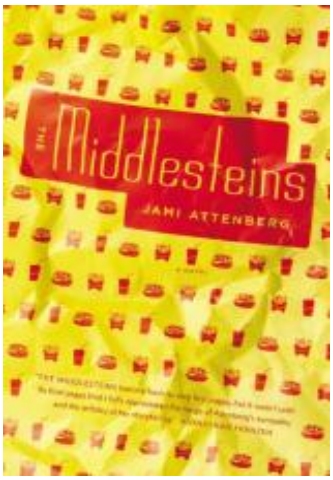
The Middlesteins

by Jami Attenberg



About the Book

For more than 30 years, Edie and Richard Middlestein shared a solid family life together in the suburbs of Chicago. But now things are splintering apart, for one reason, it seems: Edie's enormous girth. She's obsessed with food --- thinking about it, eating it --- and if she doesn't stop, she won't have much longer to live.

When Richard abandons his wife, it is up to the next generation to take control. Robin, their schoolteacher daughter, is determined that her father pay for leaving Edie. Benny, an easy-going, pot-smoking family man, just wants to smooth things over. And Rachelle --- a whippet thin perfectionist --- is intent on saving her mother-in-law's life, but this task proves even bigger than planning her twin children's spectacular b'nai mitzvah party. Through it all, they wonder: do Edie's devastating choices rest on her shoulders alone, or are others at fault, too?

With pitch-perfect prose, huge compassion, and sly humor, Jami Attenberg has given us an epic story of marriage, family, and obsession. THE MIDDLESTEINS explores the hopes and heartbreaks of new and old love, the yearnings of Midwestern America, and our devastating, fascinating preoccupation with food.

Discussion Guide

1. Why can?t Edie divorce herself from her relationship with food? What makes her eat? When the story begins, her health is far gone. Do you think she could have learned to curb her appetite? If so, when?

2. Do you believe Richard made the right decision, breaking off his marriage with Edie? Why or why not? Did their subsequent dates with other people change your opinion? Did their children?s reactions?

3. At the beginning of the novel, Rachelle gives the impression her marriage with Benny is democratic. ?At any given moment, she could never be sure who was in control in their relationship? (p. 31). How does this change over the course of the novel? Do you think Rachelle was right to pressure Benny to talk to his parents, or do you think she should have spoken with each of them directly?

4. Each of the characters struggles with their responsibility to Edie. Why didn?t Edie?s family act sooner? Why didn?t the neighbors step in? Are the other characters at fault here, or do you believe it is Edie?s responsibility to care for herself? Do you think Rachelle overreacts?

5. Emily is described as resembling her Aunt Robin, since they share black, beady eyes and a surly temperament. What other similarities did you notice between the family members? Do you think Benny is like his father, or Robin like her mother?

6. What is the significance of the suburban Chicago setting in this novel? How has the Jewish community there shifted since Richard opened his first pharmacy?

7. What role does Jewish heritage play for Robin, when she feels so conflicted about her faith? Why do you think she tries so hard to avoid going to Daniel?s family Seder? Do you think her romance with Daniel changes her relationship with her faith?

8. Were you surprised that Edie?s boyfriend was the one to find her when she finally passed? At the end of this chapter, one sentence reveals a lot about Kenneth?s heartbreak: ?No one was entitled to anything in his life, least of all love.? Do you agree or disagree? What does this tell you about Kenneth?s love life?

9. How does the funeral change Richard?s feelings for Edie? Why do you think he blames the neighbors for buying food without letting him chip in? How has his relationship with his community been affected by the divorce? Do you think he?ll be able to repair the damage after Edie?s death?

10. The narration often skips ahead in time, so we know which statements the characters make are true and which ones are not. An example is p. 268, where Richard says Robin will regret calling herself an orphan, and she doesn?t until he passes away. How does this narrative style change the story for you? How do the multiple perspectives differ in the telling? Did you sympathize the most with one character above the others? If so, who?

11. Do you believe the last sentence, that the family was close in the end? Why or why not?

Author Bio

Jami Attenberg is a *New York Times* bestselling author of eight books of fiction, including THE MIDDLESTEINS and ALL GROWN UP; a memoir, I CAME ALL THIS WAY TO MEET YOU; and 1000 WORDS: A Writer's Guide to Staying Creative, Focused, and Productive All Year Round. She is the founder of the annual #1000WordsofSummer project and maintains the popular Craft Talk newsletter year-round. Her work has been published in 16 languages. She

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