



# Vita: A Novel

By Melania G. Mazzucco

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In April 1903, the steamship *Republic* spills more than two thousand immigrants onto Ellis Island. Among them are Diamante, age twelve, and Vita, nine, sent by their poor families in southern Italy to make their way in America. Amid the chaos and splendor of New York, the misery and criminality of Little Italy, and the shady tenants of Vita's father's decrepit Prince Street boarding house, Diamante and Vita struggle to survive, to create a new life, and to become American. From journeys west in search of work to journeys back to Italy in search of their roots, to Vita's son's encounter with his mother's home town while serving as an army captain in World War II, *Vita* touches on every aspect of the heartbreaking and inspiring immigrant story.

The award-winning Italian author Melania G. Mazzucco weaves her own family history into a great American novel of the immigrant experience. A sweeping tale of discovery, love, and loss, *Vita* is a passionate blend of biography and autobiography, of fantasy and fiction.

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## **Vita: A Novel** By Melania G. Mazzucco Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

*Starred Review.* Inspired storytelling drives this fictionalized narrative, which follows the Italian author's family to 1903 Ellis Island, where 12-year-old Diamante Mazzucco and his cousin Vita, age nine, evolve into star-crossed lovers striving to fulfill their destinies. Earning their keep in the squalid boardinghouse run by Vita's father, the two (along with other relatives) are more or less confined to Prince Street in Manhattan, where they are subject to a horrifying array of abuses and privations. Deeply in love with Vita by the time he is 16 and determined to earn enough to marry her, Diamante signs on with a railroad building crew and unwittingly begins four years of involuntary servitude under conditions that Mazzucco describes in unsparing detail; this underrepresented corner of the East Coast immigrant experience feels as fresh here as it is brutal. Vita, meanwhile, survives three years in reform school and betrayal by a man who seduces her. The narrative throughout is lively, deeply affecting and complex, involving dozens of striving minor characters, some of whom turn to crime. Four-time novelist Mazzucco also interjects nonfiction chapters that relate her search for family members in Italy and the U.S., adding a resonant sleuthing element that further distinguishes this literary take on early-20th-century Italian-America and enduring love. (Sept.)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Mazzucco's intermittently commanding and moving epic about the Italian immigrant experience tells the story of two children from a rural village in southern Italy amid the fetid slums of New York, circa 1903. Diamante, aged twelve, is the author's paternal grandfather, and Mazzucco mixes fact with fiction in an attempt to imagine the life of his nine-year-old cousin Vita, a girl "with a great mass of dark hair and deep dark eyes." Some of the more factual sections flag (such as those describing the Italian campaign in the Second World War), but in the early, imaginative parts the narrative is full of pungent fictional details, like Vita in her boarding house making artificial flowers, and Diamante loading bodies on a cart at a funeral parlor and measuring them for coffins.

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From [Booklist](#)

In this long but heartfelt novel, Mazzucco tells the story of 12-year-old Diamante and 9-year-old Vita, who make the arduous journey from Italy to Ellis Island in 1903; their exhilarating, terrifying trip will be the source of a lifelong bond. They make their way to a squalid boardinghouse owned by Vita's gruff, irritable father, where they room with more than a dozen other impoverished immigrants. Vita cooks and cleans all day, while Diamante works long hours at odd jobs, making just enough to pay for his food. When the two increasingly turn to each other for comfort, Vita's father harshly intervenes, and Diamante leaves for Ohio, where he spends years engaged in backbreaking work. Vita, meanwhile, feisty and reckless, opens a restaurant and makes a fortune but longs for the unique connection she shared with her first love. Mazzucco won Italy's Strega Prize for this lavishly detailed novel, which also incorporates nonfiction chapters about her family history. She brings home the isolation and deprivation of the early immigrant experience in a highly accessible and inspirational story for historical fiction fans. *Joanne Wilkinson*

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