



The Story of the Lost Child

Elena Ferrante, Ann Goldstein (Translator)

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Here is the dazzling saga of two women, the brilliant, bookish Elena and the fiery, uncontrollable Lila. Both are now adults; life's great discoveries have been made, its vagaries and losses have been suffered. Through it all, the women's friendship has remained the gravitational center of their lives.

Both women once fought to escape the neighborhood in which they grew up—a prison of conformity, violence, and inviolable taboos. Elena married, moved to Florence, started a family, and published several well-received books. In this final book, she has returned to Naples. Lila, on the other hand, never succeeded in freeing herself from the city of her birth. She has become a successful entrepreneur, but her success draws her into closer proximity with the nepotism, chauvinism, and criminal violence that infect her neighborhood. Proximity to the world she has always rejected only brings her role as its unacknowledged leader into relief. For Lila is unstoppable, unmanageable, unforgettable!

Against the backdrop of a Naples that is as seductive as it is perilous and a world undergoing epochal change, the story of a lifelong friendship is told with unmatched honesty and brilliance. The four volumes in this series constitute a long remarkable story that readers will return to again and again, and every return will bring with it new revelations.

The Story of the Lost Child Details

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From Reader Review The Story of the Lost Child for online ebook

Warwick says

The tunnel on the edge of the neighbourhood, beyond which Lila couldn't pass.

When I arrived in Naples I had just read the Claudio Gatti article which claimed to expose Elena Ferrante's real identity. I remembered being amazed, when it had come out back in 2016, by the fury it had provoked. People were outraged! Not just readers but literary editors too had lined up to condemn the piece – putting across, in the process, a lot of wrong-headed ideas about 'the death of the author' which should really have been kept separate from the ethical concerns in question.

But now I've finished the last book I think I understand the disproportionate reaction a bit better. *The Story of the Lost Child* is, like its three predecessors, a bit of a messy novel, stylistically indifferent, but intensely emotional and involving. And everyone struggles to understand why. Despite what some reviews imply, this kind of long, female-focused *Künstlerroman* is not a complete novelty – it's not a million miles from Doris Lessing's *Children of Violence* sequence, or AS Byatt's *Frederica* quartet – and even the notion of a woman trying to piece together the details of her friend's life is, if Gatti is right, probably lifted from Christa Wolf's *The Quest for Christa T.* But Ferrante's characters – especially the flinty, talismanic Lila – are so comprehensively imagined that they must, you feel, reflect something essentially autobiographical, something profoundly *true*, on the part of the author.

So I get to Naples. I've just read book four, I've just read Gatti's article. I want to go and see the *rione* or 'neighbourhood' where the books are set, which is a run-down little area of estates in the eastern suburbs called the Rione Luzzatti. I ask a few cab drivers: they won't take us to that part of town. 'The criminal families live there,' one leers. Then I try some tour agents – they all refuse as well. One of them even specialises in Elena Ferrante tours, but it turns out on further inquiry that they just go to the upmarket Piazza dei Martiri (where the characters go shopping when they've got some money) and the historical centre. 'The *rione* is not good for tourists,' I am told. 'Actually, even we do not go there.'

Eventually, though, I find someone who knows someone who has a friend who will take us. (view spoiler) Laura, who grew up in the *rione* herself, comes to meet us: she is super friendly and, far from being offended by our desire to gawk at her childhood stomping-ground, which is what I'd been worried about, she actually seems rather touched by it, and is genuinely excited about the chance to show us around. We walk down the famous *stradone*, litter-swept and bleak, and peer through grates into communal cellars like the one where Lila dropped Lenù's doll. We walk through the tunnel that marked the edge of the girls' world, where some of the lights have been smashed, the better to mug people walking back home from the nearest metro station. We walk by the school, where 11-year-old Laura had to fend off knife crime from 16-year-olds who had been held back so many times they were sitting right next to her in class. We creep into the courtyard where Lila's apartment is set and where, locals are convinced, from cross-referencing details in a variety of books and articles, Ferrante herself once lived.

Ferrante's old apartment. Maybe.

Laura and her friends, she says, are proud and happy that Ferrante has now immortalised the place 'for something positive – for books, for literature'. I am a little surprised, if only because, in the novels, the locals

are not so happy when Lenù starts writing about the area.

But of course, Elena Greco is not Elena Ferrante. It's always an effort to remember that, because that's the conceit that the books are selling: an author called Elena writing a narrator who is an author called Elena. Draw your own conclusions, they suggest. And yeah, they must surely contain lots that is true, like all good fiction does. But reading these books is such an overwhelming experience that the slightest retreat from autobiography starts to feel almost unacceptable: OK, OK, maybe you've reordered events a bit, drawn out a couple of poetic coincidences, conflated a couple of minor characters here and there – but the essentials are true, right? You really grew up like this, didn't you? There's a real Lila out there somewhere...yes?

The Bar Parisi, the assumed original of the Solaras' bar

The idea that the author could be in here somewhere, waiting to be found, is helped along by the books' constant theme of authorship and unstable identities. We don't know who wrote what, only that both Elena and Lina have been writing something; Elena worries that Lina has quasi-mystically entered into her computer to tell her story her own way; then she denies it. There is an almost Nervalian reduplication of women, starting with the Lenù/Lila pairing, one blonde, one brunette, one who leaves, one who stays, one who writes fiction, the other who writes computer code;

I fair, she dark, I calm, she anxious, I likeable, she malicious, the two of us opposite and united....

Even their daughters are mistaken for each other, misidentified. And Lina is further refracted into their friend Alfonso, who looks like her and starts to dress like her, too. At times, Lina the character seems to recognise her own fluidity. She talks about disappearing, about erasing herself; she does in fact vanish without trace. And she has regular psychological episodes of *smarginatura*, the 'bleeding' of one object or person into another, which Ann Goldstein translates a little awkwardly as *dissolving boundaries*. All of this is, really, in the service of the fantasy of an 'Elena Ferrante' who can become whoever we need her to be for the novels to have the greatest power for us.

Piazza Salvatore Lobianco

Standing in the little square, Hannah and I get a bit emotional. Actually, the area is a lot like parts of Livingston, where my wife grew up; it's like run-down, neglected suburbs in a lot of cities. To elevate this kind of urban wasteland into something transcendent seems like a heroic feat – it suddenly reminds me a bit of what Alan Moore did with Northampton, though it's even more impressive because there are no forgotten historical riches underlying the Rione Luzzatti – it's just stark, rationalist housing, built by Fascists, and subsequently ignored. Until Ferrante.

But again I check myself immediately. I'm constructing my own emotional story of what Ferrante did, the same way all readers of these books do. How much difference would it make if that isn't her apartment, if she grew up miles away in Rome, if her husband was the one with the Neapolitan childhood, the dialect? If it was all a brilliant fabrication? What would that do to our experience of the books?

It's almost – I say to Hannah – like the greatest creation in these novels is not anyone listed in the cast, but

‘Elena Ferrante’ herself. Hannah nods. But all morning we stare at every old woman we pass, searching for Lila Cerullo’s face.

Kelly says

This review originally appeared on my blog, ShouldaCouldaWoulda Books.

I've been writing for too long, and I'm tired; it's more and more difficult to keep the thread of the story taut within the chaos of the years, of events large and small, of moods... What to do then? Admit yet again that she is right? Accept that to be adult is to disappear, is to learn to hide to the point of vanishing?

It's been a few weeks, but I'm finally able to deal with this. This is the last novel in Elena Ferrante's celebrated Neapolitan series. We've followed Lila and Elena from their barefoot girlhood in the tattered, broken courtyards of 1950s Naples to the period of *dolce vita*, that was only ever *dolce* for a select few (these girls only glimpsed its crumbs and its outskirts and found it terrifying), to the late 1960s and 1970s as they matured into wives and mothers and workers amidst gangs and class warfare and quasi-intellectual circles, socialist and violent communist politics and the awakening of feminism. They've made it to the 1980s now, carrying pieces of all of these things with them, jumbled up inside their heads and poking out at odd angles- as tends to happen when you're carrying a suitcase with far too much inside that you haven't quite figured out how to empty yet. “Made it” is really the key word here- as perhaps is the case with most people who make it to old age with any honesty and consciousness of what they've done. This book feels like the last gasp of someone who really wants to give up and say the hell with it- but can see the top of the mountain- and almost wishes she couldn't, almost wishes that she had some excuse to sit down forever.

Elena and Lila are no longer girls in any sense of the word- they have lived what would have been even just a few decades earlier the better part of their lives. But that doesn't mean anything real has changed, not really. Elena and Lila, in this novel, find themselves quite literally back where they started- back in that courtyard, still tied to each other more than anyone else. They still run and yell and hide on the stairways- the same stairways where they hid from the mysterious, supposedly monstrous Don Achille are now the same stairways where they now hide from their husbands, ex-husbands, ex-lovers, brothers, fathers, mothers, children- and, most heartbreakingly, from each other. They have become the monsters that sit at the end of the stairs.

There's so much to talk about here, but for me, I can only talk about it by dealing with the main relationships of the novels, which, after all, are the only reason these stories exist at all. I've said before that the class-based insecurity and despair of these novels breaks my heart, and this was the final throwing up of the hands, the final ironic laugh. This is the story of how the cycle of poverty wins, nearly every time, even with those who spend their whole lives trying to escape it. Usually not with a bang, but with a thousand small, seemingly reasonable compromises, a million little cuts, a hundred “Well, why don't you just....?”, a veritable boatload of, “Well, why does it matter so much anyway? Who do you think you are?”-s. It's no coincidence that Elena's relationship with her working-class mother, which powerfully haunted the background of the first novel and was a major motor of Elena's drive to escape (no less powerful, in her way, than Lila, though often much less acknowledged) flings itself to the forefront of this one. She is that mother we all watched after the Ferguson protests, the one who beat her child publicly after discovering him participating in them, which was shared by some other mothers in a startlingly positive way, (which got less startling the more you thought about it).

Elena is brought down, punished, berated, and endlessly shamed for the crime of being successful enough to forget that she is not allowed to be human in the way that people who are born to the sort of status she has earned are human:

And yet in my memory that place-name, Montpellier, has for many reasons remained a symbol of escape. I had been out of Italy once, in Paris, with Franco, and I had felt exhilarated by my own audacity. But then it seemed to me that my world was and would forever remain the neighborhood in Naples, while the rest was like a brief outing in whose special climate I could imagine myself but never in fact be. Montpellier, on the other hand, although it was far less exciting than Paris, gave me the impression that my boundaries had burst and I was expanding...It was marvelous to cross borders, to let oneself go within other cultures, discover the provisional nature of what I had taken for absolute.

Well how dare she, *that uppity hussy*. She forgot that she is not just a status-earning, status-protecting machine whose job is to be a repository of that status until she can pass it on to her children who are born to it, and therefore will never know anything else. The intellectual freedom, the grace and elegance, the ability to feel free, was once something that she genuinely craved and yearned towards- and is now the new set of chains she has made for herself once she discovers that those things will not save her. Her mother is there to beat every thought of self-actualizing out of her. It's something that is not a part of her universe, something her mother has never been able to afford and something it enrages her that her daughter thinks she can afford. It is a harsh, but deeply understandable picture of a love between a mother and daughter who have never quite understood each other, and who have, actually, been each others' greatest fear in many ways.

What's interesting is that other than one or two major through lines, this was a rather disjointed work. It covers more time than all the other books put together- it contains the reasons that this had to be written to begin with, and so had to be so. But it reads like a set of impressions from here and there that Elena finds so much harder to recall than the stories she tells from when she was nine until her mid thirties. I was surprised, after the immersive nature of the first volumes, how easily I slipped in and out of this one, largely due to this device- I am used to following Elena around and evidence of her older life has crept in, the closer she got to it. It is clear that she is older now, someone who has been a writer, a journalist, an editor, a manager, a mother, and that therefore it is hard to simply live in a genuine way without watching yourself and the events of your life with one of those hats on. Especially when she is purely talking about herself, especially after the mother of he she deals with herself with an irritable flick of the wrist.

It takes Lila to get her going again. Where is their friendship now? Lila has come up in the circle of fortune, at least in the first part of the book. She finally occupies the place that Elena has always seen her occupying- which read like a clear rebuke to the idea that Lila never needed Elena the way that Elena seemed to need her. But while Elena will never think Lila is less important, or less powerful in any way, by this point in her life she is able to see vulnerabilities in her that would never have occurred to her younger self (think back to the first and second book when we can see so many moments when Lila is scared, confused and vulnerable but Elena has no idea- that time they're sexually harassed on the street, when she marries the former ganglord's son to avoid having to marry the children of the current ganglord, that time Elena brings Lila- poor and separated and working at a sausage factory-her childhood story, full of hope that this will reignite the Lila she knew and Lila throws it on the fire). Elena is finally put in positions where she has to deal with a Lila whose weakness scares her, saddens her, and frightens her. It is something that has been hinted at before, in the narrative third person, but not something we've ever seen. In the midst of an earthquake that they both survive, pregnant together, Lila tells her what its like living inside of her head where everything has dissolving boundaries:

An object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and

mixing. She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was absolutely not like that – and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped.

Elena has lived her whole life bumping up against the rules and finding them more solid than ever. The end of her life seems like one long confirmation that she has been breaking rules and that she should be punished for it- Lila has always lived understanding that everything is a construct and can easily become something else. She is scared of the impermanence of that, had accordingly, has hunkered down more and more tightly in the muck and mire of their Naples neighborhood, surrounding herself with all the rules and chains and barriers she can find- and still can't seem to help but break the rules every day. Elena sees the place as a nightmare of inevitability, Lila as a bastion of stability that will keep her head screwed on straight- something that she unfortunately feels necessary to teach herself, being born where and when she was born. In this book, in their late “maturity”, then, both their childhoods finally end. Elena’s dies when she sees Lila’s inner struggles for the first time. Lila’s is done after Elena finds herself in the painful position of having to end her innocence, and, it seems, the basis of the friendship powered so many of her choices for more than thirty or forty years. The main event of the novel, for which it is named, ends up feeling like an emotional afterthought, something inevitable that proves the final end of the innocence that this book details.

What does this say, in the end, about friendship? It would be tempting to think that it seems to leave us in despair and darkness, showing us what not letting go can lead us to, the damage that retaining your girlhood, however subliminally, will wreak on your brain.

But that would be to forget the frame- to forget the woman we were introduced to in the first few pages of *My Brilliant Friend* who was told about how Lila disappeared and who seemed so tired, almost irritated, to be interrupted- and who then sat down and wrote for what must have been days, weeks, months, everything about her that she’ll never forget. Who still, at the end, seems to be trying to fulfill Lila’s faith in her, the faith that she broke, that she no doubt blames for what happened to her in some sense- and use her writing as a kind of black magic to conjure her up again... with just the sort of power that she and Lila always imagined that words had.

So perhaps they didn’t destroy each other in the end. Perhaps it is, after all, a story about how friends preserve the best of us, the things that are the most precious and real, even when we quite literally disappear on them. Friends freeze us in time and allow us to time-travel, and make us part of themselves. Now, as we’ve seen, we know that this isn’t always a positive effect- but it is, in the most lasting of friendships, forever. It is that rock that Lila always sought and couldn’t believe existed. We build ourselves out of our friends at the times when we are the most malleable and they can never be removed- whether it is them or our illusion of them- they’re not going anywhere. Lila and Elena, more than anyone else in their lives, dreamed each other into being. I skipped a part in that quote that I put up at the beginning, a part where Elena pauses to talk to herself while she is writing, re-setting and justifying her approach to her story:

I've been writing for too long, and I'm tired; it's more and more difficult to keep the thread of the story taut within the chaos of the years, of events large and small, of moods. So either I tend to pass over my own affairs to recapture Lila and all the complications she brings with her or, worse, I let myself be carried away by the events of my life, only because it's easier to write them. But I have to avoid this choice. I mustn't take the first path, on which, if I set myself aside- I would end up finding ever fewer traces of Lila- since the very nature of our relationship dictate that I can reach her only by passing through myself.

But I shouldn't take the second, either. That, in fact, I speak of my experience in increasingly greater detail is just what she would certainly favor. Come on- she would say- tell us what turn your life took, who cares

about mine, admit that it doesn't even interest you. And she would conclude: I'm a scribble on a scribble, completely unsuitable for one of your books; forget it, Lenu, one doesn't tell the story of an erasure. What to do then? Admit yet again that she is right? Accept that to be adult is to disappear, is to learn to hide to the point of vanishing? Admit that, as the years pass, the less I know of Lila?

This whole book says NO as loudly as possible, it says no like a child who is denying the reality of the no while realizing sooner or later that she will need to confront it, realizing that it is there and angry about it, deflecting that anger onto everything around her, and it is only admitted at the very last.

I won't reveal what Ferrante decides the end of Lila and Elena's story is (if it is an end), but I will say that I believe that she agrees with me that whatever these women did to each other over the years, she doesn't believe they destroyed each other. They *made* each other, for better or worse. And that (ALL of that- every last ugly, sad, joyous, nostalgic part of it) is what friendship is.

Don't you agree?

Candi says

3.5 stars

"I've been writing for too long, and I'm tired; it's more and more difficult to keep the thread of the story taut within the chaos of the years, of events large and small, of moods. So either I tend to pass over my own affairs to recapture Lila and all the complications she brings with her or, worse, I let myself be carried away by the events of my life, only because it's easier to write them."

Gosh, relationships - particularly those of the 'girlfriends' variety - are quite complex, aren't they? Never before have I ever read about a friendship in such microscopic and candid detail as that of Elena and Lila. Never before have I been forced to examine my own friendships with such excruciating rigor. I'm honestly worn out! Yet, this series will stay with me forever. Having started Book 1, **My Brilliant Friend**, over a year ago, I have finally made my way through to this last in the series. I know, you're probably thinking it took me a rather long time to get through a relatively short series; after all, there are only four books total. Personally, there's no way I could have devoured these books one after the other, although many did just that.

I've reviewed the first three Neapolitan books, so I'm going to keep this relatively brief. Truly, the entire series feels like one long, epic novel, simply divided into four parts. Each builds on the previous installment in a linear fashion, therefore making it necessary to read them in order. I get the feeling that the entire collection is autobiographical in nature, although this last book has me really questioning exactly whose story is this - is it Elena's, as I originally assumed, or is this truly Lila's story? It is written from Elena's first person point of view. Her character is that of an author; she has the fame from her books, has travelled and is formally educated. Lila on the other hand never left Naples, never finished high school. She remained in the violent neighborhood of her childhood, yet acquiring her own large degree of influence and success. In one sense, I have a difficult time separating Lila from the city of Naples itself, maybe even from the volatile mass of Mount Vesuvius, towering over all, sometimes explosive, other times merely smoldering, but always present. In any case, Lila is a fascinating character. *"However much she had always dominated all of us and had imposed and was still imposing a way of being, on pain of her resentment and her fury, she perceived herself as a liquid and all her efforts were, in the end, directed only at containing herself. When, in spite of*

her defensive manipulations of persons and things, the liquid prevailed, Lila lost Lila, chaos seemed the only truth, and she – so active, so courageous – erased herself and, terrified, became nothing."

This novel is not only about the strength of a friendship, despite its changeability, but also an intelligent and thought-provoking discourse about motherhood, marriage, feminism, and the craft of writing. How is a woman's identity shaped by education, culture, and her relationships with her children, her parents, her spouses, her lovers and her friends? It's a tribute to Naples as only Lila can voice so passionately: "... *what a splendid and important city: here all languages are spoken, here everything was built and everything torn down, here the people don't trust talk and are very talkative, here is Vesuvius which reminds you every day that the greatest undertaking of powerful men, the most splendid work, can be reduced to nothing in a few seconds by the fire, and the earthquake, and the ash, and the sea.*"

Having closed the last page in **The Story of the Lost Child**, I have to make a small confession: I am relieved. I was overwhelmed by the time I reached the two-thirds point in this novel. It's truly a mental exercise of Olympian proportions to examine in such detail the inner workings of a friendship to such length. You couldn't pay me to do that with my own relationships – I may in the end have nothing left! Yet, I am quite pleased to have read these – Ferrante's skill is indisputable.

"Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines toward obscurity, not clarity."

Michael Finocchiaro says

[UPDATED - SEE BELOW]

I can't believe it's over! I mean really, after finishing Ferrante's riveting tetralogy, I feel a sense of loss. The fourth volume was fast-paced and full of reveals (no spoilers!). It was hard to read at several points, but always entertaining and thought provoking. If you have not read it yet, please do so this year. Definitely a journey to Naples that you do not want to miss.

One thing that struck me with this series is the similarities and differences with another classic story which crosses four decades in as many books: the Rabbit Trilogy by John Updike. I have reviewed all four Rabbit books here in GR, but if you are not familiar with them, Updike follows Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom from the 50s to the 80s with one book per decade. The Ferrante series is similar even if the boundaries are not drawn as clearly between books as in Updike and covers roughly the same period as the Neapolitan series. Similarly, the character of Rabbit is deeply developed like that of Lena and Lila. Where Rabbit is quintessentially American in his own unique and depraved way, Lena and Lila are quintessentially Neapolitan. I think that rural Pennsylvania and metropolitan Naples are quite different geographically, but both serve as a evolving canvas backdrops upon which the central dramas play out. I just think that if you read the Updike books, you'd probably enjoy the Ferrante ones and vice versa in terms of a look a slice of life from the middle to the end of the 20th century seen on two different continents and from the perspective of the two sexes.

[SPOILER SECTION - STOP HERE OR BEWARE!]

I really enjoyed the allegory of the doll which brought the story full circle from the beginning of the relationship between Lena and Lila and was a beautiful reminder of that first wonderful book. Further, the disappearance of Tina (for which I enjoyed the ambiguity, almost dreamlike, in not knowing definitively her fate) was also a beautiful allegory for the lost innocence (and sanity to a degree?) of Lila and the loss of

intimacy between here and Lena.

In all four books, it was wonderful to feel Naples like a character in the book (much like Paris in L'Education Sentimental). There are moments when you feel like you are overhearing Lena and Lila in a café or crossing them in a park. The city evolves around them in colors, smells, and great differences in wealth and power.

There is a Proustian feel to Ferrante's writing, although as one of my friends pointed out, the male characters (Enzo, Piero, Nino, etc) here are not as three-dimensional as the female characters (whereas in La Recherche, Odille, Gilberte, and Albertine are all much more profound). But still there is a nice on-ne-sais-quoi in her phrasing, her descriptions, and her unique female sensibility that lends a limpidity and beauty to her prose that is just so pleasurable to read.

Orsodimondo says

IL CERCHIO SI CHIUDE

Diventare amiche: ...mi diede la mano. Questo gesto cambiò tutto tra noi per sempre.

Per il primo paio di pagine ho fatto un po' fatica a riannodare il filo: benché il racconto riprenda esattamente dal punto dove era stato interrotto la volta precedente, alla fine del terzo romanzo, *Storia di chi parte e di chi resta*, è comunque passato un anno da allora.

Ma è stata una sensazione di breve durata: in poco tempo Elena Ferrante mi ha preso e portato via, mi ha trascinato con sé, all'inseguimento della vita e nella vita - nella vita dei suoi personaggi, incalzandoli, seguendoli, entrando nel loro intimo, nei recessi più nascosti, negli umori cattivi, per quanto a volte innocui.

La bambola e l'ombra di don Achille.

Sempre con quella sua caratteristica che consiste nel sapere svelare e mostrare il lato oscuro e meno gradevole dell'animo umano, la dark side quotidiana, quella con cui si convive ogni giorno, la grettezza la meschinità la malizia la gelosia la violenza l'invidia la malignità l'intolleranza con cui ogni giorno dialoghiamo, vuoi per sopprimerle o metterle a tacere, vuoi per dar loro un po' di sfogo.

Quale più, quale meno. Chi più, chi meno.

È come un'onda, di quelle grandi, che crea un tunnel, e io lettore ci sono dentro, nel tunnel, trasportato dalla forza dell'acqua, surfando come se fossi nato sulla tavola.

Catherine McCormack-Lila, straordinaria.

È una lettura che crea dipendenza, assuefazione, come già lo hanno fatto le oltre mille pagine che hanno preceduto queste: la dose quotidiana non può scendere sotto le cento pagine.

Ferrante scava, va al fondo dell'oscurità, la racconta con precisione.

E verrebbe da sentirsi intrusi, indiscreti, spioni: non fosse che la qualità della scrittura è tale che questo rischio è evitato.

Poi si giunge all'epilogo, intitolato 'Restituzione': sono solo cinque pagine, non ci si può illudere, siamo arrivati alla fine.

Niamh Cusack (Elena-Lenù) e Toby Wharton (Nino Sarratore). Tranne la Cusack e la McCormack impegnate in un interrotto tour de force per interpretare Elena e Lila, gli altri dieci attori affrontano tutti più di un personaggio, un perfetto meccanismo di entrate e uscite, cambi d'abito e personaggio, che va avanti per cinque ore.

Ecco, dopo, è proprio come nella canzone: *la musica è finita, gli amici se ne vanno, e tu mi lasci solo più di prima...*, la casa si svuota, improvvisamente non si sente più parlare, neanche una parola di napoletano, tutte quelle facce familiari, tutti quegli amici, quelle due bambine diventate adulte, e donne, e anziane, diventate soprattutto grandi, Grandi, tutte quelle storie, quei fatti, gli episodi, le partenze, i ritorni...

Beh, no, non proprio come nella canzone: sono finiti, ma non sono perduti, ci si sente soli, ma riscaldati, illuminati.

Le mie due amiche geniali, my brilliant friends.

Si è ripetuta la magia della grande letteratura.

Anche ora che sapevo della malattia di mia figlia, non riuscivo a cacciare via la soddisfazione per ciò che ero diventata, il gusto di sentirmi libera spostandomi per l'Italia, il piacere di disporre di me come se non avessi un passato e tutto stesse cominciando adesso.

Violet wells says

I've never read a series before. Finally I understand why people sleep outside bookstores the day before the next instalment is due to be published. Were there to be a book five I might well zipper myself inside a bag outside Feltrinelli the night before release. Except there will be no next instalment here. I'm done. Lila has left my life and I will never know anything more about her. I feel horribly bereft.

Book Four has less of a feel of fictional memoir about it; it reads more like a novel. It contains some clever post-modernist tricks, most notably the book within a book theme. Elena Greco finally writes about Lila, except it isn't these books (these books play no part whatsoever in her story); it's a seventy page novella called Friendship. Meanwhile she has the suspicion that Lila is writing secretly about Naples. In spirit, these have always been Lila's books. Now Elena lets slip the possibility that maybe they really are Lila's books. Vanity is probably the central theme of this book but authorship is also a prevailing theme. Ferrante asks many probing questions about the nature of authorship. And we end up asking, who is the author of the Neapolitan series?

Elena becomes rather more disagreeable in this book. She becomes vain and a bit petty. Especially in contrast to Lila, who seems to live without any recourse to vanity, which is why perhaps she's such a compelling and deeply fascinating character. The only other author I can recall who attempted to create a

character free of vanity was Dostoevsky with *The Idiot* and, brilliant as that was, I'd have to say Ferrante did a better job than he did. It began to bother me how disagreeable I was finding Elena and her vanity. I wasn't at all sure this was what Ferrante intended. Then I realised that what Ferrante intended was probably exactly the confusion I was feeling. This isn't one of those run of the mill novels where every character is morally and emotionally consistent and so has a clearly designated and manipulative charge and endgame. It's a novel that constantly springs surprises, that constantly makes you stop and question lazy emotional and moral assumptions you realise you harbour. One thing Ferrante does so well is get at the anatomy of every strong emotion. Emotions aren't single and straightforward. Every emotion carries the charge of its opposite. Emotion in fact is often us arguing with ourselves. She shows how hate can be simultaneously present with love, jealousy with aspiration, admiration with resentment, conviction with doubt. I don't think any writer has done arguing better than Ferrante. You could say the books are one protracted argument – everyone is constantly arguing, romantically, domestically, politically, socially - and you come to realise that this what life is, a long protracted messy argument. Lila is almost like some magical touchstone creature. Even when she appears to be wrong she turns out to be right. I don't think she's wrong once in the entire novel and yet she's far from some simplistic Obi Wan Kenobi; she's hugely complex, volatile, divisive, contradictory, spontaneous, calculated, adorable, obnoxious. She bristles with lived life on every page. In contrast, the more of Elena's vanity we see the more we doubt that Elena Greco could have written these novels. You begin to feel only Lila could have.

For me Lila is up there with Anna Karenina, Molly Bloom and Mrs Ramsey as one of the great female characters of literature. No question in my mind Ferrante will be on the classics shelf in two hundred years.

Francesca Marciano says

There is a terrible sense of loss once you reach the last line of the last volume of Ferrante's saga, her writing is so addictive, it has kept me company for over a year now and waiting for the next installment of the story has been a delightful suspense. I feel abandoned to my own device now that the curtain fell on this wonderful story. The last volume "La bambina Perduta" has just been published in Italy, so I've devoured it in three days and it's not a disappointment. It has a somehow slow start, with a tremendous and unexpected twist that comes as a blow half way through the book. Her writing keeps digging, like a furious fox terrier the depths and the folds of the relationship between Lena and Lila. This writer has a ferocity and a depth that I've rarely encountered.

Maxwell says

I'm done. I'm actually done. The journey is over, and what a wonderful journey it was. Maybe soon I will be able to write a better review, but for now I can only say that this series is truly unlike anything I've read. It's a modern masterpiece, and Elena Ferrante is one of the greatest living authors. I'm sure to revisit these books again and again and again. In the mean time, goodbye Lila & Lenu. It's been a pleasure.

Julie Christine says

*This is the end
Beautiful friend
This is the end
My only friend, the end*

*Of our elaborate plans, the end
Of everything that stands, the end
No safety or surprise, the end
I'll never look into your eyes...again*

*Can you picture what will be
So limitless and free
Desperately in need...of some...stranger's hand
In a...desperate land*

*Lost in a Roman...wilderness of pain
And all the children are insane
All the children are insane
Waiting for the summer rain, yeah*

~The Doors, "The End"

Nothing about the way the Neapolitan Novels has captured and held me spellbound makes sense. Pages of expository text barely broken by a paragraph indent; characters relentlessly bashing their heads against poverty and violence, returning again and again to the places and people that have caused them the greatest misery; periods of hope and redemption brought to bitter ends by poor choices and slashing domestic acrimony. And yet. And yet. I know that by reading Elena Ferrante's *bildungsroman*, I have partaken in one of the greatest literary journeys, feasts, dreams, accomplishments of the 21st century. It isn't so much that the Neapolitan Novels, built on the simple premise of a female friendship from childhood to old age, breaks new ground. It's that Ferrante returns us to the best of what we can be as readers: thoughtful, patient, introspective, willing to dig deep into layers of meaning, to see beyond the cold surface of quotidian events to the simmering magma of emotion beneath. In eras past, Eliot, Mann, Tolstoy, Woolf, Hardy demanded the same and the rewards of Ferrante are as great.

This final installment brings Elena Greco full circle, back to the neighborhood she fled as a young woman—first to the towers of academe, then to literary acclaim, spending her young adulthood and her early years as a wife and mother in the orderly, civilized north of Italy. But as her friend Lila had done years before, Elena throws propriety and security to the winds and follows her passion back to Naples, the scene of so much crime in the streets, so many crimes of the heart. That passion is the fickle Nino, the man-boy to whom both women sacrifice their burgeoning self-determination. I'm just full of lyrics today—as I think of Nino, of young Lila's and not-so-young Elena's obsession with his empty soul, I hear Paul Simon lamenting: "*I have squandered my resistance for a pocketful of mumbles, such are promises All lies and jest, still a man hears what he wants to hear And disregards the rest, hmmmm*".

We know from the very beginning—hundreds of pages ago, when we embarked on this political and personal Odyssey—that Lila has disappeared as an elderly woman, at the twisted and burnt end of her rope. But where has she gone? The legacy she leaves behind is that molten lava roiling beneath the surface, and in

The Story of the Lost Child, the hard, black earth is rent open, letting the impossible heat burst forth. Elena seems more curious than concerned by Lila's disappearance. Her friend's presence hovers, thick and insistent, over every aspect of her life; *Lost Child* illustrates how and why this friendship has endured despite the psychological damage each woman inflicts on the other.

The title, *The Story of the Lost Child*, can be taken for its literal meaning, as the plot bursts with tension and tragedy. But the entire collection speaks to children lost in this Neapolitan ghetto, the children we met pages and heartbreaks ago. We witnessed their twisted paths to adulthood over the course of four novels, until at last we now stand with them at a reckoning place. The great loss is the reader's, knowing we must bid our final goodbyes to the Grecos, Cerullos, Carraccis, Pelusos, Sarratores and so many others, with so much left unsaid and unknown.

And undone. Oh, how our hearts are utterly undone.

Elyse says

Book Four....The Final Conclusion to the Neapolitan novels:

And so this story begins.....-[page 1]:

"From October 1976 until 1979, when I returned to Naples to live, I avoided resuming a steady relationship with Lila. But it wasn't easy. She almost immediately tried to reenter my life by force, and I ignored her, tolerated her, endured her. Even if she acted as if there were nothing she wanted more than to be close to me at a difficult moment, I couldn't forget the contempt with which she had treated me".

"Today I think that if it had been only the insult that wounded me --You're an idiot, she had shouted on the telephone when I told her about Nino, and she had never 'ever' spoken to me like that before -- I would have soon calmed down. In reality, what mattered more than that offense was the mention of Dede and Elsa. Think of the harm you're doing to your daughters, she had warned me, and at that moment I had paid no attention. But over time those words acquired greater weight, and I returned to them often. Lila had never displayed the slightest interest in Dede and Elsa; almost certainly she didn't even remember their names. If, on the phone, I mentioned some intelligent remark they had made, she cut me off, changed the subject. And when she met them for the first time, at the house of Marcello Solara, she had confined herself to an

absentminded glance and a few pat phrases--she hadn't paid the least attention to how nicely they were dressed, and neatly their hair was combed, how well both were able to express themselves, although they were still small. And yet I had given birth to them. I brought them up, they were part of me, who had been her friend forever: she should have taken this into account--I won't say out of affection but at least out of politeness -- for my maternal pride. Yet she hadn't even attempted a good-natured sarcasm; she had displayed indifference and nothing more. Only now--out of jealousy, surely, because I had taken Nino--did she remember the girls, and wanted to emphasize that I was a terrible mother, that although I was happy, I was causing them unhappiness. The minute I thought about it I became anxious. Had Lila worried about Gennaro when she left Stefano, when she abandoned the child to the neighbor because of her work in the factory, when she sent him to me as if to get him out of the way? Ah, I had my faults, but I was certainly more a mother and she was".

WOW.... Can you see how we might be for a ride for the next 473 pages?

Well, as much as I HAD THOUGHT I was going to be glad when I finished these 4 books..... now, I'm not so sure. I'm sad! This 4th book broke my heart more than all three put together!

I can't help but wonder if other readers -'had/have' a long term friendship of 40 to 50 years. Any similarities to Elena and Lila? I also wonder what these stories might be like if Lila were the narrator.

Lisi and I met in 7th grade. Her real name is Ilyce. I went by my nickname, Liz in Jr. high school - and my real name is Elyse. Having similar names, with our school lockers back to back brought us together. An instant friendship it was. We are the same height, both Jewish--- but from very different types of families. Lisi introduced me to Goodreads. She was the reader as a child. Not me! The first time either one of us either had sex--- both late bloomers--- it was with the same guy! NOT AT THE SAME TIME!!! Me first- she later - a triangle messy drama -- which we survive with flying colors. Our friendship lasted longer than the guy. (that's a very sad story:he died)....

Lisi and I are still close friends -now in our 60's. Both of us have been married for approx 30 + years. Both have 2 daughters. Our husbands are good friends too....

Lisi and I have another friend- Renee. Renee was my closest friend - in a crazy - complex - deep way - more than with Lisi during our teen -growing years...

I spent most of my time with Renee. -- Long story....but after an almost 50 year friendship.....we aren't speaking today....(I quietly let her go- but maybe she had let me go years before I even noticed). Lisi and Renee are still in touch....

but I only have the memories we once shared....(over 40 years worth). I 'think' about our resuming our friendship often -- but it hasn't happened.

Woman's friendships may be the most complex relationships on the planet!!!!

My suggestion....(but it's only my opinion)....either read all 4 books -- or don't read any of them! I went into THE BINGE READERS CAVE.....reading approx. 300+ pages a day - non -stop until I finished all 4 books - days and night. Took a few breaks, but not many.

Elena Ferrante....I think it's fair to say she's a great artist....an extremely gifted storyteller! Kinda a genius!

Hadrian says

Slum, Naples, Italy, 1947

In reading the 'Neapolitan series' of Elena Ferrante, I am constantly reminded of the clear influence of 19th-century realism - description of ordinary or familiar events as they are, with digressions into political events or societal norms to fill in the background. But the ordinary or real does not mean the banal.

One could reasonably say that this is series of war novels. It speaks without bombast or pretensions, and describes, with precise and subtle prose, a war of attrition. This war is one of slow-burning family arguments

with no real end even after long bouts of shouted insults, of the slow suffocation social roles telling you what you must and must not be. There is a code word spoken very early in the first volume which tipped me off to the later developments of the rest of the book, when the two girls talk about Little Women. But how would it be possible for one of them to be both a woman and a writer?

This volume, as all the others, deals with social aspirations and the cycle of poverty - how *dare you* want to be like them, to go to university, to write a book, do you think you're better than us? Elena's mother, with her crooked leg and frail body, is a driver for her to escape, a shambling phantom behind her, a symbol of the deformations of the past.

Each of the four volumes has an established theme: the development of resentment and friendship in childhood, the limitations of social boundaries, the compromises and confinements of marriage, and the establishment of regrets in old age. Of course these are not four discrete topics, but they build upon each other, as one's life builds upon experiences of the past. Little elements or details which might not seem like much in the beginning are the foundations of emotional triumphs and resentments. And of course the author is not so blunt as to just tell you such a thing happened, but to show individual reactions, facial expressions, choices in words, who talks to who and who avoids who. The implications are the thing.

I feel like I've said too much and too little already. I very seldom say this, but this is a series I will read again.

Manny says

[From *Celle qui fuit et celle qui reste*]

Whenever you read a book that the author seriously cared about, you realise after a while that in fact it's two books: there's the book that got written, the one you're holding in your hands, and there's the other book, the one the author wanted to write but couldn't, due to the problems inherent in being a mortal human being. Sometimes the distance between the two books is close enough that you can believe they're the same. (I don't know how one would improve *Candide* or *Alice in Wonderland*; maybe Voltaire and Carroll did). But in other cases, it's clear that the two books are different. The authors of the New Testament would have liked to set down a clear and complete account of the life of Jesus Christ and the events it inspired, but, since the four Gospels contradict each other on numerous points, they must have fallen short of their ambition. For similar but slightly more complicated reasons, it seems that Plato's Dialogues also fail to report accurately the teachings of Socrates. Moving on to more recent cases, Wittgenstein famously apologised for not being able to write a better book than the *Philosophical Investigations*, which nonetheless is often cited as the twentieth century's most influential work of philosophy; and, a personal favorite, Jan Kjærstad's Jonas Wergeland trilogy gives you numerous clues about the nature of the true, ideal version of the book, and how it differs from the imperfect copy you have received.

I think Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale* also belongs to this distinguished club. On the surface, the novel is straightforward. It appears to be a minutely detailed, ultra-realistic account of the narrator's life, starting with her childhood in a poor quarter of Naples and showing how she becomes a famous author who, in particular, has written this book. The unifying theme, which gives the novel its title, is her friendship with Lila, a woman she has known since they were both small children. If you read it in this way, it's easy to see why it's often been compared to Knausgård's *Min kamp*, another long and ostensibly autobiographical ultra-realistic novel. I did indeed start reading both Knausgård and Ferrante from this obvious point of view, and I'm not

trying to convince you that there's anything wrong with that. Perhaps both novels are just what they appear to be on the surface. But, at least from my perspective, they diverged more and more as they progressed. What Knausgård wants to do, it seemed to me, is to show you how suspect the whole notion is of being a novelist. You take your life and the lives of the people around you, and you turn them into a story which you sell for money. There's a certain amount of this in Ferrante too, and some of the moral disgust that Knausgård so effectively inspires. But I don't think that's the core of the book.

Knausgård is, or at least pretends to be, an egotist, and his book is all about ego, and in interviews he sticks to the line that everything in it is true. But Ferrante has gone to great lengths to stay anonymous, and no one knows who she is. She drops hints in her novel, which contains numerous novels-within-the-novel, that at least some of it is true. Evidently the narrator, who's also called Elena and who also claims to have written the book, could to a certain extent be her. But it's also clear that Elena Greco can't be the same person as Elena Ferrante. And at the same time, she drops contradictory hints that the book may not really have been written by either Elena. Maybe it was written by Lila. But finally she denies this too.

The thing that makes the book so unusual is that it manages to keep the ambiguity between truth and fiction all the way through. We don't know if Elena really exists; all we know is that someone who calls herself Elena exists, that she wrote *L'amica geniale*, and that, in some unspecified way, it is inspired by real events. But more and more, one feels that the identity of the author is irrelevant. The important character isn't the vain, superficial, and not overly bright Elena. It's her friend Lila, who comes across as a truly admirable person; a person one could compare with Socrates, whom Plato says was, of all the men of his time he had known, "the wisest and justest and best". Lila is sometimes described in similar terms, by people who are surprised to hear themselves say it. Elena is ultimately disappointed with her novel, because she knows she has failed. She has lost Lila, and despite all her work she hasn't been able to tell us what she was really like.

Did Lila exist, in some sense? I assume we will never find out. But at least we have this account of her life, distorted and imperfect and incomplete as it is. It's a completely stunning achievement.

Malia says

Brilliant, though I'm feeling a bit bereft now. Better review to follow, but for now I'll just say that this has been a year of great reads for me, highlighted boldly by Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels. Read them, trust me. Find more reviews and bookish fun at <http://www.princessandpen.com>

PorshaJo says

What can I say about this book that has yet to be said. This is the fourth and final book in The Neapolitan Novels. It is the culmination of the lifetime of two dominate, strong women. It is the story of one lost child and the impact it has on so many lives. But it's also so much more. It is the final story of many of the characters that lived in this town and came in and out of Lila and Elena lives.

I'm not sure how to feel about this one. On one hand, I'm happy to hear more of the story of these two women and all the wonderful characters in the neighborhood. But then, I'm sad as this is the final installment and I will no longer be able to hear more of them. Their life stories have been told. I will say, of all the books, this is my least favorite. Elena was so self-indulgent and selfish. She seems to thrive almost on the

tension of her friendship with Lila. She seems obsessed about what Lila is doing and that she is better than Lila. Lila on the other hand, at times, I found her very mean. But is she stronger than Elena even though she has never left the neighborhood? I think through the love-hate relationship these two have, it pushes them to strive to find their better selves. And I would have thought by the fourth book I would remember who everyone is...but nope. There were times I still had to look someone up and figure out who they were. I also felt towards the end of the book, it seemed to move through 'life' rather quickly. All of sudden you got glimpses of things...Elena children/grandchildren, Lila's disappearance. I wanted more, I wanted the full details of the story.

This is a wonderful series of books that I would tell anyone to read. But be aware, there is murder, adultery, crime, death, drug abuse, violence within. After all these books, I still can't put my finger on why these books are so captivating. Perhaps it's the hope that this IS a true story, that it's based on real people. I listened to this entire series via audio narration and the narrator, Hillary Huber, is wonderful and gives life to these two amazing characters.

Diane says

This novel nearly broke me.

The Story of the Lost Child is beautifully heartbreakng. It is the culmination of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan series, and it wraps up the story of two friends, Elena and Lila. I spent my summer with these two women. I read the first book, *My Brilliant Friend*, just to see what all the Ferrante Fever fuss was about, and I didn't expect to read any more of the series. But I ended up intrigued and wanting more, and I gobbled up Books 2 and 3 as quickly as I could.

In this fourth book, Elena has run away from her marriage to Pietro and has a passionate affair with Nino, the boy she has loved since childhood. Lila is opposed to the affair, and the women's friendship becomes even more strained. Meanwhile, Elena's writing career has ups and downs, and Lila becomes entangled in the underground politics of their old neighborhood in Naples.

It is hard to explain to someone who hasn't read Ferrante why these novels are so powerful. On the surface, they sound like any other domestic drama — two women living their lives, experiencing love and loss, going through the highs and lows of marriage and parenthood.

But it's not that simple. Their lives are so well-drawn, their emotions and experiences are so real, and the history and neighborhoods of Italy are so well-described that this book feels more like an autobiography than a novel. The Ferrante books are rich in the same way that Tolstoy's novels are a feast. To paraphrase an Internet meme, One does not simply read a Ferrante book. One lives it.

I have become deeply connected to Elena and Lila over these four books. When Elena's mother is diagnosed with cancer, and Elena has to care for her, I nodded in sympathy, for I, too, am caring for a mother with cancer. When Elena experiences incredible heartbreak, I empathized and remembered my own heartbreak. When Lila suffers a devastating loss and is consumed with manic grief, I thought of my own despair after a loss.

Some reviewers have said this fourth novel is the best one in the series. I honestly couldn't rank them. They are all part of one epic story, and I feel both sadness and triumph now that I have finished reading. Sad

because I will miss spending time with these amazing women, and triumph at what Ferrante has accomplished. Truly, this is a modern masterpiece.

Favorite Quotes

"How many words remain unsayable even between a couple in love, and how the risk is increased that others might say them, destroying it."

"Good feelings are fragile, with me love doesn't last. Love for a man doesn't last, not even love for a child, it soon gets a hole in it. You look in the hole and you see the nebula of good intentions mixed up with the nebula of bad."

"I thought: maybe every relationship with men can only reproduce the same contradictions and, in certain environments, even the same smug responses."

"From childhood I had given her too much importance, and now I felt as if unburdened. Finally it was clear that what I was wasn't her, and vice versa. Her authority was no longer necessary to me, I had my own. I felt strong, no longer a victim of my origins but capable of dominating them, of giving them a shape, of taking revenge on them for myself, for Lila, for whomever."

"One writes not so much to write, one writes to inflict pain on those who wish to inflict pain. The pain of words against the pain of kicks and punches and the instruments of death."

"Where is it written that lives should have a meaning?"

"I was distressed that nothing of me would endure through time."

"Unlike stories, real life, when it has passed, inclines toward obscurity, not clarity."
