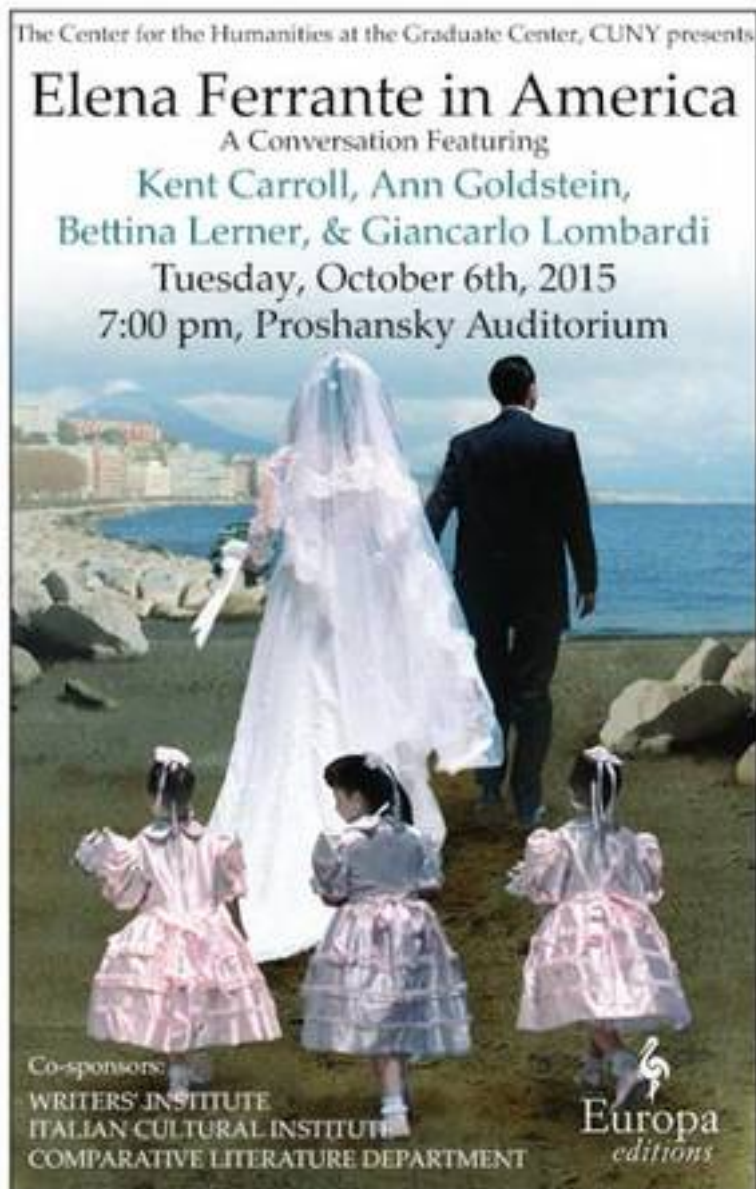




Elena Ferrante Fever

Natasha Lardera (October 09, 2015)



Elena Ferrante is one of the very few recent Italian writers whose fame has reached the U.S., and now the tetralogy, the Neapolitan Novels, has earned an undisputed place in twenty-first-century letters. Cosponsored by the Writers' Institute, the Italian Cultural Institute and the Comparative Literature Program at the Graduate Center, CUNY, the Center for the Humanities at the Graduate



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Cosponsored by the Writers' Institute, the Italian Cultural Institute and the Comparative Literature Program at the Graduate Center, CUNY, the Center for the Humanities at the Graduate Center, CUNY, held a conversation on Italian sensation Elena Ferrante. Ferrante is one of the very few contemporary Italian writers whose fame has reached the U.S., and now the tetralogy, the Neapolitan Novels, has earned an undisputed place in twenty-first-century letters.

Elena Ferrante in America, thus was the evening titled, featured a panel composed by Kent Carroll, the publisher of Europa Editions, the house that has published Ferrante's books in English translation; Ann Goldstein, the translator of the Neapolitan Novels; Bettina Lerner, Comparative Literature at CUNY Graduate Center; and Giancarlo Lombardi, Comparative Literature at CUNY Graduate Center, also known to be the one of the firsts to speak of Ferrante's work and bringing her work to America.

"When he first mentioned her name, we thought he just had mispronounced Elsa Morante's name," joked the Director of the Center for Humanities in his introduction. He continued to explain that at the moment there is "a fever of Elena Ferrante's stuff. Pretty soon we are going to have t-shirts. There was another event last week at Symphony Space and there will be an event coming up at the Italian Cultural Institute."

Elena Ferrante is the pen name of an Italian novelist who has dominated the Italian literary landscape for the past twenty years. Her, or we could even say his, true identity is not publicly known. The author's first book was published in 1992 (*L'amore molesto*) and a few followed, there is a total of ten. The most popular ones are *Days of Abandonment* (*I giorni dell'abbandono*, 2002) and *My Brilliant Friend* (*L'Amica Geniale*, 2011).

"Ferrante has taken inspiration from growing up on the outskirts of Naples to weave narratives of many strands: the depth and complexity of female friendship, changes in Italian society in the second half of the twentieth century, and possibilities for self-actualization in a world still largely determined by poverty, patriarchy, and corruption."

In 2004, Kent Carroll and Italian publisher Sandro Ferri started Europa Editions, an American company created to publish European literature in translation as well as US and UK literary fiction. In 2005 Europa published its first novel, Ferrante's *Days of Abandonment*. "Usually in any romance novel a woman is dumped by her husband," Carroll explained when recalling how he first got interested in Ferrante's work, "she is initially depressed but then she takes care of herself, becomes hotter, meets an even hotter man who falls for her. The husband tries to come back but she rejects him and everybody lives happily ever after. Not in Ferrante's book. I read it and I thought it was unusually good. It was a common story told in a very different way. I realized immediately though that it was going to be a difficult story, not for everyone. This was going to be a difficult book."

And indeed it was. Although the *New York Times* compared it to *Anna Karenina*, the book was not flying off the shelves. People were reviewing it, who read it loved it but sales were somewhat disappointing. Things started off well but in about a couple of months they were coming to a stop. A year and a half later they published *Troubling Love* and "everybody had difficulty with that," Carroll continued. "People who liked the first book put down the second. The third book did not capture any interest either."

The turning point coincided with the publication of *My Little Friend* and an article published in the *New Yorker* written by James Wood. "Wood wanted all the books and wrote a five page article not only about her books but about the author herself. He wrote about why this writing. The article gave her stature." Sales didn't increase immediately but people's interest did and it seemed like everybody wanted to be the one who had discovered this great, new author. James Wood was also the one who "pointed out that in her written correspondence with journalists Ferrante has referred to herself as a mother, implying that she is indeed a woman." The mystery remains.

And it is indeed the mystery around the writer's identity, the unique stories and narrative forms, the mixture of genres are what make Ferrante such a unique writer. Word of mouth and the hard work of



a publishing company who believed in the work of one of their writers is what made Ferrante stand out and now be one of the most talked about contemporary authors.

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