

Italian Contemporary Fiction Celebrated in New York

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Helena Janeczek wins the ninth edition of the Zerilli-Marimò/City of Rome Literary Prize with her "Le Rondini di Montecassino"

The [Zerilli-Marimò/City of Rome Literary Prize](#) [2] just took place in New York, important for promoting Italian fiction in the States. Organized by [New York University's Department of Italian Studies](#) [3], [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [4], [Casa delle Letterature of the City of Rome](#) [5], and the Italian [Cultural Institute in New York](#) [6], the Prize is at its ninth edition. "This is a very rich edition" Maria Ida Gaeta, Director of Casa delle Letterature, explained to us, underlining how this year's jury chose authors representing three strong currents of Italian contemporary narrative: the epic novel, the classic novel and an avant-garde work.



Le Rondini di Montecassino, *The Swallows of Montecassino*, by Helena Janeczek, winner of the Prize, is an epic novel "which comes to terms with the relationship between history and literary writing." *Il valore dei giorni*, *The Value of Days*, by Sebastiano Nata, "is a classic novel by a somewhat hidden author who, however, has an interesting background and can boast a distinct group of readers." The great Italian narrative debut, *Lo spagnolo senza sforzo*, *Easy Spanish*, by Gabriele Pedullà is a collection of short stories "important from a stylistic and linguistic point of view," Gaeta explains.

The jury, made up entirely of non-Europeans, was chosen among "language and Italian literature scholars, who work, teach and do research in American cities," added Gaeta. These excellent readers are at the same time one of the strong points of the Prize, that aims at and succeeds in attracting the attention of American publishing houses. In a country where the large publishers are short of "readers" in the Italian language, the Prize allows our own literary talents to reach the American publishers. And after a summer spent reading books, this year the jury decided to award the \$3000 prize and the \$10000 translation and US publishing contribution to Helena Janeczek who tells us, "when I received the phone call announcing that I was among the finalists, I was in the kitchen cooking, and felt like a Hollywood star."

In *Le Rondini di Montecassino* Janeczek (who in 1997 conquered the critics with her *Lezioni di tenebra*) uses the battles and the bombings of the abbey, a key episode of World War II, as the stage for a fascinating mosaic of stories and destinies. A Texan general, a Maori from New Zealand, a Polish-Italian, an Indian, a Jew, and two ex-deportees in Gulags are the characters of the epic novel that won the prize. "It is an attempt at observing Italy, and possibly past and present European history, with an additional external view: overturning the prospective." Helena Janeczek, daughter of Polish Jews, who grew up in Munchen, and who has lived in Italy for thirty years, has chosen to write in our language. When asked how difficult it is she answers that it is even easier. "What is pre-existing is the need to write and the need to tell, and this is more important than which language I chose." She adds that this concept is quite understandable in the United States, "here many authors come from multi-lingual backgrounds." When we ask her about the importance of this prize, Janeczek recognizes how it has been a rare opportunity to bring the Italian literary world to the "center of the world." "Literature has always fed off of exchanges and as much as New York is symbolically the center of the world, it also risks becoming provincial if it closes off from everything else and stops enriching itself."

The other two finalists to the prize were Sebastiano Nata with *Il valore dei giorni*, and Gabriele Pedullà with *Lo spagnolo senza sforzo*. Sebastiano Nata is a writer who tries to conjugate a view upon a society - and also upon the economic mechanisms that move it - through personal narratives. In *Il valore dei giorni* he underlines "the human costs of concentrating everything on personal success, the social costs of a society that sees the maximization of profit as its main objective." It is the story of two brothers who represent two very different ways of life: one is a successful manager, with a young journalist wife, a winner, and the other is a loser, never successful in work, divorced, and has lost a son. After a series of events their roles are switched, and the loser is able to learn that other values exist beyond the economic and political power ones.

Lo spagnolo senza sforzo, on the other hand, is the title of the fifth of five stories that make up the collection by Gabriele Pedullà. The five different stories are connected by their attention "towards the problem of language as the source of misunderstandings and misconstructions, as well as extraordinary opportunities" says Pedullà. "Where there is misunderstanding we cannot communicate to each other and this allows encounters of a completely different level." Then he adds, "most of contemporary American writing tends to be fundamentally visual, while I believe I belong to a writing tradition more careful about phonic associations." And the Zerilli-Marimò/City of Rome Prize also serves this purpose: to bring novelty to this side of the Atlantic. Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò and Casa delle Letterature created a special opportunity for focusing the attention upon the talent of contemporary Italian writers.

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