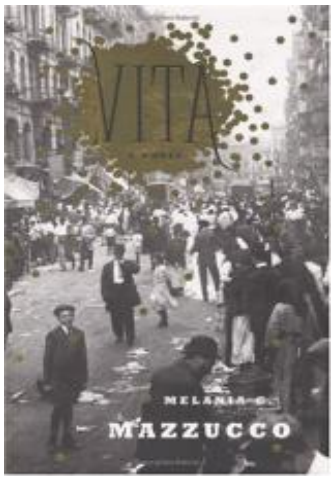
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Vita: A Novel

by Melania G. Mazzucco



About the Book

A family epic, a love story, and a fascinating new image of America at the dawn of the twentieth century, **Vita** conveys a lost world that sparks the imagination as well as the heart. Just as the novel's characters unlock one another's secrets, readers will find much to discover and discuss in each captivating chapter. This guide is designed to enhance the experience of reading groups and individuals in exploring **Vita**. We hope that the following questions will enrich your reading of Melania G. Mazzucco's extraordinary novel.

Discussion Guide

1. What is the effect of the novel's opening scene, in war-ravaged Tufo? What significance did it have for you once you reached the last chapter? How does the author's approach to the three timelines enhance her storytelling?

2. How would you characterize Vita's relationship with her brother, Nicola (Coca-Cola)? Are family ties meaningful in Agnello's house?

3. When the narrator apprehensively makes her first trip to the United States at age thirty, what does she discover? Does Little Italy retain any traces of Vita and Diamante's experience when they arrived there nearly one hundred years before? What compels the narrator (and all genealogists) to dig for details about ancestry?

4. How does Vita's Prince Street community compare to other immigrant neighborhoods featured in fiction? What events are unique to the Italian-American immigrant experience?

5. Why does Diamante lie to his parents in his letters home? What consequences would there have been had they known the truth? How is he affected by this separation from them? Throughout her life, how is Vita affected by living so far away from her mother?

6. How do the author's descriptions of the Black Hand differ from stereotypes about organized crime? Is Vita more immune to intimidation than her father was?

7. Does Lena's Circassian ancestry make her an outsider in the boarding house? How do the residents feel about literacy and language, including Lena's habit of speaking Neapolitan with Lebanese words mixed in?

8. What do you make of the tragedies involving Lena, including the "burial" of Baby and the fire ignited by Vita's wrath? Is Vita's presence a sort of curse in Lena's life? Does Vita's supernatural gift wane as she grows older, or does she simply get better at controlling it?

9. What prevents Diamante from attaining financial success despite his phenomenal ability to survive? Is he gullible, or is poverty his fate? Is his passage back to Italy yet another trap? Or does leaving America ultimately free him?

10. Part Two, "The Road Home," begins with a description of Dy's entry into military service, despite a Princeton record that could have taken him on a far more lucrative career path. What keeps him from feeling pride in his ancestry? How does his nationalism compare to that of his uncle Nicola, who died in the previous world war?

11. How do you interpret the story of "The Son of the Lady Tree," which Vita frequently recounts to Dy?

12. Diamante and Vita become separated even after passing through Ellis Island. Were they meant to be apart? Are Diamante's reasons for postponing their relationship rational? Would their love have survived had they not spent so many years envisioning a reunion? Does Diamante make "the path of their existence diverge [and] those tracks welded together forever come apart," as the closing lines of "The Wreck of *The Republic*" suggest?

13. Melania G. Mazzucco drew heavily on her own genealogical research to create **Vita**. How were you affected by the inclusion of photographs, reports, and other mementos in a novel? Is any novel purely fiction?

14. Whose dreams are realized in the novel? Do Vita and Geremia join the mindset of railroad and coal-mining robber barons when they venture into real estate? What does it take for Geremia to rise above the rubble of his blue-collar roots?

15. One of Diamante's first observations about his uncle Agnello's house is that Rocco acknowledges him, and is one of the few tenants to do so in a respectful way. Is Rocco entirely calculating, as when he buys guidebooks to help him win a respectable bride? Does he ever act out of pure compassion?

16. Discuss "Vita" as the title of the novel and as the name of its heroine. How do the characters define vitality? What does it take for them to live fully? How would you summarize their lives? Are love and life synonyms in the novel?

17. The celebrities Enrico Caruso and Charlie Chaplin make cameo appearances in the novel, taking the characters' futures in unexpected directions. In what way do those stark images of famous entertainers contribute to **Vita**'s tone?

18. Why is Diamante unable to accept Dy's visit? What keeps him from accepting Vita's final offer of love? Is Diamante's death, so soon after her visit, a coincidence?

19. How does twenty-first-century immigration to America compare to the Ellis Island experience? Do today's immigrant neighborhoods resemble the streets Vita first encountered here? What legends exist in your family's immigration stories?

Author Bio

Melania G. Mazzucco was born in Rome in 1966. She earned a degree in Italian literature from the University of Rome ?La Sapienza? and a degree in cinema from the Experimental Center for Cinematography. In addition to her four novels, she has written award-winning works for the cinema, theater, and radio. **Vita** was awarded the 2003 Strega Prize, Italy's leading literary award.

Critical Praise

"**Vita** is a fabulous book. Mazzucco digs in her memory and her family history . . . to recount the colossal and painful journey of those Italians who emigrated to America, driven by a dream of prosperity they were denied at home."

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