



## One Great Book: Volume 1, Episode 6 *The Time in Between* by Maria Dueñas

[Show Notes](#)

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume 1, Book 6: *The Time in Between*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to One Great Book, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it.

[MUSIC]

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[01:08]

“A typewriter shattered my destiny.”

Readers, I’m a sucker for a good first line, and *that* is the first line of *The Time in Between*, the 2009 debut novel from Spanish author Maria Dueñas. The book was a publishing sensation in her native country, and while it’s not unknown in my part of the world, I would love to see more readers pick up this excellent book in translation, because *The Time in Between* is One. Great. Book.

The story begins in Spain, just before its Civil War. Sira Quiroga is one of the most distinguished seamstresses in Madrid, gifted with a fine hand and a fine eye. She got the work because of her mother, beginning as a helper and errand girl in Doña Manuela’s glamorous shop, where she especially enjoyed delivering the just-finished garments to the households where the elegant ladies lived. For someone who isn’t *of* that world, Sira knows what it’s like, and she’s learned to shift effortlessly between the two worlds: the hum of the seamstresses room and the homes inhabited by the highest echelons of Madrid society.

But all is not well in Sira’s Spain. Sira begins to notice the political tensions simmering in Madrid, she can feel it in the air, and hear it in the increasingly frequent gunshots at night. Those who can afford to leave, do—and that means disaster for Doña Manuela’s shop. How can a fine seamstress earn her living if there’s no one left to sew for?

Sira’s fiancé, her childhood love, Ignacio, persuades her to take the civil servant exam, the same one he is preparing for, so she won’t be left unemployed. But to be employable, she needs to learn to type.

Which brings us back to that typewriter. Ignacio and Sira research the best models and the best Madrid shops in which to buy them, and that leads them to the Casa Hispano-Olivette. “How could we have known,” Sira asks, “with that simple act, with the mere fact of having taken two or



three steps and crossed a threshold, we were signing the death sentence on our time together and irreparably twisting apart the strands of our future.”

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In the shop, Sira meets and is instantly smitten with Ramiro, her handsome typewriter salesman, he’s warm and witty, with “a capacity for seduction so powerful that not even a concrete wall could have contained it.”

Sira promptly dumps her fiancé to pursue a life with Ramiro; she leaves home with only her reckless heart and a few clothes. It’s the wrong choice, of course, the reader can see that, but bad choices drive the plots of good novels, and the results of Sira’s choice sure make for good reading. With this man she learns a new kind of life, and another Madrid, the Madrid of sophisticated fashionable places, of shows, restaurants, and nightlife.

But there’s the political situation. Her father urges her to leave, as soon as possible. “Start a new life far from this crazy country,” he tells her, “because when you least expect it something enormous is going to explode and no one here will be left alive.” His first choice for his daughter is America, but if that’s too far to manage, Morocco would be perfect.

[MUSIC]

[04:19]

And so Ramiro and Sira settle into a new life in Tangier, but it’s not long before Sira discovers “that at any moment and with no apparent cause, everything we believe to be stable can be upset, derailed, twisted from its course.”

In other words, she comes home one day to discover Ramiro abandoned her, leaving her with nothing except a whole load of debt, and a note that says to keep her eyes open because some people may be “interested in finding him.”



That leaves Sira alone, devastated, broke, and with no resources... except her way with a needle. A wise novelist friend once told me that everything meaningful in a novel is set up and payoff. Well here comes the payoff from all that setup.

[05:03]

All those wealthy families who fled Madrid, leaving Sira in danger of losing her job? They've ended up in places like Morocco, which means, if she were to begin again as a dressmaker, business could be quite good. Before long Sira once again establishes herself in business—and, let me tell you, as a reader it is so much fun to watch her new persona take shape. She carefully cultivates an image that is not entirely accurate, but it's wartime, she's not the only one: Sira sets herself up as a young haute couture dressmaker, daughter of a ruined millionaire, betrothed to an incredibly handsome aristocrat. If only the other dressmaking girls from Doña Manuela's workshop could see her now!

Now, with World War II brewing, the poor girl from Madrid is moving among Europe's high society, sewing dresses and forging friendships with the wealthy and powerful, including the wives of Nazi officers. She's a woman with access, and with a great cover. I won't tell you how Sira is drawn into the dim world of international espionage, but reader—it's coming. And it's *good*.

If you loved *Casablanca* for its setting and its stakes, definitely give *The Time in Between* a try. An interesting companion read would be Jennifer Robson's *The Gown*, for its fascinating treatment of both fashion *and* history. *Rules of Civility*, from One Great Book episode 4, would also pair nicely: it's another glamorous historical novel that toys with luck and fate. It's set during about the same time, but in a whole different world.

In short, if you like the sound of a sweeping historical tale of love, fashion, and espionage, set in the time between youth and maturity, war and peace, love and duty... *The Time in Between* may be the next great book you're looking for.



[06:51]

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And make sure you check out our sister show What Should I Read Next, That is our long format show where each week a reader tells me three books they love, one book they don't, and what they're reading now, and I recommend three titles for their To Be Read list.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.