

AND THEN THEY STOPPED TALKING TO ME

MAKING SENSE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL

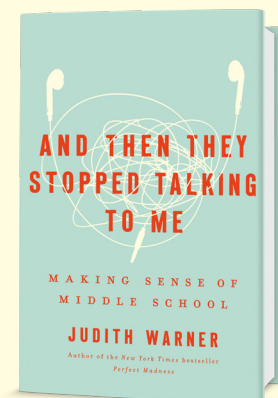
JUDITH WARNER

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* comes a manifesto on why we urgently need to rethink the middle school years.

The very phrase “middle school” evokes feelings of abject misery: painful loneliness, extreme self-consciousness, a sense of never measuring up or fitting in. Due to a perfect storm of developmental changes—physical, psychological, and social—these years are frequently ones of great distress for parents and children alike. Judith Warner believes they don’t have to be quite so bad — if we adults are willing to take a hard look at ourselves and the culture that we’ve created. Marshaling history, sociology, and science—and with a singular mix of curiosity, wit and skepticism—she shows that we need an enlightened new approach to make the most of this crucial period in children’s lives. And the ideal place to start, she writes, is by becoming better aware of the enduring power of our own inner middle schoolers.

Part cultural critique and part call to action, this essential book unpacks one of life’s most formative periods and shows how we can help our children not only survive it, but thrive. Warner argues:

- Middle school misery is as American as apple pie — a product of our unique history, culture, and society.
- Its ups and downs can’t all be blamed on “raging hormones.”
- Puberty matters — a great deal —but not in the ways that most adults think.
- The early adolescent brain enters a second critical period of rapid development that makes the period extra-memorable, for better and for worse.
- Biology is not destiny: good environments can nudge young teens and tweens to become their best selves.
- The cattiest, cliquiest, most exclusive people in the middle school universe aren’t the “popular” kids; it’s their parents.
- “Mean” is not just a girl thing.
- “Popularity” isn’t all it’s cracked up to be; “cool” crowd membership is actually a significant risk factor for unhappiness, both in the short term and later in life.
- Parents who over-identify with their kids’ middle school suffering can turn solvable problems into existential crises.
- The greatest dangers facing middle schoolers today don’t come from sex, drugs or alcohol, or even from social media, but from our culture’s “winner-take-all” attitudes—which enable the very worst middle-schooler instincts and behavior.
- Nowhere are those attitudes, values, and behaviors more toxic than in highly competitive, upper-middle-class communities.



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A CONVERSATION WITH
JUDITH WARNER
AUTHOR OF
AND THEN THEY STOPPED TALKING TO ME
MAKING SENSE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL

What inspired the book's title?

Coming up with a title that captured the full sweep of the book—which looks at middle school not just as an educational institution but as a phase of life, a set of memories and, above all, a feeling—was no simple thing. Ultimately, it was a matter of closing my eyes and letting what I've come to think of as the “middle school feeling” wash over me. And then, there it was: that terrifying, out-of-the-blue day when, suddenly, they stopped talking to me. (The “popular” girls. In eighth grade.) That's the way the words came to me. What was interesting, however, was that other people, hearing the title for the first time, just as quickly interpreted it very differently: they imagined the “me” as a middle school parent, dealing with kids who'd suddenly withdrawn into the stony silence of closed bedroom doors and headphones. What was great, I realized, was that the title could work on both levels—capturing the middle school experience from both a kid's and an adult's perspective.

When it comes to being in middle school, or parenting children of that age, how has the landscape changed since your *New York Times* bestseller *Perfect Madness* was published in 2005?

The advent of the iPhone is the most important change of all. The use of communication technology to further the cause of in-group/out-group social sorting and plain old meanness is hardly new; iPhones didn't create middle school cruelty or angst. I think that everyone who went through what was still most commonly called “junior high” in the 1970s and '80s remembers the nefarious practice of a “friend” calling another friend and getting her to say terrible things about a third friend, who was listening in from another extension. FOMO isn't new either—you can find junior high girls suffering over the fear of missing out in books and women's magazines going back at least to the 1940s. (One even wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt about it.) With the spread of smartphones and the proliferation of social media, the difference in the past fifteen or so years is that there's no escape, ever: middle school buzzes in your pocket, follows you home, lives in your bedroom, and never, ever gives you a break.

You say that our memories of our middle school years can be indelible. How can our residual emotions from middle school exert a powerful force over us even as adults?

There are a fascinating series of changes that happen to the brain in the years around puberty. As an ensemble, they essentially give the brain a tune-up in terms of efficiency and acuity. Impressions become sharper, feelings cut deeper, the memories we form are more intense and detailed. That's why we remember our suffering so well, and why what happened to us often continues to loom so large in our minds for so long after. That's why we come back to our middle school stories over and over again, even in pop culture: think of the power of the recent movie *Eighth Grade*, and the irresistible pull of otherwise cringeworthy shows like *Big Mouth*. In earlier centuries, puberty came later, but the mental changes around it were the same, and you can find descriptions of them—sometimes laudatory, sometimes fearful, sometimes floridly hilarious—in writing going back to classical antiquity. We have an endless fascination with that phase of life. It's in many ways the moment when we start to become our adult selves. But we shouldn't give it too much power. It's easy to overestimate the accuracy of our memories and underestimate the degree to which they were formed at a time when we were better at experiencing our feelings than making sense of them.

How has recent research and an expanded diagnostic vocabulary for adolescent psychology changed our views of middle schoolers?

We now know—based on technological advances in brain imaging—much of what the most forward-thinking social scientists believed more than a century ago: something new and special happens in the minds of kids right around puberty. We know that early adolescence is a phase of life when kids are capable of taking a great leap forward intellectually: they are eager to learn and hungry for knowledge, curious, filled with a strong sense of injustice, passionate in their interests, and possessed of a wide range of new cognitive abilities. But this expert knowledge, which lay behind the birth of the junior high school right around 1900, was largely ignored throughout much of the 20th century, as junior high schoolers came into being as a new, and largely disliked, breed of human. Today's middle schoolers have inherited that legacy. It has become all but impossible to separate who they really are and what they are capable of doing from the negative stereotypes that adults have about them. In recent decades, academic researchers have done a great deal of work to try to set the record straight, but it remains extremely difficult to break through the popular view of 11 to 14-year-olds as little monsters enslaved by their “raging hormones.”

Why do you believe that upper middle class kids are really struggling in our current culture?

This might come as a surprise to readers. After all, wealthier parents have money and, generally, a high level of education, so their kids have access from the start to all the things that set them up for a lifetime of thriving: good schools, quality food and medical care, cultural enrichment, (relatively) stable households, safe neighborhoods, and the expectation that their voices matter and will be respected. At the same time, however, they're also growing up in communities in which the adults are experiencing class anxiety like never before. That anxiety translates into a widespread feeling that there are no longer any guarantees when it comes to social status, which in turn has led to a narrowing of what's considered the path to success. That has brought about a huge mental health crisis on college campuses as kids flame out after too many years of burning the candle at both ends. The pressures fueling that crisis are now starting in the middle school years, which is when the college craziness in upper middle class communities begins. There's a significant body of research demonstrating that the values that most markedly hold sway in upper middle class communities—being competitive, being a winner, looking out for number one to guarantee personal success at all costs—are psychologically damaging. And they're especially so to kids in early adolescence.

How did you decide who to interview for the book? Was it difficult to achieve diversity?

I started by using what sociologists call “snowball sampling,” which is a fancy way of saying that I sent out a general query to dozens of people I knew, or whose work I knew, to see if they wanted to talk about their middle school experiences. I prioritized those who had talked to me or written on the topic, who currently or recently had middle schoolers, or who were experts in that age group. I then asked them to pass my query on to other people who they thought might want to talk. I got a huge response rate—so great that if I'd spoken to everyone I'd still be doing those interviews four years later.

Getting people to talk about their experiences as parents, however, was a whole other story. Even when they're speaking anonymously, people are extremely protective when it comes to sharing stories about their kids, and they tend to want very badly to be seen in a positive light. I'd witnessed a lot of bad parent behavior up close when my daughter was in middle school, and entertained some very ugly feelings myself—some very middle schooler-ish feelings—toward other parents. But, at first, none of my interview subjects admitted to having noticed or experienced any of that, which made me wonder if I was uniquely awful. Fortunately, I went on to interview a number of psychologists and other experts who spend a lot of time talking to and, above all, observing middle school parents, and they said they weren't surprised at the denials that I was getting. They explained that the phenomenon of parents behaviorally “going back to middle school” along with their middle schoolers is ubiquitous—as is parent denial of it. So I changed the way I asked my questions. It was the same lesson I'd had to learn while reporting *Perfect Madness*: ask a group of women to tell you about all the ways they're crazy, perfectionist control-freaks and you get nothing. But ask them what it's like to be a mother around the other mothers in their communities, and you get it all. The same thing happened here.

My interview subjects represented a good mix of people of different racial and ethnic groups; they ranged in age from their

20s to their 60s; some were gay or lesbian (though none were trans or gender non-conforming), and they had grown up in all different parts of the country, with some growing up overseas. Their families of origin spanned the economic spectrum, though the majority had grown up at least middle class. Where they weren't diverse, however, was in their level of education: With only one or two exceptions, all were four-year college-educated, and many held graduate degrees. This meant that, no matter where they'd started, they were now—again, with one or two exceptions—at the top of the middle class or in the upper middle class. Limiting though this is—and it is, admittedly, a limitation—it's also symptomatic of the fact that the kinds of parents who'd first caught my eye, parents with the time and temperamental inclination to closely follow and get caught up in their middle schoolers' social miseries—are grossly overrepresented in affluent communities.

Why do you believe your book will resonate even with people who don't have children?

Everyone was once a middle schooler, so everyone knows what it's like to be hit with the middle school feeling: that overwhelming discomfort of not being rich enough or cool enough or attractive enough or sophisticated enough or plugged-in enough—whatever your thing, or the thing that's valued in a particular circle, happens to be. People reference it all the time, saying, “It's like middle school all over again” when describing the behavior of “mean girls” in an office or the “queen bee” in a book club. (Men tend to get a free pass with this vocabulary, which isn't accurate or fair.) They tend to make middle school a kind of laugh line: “Oh my God, I felt like I was back in middle school!” But if you dig deeper you find an avalanche of emotion underneath, and, much of the time, all sorts of unanswered questions: Why did that happen to me? Why did I dump my best friend? Why did everyone say I was “annoying?” I think a lot of people are still looking for answers, decades later. They really want to be able to make sense of their middle school experiences. After all, more likely than not, no one helped them do so at the time.

I was able to go talk to experts, look things up, boil it all down, and extract the most important and interesting takeaways. And I share story after story to let people know that they weren't—and aren't—alone.

Has your view of your own middle school experience changed as a result of your work on this book?

My view changed enormously, not just of my middle school experience, but of myself. For a very long time I saw myself purely as having been a mean girl's victim. Now I know that, while I had at times been victimized, I had sometimes been pretty mean, too. I may have been more guilty of sins of omission (what we'd today call “ghosting”) than of commission (out-and-out bullying), but the dividing line between the two is less solid than it might seem. I understand now that when it came not just to telling but to perceiving my own middle school story, I was a very unreliable narrator. I missed a lot when I was in sixth through eighth grade—pretty much all the really big stuff going on beyond the scope of my own self-obsession. I say this now not just to be self-critical—another form of self-obsession—but because realizing that my story was more complex, that I was not purely acted upon, that I could, with some adult help, have perhaps handled things differently, is actually very empowering.

***And They Stopped Talking To Me* delves into how an adult's perspective of middle school can influence a child's experience of it. Why is it so important to understand our own role in the middle school experience?**

Even though they are coming into their own, socially and intellectually, and beginning to explore and discover the universe outside of their homes (or should be), middle schoolers still primarily know the world as we present it to them. No matter how much they seemingly reject us, we remain their base of operation. Their rebellions tend to be pretty superficial; the not-me stuff they try on still has us as its center of gravity. What we say, how we act, dress, think, talk about, and relate to others is enormously important—perhaps even more important than at any other point in their childhood, because their powers of perception have become so sharp. Just as, when they were very little, our reaction when they fell down conveyed to them whether or not they were hurt, in middle school our degree of calm or agitation cues their responses to their social and emotional ups and downs.

What are some of the craziest parenting behaviors you document in your book?

Fathers getting into a fist fight because their daughters are at war. Mothers making birthday party invitations into affairs of state. Parents pressuring schools (sometimes successfully!) to fire teachers or administrators who try to get in the way of popular kids' social machinations. The list goes on and on.

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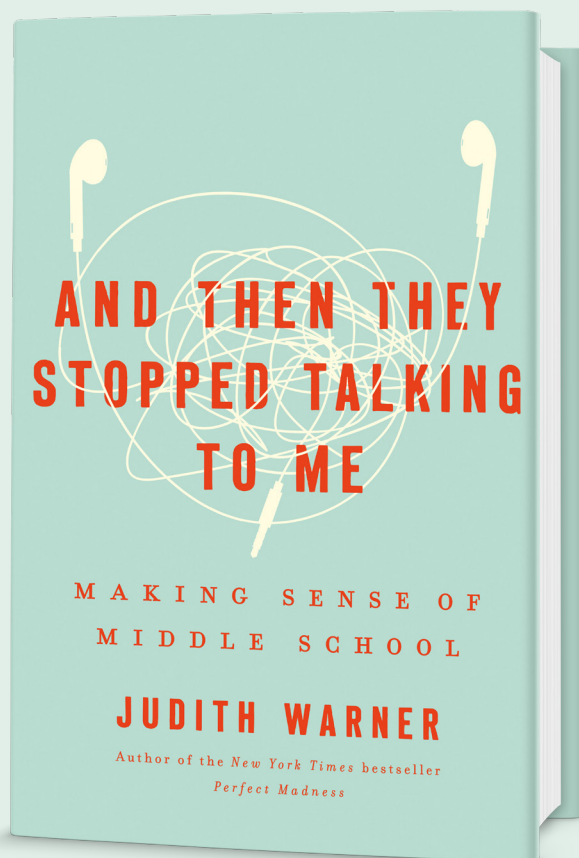
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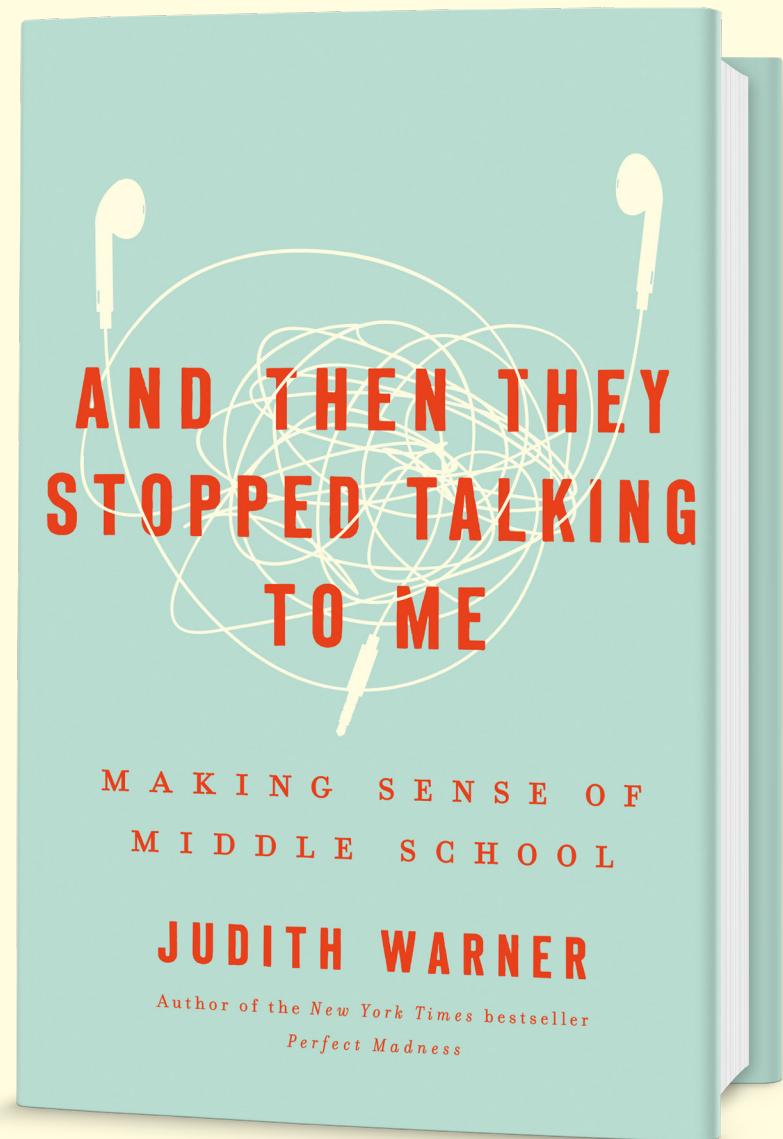
MAKING SENSE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL



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“Psychologists make no secret of what middle schoolers need in order to thrive: good relationships, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of being competent and skilled. Those are the keys to happiness at all ages, for that matter, and for lifelong resilience. I’ve spoken to many teachers, camp directors, counselors, and administrators who are eager for more opportunities to provide kids with those essential elements of well-being. Parents can teach their kids the skills they need to navigate the inevitable ups and downs, frictions and factions, of middle school life, too. Like educators, they can empower them to start to solve their problems productively by themselves and find their way toward better friendships.”

—from **AND THEN THEY STOPPED TALKING TO ME**, Chapter 8



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In *And Then They Stopped Talking To Me*, Judith Warner has written a powerful critique as well as a call to action that can be used as a basis for an enlightened new approach to this formative period in our own and our children’s lives. It answers many questions—and raises more. By helping adults come to terms with some of their more difficult memories, it aims to make it easier for them to access “the keys to happiness,” and pass them down to middle school-age kids. We hope that you will find the prompts in this guide, divided by topic, interesting and useful for discussion—and that they will help all the former middle schoolers among us gain a more nuanced understanding of who we were in early adolescence, and who we are today.

QUESTIONS BY TOPIC

1. “Middle school is brutal.”; just about anyone will likely tell you “it was the worst time in their life.” How much does this tally with your own middle school or junior high experience or with that of any current or recent middle-schoolers in your life? Do you look back at yourself and see a “mean girl” (or boy), a “bully” or victim—or some combination of all the above? Or do you remember a basically happy period?
2. “People’s middle school stories . . . very often have a disproportionate impact on the narratives of self that they carry through adulthood.” Do you feel like you started to become who you now are during your middle school period? Why—and in what ways?
3. Judith Warner mentions fictional depictions of difficult or sensitive young adolescents past and present: Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, for example, or Kayla in the movie *Eighth Grade*. What other famous cultural portraits can you think of? Which ones, if any, have had an impact on you? Do those you encountered at a younger age have the same resonance for you today? And, in retrospect, are they more about kids, or about the adults who created them?

1. In 1904, the pioneering psychologist G. Stanley Hall popularized the notion of adolescence as a special and unique phase of life, describing it in part as a “kind of repressed insanity.” Do you agree? From your experience and reading of this book, what factors do you think are the most important in making this such a “crazy” period in life? How much of what we believe about middle schoolers is real and how much is myth?
2. At the beginning of the twentieth century, idealistic education reformers argued that twelve- to fourteen-year-olds were at an age of “exciting potential,” and that the grades that would soon come to be known as junior high school were the ideal time for these kids to use their “strengthened powers of judgement” to develop knowledge and personal virtue. Do these ideas ring true for you? If so, why hasn’t middle school ever lived up to its potential?
3. Perhaps most disappointing of all for idealistic educators was that junior high schoolers didn’t end up showing a penchant for “independent and original thinking,” and instead they “policed one another’s behavior.” According to Warner, what lies behind this conformist urge?

1. The book discusses research showing that the adolescent brain enters a “second critical period” of growth—heightened perception (caused by sex hormones) as well as a lopsided development with the growth of the amygdala (responsible for emotion) outpacing the frontal lobes (responsible for control and decision-making). Does this picture of a hypersensitive battle between emotion and reason tally with your own experience?
2. Would it have been helpful to have known about the science of the adolescent brain during your own middle school years? Would other insights this book contains have made a difference for you? Which ones? And why? And what are the takeaways you think are the most important now for parents, teachers, and schools?
3. “The American obsession with adolescents and sex has long had adults chasing after demons that don’t exist.” How much do you think adult fears about the sex lives of young adolescents—from concerns over the health effects of the “solitary vice” of masturbation in the nineteenth century to present-day worries over the “verbal horrors” of sexting—reflect the preoccupations of adults rather than the actual problems of kids? Do adults ever underestimate the dangers facing this age group? Did they in the past?
4. In chapter 5, the book describes in detail how the “sexual revolution” produced a more sexualized world for 1970s adolescents, along with new and confusing “rules of engagement” that young teens tried to follow in an “adult world that was falling apart.” What were the effects on adolescents at that time and as the fallout continued in the 1980s? Now that those kids have grown up, do you think that memories of that time affect the way they parent their middle schoolers today?

1. The author notes that the early adolescent years have long been understood as a time of “non-stop self-monitoring,” during which we develop what the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley once called the “looking-glass self.” The psychologist David Elkind described it as “living life as a performance before an ‘imaginary audience’ of alternately jeering and cheering critics.” Does that tally with your own experience? Does this get better with age? Or do some people stay stuck in middle school all their lives?
2. Warner notes that, at least as far back as the 1930s, “popularity” was a junior high schooler obsession, and it looked very much like it still does today. “At the top of the heap were kids who were good-looking and had money. . . . At the bottom were those who were socially awkward or physically unattractive.” How much do you think the problems of middle school are the result of adolescents sorting themselves into a hierarchy? Are there any ways that schools could ameliorate this problem? Do you think the American practice of having schools exclusively for children aged twelve to fourteen make this problem worse?
3. Popularity “can be a risk factor for unhappiness.” From your reading and experience, would you say this is true? If so, how? Does it have to be?

1. “Today, though, it seems that it’s the kids who are often dragged along for the ride as they struggle to manage the crazy ups and downs of their middle school parents.” Warner depicts cases of parents who have become too involved in their children’s social lives—often taking sides or colluding with their children in disputes with others. From your reading and experience, what are the causes of this “boundary-slippage”? How can parents learn to recognize and limit it? Do you think schools can do anything to help?
2. Many parents say that other parents now are “competing through their kids,” making middle school parenthood feel like “seventh grade all over again.” Have you witnessed or experienced this? If so, what drives it? Do you think it’s worse in some schools than others—and is more prevalent among certain types of parents? What effects do think all this has on middle school kids?
3. “Better to let the school handle things.” Do you agree that parents should step back from the disputes their children are having with others in middle school, that “school business [is] school business”? In your opinion, are teachers and schools actually capable of handling that “business”?

1. What do you understand by the idea of parents “interviewing for pain” when discussing school with their children? Have you caught yourself doing this? Do you see others engaging in it? In what ways can parents “elevate, rather than lower, problematic conversations”? What benefits would this bring?
2. Warner describes a “winner-take-all society” that encourages ruthless “parenting to win,” arguing that toxic competitive attitudes are being passed on from adults to children—particularly among the upper-middle class. Do you agree? Has there been an accompanying diminishment of the “old-fashioned notion of [being] considerate to others”? What do you think might have caused these changes? Are there practical measures that could be taken to mitigate it among parents, within schools, and among kids?
3. Children’s mental health issues are left untreated for an average of “*eight* years before getting a proper diagnosis and starting treatment.” Are there ways that potentially damaging long-term problems could be better identified and even prevented in middle-school?
4. “Does a school really celebrate all sorts of students, even those the faculty doesn’t necessarily love?” How can schools live up to their own mottos and mission statements? How can teachers and administrators stand up to parents who might not get with the program?
5. When talking with a class of students, Warner tells a story about how she nursed a long-term resentment against a girl she felt had bullied her in middle school, but had completely forgotten—until she was in her 30s—that she herself had cruelly “dumped” two of her own eighth grade friends, concluding that, particularly where middle school is concerned, “*things are not always as they seem.*” Have you ever had a reality-shifting realization like this? Do you think sharing our own stories of adolescence—ones that show that our personal interpretations of events are often inaccurate—could help middle-schoolers “expand their thinking and feeling beyond the bounds of their own minds”? Why might this be valuable for them—and for us as adults?

“Middle school is a monstrous roller coaster ride. . . .

Judith Warner has written the book that every parent of every adolescent needs and has not been able to find. It not only helps us decipher what’s going on inside our middle schoolers’ hearts and minds, but also gives us concrete advice on what to do about it.”

—**LISA BELKIN**, creator of
THE MOTHERLODE BLOG
for *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

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