Monday, March 14, 2016, at 1:00 P.M.

*My Brilliant Friend, by Elena Ferrante* (Book One of the Neapolitan Novels) (translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein)

**Discussion Leader: Edna Ritzenberg**

In a poor, 1950’s Italian neighborhood, two girls, Elena and Lila, exhibit remarkable intelligence early in school, at a time when money is scarce and education a privilege, especially for girls. Through the lives of these two women, Ferrante tells the story of a neighborhood, a city and a country as it is transformed in ways that, in turn, also transform the relationship between her two protagonists.

Monday, April 11, 2016, at 1:00 P.M.

*Leaving Time, by Jodi Picoult*

**Discussion Leader: Edna Ritzenberg**

*Leaving Time* is the story of a teen searching for her missing mother. Jenna was just a baby the night her mother disappeared from the Elephant Sanctuary where they lived. Now, ten years later, Jenna enlists the help of a disgraced psychic and disillusioned ex-cop in the hope of uncovering new evidence which may lead to her mother’s whereabouts. The mystery at the heart of the novel makes for a compelling read. However, it is the background research into elephant behavior which is the real strength of the novel.

*************

**Women on the Verge**

The fiction of Elena Ferrante.

*BY JAMES WOOD, THE NEW YORKER, JAN 21, 2013*
Elena Ferrante, or “Elena Ferrante,” is one of Italy’s best-known least-known contemporary writers. She is the author of several remarkable, lucid, austerely honest novels, the most celebrated of which is “The Days of Abandonment,” published in Italy in 2002. Compared with Ferrante, Thomas Pynchon is a publicity profligate. It’s assumed that Elena Ferrante is not the author’s real name. In the past twenty years or so, though, she has provided written answers to journalists’ questions, and a number of her letters have been collected and published. From them, we learn that she grew up in Naples, and has lived for periods outside Italy. She has a classics degree; she has referred to being a mother. One could also infer from her fiction and from her interviews that she is not now married. (“Over the years, I’ve moved often, in general unwillingly, out of necessity. . . . I’m no longer dependent on the movements of others, only on my own” is her encryption.) In addition to writing, “I study, I translate, I teach.”

And that is it. What she looks like, what her real name is, when she was born, how she currently lives—these things are all unknown. In 1991, when her first novel, “Troubling Love,” was about to be published in Italy (“L’Amore Molesto,” its original title, hints at something more troubling than mere trouble), Ferrante sent her publisher a letter that, like her fiction, is pleasingly rigorous and sharply forthright. It lays out principles she has not deviated from since. She will do nothing for “Troubling Love,” she tells her publisher, because she has already done enough: she wrote it. She won’t take part in conferences or discussions, and won’t go to accept prizes, if any are awarded. “I will be interviewed only in writing, but I would prefer to limit even that to the indispensable minimum”:

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. . . . I very much love those mysterious volumes, both ancient and modern, that have no definite author but have had and continue to have an intense life of their own. They seem to me a sort of nighttime miracle, like the gifts of the Befana, which I waited for as a child. . . . True miracles are the ones whose makers will never be known. . . . Besides, isn’t it true that promotion is expensive? I will be the least expensive author of the publishing house. I’ll spare you even my presence.
It is hard to argue with the logic of this withdrawal, and the effortful prying of the Italian press—Why have you chosen this privacy? Are you hiding the autobiographical nature of your work? Is there any truth to the rumor that your work is really by Domenico Starnone?—has about it the kind of repressed anger that attends a suicide. Ferrante is probably right when she claims that an author who does publicity has accepted, “at least in theory, that the entire person, with all his experiences and his affections, is placed for sale along with the book.” Our language betrays us: nowadays, you triumphantly sell a novel to a publisher; thirty years ago, a publisher simply accepted that novel.

As soon as you read her fiction, Ferrante’s restraint seems wisely self-protective. Her novels are intensely, violently personal, and because of this they seem to dangle bristling key chains of confession before the unsuspecting reader. There are four novels available in English, each translated by Ann Goldstein, an editor at this magazine: “Troubling Love,” “The Days of Abandonment,” “The Lost Daughter,” and now “My Brilliant Friend” (all from Europa Editions). Each book is narrated by a woman: an academic in “The Lost Daughter,” and a writer in “The Days of Abandonment.” The woman who tells the story of her Neapolitan youth in “My Brilliant Friend” is named Elena, and seems to cherish the possibilities of writing and being a writer. More than these occasional and fairly trivial overlappings with life, the material that the early novels visit and revisit is intimate and often shockingly candid: child abuse, divorce, motherhood, wanting and not wanting children, the tedium of sex, the repulsions of the body, the narrator’s desperate struggle to retain a cohesive identity within a traditional marriage and amid the burdens of child rearing. The novels present themselves (with the exception of the latest) like case histories, full of flaming rage, lapse, failure, and tenuous psychic success. But these are fictional case histories. One can understand that Ferrante has no interest in adding her privacy to the novelistic pyre.

“The Days of Abandonment” is Ferrante’s most widely read novel in English, with good reason. It assails bourgeois niceties and domestic proprieties; it rips the skin off the habitual. Olga is thirty-eight, is married to Mario, lives in Turin, and has two young children, Ilaria and Gianni.

“One April afternoon, right after lunch, my husband announced that he wanted to leave me.” The
calm opening sentence belies the fury and turmoil to come. Olga is blindsided by Mario’s announcement. First, there are the obvious responses: loathing, jealousy, despair. She yells without control at Mario:

“I don’t give a shit about prissiness. You wounded me, you are destroying me, and I’m supposed to speak like a good, well-brought-up wife? Fuck you! What words am I supposed to use for what you’ve done to me, for what you’re doing to me? What words should I use for what you’re doing with that woman! Let’s talk about it! Do you lick her cunt? Do you stick it in her ass? Do you do all the things you never did with me? Tell me! Because I see you! With these eyes I see everything you do together, I see it a hundred thousand times, I see it night and day, eyes open and eyes closed!”

What menaces Olga more deeply is the threatened dissolution of her self. What does her life amount to, without the intact family unit? “What a mistake it had been to close off the meaning of my existence in the rites that Mario offered with cautious conjugal rapture,” she reflects. “What a mistake it had been to entrust the sense of myself to his gratifications, his enthusiasms, to the ever more productive course of his life.” She is haunted by the memory of a dark figure from her Neapolitan childhood, a woman who lived in her apartment building, whose husband left her, and who, in her abandonment, lost all identity: “Every night, from that moment on, our neighbor wept. . . . The woman lost everything, even her name (perhaps it was Emilia), for everyone she became the ‘poverella,’ that poor woman, when we spoke of her that was what we called her.” Young Olga was repelled by “a grief so gaudy,” and is desperate, in her own abandonment, not to act like the poverella, not to be “consumed by tears.”

Over the next few weeks, Olga struggles to hold on to reality. The children must be looked after, the dog walked, the bills paid. One day, she sees Mario with his new lover, and realizes that it is Carla, a twenty-year-old who is the daughter of an old friend; Mario had tutored her. Olga violently assaults her husband, knocks him down in the street, tears his shirt. Meanwhile, at home, everything is disintegrating. Ants have invaded the apartment; Gianni has a fever; the phone stops working because the bill hasn’t been paid; the front-door lock won’t work; the dog gets sick. Ferrante turns ordinary domestic misery into an expressionistic hell; she can pull a
scream out of thin air. These small trials become a huge symbolic judgment. When Olga sprays insecticide to kill the ants, she does so uneasily, “feeling that the spray can might well be a living extension of my organism, a nebulizer of the gall I felt in my body.” Her inability to open the front door strikes her as the overwrought emblem of a sexual failure; the workmen who had installed the new lock had seemed to insinuate that locks “recognize the hand of their master.” “I remembered the sneer with which the older one had given me his card, in case I should need help,” Olga tells us. “I knew perfectly well what lock he wished to intervene in, certainly not that of the reinforced door.”

The literary excitement of “The Days of Abandonment” lies in the picture it gives of a mind in emergency, at the very limits of coherence and decency, a mind that has become a battlefield between reason and insanity, survival and explosion. Here Olga watches Carrano, her downstairs neighbor, a single man, a mild, shy, graying professional cellist:

So I stood silently watching him from the fifth floor, thin but broad in the shoulders, his hair gray and thick. I felt an increasing hostility toward him that became more tenacious the more unreasonable I felt it to be. What were his secrets of a man alone, a male obsession with sex, perhaps, the late-life cult of the cock. Certainly he, too, saw no farther than his ever-weaker squirt of sperm, was content only when he could verify that he could still get it up, like the dying leaves of a dried-up plant that’s given water. Rough with the women’s bodies he happened to encounter, hurried, dirty, certainly his only objective was to score points, as in a rifle range, to sink into a red pussy as into a fixed thought surrounded by concentric circles. Better if the patch of hair is young and shiny, ah the virtue of a firm ass. So he thought, such were the thoughts I attributed to him, I was shaken by vivid electric shocks of rage.

In a spasm of self-hatred and need, Olga throws herself at poor Carrano: the scene in which she sadistically seduces him, at once requiring and repulsing his desire, is a tour de force of squalor. Yet Carrano surprises Olga, later in the book, with his gentleness and generosity, and becomes one of the unexpected agents of Olga’s eventual survival, her successful race against dissolution.

Ferrante has said that she likes to write narratives “where the writing is clear, honest, and where the facts—the facts of ordinary life—are extraordinarily gripping when read.” Her prose has
indeed a bare lucidity, and is often aphoristic and continent, in Ann Goldstein’s elegant, burnished English. But what is thrilling about her earlier novels is that, in sympathetically following her characters’ extremities, Ferrante’s own writing has no limits, is willing to take every thought forward to its most radical conclusion and backward to its most radical birthing. This is most obvious in the fearless way in which her female narrators think about children and motherhood.

Ferrante’s novels could be seen as marked, somewhat belatedly, by the second-wave feminism that produced, among other writing, Margaret Drabble’s fiction of female domestic entrapment and Hélène Cixous’s theory of *l’écriture féminine*, in the nineteen-seventies. (*L’écriture féminine*, or feminine writing, is the project of inscribing the feminine into the language of a text.) Yet there is something post-ideological about the savagery with which Ferrante attacks the themes of motherhood and womanhood. She seems to enjoy the psychic surplus, the outrageousness, the terrible, singular complexity of her protagonists’ familial dramas. Olga’s plight might seem familiar enough, in particular her apprehension that, in throwing her all into being a mother, she has become dangerously null, while her “ever more productive” husband has only blossomed in the outside world.

But the rhetoric with which she expresses her despair and revulsion around motherhood is perhaps less familiar. There is little room for ideological back-and-forth when children are seen as hideous enemies from a horror film: “I was like a lump of food that my children chewed without stopping; a cud made of a living material that continually amalgamated and softened its living substance to allow two greedy bloodsuckers to nourish themselves, leaving on me the odor and taste of their gastric juices. Nursing, how repulsive, an animal function.” As Olga follows her train of thought, she becomes convinced that the “stink of motherhood” clung to her and was partly responsible for her husband’s defection. “Sometimes Mario pasted himself against me, took me, holding me as I nearly slept, tired himself after work, without emotions. He did it persisting on my almost absent flesh that tasted of milk, cookies, cereal, with a desperation of his own that overlapped mine without his realizing it. I was the body of incest. . . . I was the mother to be violated, not a lover. Already he was searching for figures more suitable for love.” There is
a foul brilliance in how Ferrante sticks with the logic of Olga’s illogic, so that an ordinary
enough complaint about the difficulty of raising children becomes an outsized revulsion, and the
stink of motherhood leads inexorably to the incestuous end of all marital eros. But this wayward
rigor, engrossing in its own right, also makes absolute sense within the context of Olga’s raging
jealousy.

Leda, the narrator of “The Lost Daughter” (published in Italian in 2006, and in English in 2008),
is a forty-seven-year-old academic who, like Olga, has had to manage both motherhood and
professional advancement. She is no longer married to her scientist husband, who lives in
Toronto, where her two grown daughters, Marta and Bianca, have also gone to live. About her
daughters Leda has ambivalent and often sharply hostile thoughts. Did she, she wonders, really
want her children, or was her body simply expressing itself, as a reproducing animal?

I had wanted Bianca, one wants a child with an animal opacity reinforced by popular beliefs.
She had arrived immediately, I was twenty-three, her father and I were right in the midst of a
difficult struggle to keep jobs at the university. He made it, I didn’t. A woman’s body does a
thousand different things, toils, runs, studies, fantasizes, invents, wearies, and meanwhile the
breasts enlarge, the lips of the sex swell, the flesh throbs with a round life that is yours, your life,
and yet pushes elsewhere, draws away from you although it inhabits your belly, joyful and
weighty, felt as a greedy impulse and yet repellent, like an insect’s poison injected into a vein.

For the narrators of Ferrante’s earlier novels, life appears to be a painful conundrum of
attachment and detachment. What seems appalling to Leda is that her daughters are so
umbilically connected to her own flesh and at the same time are always pushing “elsewhere,” are
so alien and other. Thus she feels for them “a complicated alternation of sympathy and
antipathy.” When her daughters were six and four, Leda abandoned them for three years. “All the
hopes of youth seemed to have been destroyed, I seemed to be falling backward toward my
mother, my grandmother, the chain of mute or angry women I came from.” Suspended on a
chain of maternity—grandmothers, mothers, daughters, all flesh of one’s own flesh—the only
thing is to sever the links and get out. Leda feels it is the way to survive: “I loved them too much
and it seemed to me that love for them would keep me from becoming myself.” She remembers
standing in the kitchen, her daughters watching her, pulled by them but more strongly pulled by
the world outside the home:

I felt their gazes longing to tame me, but more brilliant was the brightness of the life outside
them, new colors, new bodies, new intelligence, a language to possess finally as if it were my
true language, and nothing, nothing that seemed to me reconcilable with that domestic space
from which they stared at me in expectation. Ah, to make them invisible, to no longer hear the
demands of their flesh as commands more pressing, more powerful than those which came from
mine.

Ferrante may never mention Hélène Cixous or French feminist literary theory, but her fiction is a
kind of practical écriture féminine: these novels, which reflect on work and motherhood, on the
struggle for a space in which to work outside the work of motherhood, necessarily reflect on the
achievement of their own writing. To get these difficult words onto the page is to have subdued
the demands of the domestic space, quieted for precious intervals the commands of children, and
found “a language to possess finally as if it were my true language.”

Before the writer is an adult, she is a child. Before she makes a family, she inherits one; and in
order to find her true language she may need to escape the demands and prohibitions of this first,
given community. That is one of the themes that connect Ferrante’s latest novel, “My Brilliant
Friend,” with her earlier work. At first sight, her new book, published in Italy in 2011, seems
very different from its anguished, slender predecessors. It’s a large, captivating, amiably peopled
bildungsroman, apparently the first of a trilogy. Its narrator, Elena Greco, recalls her Neapolitan
childhood and adolescence, in the late nineteen-fifties. There is a kind of joy in the book not
easily found in the earlier work. The city of Elena’s childhood is a poor, violent place (the same
city is found in Ferrante’s first novel, “Troubling Love”). But deprivation gives details a
snatched richness. A trip to the sea, a new friend, a whole day spent with your father (“We spent
the entire day together, the only one in our lives, I don’t remember any others,” Elena says at one
point), a brief holiday, the chance to take some books out of a library, the encouragement of a
respected teacher, a sketched design for a beautiful pair of shoes, a wedding, the promise of
getting your article published in a local journal, a conversation with a boy whose intellect is
deeper and more liberal than your own—these ordinary-seeming occurrences take on an unexpected luminosity against a background of poverty, ignorance, violence, and parental threat, a world in which a character can be casually described as “struggling to speak in Italian” (because mostly people in this book are using Neapolitan vernacular). If Ferrante’s earlier novels have some of the brutal directness and familial torment of Elsa Morante’s work, then “My Brilliant Friend” may remind the reader of neorealist movies by De Sica and Visconti, or perhaps of Giovanni Verga’s short stories about Sicilian poverty.

Elena meets her brilliant friend at school, in the first grade. Both children are from relatively impoverished households. Lila Cerullo is the daughter of Fernando Cerullo, a shoemaker; Elena’s father works as a porter at city hall. Lila first impresses Elena because she is “very bad.” She is feral, quick, unafraid, vicious in word and deed. For every act of violence meted out to her, Lila has a swift response. When Elena throws stones back at gangs of boys, she does so without much conviction; Lila does everything with “absolute determination.” No one can really keep pace with that “terrible, dazzling girl,” and everyone is afraid of her. Boys steer clear of her, because she is “skinny, dirty, and always had a cut or bruise of some sort, but also because she had a sharp tongue . . . spoke a scathing dialect, full of swear words, which cut off at its origin any feeling of love.” Lila’s reputation grows when it is discovered that she taught herself to read at the age of three: there is a wonderful scene, indeed the equal of something by Verga, when Lila’s schoolteacher excitedly calls in her mother, Nunzia Cerullo, and asks Lila to read a word she has written on the blackboard. Lila correctly reads the word, but her mother looks hesitantly, almost fearfully, at the teacher: “The teacher at first seemed not to understand why her own enthusiasm was not reflected in the mother’s eyes. But then she must have guessed that Nunzia didn’t know how to read.”

Elena, who had enjoyed her status as the cleverest girl in the class, has to fall in behind the brilliant Lila, who is as smart at school as she is on the street: she comes in first on all the tests, and can do complicated calculations in her head. The two girls seem destined, through education, to escape their origins. In the last year of elementary school, they become obsessed with money, and talk about it “the way characters in novels talk about searching for treasure.” But “My
“Brilliant Friend” is a bildungsroman in mono, not stereo; we sense early on that Lila will stay trapped in her world, and that Elena, the writer, will get out—like the academic who, in “The Lost Daughter,” describes her need to leave violent and limited Naples thus: “I had run away like a burn victim who, screaming, tears off the burned skin, believing that she is tearing off the burning itself.”

In this beautiful and delicate tale of confluence and reversal, it is hard to identify the moments when a current changes course. Perhaps one occurs when Elena’s schoolteacher, Maestra Oliviero, tells her that she must take the test for admission to middle school, and that her parents will have to pay for extra lessons to prepare her. Elena’s parents, after some resistance, say yes; Lila’s say no. Lila tells Elena she is going to take the test anyway, and no one doubts her: “Although she was fragile in appearance, every prohibition lost substance in her presence.” But Lila eventually loses heart, and does not go to middle school. When Elena later mentions the brilliant Lila to Maestra Oliviero, the teacher asks her if she knows what the plebs are. Yes, Elena says, the people. “And if one wishes to remain a plebeian,” Maestra Oliviero continues, “he, his children, the children of his children deserve nothing. Forget Cerullo and think of yourself.”

This warning casts its shadow over the rest of the novel like a prophecy in classical tragedy. In a powerful scene near the end of the book, Lila Cerullo, now sixteen and on the verge of marrying a grocer’s son, decides that she wants to take the wedding invitation in person to Maestra Oliviero. Elena accompanies her. The old teacher affects not to recognize the brilliant girl who never made it to middle school, and turns to Elena: “I know Cerullo, I don’t know who this girl is.” With that, she shuts the door in their faces. At Lila’s wedding—where, in a characteristically vivid detail, the guests become restive when they realize that the “wine wasn’t the same quality for all the tables”—Elena looks at the modest company and recalls the schoolteacher’s question:

At that moment I knew what the plebs were, much more clearly than when, years earlier, she had asked me. The plebs were us. The plebs were that fight for food and wine, that quarrel over who should be served first and better, that dirty floor on which the waiters clattered back and forth, those increasingly vulgar toasts. The plebs were my mother, who had drunk wine and now
was leaning against my father’s shoulder, while he, serious, laughed, his mouth gaping, at the sexual allusions of the metal dealer. They were all laughing, even Lila, with the expression of one who has a role and will play it to the utmost.

This is where “My Brilliant Friend” ends, with Elena watching the horizon, and Lila being watched by Elena. One girl is facing beyond the book; the other is caught within its pages. Elena Greco, like the women who narrate Ferrante’s earlier novels, is a survivor; like them, she has had to wrench her survival out of the drama of attachment and detachment. She feels a kind of survivor’s guilt, as if she had robbed the promise of her riches from Lila’s treasury. A final irony is coiled in the novel’s title, the biggest reversal, a shift in perspective that has taken a whole novel to effect. Before the wedding, when Elena is helping Lila with her wedding dress, the two girls briefly discuss Elena’s continued schooling. Lila urges Elena to keep on studying; if necessary she—soon to be a comfortably married woman—will pay for it. “Thanks, but at a certain point school is over,” Elena says with a nervous, doubtless self-deprecating laugh. “Not for you,” Lila replies ardently, “you’re my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls.” ♦
American readers are likely to have strong olfactory associations with the southern Italy glorified by travel and restaurant guides, where the cuisine is rich, the markets overflowing, and where women patiently tend simmering pots for long stretches of the day. In *My Brilliant Friend*, the first installment in her forthcoming trilogy, Elena Ferrante beautifully manipulates the olfactory to deliver its underbelly—a world on the outskirts of 1950s Naples drenched in a “stink” that binds hunger, fear, violence, and female rage.

Elena Greco, the narrator of *My Brilliant Friend*, is sixty-six when we meet her in a brief prologue in which she receives a phone call from her best friend’s son, Rino. During this phone call, we learn that Lila Cerullo, Elena’s best friend from childhood, has “vanished.” Elena is not surprised, nor does she tell Rino, that his mother is fulfilling a longstanding promise to vanish without a trace. In fact, Elena shares the information only with the reader and then sets out to write the book that will ostensibly explain Lila’s disappearance. Elena Greco begins with a description of how she met Lila when they were little girls playing with dolls. Before they even speak to each other, Lila takes Elena’s doll and casts it into the basement of Don Achille, the man who, in the imagination of the town’s children, is the ogre ready to tear a child apart limb by limb. In one bold move, Elena throws Lila’s doll after her own, and then Lila leads Elena into that basement—the first of many horrifying journeys, both real and metaphorical, that the two girls will take over the course

of this narrative spanning the next twelve years of their lives. Elena’s deep and abiding friendship with Lila is often fraught with envy and pain intertwined with admiration. But any alliance is crucial to the physical and mental survival of these two girls, trapped in a world infested by a rage that—in their town—manifests as a particularly female disease:

As a child I imagined tiny, almost invisible animals that arrived in the neighborhood at night, they came from the ponds, from the abandoned train cars beyond the embankment, from the stinking grasses called fetenti, from the frogs, the salamanders, the flies, the rocks, the dust, and entered the water, the food, and the air, making our mothers, our grandmothers as angry as starving dogs. They were more severely infected than the men, because while men were always getting furious, they calmed down in the end; women, who appeared to be silent, acquiescent, when they were angry flew into a rage that had no end.

As in Ferrante’s past novels, particularly Troubling Love (2006) and Days of Abandonment (2005), the mother-daughter bond is freighted with pain, misunderstanding, and shame. At every critical juncture in Elena’s life, her mother threatens to pull her into the muck of the world that she is trying so desperately to escape. When Elena is accepted to middle school, her mother complains about the cost and wants her to forgo schooling and stay home to help with the house. Elena’s father is more supportive, and with the intervention of Elena’s teacher, her mother gradually relents and Elena is allowed to pursue her education. Lila, despite her brilliance, is not so lucky. After elementary school, her parents refuse to allow her to test for middle school. They keep her home, and she goes to work in her father’s shoe shop. In the afternoons, she sneaks out to study with Elena, who is astounded by her autodidacticism. It turns out that, with the help of library books, Lila has been keeping up with all of the subjects Elena is studying in middle school. Incredibly, Lila’s knowledge still surpasses Elena’s in every subject.

Foregrounding the girls’ passion for knowledge are the many thwarted passions of the women surrounding them: there is the woman who has gone crazy from loving a philandering poet, the neighbor who regularly beats her children, the women who attack each other on the street. In fact, at the root of the great tension that propels this narrative forward lies the girls’ fear of merging into the looming female world that beckons them. Although they cannot articulate this fear, the girls eventually create a term for it. Elena writes, “The thing was happening to (Lila) that I mentioned and that later she called dissolving margins. It was—she told me—as if, on the night of a full moon over the sea, the intense black mass of a storm advanced
across the sky, swallowing every light, eroding the circumference of the moon's circle, and disfiguring the shining disk, reducing it to its true nature of rough, insensate material."

This riveting narrative, which derives its tension from language and emotion rather than plot, demands a wordsmith as translator; fortunately, Ann Goldstein, who has translated Ferrante's previous novels, brings to the English version the skills to transmit the subtle but crucial tension of the original. Issues of translation, and Elena's own function as translator, are, in fact, intimately intertwined with her coming-of-age, academic blossoming, and eventual escape from the fate of her peers. Italian is the scholastic language of Elena's world, the language of the teachers, of television, and national politics. But Napolitano (Neapolitan dialect) is her native tongue, the language of the town, the less educated and, of course, of the Camorra (the southern Italian version of the Mafia). Throughout the text, Elena is in the position of "translating" from Neapolitan into Italian for the reader, and she becomes increasingly aware of the ever growing divide between speakers of Italian and Neapolitan.

Since the author and the narrator of *My Brilliant Friend* share the same first name and origins, it is enticing to read this narrative as an autobiographical account of growing up female and poor in post-war Naples. But the impulse to merge biography and fiction is particularly irksome in the case of Elena Ferrante, who many suspect is not even a woman but writer and journalist Domenico Starnone. Despite film adaptations of her novels, high critical acclaim, and numerous recognitions, including the much sought-after Elsa Morante prize for literature, Elena Ferrante never makes public appearances and has only granted a few interviews via e-mail. The elusiveness of her identity has created such a stir throughout Italy that cynics have decreed it a publicity stunt. Ferrante, on the other hand, argues that her anonymity is an effort to separate the self she is "in life" from her "writing self" in an attempt to be as true to the latter as possible. In fact, *My Brilliant Friend* is very much a book about identity and the particularly female struggle to protect and nurture a self robust enough to hold out against the barrage of forces that threaten to eclipse it.

As in Ferrante's previous work, identity becomes increasingly defined by physical appearances. As Elena and Lila reach adolescence, Elena compares herself unfavorably to Lila, though she is also aware that her friend's beauty is partly responsible for eclipsing her ambitions and intelligence. The more beautiful Lila becomes, the more she must devote her energy and wit to self-protection and fend-
ing off men's sexual attractions and jealousies. In order to avoid the attentions of one rich young suitor that her family encourages but who is particularly reprehensible to Lila, she turns her attentions to the local grocer, Stefano. At sixteen years old, Lila marries Stefano. Though Lila is seemingly reconciled to her domestic role, through Elena, we continue to catch whiffs of the brilliant, outrageous girl of the early chapters who promises to return in electrifying, unexpected ways. After all, as a small child, Lila Cerullo birthed her own self into literacy:

Then the teacher turned to Lila and with sincere admiration asked her in front of all of us, 'Who taught you to read and write, (Lila) Cerullo?' Cerullo, that small dark-haired, dark-eyed child, in a dark smock with a red ribbon at the neck, and only six years old, answered, 'Me.'

While contending with an identity defined by those around her, Lila, like her creator, nurtures another self that insists on shaping the language and structure through which it will flourish.
About the Book

From one of Italy’s most acclaimed authors, comes this ravishing and generous-hearted novel about a friendship that lasts a lifetime. The story of Elena and Lila begins in the 1950s in a poor but vibrant neighborhood on the outskirts of Naples. Growing up on these tough streets the two girls learn to rely on each other ahead of anyone or anything else, as their friendship, beautifully and meticulously rendered, becomes a not always perfect shelter from hardship. Ferrante has created a memorable portrait of two women, but MY BRILLIANT FRIEND is also the story of a nation. Through the lives of Elena and Lila, Ferrante gives her readers the story of a neighborhood, a city, and a country undergoing momentous change.

With this stylishly plotted novel, the first in a series dubbed the “Neapolitan Novels,” Elena Ferrante proves herself to be one of Italy’s greatest storytellers.

Discussion Guide

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 Cerullos 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?

**Author Bio**

Elena Ferrante was born in Naples. She is the author of THE DAYS OF ABANDONMENT (Europa 2005), TROUBLING LOVE (Europa 2007) and THE LOST DAUGHTER (Europa 2009). Her Neapolitan novels include MY BRILLIANT FRIEND, THE STORY OF A NEW NAME, THOSE WHO LEAVE AND THOSE WHO STAY, and the fourth and final book in the series, THE STORY OF THE LOST CHILD.

**Critical Praise**

“One of the great novelists of our time.”