

One in Two, Two in One



The Story of the Lost Child

By Elena Ferrante

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Reviewed by Lisa Mullenneaux

Passions run high when you're talking about the fiction of the pseudonymous Italian author Elena Ferrante, particularly the four-volume coming-of-age series that begins with *My Brilliant Friend* (2012). "She just nails it," said a woman in her sixties, who was in the audience for a crowded panel on Ferrante at the PEN World Voices festival last May. To judge from the number attending the event, the quartet has a special resonance for those of us who rode the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and who write for a living.

For starters, we are the age of the narrator Elena Greco (Lenù) and her best friend Raffaella Cerullo (Lila), who sprout like weeds in the cement jungle of postwar Naples and fight for and with each other for sixty years. Secondly, the Neapolitan novels describe an artist's progress from early success to bad reviews to professional stature—yet the story of Lenù, the writer, is not like any other account of an artist's development that I have ever read. The "anxiety of

influence," or the "writer in the writer," to use the literary critic Harold Bloom's term, is not one of Lenù's literary forebears, but Lila. As *The Story of the Lost Child*, the final book in the series, makes clear, the two friends are better together than apart.

Throughout *My Brilliant Friend*, Lenù works hard to keep pace with Lila, who impresses her in first grade as being "very bad." Lila walks through the hail of stones the mean kids throw and carries a knife to defend herself. In school or out, and for the rest of her life, Lenù will try to match "that terrible, dazzling girl." Reflecting back on their sixty-year relationship, she muses,

I suppose that that was my way of reacting to envy, and hatred, and of suffocating them. Or maybe I disguised in that manner the sense of subordination, the fascination I felt. Certainly I trained myself to accept readily Lila's superiority in everything, and even her oppressions.

What seals their friendship is a dare: Lila climbs the dark stairs to the apartment of Don Achille, about whom the girls have built up a fantasy as the "ogre of fairy tales." Lenù follows, frozen with fear. Then, "At the fourth flight Lila did something unexpected. She stopped to wait for me, and when I reached her she gave me her hand. This gesture changed everything between us forever." Lila is determined to recover their dolls from Don Achille's cellar: it takes us 1600 pages in four volumes to find out whether she succeeds. Throughout, Lila continues to test Lenù's courage—and her patience—until, when they are both 66, Lila disappears "without leaving a trace."

Lila's disappearance infuriates Lenù, who fires up her computer and begins to record the details of their story. "We'll see who wins this time," she vows. Ferrante's twin portrait of Lila and Lenù describes a sisterhood born in a postwar slum, where organized crime (the Camorra) and violence are endemic. They dream of co-authoring a bestseller like *Little Women* to lift themselves out of poverty, but their paths diverge: Lenù continues her education, while Lila marries at sixteen; Lenù leaves Naples, while Lila never moves far from her birthplace on *lo stradone* (the big avenue); Lenù is the eternal optimist, while Lila learns to expect little and get less.

As Book Four, *The Story of the Lost Child*, opens, Lenù is reaping the fallout from her decision to leave her professor husband, Pietro, for her childhood crush, Nino. Lila, who broke up her own marriage for Nino, thinks her friend is insane—as do her in-laws and parents. In the first of many reversals and surprises, Lenù, the "good wife," becomes a single mother, moves back to Naples, and then to the neighborhood she fought hard to escape. When she returns, she finds that Lila is no longer struggling to survive but has become a wealthy neighborhood employer. Lila offers Lenù protection, much as Lenù rescued her, back when she was sick and suffering in Book Three, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014).

Part of the protection Lila offers Lenù is reporting to her on Nino's lies, yet Lenù continues to live with him and has his child. Despite having written a book about "women as male inventions" and lecturing on feminism to women's groups, Lenù lets Nino use her to boost his own career. But Nino's infidelities finally force her to move into Lila's building—"My floor was her ceiling," she says—where their rivalry continues, this time focused on the best methods of baby care. "We shared with each other everything good and useful for healthy growth, engaging in a sort of virtuous contest to see who could find the best nutrition, the softest diaper, the most effective cream to prevent rashes." Together, Lila and Lenù manage an extended brood of four daughters and a son.

More than her other Neapolitan novels, *The Lost Child* stresses matriarchy. Only one thing can interrupt it: male violence. The number of Lila and Lenù's childhood friends who die of unnatural causes—murder, overdose, suicide, heart attacks—testifies to street life as hazardous and brief. The crime lords along *lo stradone*, Marcello and Michele Solara, built their mother's loan sharking business into an empire of drug dealing. Like an oracle, Lenù's mother predicts that one day Lila will make up her mind, and "she'll crush both of the Solaras." For Lila the war is personal: both her

brother and her son have become addicted to heroin, her brother fatally.

The stage is set for Greek tragedy, and Ferrante, the classics scholar, doesn't disappoint. Lila's hubris leads her to challenge the Solaras for control, and after an inevitable contest of wills, she loses what cannot be replaced. She fades as a force for reform and prosperity among her neighbors; afraid, they shun her. Her partner Enzo leaves; their computer business is sold. Finally, she disappears. What survives is Lenù's testimony of their friendship: a complex and volatile relationship, a seesaw of attraction and repulsion, jealousy and admiration, but always "one in two, two in one." Lila and Lenù's need for each other survives husbands, lovers, sadistic employers, the deaths of family and friends, and even earthquakes. What they can't change is the unpredictable violence they grew up with, Naples' "black hole."

In a spring 2015 interview in the *Paris Review*, Ferrante defines the relationship of the brilliant friends as an "oscillation" that constantly reverses direction:


If this oscillation were not there, the two friends would be doubles of each other, by turns they would appear as a secret voice, an image in the mirror, or something else. But it's not that way. When Lila's pace becomes unsustainable, the reader grabs into Elena. But if Elena falls apart, then the reader relies on Lila.

However, because Elena narrates, the two voices aren't equal. We root for the studious Lenù to come into her own as a woman and writer. For this reason, what happens during her first year as a scholarship student in Pisa is crucial for her psychic growth. In Book 2, *The Story of a New Name* (2013), she becomes mesmerized with notebooks Lila has given her for safekeeping, which contain ruthlessly accurate descriptions of their old neighborhood, in which "there was not a single line that sounded childish." Reading them, Lenù realizes "that her friend is just as seductive on the page as in person." She drops the box of Lila's notebooks into the Arno River—a parallel to the scene in which Lenù gives Lila a copy of "The Blue Fairy," a booklet she wrote as a child, and Lila throws it in a furnace.

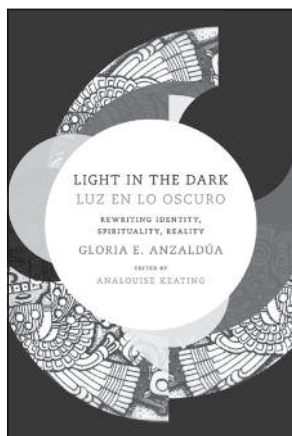
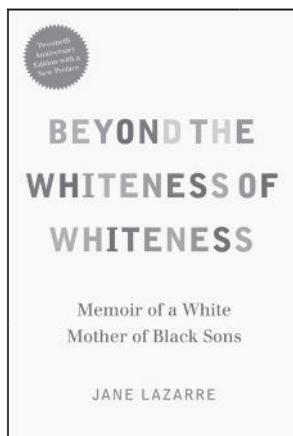
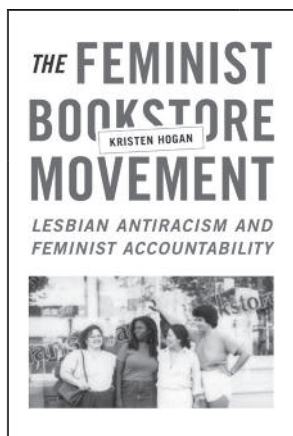
In many ways, Lenù's rise into academia and an elite marriage follows the pattern of a conventional *bildungsroman*, and if the Neapolitan novels were conventional, she would heed the wisdom of her teacher Maestra Oliviero to "forget Cerullo and think of yourself." Book One ends with Lenù's epiphany that "we are the plebs [plebians]" her teacher has warned her to avoid. She surveys her tribe at Lila's wedding feast and sees their drunken lewdness, pettiness, and greed.

By writing "our story," Lenù has defied not only her teacher but also Lila's explicit warning that she not write about any of their old gang. She can't "forget Cerullo" any more than she can forget Naples, her birthplace. "All that has been meaningful and lasting for me," Ferrante writes in

her 2003 collection of letters and interviews, *La Frantumaglia*, "has Naples as its setting and its dialect as its voice" [my translation]. That said, we must resist reading her fiction as "confessional," an interpretation that reflects a long tradition of judging the female writer by her protagonist. Elena Greco is not a proxy for the author—despite her name. Those who have read *La Frantumaglia* know Ferrante has spent far too much time deflecting questions about her identity than answering questions about her work.

Her success in the US has prompted her to divulge much about how she tells a story, but Ferrante cautions that everything we need to know about her is in her books. For most of us, that's good enough. We welcome a writer brave enough to leap a generational chasm by exposing the lies that pass for propriety. We cheer when the obedient Lenù says to her mother-in-law, my adultery is out in the open, but yours is hidden like "dirt under the carpet." Olga, the jilted wife, in Ferrante's 2005 novel, *The Days of Abandonment*, is precious to me as a reader not because she proves she's better than her lying husband, but because she has spent the novel learning how to save herself. This need to fight for respect, if not survival, defines the voice of Ferrante's narrators: it is like lava whose heat melts masks. 

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