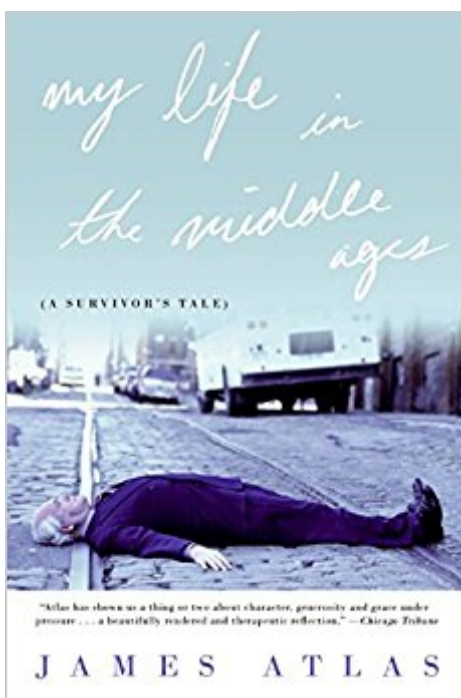


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My Life In The Middle Ages: A Survivor's Tale



Synopsis

Part survival tale, part confessional, part meditation, part observation, James Atlas's funny and poignant memoir reveals the pleasures and pathos of the decades of our forties and fifties -- the time when we face, for better or worse, our limitations and discover who we are. Whether he is struggling with God or trying to find out if he believes in one, celebrating the books he's loved and regretting those he'll never read, or leafing through the snapshots in his family album and marveling at the passage of time, Atlas is always alert to the surprises of everyday life as he shows us how to flourish -- how to live.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Penguin Lives' founding editor Atlas (Bellow; Delmore Schwartz) offers 11 rather self-involved essays about being in his 50s. The collection hits on various midlife themesâ "Mom and Dad" describes Atlas's father's illness and its effects on the family; "Home" explores the joys and pains of owning a country house; "Money" focuses on, well, moneyâ and brings out the author's envious and insecure side. In his introduction, Atlas confesses that he writes from within a "highly rarified segment of society," but hopes all readers will find something of themselves in each piece. Despite exploring such universal themes, Atlas often steers away from their common aspects to instead dwell on his own personal disappointments. In "Failure," he recounts receiving a negative review of his novel, and in "The Body," he gets sullen when his son trounces him on the tennis court. Atlas's strength lies in his extensive literary allusions, and each of these essays is buoyed by examples from both well-known and obscure authors, which often serve to augment the lackluster revelations

("The rich, the powerful, the well-known made it because they had the drive to make it

The author evaluates his rites of passage—both the successes and the failures, from his 25th anniversary to his father's death—with good humor, affection, and honesty in this "generational memoir." An amiable book, some sections may seem short on specifics and long on generalizations, even to the point of being preachy. Not all reviewers found universal appeal in Atlas's reflections; some found them self-indulgent and of interest mostly to other upper-middle-class literary urbanites. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Having been a contemporary of Atlas's at Harvard nearly 40 years ago, I was pulled back to that time when we spent hours in the womblike campus setting --privileged to fantasize about where we were headed. In the blink of an eye, here we are, still trying to make sense of our lives -- but now dealing with all these losses of opportunities, loved ones, energy, dreams and illusions. Atlas hits all the big issues -- death of parents, loss of job, stiffening joints, anxieties about money and marriage and status amongst peers. It's poignant and provocative and, as Atlas has himself done many times, I, too, teared up -- facing up to the reality that there's likely a lot more living behind me than ahead. All in all, a wonderful collection of thoughtful, poignant, sweet, and revealing musings on the beginning of the endgame from a guy who writes about the kind of stuff we'd prefer to ignore, but know we need to reflect on.

Since Mr. Atlas wrote this timeless piece, the stock market has crashed, our 401Ks have shrunk and some of us no longer have our 5 figure monthly salaries. When I picked the book up at my local library - I was not sure if I would read it - but I have devoured it and will recommend to my book club... many of whom have either lost jobs, lost partners, parents, siblings, or even children, and of the least, have lost our retirement pensions and will be working for the next 10-15 years even though we are coming 'round to 60. Mr. Atlas has written what all of us have felt and he does it superbly. The inclusion of various pieces of fiction, plays and such that he references, inspires us to go back to our own bookshelves and re-read. One does not have to be uber-rich to relate to the petty day to day - nor today - relate to Bernie Madoff victims. This book is a must read for anyone who goes to bed at night and spends several hours tossing and turning and wondering "what if"... "what if"... "what if" or maybe just asking "why"??? It grabs you in the gut.

Not really a survivor of the 12th century, but one who survived the middle years in life. Fun to read through and explained my propensity to line my shelves with books, and floors, and tables.

In one of the central chapters of this work James Atlas writes about the concept of 'life-failure'. He describes the moment of his at the age of fifty being fired, and being forced to consider himself as someone who has not made it in life. He then goes on, somewhat more interestingly, to talk about failures in Literature and comes to what may be the greatest modern literary example of all, Willy Loman, the failure in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman." He considers how great literature provides a kind of recognition and understanding of our own situation that moves in the deepest way. At the closing of the first performance of 'Death of a Salesman' the audience did not applaud. It sat stunned. Grown men bent over in their seats, many of them weeping. They recognized in the failure of Willy Loman failures that they had known, perhaps their own, perhaps their fathers'. Atlas tells in this work of keeping a kind of score-card in which he would follow the professional lives of his classmates, and see who had gotten where in the 'wealth' and 'fame' derby. A self-confessed child of the lower-middle class (His grandfather was a multi-lingual druggist, and his father a physician in Chicago). It becomes clear to him in his middle-age, the age of closing possibilities and horizons, that he will not get to the top of the greasy pole. And in this sense be a failure, or perhaps what he regards many to be a 'thwarted life'. Yet looking from outside at the life and career of Atlas' one could conceivably paint a very different picture. He is a very well-known biographer who has written what to this point is the definitive work on his literary-hero Saul Bellow. He wrote an earlier much praised biography of Delmore Schwartz. He has worked for and written for major literary venues - 'The New York Times Book Review', 'The Atlantic', 'The New Yorker'. He has founded his own publishing line of 'literary biography' supported by Wall Street maven Thomas Lipper. He has thus in the eyes of most achieved a career success well beyond the average. But if his dream was the dream Harold Bloom says is characteristic of literary inheritors, to somehow overcome the great inspiring predecessor, of course, he has not done that. Bellow, however his life and character whittled down a bit in Atlas' biography is a literary giant of the American twentieth-century. Bellow's kind of success, even in portraying 'failure' as in his depiction of Atlas' most beloved Bellow character, Herzog, is another level of emotional intensity in his work. Bellow in fact with Tommy Wilhelm in 'Seize the Day' makes a kind of intense universal cry of pain in 'failure' which certainly has few literary equals anywhere. Atlas is an insightful, often moving and interesting writer about his own life. He appears to be a decent commendable son, husband, father and human being. He has produced literary work of very high quality. But very very few are true giants, and the bell tolls even

for them. This is a very good book, but it is doubtful that it will provide the answer to his heart's deepest need.

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