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Twice Born: The Return of Margaret Mazzantini

by NICOLA ORICHUIA on Apr 21, 2011 • 12:23 pm

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It appears everything nowadays is produced quickly and consumed immediately. There is little time to sit back and think about the small and big stories that fill our everyday lives.

So for **Margaret Mazzantini** to take seven years off to write a book that she started thinking about in 1991 is in itself a miracle of perseverance. In a way, it is the same perseverance with which most of the characters in her books overcome great obstacles. It is the perseverance of Gemma, the protagonist of *"Twice Born"*, the 2008 book that is being published for the first time in the United States through [Penguin Group USA](#).

"'Twice Born' is a story of love and hate, of good and evil, of peace and war," says Mazzantini, in an exclusive interview with *Bostoniano.info*.

"It is the story of a hard-sought maternity. Gemma, the protagonist, is unable to have children, so she goes through great pains to have a child in so many different ways. Her personal battle is fought while in the background a much larger war takes place."

The backdrop is in fact Sarajevo and the [war in the former Yugoslavia](#), which rattled Europe in the early 1990s. It is a city Gemma returns to after many years, with her 16-year-old son Pietro.

Not coincidentally, Mazzantini's oldest of four children is also named Pietro, 16 at the time the book was published. "The idea for the book goes back to 1991, when the war broke out," says the author. "But then my first child was born and I didn't have the energy to write about such an important story. The contrast between the joy for my son and the misery of war just across the sea was a feeling I felt compelled to tell. I strongly felt that only through intimate stories, made of joy and sorrow, I would be able to convey the true meaning of overcoming tragedy."

Besides growing four children, in the 16 years between the birth of Pietro and the Italian version of *"Twice Born"* (*"Venuto al mondo"*), Mazzantini was also busy working at becoming one of the country's most renowned and respected authors.


Born in 1961 in Dublin, Ireland, Mazzantini followed her family around Europe for many years before settling with them in Tivoli, just outside Rome. After receiving her diploma at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Rome, she started an acting career that lasted almost 20 years. All throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Mazzantini played important theatrical roles, as well as parts in feature films and television dramas.

Her first shot at literature came in 1994, with the book *"Il catino di zinco"* (The zinc basin), winning the prestigious Selezione Campiello and Opera Prima Rapallo-Carige awards. But her breakthrough success came only several years later, with *"Non ti muovere"* (Don't move). The 2001 book won one of Italy's highest literary awards, the [Premio Strega](#), and has sold over 1.5 million copies around the world. Shortly after its publication, it also turned into a [feature film](#), starring Mazzantini's husband, the famous Italian actor and director [Sergio Castellitto](#), and [Penelope Cruz](#).




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Margaret Mazzantini returns with her new book, "Twice Born," published by Penguin. - Photo by ©Marco Rossi

Apparently, the only moment Mazzantini took a break was right at the top of her success. "Actually, the seven years between "Non ti muovere" and "Twice Born" were full of work," she says.

"Sometimes writing is a painful process. I tried writing different things, but was never satisfied. Then I closed myself in this book, and the writing was like an overflowing river." Washing ashore were memories of a trip she had taken to Sarajevo years earlier, right after the war. "I remember the great dignity I found in people. There were teenagers who had the same passions and dreams as our teenagers. It made me see war as two brothers fighting and trying to kill each other and their shared culture. It was a war in the heart of Europe, just a few miles away from our shores. In a sense, it was the first televised war that made its way into our houses. Despite all that, we seem to have removed this recent memory. Maybe it is because of television and the spread of reality TV, which blends truth and fiction until we are not able to distinguish them anymore."



The novel tells the story of two once reckless youngsters, Gemma and Diego, grown older in the aftermath of war. A story of a love as passionate and imperfect as only true love can be, but also the story of a hard-sought motherhood, thwarted and finally found, as well as the mysterious tale of a birth that defies both science and biology. The intimate journey of a man and woman toward parenthood becomes an epic struggle, a tale as stern as justice, as luminous as a miracle.

Despite its clear historical value, Mazzantini doesn't like to consider "Twice Born" as "historical fiction," a genre that has influenced many Italian authors since Alessandro Manzoni's "Promessi Sposi" was first published in 1827.

"I'm primarily a storyteller," she points out. "What I want to do is leave a testimony of personal stories that can heal and are able to untie knots in our spirits. I don't start writing thinking about the greater meaning or the final goal. It's the lives of people that interest me, with their highs and lows." Ultimately, she says, "a good book is one that can endure the passing of time because it speaks to people."

The human aspect of Mazzantini's work is a central point in both "Twice Born" and "Don't Move," as well as in her new novel "Nessuno si salva da solo" ("No one can save themselves alone").

"As a writer, I never consider the time I spend away from typing as time off. I love to spend time among people. It gives me a vision that is level with others, not above or below. It's a characteristic more common in the United States, I think, where authors are more used to mixing various worlds together. In Italy, authors sometimes tend to isolate themselves too much."

Luckily, Mazzantini chose to isolate herself only the time necessary to write "Twice Born" in her private studio in Rome.



Photo by ©Marco Rossi



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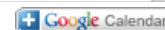


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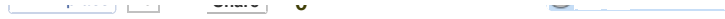
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