

Calvino's Letters: Insight into the Mind of Italy's Novelist

Natasha Lardera (November 27, 2013)



"Italo Calvino: Letters, 1941-1985" (Princeton University Press, 2013), was presented at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò in a special program developed by Calvino's daughter, Giovanna Calvino. The 650 letters are filled with insights about Calvino's writing and that of others; about Italian, American, English, and French literature; about literary criticism and literature in general; and about culture and politics.

If you walk into an American bookstore and looked for a book by an Italian writer, chances are the author with the most copies there is [Italo Calvino](#) [2], Italy's most important postwar novelist. At the time of his death, in 1985, he was the most-translated contemporary Italian writer and a noted



contender for the Nobel Prize for Literature. "His best known works include the "Our Ancestors trilogy" (1952-1959), "the Cosmicomics collection of short stories" (1965), and "the novels Invisible Cities" (1972) and "If on a winter's night a traveler" (1979).



Italo Calvino: Letters, 1941-1985”

translated by Martin McLaughlin





Italo Calvino

RAI interview with Italo Calvino





Josh Hamilton at NYU

Calvino was also an influential literary critic, an important literary editor, and a masterful letter writer whose correspondents included Umberto Eco, Primo Levi, Gore Vidal, Leonardo Sciascia, Natalia Ginzburg, Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Luciano Berio.

In *Understanding Italo Calvino* by Beno Weiss, the journalist and writer was described as “a timid, solitary person, partly because he stuttered and spoke haltingly; even though he was quite open and congenial with his family and intimate friends, he felt ill at ease and awkward in society. Furthermore he also refrained from revealing his intimate feelings, and often spoke ambiguously about his writings.

He rightly expected his readers to know him through his works and nothing else!” There is now the possibility to look into the writer's life thanks to the publication of a new book, *Italo Calvino: Letters, 1941-1985* (Princeton University Press, 2013), that was presented at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimo in a special program developed by Calvino's daughter, Giovanna Calvino.

With her Michael Wood, the scholar responsible for selecting the letters and for writing the introduction of the book, Martin McLaughlin, the letters' translator, and actor Josh Hamilton, who read some letters for the audience.

This book includes a generous selection of about 650 letters, written between World War II and the end of Calvino's life. “The letters are filled with insights about Calvino's writing and that of others; about Italian, American, English, and French literature; about literary criticism and literature in general; and about culture and politics.

The book also provides a kind of autobiography, documenting Calvino's Communism and his resignation from the party in 1957, his eye-opening trip to the United States in 1959-60, his move to Paris (where he lived from 1967 to 1980), and his trip to his birthplace in Cuba (where he met Che Guevara).

Some lengthy letters amount almost to critical essays, while one is an appropriately brief defense of brevity, and there is an even shorter, reassuring note to his parents written on a scrap of paper while he and his brother were in hiding during the antifascist Resistance.” “Reading other people's letters is a revelation,” Michael Wood told us, “Nowadays we are used to snooping on other people's lives... there is almost no privacy anymore. I must confess though that while reading these letters my dream of finding something scandalous or whatnot remained unfulfilled. Yes, the letters are very personal but they are not confessional or too revealing. What transpires though, is that Calvino was not the person you thought you knew when you read his fiction.”

“These letters do offer some insight into the every day of a great artist,” Martin McLaughlin, added, “We learn about his tenacity for reading and writing, and how he was always trying different voices. Indeed his first letters were a bit difficult to translate as he was always shifting voices... sometimes he is sarcastic, other he is more concerned, serious. There is a mixture of seriousness and gentle humor Still they are written with great maturity.”

The letters are divided into three groups: personal, that make no reference at all to writing (Josh Hamilton read a letter from 1959 when Calvino visited New York City and was amazed by a city that swallows you and where solitude is impossible), those on literature and the art of writing (in one of the letters read at Casa Italiana, Calvino jokes about the tribulations of writing his first novel, and in an era before the internet, about the long period of times necessary to do fact checking). The last



group of letters are the ones with political meaning, and here the author addressed serious issues like abortion.

True, maybe the readers will not discover anything crazy about Calvino, but these letters are indeed a necessary tool to complete the portrait of this writer, a writer who “hated all forms of waste, including wasting words.”

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