

A Midlife Intermezzo

Boas Gonen

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Fans of schadenfreude will devour this compelling story of a midlife crisis that deteriorates into obsession.

Boas Gonen offers a drama of the human soul in *A Midlife Intermezzo*, the compelling story of one man's midlife crisis gone awry.

Dr. Vip Van Buren, acting chair of a New York City hospital's neurology department, is at a crossroads. His job frustrates him—not only is his chairmanship temporary, but patients are dying and staff morale is horrible—and his marriage provides little contentment. So he embarks on a search for satisfaction and excitement for himself. But his journey leads to uncertainty, indecision, and an obsession with beautiful international opera star Lana Borisenko. Uncertain if it's what he really wants, Vip still risks everything to chase Lana. As his world falls apart and his obsession grows, he pens a novel that mirrors his own emotional turmoil.

The characters' struggles feel as messy as real life can be. Vip, for example, makes decisions he knows are bad, but doesn't care—such as when he travels to Europe without contacting his family. Yet, four hundred pages is a long time to wallow in a man's inability to get a grip on his life: "I was not proud of how I was being a hypocrite, but I was desperately trying to hold on to my two lives." While this proves key to the plot, it also hinders story progression because the main character can't move forward. However, there's also a tempting sense of voyeurism. Peeking into someone's intimate passions as they allow their life to unravel has a certain allure.

The first-person perspective, which can be tricky, is well crafted. The voice is candid and honest. It provides suspense just when the story needs it: "It was time to quit...while my sanity was intact, although I wondered whether it wasn't too late for that."

The characters are fully dimensional and fallible, sometimes even unlikeable. Lana can't stick with one man and plays games with her lovers, though she never intends to hurt. Vip is unconcerned about how his decisions and struggles impact his family and his job, including when his hurting daughter says, "If you really loved us, you would have stayed here and cut out the crap." The main draw to turn the pages is to see if he will finally "man up" and get things together. Though an intriguing plot device, it also runs the risk of stagnation.

This is a tale of one man's struggles, providing enough interest to inspire pressing on through all four hundred pages. It will appeal to those who enjoy watching characters wallow in the mires of life.

DIANE GARDNER (February 24, 2014)

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