhat later than she had expected to. There is the occasional misstep in which the text appears to borrow the trope of an omniscient Victorian narrator offering pronouncements such as "at a certain age, what might once have seemed fascinating in a prospective partner—moodiness, indecision, all seeming to indicate emotional depth—becomes all together less appealing" (177), but in general, the connections Mead draws are resonant, spurring a reader to his or her own recollections of times when it seemed that a

“book was reading me, as I was reading it” (5). Interestingly, Mead suggests that there is nothing necessarily unique about *Middlemarch* to inspire this relationship; rather, different individuals find themselves drawn towards such a life-long engagement with different novels (she lists several friends and their respective touchstone texts, including *David Copperfield* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, on page 213). Mead’s book is not so much a source of insight into Eliot’s novel as it is a study of a particular affective relationship with that novel. Readers, particularly those who have made *Middlemarch* an object of critical study, may or may not find the narrative of such an experience compelling, but those who recognize themselves in Mead’s history of lovingly cultivating an evolving relationship to a fictional world will likely take pleasure in her account of it.

Mead’s approach to primary research into Eliot’s life offers a pleasingly idiosyncratic approach that fits well with this personal orientation. The biographical facts she highlights work more towards creating a profile or a sense of a personality than a straightforward chronological record, but they tend to be memorable for precisely this reason. She records, for example, a recollection from one of Eliot’s schoolfellows that as a child Eliot cried when school closed for the holidays (25). An academic reader may find encounters with some of the biographical details tantalizingly imprecise in the absence of the usual scholarly apparatus of citations and references, though the notes at the book’s end do point to Mead’s sources. She also highlights the material details of her research experience. At times this serves to give readers the sense of what she is experiencing: Mead’s encounters with objects such as Eliot’s pen or desk are evoked so vividly that they almost seem tangible. At other times, these details evoke the experience of what she encountered while conducting her research: she notes for example, the oddly specific detail that her guide on a visit to Oxford wore “a burgundy-colored suit” (164). These instances are subtle

and deftly handled enough that they rarely, if ever, prove distracting to the reading experience. Instead, they give Mead's book a texture that seems reminiscent of Eliot's realist mode, in which the inclusion of small details allows a reader to more fully imagine him or herself in the world of the text.

Mead hedges outright biographical interpretation of the novel but interpretation in general is not the key aim of the text; meditation might be a more apt phrase. Her orientation towards *Middlemarch* is not primarily critical: indeed, she recalls wryly her education in literary criticism wherein "books . . . weren't supposed to merely to be read, but to be interrogated, as if they had committed some criminal malfeasance" (145). Mead generally does not develop her insights into argumentation; she makes it explicit that what she finds provocative or telling about the novel is individualized, and not necessarily of significance to any other reader. The idea of a deeply personal reading experience is foregrounded from the title: "my life" reinforces the notion of a highly individuated experience. (The British edition is titled *The Road to Middlemarch*, but includes the subtitle "My Life with George Eliot.") She writes plainly that, "My *Middlemarch* is not the same as anyone else's *Middlemarch*" (172). For academic readers in search of a deepened understanding of Eliot's novel, such an orientation may restrict the utility of Mead's book, and she acknowledges as much when she writes that "an approach to fiction [that involves asking]—where do I see myself in here—is not how a scholar reads, and it can be limiting in its solipsism" (172). But as her idiosyncratic narrative does well to remind us, different kinds of reading experiences bring different kinds of pleasure, and while hardly revelatory, her argument that reading in light of one's personal experience "is where part of the pleasure, and the urgency, of reading lies" (173) is difficult to dispute.

In light of this foregrounding of the personal and the subjective, Mead draws on the notion of sympathy as a way of rationalizing why one would want to read about someone else's experience. Towards the end of the book, Mead summarizes her understanding of Eliot's ethical project, which she sees as underpinning both *Middlemarch* and her other writing: "If I really care for you—if I try to think myself into your position and orientation—then the world is bettered by my effort at understanding and comprehension" (223). She mirrors this approach both in how she approaches her subject and how she guides her readers to approach her. Eliot, here, is not an object of study, but a fellow human being to be interested in and engaged by, through "walk[ing] the streets Eliot walked, and read[ing] the diaries and letters she wrote ... attempt[ing] in some small measure to enter sympathetically and imaginatively into her experience" (168). Because readers also learn about aspects of Mead's life, such as her personal history and the everyday details of what she sees and hears and touches, they can likewise share in her experiences.

Mead interestingly doesn't spend much time explicitly grappling with the question of precisely why *Middlemarch* is so richly evocative for its reader, choosing instead to demonstrate that impact via the case study of her own reading experience. That she chooses this strategy is itself a testament to the novel's central premise: the notion that compassionately examining the lives of individuals—whom Eliot describes as "we insignificant people with our daily words and acts" (*Middlemarch* 785)—fosters a valuable kind of knowledge and way of understanding. The reminder that a novel that can, and has been, read so productively through critical lenses can also be read in an intensely personal light stands to have particular value for those teaching *Middlemarch*. More broadly, Mead's book will resonate with anyone who has returned time after time to any novel, and come to feel that these readings have shed light on oneself as much as on the text.

Biographical Notice:

Danielle Barkley holds a PhD from McGill University, and is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for English Studies, University of London. Her current research focuses on the relationship between realism and nineteenth-century genre fiction.

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