



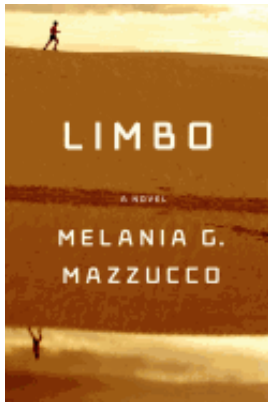
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★ **Limbo**

Melania G. Mazzucco, trans. from the Italian by Virginia Jewiss. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$28 (416p) ISBN 978-0-374-19198-6



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Mazzucco (*Vita*) dazzles in her latest novel, treating readers to a wonderfully paced love story set against a backdrop of modern warfare. On Christmas Eve, Sgt. Manuela Paris has returned to her home, a beach town outside of Rome, still recovering from serious injuries from an attack in the final days of her posting as a platoon leader in Afghanistan. The narrative smoothly alternates between Manuela at home with her family, which includes her vivacious sister Vanessa, and her first-person account of her time in the field. While Manuela copes with her injuries and the undetermined future of her military career (a career that had given her the “certainty of having a destiny” after an unhappy, defiant childhood), an encounter with a mysterious stranger, a solitary guest at the Bellavista Hotel whom she can observe from her window, jolts Manuela back to life in ways she never expected. Her training as a soldier means her assessments are clear-eyed and unsentimental, which only adds to their emotional weight. Mazzucco’s finely drawn portraits of soldiers are excellent, but her aim is broader: a love story for rational people, providing complex answers to universal questions about recovering from trauma. (Nov.)

Reviewed on: 09/01/2014
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Library Journal Reviews

September 1, 2014

Limbo

BYLINE: Lisa Rohrbaugh

SECTION: REVIEWS;

Fiction; Pg. 95 Vol. 139 No. 14

LENGTH: 237 words

Manuela Paris springs off the page of this new novel from Mazzucco (*Vita*), as the reader is drawn into the world of this fierce, determined young woman. Having decided in high school that she wants to join the Alpini regiment of the Italian Armed Forces, Manuela ends up in Afghanistan as a platoon sergeant, earning the respect and admiration of the men and women under her command. Manuela alone survives a devastating attack on the platoon by a body-borne IED and is sent home after several surgeries, her left leg and ankle bones held together with screws and titanium plates. She also has a bad case of post-traumatic stress disorder as well as survivor's guilt. Across the street from Manuela's family home in the beach resort town of Ladispoli, she sees a mysterious man, the only guest at a large hotel during the winter months. Manuela is drawn to the secretive Mattia, and they fall in love, but later she learns that she is not the only person living in limbo, waiting for a new chapter in her life to begin.

VERDICT With exceptional writing and a masterly grasp of storytelling, Mazzucco offers such a realistic portrayal of the war in Afghanistan and its aftermath that you would bet she was actually there, living through it all. An excellent translation, too.

—Lisa Rohrbaugh, Leetonia Community P.L., OH

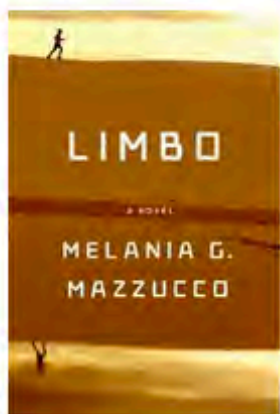
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KIRKUS REVIEW

A female Italian soldier returns from Afghanistan physically and psychologically wounded and unsure how to start over.

After years of proving her mettle in a sexist Italian military, Manuela was given the command of a platoon in Afghanistan and only barely survived when a suicide bomber attacked the opening of a girls school. As the novel opens, she's returned home to a small coastal resort town on Christmas Eve to recuperate, and her family—particularly her extroverted sister, Vanessa—is unsure how to help. No matter: Manuela's attention soon turns to Mattia, a mysterious man who's the sole occupant of a nearby hotel, and over the course of the following weeks, the two pursue an awkward romance. This novel, Mazzucco's second in English translation (*Vita*, 2005), runs on two alternating tracks: a third-person chronicle of Manuela's present-day recovery and her first-person recollection of her rise in the military and deployment. The latter thread is made of much stronger stuff, revealing Mazzucco's close research on soldiers and the war in Afghanistan, as well as Manuela's determination to overcome slights as a female leader to earn the respect of the men serving under her. When Mazzucco strains to suggest that everyday life is rife with similar calamities, she's on shakier ground; Vanessa's despairing attempt to find a morning-after pill doesn't have the same gravitas as a war wound, nor does Mattia's secret, revealed in the book's climax. The novel fills an important gap in addressing the lives of female soldiers (and non-American ones), but in its effort to make Manuela's tale symbolize multiple aspects of military and civilian life, Manuela herself gets a bit lost. Her PTSD, curiously, is treated as relatively minor in the face of holding a family together or finding true love.

An important addition to 21st-century war literature, if a flawed one.

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Limbo: A Novel

by **Melania G. Mazzucco**, translated from the Italian by **Virginia Jewiss**



When Manuela Paris returns to her seaside hometown of Ladispoli, Italy from her tour as a platoon commander in Afghanistan, “everyone wants to see her.” Her sister Vanessa tells the TV reporter it’s not like her sister to bask in the public’s attention, though, because “she hates pretentiousness and would never want people to think of her as a hero, or a victim—she was just doing her job, like when a bricklayer falls off scaffolding, or a factory worker gets splashed by acid. She chose that life, she knew the risks, and she didn’t let the difficulties get to her, that’s why I think it makes sense to talk about Manuela Paris, because young Italian women today aren’t all bimbos with no brains or values who only think about money, they’re also people like my sister, who have dreams and ideals, and the courage to try and fulfill them.” In fact, nothing could sum up Manuela better.

Italian novelist Melania Mazzucco's previous work has won worldwide recognition; *Limbo* is her second novel to be translated into English. Alternating Manuela's first-person recollections of war with the story of her readjustment to life in Ladispoli, *Limbo* is an unconventional exploration of the toll of war—and its aftermath—on its combatants. Just doing her job, as Vanessa says, has left Manuela with the emotional scars of warfare—“*avoidance*” as her psychiatrist calls it, or, simply PTSD. That's in addition to physical injuries for which she still needs crutches. In the sections of the novel narrated on the frontlines, Manuela grapples daily with her commitment to the war and her authority as a female leading male soldiers. But back in Ladispoli, she goes through her days in a daze, particularly as she falls into a strange (“frivolous, immoral, deplorable,” she chides herself) affair with a mysterious man named Mattia.

Limbo's efforts to weave the struggles of a soldier with surreal love story—as well as the story of the kind of ordinary but deep love that binds sisters through life and soldiers on the battlefield—are admirable, even if they fail to fully cohere. What's remarkable about *Limbo*, though, is the dreaminess it brings to a story of war's brutality and the defiance with which it upends the conventions that have come to define the war stories of our time.

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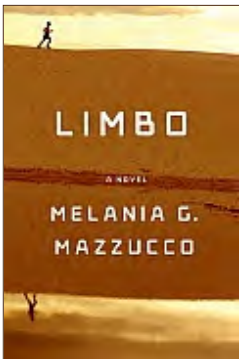
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Limbo by Melania G. Mazzucco, translated by Virginia Jewiss



Survivor's guilt is one of war's invisible scars. On the field of battle death feels random, perhaps due to the chaos of war or the certainty that there will be casualties among otherwise healthy, young men and women. War's cruel assignation between victims and survivors is the subject of Italian writer Melania G. Mazzucco's novel [Limbo](#), in which an Italian army sergeant, Manuela, struggles to understand why she survived an explosion in Afghanistan that killed five men from her platoon.

In the novel's opening pages, Manuela is released from the hospital and returns to convalesce at her family's home on the coast of Italy. Her leg and mind are crippled from the explosion. During her convalescence Manuela falls in love with Mattia, an elusive stranger who is living at the seaside hotel across the street. Mattia, too, is a troubled survivor; he was forced to walk away from his life and change identity after testifying against a man with connections to the mob.

As part of her healing process, Manuela works out a theory of why she survived the explosion: her course was predetermined -- to die with the others in the explosion -- but by virtue of a few last minute, unconscious acts she created a divergence from the innumerable and uncontrollable events that were converging to result in her death. In discussing a war that took place two hundred years before Manuela's deployment to Afghanistan -- Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 -- Leo Tolstoy likewise asserted in his epilogue to [War and Peace](#) that the combined decisions and actions of many individuals, when taken together, create inevitable outcomes. And

Tolstoy criticized historians for attributing events, like the outcome of a battle, to the act of any great man. Although she does not refer to him by name, Mazzucco gives another conspicuous nod to Tolstoy when Manuela tells the mother of a deceased fellow soldier:

[I]ndividuals don't make history; certainly not an Alpino corporal, not even the brigade general or a minister, or the president of a country. History is something beyond the intentions and aspirations of individuals; it's more like the tide. You can be part of it, but you can't stop or guide it.

Mazzucco uses an engaging and approachable narrative style to tell Manuela's and Mattia's stories. Manuela's character is fully developed; her motivation for joining the military and the emotional impact of her experiences in Afghanistan feel authentic, especially the closeness that develops among the soldiers with whom she shares the struggle of living in harsh conditions and the vulnerability of being surrounded by unidentified enemies. Mazzucco's writing is especially strong and avoids cliché when she describes life at the front and the difficulties that Manuela, as a female soldier, must overcome to earn and maintain respect.

However, it is a challenge to empathize with Mattia, and this makes Mazzucco's portrayal of his love affair with Manuela unsatisfying. Mattia's life in a witness protection program is removed from everyday life, and his calculating nature brings to question whether he truly could feel affection for someone as physically and psychologically shattered as Manuela. It is hard to believe that so soon after her trauma Manuela could trust and establish an intimate relationship with someone like Mattia.

Fortunately, it is Manuela's need to work out why she survived and how this need both retards and accelerates her recovery, rather than the love story, that provides the narrative momentum for this novel. Manuela and Mattia refer to themselves as "the walking dead" and the "living dead." Each had a near-death experience, and the inexplicableness of their survival creates the feeling that they exist in an intermediate state, not fully alive and not dead -- in limbo. But on any given day, at any point in time, each of us sits at some unknowable point on the continuum between life and death. Being in limbo is a necessary fact of the human condition. It is a credit to Mazzucco that she does not tidy all of the loose ends at the novel's conclusion -- a validation that, like each of us, Manuela and Mattia, in some sense, will remain in limbo.

Limbo by Melania G. Mazzucco, translated by Virginia Jewiss
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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