About the Author

Full text biography:

Elena Ferrante

Birth Date: 1943

Place of Birth: Italy, Naples

Nationality: Italian

Occupation: Novelist

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Personal Information:

Born 1943, in Naples, Italy.

Career Information:

Novelist.

Writings:

- *La frantumaglia*, Edizioni e/o (Rome, Italy), 2003.
- *Short Stories: Selection Cronache del mal d'amore*, with an introduction by Edgardo Dobry, Edizioni e/o (Rome, Italy), 2012.

"NEAPOLITAN NOVELS" SERIES


Media Adaptations:

*Troubling Love* was adapted for a 1995 by Mario Martone.
Sidelights:

Pseudonymous writer Elena Ferrante has received acclaim for novels that expose dark secrets beneath the pleasant veneer of family life. Her first book to be translated into English, The Days of Abandonment, spent almost a year on the best-seller lists in Ferrante's native Italy. It tells the story of Olga, a wife and mother who falls apart after Mario, her husband of fifteen years, abandons her for another woman. Once cool and collected, Olga becomes slovenly, disorganized, impulsive, and even violent. She obsesses about Mario and his mistress and takes to stalking them; in one particularly memorable scene she attacks Mario in the street and rips off his shirt. She drives recklessly, neglects the dog, and almost forgets to feed her young children as she sinks into utter degradation.

Many reviewers noted the timeworn theme of The Days of Abandonment but nevertheless found the novel exceptionally fresh. Writing in the New York Times Book Review, Jean Hanff Korelitz observed that Ferrante "makes her heroine a new and individual character in a well-worn story." Seattle Times contributor Misha Berson wrote that Ferrante reworks her paradigmatic theme with an extreme urgency that has the impact of "a blow to the gut." What makes the book so powerfully moving, Berson went on to say, is Ferrante's ability "to hypnotically capture an intelligent, sophisticated woman's implosion under pressure." Carlin Romano made a similar point in his Philadelphia Inquirer review, noting the "fierce intelligence" of its protagonist and the book's "astonishing exactness of insight, its introspective wisdom."

As Radhika Jones observed in the Literary Review, "the most compelling aspect of the story proves to be the danger that Olga will abandon herself--her identity, her sanity, her capacity to live." Praising Ferrante's ability "to navigate searing human emotion and to give it an architecture," Jones particularly admired the author's skill in bringing Olga through pain toward some kind of grace. Describing the book as "raw and gut-wrenching," Library Journal reviewer Lisa Nussbaum commented that The Days of Abandonment is a satisfying novel but not a story for timid souls.

Troubling Love, Ferrante's first novel but the second to be translated in the United States, confronts a similarly dark theme. Protagonist Delia, now aged forty-five, returns to her hometown of Naples to seek the truth about her mother Amalia's mysterious death by drowning. Amalia and Delia had both endured years of violence at the hands of Delia's father, a mediocre artist whose jealous rages kept Amalia submissive and fearful. Delia is puzzled to discover that her mother had become romantically involved with another man, and her attempt to puzzle out the clues about Amalia's death allows her to learn, finally, about the person her mother really was.

"Dense with imagery that speaks directly to the reader's own sensibilities about family," wrote Mary Whipple in Mostly Fiction, "the novel recreates the mysteries that will always surround our parents and the personal experiences they have had that we can never fully understand." Booklist reviewer Allison Block also noted the novel's emotional impact, calling it a "brutally frank tale about the dangerous intersections of rage and desire." A writer for Publishers Weekly also praised the book highly, admiring how Ferrante has "forcefully delineated how the complicity in violence against women perpetuates a brutal cycle of repetition and silence." And Minna Proctor, writing in Time Out New York Online, observed that Ferrante's "raw, heady intimacy is unique and disturbingly compelling, like gorgeous roadkill."

In The Lost Daughter, according to Words without Borders contributor Joseph V. Tirella, Ferrante "pulls back the layers of escapist fantasy and exposes all those disturbing shadows hiding underneath [the] Mediterranean sun." The novel tells the story of Leda, a divorced professor of English whose two grown daughters have recently moved to Canada. To her surprise, Leda enjoys this new solitude and decides to enhance it by taking an extended summer holiday at a small seaside resort. There, however, she encounters a boisterous Neapolitan family whose noisy interactions remind Leda of her unhappy childhood. Leda watches the young mother, Nina, interact with little Elena, who is attached to a beloved doll. Gradually, Leda insinuates herself into the family; she finds Elena when the girl goes missing, but--in a decidedly creepy turn of events--turns out to be the culprit when Elena's doll is stolen. As it happens, this doll prompts intensely painful memories for Leda, forcing her to confront her mother's threats of abandonment years before and, in the end, her own decision to abandon her own two daughters.

Citing Ferrante's "devastating power as a novelist," Tirella wrote that the author "navigates the emotional minefields and unsparringlly tallies the cycle of psychological damage among multiple generations of women in Leda's family."
Publishers Weekly contributor found The Lost Daughter an "arresting" novel with prose that is "stunningly candid, direct and unforgettable."

Ferrante’s “Neapolitan Novels” tetralogy includes My Brilliant Friend, The Story of a New Name, Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay, and The Story of the Lost Child. Discussing the four books on the London Guardian website, Meghan O’Rourke stated: "Taken together, the novels span some fifty years, chronicling the life-long friendship between Lila Cerullo and Elena Greco. With them, Ferrante has written both a capacious story of Elena's coming of age—Elena, who has become a novelist, is the narrator—and a social novel explicitly dealing with Italian politics and history where the earlier work confined itself to internal psychic dramas. The "Neapolitan Novels" are set in a chaotic, impoverished neighborhood where the Camorra reigns, in the local form of the dominant Solara brothers, Marcello and Michel, and where, during a domestic dispute, one might see an iron and furniture flying out of a window, and where even mild-mannered fathers like Elena's routinely beat their children and their wives." According to Sarah Hampson, contributor to the online version of the Globe and Mail, Ferrante created "a world of women so compelling, so unflinchingly honest, so brutal." Katherine Hill, a writer on Philly.com, described the series as "ferociously addictive."

The first installment in the series, My Brilliant Friend, introduces the characters of Elena Greco and Lila Cerullo. The volume follows the beginning of their friendship, while in grade school, and chronicles their young lives, as they attend school and consider getting married. "It's a large, captivating, amiably people Bildungsroman," asserted James Wood in a review that appeared on the New Yorker website. Wood also described the volume as a "beautiful and delicate tale of confluence and reversal."

The following two books in the series describe the adulthood of the two women, highlighting their family lives and changes in their relationship with one another. "The fourth volume of Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan' quartet brings her ambitious project to a triumphant, satisfying, baffling, and unsettling conclusion," stated Margaret Drabble in the New Statesman. Tim Martin, a reviewer in Spectator, asserted: "Ferrante's prose is compellingly accurate at the molecular level of emotion where love and friendship shade into jealousy, manipulation, and Schadenfreude, but it's this narrative organization that fascinates." Writing in Maclean's, Erin Beth Langille commented: "With the release of The Story of the Lost Child, ... readers are granted an epic masterpiece (think Tolstoy, Chekov, or Stendhal) that fits this subject matter in all its guts and glory."

Though she is considered one of Italy's foremost contemporary novelists, Ferrante carefully guards her privacy and, despite intense speculation as to her real name and background, has kept her identity secret.

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- Booklist, March 15, 2003, review of I giorni dell'abbandono, p. 1287; September 15, 2005, Whitney Scott, review of The Days of Abandonment, p. 31; August 1, 2006, Allison Block, review of Troubling Love, p. 49.
- Internet Bookwatch, December, 2006, review of Troubling Love.
- Kirkus Reviews, March 1, 2008, review of The Lost Daughter.
- Maclean's, September 14, 2015, Erin Beth Langille, review of The Story of the Lost Child, p. 75.
- New Statesman, September 11, 2015, Margaret Drabble, review of The Story of the Lost Child, p. 44.
Discussion Questions for The Lost Daughter

*The Lost Daughter* by Elena Ferrante

Notes and questions

Central threads of the story

- Taking the doll – central to the story. Why does she do it? (p44).
- Elena’s (the child) reaction to losing her doll – why was it so important to her?
- Obsession with Nina. Is she a misanthrope?
- Violence – The pine cone injury (p30); slapping Bianca when she tried to get her mother’s attention, the broken glass pane (p73); stabbed with the hat pin by Nina (p140)

Incidents
• Making Florinda wash the floor, because of F’s voluptuousness compared to her daughter Marta (p59)

• The impact of the encounter with ‘Brenda and her lover’ - revisited on p94, aroused her desire

On motherhood

• ‘the crushing weight of responsibility’ (p42)

• ‘What I wanted of them I never understood. I don’t know even now.’ (p53)

• abandoned her children for 3 years (p69) - why she left and then returned to her daughter (p117) – she explains it ‘...I returned for the same reason I left: for love of myself.’ (p118)

• ‘an unnatural mother’ (p139)

Mother-daughter relationships in the story

• Author and Bianca, Marta

• Nina and Elena

• Nina/Elena and the doll
The Story of the Lost Child (L’amica geniale #4)
by Elena Ferrante, Ann Goldstein (Translator)

4.39 • Rating details • 32,269 Ratings • 3,014 Reviews

Here is the dazzling saga of two women, the brilliant, bookish Elena and the fiery, uncontrollable Lila. Both are now adults; life’s great discoveries have been made, its vagaries and losses have been suffered. Through it all, the women’s friendship has remained the gravitational center of their lives.

Both women once fought to escape the neighborhood in which they grew up—a prison of conformity, violence, and inviolable taboos. Elena married, moved to Florence, started a family, and published several well-received books. In this final book, she has returned to Naples. Lila, on the other hand, never succeeded in freeing herself from the city of her birth. She has become a successful entrepreneur, but her success draws her into closer proximity with the nepotism, chauvinism, and criminal violence that infect her neighborhood. Proximity to the world she has always rejected only brings her role as its unacknowledged leader into relief. For Lila is unstoppable, unmanageable, unforgettable!

Against the backdrop of a Naples that is as seductive as it is perilous and a world undergoing epochal change, the story of a lifelong friendship is told with unmatched honesty and brilliance. The four volumes in this series constitute a long remarkable story that readers will return to again and again, and every return will bring with it new revelations. (less)

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Paperback, 480 pages
Published September 1st 2015 by Europa Editions (first published 2014)
More Details... edit details

FRIEND REVIEWS (2) 5.00 average rating

Neeyati rated it Dec 19, 2015
Shelves: books-by-women, historical-fiction, mental-health, class, europe, feminist, gender, series
Like • comment

Peggy Geiger marked it as to-read Jul 23, 2016
Like • comment

READER Q&A

Ask the Goodreads community a question about The Story of the Lost Child


ABOUT ELENA FERRANTE

Elena Ferrante is a pseudonymous Italian novelist.

Ferrante is the author of a half dozen novels, including The Lost Daughter (originally published as La figlia oscura, 2006).

In 2012, Europa Editions began publication of English translations of Ferrante’s "Neapolitan Novels", a series about two perceptive and intelligent girls
A Look at Ferrante's The Story of the Lost Child

SPOILER ALERT! This post discusses the final novel in Ferrante’s Neapolitan Saga and deals with plot points without warning or discretion. If you haven’t read the series up to the end and do not want plot spoilers, stop reading here.

Introduction

So much happens in The Story of the Lost Child and there are so many surprises that a good way to make sense of it is to begin at the end and consider what we know by the final stages of the book. Before I do so, however, a few preliminaries are in order.

Firstly, Elena analyses her own behaviour, and this layer of analysis illuminates her and others’ behaviour. I will try not to repeat the obvious. Secondly, the final novel veers off into territory I had not anticipated in my analysis of the first three. I am glad. As a reader I tend to prefer the Lila-centric parts of the novels over the Elena-centric parts of the novels, probably because they are the extraordinary ones. It also means that some of my observations were not conclusive. I will comment on a couple of these, but I won’t harp on about it.

The Lost Child

Until Tina’s disappearance, we are led to think of Imma as the lost child, because of her inability to adjust. She is an emotionally lost child. This turns out to be a clever ploy by the author to keep us ensnared in the joy of those Haleyon days before the cruel blow is delivered. Whether intended or not, the care with which Tina was made the focal point of the photoshoot signalled to me a symbolic exchange of destinies and, indeed, I feared for the worst. I had a sleepless night after Michele punched Lila in the face and sensed a terrible tragedy in the lives of the Lila and Enzo.

Yet by the end of the novel Tina’s fate is magnified in other characters and perhaps in almost all the familiar characters of the neighbourhood. Lila and Gennaro are both lost children. Gennaro, like Imma, is emotionally lost and weak willed. He never really grows up. Elena treats him like a stupid boy at the very start of book one. Lila herself is a lost child. Her precocious talents as a child have all stilted and repressed by adult responsibilities, an adult world, through work, through hardship, and now through tragedy. Yet the child inside never gave up, always held fast in some hidden corner. This child held fast to hope, and this hope is for the longest time connected to Elena, whose life was meant to justify Lila’s suffering. Once Elena’s activist efforts in the neighbourhood fail, and especially after Tina disappears, even this hope fades. Lila is disappointed in Elena.

The truth about Elena’s doll Tina, like a voodoo doll representing Elena, remains hidden inside Lila until the novel’s resolution. At the same time Lila herself remains tucked inside Elena’s soul. This hidden knot binds the two friends for a lifetime, and
is the edifice on which the novel is built. Like those Neapolitan churches that come to
fascinate Lila, and that commemorate forgotten atrocities, Elena’s story is a literary
monument that exists because of the horrible events that caused suffering in their
lives.

To clarify this point, let’s ask a question. Would there have been a story or indeed the
need for one, if Lila’s life had proceeded according to her childhood promise? Yes!
There would almost certainly have been a need for it, but chances are that she would
have written it herself, even if that life unfolded side by side with Elena’s.

The lost child from Elena’s point of view, therefore, is Lila, and if Lila once
admonished Elena for writing “ugly things” (in that second novel that only belatedly
gets published, and then to great fanfare) it can be understood from this viewpoint:
that Lila’s hidden child wanted beautiful things, and that Lila’s hidden, lost child
wanted Elena to transform the world into beautiful things. Instead, Elena merely
reflected the ugliness of their world. It is a world from which Lila never tried to
escape, trusting Elena would help her to transform it, even if only in literature. Yet in
old age, after even Elena disappointed her, she finally shifted out of Elena’s range.
Lila’s hidden child is lost first because she is left behind, and second because Elena
disappoints her, doesn’t help her escape the ugliness. Tina’s disappearance is the
symbolic reinforcement, or realisation, of this “lostness” - of being lost.

Elena suffers in the absence of Lila. It is a type of mourning that refuses acceptance.
It is an angry suffering. Acceptance comes only at the very end. Elena’s suffering in
the absence of Lila mirrors the suffering Lila felt in the absence of Tina. It is a
suffering that results from not knowing whether she is dead or alive. This suffering
finds further fertile ground in the imagination of the reader, who knows about Lila’s
disappearance from the start, and learns about her tragic life only through the eyes of
Elena. As readers we are outraged at Lila’s fate, but also at the fate of all the
downtrodden characters.

The significance of the dolls have a direct connection to the lost child(ren), but I
discuss them more fully in the next section. For now, let’s complete the round-up of
“lost children” by acknowledging with Elena that, although the Solaras have been
almost universally hated, they also did their bit for the neighbourhood, to make it
what it is - even its good aspects. Alfonso, Rino, Gigliola, Gino, Bruno are all
children who got lost somewhere on the way. They stand for the loss of innocence, of
hope, of childhood in general. In their place Elena writes her literary monument that
remembers all their lives - not just her and Lila’s.

More specifically, through the loss of little Tina, Lila’s suffering is the suffering of
the whole neighbourhood. By disowning Lila and forgetting, the people in the
neighbourhood disown themselves, and thus their redemption becomes truly futile.
Lila realises that the neighbourhood cannot be truly changed - not even by her and
Elena.

It is not an optimistic vision, but it is rooted in a reality that has an emotional
authenticity that is difficult to dispute.

The Dolls

Now that we have considered the Lost Child of the title, what should we make of the
dolls and their return at the end? Elena receives the two little dolls from their
childhood, Tina and Nu, in an unmarked newspaper package together with her post.
No addressee, no return address.

The first conclusion we can draw is that Lila is alive and well somewhere, which

Links

- Experimental Writing
- Illegal Art
- Koko the Gorilla
- Slow Stories
- The Institute for Contemporary
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- World Literature Today

Labels

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About Me

thundercomb

Never one to shy away from the starry expanse
he cradled the tomato like a child,
remembering its growth in the field
through the long winter. He held his
hand aloft, watching the humanoid
inhabitant of a distant galaxy walk
indeed is the possibility that Elena herself entertains:

“Maybe those two dolls that had crossed more than half a century and had come all the way to Turin meant only that she was well and loved me” - p. 473.

We see here Elena’s need for validation and approval on clear display ("she ... loved me"), but it is the strong possibility that Lila is alive that is of primary interest to us. Lila could have committed suicide and planned it that way, but it would not be consistent with the lost child who has finally found a new life for herself. That child was too curious and irrepressible. That child, now lost to Elena, has been recovered by Lila unto herself.

Secondly, it is an admission by Lila of the role - unspoken up to now - Elena has played in providing courage to her in the face of overwhelming fears, such as those she confessed to in the aftermath of the earthquake. When they went up to Don Achille to confront him - one of the scariest moments of their childhood - and Lila looked so brave she was partly brave because Elena was there beside her.

This fear-courage duality is part of the secret knot of their friendship alluded to in the previous section. It is not just that “Lila has let herself be seen so plainly” (p. 473), but the very knot of their relationship has been made plain. By being made plain it now also loses its power, because Lila has relinquished it. Lila no longer needs Elena to give her courage - she has made a leap, on her own, that we know nothing of.

Thirdly, by relinquishing it, Lila also releases herself. The suppressed confines of her life finally lifts and she is free. We don’t know anything about it, but we can perhaps imagine her: a cantankerous old woman no one would pay any attention to, yet whose intelligence is still sharp and inquisitive at nearly 70 years of age, and who still has a few years left to live and enjoy life without the neighbourhood, without children, without men, without Elena, without the expectations of her childhood - without even the expectation and intrusion of us as readers (here we are reminded of the contrast between the real author, Elena Ferrante, who prefers to live anonymously rather than riding the wave of fame the way Elena of the novel did for the sake of her career; in other words, Ferrante is more like Lila in this respect).

The returned dolls means Lila has gone beyond the pale, and beyond even the bounds of Elena’s tale.

Fourthly, since dolls are often stand-ins for babies in the cultural environment in which several generations of girls have grown up in, the return of the dolls also reflect on the motherhoods of Elena and Lila. Although Lila lost Tina, and Gennaro was a disappointment, she was nevertheless a responsible, dedicated mother - even to Elena’s children until adolescence. Elena was a far better mother than Nino was a father, but she still suffers from her own children’s admonishment that she was too absorbed in her own work. Lila filled this gap.

By returning the dolls, Lila relinquishes her own role as surrogate mother completely, as well as being mother to Gennaro. Their roles have reversed, and on Elena’s side of the fence the story hasn’t quite ended. She has three children, plus Lila had made Elena promise all those years ago. Elena is now responsible for Gennaro.

Fifthly, the loss of those dolls were the stuff of childhood emotions. They chucked each other’s dolls into the cellar in a jealous rivalry, a dynamic pattern that repeated itself over many years. The return of those dolls means the end of that dynamic. No more jealousy, no more rivalry. Elena, however, thrived on that competition, and her
career was ignited by it.

Finally, the timing of the dolls’ return suggests a simultaneous discovery and loss of Lila’s inner child. Elena wanted Lila to hack* into her computer and read the novel. It is not inconceivable that this actually happened, and that Elena’s conclusion to the contrary is simply more evidence of her inability to see coincidences and the connections between events. The novel is finished, and soon after the dolls arrive. Perhaps Lila, herself finally free, read eagerly and realised that what Elena wrote is actually good, even if not exactly beautiful. Lila no longer needs it to be beautiful. She sees something of herself, and perhaps above all she sees Elena. She takes mercy, and frees Elena.

* Readers may have noticed more than a passing resemblance between Lila’s character and that of Lisbeth Salander. I know that I have.

Elena and Lila

Where does this leave Elena? There are many things we don’t know about Elena’s day-to-day life, but she has told us about most of the truly important events. We know that for significant periods she thrived on the competition and inspiration Lila provided. That force has now faded from Elena’s life, and she can enjoy what’s left - children and relative fame - without that pressure, without that interference. Perhaps she can mend her relationships with her children, perhaps Gennaro will take up some of her time. Either way, it is without a doubt the end of an era.

As for herself, Lila has finally freed herself of the burdens and responsibilities that had taken up her whole life. She gives up Gennaro, she gives up Elena, the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood had given up on her over the years, but she had always been a fixture, an anchor. In the final instance, her energy and inspiration had also gone into the novel we’ve just read. In this way she served Elena’s career, albeit frequently in her own interest. Now, finally, she was free. She who had always been afraid had finally done what she could never do before: be completely independent - even independent of Elena, of the novel. True to her nature, there is no tying her down, and no knowing who she really is.

Nino

The Neapolitan saga is full of characters struggling to escape the influence of their parents, only to find themselves emulating them in one way or another. Nino epitomises this theme. He hated and rejected his father throughout his adolescence, yet ended up taking womanising to a whole new level. We saw the first part coming, even if Elena did not. Yet when she finally processes his legacy, she judges him “disappointing”. Of course, Lila got there first and understands the nature of his character all too well. She judges him worse than herself because, she says, he is superficial. Guido Arotta makes a separate observation about him, namely that he is “intelligence without tradition”. A talented man without roots, who has nothing to lose, and is all too eager to be someone. At the end of the saga Nino sings his own praises, but those who loved him from close up have all realised that he is an unreliable, lightweight human being.

What, therefore, should we make of Elena’s longstanding crush on him? She herself realises that she had created a fantasy, and that the person who showed up at her book reading in Milan had nothing to do with that fantasy. They were separate entities. However, fantasy and reality corresponded sometimes. For instance, his behaviour as an adolescent was real. She saw him as cool and untouchable, unaffected by the opinions of those around him. His head was somewhere else. That trait turned out to be a flaw, a disregard for everyone around him, even those who adored him and
whom he sporadically loved in return when it suited him.

He had intelligence, charisma, and good looks. He seemed untouchable, smooth in all situations. When he showed up at the book reading he was a knight in shining armour, rescuing her from the attacks of a stuffy intellectual. What Ferrante is doing, as Nino’s character unfolds in all its mirage-like glory, is turn the literary convention of the hero - reminiscent of, say, Will Ladislaw in Middlemarch - on its head. She is taking a longer view. Book 3 could have ended with Nino willing to reform for the sake of his “true” love for Elena. We could have been told that “they lived happily ever after”. Instead, we got the bombshell that is book 4. Nino is a warning that many of the classics are perhaps guilty of building fantasies and gender stereotypes rather than looking at the genuine commitments to gender role realities that are implied by marriage and long term partnerships. It is a stunning critique.

If I had expected Nino’s general infidelity, his ongoing marriage to Eleonora was more of a surprise. It is a cleverly disguised plot device that all but defines his character. It anchors his tendency to put every relationship in service of his career ambitions. It provides him with monetary stability and a conservative societal esteem, namely of keeping a family. It also characterises his inability to finish off any relationship. In his personal life he is a politician: not a conviction politician, but one who goes where the grass is green.

Another surprise was the amount of time it took for Elena to get rid of him. In her case, also, we see what she is willing to sacrifice for her career - in her case her human dignity. For a while she lives the life of a concubine. Yet it’s not just a career, it’s also the children and the roof over their heads. She’d created a complex set of responsibilities for herself, and she was keeping herself entangled out of necessity.

It takes her even longer still to realise that his interest in her was due to the prestige she reflected back on him. This tendency in a man is so unusual that she couldn’t see it for what it is.

Only Lila put Nino’s life at risk by being of no use to his career. Lila is therefore in a league of her own.

“She stood out among so many because she, naturally, did not submit to any training, to any use, or to any purpose. All of us had submitted and that submission had - through trials, failures, successes - reduced us.” - p. 403

If Lila’s capacity for suffering is bottomless, Nino’s suffering is like a sulking child’s when it cannot get its way. When he gets the upper hand once more, it is water off a duck’s back. By the end of the novel Nino is nothing but an annoying stranger whom Elena finds “large, bloated, a big ruddy man with thinning hair who was constantly celebrating himself” (p. 470).

By the end of the saga, Elena herself is leaning more towards traditional values again. She recognises that Pasquale is “much better preserved than Nino”, and speaks fondly about the values he took over from his father and that he upheld at great personal cost. Indeed, even the passing of the Solaras are met with a balanced sense of loss. Elena may share something of Nino’s lightness and ambitious disregard for those close to her, but she recognises the love she had for her old friends, for the neighbourhood, for all the families that lived there - even for her own mother. We don’t truly know Nino anymore by the end of the saga, but his lack of interest in his own children speaks volumes.
I return to Nino a little later for a final look at his character.

Pietro

Pietro, who resembles MiddleMarch’s Casaubon and Wuthering Heights’ Edgar Linton in the during the earlier novels, in book 4 emerges as a far better partner and father than Nino. He never shirks his responsibilities, he is tender and observant (as when he advises Elena sensitively about Lila), and despite his general physical deficiencies, Elena judges him worthy of her bed once last time before he leaves for America. Elena recognises his selfish need to spend his personal time with his work, yet accepts it more readily later in life, since she recognises the similarity to her own character. In short, she endorses him as a good former husband, even if she has no desire to start something new. In all these respects Pietro also turns the classic literary stereotype somewhat on its head.

With both these male characters Ferrante is taking our common literary canon to task.

Alfonso

One of the great satisfactions of Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan saga is the way in which the story lends itself to analysis. There is enough substance for a thesis, and a blog post can really only hope to probe a few angles. We have not even taken a look at the Solaras, and we should.

One perspective from which to tackle the changing fortunes of the Solaras in book 4 is via the prism of Alfonso. Alfonso is a gender bender who mediates between the destructive masculine energy represented by the Solaras, and Lila’s near-indestructible counterpoint of female energy. He is both a gay man and a cross-dresser, and his muse is Lila. Not only that, he wants to become Lila. The result is that he begins to resemble Lila even more than Lila herself.

Michele Solara, always the more dangerous of the two brothers, has lost the upper hand in his dealings with Lila since she established Basic Sight with Enzo. She and Enzo have become self-sufficient. Michele’s deep respect and yearning for Lila means that this energy now spills over a cliff and he needs a surrogate for his obsession, which the shape shifting Alfonso provides. They become a type of couple, albeit covertly. (Marcello is furious, although there is nothing he can do.)

The Solaras epitomise a type of macho male energy that simply cannot co-exist with a true female energy. Michele is obsessed by his opposite, but it is also his downfall. Their violence is not compatible with equal distribution of male and female energy. They require submission. Lila and Enzo, on the other hand, embody the only example in the neighbourhood of a different, balanced model of male and female partnership.

As Michele and Alfonso get closer to each other, the Solaras are weakened. At the same time Lila and Enzo become stronger, especially after the return of Elena, and the birth of both their daughters. Masculine and feminine energies find a kind of equilibrium in Lila’s family life perhaps for the first time, and the result is a temporary happiness and harmony (which, after the loss of Tina, never returns). During this period Michele is reduced to a tentative, nervous man who can no longer act with vigour. Whereas Alfonso now embraces his own newfound identity of a woman in a man’s body, modeled on and inspired by Lila, Michele is completely at odds with himself.

We don’t really know what happens between Michele and Alfonso, but it seems that Alfonso overshoots his privileges and Michele kicks him out. The entire balance of masculine and feminine forces in the neighbourhood are once again in jeopardy, stacked in favour of the destructive masculine element once more. Alfonso loses his
feminine appearance, he becomes unreliable, and the whole sorry saga ends with his death at the hands of unknown assailants. It is the beginning of the end.

Tina’s disappearance is the visible culmination of this multi-generational journey. Whereas we are never sure who took Tina, the flow of energies suggests the Solaras were behind it, except that they thought it was Elena’s child - not Lila’s.

Everything from then on - even the death of the Solaras - suggests to Lila that nothing will ever really change in the old neighbourhood.

Nino and Elena
While we are on the topic of contrasting energies we should take a last look at Nino and Elena.

Nino exhibits a strong blend of the feminine and the masculine. His willingness to sleep with influential women in order to get to the top is a strategy more commonly associated - rightly or wrongly - with ambitious women in society. Combined with his intelligence, charisma, and good looks, this is a killer strategy. He appears to have disguised his stereotypically Southern tendencies behind an alluring, more acceptable Northern veneer. His masculine aggression, paired with a keen feminine sensibility, which is to say an ability to tune into women’s emotions, makes him an effective and well rounded talent. Unfortunately it is almost completely erased by his lack of commitment to his roots, or indeed to any place where he puts down new roots - except where there is power. He sows the wild oats and moves on.

Elena comes across as conservatively feminine during most of her adolescence, but her ambition passes through masculine territory via her academic learning of the classics. She breaks out of academia and attempts, with Lila as inspiration, to marry her feminine and masculine sides to great subversive effect.

If the masculine and feminine are played off against each other, so are the Northern and Southern cultures. In this case Nino and Elena are the clearest examples of this co-habiting duality, since both rise high above their origins. Indeed, at times they mirror each other. However, unlike Nino, Elena increasingly recognises her roots and turns to the neighbourhood of her and Lila’s youth for inspiration. Even so, she moves to Turin in the North for her retirement.

Conclusion

As epitomised by Lila’s life throughout most of the saga, any equilibrium of opposing forces is extremely hard to maintain. Each character in his or her own way tries to find such an equilibrium, and success tends to come at the cost of others, or at the cost of social cohesion.

_The Story of the Lost Child_ resolves the main plot points in often startling ways, but it is the opened implications of the ending that ensures the reader will continue to reflect on the rich material provided.

Posted by thundercomh at 11:33 pm
Labels: analysis, literature

10 comments:

Debra Hotmer said...

Thank you. This analyses has been very helpful for me. At the surprise twist at the end, I was struck by the connection between the following: there is a short conversation between Elena and Lila on page 218. When Elena reminds Lila that Lila had given her daughter
Elena and Lila, the two heroines of Elena Ferrante's dazzling Neapolitan quartet of novels, are one of those unforgettable pairs who define each other and take their place in our collective imagination as a matched set — like Prince Hal and Falstaff, Settembrini and Naphta, Vladimir and Estragon, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Thelma and Louise.

They grew up best friends in a poor, violent, crime-ridden neighborhood in post-World War II Naples. Elena was the good girl, the hard-working, conscientious one, lucky enough to win a place at a decent school, and to escape to a new life in Florence; she becomes a successful author and marries a professor from a prominent family. Lila was the fierce, impulsive, erratic one — a “terrible, dazzling girl” who intimidates everyone with her sharp elbows and sharper tongue. She leaves school, marries young and starts a successful business; while she becomes a kind of power broker in the old neighborhood, she remains trapped there, her radiant artistic gifts unrealized.

With the three earlier installments of the quartet (“My Brilliant Friend,” “The Story of a New Name,” “Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay”) and this stunning
final volume, "The Story of the Lost Child," Ms. Ferrante has turned the stories of Lila and Elena into an extraordinary epic that bridges six decades and unfolds into a portrait of a neighborhood, a city in transition and a country lurching through the second half of the 20th century into the next.

The notion of tracing the stories of two women over the long arc of their lives is hardly new — Arnold Bennett and Richard Yates both drew powerful portraits of two very different sisters in their novels "The Old Wives’ Tale" (1908) and "The Easter Parade" (1976) — but Ms. Ferrante’s Neapolitan quartet is utterly distinctive, immersing us not just in a time and place, but deep within the psychological consciousness of its narrator, Elena (who, not coincidentally, shares the first part of her creator’s pen name). These four novels have the symphonic intricacy of Anthony Powell’s “A Dance to the Music of Time” and the intensity and sense of place of Lawrence Durrell’s “The Alexandria Quartet.” They are ingeniously plotted, with clues to thriller-like disappearances deftly and invisibly planted (beginning in the first volume, with the vanishing of a 60-something Lila, and circling back in time to the even more devastating loss of a child), and at the same time, rooted in an understanding of their two heroines that is utterly visceral and immediate.

Indeed, Ms. Ferrante’s writing — lucid and direct, but with a cyclonic undertow — is very much a mirror of both her heroines. Elena has a decidedly linear approach to life, and, as a narrator, she often takes a matter-of-fact tone, but that appearance of control belies the roiling, chaotic, Lila-like emotions beneath. This constant pull between detachment and turmoil (or, to put it in terms of the classics that the author loves, between Apollonian rationality and Dionysian ferocity) creates a kind of alternating electrical current that lends these novels a compelling narrative tension.

We are made to identify with Elena’s struggles to balance the competing demands of her career, her children and her lover, Nino, just as we are made to understand Lila’s impatience with her class-conscious, often pretentious friend, and her daily frustrations with the swirling criminal and political corruption in their old neighborhood, which grows ever more clamorous as Communists, socialists and right-wingers collide in the 1960s and ’70s.
Like Alice Munro and Doris Lessing, Ms. Ferrante (a pseudonym for a writer who has never revealed her identity) captures the day-to-day texture of women's lives: the effort it takes to hold onto some core sense of self in the face of endless, banal household tasks — diapers and dusting and cleaning the kitchen — and the demands of time and attention made by husbands and lovers. The difficulty, for those with artistic ambitions, of clearing mental space in the face of mundane worries about paying the rent and making supper for the children. The often dizzying gap between fiercely held beliefs — about politics, philosophy, feminism — and the compromises of their daily lives. The collision and confluence of personal family dramas and larger events on the public stage.

The ever-fluctuating relationship between Elena and Lila remains at the center of all four novels. They are at once best friends and confidantes, and rivals for the same man; cheerleaders for each other's literary ambitions, and, at the same time, jealous rivals; sisters in commiseration over the travails of pregnancy; and competitive mothers, worrying about whose daughter is prettier and more gifted.

Lila tends to be the aggressor, bullying Elena, making her feel guilty about not spending more time with her children and leaving her husband to run off with Nino (who, long ago, had been Lila’s lover). She is a troublemaker and pot stirrer — she has Nino followed and tells Elena her unpleasant findings. But if Lila is often manipulative and undermining, she can also be generous and devoted. She takes care of Elena’s daughters when book tours and the feckless Nino take Elena out of town, and she takes Elena's ailing mother (a matriarch as cruel and cunning as Tony Soprano’s monstrous mother, Livia) to the hospital when she collapses.

We see Lila through Elena’s eyes in these books, but Ms. Ferrante simultaneously gives us a cleareyed perspective on Elena — her annoying need to feel that she’s surpassed her childhood friend, whose brilliance she has always envied; her selfishness in placing her writing career and her passion for Nino before the needs of her children; her almost mercenary willingness to turn Lila’s life into material for her books.

Over the years, as age and success and misfortune take their toll, the relationship between Lila and Elena shifts and mutates — and yet, in many respects,
remains the same. Sometimes one’s life seems ascendant. At other times, the wheel of fortune appears to turn, favoring the other, or inflicting terrible losses on them both.

Ms. Ferrante knows her heroines so intimately (and their place in a constellation of relationships within an incestuously close neighborhood, controlled by families with criminal and political connections) to show us how one decision, one accident, one misunderstanding can set a chain of dominoes among family members and neighbors, how clashes between mothers and daughters are repeated generation to generation, how present-day situations are rooted in the geologic layers of the past — in old loyalties, betrayals and resentments.

In “The Story of the Lost Child,” Elena returns to Naples after leaving her husband and finds herself reimmersed in the lives of Lila and her family, and in the community whose gravitational pull she once tried so desperately to escape. The novels are beautifully enmeshed, one with another, as if Ms. Ferrante had the entire quartet in her head from the start. There is something musical about the intertwined lives of Elena and Lila, like Lila’s cyclical view of Naples and its history: “where everything was marvelous and everything became gray and irrational and everything sparkled again, as when a cloud passes over the sun and the sun appears to flee, a timid, pale disk, near extinction,” before the cloud dissolves, and it’s suddenly “so bright you have to shield your eyes with your hand.”

THE STORY OF THE LOST CHILD

By Elena Ferrante

Translated by Ann Goldstein

473 pages. Europa Editions. $18.

Follow Michiko Kakutani on Twitter: @michikokakutani

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