

The Neapolitan Novels

Elena Ferrante

ISBN

Book 1: 9781925240009

Book 2: 9781925240016

Book 3: 9781925240023

Book 4: 9781925240511

Fiction paperback



Praise for *The Neapolitan Novels*

'Her novels are intensely, violently personal, and because of this they seem to dangle bristling key chains of confession before the unsuspecting reader...[A] beautiful and delicate tale of confluence and reversal.' James Wood, *New Yorker*

'Cinematic in the density of its detail.' *Times Literary Supplement*

'Elena Ferrante will blow you away.' Alice Sebold

About Elena Ferrante

Elena Ferrante was born in Naples. She is the author of seven novels: *The Days of Abandonment*, *Troubling Love*, *The Lost Daughter*, and the quartet of Neapolitan Novels: *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child*. She is one of Italy's most acclaimed authors.

A reader's introduction to the Neapolitan Novels

These four compelling novels (or this single novel broken into four parts) have such a broad scope that to introduce them according to a single theme would be to reduce them to something less than they are. At their heart is, of course, the relationship between Elena and Lila. So are the Neapolitan novels about female friendship? Yes. But they are also about male–female relationships and mother–daughter relationships. And then they are about the political beyond the personal (although the two are inextricable in these novels). They are about history: Neapolitan, Italian, global. They are about how power is exerted. They are about the power and impotence of words, and the reach and limits of knowledge and learning.

Perhaps the overarching theme is the experience of women, in all its complexity. The potent rendering of one woman's experience is at once the starting point for the exploration of these other themes, and a theme in itself. After the framing narrative that introduces us to Elena as a 66-year-old woman writing the story of her friendship with Lila in an act of defiance, we start

in the confines of Elena's immediate world. Her poor neighbourhood, marked at all times by violence, is a defining part of her, and the place she wants to escape. Lila also seems to want to escape, but she never does, until, perhaps, her final disappearance.

As Elena's world broadens, so too do the concerns of the novel. As Elena becomes more aware of corruption and extortion, for example, we are more clearly able to see it operating. As she discovers feminism, her narrative becomes more explicit about the effects of the patriarchy.

These insightful novels are brilliantly plotted and carefully constructed, but at the same time capture the 'disjointed, unaesthetic, illogical shapeless banality of things' (SLC 311). Reading them is like reading about real life.

Questions for discussion

1. The Neapolitan novels have been widely acclaimed by critics and adored by readers. What makes them so admired?
2. The relationship between Elena and Lila swings between love, envy, meanness, generosity, intellectual engagement and intellectual rivalry. Does this fictional friendship ring true? Why does it endure?
3. What does the novel say about relationships between men and women? Are there any positive relationships depicted? Elena wonders whether 'every relationship with men can only reproduce the same contradictions' (SLC 233). Are all romances destined to end in unhappiness? Why or why not?
4. Elena writes occasionally but regularly about how Lila is 'badly made.' Is there something essentially flawed in Lila? Is she evil, as she is sometimes described? What are Lila's dissolving boundaries? Are they a nervous disorder or something more?
5. Elena has always wanted to expand her world beyond her neighbourhood, yet she is tied to it in many ways. Can she ever escape her past? What about other characters – Lila of course but also, for example, Nino, who becomes a successful politician. Can anyone escape their past? What does escaping one's past actually mean?

6. In relation to the previous question, what is the influence, whether genetic or social, of parents on their children? For example, Nino is sickened by his father's betrayal of his mother (MBF 221), and when Elena first sees Donato Sarratore on Ischia she can't see any resemblance between the two men, but gradually she comes to see that Nino is just like his father. Similarly, Stefano at first seems to Lila and Elena to be different from his father, but later they see shadows of Don Achille in him. And Elena is terrified of turning into her mother but later comes to welcome her slight limp. What is the answer to Elena's question: 'Is it possible that our parents never die, that every child inevitably conceals them in himself?' (SNN 48).

7. Following on from the previous two questions, is destiny seen as fixed in these novels, or changeable?

8. What about the self—is it fixed or changeable? Is it even identifiable? When Elena writes about 'what finally restored me to myself', she immediately asks 'what myself?' (SNN 467). What do the Neapolitan novels say about the notion of self-ness?

9. Why doesn't Lila ever leave Naples? Is she defying the destiny that Maestra Oliviero saw for her (e.g. SNN 381) or is she fulfilling a destiny that was set for her by virtue of her birth and personality?

10. Maestra Oliviero says that 'If one wishes to remain a plebeian, he, his children, the children of his children, deserves nothing' (MBF 72). Does Lila wish to remain a pleb? What does she deserve?

11. 'I take it for granted that she has found a way to disappear, to leave not so much as a hair anywhere in this world' (MBF 21), Elena writes at the very start of the series. What happens to Lila when she disappears? Are we meant to understand her disappearance as a physical or supernatural act?

12. Characters in the novels, especially Elena, often come to profound realisation about themselves or the world, only to change their ideas soon (or long) after. What remains constant? Which, if any, of Elena's insights remain unchanged?

13. Walking through the neighbourhood after seeing Lila one day, Elena notices women's bodies as if for the first time. She recognises that women only a decade or so older than her 'had been consumed by the bodies of their husbands, fathers, brothers, whom they ultimately came to resemble, because of their labors or the arrival of old age, of illness?' (SNN 102). How does Elena's

perception of her body change throughout the novels? How are women's bodies understood in relation to, for example, fury, violence, motherhood, and sexuality?

14. Motherhood is portrayed as both profound joy and dragging obligation. Are the contradictions of motherhood ever resolvable? How can a mother live a fulfilling life without guilt?

15. Particularly in *The Story of the Lost Child*, Elena feels the contradiction between her intellectual feminism and the way she is living her life. How can women be feminists and account for the contradictions in how they live? Is Elena's conclusion that women are 'invented' by men accurate? Is it possible to escape or fight this invention?

16. Lila argues that nothing can 'eliminate the conflict between the rich and the poor' (SNN 208). Does Lila always believe this? Do the books support this view? What is your opinion? Do the novels support any particular political position?

17. Franco tells Elena he admires the passages in her book 'where you give the protagonist the capacity to put together the fragments of things in her own way' (TWLTWS 79). Is this what Elena Ferrante has Elena Greco do?

18. In response to Elena telling her about Dede, Lila responds that 'each of us narrates our life as it suits us' (TWLTWS 237). Is Elena a reliable narrator? Elena sees her narrative as a way to win against Lila, and she threw away Lila's notebooks. How much power do words and writing have in these novels?

19. When Elena realises that she has always had a fascination with the verb become, and that she has wanted to become something (although she can't define what) only because she didn't want to be left behind by Lila, she decides that she 'had to start again to become, but for myself, as an adult, outside of her' (TWLTWS 347). Does she succeed in this?

20. Elisa tells Elena to 'go think about your books, life is for something else' (SLC 121). Do books take people away from real life? Does Elena look for the meaning of life in 'that line of black markings that look like insect shit' (SLC 431), as Lila disparagingly says? Is Lila justified in mocking Elena's desire for meaning?