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Who Is Elena Ferrante?

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus, Meghan O'Rourke and Emily Gould

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The writer known by that name has never been photographed, interviewed in person or even made a public appearance, but a collection of fiercely candid novels has earned her (him?) recognition as one of the keenest observers of Italian society. On the eve of the publication of "Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay," the much-anticipated third volume in the author's Neapolitan series, three admirers celebrate this elusive talent.



Thorsten Brinkmann

ON PRIVACY



Elena Ferrante's "The Lost Daughter," 2006, which has been (along with her other books) translated into English by Ann Goldstein and published by Europa Editions.
Marko Metzinger

On a recent Alitalia flight from Milan to New York, a woman in a neighboring seat said, in Italian, to my girlfriend, "I didn't want to disturb your privacy, but I couldn't help notice you were reading Elena Ferrante. Isn't it amazing?" Carol agreed and politely tried to resume her reading, but the woman needed her moment of ritual speculation about the reclusive author's identity. "Everyone knows Ferrante is really a man," she began.

When Italian columnists set themselves to the Ferrante mystery, they assume she must be famous for something else. For what other reason would one possibly decline celebrity? As Ferrante once said in a written interview, "It would not occur to any newspaper to fill a page with the hypothesis that my books were written by an old retired archivist or by a young, newly hired bank clerk." Part of the point of her withdrawal is to show her country, with its reality shows and cult-of-personality politics, that celebrity — the universal, wrathful demand of the public for complete disclosure — might be graciously declined.

The books themselves are about, among other things, keeping things hidden, and how the partitions we erect permit us the comfort of multiple identities. In Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, her character Elena struggles to reconcile the girl she is in her violent neighborhood in Naples with the girl she becomes at the mixed

high school, the scholarship student on campus in Pisa with the political journalist and married mother in Florence. The story is narrated by Elena's future self — the one who, in her mid-60s, seems to have figured out how it all hangs together — but this narrator is barely present; she steps into the the frame occasionally to clap it into action and then withdraws. The books find their momentum in the narrator's scenic inventory of the losses her younger self doesn't yet know she'll survive.

Thus with a young, fractured Elena, and an older, integrated Elena, there is simply no room and no need for a third Elena, the one who's presumably living in Italy somewhere and writing these books. The further comparison — to the person who has figured it all out enough to become famous — is denied. In staying out of the art/life fray, Ferrante is quite unlike the other great serial autobiographical novelists of our time, Edward St. Aubyn and Karl Ove Knausgaard, both of whom invite the life comparison — and who, in two differently macho ways, insist that they are hardy enough to withstand the sorts of conflicts that can and do ensue. In St. Aubyn's case, the extravagantly artful prose of the five-part Patrick Melrose novels, which detail his relationship to his upper-class English family, makes clear that the author has risen above the story he has inherited: the abuse, the incest, the parties, the drugs. The effortless style of Knausgaard's confessional six-book series "My Struggle," on the other hand, promises total disclosure to the reader, even if this should cause the author (and his family) some later discomfort. St. Aubyn is stylist, Knausgaard confessor and Ferrante uninterested.

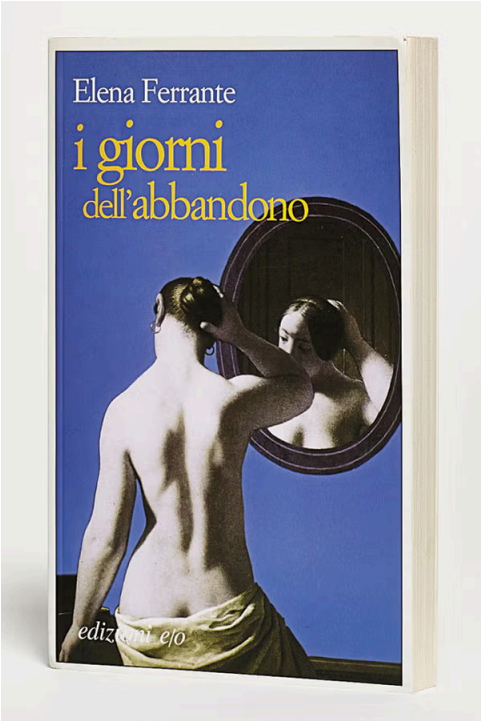
For Ferrante, becoming a public figure should be a writer's choice, not an obligation. One ought to be able to make a decision about where and when one wants to be held accountable. One of the things her Neapolitan novels do so well is describe how hard it can be, especially for a woman, to grow into something new when one's always being dragged back into the muck of the old. In the third volume of the series, after Elena publishes her own book, based loosely on her own experience of awakening sexual desire, she finds, on returning to her old neighborhood, that she's been overly identified with her narrator — that her novel

was not judged for its internal coherence but for what it seems to reveal about the author's own "dirty" life. What Ferrante shows is that the comparison to life is not only better for the writer to do without, but better for the reader, as well.

"I think she must be a film director," the woman on the plane went on to say, "because the writing in the books is only so-so. It's really the story itself that's so good." This struck me at the time as silly. But now I think what she meant was that the books feel somehow cinematically real. We are in the theater; the lights are off; the world outside has been banished and forgotten. There is only the text, and our engagement is all the richer for it. The speculation itself becomes a form of absorption. "To my way of seeing," Ferrante has written, "digging up the personality of the writer from the stories he offers, from the characters he puts onstage, from the landscapes, objects, from interviews like this — always and only, in short, from the tonality of his writing — is nothing other than a good way of reading."

– GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

ON MADNESS



"The Days of Abandonment," 2002.
Marko Metzinger

While many in the Italian reading public believe that a man must have written these novels — the leading candidate for the "real" Ferrante is the Neapolitan writer Domenico Starnone — I hope Ferrante is a woman, and one who might one day find it possible to unveil herself while still writing with the same ferocity.

On the other hand, with a voice so alive in these pages, does it really matter that we don't know who she is — especially when it's so easy to feel like we do? The protagonists of her psychological, phantasmagoric novels are accomplished, analytically-minded women who, as we follow them, lose their grip on reality. Each has suffered a major loss — a divorce, the death of a mother, the end of a friendship. Destabilized, they are nearly suffocated by the emergence of long-repressed emotions. The signature quality of Ferrante's work is the way each narrator's cool voice slowly betrays a growing hysteria. You might say Ferrante restores hysteria from a pure derangement to a radical form of insight — a way of expressing the damage that marriage, childbirth and sex can do to women's bodies and minds.

In "The Days of Abandonment" — first published in 2002, and perhaps her finest work outside the Neapolitan trilogy — Olga, a former writer whose husband has abruptly left her, slides into "bitter fantasies" that gradually supplant her reality. She's persuaded that her phone doesn't work and that her dog has eaten ant poison. At one point, she attaches a metal clip to her arm as if to hold herself together. At the book's climax, when she needs to get medicine for her son, who has a fever, she spends hours trying to unlock her door, convinced she can't. In the hands of a less agile writer, such a scene might feel excessively stagey. In Ferrante's, it's frightening — almost Kafkaesque. "You aren't listening to me," her daughter calls out in terror, as she watches her mother try to turn the key with her mouth. "You're doing terrible things, your eyes are all twisted."

Like Marguerite Duras before her, Ferrante writes candidly, even provocatively, about women's social roles. Past lives routinely resurface. In "The Lost Daughter," 47-year-old Leda, a university professor, is vacationing on the Ionian shore, reading on the beach each day, when she becomes increasingly interested in the lives of a "serene" young mother and her daughter, Elena, who sit near her, playing with a

doll. Leda's own daughters have recently gone to live with their father in Toronto, and the distance from them has made Leda feel "miraculously unfettered." Watching the strangers returns her to her own childhood, "poisoned" by her mother's unhappiness, and to memories of a time when she abandoned her own daughters. When the little girl isn't looking, Leda takes her doll. Later, considering whether to return it, she tells us, something "twisted violently inside me." Past and present collapse as she stands on the beach, near a coconut seller. "It seemed to me that I was Elena," she thinks, dazedly, "but . . . perhaps I was only myself as a child, climbing back out of oblivion."

Hysteria — expounded upon by Freud and now known as "conversion disorder" — describes the state that arises when conflicting forces (a woman's private will, society's expectations) encounter one another. For Ferrante's women, the choice is either to escape (at the risk of upsetting all social structure) or to be consumed. Sometimes they are the ones to consume themselves. In "The Days of Abandonment," Olga offers herself up to her downstairs neighbor, who initially disgusts her; what follows is one of the more arresting descriptions of sex from a woman's point of view I've read. In the second book of the Neapolitan series, the narrator — who has already begun to leave behind her traditional, misogynist and violent slum in Naples — helps her friend Lina, tethered to her home, to deface her portrait. The image, used to sell shoes, becomes an emblem of what the community does to women. This is Ferrante's world — in which the body is deformed by both emotional and physical conflict, and everything is both symbolic and actual.

– MEGHAN O'ROURKE

ON FRIENDSHIP

The nonfiction book, “Fragments,” 2003.
Marko Metzinger

When we’re young, we all have a friend who is everything to us, with whom we share everything. And when we grow up, we leave that person behind. Growing up usually means leaving her — and the alternate self she represents — behind. The effects on the abandoned and abandoning parties are rarely discussed, a lacuna that the third book in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan trilogy fills to devastating effect. It is the truest evocation of a complex and lifelong friendship between women I’ve ever read.

As the series opens, the narrator Elena and her best friend Lina (or Lila, to her “brilliant friend” Elena) are just children. Elena is a teacher’s pet, excelling because she wants to please her teachers and family, but Lila is a natural scholar who, unconcerned with praise, simply loves to learn. Blond, conventionally pretty Elena resolves to model herself on wild Lila, who dazzles with mental and physical quickness even as she repels teachers and students with her meanness and indifference to their approval.

The novels’ tension comes from the ever-shifting balance of the friends’ power, their different kinds of progress. Lila’s animal allure attracts attention in the neighborhood just as Elena’s shyness — the sense of “inadequacy and shame” that holds her back at dances — ultimately protects her from joining the ranks of young

wives, allowing her to break free of her Neapolitan community to become a university student. During Lila's wedding to a successful shopkeeper, Elena laments her solitude, feeling she can relate neither to the people nor the rituals. Still, it isn't so easy to leave her old friend from Naples. In the second book in the series, Elena — angry with her friend for having an affair with a boy she loves — destroys a packet of Lila's own writing entrusted to her for safekeeping. It's an act so damaging that only a friend could pull it off.

There aren't many books that illuminate the inner workings of this kind of relationship between women; Lorrie Moore's "Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?" and Mary Gaitskill's "Two Girls, Fat and Thin" both get at some of the jealous toxicity, the worship mixed with disgust and enduring love that women can feel for each other, but only Ferrante has anatomized such a bond over decades in so much detail. Friendship is more like a romantic relationship than we mostly allow ourselves to think, and Ferrante understands its lulls and moments of reinfatuation, how rifts between friends can be even more painful than breakups between lovers. As the third book in the series, "Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay," opens, Elena is writing the words we're reading at her computer, sipping her coffee and looking out onto the Po. She recalls seeing Lila for what she tells us was the last time before learning that Lila has disappeared from her home. Just before they parted, she remembers, Lila cautioned Elena to never write about her, and Elena promised not to. Lila says that she'll know if Elena does, and that she'll break in and delete the files from Elena's computer. Elena says she can protect herself. "Not from me," Lila says.

One of the most excruciating passages occurs when Elena begins to encounter her own literary fame via reviews and neighborhood gossip. I put the book down many times as I read these chapters, almost unable to go on. Elena's excoriation as the avatar of a lost generation and a shame to her family hit close to home — that was part of it. But the other part was how Elena's concern for herself soon turned into a concern for the way this kind of attention would deform her already strained bond with Lila. Elena already suspects that she has stolen the voice of her novel from a 10-page story Lila wrote as a child; she cannot rid herself of the thought that she is

somehow plagiarizing her friend. I, too, started to worry about Lila's response — not to Elena's first novel, but to the book that was in my hands, the one that broke her promise.

Who is Elena Ferrante? I imagine her to be someone who knows the temptation to write about what is closest to home, and who has done what she can to protect the people she loves from herself, even though that has meant giving up anything good that being the public representative of her work could ever entail. This may be wise, but it's clear from the books, at least to me, that this choice has not protected anyone entirely. Perhaps nothing can.

– EMILY GOULD

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