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Mend the Living
Maylis de Kerangal
Translated by Jessica Moore
MacLehose Press, 2016, PB, 240pp, £8.99, 978-0857053855

A PLEASURE AND A TORMENT

At 05:50 Simon Limbeau's mobile alarm goes off, alerting this vibrant 20-year-old lover, brother, son, and friend to the start of a day meant to be filled with the thrill and pleasure of surfing. By 05:49 the following morning, Simon's heart is taking its very first beats inside 50-year-old Claire Mejan.

This is the story of what unfolds within those 24 hours: of cruel endings and of new and difficult beginnings. It is the story of how we are defined by who we love, what we are, what we do. Of medicine as salvation and redemption, and of familial bonds that transcend death.

Mend the Living is only the second novel to have won the Wellcome Prize and is the first novel in translation to be awarded the prize, translated from French into English by the Canadian translator Jessica Moore.¹ Written by the French novelist Maylis de Kerangal, it is both a pleasure and a torment to read. We read with baited breath, with muscles clenched and a sense of nausea, as Dr Pierre Revol, the ICU consultant, begins the familiar and yet still painstaking task of breaking the news no mother should ever hear. Marianne Limbeau recognises that:

'... he's buying time, arranging his words, she knows this, and goes along with the tempo, feels the paradoxical tension as time drips out like coffee from the coffee-maker while everything else simultaneously screams the urgency of the situation.'

We share Revol's sense that he is *'dealing a blow, the sense of detonating a bomb'* as

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he has to start to make Marianne Limbeau understand that her son is in a coma from which he will never recover.

For a short novel covering a mere 24 hours there is a large cast of characters: Thomas Remige, the earnest and precise nurse who leads the organ donation programme; Cordelia Owl, the nocturnal woman who finds refuge from her turbulent personal life in her work as an ICU nurse; and Virgilio Brega, the ambitious, football-loving Italian cardiac surgeon.

There are many more, not least the bereft parents Marianne and Sean Limbeau, exemplifying the number of people inextricably involved in the process of organ donation. This is Simon Limbeau's final gift — his death heralds life for those who receive his kidneys, his liver, and his heart also — forming the soul of this narrative.

This book can be read as a meditation on parental love, on the promise of youth, and second chances. Or as an ode to the biomedical achievements of the 20th century where heart transplants became a reality, of the development of intensive care medicine, Or as an invitation to consider the ethical quandaries surrounding brain death, organ donation, presumed consent, and more. It is above all the story of a heart and all the lives it touches.

Maryam Naeem,

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<https://wellcomebookprize.org>

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