

**Elena Ferrante:
Biography of an Unknown Woman**

**A biographical essay by
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I took on this task with relish. In part, I was excited to see *My Brilliant Friend* on the Novel Club list because I so much enjoyed reading it a few years ago. In part, however, I took this on out of utter laziness, for what could be less onerous than an assignment to present the biography of an unknown author? (“Elena Ferrante” is a pseudonym.) I’m tempted to end here. (Pause.) Whereas some of you might be slightly amused were I to say no more, though, I have a feeling that most of you would be annoyed, enraged even—why should she, or they—both Ferrante and me—be let off the hook so easily? So, instead, I’ll present the little that we do know about “Elena Ferrante,” including her writing history, and then summarize the various efforts to “out” her. My own belief is that if an author wishes to remain anonymous, we should leave her be; but others, quite a few others, have interpreted Ferrante’s pseudonymous existence as a challenge, a riddle, or even a sort of “crime” to investigate and solve. I also want to say right off that in spite of the concerted attempts at unmasking Ferrante, I remain of the opinion that we still don’t know who she is.

Many readers enjoy knowing something about the lives of authors; some even believe we cannot truly understand a novel without knowing about the author’s life. Indeed, there is a time-honored school of criticism that depends on the “biographical approach” to works of literature. Publishers, for their part, use photographs and biographies of their authors to sell books, and the selling of a book is now arguably just as important as the writing of it. Authors must make themselves available for book tours, in-person interviews on TV and radio, web sites with photos and bios, etc. Elena Ferrante, whoever she is, is keenly aware of this, and in fact one of her objections to revealing her identity is that she does not want to participate in what Joni Mitchell called “the star maker machinery behind the popular song” (Ferrante herself does not quote Joni as far as I know).

There is of course a long history of female authors, in particular—although not exclusively—taking pseudonyms or signing themselves “anonymous.” They

have most often done this to escape condemnation, ridicule, or the refusal of reviewers and the public to believe that the text in their hands could possibly have been written by a mere woman. Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own* that “for most of history, anonymous was a woman.” Two pseudonymous writers, George Sand (Aurore Dupin) and George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), took men’s names, and they are still called by these names, even though we all know the truth—and many knew it at the time. But Ferrante’s case is different, as we shall see.

Ferrante has published seven novels, four of which constitute the so-called Neopolitan Novels. Before these, she was already established as a writer. Her first novel, *L'Amore molesto* (*Troubling Love*), came out in 2006. *The Days of Abandonment* appeared in 2002, and was made into a film. The last of the three novels that preceded the Neopolitan tetralogy was *The Lost Daughter*, from 2006; I’ll say more about this novel in a moment.

The Neopolitan books, which appeared between 2011 and 2015, are *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child*. “Storia,” in Italian, means both “story” and “history,” which gives a dual meaning to three of these titles. Related to this, *La Storia* is the title of a novel by an Italian author whom Ferrante cites as a major influence: Elsa Morante, who published the novel *La Storia* in 1974. It has been translated as *History: A Novel*, in 1977), and is considered one of the most significant Italian novels of the 20th century. Indeed, Ferrante seems to have chosen her pseudonymous last name as an ode to Morante.

Ferrante has also published two books that are not novels. *The Beach at Night* (2007; 2016) is a children’s book. *Frantumaglia* (2016 for the expanded version) is a collection of commentary, letters between Ferrante and her editors and film directors, and interviews with reporters conducted by email. *Frantumare* is a verb meaning to shatter, crush, or break up. *Maglia* means knitting, mesh fabric, or stitches. In the book, Ferrante notes that her mother used the Italian term *frantumaglia* to refer to a jumbled mix of unrelated things in her head, which made her feel uncomfortable. *Frantumaglia* the book is our best source of words straight from the author’s mouth, although and as Ferrante writes, she may occasionally resort to “lies” if she is “molested” too much by those trying to identify her. We discover little about her: she grew up in a working class section of Naples, her mother was a seamstress, she left Naples, and has been a teacher.

The following, which Ferrante wrote to one of her editors in 1991, summarizes succinctly her reasons for remaining anonymous: “I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors. If they have something to say, they will sooner or later find readers; if not, they won’t.” And, to the

question “Why did you choose not to become a public personage?” Ferrante responded, in 2002:

From a somewhat neurotic desire for intangibility. The labor of writing touches every point of the body. When the book is finished, it's as if you had been rudely searched, and you desire only to regain integrity, to return to being the person you usually are, in occupations, in thoughts, in language, in relationships. The work is public: in it, there is everything we have to say. Today, who really cares about the person who wrote it? What's essential is the finished work.

The need to identify the writer is, for Ferrante, an attack, felt almost as a physical attack, and at the same time a way of diminishing the literary work, the only “body” that the public needs to know.

Indeed, Ferrante’s fiction is a fiction of the body, especially the female body. Her recurring themes—even those of the children’s book, which is quite dark—include: abandonment, jealousy, adultery, relationships between women (mother and daughter; sisters; friends); childbirth and mothering; sexual intimacy; and domestic violence (usually the violence of men towards their spouses). An example of how Ferrante depicts these relationships is her use of dolls as mediators between characters.

Dolls, which appear in several novels, including *My Brilliant Friend* and the children’s book, stand in for daughters in eerie, even perverse, ways. *The Lost Daughter* (2008) is a short novel about a child who, with her doll, becomes lost at the beach. The child, Elena or Lenù, is found, the doll is not—our protagonist, a vacationing literature professor named Leda, has stolen it. Leda keeps the doll for several days, during which she reflects on her broken marriage and sometimes broken relationships with her two daughters, whom she had abandoned for three years when they were quite young. Leda bathes and dresses the doll, and poses it on her bed and sofa. Through the doll, she wrestles with memories of her distant mother and her daughters, who live a continent away. The reader wants to identify with and like Leda, but we can’t help but be shocked at her sadistic behavior: the child Elena repeatedly cries for the lost doll, but Leda takes her time returning it.

I now turn to the attempted “outing” of our author. Ferrante became established as a fairly well-known writer in Italy and Europe with her three novels and the films made from two of them. But it is the Neapolitan tetralogy that has made her an internationally acclaimed writer. An Italian-language TV series of the tetralogy co-produced by HBO and RAI (Italian television) is in the works, for example, and Ferrante was named as one of Time magazine’s most important people of 2016. Attempts to identify her began before the Neapolitan novels, but the enormous success of these has heightened the intensity of the search. Elena Ferrante has up to now been unmasked several times: as a woman, a man, another woman, and finally, a man-woman team.

In 2016, professor of literature and novelist Marco Santagata identified Ferrante as Marcella Marmo, a professor of contemporary history in Naples. Santagata and Marmo had both been students in the 1960s at a university in Pisa, although they did not meet. The same university in Pisa is attended by Lenu in one of the Neapolitan books. Santagata's declares that since Ferrante does not describe events in Pisa from after 1966, the year when Marmo left Pisa for Naples—Ferrante must be Marmo. If you don't think this is flimsy, I have beach property in Arizona to sell you.

Woman candidate Number Two is Anita Raja, a translator (German to Italian) for the publishers of Ferrante's novels: E/O Editions. This claim was made by financial reporter Claudio Gatti, also in 2016. Gatti's "evidence" is financial. An 'anonymous source' showed him a list of salaries earned by employees of the publishing house, and Gatti noticed that something was terribly amiss. The translator Anita Raja's salary increased by 50% a few years ago, and 150% the year after! Raja must be doing something else to earn this fortune, Gatti surmised, since translators are known to only make a pittance. Oddly enough, Gatti thus undermines his own argument, for a jump of 50% and even 150% from a "pittance" would hardly seem enough for someone making royalties on the millions of books sold under the Ferrante name. Gatti's other evidence is that Raja and her husband, novelist Domenico Starnone (who publishes with the same press), have bought expensive apartments in Rome lately—Gatti doesn't know how much the couple paid, but he knows these places are worth lots of euros. He doesn't tell us anything else. But perhaps Starnone or Raja may have inherited money—who knows? And what about Starnone's own royalties—he's quite a popular novelist. No, Gatti does not convince me.

Others have followed Gatti by offering even more convoluted ideas about Anita Raja and Ferrante. Raja, a German brought up in Italy, is known for her translations of German novelist Christa Wolf's books into Italian. A few commenters have been astounded that Wolf's themes and style are so similar to those of Ferrante; both authors write about women and women's intimate thoughts and experiences. The claim is that Wolf has influenced Raja to such an extent that Raja/Ferrante has written similar novels about women in Italy. For some reason, no one has thought to claim that Wolf was the actual author of the Ferrante novels and that Raja simply translated them into Italian, perhaps because Wolf died in 2011—too bad, it would have been a nice theory.

Behind Door Number Three we find Domenico Starnone, Raja's husband, a well-known novelist. Several people have speculated that Starnone and Elena Ferrante are one and the same person. Starnone's themes include: adultery, jealousy, and post-War politics—they match those of Ferrante! Hmmm. But aren't there many other authors who write on these themes? In addition, the

arguments for Starnone seem based on a faulty principle: that Ferrante must be a *known* author, that she or he must have published other works under his or her true name—but why should we assume this?

This reasoning is at the foundation of “scientific studies” in the field of digital humanities that claim to prove that Ferrante and Starnone share the same body. In one study, at the University of Padua, “linguistic data” from Ferrante’s novels—word choice, basically—is compared to the word choice of thirty-nine Italian novelists of the last fifty years. The study concludes that Domenico Starnone is Elena Ferrante. Furthermore, the study’s authors state that *Ferrante writes more like Starnone than Starnone does*. I’m not kidding. Of course, this makes no sense. Towards the end of his article, the lead author admits:

And yes, isn’t that the problem right from the start with such a study: why limit the study to forty authors, first, and then more importantly, why assume that Elena Ferrante has published novels under her/his true name? Why not just accept the simplest explanation: that she is a writer who has always used a pseudonym? That her novels resemble most those of Starnone may merely mean that these two writers have a lot in common. Period.

Even the lead investigator seems to know that this study is full of holes.

Finally, some have proposed that Elena Ferrante’s novels are the work of Starnone and Raja, together. She can write about women because she is a woman, and he grew up in Naples, so there you go: a perfect duo! But to believe this, and in fact to believe that either Starnone or Raja individually is Elena Ferrante, means not only that he/she/they have written the novels that appear under Ferrante’s name, but that they have spent concerted time and effort in creating the persona of Elena Ferrante. How realistic does this sound? Why would an author such as Starnone or a translator such as Raja choose to spend literally hours and hours “faking” interviews and writing fake letters, such as those that appear in *Frantumaglia*? Why would Starnone develop an entire philosophy around why Elena Ferrante chooses to be pseudonymous when he does not seek anonymity for “Domenico Starnone”? Why would anyone in his or her right mind do this? For fun? For some perverse pleasure? Because he somehow knew, from the very beginning in the early 1990s that Elena Ferrante would eventually sell millions of books and that he’d be able to buy a luxury apartment in Rome? You may draw your own conclusions.