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ARTS & CULTURE

An Interview with Margaret Mazzantini on the Eve of Her Arrival in New York

BENEDETTA GRASSO (April 14, 2011)



The Italian writer represents Italy at the PEN World Voices Festival with her latest novel "Twice Born". i-Italy had a chance to sit down with her

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Writers of the world, unite! The **PEN World Voices Festival** is just around the corner (April 25-May 11). It is a cultural event, founded by the world's oldest international literary and human rights organization in which New York brings together voices from Israel to Nicaragua, from Russia to Korea.

The only Italian flag in this diverse group of more than a hundred writers, is carried by Margaret Mazzantini, an immensely popular writer in her home-country who has sold millions of copies and won the most important literary awards (**Premio Strega**, **Premio Grinzane Cavour**). Her latest works have become International bestsellers: *Don't Move* was turned into a feature film starring **Penelope Cruz** by her husband **Sergio Castellitto**, a prominent Italian actor and director.

Artistic genes are in her blood: her father was writer Carlo Mazzantini, her mother the Irish painter Anne Donnelly. Born in Dublin, Margaret moved to Italy as a child and now embodies Italy and represents it abroad in its truest form.

At the PEN Festival, Mrs Mazzantini is presenting her novel *Twice Born* (published in Italy in 2008 with the original title *Venuto al Mondo*). *Twice Born* is a compelling novel, one of those that keep you awake at night turning the pages and holding your breath. It's moving and intimate but it also takes you on a historical and political journey in the war-torn world of **ex-Yugoslavia** during the early 1990s.

The story moves back and forth between the present and the past: a mother, Gemma takes her 16-year-old son to **Sarajevo** for the first time where he was born and his father Diego died.

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We slowly start to grasp the love story between Gemma and Diego that changes as the city changes over ten years and when the siege of Sarajevo begins things don't look as rosy and hopeful as they did at first, as Gemma discovers she can't have children. To discover Pietro's story, how he came to life and the constant twists and turns, you have to read the book...

Margaret Mazzantini gave us an interview.

You have always been a multi-faceted artist, an actress, a writer, and a dramatist. It seems like in your personal and professional life cinema and literature always overlap. When you sit down to write, what inspires your creativity more? Do these different experiences help?

Well, first and foremost I'm a writer and a writer has to be in sync with his or her times, with contemporary art. Obviously all these experiences converge and definitely my years in the theater, not only acting, but analyzing different texts, have helped me.

More importantly, though, I observe. I'm an observer. There are writers who turn all their attention within, while I'm a writer who sits in front of an open window. I like how writing always manages to make you visualize things even if you're not familiar with them. I don't know if I would define my writing visual - possibly visual and visionary at the same time - but at the end of the day the greatness of an author is measured by the hidden intensity. It doesn't simply make you imagine new things, but it unties the most intimate nods and it becomes cathartic.

We need to be moved by books that tear down walls of incommunicability a lot of us have built today.

A book becomes a secret map and the story is a gift that a writer gives to the writers, you give them the themes you care more about.

A writer is a vision of the world.

How was *Twice Born* conceived?

The book had a long gestation period. It's always like that when you have a story that buzzes in your head for years and it's made of images you are not really conscious of.

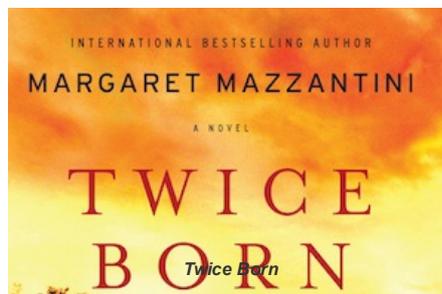
I've never written something just to sell or have it published.

The inspiration for this book started in 1991, when my first child, Pietro was born. It's not a coincidence, in fact, that I've called the character of the son in the book Pietro.

He was a little newborn baby that required all my attention and I would spend my days inside breastfeeding and on the TV there were the images of the war in Sarajevo. I can remember that mixture of feelings: a world that was falling apart, horrible images of refugees, war, corpses across the sea, a few miles from my house and that powerful hope of having given life.

You know, the war in Ex-Yugoslavia was one of the first wars that was televised almost live and we could follow it very closely, it had a real emotional impact on us.

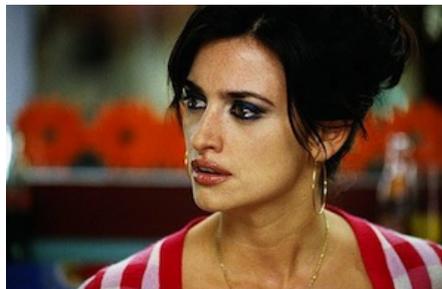
After several years I thought back on that time and told a story of a woman that defies every odd to have a child. She's slowly stripped of her previous ways of life to immerse herself in a love story that crumbles along with the Soviet Union, the Berlin Wall and ultimately the siege of Sarajevo becomes the siege of all the



Margaret Mazzantini and Sergio Castellitto



Sergio Castellitto



Penelope Cruz

characters in the story.

What makes this story International and in which ways does it represent Europe?

When the book came out in Italy I received lots of emails and letter of readers, psychologists, historians, volunteers, young people who thanked me for depicting a side of history that they either took part in and touched them deeply, or knew very little about and discovered for the first time. There are aspects of our European history that for the old continent are still very relevant and I'm not sure how well those are known in the States.

That being said, this is a story about a war, that could be any war; it's universal and the setting could even be defined a "metaphysical" one. War brings out the best and the worst of people because it's an extreme situation where all the masks fall down. There are "bad guys" and "heroes" but I chose to focus on the silent heroes.

Twice Born tells a story that could have happened anywhere, but at the same time captures twenty years of European history.

What are the aspects of this book that will resonate the most in America?

Once again I feel like a good novel has to be universal and great writers such as **Dostoyevsky** talk among themselves and to the audience despite the language barrier. Somehow even the stories are always the same: the struggle of being human, our temporary lives...these are all universal themes that will touch an American audience as well as any other audience.

i-Italy's readers all have a double passport, real or imaginary. You can relate to this having different national identities among your own family, and your book focuses on Italians in another land. Pietro learns more and more things about Sarajevo, a new world, and absorbs them. How do you think this theme plays out in your book?

It is absolutely true. It's a book about us and "the others", about different cultures and it's particularly relevant today given our global and multi-ethnic world to see how even one own's son can come from a different world. I think there is a focus on a cosmopolitan reality in the book on discovering who our "fathers" are.

Sarajevo changed a lot through the years and serves as a background to the love story. Do you have a special connection to that city?

I've been there and met truly amazing people that have showed me how strong they had to be during the war. In 1984 the Olympic torch was lit in Sarajevo starting an era of hope and struggles and the torch passes on and on from generation to generation, from the different "fathers" you will meet in the book, that Pietro will meet...and yet it still symbolizes that hope and a child born under the most terrible circumstances can still turn out to be a normal sweet teenager filled with ingenuity and a surprising innocence like any other teenager around the world.

What are your expectations for the PEN World Voices? Are you excited?

I'm definitely curious and excited. I have a lot of readers in Italy and an audience that I know really well so it's always different to be abroad. In America, translations and foreign writers occupy a smaller percentage of the literary market, but it will be an interesting and positive experience. I have great expectations about the book because I know that it's a story that is both universal and specific, a fable and a tranche de vie.

I'm also excited to meet other writers, and to embark on a small journey, although a writer only needs imagination to travel around the world...



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