



# Middlegame

Written by Seanan McGuire

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Middlegame

# Middlegame

By Seanan McGuire

## Middlegame Seanan Mcguire

Meet Roger. Skilled with words, languages come easily to him. He instinctively understands how the world works through the power of story.

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## Middlegame Book

Meet Dodger, his twin. Numbers are her world, her obsession, her everything. All she understands, she does so through the power of math.

## Middlegame Chess

Roger and Dodger aren't exactly human, though they don't realise it. They aren't exactly gods, either. Not entirely. Not yet.

## Middlegame Seanan McGuire Review

Meet Reed, skilled in the alchemical arts like his progenitor before him. Reed created Dodger and her brother. Heâ€™s not their father. Not quite. But he has a plan: to raise the twins to the highest power, to ascend with them and claim their authority as his own.

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## Middlegame Ventures

Godhood is attainable. Pray it isn't attained.

It's 3 am.

You hear a noise downstairs.

You go to investigate.

It's me sitting at your kitchen table.

I ask you to sit down.

Slowly, reluctantly, you do.

I draw in a small, sharp breath and start telling you how the thought of this book still stirs such a storm in me—a thousand smithereens of joy and yearning and grief—all of it seething and bleeding and writhing. How the story settled like sediment in my mind, and, how it was days before I could pull my senses home to my body—most of them, at least. It's 3 am.

You hear a noise downstairs.

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I draw in a small, sharp breath and start telling you how the thought of this book still stirs such a storm in me—a thousand smithereens of joy and yearning and grief—all of it seething and bleeding and writhing. How the story settled like sediment in my mind, and, how it was days before I could pull my senses home to my body—most of them, at least. Enough to stop the spinning and bail out the excess feeling that threatened otherwise to capsize me.

“What's the book about?” you may ask.

Roger and Dodger have hidden their secret for so long, and worked so hard to be normal, but now the truth lay all around them in crimson arcs of gore written out across the ground.

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But you need context. So, let's try the ending again, writ sequentially.

Greed lies beneath all our ugliest transactions. Roger and Dodger are the product of an alchemist's covetous desire to make the universe yield to his sounding by controlling the elemental forces of creation. His name is James Reed, and he's been trying for over a hundred years to follow his master's teachings and harness a universal concept called the Doctrine of Ethos"by splitting it into a pair of kneadable human bodies, one of whom is endowed with an extraordinary deftness for math, and the other an extraordinary dexterity for language.

Ever since Roger had heard Dodger's voice in his head as clearly as if an unseen person had pronounced the words, he'd stumbled onto something that refused to be believed: Roger has a twin whose name rhymes with his own and they can communicate via quantum entanglement. Their situation was one they drew consolation from as they marveled at it. But things were seldom that simple. When the artfully placed leaves blow away, revealing the shining jaws of the trap beneath, their amazement slips, taking on an unfamiliar, uncomfortable form. And the more Roger and Dodger fight against their destiny, they only draw it more tightly around their throats.

James Reed had cast the shining snare long before Roger and Dodger knew about each other, and it is closing, and they will be caught.

• There is so much blood. • It's quite a fitting opening sentence for a novel steeped in the eventuality of menace.

McGuire knows how to hold the reader spellbound. Her storytelling has its own energy and speed; it brings the tale into the room, with its dark and its chill. I resented spending time away from the novel. Like Dodger's voice, it seemed to call to me, like a faint heartbeat, insistent and persuasive. Yet, I did not really chase after explanations, snatch at reasons, or make effortful attempts to connect thoughts. Instead, reading Middlegame was like being caught in a current, drifting along with the river's twists and turns. I simply waited, with a mounting thrill of consternation and exhilaration, until the conclusion that had been inexorably readying itself in the depths came to the surface. I must warn you, however, that this book isn't short on misery, tragedy or violence. Darkness is served up deliciously in this novel, and a tendril of fear for the characters often curled in my belly. But fear not, there is a happy ending. Perhaps, more uncertain than happy. In any case, the world will eventually run at its own pace again.

Middlegame is a complex, intricate clockwork of a story. But the novel's structure is a tricky one, and our dauntless heroes aren't the only ones destined to get their heads turned around here. The concepts in this book come fast, thick and tangled, seeming at first dreamy and obscure, like a sentence half translated into a new language. It's the kind of tangle that you could easily make worse in your efforts to straighten things out. The past and the present often touch and overlap, and the story makes abrupt jumps ahead in time in sometimes-illuminating, sometimes-disconcerting or confusing ways. But McGuire supports all of that mind-twisting theory with deeply empathetic characters, and, even when



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the novel lags, the clarity of her prose and keenness of her dialogue slice through.

In the end, this is a book that convinces and compels—it's honestly quite unlike anything that I've ever read, and it's altogether triumphant.

But what holds steady throughout the novel is how expertly balanced the pursuit of plot is with the pursuit of characterization. I am a reader who leans more towards character-driven stories, and to my delight, Dodger and Roger form the thread that holds the beads of this novel together. McGuire has given us a mind-constellating peek behind the workings of the universe, then distilled it into a quiet, intimate tale of twin siblings who, separated by miles and decades, have constructed between them a sense of unaccustomed security as impressive as a moated castle, but they alone knew how flimsy it really was.

See, Dodger and Roger were two sides of a single coin that could be thrown in the air and land on either side. They were quantum-tangled twins, each a presence that surrounded the other and protected them and was no less real for being—for years—invisible. The irony is as hard and cold as ax-fall, for their entanglement often only sharpened the hardship of their existence.

Middlegame takes readers through a journey of their obsessive years of curiosity, of waiting for their destiny to reveal its staggering answer to them, then the years of loss and confusion, when the blunted edges of their relationship had suddenly become cut-throat sharp, threatening to slip and slice them both if not handled with care, then the years of revelation when Dodger and Roger realize that their center of gravity have immutably shifted: from being one of one—alone, apart—to being half of something that would crumble if either side were cut away.

I felt such a keen sense of connection with the characters. With Dodger who could sense numbers and see their path in her mind, as though they were right there, waiting to resolve, like a kaleidoscope in need of turning. Dodger who feels losses most keenly, whose mind was a torment and whose chest was hinged like a gate and she had simply never noticed until Roger had spoken the word sister and filled an empty place inside her. With Roger to whom words were like a drumbeat constantly pulling at his pulse. Roger who understood the torment in Dodger's eyes and carried it with him down the long roads of his life, who was always too acutely aware of how porous is the line that separated them. Such a current of love and rage and resentment ran between Roger and Dodger that at times the novel felt colored by it, while all else was drowned and forgotten.

Siblings, huh?

(I falter into a cutting silence.)

Well! I've taken too many moments of your time.

(I press the book into your hands.)

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Just trust me.

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## Middlegame McGuire

“They grew up sort of weird and sort of wonderful and they found each other and lost each other over and over again. But this time, when they found each other, they came as close as they could to the Impossible City. They walked the length of the improbable road, and the girl wrote down everything she knew about the universe, and the boy read it all aloud, and everything was okay.”

Going into Middlegame, I don't think I actually considered that I might not like it. It didn't seem possible.

“They grew up sort of weird and sort of wonderful and they found each other and lost each other over and over again. But this time, when they found each other, they came as close as they could to the Impossible City. They walked the length of the improbable road, and the girl wrote down everything she knew about the universe, and the boy read it all aloud, and everything was okay.”

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I have given five stars to all the four books I've read in McGuire's Wayward Children series, and I just assumed this would be an obvious five-star, love-you-forever kind of read. I actually feel bad saying this, but this was not my kind of book at all.

There was a lot of stopping and starting in my attempts to read this book (which have been going on for weeks). I guess I just don't enjoy being this confused for so long and receiving so little explanation for anything. The Wayward Children series is exactly my brand of atmospheric fairy tale weirdness, but this was a completely different kind of weird. A dense sci-fi novel that was at least 200 pages too long for me.

I found it frustrating and confusing-- one of those books where I was kept in the dark for so long that my attention was waning. Trying to stay invested when I had no idea where it was going or what questions I needed to be asking was hard work. And so much feels unanswered. While I'm sure this is wholly intentional, it didn't quite work for me. I was left with the unsatisfying feeling that I never fully "got" it.

There's a lot of repetition, too. Roger and Dodger are "experiment" twins - he a word genius, she a math genius - separated after birth and placed with adoptive parents. They discover each other through a psychic link, lose each other, find each other again. Little is happening during these psychic encounters. Alongside this, we get the perspective of James Reed, an alchemist who wishes to use Roger and Dodger to get to the Impossible City. Unfortunately, I felt zero emotional connection to these characters.

Though this is supposed to be a math and logic based sci-fi, it is strange how very little is explained. The lack of details made it hard to picture and suspend disbelief for. I struggled to understand the motivations of Reed or how he really planned to accomplish his ambitions. The "Impossible City" is just a cool-sounding name being thrown around without explanation.

Probably my favourite parts were the nods to The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, which I thought were clever. But, overall, this book was for a reader very different from myself. I know McGuire also writes under her

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Mira Grant pseudonym, but I'm starting to think she might actually be several different people in one, because all her books are so different. I mean it as a compliment. Middlegame wasn't my cup of tea, but it's pretty impressive to have so many different tricks up one's sleeve.

CW: Attempted suicide.

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This synopsis had been taunting me for months. It's honestly just so well written I can barely stand it. For some reason I was hella nervous to actually get into this book. This was my first Seanan McGuire outside of (one of my favourite series of all time) The Wayward Children books, and I figured there's no way I could TRULY love an adult fantasy novel about science....and gods....right?

But slap my ass and call me Judy, if this isn't one of my new favourite books of all time. I have an inkling  
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But slap my ass and call me Judy, if this isn't one of my new favourite books of all time. I have an inkling  
this isn't going to be for everyone, I must admit. It was my perfect brand of weird, and her writing is so addictive, and also..accessible? But this isn't a genre (actually...what even subgenre does this fall into) I ever read...so those well versed in this alchemical, mythological, SFF shit- could find something lacking for all I know. But to me it was flawless.

Roger and Dodger are precious cinnamon buns who must be protected at all costs. How Seanan McGuire manages to keep things fast paced, fun, and totally otherworldly...but then throws in some Real Life Shit, is inspired. There were scenes right from the jump that almost had me in tears.

Also the opening scene is "Five minutes too late, thirty seconds from the end of the world." And I mean, with a start like that, what could go wrong? Please go pre-order this so she writes a sequel. ...more

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## Middlegame Seanan McGuire Vk

"In the same ordinary town, on the same ordinary street, lived two ordinary children who had never quite managed to cross paths."

MR. HUMPHREY: "So what was this book about?"

ME: "Honestly, I couldn't tell you but I loved it."

MR. HUMPHREY: .....

ME: .....

Ok, but have you ever read a book that is so intellectually deep and intricately detailed in subject matter that you aren't well versed in, that you haven't got the first clue how to explain it to someone else? Honestly, that's how I feel about "In the same ordinary town, on the same ordinary street, lived two ordinary children who had never quite managed to cross paths."

MR. HUMPHREY: "So what was this book about?"

ME: "Honestly, I couldn't tell you but I loved it."

MR. HUMPHREY: .....

ME: .....

Ok, but have you ever read a book that is so intellectually deep and intricately detailed in subject matter that you aren't well versed in, that you haven't got the first clue how to explain it to someone else? Honestly, that's how I feel about most of Seanan McGuire's books, because her writing is so flawlessly executed that we aren't worthy of her stories, yet she allows us to read them anyway. Even the blurb is fairly cryptic, and I think the publisher wisely chose to keep the cards close in hand on this book for the very reason that it's best to go in open-minded and ready to be lead by the author, hand-in-hand, to *The Impossible City*.

"Medicine rests upon four pillars-philosophy, astronomy, alchemy, and ethics."

^ That above quote, to me, sums up what this book is about. \*Insert best SNL Stefan voice\* This book has everything-twins, alchemy, quantum physics, fires, Frankenstein creatures, MORE FIRES, telepathy (of sorts), a book within a book, EVEN MORE FIRES- well, I think you get the picture. Throwing a list of buzz words at you is much easier than trying to explain precisely WHAT this book is, and the author even stated in her afterword that her four page pitch of this novel wasn't enough for her agent to get what this book was, so she just wrote the damn thing. Badass level, achieved!

This book is long, friends. Please don't let it scare you, because i plowed through all \*roughly\* 550 pages in 3 days, and that's only because I had adulting to do in between. The beauty of McGuire's novels are that, she takes an idea that seems so far fetched it could never happen, and then magically forms it into this ALMOST realistic and very scientific sounding hypothesis that has you googling at

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midnight wondering if scientists have achieved this level of madness. It's safe to say that this book won't be for everybody, and will mostly appeal to those looking for a science fiction novel that is heavy on the science side, but once again Seanan McGuire, queen of all things intellectually quirky and deliciously bizarre, has blown me away. Highly recommended for those looking for a challenging read, and I mean that as the highest compliment.

"It doesn't matter how beautiful your theory is, it doesn't matter how smart you are. If it doesn't agree with experiment, it's wrong." -Richard Feynman

\*Many thanks to the publisher for providing my review copy via NetGalley. ...more

4.5 stars for Seanan McGuire's latest novel, on sale today! Final review, first posted on Fantasy Literature in a slightly different form, as a collaborative review with my friend and co-reviewer Jana. You should read our (excellent) joint review there! :D

James Reed and his assistant Leigh Barrow • a pair of rebel alchemists of the mad scientist type • have been doing human experimentation for years, trying to make/breed (it's a combination of both) children who will embody the • Doctrine of Etho 4.5 stars for Seanan McGuire's latest novel, on sale today! Final review, first posted on Fantasy Literature in a slightly different form, as a collaborative review with my friend and co-reviewer Jana. You should read our (excellent) joint review there! :D

James Reed and his assistant Leigh Barrow • a pair of rebel alchemists of the mad scientist type • have been doing human experimentation for years, trying to make/breed (it's a combination of both) children who will embody the • Doctrine of Ethos • and have godlike magical powers. Because putting all this power in one person hasn't worked, they split the Doctrine into its two components, math and language, between two fraternal twins. One twin will be a math genius; the other gifted with language and words. Raising these children under controlled conditions, the alchemists believe they can achieve the results they want and keep the powers under their own control.

Roger and Dodger are one of these sets of twins, separated at birth and adopted out to families living on opposite coasts of the United State of America. Roger is the language-gifted child and Dodger (a girl) is the math-gifted one. At age 7 the twins figure out that they have not only the ability to mentally communicate (through • quantum entanglement, • announces Roger triumphantly) but the capacity to see through each other's eyes • a revelation to Roger, who is completely colorblind. But meanwhile the single-minded alchemists are keeping a VERY close eye on them. They'll do anything - even murder - to make sure nothing interferes with their plans.

In Middlegame, McGuire blends together light science fiction, fantasy and some horror, and then tosses in elements of Greek philosophy (the aforementioned Doctrine of Ethos), Tarot-like concepts, timeline shifting, classic children's literature, and more in an almost indescribable literary concoction. Initially I found it a little too muddled. I wanted the improbable road leading to the Impossible City to make

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more logical sense, and I thought the half-explained quasi-Tarot references to the King of Cups, Queen of Wands/Swords, Jack Daw, and Page of Frozen Waters were more distracting than useful. A. Deborah Baker only briefly appears at the very beginning of Middlegame, but her ideas inform the entire plot. The chapter-heading quotes from her *Over the Woodward Wall* add color to the main plot but didn't supply all of the additional clarity and meaning I was looking for. (I deeply wish that this were an actual book, though!)

But a funny thing happened on my way to the virtual forum where Jana and I were exchanging our ideas and assembling our joint review. I dug back into the text of Middlegame and found that these various elements melded together far more satisfactorily than I thought on first read. Elements that at first seemed opaque appeared much clearer on second read. I especially like the idea of L. Frank Baum using *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* to deliberately muddy Baker's pure division of the four elements (water, air, fire and earth and the related humors) into four quadrants.

I'm still dubious about the "Doctrine of Ethos" as the concept underlying the entire alchemical plot. The original doctrine (a Greek theory of how music influences the thoughts and emotions of humans) has an extremely tenuous logical connection to how our unbalanced alchemists are literally embodying the Doctrine in a pair of individuals, "forc[ing] the Doctrine into flesh" as a way to influence the entire world, the fabric of time and reality itself. And we've concluded that you just have to roll with it. Suspend disbelief, strap yourself into your seat and enjoy the ride. Smart kids get put on a pedestal by parents and teachers alike, and the rest of the class gathers around the base of it throwing rocks, trying to knock them down. People who say "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" don't understand how words can be stones, hard and sharp-edged and dangerous and capable of doing so much more harm than anything physical. McGuire has such a gift for putting profound insights into words that strike your heart. As Roger and Dodger, both lonely children who don't really fit in with others, get to know each other through their long-distance telepathic relationship, they realize how much they fit together, the scholastic strengths of one matching the weaknesses of the other. They can help each other. They can shore up the broken places. He knows the words for this: cooperation, symbiosis, reciprocity. So many words, and he'll teach her all of them, if she'll just keep being his friend. I realized, not long before Roger and Dodger themselves mention it, that their last names, Middleton and Cheswich, combine to make Midwich, a clever reference to *The Midwich Cuckoos*, a classic SF horror novel about a group of alien children (partially) concealed among humans. In Middlegame, though, the cuckoos have our undivided sympathy.

Erin, the female half of one of Reed's failed twin sets, turned assistant, developed into an excellent, multi-layered character, with far more depth than I initially expected. She ended up being one of my favorite characters; unlike Leigh, whose beauty hides an appalling bloodthirstiness.

I have to add that I think the main plot of Middlegame is ingenious. I loved experiencing the growth of Roger and Dodger and the twists and turns in their relationship, and seeing how their powers gradually manifested. The astrolabe in Reed's lab turns out to be more than a lovely symbol. There's some pretty cosmic stuff going on here! If this is just the middle game in this world, I'd love to read about

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the endgame.

Middlegame is a complex and thought-provoking novel that defies easy categorization. If you're in the mood for something unusual, I strongly recommend Middlegame.

Thanks to the publisher and NetGalley for the review copy!

Content notes: Some horror (THAT BURNING HAND THING) and violence, murder, attempted suicide, scattered F-bombs. ...more



## Middlegame Advisors

neither the threat of math nor the threat of twins are enough to keep me from wanting this book. only for you, mcguire...

Oh, lordy! Big caveat coming. I'm already a devoted fanboy of Seanan and I read almost everything she ever comes out with no matter what because I trust her implicitly.

BUT.

Nothing prepared me for this ambitious, thoughtful, mind-blowing modern fantasy of Alchemy and Twins. She spread her wings for this one and turned tons of dichotomies into hardcore story elements, synthesizing Order and Chaos, Math and Storytelling, Isolation and Community, and made a story of Balance a bit more ambitious than any I've seen in almost any novel. Oh, lordy! Big caveat coming. I'm already a devoted fanboy of Seanan and I read almost everything she ever comes out with no matter what because I trust her implicitly.

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That's Middlegame. The space between the beginning and the end. The moment of transformation. The moment of synthesis.

I'm SOOOO freaking happy to have read this. :) I'm going to nominate it for next year's Hugo on its own merits and NOT because I'm already a fanboy of the author.

That's the quality within. :) My decision has been purified with a universal solvent. :)

Oh, and the characters, Roger and Dodger, are freaking cool. :) Great, complicated, beautiful story. The opener isn't quite as strong as the early days of the two kids, but that's merely my own opinion. Once all the elements started mixing together into this alchemical brew, the results were amazing.

...more

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## Middlegame Amazon

Welp, here is my most anticipated release of 2019. All other books can go home. â•†

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It's time.

Thank you, Tor.

Thank you.

I shall cherish this e-ARC until the end of time.

Bless you.