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The Irish Times - Saturday, July 16, 2011

A Story of Miss Sarajevo



[Margaret Mazzantini with her husband, Sergio Castellitto. Mazzantini's latest book is set in Sarajevo, partly during the war there in the 1990s.](#)

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PADDY AGNEW

MARGARET MAZZANTINI TELLS a curious but revealing little story about her blockbuster novel, *Venuto Al Mondo*, just published in English as *Twice Born*.

Much of this monumental tale is lived out in Sarajevo against the background of the horrendous four-year siege of the Bosnian capital between 1992 and 1996.

Following the book's publication, she received many letters and messages from people who had lived and worked through those horrors – social workers, priests, doctors and members of various non-governmental organisations, many of whom claimed to have relived aspects of their traumatic experience while reading the book. In particular, one gentle letter from a girl in Dubrovnik intrigued her.

The writer complimented Mazzantini on a scene in which she describes the protagonists eating a particular type of banana ice cream that was very popular in the pre-war Balkans. "I had almost completely forgotten about ice creams like that," she wrote. The point is that Mazzantini had no idea what sort of ice creams they ate in the old Yugoslavia, but her imagination and her desire to immerse herself in the Balkan reality had unwittingly hit on a small, very real item of the past.

Even if *Twice Born* certainly reads like an "inside Sarajevo" book, this is not a book about the Balkan war. In one sense, it is an intimate story about infertility and one woman's increasingly desperate desire for a child, set against

the background of besieged Sarajevo. In another sense, though, the book clearly recounts an important chapter in the past 20 years of European history.

“The writer is a radar of her time . . . and that war entered into all our lives,” says Mazzantini. “I remember 1991 very well, I had just had my first child , and I remember very well the gulf between my sense of optimism and hope, the sort of hope that is generated in anyone by the birth of a child, and the feelings I had when we began to see the first horrific images of this war.”

Mazzantini is clearly someone who does not let the grass grow under her feet. Nowadays she is established as an Italian bestseller – her first big success, *Non Ti Muovere (Don't Move)* in 2002, has sold more than two million copies, while her most recent novel, *Nessuno Si Salva Da Solo (Nobody Can Save Themselves Alone)*, has been on the bestseller list for the past six months. She also finds time to be a hands-on mother of four, ages five to 19, even cooking most family meals in the evening.

Being a busy mother has not stood between her and a full-time career, at first as an actor and then, much more successfully, as a writer. The Mazzantini oeuvre now contains 11 films and six books, many of which have won important literary prizes, such as the Premio Strega, won with *Non Ti Muovere*, which was later made into a successful film by her actor/director husband, Sergio Castellitto, and starred Castellitto and Penélope Cruz.

Even if Mazzantini says she is tired and dreams of being able to lie in bed until half eight in the morning (she is usually up and at it by 7am), she sure does not look it. On the day we meet in her Parioli, Rome studio, she is wearing a denim mini-skirt, with a blouse and gilet jacket outfit that would not look out of place on a fourth-year university student, rather than a mother of four who turns 50 in October. But then, Mazzantini is also very good looking.

Mazzantini is the Daughter of the novelist Carlo Mazzantini and the Irish painter Anne Donnelly, so the Irish would probably like to “lay claim” to her. Yet, although her bloodline might be 50 per cent Irish, her upbringing was very Italian, as is her literary vision, as evidenced by books such as *Non Ti Muovere* and *Nessuno Si Salva Da Solo*, which is not yet available in English.

Twice Born , however, is painted on a very broad canvas, a story that strikes universal chords. The fundamental themes – surrogate motherhood, love and betrayal and the war in former Yugoslavia – talk to everyone. Those of us who lived through the 1990s are unlikely ever to forget the sense of frustration, powerlessness and guilt prompted by a conflict right in the heart of Europe that threw up the ultimate horror of the July 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in which an estimated 8,000 Bosnian men and boys were executed, despite the presence in the area of Dutch UN forces.

The siege of Sarajevo itself, the longest siege in the history of modern warfare, saw 10,000 civilians killed as Serb forces blockaded the city, encircling it from the surrounding hills and bombing the hell out of the place. Srebrenica does not feature in *Twice Born* but the horrors of the Sarajevo siege, including snipers and mass rape, are all there.

“Remember, too, that this was a very televisual war, we would see fresh images of it every night in our homes . . . At times it seemed like a forgotten war, or a humanitarian crisis, and yet it was happening in the heart of Europe,” says Mazzantini. “People would say that it was a tribal war, an ethnic clash, a war between primitive violent peoples that has nothing to do with us. We sent off blankets and food packets, we did our charitable act but there was no real political will to understand or resolve the problem.

“And yet, this was happening just a few miles across the sea, happening to kids like us who wore Levis and a Swatch. Sarajevo, too, was an intellectually vibrant city with a lot of intercultural mixing and exchanges.”

For all that, there is a small glimmer of hope (and a dramatic twist) at the end of this traumatic tale. It is the hope represented by those Sarajevans, described in the book, who attempted to maintain a dignity throughout the bombings. There were those people who, despite desperate hunger, would put on some improvised make-up and their best coats and go to work, even if their office had long since been destroyed. Or there was the woman flower-seller who, despite having no flowers left to sell, would open up her stall every day, selling painted paper flowers.

Mazzantini says that if you visit Bosnia now, you realise just how difficult it is for that society to get back on its feet, 16 years later. Sarajevo is still very scarred, while the whole physiognomy of the place has changed; the communities have become much more ghettoised. In that sense, in the person of teenage son Pietro, the son who

reluctantly accompanies his mother back to Sarajevo 15 years later, the book carries a very clear didactic message about those “who forget history”.

On the way back from the airport on his return from Sarajevo, Pietro knowingly tells his father: “Europe did nothing . . . And they have arrested Karadzic now only because they have done a deal.” The same might have been written, more recently, about the Srebrenica butcher himself, general Ratko Mladic.

Not for the first time, a Mazzantini novel is destined for the cinema screen with *Twice Born* due to be filmed on location in Sarajevo, Bosnia, Croatia and Rome later this summer. Husband Sergio Castellitto again directs, with Penélope Cruz and Emile Hirsch already signed up for two of the main parts.

Mazzantini is very hopeful about the film, not only because it will be directed by Castellitto but also because it will star Cruz, with whom both she and Castellitto have developed a close friendship. Her role in the film-making stops after she has worked the 500-plus-page novel into a manageable script. At that point, it is all Castellitto’s baby: “But that is not a problem . . . We have the same vision of the world, the same moral and ethical vision and then we laugh at the same things, we get angry at the same things, we get moved by the same things.”

So where does Mazzantini go from here? Currently she is writing a short story for a new publisher, Einaudi. (Until now, she has been published by the Berlusconi house, Mondadori.) Does this mean that she is moving away from Italy’s most powerful man? Does it mean that we can one day expect a novel from her on the Berlusconi years?

“I’m not sure. In today’s Italy, we’re in a moment of a very low [cultural] tide. We have politicians on our TVs every night, they’re all quite glamorous, all have their press officers, all go to the same restaurants, they all follow the same look, but it’s just a circus in which the way you look matters more than anything else.”

If she does write that novel about the Berlusconi years, it sure will be a good read. As, indeed, is *Twice Born*.

Twice Born is out now (Oneworld, £12.99)

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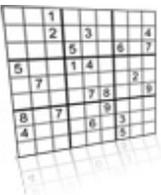
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