

Romanian novelist **Norman Manea** reviews *Blameless*, Italian author Claudio Magris's novel about truth and hatred, past and present.

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Truth for Our Time

In 2017, lies have become “products,” and mendacity has embedded itself into social, political, and even cultural life. The challenge for our time, then, is to find truth amid humanity's infinite complexities and contradictions.

AUG 25, 2017



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Claudio Magris, [Non luogo a procedere](#), Garzanti Libri, 2015 (English edition, [Blameless](#), Yale University Press, 2017)

VENICE – Claudio Magris is one of Italy's – indeed, Europe's – most graceful and compelling modern writers. He is the author of more than a hundred books, and has been awarded high literary honors in many countries. His novel *Blameless*, newly published in English, should not be interpreted as anticipating Donald Trump's presidency, because such a cosmopolitan and refined author would not wish to give Trump a first – let alone a second – thought. But, as Anne Milano Appel writes in her introductory note to this English translation, Magris is always “after the truth”; and truth is precisely what seems to have gone missing in an era in which Trump's election was possible.

Magris's literary fecundity makes classifying his work difficult, if not impossible. But even if his novels, stories, essays, and scholarly and journalistic writings do not share a single predominant theme, they are clearly concerned with the topic of identity, and the challenge of living with one's true self.

Indeed, Magris has explored truth and identity across different historical periods, territories, religions, and ideologies – domains that clash and mix with one another. He has conducted this search with lucidity and undaunted humanism at least since his 1977 book on Joseph Roth, *Lontano da dove* (*Away from Where*), his famous travelogue-*cum*-history *Danube*, his earlier novel *Microcosmi*, and in his daily journalism. In all of Magris's work, there is a deep spiritual commitment to truth and human solidarity. It is not by chance that, in a [recent conversation](#) with Appel, he singled out “love” as the crucial etymological component of “philology.”

A Lie of the Mind

Blameless has extraordinary energy, and like Magris's previous novel, *Blindly*, its narrative scope is vast, with settings ranging from Germany, Italy, Austria, and Yugoslavia, to Prague, Russia, and the United States. Magris even brings Paraguay and Bolivia into play with his ample cast of characters. Through it all, he addresses the challenge for truth when it must compete with a blitz-like invasion of political lies – old and new – into every aspect of life.

Blameless comprises many chapters, or “Rooms,” that keep the reader focused on a peculiar “War Museum for the Advent of Peace and the Disarming of History.” As the primary setting for the novel, the museum is a place for reckoning with the monstrosity of war – in this case, World War II – and the human weakness that emerges in its aftermath. More specifically, Magris focuses obsessively on the role of lies in perpetuating past wars and their consequences – cases when “the lie spread until it became true or was believed to be true by so many people.”



Of course, in our own time, lies have become valuable “products.” Reality is increasingly being manipulated through countless mass-media channels for news and fake news, and mendacity now has a stranglehold on political, social, and even cultural life. To understand the social and political consequences of this virulent infection, one need only read *TheNew York Times*'s [“definitive list”](#) of lies told by America's president.

The peculiar museum at the center of *Blameless* was established in the northeastern Italian city of Trieste by the novel's narrator, a lonely, eccentric, and unnamed collector. The collector died years earlier in a fire at the museum, which is being rebuilt and reconfigured by Luisa Kasika Brooks, a charming and devoted young curator of Jewish and African-American descent. Brooks is exhuming the past, we are told, so as not to allow “its atrocities to remain whitewashed, as the walls of the Risiera were.” The Risiera di San Sabba was an infamous Nazi death camp and crematorium in Trieste, where countless crimes were committed and then covered up.

Magris's "Museum of hatred" is host to a great variety of papers, objects, films, official and private documents, memoranda, and even "Electroencephalograms, electrocardiograms, EEGs and EKGs of hatred." The items are all mute witnesses to words: "the most available powerful weapon, overused and still in use in all places and periods."

The museum's "Red Room" reminds us of songs from a "troubled time ... that make you love life, generated by slaughter ... all those flowers from the manure of blood." Here Magris tells the story of Enrico Paolo Salem, an early Fascist bank and city manager, both circumcised and baptized, who found a clever way to defend himself against the Resistance at the end of the war: "I wore the Black Shirt, like everyone else, because it's dumb to pointlessly present yourself as a target ... Yes, it's true, on April 30 and May 1, 1945, I was negotiating with the Germans and then, on their behalf, with the Yugoslavs and two days later with the British and the Americans ... Then, too, even the Germans were gentlemen, it was a pleasure to negotiate with them. But go ask those Slovenians of San Pietro del Carso affiliated with the Osvobodilna Fronta ... and they will tell you how ... I saved the lives of many of them, convincing the Nazis that they were good people ... And in the end, in Trieste, it was to me that Major General Linkenbach capitulated and surrendered on May 2, he also gave me his jacket, which I like to wear every now and then when I receive someone."

Blameless is replete with ambiguities – of the moral and criminal kind; of what a survivor feels. They are encountered everywhere, from the electroencephalograms and electrocardiograms of lies to the Karst Plateau in Slovenia, where the Italians launched a mad and nearly suicidal offensive in 1915-1918. They are in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Lenin's works in the Casa del Popolo, as well as in a book by the great Czech botanist Alberto Vojtěch Frič, who brought a Chamacoco Indian from Paraguay to Prague. Frič was a cataloger of cacti, and he wanted to put one "under the ass of the Germans," whom he regarded as "the evil cactus that is spreading throughout Europe" – "*Cactus marcescens Hitler*, Sieg heil."

Other items in the museum include "loads of uniforms, heaps of movie film, reams of military documents," anonymous letters, denunciations, vendettas, and copies of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *Mein Kampf*. There is a "photo from the [collector's] honeymoon, dated October 1, 1933," but also various instruments of war, such as a Chamacoco-built catapult for launching sundried mud balls, a *Panzerabwehrkanone*, an AB41 – the armored Italian Autoblinda used by the Wehrmacht in the Balkans and Northern Italy – and a Saint Etienne machine gun. And in addition to all kinds of penholders, bottles of ink, brushes, and scrolls of papyrus and parchment is an Olivetti typewriter with a page warning that, "The pen kills more than the sword."

In other rooms are pages from the collector's diaries (dated April 30 to May 2, 1945), photos, computers, and a pair of shoes that had belonged to a Slovenian partisan. In Room 19, a printed advertisement – "Long LIVE the Fuhrer" – sits near a sword that belonged to a soldier stationed under Archduke Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico. A Hungarian banknote *circa* 1946 sits near a wooden Aztec weapon from the third century.

The rooms go on and on, and include miscellany such as a posthumously awarded medal for one Commissioner Collotti, who was known for having tortured an anti-Fascist captive with electrical cords – one end on his genitals, the other in his mouth. Near that is a video from the tenth anniversary of the collector's death. Was he "a great scholar, a fraud, an impostor, a great hallucinator?" one character asks.

Confronting History

The museum is fascinating and frightening, full of trophies and triumph. According to the narrator, speaking from his sarcastic solitude after death, it is also “full of *eros*, but *eros* in armor, without flesh, harmless.” For him, it is a “real fallout shelter, keeping out the devastating power of love.” He muses that the “Hiroshima contraption” should be adorned with the word “Love,” and left “outside to stand watch in front of the Museum’s gate.”

In a telling vignette, Magris describes the “Porter’s lodge on Via Combi.” The porter represents an average citizen – one of the complicit “masses.” He may or may not have been “one of those who, in the room next to the chimney, had hidden behind the door and when the detainee was shoved inside, bashed his head in with a club ...” The porter delivers a monologue that revels in opportunism, and stands as an expressive summary of ambiguous retrospection generally:

“The Risiera, what Risiera? The Germans, me with the Germans? But I was their captive, taken prisoner in Russia and then brought to Germany and liberated by the Americans! I arrived in Trieste in ’46, I even have a document from the police. I was a laborer in Via Madonnina, then the British even took me into the civilian police force. No, she’s the porter, she’s my wife. I’m retired. Yes, earlier I was also Commendator Zanchi’s driver. A fine gentleman, that man, he paid well and gave generous tips, besides room and board ... Did I know him before? When, before, since I came here in ’46? A gas smell? No, sir, don’t worry, you’re not used to the sour smell of borscht. I’m one who taught my wife to make our Ukrainian borscht, now she can make it quite well, better than your typical *jota* ...”

Two especially acute chapters in *Blameless* focus on historical-fictional characters who are emblematic of this dyspeptic time. The first is Private Otto Schimek, who, according to the gold plaque on his Polish gravestone, was executed by the Wehrmacht for refusing to fire on the civilian population of Poland. This “hero’s” story was later revealed to be a fake. In reality, Schimek was a childish, vulnerable soldier who had defected from the German Army. But Austrians and Poles needed patriotic legends, and they used Schimek’s story for political and psychological manipulation long after the war had ended. Some still cling to it even today, and insist that attempts to debunk it are part of a Jewish conspiracy against the heroism of the past. Then there is Luisa de Navarrete, who is presented in *Blameless* – and in the museum – as an ancestor to Luisa, the current curator. Navarrete is a semi-fictional witness of the massacres carried out by Spaniards in the Antilles in the sixteenth century. A black freedwoman who was born in Puerto Rico, she returns from four years of captivity on the island of Dominica with memories and stories about that place, and about herself. But when she gets home, she is 23 years old and wants to be a good wife and a good Christian, having forgotten the children she left behind in the forest with their father and tribe. She thus enters into legend as the captive queen of the Caribbean who was worshiped by her jailers, and as a symbol of the banality of the domestic female condition.

Truth in the Shadows

In such a comprehensive narrative about war and peace, past and present, and the deep and disturbing connections and disconnections between humans and humanness, “shadows” play a crucial role. When reading *Blameless*, it is common to encounter lines such as “the proposition of a pimp in the shadows”; “fate is the shadow that swallows those who arrive”; and so forth. While thinking about her ancestors, Luisa envisions them “crowded in the shadow of the temple on Friday evenings, in the shadow that echoed with not only the songs of the living but also the voices that no king of Babylon and no pharaoh had been able to silence.”

There are many, perhaps too many, fascinating figures and tales in this vast epic. But Luisa and her exotic, deceased boss are the two characters present throughout. Luisa’s Jewish-Italian and

African-American lineage speaks to a family history marked by fear, persecution, and adjustments. Her mother, Sarah, married an African-American Army officer. Her grandmother Deborah became a police informant in order to save her family; but she was deported by the Italian regime, and murdered at Auschwitz. Magris describes Luisa as “beautiful and slender ... a snail’s trail”; and her “still dark hair” as a “legacy of two exiles, centuries-old, who had merged in her after crossing the desert and great sea.”

After the collector’s death, Luisa starts to reconstruct the museum archive, and remembers him with fresh nostalgia and regret. She is depressed by her own adventures in love and marriage, and becomes estranged from her husband, Carlo, whose death gives rise to a sad indifference. “She let the years slip by in a kind of suspension, doubly unfaithful to both of her progenitors,” Magris writes. She accepts the routine of sleep “close by yet far” from whatever male body is beside her.

In the novel’s [Author Note](#), Magris tells us that his fascinating but fictional narrator-collector “was liberally inspired by an individual of considerable prominence who actually existed, Professor Diego de Henriques, a brilliant, uncompromising Triestine of vast culture and fierce passion.” But he is quick to point out that Henriques, “the tragic collector from Trieste, is not in any way portrayed in the book.” He is ultimately an invention, “as is the character of the woman who, in the novel, is assigned to plan the Museum.”

In one of the book’s most wonderful scenes – a marvelous page of literature – the collector takes a short break, and evades his daily routine by stopping off in a bar, where he is welcomed by a ghostly courtesan from his dreams. She reminds him of his timid adolescence, when he did not have the courage to initiate his long-sought sexual debut:

“She was there sitting at a table, smoking ... her face an expression of lazy indolence ... like when we used to play in the courtyard behind the house ... fatter ... imperious as ever ... those feet that I had dreamed of kissing, white cats ready to play, to tear the unwary prey to pieces with their claws, as she had done to me unknowingly for a lifetime ... I had dreamed of only her, desired only her, alone or making love with whoever came along – love? Maybe it was, but only for her image that was always before me as I came, no matter in whose cunt, strong and virile thinking of her, otherwise limp and timid between other women’s legs.”

The collector does not reach a climax of the same intensity until he, along with the museum, is consumed by fire: “His flesh burning in the flames, irreducible to words. But his stage exit had to be a part of his Museum, even though he, the only witness, could not describe it. The final war – lost, like all wars.” In his terrible agony, the collector – who sleeps in a coffin in the museum every night – suddenly reminds us that even the last Fascist mayor hoped that his status as a Resistant fighter would be recognized.

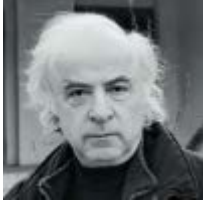
Finally, with the smoke clinging to his face, the collector observes that, soon enough, “the dried blood under the fingernails is long gone; History, though brief, is a good manicure.” As the blaze reaches the shelves, the unwanted names of victims begin to disappear, and breathing becomes more difficult. The collector compares his situation to when the Risiera’s chimney, garage, and crematorium, too, were blown up: “fire destroys fire, destruction destroys the traces of the destruction and the destroyers.”

The Lie of Literature

Magris is reminding us that fiction and facts are related, and that the “lie” of literature is sometimes truer than our immediate reality would suggest. *Blameless* itself is proof of this. It puts ethics and aesthetics in the service of one another, and stands as a testament to the originality of art and the moral force of literature.

Magris achieves an intense and captivating narrative rhythm through contrast and complementarity. He brings deep, nuanced scrutiny to bear on the inner lives of his characters, and on the larger historical and political portrait of their time and place. With impressive historical and social knowledge, and a mix of sarcasm and compassion, the book tells its disturbing story with peerless lucidity.

We are left with a remarkably comprehensive report on humanity and all of its contradictions and complexities in peace and war. One of our greatest contemporary writers has written a great book for our not-so-blameless age.



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