

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Rebecca Mead, *The Road to Middlemarch* (Text, 2014)

It's only a question of time before the term 'bibliomemoir' finds a place in the dictionary. It will sit somewhere between biblioklept ('a book thief') and bibliophagist ('a devourer of books'). The definition has already been proposed: 'bibliomemoir, a memoir about the books one has read', with 'bibliomemoirist' coined to define the author.¹

In the last few months, I have read several bibliomemoirs. They seem to be a particularly popular sub-genre with New York writers, perhaps because their city is so well-endowed with publishing houses, libraries, bookshops and literary magazines. Joanne Rakoff wrote *My Salinger Year* (Random House, 2014); Phyllis Rose described her year of reading in a New York library in *The Shelf: From LEQ to LES* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014). And now Rebecca Mead, one of the staff writers for *The New Yorker*, lays claim to the title of bibliomemoirist with her intelligent and entertaining book, *The Road to Middlemarch: My Life with George Eliot*.

Mead approaches this canonical nineteenth-century novel from the perspective of a passionate and responsive twenty-first-century reader. She is trained in the language of literary scholarship – she majored in English – but her working life has been spent outside academia, as a writer and a journalist. It is this fresh, educated perspective that makes her book such a pleasure to read. If you like reading Victorian fiction, particularly if you admire George Eliot's work, you will probably enjoy Rebecca Mead's bibliomemoir very much indeed.

Text Publishing promotes *The Road to Middlemarch* as 'a sensitive work of deep reading and biography, for every reader of literature who cares about why we read books and how they read us'. This encompasses the disparate strands that Mead weaves into her text. There are sections of close reading and criticism of *Middlemarch*, combined with lengthy passages on George Eliot's life and times. These are blended with the *memoir* of bibliomemoir, personal elements of Mead's experience – from the time she first read *Middlemarch* 'when I was seventeen years old and still living in the seaside town where I spent my childhood' (1) through to the phases of her adult life (career, marriage and motherhood). Throughout the book, there is the passionate invocation of the power of reading:

Reading is sometimes thought of as a form of escapism, and it's a common turn of phrase to speak of getting lost in a book. But a book can also be where one finds oneself; and when a reader is grasped and held by a book, reading does not feel like an escape from life so much as it feels like an urgent, crucial dimension of life itself. There are books that seem to comprehend us just as much as we understand them, or even more. There are books that grow with the reader as the reader grows, like a graft to a tree. (16)

If this passage resonates strongly with you, then you are likely to enjoy this bibliomemoir whether you have read George Eliot's work or not.

I *have* read *Middlemarch* – years ago, lying on the university lawns under the plane trees, sitting in crowded lecture theatres with a hundred or so other students. It is still taught at the University of Adelaide, as it is in many other colleges and universities, in courses on nineteenth-century literature and society. Virginia Woolf admired it; the critic F R Leavis famously declared it to be part of England's literary *Great Tradition*.² One way of appreciating the value of *Middlemarch* is to read the criticism – Leavis, or Barbara Hardy, or any of the other reputable scholars who have

¹ Bibliomemoir (New Word Suggestion), Collins Dictionary (2014) 18 March 2015 <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/13826/bibliomemoir>.

² F R Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (Chatto and Windus, 1948).

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published monographs, book chapters and journal articles on Eliot. Another approach is to ransack library shelves for biographies of Eliot's life and writing, coming away with the work of authors such as Gordon Haight and Jenny Uglow. Reading a bibliomemoir like Rebecca Mead's is another way again.

The *Road to Middlemarch* is a remarkably accessible book based on literary criticism and biography. It is not academic, but it is scholarly enough to be insightful as well as entertaining. There isn't an index for pinpointing specific facts and interpretations, but there is a section of bibliographical notes that could lead an enthusiastic reader to further studies, and to other novels by George Eliot.

What there is in Rebecca Mead's work, in abundance, is the lived experience of a genuinely passionate and educated reader. The memoir glows with her love of *Middlemarch* and her appreciation of the generous humanity and thoughtful morality that it teaches. I'll leave the last words of the review to Mead, with the hope that you will read this bibliomemoir, and share it with anyone who has not yet had the pleasure of reading *Middlemarch*:

Cloaked in my quasi-objective spirit of enquiry was another set of questions, these ones more personal, and pressing, and secret. What would happen if I stopped to consider how *Middlemarch* has shaped my understanding of my own life? Why did the novel still feel so urgent, after all these years? And what could it give me now, as I paused here in the middle of things, and surveyed where I had come from, and thought about where I was, and wondered where I might go next? (10)

Jennifer Osborn