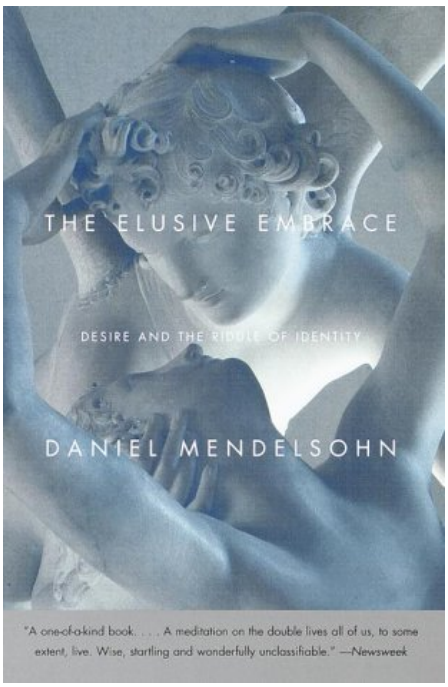

The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity

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Hailed for its searing emotional insights, and for the astonishing originality with which it weaves together personal history, cultural essay, and readings of classical texts by Sophocles, Ovid, Euripides, and Sappho, **The Elusive Embrace** is a profound exploration of the mysteries of identity. It is also a meditation in which the author uses his own divided life to investigate the "rich conflictedness of things," the double lives all of us lead.

Daniel Mendelsohn recalls the deceptively quiet suburb where he grew up, torn between his mathematician father's pursuit of scientific truth and the exquisite lies spun by his Orthodox Jewish grandfather; the streets of manhattan's newest "gay ghetto," where "desire for love" competes with "love of desire;" and the quiet moonlit house where a close friend's small son teaches him the meaning of fatherhood. And, finally, in a neglected Jewish cemetery, the author uncovers a family secret that reveals the universal need for storytelling, for inventing myths of the self. The book that Hilton Als calls "equal to Whitman's 'Song of Myself,'" **The Elusive Embrace** marks a dazzling literary debut.

The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity Details

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From Reader Review The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity for online ebook

Mel Bossa says

Very well written and unique in its perspective. I loved discovering Chelsea in NYC during the late 80s and early 90s through his astute eye and how he used geography, personal history, mythology (which he is obviously passionate about and fluent in latin and greek) and paternity to examine our dualities and the intersections of identity--gender, cultural, and sexual. But it was missing vulnerability.

Rita says

This is one of my favorites of DM's books. Much is revealed about the personal odyssey of the writer in relation to desire, but the revelations never feel sensational or gratuitous. The memoirist has to ask hard questions about intimate truths and what one hides, not only from others, but from oneself. As Mendelsohn explores the secrets he kept, the avid scholar he became, the people who helped him become a fuller, richer self, the word "risk" kept coming to me. He risks much here, and in doing so, exhibits courage on every page.

As I was working on my own memoir, I returned to this book again and again--for fortitude.

Obe says

3,5*

Nathanial says

Desire and the Riddle of Identity is the subtitle for this book.

How can we both desire love and still love to be the object of desire? "Identity, the Greeks knew, is a paradox," says Daniel Mendelsohn at the end of Geographies, the first chapter of The Elusive Embrace; the next four chapters - Multiplicities, Paternities, Mythologies, and Identities - elaborate this paradox, not to solve it, but to parse out the strands that make him who he is, follow them along their sources, and speculate to their further unbindings and collusions. He writes, almost evenly, half of the book's vignettes in an autobiographical mode, tracing his life as a middle-class gay Jew, and half in an expository, etymological mode, going back to Greek myth and language for fertile frameworks of his explorations. Just as he explains that he divides half of his days (alternating between the Chelsea's anonymous tricks and the suburban house where he helps raise a young child), he argues - no, not argues, rather 'puts forth' passages like these:

"Greek grammar, unlike most others, unlike Latin, the language of the practical Romans, has a special verbal mode called 'the middle voice,' which is neither active nor passive but, in a way, both at once: a voice in which the subject of the verb is also its object; diadoumenos, for example, is a participle in the middle voice:

the one binding his head/whose head is being bound, the beautiful boy who ties a ribbon around his own head / around whose head a ribbon is being tied, adorning and adorned, subject and object."

How does such a figure avoid hypocrisy and acknowledge both aspects of its being? Mendelsohn goes on, paragraph after paragraph, page after page, chapter after chapter, to model this duality as an epistemology, to demonstrate how he lives both 'here' and 'not-here' when the utopia of gay enclaves is a 'no-place' both because of the fantasies that support it and the stigmas that would ignore, deny, or destroy it. Simultaneously, he elucidates unspoken aspects of the 'here' by relating, in complementary if fragmented juxtaposition, both the stories of exile and exuberance that led his grandparents to escape the Naziis and eventually raise a family, and the conversations that brought him to the position of being a 'male role-model' for a young boy. Mendelsohn's strength comes to the fore when he examines, in disturbing and fascinating detail, how he is still in the middle voice of masculinity himself: both being bound by his grandfather's example, and binding himself (yes, he does get into erotics) with the trappings of his gay ghetto, both raising a child and being raised by a child.

The quiet inhibition of his writing spills across these mythic comparisons, and it is that very boundlessness which reveals Mendelsohn's own limitations: he has a difficulty holding this material all together in one book. He may have realized this himself, especially upon the writing of his second book, The Lost, in which he recounts his efforts to learn the stories of the lost six ancestors who didn't make it out of Europe. Released this year, The Lost is a hydra-headed travelogue, historical essay, and autobiography, yet domesticated enough so that when you cut off one of it's heads (or speculations), you get two more photographs dug out of dusty trunks, two more people who knew his ancestors before they themselves escaped, two more storylines, in fact, which in turn open two more avenues of inquiry. If Daniel Mendelsohn is cursed with infinite material, it is an enviable curse. Luckily for us, he handles it well - or does it handle him?(cue mood music here).

Kristen says

As a woman reader, I occasionally felt pretty alienated from Mendelsohn's discussion of the gay male experience, despite being queer myself. Still, the writing itself is quite beautiful and stunning, and the way he weaves together personal narrative with mythology and philosophy is really breathtaking.

Miriam Jacobs says

The Elusive Embrace is not Mendelsohn's strongest work, but that is as it should be, since he seems at the time of publication to be still finding his voice as a writer. I suspect the award garnering has more to do with the writer's frankness with regard to his subject than the merits of the writing. The speaker does not begin with a thesis he uses experience to prove, but, rather, explores experience - a perceived duality of nature and sense of specialness - to uncover a thesis - a genuine exploration, neither pat nor smug. He is conscious of arguing against the grain in addressing the myth of Narcissus and Echo, but he tells the truth about what he feels, aware that it may be currently incorrect, politically speaking, I feel, historically speaking, it is an important beginning for him personally, as a writer, but least in significance with regard to his body of work.

Hal says

An enjoyable, insightful and enlightening memoir. The author's journalistic style seems to be a dogged pursuit of the truth - I think this works a little better when the object of investigation is his murdered relatives (The Lost) or his father (An Odyssey), than when it's himself.

Chani says

This was Mendelsohn's literary debut and he was already a master in connecting personal stuff –in this case about his childhood and homosexuality, general reflections on desire and identity and a study on the classics. His memories are touching but not as powerful as the way he re-visits the past in*The Lost*; his cruising New York streets in quest of "boys" he could play with isn't the most interesting side of the book though; his take on male desire, or rather on homosexual desire is insightful but it isn't that refreshing. However as soon as he starts diving into Greek and Latin, and connecting his thoughts to either Myths or tragedies it's simply wonderful.

And of course, it's well-written.

Ayelet Waldman says

Okay, he's my friend, but even if he weren't I would be blown away by the originality, the creativity, the verve of this book.

James Smith says

Effortlessly masterful, Mendelsohn weaves his expertise as a classical scholar into his Jewish heritage to narrate his experience of "identity"--as a son, as a godfather, as a gay man "just outside" Chelsea. The result is a meditation on the nuances and messiness of "identity"--and hence the silliness of identity politics--that, quite apart from Mendelsohn's intentions, has a lot to teach religious communities in a secular age.

K says

This book was published before *The Lost*, and I think it shows. *The Riddle of Identity* has a similar style (addressing different aspects of the issue through the lens of academic commentary) and it covers a lot of the same areas of Mendelsohn's family history, but in both senses, it feels less cohesive and less compelling.

The first explanation of the μεν, δε dilemma is something any student of Ancient Greek will appreciate, and his commentary on ancient texts is readable and accessible to all. His discussion of his sexual identity felt more like a casual chat with a long-winded friend -- the kind who makes a lot of generalizations based on his own experience. I enjoyed reading about his family's own myths, but not as much as I did when reading *The Lost*. I rounded my 1.5 star review up to two because I believe this would have held my interest better had I

not already read *The Lost*, but as it stands, I was ready to be finished with this book about 3/4 of the way through.

Rj says

On my nightstand I have a collection of books that I am slowly wading through. As I order my nighttime reading from the local library it means that sometimes I have little to read and at others too much. I just finished reading Daniel Mendelson's The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1999). The book is a fascinating although often odd memoir about Mendelsohn's exploration of homosexual desire interwoven with classical myths that are part of his training as a classicist. Although he is better known for The Lost: A Search for Six Million a book that chronicles his search for relatives lost during the Holocaust The Elusive Embrace, a memoir of desire maps how it is related to concepts of self, especially for gay men. Although at times the book and his writing can be a bit odd (often laced with overreaching prose and narratives of the one that got away) I enjoy reading memoirs about sexuality and desire and how individuals navigate such territories.

James says

How does one resolve the mystery of his own identity? Can one understand the rest of the world if he does not know himself first? These questions and more form the themes of this rare if not unique memoir. Daniel Mendelsohn shares his own personal history through essays on the ways that he, and by reference we, defines himself. The geographies, paternities, mythologies and what he calls multiplicities lead him to a summary section that discusses identities. Concluding at the end of his musings that "you live in the middle voice, you are here and you are there," (p 206), and this is the cumulative result of the experiences of a life - our personal mythology. By weaving into his personal experience the lessons of classical mythology (Ovid et. al.) Mendelsohn pursues the nature of the desire. Since Plato discussed the relationship between eros and the good this question has been a critical part of human existence. The Elusive Embrace updates the search for the nature of this relationship and its part in the "riddle of identity". Beautifully written and deeply felt this is a book to return to again and again.

Ed says

not a good book from an otherwise astute critic.

Jim says

Nearly twenty years after its original publication, this unique book continues to defy classification. Part memoir, part family history, part socio-cultural critique—*The Elusive Embrace* resonates as a late 20th-century/early 21st-century chronicle of the ambivalent lives that many gay men lead.

As a Classics scholar, Mendelsohn informs his observations of contemporary life with relevant analogues

from Greek language and drama. Using the Greek construction of “men” and “de” (i.e., “On the one hand…but then again, on the other…”), Mendelsohn (whose surname begins with the combination of these two Greek syllables) demonstrates the conflated binaries of his own life (*men*, as an intellectual…*de*, as a sexual being) as well as broader humanistic concerns (*men*, the desire for love…*de*, the love of desire).

The references to AOL chat rooms now seem quaint, and the somewhat lengthy chronicle of his family’s history in the latter quarter of the book gets a bit tedious, but ultimately, Mendelsohn’s transcendent prose and the sheer power of his youthful memories will strike a bittersweet chord with many gay men of a certain age.
