



Milena Agus wins the 2008 Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò/Città di Roma Prize for Italian Fiction

Marina Melchionda (December 16, 2008)



The prize consists of a grant of \$3,000 and, more importantly, a large financial contribution for the translation and publication of her book in the United States. i-Italy interviewed the Sardinian writer who won with her novel *Mal di Pietre*.

The curtain falls on this year's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò / Città di Roma Prize for Italian Fiction. On December 9, Casa Italiana's director, Stefano Albertini, conferred the award to Milena Agus for her work *Mal di Pietre*, a novel published in 2006 by Nottetempo.

Mal di Pietre is the story of a woman, her marriage, and her extramarital affair with a man she calls "il Reduce" (the Veteran). She meets him at a spa which both of them frequent to cure their kidney stones (hence the title of the book). Their love affair is told through the eyes of the woman's granddaughter who, with



curiosity and childish sweetness, explores the mysteries of her secret life. When accepting the prize, Milena Agus, a high school teacher in Cagliari, Sardinia, revealed that the character of Nonna Lia has strong autobiographical connotations. She invented her to try to discover the kind of person she would have been had she lived a half of a century ago: “Sometimes I feel like I am stuck in this era, and ever since I was a child, I have always tried to imagine a hypothetical life at the beginning of the

twentieth century,” said the writer.



The prize, founded by Baroness Zerilli-Marimò and organized by the Department of Italian Studies at New York University, Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, Casa delle Letterature in Rome, and the Italian Cultural Institute of New York, consists in a grant of \$3,000, and, more importantly, a large financial contribution for the translation and publication of the book in the United States.

“The prize has a double aim: to promote Italian fiction in America and to give Italian authors and publishers the chance to meet a young and international audience in order to facilitate a cultural interchange across borders,” said Director Albertini.

Over the past six years, four award winners have already published English translations of their work through Steerforth Press: Giorgio van Straten, *My Name, A Living Memory* (2003); Roberto Pazzi, *Conclave* (2003); Alessandra Lavagnino, *The Librarians of Alexandria* (2006); and Silvia Bonucci, *Voices From a Time* (2006). Gianni Celati's *Adventures in Africa* was translated and published in 2000 by the University of Chicago Press.



Zerilli-Marimò; Francesco Erspamer, the prize's founder; the director of Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò; the director of Casa delle Letterature in Rome; New York University's chair of the Department of Italian Studies or another member of the Department; and the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute of New York or another representative of the Institute.

The committee, along with Italian publishers and a group of consultants from the university and institutions that collaborate on the prize, choose the prize nominees. The winner is then selected from among the nominees by a jury of 90 members who must be fluent speakers of Italian but non-European citizens. They are all professors, journalists, and publishers. Columbia University's Department of Italian Studies selects the judges from among the most preeminent experts on Italian culture and language worldwide.

Experience has proven the jury's competence not only in selecting the best works from a literary standpoint, but also in identifying those books that might have a better chance of being appreciated by the American public. This year's three finalists confirm this: their books are excellent examples of contemporary Italian literature. While these three novels are very different from each other, they are all very moving in their own way.

We wish Mario Calabresi's *Spingendo la Notte Più in Là* (Mondadori, 2007) and Andrej Longo's *Dieci* (Adelphi, 2007) all of the success they deserve in Italy, in Europe, and hopefully in America as well.

The day after the award ceremony, we met with, Milena Agus. We talked with her about her life back in Sardinia, her visit to New York, her writing, and her future projects.

Professor Agus, you came to New York to receive the Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò / Città di Roma Award. Is this your first time here?

No, I was here once already; it was 18 years ago. I can't tell whether this city has changed or not during this period, but the one thing I know is that this time I am literally astonished by its beauty. Most of all, I like the sensations, the emotions that this city is able to give me. I feel at home here. I can't explain why, but maybe it's because my generation back in Italy grew up with the American myth. I love Hollywood cinema and most of the movies I saw were set in New York. Plus, I often read books by American writers; one of my favorite authors is Paul Auster. He made me discover, even before I came here, the marvelous and diverse architecture of this city, its people, and its colors. Maybe that's why I always feel at home in New York: coming here means experiencing for real the places and emotions that I have been imagining for the longest time.

But I guess you never imagined that one day you would come back here to receive an award. What was the first thing you thought when they told you that you won first prize?

I didn't expect it at all. I am not being modest when I say that I still think that it is just too much for me. Receiving a prize from an American jury is more than I could ever imagine. I almost feel embraced, maybe because - as I told you a moment before - I grew up with the American myth. I will never get used to this kind of recognition, even if I have many years of writing experience behind me.

When did you start writing?

I started writing when I was just a child. *Mal di Pietre* is only my second published book, a year after *Mentre Dorme il Pescecane* and two years before *Ali di Babbo*. This is because the idea of letting people read what I write only recently came to mind. When I came across the publishing house *Nottetempo* I finally decided to do it. I sent the editors my novels because I liked the way they work. Their philosophy is mirrored in the name they chose for the company, *Nottetempo*: they publish only books that "can be read at nighttime." They must be small and "light." They have to encourage



sleep.

My three novels follow these guidelines, and that's why we've continued to collaborate. There is an emotional tie between us and I care about it. That's why I would never think of changing my publishing house, even if I am perfectly aware that maybe a bigger one would have the possibility to promote and distribute my books on a wider basis. But I have confidence in Nottetempo; after all it is run by Ginevra Bompiani and Roberta Einaudi, two great professionals from the most famous Italian families in the editorial field.



What compels you to write a book?

I write to resolve my personal and existential doubts: the stories of my characters, and their own personalities, have an autobiographical quality that helps me find my way in life. When I want to find solutions to my little personal dilemmas, I know I am about to write a book.

To whom would you recommend your books?

I would suggest them to the unlucky people, because I like to think that, in resolving my doubts and trying to find my way in life through the stories of my characters, I can help them to do the same thing. At the end of the day, in most cases existential doubts are also universal...and why not? People could find part of the answer they are looking for in my stories...

What is the doubt you resolved with *Mal di Pietre*?

I understood something more about the relationship between reality and imagination. I always asked myself if living too much in the world of imagination could destroy people's lives. It happened to me, so in *Mal di Pietre* I tried to find a balance between these two dimensions. In *Ali di Babbo* you can already see the results of this introspection: my attitude towards the world surrounding me is much more serene. Today I am also more open to love: I look at it through a different point of view. I will tackle this issue in my next book, where my characters will finally find that someone who will bring true joy to their lives. No more suffering, at least the kind you could see in past novels.

The prize Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò / Città di Roma will give you the chance to translate *Mal di Pietre* into English, a fundamental step towards reaching the American public. This way, however, the book will also lose one of its peculiarities: the dialogue in Sardinian dialect. In your opinion, will this weaken your novel?

I don't think so. Anyway, I would like the passages in Sardinian dialect to be left just as they are. Maybe the translators could add the English version in a footnote at the bottom of the page. This is what they did in France and I find it to be the best solution possible. I think that the Sardinian language lends a sort of intimacy, a familiarity to the characters, which is unknown to their Italian counterparts.

Sardinia is also home to another gifted writer: Grazia Deledda. You both have a clear, simple, and direct style. Do you consider yourself to be her heir?

I wouldn't dare! She is one of the icons in Italian contemporary literature and I feel I still have too much to learn to be compared to her. She wrote one of my favorite books ever, *Canne al Vento*. I read it many times, getting great inspiration from it for my own novels. Some of my characters are also inspired by hers. One of them is Nonna Lia from *Mal di Pietre*. She has the same name as the main character in *Canne al Vento*, and they are also very similar in attitude and conduct.

How do you think the American public will like *Mal di Pietre*?

I don't know; success is a complete mystery to me. It is purely casual. In Italy, for example, *Mal di Pietre* did not attract any attention at first. Nobody bought the book while only two critics wrote reviews on it. On the contrary when we published it in France, we were hugely successful right away. It was only after this that the novel became famous in Italy. I can't understand what it is that makes people like or dislike a book, so I can't make any predictions about my American debut.

Edited by Giulia Prestia

Related Links: <http://www.edizioninottetempo.it> [2]



<http://www.casadellelettere.it> [3]

<http://www.nyu.edu/pages/casaitaliana> [4]

Source URL: <http://www.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/art-culture/article/milena-agus-wins-2008-casa-italiana-zerilli-marimocitta-di-roma>

Links

[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/milena-agus1229414022jpg>

[2] <http://www.edizioninottetempo.it>

[3] <http://www.casadellelettere.it>

[4] <http://www.nyu.edu/pages/casaitaliana>