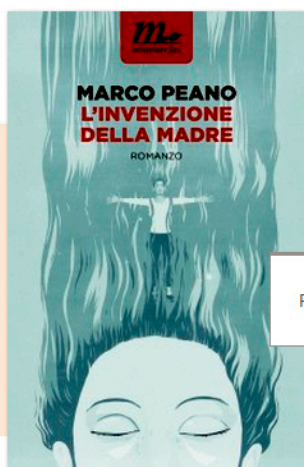


## Reading Reports



### Marco Peano *L'Invenzione della Madre*

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#### In Brief

Mattia lives in a small country town; he has a cat and a girlfriend; he works as a clerk in a video rental store (*L'Invenzione della Madre* is set at the beginning of the new millennium, when such businesses still existed in Italy); and his mother is dying of cancer. Peano's largely autobiographical book is constructed, then, around this black hole in Mattia's life—his mother's illness and the suffering of those around her. Mattia recounts, sparing nothing, his mother's progressive physical decline, the long hours spent in hospital waiting rooms, and the care he and his father provide to his mother when it is clear nothing more can be done for her and she is released to finish out her days in a room in their home.

But *L'Invenzione della Madre* also constitutes a kind of document, a ledger of suffering. Crushed by grief and—as his mother's illness becomes more savage—by the awareness that their time together is dwindling, Mattia is forced to redefine his relationships with others in terms of new priorities: it is to his mother that he must devote himself, and he seizes every moment to be with her, resurrecting images and events from his memory that keep her alive and healthy, as if she were never to leave him. In the maelstrom of this family drama, whatever is unconnected to Mattia's relationship with his mother ceases to have power over him. What emerges, somewhat between the lines, is a kind of coming-of-age story as Mattia, faced with his experience of pain and loss, ultimately reaches manhood.

#### Characters

Mattia, the only named character, is around twenty-five and is struggling to enter adulthood. His eternal adolescence is violently shaken by the tragedy that befalls his family and which pushes him to reconsider the question of how much time he has wasted. Mattia's father remains a shadowy figure, though there is great dignity in his demonstration of personal strength. Mattia's girlfriend, caught up despite herself in the enormity of what is happening in Mattia's life, does her best to remain at his side, accepting his silences and his manias. Finally, the reader follows every step in the decline of Mattia's mother toward death, witnessing her escalating loss of contact with the world and with those who care for her.

#### Language and Style

Written largely in the present tense—as if, at least in his use of language, Peano hoped to keep alive something that no longer existed—the book is a series of fragments and brief chapters that focus on significant moments in the story. Peano's tone is sober, and he reduces description to the bare minimum—his way of avoiding the trap of sentimentality. The subject matter, in any case, is sufficiently eloquent on its own, and a more elaborate or ornate prose would have rendered the book excessive.

#### In My View

Peano presents the mother and son relationship in *L'Invenzione della Madre* as though it were the first, most archetypal of love stories. Having realized that he cannot save his mother's life and cause her to stay, Mattia decides that he will keep her within him, saving instead her memory and rebuilding his own life in light of their relationship. Surprisingly enough, and the subject matter notwithstanding, this is a book that lends itself to being read rather quickly (the short chapters help as well). Rarely in recent Italian literature have we witnessed intellectual honesty like Peano's. He does not linger over morbid details, and he spares the reader the most harrowing scenes (though a mere hint is often sufficient), describing his grief and mourning with restraint and simplicity. The delicacy of this underlying tone allows Mattia's mother's illness to

#### Why this Work Merits a Translation

*L'Invenzione della Madre* is in part a novel and in part a work of fictionalized memoir. Even for those who do not know the author's story, it will be clear that much of the book reflects his personal experience. That approach aligns Peano's book with others in which the process of working through family grief forms the nucleus of the narration: Philippe Forest's *Tous les enfants sauf un*, for example, in which a father describes the death of his baby daughter; Donald Antrim's *The Afterlife: A Memoir* in which Antrim comes to terms with his mother's slow decline toward death and enacts his own attempt to return to the land of the living following his bereavement (Peano quotes Antrim in an epigraph); "The Aquarium," from Aleksandr Hemon's *The Book of My Lives*, in which the author describes the loss of his daughter; and a classic of the genre, *This Wild Darkness: The Story of My Death*, Harold Brodkey's ruthless story of his own death from AIDS. In short, contemporary literature includes a fairly substantial subgenre of works that focus on family tragedies as they are seen, so to speak, from within. As in the examples above, Peano's book takes a private drama and renders it accessible to a wide and inclusive public.

#### Critical Commentary

*A book that is both tender and tough. Tender because it explores the emotions of a son—no longer a child but not yet an adult, either—whose life has come to revolve around his mother's cancer diagnosis, his caretaking duties, experiences of hope and self-deception, his relationship with his father. And tough because Peano spares the reader nothing of that suffering body.*

Valeria Parrella, *Grazia*

*An exquisite book*

Luca Romano, *Huffington Post*

Marco Peano was born in Turin in 1979 and today serves as fiction editor for Einaudi. *L'Invenzione della Madre* is his first book.

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**Marco Peano**  
***L'invenzione della madre***

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## **Wigs and Orangeade**

One afternoon, a few years earlier but after the surgery on her cerebellum, his mother received a visit from one of her friends. The two women went outside to sit and chat. The summer of 2003 was especially warm, and Mattia's mother allowed herself short walks in the garden. When she did, she was forced to wear a straw hat because radiation therapy had left the skin on her head hypersensitive to the sun. She could stay outside—and she loved to rest in the shadow of a dogwood—as long as she was properly covered and didn't exhaust herself.

The friend was smiling and saying she never expected to find his mother looking so well; she talked about how impossible it seemed when they'd seen each other last, not even a month ago in the hospital. And now: Look at you!

Mattia, meanwhile, playing the good host, was carrying out a tray with two glasses of orangeade for the women and some water flavored with mint for himself.

(Each time Mattia drinks a sip of cool water on a muggy day, and feels the liquid smoothly coating the walls of his throat, he understands that this is life: the water that descends into the dark recesses of his body to give new life to his cells. The opposite of alcohol, that is, which scratches the entire way down with its hooked claws, sweeping everything away with it.)

His mother cheerfully recounts the details of her recent surgery: the future seemed filled with hope; her disease could be defeated.

And as her friend listened and nodded, sipping her orangeade in which a cube of ice floated amiably, his mother suddenly turned to her son and asked him to go upstairs and bring back her wig so she could show it to her friend.

Mattia and his mother had bought the wig in a store downtown, but they'd had difficulty finding the right one. They'd first gone into a store called The Wig Ward, and the name alone was enough to put them on their guard.

The salesclerks, expounding upon the handcrafted quality of their products, emphasized the adjectives. Each one of their wigs was designed and made for *strictly personal* use, and the hair—they were quite intent on making this clear—came exclusively from only the most reliable individuals. As real as the hair on my head, said one young clerk. She featured a ginger-colored mane, a lock of which she twirled around one finger. (Mattia imagined that, to make clear the true excellence of their products, one of the clerks might suddenly whip off what seemed to be her real hair to reveal to the astonished clientele a completely bald pate.)

The staff of the Wig Ward seemed to know their business. They evaluated each client's facial symmetry and precise shade of skin tone (in their workshop they designed wigs made exclusively to order; the ones displayed in the shop window for the public to admire were only there for show). A specialist, after taking a photograph of Mattia's mother's head, sat at a computer, analyzing every eccentricity of her skull before drawing up an estimate.

After his mother's first breast surgery—the one in 1996—her hair hadn't fallen out, despite all predictions. Perhaps that meant the

doctors were wrong this time, too. Weren't they the ones who were constantly insisting that each case was unique? His mother had come to the wig store because she didn't want to be caught off guard. But perhaps it was, after all, an unnecessary precaution. Talking it over with Mattia, she became convinced there was no reason to spend so much money, and so the two of them thanked the salesclerks, gave their regards to the specialist with the estimate, and made their escape from the store.

Before heading back home, they stopped in a café for coffee and then window-shopped, arm-in-arm. At an earlier time, Mattia would have been ashamed, but now he felt fiercely proud to stroll the downtown alleyways with his mother at his side.

They had almost reached the car when they happened to find themselves, nearly by chance, standing before a shop (much more unassuming than the Wig Ward) whose front window displayed a variety of wigs at reasonable prices. With exaggerated haste, like a couple under pressure to procure a gift, they all but burst into the store. They chose a wig, his mother tried it on (attaching it to her hair, which was still thick), and, because they both seemed satisfied, they paid without a second thought. As they left the store, clutching a parcel that resembled the kind of bag the baker put bread in, they experienced a sense of relief.

The day had been perfect, a kind of treat that mother and son had presented to one another. They'd gone to the movies and, afterwards, decided to have supper in a restaurant. In the years since, Mattia had kept the movie ticket and the receipt from the restaurant folded in his wallet, a pocket-sized proof of happiness.

As they left the restaurant, they saw that the windshield on the car parked just behind theirs had been destroyed. The paving stone that had been used to smash the glass was still lying there on the dashboard, surrounded by pulverized shards of glass that twinkled beneath the light of the streetlamps. As they got into their car, his mother said, *That could have happened to us.*

Back at home, his mother had shut herself immediately in her bedroom; she was tired. Mattia's father was still out at a work supper, and Mattia called his girlfriend to tell her about their day, memorable as it was, in its way.

When he decided to go to bed, Mattia noticed that the light was still on in his parents' bedroom. He poked his head through the door and saw his mother, naked, standing before the mirror, the scars on her chest a silent denunciation of injustice. She was wearing the wig and nothing else, but the wig suggested nothing so little as harmony: rather, a wounded animal seemed to have deposited itself on her head. When she noticed her son standing motionless in the doorway, she tried to hold back a sob, and then she began to weep.

The next morning, Mattia had tossed the grotesque heap of fake hair into the trash. He called the Wig Ward to say that their specialist's estimate was more than acceptable and they should go ahead with the custom order, please, thank you very much.

Afterward the wig became, for Mattia's mother, an all-occasion headdress, a personal object—*strictly personal*, as they would have said at the Wig Ward—that she would nonchalantly slip on as the mood struck her, and when it was not in use, she hung it on a knob in the armoire as though it were a coat or a beret.

When Mattia handed the wig to his mother, she immediately put it on in front of her friend, the way she might have done thirty years earlier when she wanted to show one of her schoolmates her handsome new pair of shoes.

The friend had hurried to say that, yes, indeed, his mother looked wonderful in the wig, and in fact one would hardly even notice it was a wig.... Luckily, and much to Mattia's relief, his mother had taken the wig off then; he worried, if the friend's compliments went on much longer, that she'd end up telling his mother that the wig made her look even better than her real hair did. In fact, now that he thought of it, perhaps the friend should undergo a little radiation therapy herself so she could wear a wig just like it. (In any case, as soon as she was back at home, perhaps she'd finish the story of her visit by telling her husband, *That could have happened to us.*)

As his mother sat with the wig on her head, Mattia alone noticed that the glass with the orangeade had trembled for a moment in the friend's hand.