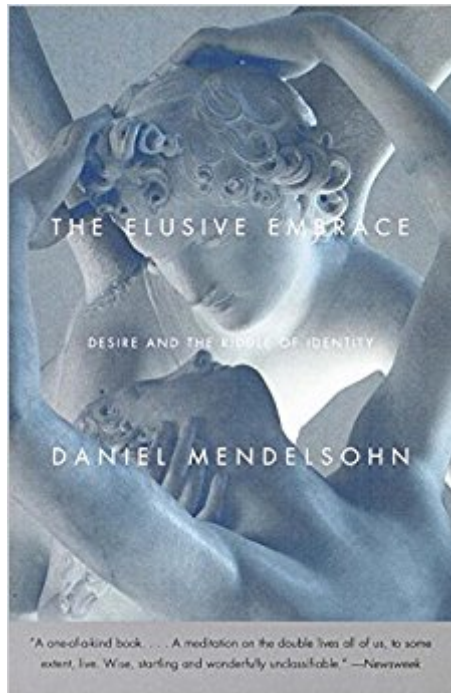


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The Elusive Embrace: Desire And The Riddle Of Identity



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When Daniel Mendelsohn was growing up, he "secretly imagined a place where all the people were other boys, and where all the stores and books and songs and movies and restaurants were by boys, about other boys. It would be a place where somehow the outside reality of the world that met your eyes and ears could finally be made to match the inner, hidden reality of what you knew yourself to be." And while he's found that place in Manhattan's Chelsea district, Mendelsohn has

only one foot there--his other foot is in suburban New Jersey, where he acts as a masculine role model ("not exactly a father but a man who would be present") to the young son of a close friend. *The Elusive Embrace* is an elegantly written memoir that shifts effortlessly between these locales, and between the events in Mendelsohn's life and the Greek and Roman classics that are his academic specialty. Whether he's elaborating upon his earliest explorations of his sexuality or teasing out the secrets that redefine his family history, he writes with admirable grace and delicacy.

--Ron Hogan --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Weaving philosophical musings and discussions of Greek myths and drama with his personal experiences, Mendelsohn explores issues of identity, sexuality, fatherhood, family and history in five essays that amount to an idiosyncratic memoir. A lecturer in classics at Princeton whose literary criticism has appeared in the *New Yorker* and *Out*, he aims to understand the apparent contradictions of his life as a single gay man and a father figure to a friend's son, and as a critic and consumer of gay culture who lives amidst yet apart from his Jewish immigrant family's heterosexuality. Despite his ambition, however, Mendelsohn doesn't entirely hit his mark. The book is flawed by a style that aims to be elegantly elaborate. One sentence is 404 words long. But comes across as pretentious (as when he employs "necropolis" instead of "cemetery" for little reason). His use of Greek myths is neither original nor insightful; a three-page sketch of the story of Antigone feels like filler. More problematic, however, is Mendelsohn's tendency not simply to generalize but to universalize from his own experience. He makes such dubious claims as this: "when men have sex with a woman they fall 'into' the woman... gay men fall through their partners back into themselves." He also frequently speaks unreflectively of all gay men as a single group, undercutting his credibility as a social observer and critic. In the end, his intense focus on the primacy of his experience and the lack of social and historical context diminishes the resonance his own experience might have for others.

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I was first introduced to Daniel Mendelsohn's writing style with an April 2017 *New Yorker* article, "A Father's Final Odyssey." I was so intrigued with his writing style blending personal/family narrative with classical literature (Homer), I needed more. This work did not disappoint. I highly recommend this work especially for members in the LGBTQ community. We rarely get deep insightful narratives about life, longing, and the struggles we face growing up and what it all now means, can mean as adults. I will continue to read Daniel Mendelsohn's books and articles. I see he has a new book

coming out next month (September 2017: I'm on it, Daniel. You got me hooked!

I love Mendelsohn's prose, he often embeds one clause within another and the result is that he writes the way the mind works -- one idea leading to another and depending upon another. And yet, it is all very clear, it makes sense and it resonates. I started noticing that several of my favorite New Yorker articles have been written by him, so I am going back to his previous works. The subject matter of the *Elusive Embrace* is of a young, gay man's search for identity. He expresses it well, we (I) feel that I understand what he is saying at a gut level, but I find myself wanting to read an update -- where is his head at now? There is a great deal of self-absorption here -- yes, it's a memoir -- but, I wonder, has he moved out of himself a bit more, is he writing more about himself in relation to others, as we start to see when he writes about the young boy whom he is raising with a friend? I would read that book.

At first I was intimidated by the customer reviews that made mention of the author's use of classical references as I am not classically educated and often find such references pretentious. However, I am happy to report that Mr. Mendelsohn's work is compelling and always easy to follow. "The *Elusive Embrace*" is equal parts memoir and essay, filled with keen observations and poignant scenes from his life. I was especially moved by those involving his god son Nicholas, and the final sections dealing with ancient family secrets and myths. His prose is beautiful, and his ideas about the duplicity of identity, how we are all many things at once, are succinctly articulated. I highly recommend this book, though I do have one caveat. On page 82 (of the paperback) the author notes that all the happy gay couples he knows have sex outside of their relationships. He follows this observation with the gross generalization: "This is a fact of gay life." It may be a fact for some gay couples, but certainly not all. It sounds like the author is trying to justify his own suspect promiscuity by proclaiming it to be the norm. I would advise him to reference his own comments from page 38: "Knowledge may make you aware that the certainties of others are often more convenient than true, allowing those who hold them to live a coherent and sensible life, allowing their choices and their ideologies to make a kind of sense."

This autobiographical "study" of erotic desire and family dynamics is very entertaining and its focus on classical mythology is stimulating, but ultimately a little disappointing. The author is a classics scholar, and perhaps it is too much to expect him to address more than a handful of Greek literary or mythic works. But when reading his careful and perceptive analyses of myths such as Narcissus,

plays such as Sophocles' Oedipus and Antigone, Euripides' Hippolytus and Ion, I found myself wondering if he would ever go further to Achilles and Patroclus, warrior-lovers in Homer's Iliad, or to the many dialogues of Plato about love. This would be particularly appropriate for this work; one of the author's points is that part of the "nature" of erotic attraction is contradiction and antithesis. In Plato's dialogues, love is sometimes a cruel master that must be avoided or somehow subjugated (Republic), sometimes a "divine mystery" to be celebrated (Symposium), sometimes a force to be tamed (Phaedrus). Mendelsohn's writing is excellent for an academician--it is sometimes confusing in his descriptions of his family and the intricate and complicated relationships. I found myself wishing that there were a family tree in the text somewhere. That brings me to an outright complaint. This is the second recent work of non-fiction I have read, by a scholarly writer on a serious subject, published by a prestigious house, that could have been much better, with just a little more work. How about an illustration of any of the mythology, literature, or even family matters related by the author? How about an index? (See my review of A Traitor's Kiss, biography of Richard Sheridan) But the book is definitely worth reading, and would probably be great for one of those gay reading groups. I found myself wondering, about the author, if he came to a book signing or lecture, would he be cruising the crowd for sex partners while discussing or defending some of his theories? His "defense" of promiscuity and casual sex is the most provocative thing in this book--and bound to stimulate discussion.

Somewhat self-indulgent confessional--but its honesty is appreciated, as is its portrait of a moment in LGBT affairs that placed inordinate pressure on all sorts of wonderful guys and gals. Mendelsohn is throughout an incomparably erudite and amusing writer.

One of the very finest writers on cultures from ancient Greece to modern America writing today.

Mendelsohn is the rare literary critic of today. He combines literary scholarship with a passion for aesthetics. He has internalized the ancient classical world without losing the modern beat. Therefore this critic strides two worlds, and understands the chasm between the two.

The Elusive Embrace, by Daniel Mendelsohn, is a remarkable book. The problem of one's identity is often of great importance to some people. Mr Mendelsohn, in his autobiographical oeuvre, tackles this subject with frankness and subtlety. The many references to mythology add to its value. I read this very well written book with pleasure and interest.

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