

MINUTES
of the meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
April 10, 2018

Guests: Kent and Trish Smith, Sharon Divell, Judith Ross
Hosts: Catherine LaCroix and Louise Mooney

The members of the Novel Club returned to the gracious venue provided by Catherine La Croix. Post-greetings and lovely snacks, and once gathered in the discussion circle, the Novel Club's guests were introduced, the minutes approved, the finances checked. The evening's critical presentations on Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* began.

Marie Lathers contributed an illuminating and well-researched biographical perspective on Ferrante's life and writing. Her review of the search among critics for the author's true identity is astutely observed and critiqued. Our biographer is convincingly not convinced; Ferrante's writing may be a collaboration between a man and his wife, may be written by a man, may be written by a woman named Elena Ferrante. We are lead to the inescapable conclusion that we do not have sufficient evidence to reach a conclusion as to the true identity of the author of *My Brilliant Friend*.

Jill Mushcat then shared with us her critical perspectives on the novel, drawing our attention to its time setting and cultural contexts. Much of its critical perspective hinged on the novel's place and time, it's social moment and assumptions about the highest cultural values of the time in which the novel was set.

Discussion of Ferrante's novel commenced. The Club considered the possible reasons for Lila's refusal to take financial support for her education from her brother. Lila's personal pride, the dynamic conflict of love and competition between her and Lenu, and the strong paternalistic social framework in which the two young friends grew up were all weighed. Lenu's relationship with her mother was critically examined, and again, the social and temporal contexts were agreed to be highly determinative. Even the waning periods of Lila's and Lenu's friendship seemed to the discussants to strengthen the credibility of their ultimate bond. More modern forces of educational options for young girls also introduce conflicts between the two friends, whose relationship then inflects to mirror the dynamics of the society that has bred them. Club members agreed that Lenu's educational experiences put her in the position of cultural outsider and signifier of the world lying outside of the little neighborhood that time forgot in which Lila remains enmeshed. This dynamic between them was seen to be essential to the novel's intention. How the bond

between the two girls was established, how the next books in the series might develop and mutate that bond, and most important, what it is at the heart of their connection that endures, despite the changes that time and event make in their lives – all inquiries were pursued in the effort to read the characters and significance of the two women.

The meeting's end only renewed the general vivacity of the evening.

Respectfully submitted,

Joyce Kessler