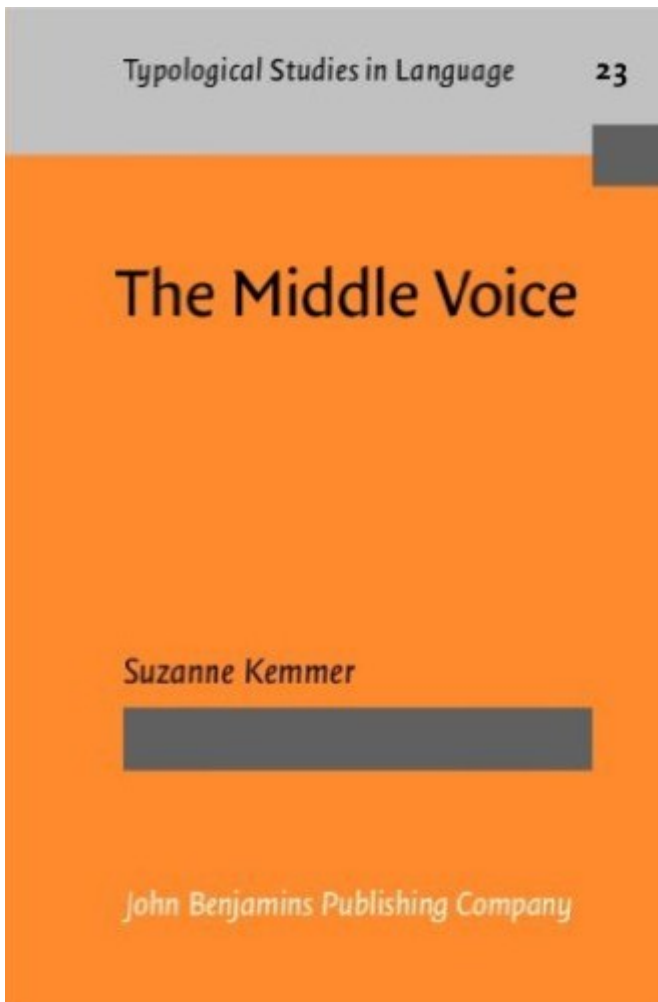


God, the implied agent

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue

In Review



The Middle Voice

Suzanne Kemmer

John Benjamins Publishing Company

The Century invited people to comment on their favorite book of the Bible and a book that has helped them appreciate or understand the biblical text. All of the responses are linked [here](#).

Linguist Suzanne Kemmer's book *The Middle Voice* gives me a framework for thinking about implied agents. Kemmer explains that sentences in the middle voice require an agent who is not identified but is necessary. English doesn't use the middle voice, but we do sometimes say things that have "middle markers." For example, just last week at a restaurant, I commented to my drinking companion that my bourbon drank smoothly. In that middle-esque clause, there is an unmentioned but entailed agent. Someone has to sip the bourbon or it couldn't drink smoothly.

Kemmer's book shows me something about the book of Esther—in which God does not appear but might nonetheless be present. I have a vivid memory of a drawing I made at age eight of Esther's dramatis personae: Vashti, Mordecai, Haman, Ahasuerus, and the queen herself decked out in a crown made from a Hershey's Kiss wrapper. When I was a child I loved the book because it featured several savvy women. When I became an adult the book pleased me because God's not in it. The book opens onto the terrain of God's hiddenness.

Esther is a book for an activist: Esther proposes that if God is nowhere to be found, you must act on God's behalf. Yet the question remains: In Esther, is God hiding, or is God altogether absent? Suzanne Kemmer is not (as far as I can tell) setting out to be theological, but she helps me to think theologically. I now see that in Esther there is another agent at work, another agent vivifying the action, even though unnamed.