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For Rosetta Gervasio, my brilliant friend

E L E N A F E R R A N T E ' S
K E Y W O R D S

NOTE

Works by Elena Ferrante cited in this essay are listed in parentheses as follows:

ban—*The Beach at Night*

doa—*The Days of Abandonment*

fer—Cited material appeared in the *Guardian* and elsewhere

fr—*Frantumaglia*

ld—*The Lost Daughter*

mbf—*My Brilliant Friend*

slc—*The Story of the Lost Child*

snn—*The Story of a New Name*

tl—*Troubling Love*

tlts—*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*

For all other works, the author's last name and, where applicable, a page number are given.

Please see the bibliography at the end of the book for a complete list of references and further information about how the cited works have been used.

INTRODUCTION
An International Hit

1. Elena Ferrante's Readers Around the World

How do we pick up the thread of a discussion to talk about the women friends in America who celebrated purchasing the quartet together? How do we unspool it to reach the reader in Leeds, England, for whom Elena Ferrante's Naples is reminiscent of Glasgow and, in general, every city on the margins of the neoliberal economy? How can we stretch that thread all the way to Australia, where a British reader who emigrated forty years ago finds in *The Neapolitan Novels* the same violence she knew in the tiny Northumbrian village where she was born? How do we untangle the skein in China, where a male student from Nanking University points out the arc of the Italian Communist Party embedded in the quartet, while a female student from Fudan University, in Shanghai, sees *smarginatura* (a term that Ferrante employs to describe the dissolution of boundaries) as a reaction against the forms of arrogance endured by women? Why not finally intertwine the thread of memory with that of emotion by recalling the reader who, again in Leeds, stood up at the end of a talk on "Ferrante Fever" and, in a loud, stentorian voice, said, "Tell Elena Ferrante to keep writing! Tell her we want to read her stories here in Yorkshire!" However far apart on the world map, these distant and distinct voices are united by a passion for this author's work. I have heard them at talks and readings that I have given about *The Neapolitan Novels* over the past two years. Their chorus suggests that, thanks to Ferrante's writing, Naples and Italy generally have given us a

repertoire of stories about our globalized ultra-modernity: a classic for our times.

Because we now live in a local and global web, Elena and Lila—two little girls who represent our hopes and fears for the future, who show us that frightened rootedness is the most painful form of displacement—speak to us; in our lives, too, those who leave *are* those who stay. For readers, the quartet excites dark impulses, unresolved questions, and tangled emotions about the major transformations taking place today, by way of an almost provocative depiction of Naples and its particular (social, cultural, political) makeup, which flies in the face of modern order. Strange, perhaps even exoticized by readers in certain passages, the city is also familiar, a kindred spirit, a sister, because it is part of European history and embodies a crisis of progress, the shadow line where today's globalized West has lost its way. The appeal of this locally rooted yet cosmopolitan story lies in its volcanic metamorphosis of lives and time. There is something excessive and elusive about the quartet, which is why this “epic story of a great friendship” (Benini) is much more than a love story and far less than a conventional oath of loyalty. This large historical tableau is actually—in Ferrante's own words—an investigation into the lives of its figures and their sufferings, a countermelody to the rhetoric of country, progress, revolution, even feminism.

To shed light on the meaning of this metamorphosis, I have mapped out the themes found in the author's complete works. Indeed, I have conceived of this book as an Ariadne's thread of key words, which, like signal lights, can indicate the many twists and turns of Ferrante's writing and help us navigate the labyrinth of her international success: a success that originated in Italy, has been nurtured in America by readers and critics—James Wood deserves special mention—and eventually led to the book's publication in forty-eight countries, where it has reached more than ten million readers worldwide (including a

million three hundred thousand in Italy and three million in the US). Ferrante's translator Ann Goldstein is also to thank for the spread of "Ferrante Fever" across the US. Goldstein has participated in many public talks about *The Neapolitan Novels* and presents, together with the invisible author, a model of creative female partnership that mirrors the literary partnership of Elena and Lila at the heart of the quartet (Milkova¹).

2. The Chapters in This Book

Elena Ferrante's Key Words targets the same varied cross-section of readers who in every corner of the world have found *The Neapolitan Novels* meaningful. I will also discuss the quartet in the context of the author's first three novels—*Troubling Love* (1992), *The Days of Abandonment* (2002), *The Lost Daughter* (2006)—the fable *The Beach at Night* (2007), and the essays, letters, and interviews collected in *Frantumaglia* (2003–2016). Like the quartet, these creative and critical works revolve around a new form of female identity made visible by a common set of themes and images. Lurking behind Elena and Lila are Delia, Olga, and Leda, the main characters of *Troubling Love*, *The Days of Abandonment*, and *The Lost Daughter*, respectively. These five women are bound by a common narrative about female subjectivity and its ability to dismantle itself and be reborn from *frantumaglia*, a traumatic experience in which reality is shattered, an experience closely linked to the *smarginatura* that governs *The Neapolitan Novels* both formally and thematically. It is no coincidence that both terms are neologisms, one of them semantic (*smarginatura*; see 3.2); their novelty suggests the need to rename the world from a new point of view. Given that "the narrative choices . . . can all be traced back to the changing condition of women at the

center of the narrative” (fr 276), the two friends’ metamorphosis and/or *smarginatura* can be linked to the metamorphosis and/or *smarginatura* of the books’ forms and themes.

Chapters Two and Three (“Female Friendship” and “*Smarginatura*, *Frantumaglia*, Surveillance: Between Mothers and Daughters”) explain how Ferrante’s entire body of work has given voice to crucial features of female difference, a historical, existential, and biological otherness that rebalances the scales and rewords what we have inherited from the age-old repertoire of the male imagination. While reckoning with that repertoire’s tendency to classify emerging female subjectivity as a deviation from (male) standards, the difference depicted in the quartet has shifted its center of gravity. Chapters Two and Three retrace the signs of such otherness in the practice of female friendship, in its controversial and baffling forms, in a *troubling* dimension of love and abandonment, in *frantumaglia*, *smarginatura*, and a new kind of surveillance, in the hidden channel connecting all these emotions and experiences, in the combative but foundational relationship between mothers and daughters, and in motherhood as both frame and cage of public life, its successes as well as its failures. These are “fragments with the most varied historical and biological origins . . . fickle agglomerations that maintain a fragile equilibrium, that are inconsistent and complex, that can’t be reduced to a fixed framework” (fr 217).

But difference is also a point of view, a means of constructing new categories of perception through which to rewrite contexts that are only apparently unrelated: literary forms as bilingualism, urban spaces as hubs of Italian and European history. Beginning with this difference, Chapter One, “A Brilliant Popular Narrative,” analyzes the narrative mechanism of *The Neapolitan Novels* and the novelty of this engaging and innovative story, which cannot be dismissed as commercial literature. The final four chapters (“Naples, the Urban Labyrinth”; “Two Languages, Emigration, and Schooling”; “Violence, Imagery,

Disappearances”; and “History and Stories”) dwell on the long time frame of the quartet and the fragments of history that emerge from it: Naples as a border city, a labyrinth both in and outside the straitjacket of modernity; the conflict and cross-pollination between standard language and dialect; the emancipation of new female and bilingual voices; national identity as a tale of emigration; school as a formative and alienating experience for a “second-class” woman; the language of male violence and its blend of physical and symbolic domination; the dissipation of history from the 1950s through the first decade of the new millennium.

3. Alienation and Inclusion

These key words in Ferrante form the lexicon of a story about women caught between emancipation and marginalization, a story both intimate and social, which can paint both the big picture and its cracks. In the quartet, gender—that is, the historically and culturally determined role of women—provides the lens that allows us to take in an entire historical-social landscape and is, crucially, what makes the scenario interesting to millions of readers worldwide. As Ferrante points out, this large historical tableau emerges from the perspective of “alienation-inclusion” that gives the plot its structure (fr 283). Elena and Lila—the first the daughter of a porter at the city hall, the latter the daughter of a shoemaker—represent a lower-class, female point of view that is historically subordinate to the logic of male power and its various hierarchies. Yet thanks to the events of the 1950s to ’70s—from the social mobility of the Italian economic miracle to the transformation of civil society and feminism—this is a point of view that can become inclusive and central by virtue of its roots in these very margins. The female “margin” is not relegated to the private realm—that

inner, domestic gynaeceum and home-*cum*-prison—but, rather, is inevitably internalized and recreated by Elena and Lila as they break free of its moldy confines; though they manage to fight back bravely, they are often embarrassed and humiliated in public spaces. Ultimately, the marginalized novel becomes a coming-of-age (and deviating-from-the-norm) story within which Elena and her writing career emerge as a clear subgenre: the *Künstlerroman*, or “artist’s novel.”

The narrative encompasses all the historical inequalities of female identity and depicts the contradictions inherent in a self that is torn between her centrality to the creative act and her historically subaltern role. To quote a popular feminist slogan, to which the entire perspective of *The Neapolitan Novels* cycle is indebted, “The personal is political.” These four words speak to “what we are made of” (fr 332), insofar as women’s bodies are shaped—in public spaces even before domestic ones—by a type of subordination rooted in an ancient symbolic order that produces structural inequality between men and women. In the quartet, the subplots about human destiny reveal their strata of power and violence through women’s lives while at the same time giving rise to an inclusive female mode, which has succeeded in turning the personal into the political, beginning with one woman’s moral and immoral relationship with another. Therein lies the ultimate meaning of *The Neapolitan Novels*’ polyphony, of the narrative mechanism that shapes the story from the echo of Lila’s words in Elena’s and from their “splendid and shadowy” (slc 451; see 1.5) friendship, forged from emancipation and power.

4. Ferrante in the #MeToo Era

Among the reasons for Elena Ferrante’s international success, three others are worth mentioning, all of them connected.

First, Ferrante revisits our idea of brilliance or “*genio*” (Setti¹ 111), a concept traditionally attributed to men, and locates it chiefly in the friendship between the two main characters (thereby breaking the stereotype that women are incapable of forming bonds; of, as they say in Naples, “*non tenere a genio*”; Brogi¹). Second, she portrays Elena and Lila as two women who are extremely intense and vivid *because* they are problematic and embody, each in her own way, ambiguities and contradictions. Just think of Elena’s opportunism, Lila’s notorious “spite,” and the mixture of nobility and misery that defines their friendship. Last, Ferrante fashions from their story a parable of survival, not of victimhood. The pathos of the victim is actually exorcized by the two friends’ complexity and by their fictional representation as women who, on the one hand, have had to suffer the physical and symbolic violence of male domination (sometimes deluding themselves into thinking they can manipulate and control it), but, on the other hand, have also sought, at various stages in their lives, to develop creative forms of resistance. The survival of Elena and Lila is not just a creative form of struggle against the status quo but also a painful reflection on the colonized parts of their own imagination.

The years that preceded and then saw the explosion of the #MeToo phenomenon and the issue of violence against women (as a normalized practice that pervades all social classes and countries) are the same that, not coincidentally, saw the widening of all forms of inequality, gender inequality chief among them (Danna). Enter Ferrante, whose writing has provided our international consciousness with a female ethic of survival and an indirect response to the attempts to dismiss #MeToo as a victims’ movement. In the quartet, surviving means recognizing our disenfranchised female past in our daughters’ emancipated present, acknowledging the violent line of matricide in the maternal family tree, processing the legacy of male domination through a controversial but solid model of friendship, and

building a new capacity for self-assertion and creativity on victims' understandable fragility and contradictions (see Chapters 2, 3 and 6).

I use the word survival here in its broadest sense, one that welcomes, first, feminist debate about processing abuse—which had already started in the 1970s—as well as the philosophical and cultural model that can explain the extraordinary anthropological, temporal, and spatial density of the quartet. Elena and Lila's marginalization is, to borrow the art historian Didi-Huberman's metaphor, an "imprint," the reemergence of a mark that some people consider outmoded and obsolete, but which resurfaces in the world at another point in history. From the perspective of #MeToo, this "imprint" has reemerged today, in the era of globalization, when "nothing has faded, everything is here in the present" (fr 366), a painful period in which the archaic and the ultra-modern, regression and progress, coexist. At the same time, survival is the ability to form a new social imaginary by overwriting the old, at times erasing old signs instead of adding new ones, even renaming the old images from a female perspective: the pictures (see Chapter 6) through which Ferrante's protagonists reformulate images of male domination have a subversive power analogous to the abuse stories of #MeToo, where the victim, by the very act of telling her story, becomes a survivor.

5. Who's Afraid of Elena Ferrante?

The quartet indirectly challenges the circumscribed place assigned to women writers by certain publishers, journalists, and academics in Italy. Golden cage or ghetto, in either case it's regarded as "a by-product, good only as a pastime for women" (fr 316). On the other hand, the ability to create a female viewpoint that is simultaneously specific and choral,

sentimental and political, in the large historical tableau that is *The Neapolitan Novels* represents a break from this cage and ghetto, a challenge to the “different standards of *credibility* in fiction” (Brogi²) still applied to female and male writing. So, who’s afraid of Elena Ferrante? Many critical responses to the quartet are, at their root, reactions against the way the novel trespasses beyond the confines traditionally staked out for women writers, against the way it challenges literary hierarchies (in particular, the double standards for men and women writers), and against the point of view from which the stories are told—reactions that are purely reflexive, muddled when not downright hysterical, and at times embarrassingly poorly argued.

It may be interesting to compare such reactions to those that greeted the release of Elsa Morante’s *History*, in 1974. One of the most important Italian novels of the second half of the twentieth century has often been described as, for example, a sentimental, mawkish *romanzone*, or romance novel. Not surprisingly, in both cases the dispute is over two women writers whose revisions of history became widely popular. Both novels were born of a twofold ambition: to describe the violent and/or chance refractions of major world events, personal lives, and their vulnerable differences over a very long period of time, and to engage—albeit using different strategies—as many readers as possible in this flow of time. The comparison reveals the similarity between the most intransigent critiques of Ferrante and the no less extreme critiques aimed at Morante, showing how each advances two overlapping lines of criticism: The first concerns gender and the way a portion of the Italian cultural world is closed off to women writers and the anti-hierarchical viewpoint through which they construct the world. The second, aesthetic, has to do with the persistence in Italian literature of an occasionally fussy experimental cult that rejects style or its (in appearance only) opposite—the highbrow cult

that identifies literary artistry in elegant and refined prose (a taste that is widespread to this day and which, several decades ago, dismissed the writing of Svevo and Pirandello as ugly). Both hardline approaches to style promote elitist taste and label as mediocre and/or slavish to market logic all forms and genres of writing that, on the one hand, express a complexity that originates in the world of the novel and not in stylistic or ideological presuppositions, and, on the other, attempt to engage a wider audience.

6. Belying Our Expectations About Identity

Earlier I spoke of the viewpoint of women writers. I think this is an essential issue for Ferrante precisely because (and not in spite) of her decision not to reveal her true identity. Indeed, there's something which no financial prying, no statistical analysis, no invasion of privacy, and no shadow of marital or patriarchal support can ever take away from her or us, her female and male readers. In a country like Italy, where male journalists, publishers, and professors consistently undermine women writers and their visibility, Elena Ferrante has chosen to stand with those women. If we were to take the many far-fetched rumors to their extreme, we might go so far as to say that Ferrante is both man and woman, transvestite and/or transgender, heterosexual and homosexual, a single living being, a couple, a threesome, a collective. We cannot know her true identity with absolute certainty, but one thing we do know is that during her two decades of writing in seclusion—from her first novel, *Troubling Love* (1992), to the publication and success of the first volume of the quartet, *My Brilliant Friend* (2011)—she chose to make herself less prominent, not more. Not only in her novels but also in the many interviews and letters included in *Frantumaglia*, Ferrante has chosen to fashion

the world from a woman's point of view. On the literary, social, and communicative (pronominal, syntactical, linguistic) plane, she has asserted and demonstrated that a woman's perspective is decisive. Nobody will ever be able to take that away from her, or us.

In countless interviews, Ferrante has provided reasons for her absence from the public stage, reasons connected to an idea of authorship as utterly disentangled from the empirical individual: "The author is the sum of the expressive strategies that shape an invented world, a concrete world that is populated by people and events" (fr 355). Her desire to highlight the truthfulness of fiction has also drawn sharp reactions from critics who see her choice to conceal her identity as a marketing ploy to increase sales. In certain corners of Italian culture, there seems to be a link between success and betrayal, a kind of moral equivalence according to which good sales correspond to a work's lack of literary merit, to its being dumbed down for commercial appeal. All we need to do is read the first seventy pages of *Frantumaglia* to understand that Ferrante's decision to remain anonymous dates back to her earliest publications, when she was a niche author who could never have imagined her future success—that it was a decision made to safeguard her creative independence: "I prefer that the corner for writing remain a hidden place, with no surveillance or urgency of any type" (fr 85).

This strategy of self-protection is confirmed by the surprising dynamic of her interrupted correspondence. In the years that followed the publication of *Troubling Love* and up until *The Days of Abandonment* (2002), some of her replies to letters and interviews—later included in the first edition of *Frantumaglia* (2003)—were either never sent or variously sabotaged before being released to the public (fr 47, 51, 57, 69, 74). Such reserve is truly alien to today's rampant narcissism and in no way corresponds to the conspiracy theories

that dismiss Ferrante's writing as the product of a marketing team. Moreover, her decision is motivated by an oft-repeated polemic against a need manufactured by the media to "[invent] protagonists while ignoring the quality of the work" (fr 255). Ferrante responds to this manufactured need with her "experiment," which directly brings into play the freedom of the reader. "My experiment," she writes, "is intended to call attention to the original unity of author and text and to the self-sufficiency of the reader, who can get all he needs from that unity" (fr 299). If curiosity about the author—on the wave of her success and despite her intentions—sometimes fuels readers' desire for autobiography, that is due to a paradoxical and currently widespread need among readers to approach narratives that are fictional by nature as if they were authentic experiences that speak directly about real life. Rather than a cynical marketing ploy, this powerful fantasy surrounding memoir (where fictional events are constantly attributed to the author's life in a kind of never-ending autobiography) is symptomatic of our present-day hunger for reality, and should give us pause. If anything, there is in Ferrante a powerful determination to reshuffle the deck and belie established expectations.

With its blend of the critical and the conversational (see 3.6), *Frantumaglia* shows how the writer intended to cast doubts on the confessionalism of autobiography by forming over time a liminal "I," free to reveal itself in secret. "Writing is a free act," she says, "by means of which, to use an oxymoron, one secretly opens oneself" (fr 178). At the same time, she eludes the expectations linked to so-called women's writing. The (almost paranoid) complaints about her anonymity actually reveal another cultural presumption, one that demands that an artist bare her soul, rubber-stamp the truthfulness of the feelings and experiences that she writes about, put herself on display and dish about her family, her marriage,

and her divorce, providing readers with a photo album of herself then and now, in group pictures or by herself, at cocktail parties and on book tours, especially if the artist in question is a woman. In other words, if she is, by certain conventions (conventions pertaining to a part of Italian culture, naturally), the best spokesperson for the cult of sentiment, private confession, the humble life of feelings.

And, if the writer in question has for decades drawn inspiration from a historically marginalized place, like the outskirts of a city, and a city like Naples, at that—a sort of aggregate of the collective unconscious of Italy and of Naples—then biography becomes paramount. Because only if your birth certificate proves you were *really* born and raised in that marginal world can you guarantee that the purity of Naples (in keeping with a certain Neapolitan essentialism) will not be peddled on the market or, on the contrary, that your literary voice is sufficiently charged with exotic intensity (in keeping with the country's rampant paternalistic condescension toward the city). Naturally, Ferrante is not the only one who has to contend with such expectations; in many ways, it is an international issue that has increasingly imposed standards of authenticity on marginalized corners throughout literature, the very corners to which women and ethnic or postcolonial writers are traditionally relegated (including, to a certain extent, the literature of the Italian South; Huggan 155, 163). If Ferrante makes these expectations particularly clear to us, it is because her choice has sabotaged them, forcing us all to reconsider their presumed naturalness and the ideologies lurking behind them.

I wonder how a biting, unsettling tale like *My Brilliant Friend* has been embraced let alone grasped by so many readers, female and male, to the point that the quartet has become one of the most well-regarded works of contemporary world literature. Perhaps it is because nowadays we all need fiction

that conveys the symbolic power of the margins of our time, that drags us through layers of time and the forms of social domination up to the present, that shows us the connection between the particular and the universal, as the world's best writers do: those who subscribe—whether or not they are aware of it—to “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Beck 19). Perhaps today all of us need the social and gender-based backwardness of our contemporary moment to be revealed to us not in the guise of a philosophical idea or essay but in the guise of a story. Perhaps what we need, ultimately, is a story based on a human event, universally felt and universally experienced, an event finally visible in literary form and in our social imaginary: the friendship between two women.

Many friends, both female and male, have accompanied me on this journey through the world of Ferrante, helping me interpret new horizons of our contemporary imagination, thanks to their research, attention, and advice. Although I alone bear responsibility for the contents of this book, my deepest thanks go to the following people and institutions:

Alessio Baldini, Anna Baldini, Francesco Barbieri, Laura Benedetti, Giuseppe Bonifacino, Maurizio Braucci, Daniela Brogi, Stefano Brugnolo, Carlo Caruso, Richard Carvalho, Domitilla Cataldi, Pietro Cataldi, Luigi Cinque, Stefano Cracolici, Chiara De Caprio, Francesco de Cristofaro, Marina de Rogatis, Anna Di Toro, Raffaele Donnarumma, Monica Farnetti, Enrica Ferrara, Eva Ferri, Cristiana Franco, Pierantonio Frare, Massimo Fusillo, Immacolata Giacci, Alessandra Ginzburg, Adalgisa Giorgio, Ann Goldstein, Marina Guglielmi, Simon Hackett and St. Mary's College, University of Durham, the Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) at the University of Durham, Helena Janeczek, Jhumpa Lahiri, Viola Lo Moro and the women behind the Tuba bookshop, Stefania Lucamante, Alberto Manai and the Italian Cultural Institute at Shanghai, Silvia Manfredo, Simona Micali, Stiliania

Milkova and Oberlin College, Mauro Moretti, Mariella Muscariello, Massimo Palermo, Valerio Petrarca, Emanuela Piemontese, Stefania Rimini, Maria Rizzarelli, Olivia Santovetti, Niccolò Scaffai, Will Schutt, Ottavio Sellitti, Nadia Setti, Maria Sica and the Italian Cultural Institute at Stockholm, Michele Sisto, Silvia Sommaruga, Elena Spandri, Adriana Sulikova and the Italian Cultural Institute at Bratislava, Serena Todesco, Désirée Trankaer, Andrea Villarini, Sergio Zatti, Katrin Wehling-Giorgi and the School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Durham.