

Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels

Anna Lawton and Laura Benedetti (May 18, 2017)



Discussing Ferrante's widely popular four-novel series. A literary success in Italy and worldwide, the series follows the life of two friends growing together and drifting apart across sixty years of Italian history.

Recently the [Italian Cultural Society](#) [2] and the [Italian Cultural Institute of Washington, D.C](#) [3], hosted the panel, "Friendship, Language, and the City: Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels," with [Laura Benedetti](#) [4] ([Georgetown University](#) [5]) and [Anna Lawton](#) [6] ([New Academia Publishing](#) [7]). This is an abridged version of their talk.

Anna Lawton: Laura, can you describe the Neapolitan novels in a nutshell?

Laura Benedetti: The Neapolitan novels can be described as the story of a friendship between two women, Elena and Lila, during sixty years of Italian history. This focus on friendship between women is an absolute novelty in Italian literature and pretty rare in other literatures as well. Remember Virginia Woolf's lament that women were mostly represented by men, written about by men, and so often imagined only in relation to men? There is definitely something new about Ferrante's novels

that has struck Italian as well as international readers.

AL: Indeed, the two women's friendship is an important factor. But it seems that their friendship also involves a great deal of rivalry. Do you agree?

LB: Definitely. In fact as you read you realize that friendship doesn't fully describe that combustible mixture of love, emulation, and rivalry between them. The complexity of this relationship is revealed in an early episode. In elementary school, the two girls set off to see the ocean, which, even though they live in Naples, they have never seen. They cut class and get into trouble when their mothers discover their adventure. The day after, Lila asks Elena: "All they did was beat you?" And Elena replies, "What should they have done?" Lila: "They are still sending you to study Latin?" Lila's comment is linked to her class resentment, and Elena's to her guilt as the one who still gets to study.

AL: Is Lila the brilliant friend of the title?

LB: It's difficult to establish who the brilliant friend really is, and this ambiguity is linked to the epigraph and the original title, *L'amica geniale*. The epigraph is a passage from Goethe's *Faust*. In Italian, *geniale* comes from the Latin genus, or spiritual guide. Lila is Elena's spiritual guide, but also a bit of the devil because of their rivalry. They're brilliant friends only when taken as two. This is one case where the translation cannot capture all the layers of the original.

AL: Let's talk about the translation. Are there other instances where it might betray the original?

LB: Well, translating Ferrante is an extraordinary endeavor. The four novels appeared in Italian from 2011 to 2014, and in Ann Goldstein's English translations shortly thereafter. Her translations are smooth and easy to read, but may- be too easy to read, since Ferrante is an expressive writer unafraid of challenging readers. This process of domesticating Ferrante begins with the titles. For example, *L'amore molesto*, the title of her first novel, juxtaposes the most abused noun in literature, "amore," to an adjective describing unwanted attention and even danger. The translation soft- ens it: *Troubling Love* is just not as disturbing.

AL: How does the translation deal with dialect?

LB: The distinction between Ital- ian and Neapolitan is essential in the novels, although not a particular problem for the translator because Ferrante uses only a handful of Neapolitan words. Still there is always this dichotomy between Italian as the language you learn in school and the dialect of friendship and family. Ferrante adds further complications, because for her dialect is essentially the language of violence and regression. Conversely, standard Italian is the language of rationality, of rules that force you to use your mind, not your instincts. Writing in Italian is a way for Elena to assert control, and is a kind of prelude to Lila's disappearance. This is not completely new in Ferrante because all of her novels hinge on disappearance, on something missing. Anna, would you care to elaborate on this theme of disappearance?

AL: Of course. The theme of disappearance is fundamental in Ferrante. She seems to be haunted by it because not only her characters disappear, but she, as the author also disappears. All we have is a voice and a pen name. The first Neapolitan novel, *My Brilliant Friend*, starts when Rino, Lila's son, calls Elena to say that his mother has vanished without a trace. This is significant because we see from the beginning that Ferrante already knew her objective: the eventual disappearance of Lila.

LB: How is this significant? What is the meaning of Lila's disappearance?

AL: Ferrante gives us many clues. She uses a brilliant word, "*smarginatura*," or "the dissolving of boundaries" or "the dissolving of margins." The Italian word is impossible to translate in all its complexity. But this translation does connote the idea of loss of identity, the dissolving of the individual's exterior shell, the breaking from a mold that has become too tight. In its first use in the novel, "*smarginatura*" refers to a copper pot. Lila sees a crack in it, as if its contents have grown so big, that the pot starts to burst. Later, when Elena talks about Lila's flesh having the consistency and color of copper Ferrante creates an analogy that foreshadows Lila's "*smarginatura*." This phenomenon does not occur only with women, however: Ferrante describes it as raw matter, a force



of nature.

LB: Do you see a difference in the way “smarginatura” applies to women as opposed to men?

AL: Definitely. Ferrante often writes about her novels as “feminist novels.” And Elena, the character, becomes famous after writing a “feminist novel.” Ferrante places her work in the context of the second wave feminism of the 70s, when the theory of *l'écriture féminine*, advocated by Hélène Cixous, had many followers. In this context, “smarginatura” has to do with women’s condition, the roles imposed by society. For a while, Ferrante’s women submit. But then they rebel, with a vengeance. They are fighting for their lives. For them it’s a matter of survival, and nothing else matters, not even the children, because children are also part of the boundaries that constrain women’s lives. They have conflicting relationships not only with their children, but also with their mothers. Ferrante’s women see this as a biological chain, where their mother’s bodies morph into their own and then into those of their children, a chain they need to break. The result is not always a better self, but it’s exactly what Ferrante calls raw, senseless matter, all instinct and no reason. In the Neapolitan novels both friends go through this process of change, but the change doesn’t solve the crisis. Actually, they fall into another mold from which they have to escape again. Disappearance is never definitive.

LB: Would Lila’s disappearance at the end be a way to finally break out of the mold, to erase all traces?

AL: Yes and no. Her disappearance at the end is ambiguous, a literary trick. Lila disappears from the story, but she survives in literature. Elena writes a novel about Lila to neutralize, or reverse, her “smarginatura,” to give Lila “a form whose boundaries won’t dissolve, and defeat her, and calm her, and so in turn calm myself.” This sentence points to the difference between art and life, between a work of art in a finite, contained form, and life as fluid, unpredictable, and messy. It also implies the friends’ love/hate relationship, which encompasses admiration, rivalry and even a desire for mutual destruction. As Elena says: “I love Lila, I wanted her to last, but I wanted it to be I who made her last.” Here Elena asserts herself, and puts Lila back into a mold. This time, forever.

LB: Indeed, the theme of disappearance runs through *L’amore molesto*, *I giorni dell’abbandono*, all the novels. You suggested that this could also be a clue to the disappearance of the author herself. How so?

AL: There has been much speculation about Ferrante’s identity. And speculation becomes gossip whenever a journalist claims that he discovered the real Ferrante. All of this is irrelevant, tabloid stuff. We’d better listen instead to what Ferrante says. In many interviews, and in her book *Frantumaglia*, she explains why she wanted anonymity. It is related to her theme of disappearance. Ferrante says she didn’t want to play the publishing game to be paraded at press conferences and book signings, where she, and not her books, would capture the attention of readers. She does not want her image to be defined and used by the press to sell her books. She wants her books to stand on their own. And in this way she acts like her women characters, breaking her own mold as “author.” She rebels, and she vanishes.

Laura Benedetti: is the Laura and Gaetano de Sole Professor of contemporary Italian culture at Georgetown University. Her publications include the volumes *La sconfitta di Diana. Un percorso per la “Gerusalemme liberata”*, *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy*, the edition and English translation of Lucrezia Marinella’s *Esortazioni alle donne e agli altri* and, most recently, the novel *Un paese di carta*. She was guest of honor at the annual meeting of the American Association of Italian Studies (2016), as well as the recipient of the Flaiano International Prize for Italian Studies, the “wise woman” award from the National Organization of Italian American Women, and the Gold Medal from the Federazione Associazioni Abruzzesi/U.S.A. She has published extensively on Elena Ferrante’s work and was a guest on an episode of the Diane Rehm Show devoted to the author.

The Author

Anna Lawton, PhD, has worked both in academia and in government. As a professor, she taught



courses in literature, cinema and visual culture at Purdue university and georgetown university. She also worked for uSia at the american embassy in Moscow as the deputy director of Public information and Media outreach and the editor-in-chief of the magazine Connections, and at the world bank in Washington, dc, as the managing editor of the magazine Development Outreach. She has served on the advisory Film committee of the national gallery of art, and organized conferences, seminars, round tables, Im programs, and editorial projects for the Kennan institute, the national gallery of art, and the italian embassy in washington dc, among others. She published three scholarly books, numerous scholarly essays and book chapters, as well as two novels, Album di famiglia and Amy's Story. her book, Imaging Russia 2000: Film and Facts, received the choice award as outstanding academic title 2005. in 2003, she founded the publishing house new academia Publishing, which is today a successful enterprise.

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