

TWICE BORN

By [Margaret Mazzantini](#) (</search/?q=Margaret%20Mazzantini>) (Author)

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The siege of Sarajevo is both subject and backdrop in this multilayered love story from Italian Mazzantini (*Don't Move*, 2004, etc.).

Gemma leaves her comfortable apartment in Rome (and her understanding husband Giuliano) to visit Sarajevo with her son Pietro because an exhibit commemorating the siege will include photographs by Pietro's father Diego. Sixteen years earlier, Gemma escaped war-torn Sarajevo with infant Pietro while Diego remained behind and later died. Now as middle-aged Gemma uses the visit to repair her relationship with Pietro, whose extreme adolescent disaffection has unnerved her, she also confronts her youthful past. Graduate student Gemma first met and fell in love with Diego, a bohemian photographer from Genoa, while visiting Sarajevo in the 1980s. Poet and Sarajevo tourist guide Gojko, himself more than half in love with Gemma, threw the two together. After many upheavals, including Gemma's marriage and divorce from a conventional Roman businessman, the two lovers found passionate, if temporary happiness. They desperately wanted children, but Gemma learned she could not conceive, and Diego's police record ruled out adoption as an option. They decided to look for a surrogate. While they were back in Sarajevo on what they thought would be a vacation, Gojko put them in touch with a young musician named Aska who wanted money to escape. Unfortunately, the unrest was beginning by then and the doctor they paid to implant the eggs disappeared. Gemma pushed Diego and Aska to conceive "naturally" but then was besieged by guilt and jealousy—just as Sarajevo was besieged and torn apart; Mazzantini brings the Bosnian civil war to violent life. Looking back, Gemma still wonders if she exchanged Diego for her baby. Only now, learning the truth of Pietro's conception, does she begin to understand the full magnitude of loss that occurred, and the horror as well as the redemptive power of love.

Too bad the overly packed novel's repetitiveness may lose some readers because Mazzantini's depictions of love, maternal and romantic, are powerfully raw.

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