

## Author Spotlight

# ELENA FERRANTE



“Elena Ferrante” is the nom de plume for an Italian author. She (or he—some critics have hypothesized that Ferrante is male) is the author of a half dozen novels, most famously the Neapolitan Quartet.. She has been nominated for numerous awards, including the Man Booker International Prize and the Italian Strega Prize. In 2016, *Time* magazine named Ferrante one of the world’s 100 most influential people.

Ferrante rose to international literary fame with her Neapolitan Novels, consisting of *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015), all translated by *The New Yorker’s* Ann Goldstein. The novels trace the friendship of two Italian women from their impoverished childhoods in 1950s Naples to the present day. Ferrante has said that she considers the quartet to be a single novel serialized in four volumes. The Neapolitan Novels have inspired an illustrious company of admirers, ranging from authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Claire Messud, and Zadie Smith, to cultural figures as diverse as Hillary Clinton and James Franco.

Ferrante’s fiercely guarded anonymity has attracted as much attention as her writing and proved a source of hot debate in the literary community ever since her debut in 1992. Multiple researchers, critics, and investigative reporters have used a variety of methods, including philological analyses, computer attribution models, and forensic financial probes in attempts to determine the author’s true identity. Many in the literary community have bristled at what they consider invasions of Ferrante’s privacy, e.g., Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* writing: “Is privacy no longer respected or possible in the age of the Kardashians, or must all artists with a popular following be turned into celebrities?” For her part, Ferrante has written that, just as her compatriot Italo Calvino, she will lie about her identity when necessary in order “to shield my person, feelings, pressures.”

Ferrante’s novels are noted for their sensitive explorations of relationships between women, and prose that critic James Woods has described as “intensely, violently personal.” Poet Meghan O’Rourke has lauded the “powerful intimacy” of Ferrante’s writing, and, echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson, praised Ferrante’s characters as “the lenses through which we read our own minds.” Many critics have commented upon the undercurrent of smoldering female rage that charges Ferrante’s fiction. Indeed, Ferrante’s female protagonists renounce the traditional fates of the *Bildungsroman* heroine—almost categorically limited to matrimonial redemption or (more commonly) self-destruction— and pursue their own survival with a fiery tenacity. By contrast to the tragic heroines brought to canonical immortality by male writers such as Flaubert and Tolstoy, the women who populate Ferrante’s literary universe would sooner feed arsenic to Monsieur Bovary or push Karenin under the train.

Prepared by Jody Smith  
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## Discussion Questions *My Brilliant Friend*—Book One

1. Why is Don Achille such an important character? His presence looms over the whole novel; what does he represent?
2. Throughout the novel, Lila earns her reputation as “the misfit,” while Elena comes to be known as “the good girl.” How do the two live vicariously through one another, and what is it about their differing personalities that makes their relationship credible? Which girl, if any, do you most easily identify with?
3. Domestic life in the outskirts of Naples in the 1950s is depicted as conservative, challenging and, at times, even severely violent. Ferrante uses the girls’ early “child play” to emulate the callous undertones of the town. Why is this analogy so successful? What is so important about Tina and Nu?
4. Why is Elena so invested in her education? Is it a means to an end, or an end unto itself? If a means to an end, what end? And if a means, is she being realistic or is she fooling herself?
5. What is revealed of the girls’ characters on the day they decide to skip school? Do these discoveries surprise you? How does this effect their relationship (or our sense of their relationship)?
6. Ferrante returns, once more, to the theme of “mother-daughter relationship” in *My Brilliant Friend*. What are the abiding characteristics of this relationship? Who do you feel suffers the most --- mother or daughter? Why?
7. It can be assumed that Elena’s voice is behind the title of the novel, referring to Lila as “her brilliant friend.” However, toward the end of the girls’ story, it is Lila who praises Elena, and encourages her to be “the best of all, boys and girls” (pg. 312). Is this dialogue between the two girls symbolic of Lila’s surrender? Are you surprised by Lila’s words?
8. Lila’s rustic personality and crude comments sometimes come off as hurtful and malicious. Furthermore, although both families struggle with poverty, it is the Cerullios who appear to be the underprivileged of the two. Why, nonetheless, does Elena remain a highly devout friend? What does this say about Elena?
9. What do the shoes that Lila designs and makes represent symbolically? What undertones do the shoes help to evidence in the latter half of the novel?
10. How would the book be different if told from the point of view of Lila or another character? Is Elena's point of view the most appropriate? Why or why not? Explain.

11. Page 282: “Do you love Stefano?”

She said seriously, “Very much.”

“More than your parents, more than Rino?”

“More than everyone, but not more than you.”

Lila’s personality seems to have grown warmer by the end of the novel. What can we attribute this change to?

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