



Middlemarch

by George Eliot

In a Nutshell

[George Eliot](#) was an English novelist writing in the mid-19th century. And before we go any further, we should let you know that Eliot was a woman. Don't let the name fool you - it was just a pen name, because she didn't think that female novelists were taken seriously as artists. Her real name was Marian (or Mary Ann - she spelled it both ways) Evans. So now you know, and can laugh up your sleeve at folks who say, "Oh, you're reading *Middlemarch* by George Eliot? I just looove *his* novels."

If we had to sum up *Middlemarch* in just a few words, we might say that it's a novel about social and political reform. But it's also a novel about love and marriage. And about trying and failing. And about second chances. It is, in other words, a huge and wide-ranging novel. And we do mean huge: the edition we're using (the 1994 Penguin edition, edited by Rosemary Ashton) is 838 pages long. That's a lot of pages, but then, Eliot had a lot to say.

The length of the novel actually forced Eliot's agent (and long-time lover), [George Henry Lewes](#), to invent a new way to publish it. For most of the 19th-century, novels were published in one of two ways - either broken into installments of one or two chapters to be printed in a magazine (like [Charles Dickens's](#) novels), or published in 3-volume hardbacks (called triple deckers). But *Middlemarch* was too big to fit into three volumes, and publishing it a chapter or two at a time would take *forever*. So Lewes arranged to have it printed in eight installments over the course of sixteen months to get people hooked on the story, and then to print it altogether in four volumes. This was a great move by Lewes - *Middlemarch* sold like crazy, and confirmed Eliot's reputation as the greatest living English novelist.

But why was *Middlemarch* so popular? Well, it was socially and politically relevant when it first came out: it was published in 1870-71, just four years after the 3rd Reform Bill was passed in Parliament. Reform was a big deal in 19th-century England. Who would get to vote, and who would take care of poor people, and healthcare, and minimum wages - everyone had some pet reform project they wanted to bring before Parliament. But Eliot didn't want to write a novel about something that had just taken place, so she set the novel forty years earlier, in 1830 - just before the First Reform Bill was passed. Eliot believed that it takes time to understand historical events - it's impossible to understand all the consequences of something right after it takes place. It's like how all the best [Vietnam War](#) movies were made at least 5-10 years after the end of the conflict. Forty years, Eliot reasoned, was the perfect amount of distance: it's long enough that people have gained some perspective on what happened back then, but it's recent enough that the events are still pretty familiar.

Setting the novel right before the First Reform Bill of 1832 made the novel both historical and immediate (since reform was still such a hot topic). That contrast of historical and immediate, and of the universal and the individual experience, is something that comes up

again and again in *Middlemarch*. Eliot's ability to move between specific events and general trends makes her characters some of the most sympathetic in English literature. That's what made her so popular at the time and it's part of why people still love her novels today.

Why Should I Care?

Middlemarch is a huge book.

In fact, it's one of the longest novels ever written in English.

But the reason that it was - and is - so popular is that there's something in it for everyone.

Yes, it's about marriage, but it's also about science, politics, reform, and second chances...

But most of all, it's a novel about feeling out of place - either as an outsider in a new place (like Will Ladislaw), or as someone who is behind the times (like Mr.

Casaubon), or as someone who is ahead of his time (like Lydgate).

Dorothea, the protagonist, feels out of place, too.

She's more like a medieval saint, we're told in the prelude to the novel, than like a traditional Victorian heroine.

Even Rosamond, the most superficial character in the novel, feels out of place.

Of course, she feels like she doesn't belong in the town of Middlemarch because she's too good for it, but you get the picture.

Have you never moved to a new place? Felt awkward at a party where you didn't know anyone? Felt misunderstood? Yeah, we have, too.

Feeling out of place is something that pretty much everyone has experienced.

It's part of being human.

And that's why *Middlemarch* is considered to be [George Eliot's](#) greatest novel - she gets at the core of common human experience.