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A RENAISSANCE WOMAN: IN CONVERSATION WITH ITALIAN-IRISH WRITER, SCHOLAR, AND TRANSLATOR ENRICA FERRARA

April 5, 2024 · by [smilkova](#) · in [Interviews](#), [Italian](#) · [Leave a comment](#)

Enrica Ferrara is a long-time contributor to *Reading in Translation* as well as a member of its editorial board. And I have long admired her accomplishments as a scholar, teacher, translator, and writer. My first encounter with Enrica was entirely discursive, ignited by our shared interest in Elena Ferrante's novels. I read with rapture Enrica's scholarly work, she read mine, and we engaged in a productive dialogue before we even met each other in person. When we did, we became friends right away – her immense generosity and kindness are equal to her superb intellect and enormous talent.

Born in Naples, she has lived in Dublin for more than twenty years. A professor at Trinity College Dublin, Enrica has published scholarly work that has changed the way we think about a host of Italian writers (Elio Vittorini, Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Natalia Ginzburg, Elena Ferrante) and subjects in Italian and Comparative Literature, Film, and Theater. Her public writing and engagement with Italian culture are notable as well. She writes for Anglophone, Italian, and French print and online publications, while also organizing electrifying events and conferences at the Italian Cultural Institute in Dublin. For *Reading in Translation*, Enrica has reviewed many authors and titles but suffice to cite a few: I. U. Tarchetti's *Fantastic Tales*,

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Natalia Ginzburg's *Valentino*, Simona Baldelli's *Evelina e le fate*, Marta Barone's *Sunken City*, Domenico Starnone's *The House on Via Gemito*, which, in Oonagh Stransky's marvelous translation, is nominated for the International Booker Prize this year, as well as Starnone's *The Mortal and Immortal Life of the Girl from Milan* (forthcoming from Europa Editions in Oonagh Stransky's English translation).

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The Lying Life of Adults



Enrica's debut novel in Italian, *Mia madre aveva una cinquecento gialla*, was just published by Fazi to great acclaim. The novel, whose title I would translate as *My Mother Drove a Yellow Fiat 500*, is a coming-of-age story, a political thriller, a feminist narrative, a family novel, and a metafictional account of a writer's *Bildung*. Set in the 1980s in Naples, it tells the story of ten-year-old Gina whose father, Mario Carafa, is forced into hiding and abandons his wife and two daughters. Gina struggles to come to terms with her beloved father's disappearance. She is fascinated but also terrified by the

new words she encounters such as "fugitive," "terrorist," "scapegoat." And as she navigates the punishing conditions of being the daughter of a political fugitive, she gradually unravels, and grasps, the events that led her father to hide. She is a captivating narrator and her readers are enchanted into following her around Naples and beyond, as she herself follows her desire to understand the past. A central figure in the novel is Gina's mother, Sofia, who bears the brunt of her husband's politics. But I don't want to give away too much of the plot of this gripping novel. When I finished reading it, I felt a kind of loss or emptiness – I didn't want the book to end!

So I sat down with Enrica whom I recently saw present her book at the prestigious Circolo dei Lettori in Turin and at the Libri Come literature festival in Rome, and we talked about her novel, the political and autobiographical events it captures, as well as some of its main themes and plot elements. A multilingual scholar, translator, teacher, and writer, Enrica Ferrara is a transnational Renaissance woman living in present-day Ireland.

Stiliana Milkova Rousseva

Stiliana Milkova Rousseva: How did this story emerge and take shape? To what an extent is it fiction and to what an extent – autobiographical?

Enrica Ferrara: For many years this story was waiting to be told. It is inspired by autobiographical events linked to the mysterious disappearance of my father, Angelo Ferrara, a politician and a bank manager, in the year 1980.

Since the plot of “My Mother Had a Yellow Fiat 500” is based on true events, it needed time and perspective to become relatable. What it took for me was to invent a narrator who did not know enough, always a step behind the reader, the historian, or even myself as the empirical autobiographical writer. Gina, the first-person narrator is 10 years old and always a step behind. Yet, miraculously, she turns out to be more knowledgeable than everyone else. Her superpower is her love for



Enrica Ferrara, courtesy of Walkabout Literary Agency. Photo: Michael Chester.

words and books. When she hears that her father, Mario Carafa, has become a fugitive – the term in Italian is “latitante” – she is immediately filled with horror and fear. However, she is also fascinated by this unheard expression, she savors it and tries to figure out what it means. Thanks to this device, the reader must also pause and consider carefully the meaning of concepts and words which we usually take for granted, such as “camorrista” (camorra mobster), “brigatista” (terrorist of the brigades), “capro espiatorio” (scapegoat).

Stiliana: Gina, the narrator, is 10 at the start of the novel, and it’s 1980. Over the next seven years she has to both grow up and come to terms with her fugitive father’s political convictions and actions. The politics (and events) of that period in Italy may not be familiar to many Anglophone readers. What political moment does your novel capture?

Enrica: Let’s start from the historical background. The 1970s and 1980s in Italy were nicknamed “Years of Lead.” The country was ruled by a majority party, the Christian Democrats (DC), who had been in power ever since the end of World War II. They represented an electorate of moderate, catholic, middle-class voters. The DC was backed by the United States during the Cold War, serving the objective to contrast the major party of opposition, the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The PCI had led the Italian people during the armed Resistance against the Fascists (1943-45) and was therefore revered by

both working class and intellectuals alike. During the 1960s and 1970s, the popularity of the Italian Communists grew exponentially. In particular, after the student revolution in 1968, there was a radicalization of Italian politics with the emergence of armed terrorist groups. Famously, the Red Brigades were left-wing Marxist extremists seeking to implement a totalitarian regime, modelled on the Soviet Union, through terrorist acts of armed resistance and kidnapping of high-profile politicians. On the other end, there were also extra-parliamentary groups which stood at the right end of the political spectrum (New Order, National Vanguard, NAR, to name but a few). These neo-fascist terrorist groups were responsible for attacks and bombing of public places during which hundreds of civilians and exponents of left-wing groups lost their lives. Later they were found to be in cahoots with the Italian Secret Services and the majority government led by the DC. Their aim was to spread fear among the population, destabilize society and nourish people's desire for a "strong" government.

Stiliana: Are there any episodes in particular that you mention in your novel?

Enrica: One episode that is central to my novel is the famous kidnapping of Christian-Democrat politician Aldo Moro, victim of an ambush by the Red Brigades on the 16th March 1978. Moro – who had been Prime Minister twice – and was President of the Christian Democrats at the time of the attack, was about to create the first center-left government of "national solidarity" in which members of the PCI would be included in the parliament. It is now widely agreed upon that this "historic compromise" was the reason behind Aldo Moro's kidnapping and subsequent murder after 55 days of captivity in the "people's prison."

What is not clear to this day is who funded the Red Brigades, to what extent members of the Christian Democrats and the police were in the know, who and why muddled the waters so that Moro – hidden in plain sight in the city of Rome – would not be found. Many investigations have been conducted to discover the truth – including two major parliamentary inquiries between 1979 and 2018 – but many details are still shrouded in mystery. The traumatic force of Aldo Moro's murder in Italian history is comparable to that of J.F.K. in the USA.

Stiliana: Thank you for this important historical-political background! How does it enter the plot of your novel?

Enrica: When Gina is 10 and then turns 11, she doesn't understand politics but has a classmate, Terenzio, who plays "detective" with her and helps her connect the dots about her father's disappearance. They won't always get it right but their candid gaze upon a murky, terrifying period of Italian history will help readers to see some familiar events as if they were experiencing them for the first time. On the other hand, the non-Italian readers who might

not be acquainted with those chapters of Italian history, will benefit from the clarity of Gina's outlook on reality. Her voice, as Catherine Dunne mentions in one of the blurbs is like a "bright, clear thread that takes the reader on this journey of discovery."

Clearly Gina's father is persecuted by his party mates, the Christian Democrats, because he knows too much. Mario Carafa gives his own account of Aldo Moro's kidnapping to his daughter. He tells her the story in Sardinia, where Gina, her mother Sofia and sister Betta have joined Mario Carafa as he is hiding away. I have been told that Mario's recollection of Aldo Moro's murder reads like a *noir* fairy-tale.

Stiliana: Gina experiences the catastrophes befalling her family through the new words she encounters. She is an aspiring writer, she has a fake English name, and she also befriends a German girl with whom she finds a common language – English. I am curious about the role of words, language, translation, and writing in the novel. How are they tied to the narrator's identity?

Enrica: As Gina acquires a fake ID to travel and meet her father in Sardinia, she realizes how easy it is to step into the world of fiction, to become "another". This is, after all, what writers do. The first character they must invent is the narrator, who differs from book to book and does not coincide with the empirical writer and their life. In my novel, Gina happens to be given a new Italian name and an English surname. She becomes Enrica Coffey. This is a metafictional game through which I allude to the identity of the writer. My Irish surname – as I reveal in the paratext at the end of the novel – is Coffey. This is not just a playful stratagem. It allows me to embed into the story a *Bildungsroman* of the writing subject. At some point, during the novel, Gina starts using the English language to communicate with a German friend, little Katia who can't speak Italian. Their friendship thrives thanks to the love both feel towards this foreign language, but they also use several other semiotic codes, such as gestures and games, to tell each other stories. This is how Gina discovers that she can reinvent herself by translating her own identity – and her traumatic past – into another language. This is what, in a sense, I have done too, throughout the writing process. I have constantly translated the autobiographical and historical material for Katia and other foreign readers who don't know anything about the Years of Lead. As I clarified those mysterious cultural references for them – terms like "latitante", "brigatista", "camorrista" – I have illuminated them for myself too.

Stiliana: What were some of your literary influences? I couldn't help noticing an affinity with Elena Ferrante's latest novel, The Lying Life of Adults, where the father is at the center of Giovanna's world (and of her narration).

Enrica: I can see why you might think that my novel is in dialogue with *The Lying Life of Adults* where, by the way, Aunt Victoria drives around in a green Fiat 500! However, that is pure coincidence. My book had already been written when *The Lying Life of Adults* came out in 2019.

But Ferrante certainly has had a major impact on my work, especially on my choice to reverse the oppressive effect that the adoption of the husband's surname has on Lila Cerullo of *My Brilliant Friend*. Lila felt that her new married surname, Caracci, erased her identity. My protagonist, Gina (aka Enrica Coffey), not only is reborn through the new identity that her "fake" Irish surname offers to her; she is also able to save her father, no longer the idealized patriarchal strongman figure Mario Carafa but a real man – weak, imperfect but still very much loved – Mario Coffey. What I mean is that, perhaps, breaking the "male cage" of the patriarchy is possible now, compared to the 1960s, but it might require acquiring a progressive attitude that doesn't exist within the borders of a traditional Italian identity.

As far as other literary influences are concerned, Italo Calvino and Natalia Ginzburg will always be masters of style for me. Calvino's *Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1947) is a major point of reference in my choice of a young protagonist as the narrative voice for such a violent period in Italian history. Ginzburg's *Valentino* with its wonderful critique of the strong male figure – "il grand'uomo" as a major evil in Italian family and society, is another important model. For someone like me who has been reading since a very young age, like Gina in my novel, clear influences are hard to pinpoint. However, some solid milestones are Elio Vittorini's *Conversations in Sicily*, Domenico Starnone's *A House on Via Gemito*, Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* and *My Name is Lucy Barton*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, all of Pier Paolo Pasolini's work, Sciascia's *L'Affaire Moro*, and Elena Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment*. But if you ask me tomorrow, I am sure I will come up with other meaningful references...

Stiliana: Sofia, Gina and Betta's mother, is forced to deal with the consequences of her husband's politics and his running away. She is abandoned and ostracized. She must support herself and her two daughters in a patriarchal, masculinist world. She goes through despair and depression, but she survives. The yellow Fiat 500 is the emblem of her resistance. Can we read your book as a feminist novel as well?

Enrica: Yes, you can ... and you should! One of my main objectives was to tell a story of resistance and survival. The heroism of mothers is too often overlooked or taken for granted. In the 1980s a mother alone with two daughters – whose husband was an outcast and therefore not worthy of forgiveness or compassion – was treated with suspicion and even contempt. In general, if a woman was abandoned by her husband, she was presumed guilty of not being able to keep the family together. In Sofia's case, she is left

to fend for herself and protect her daughters against a society that threatens to ostracize them for a crime they have not committed.

But Sofia's story is not unique. Her circumstances are unique but many women in those years had to face stigma due to the mere fact of being abandoned. Women in my novel discover that what others, particularly men, see as a weakness – that they are small, “yellow” (i.e. too bright and frivolous) and down one gear, like the Fiat 500 as opposed to the mighty Alfetta driven by the men – is their strength, in fact.

Stiliana: Naples and its urban topography – Piazza dei Martiri, the Riviera di Chiaia, the Vomero – provide a compelling setting for the unfolding of Gina's story. But I am also curious about the significance of the car journey, the car as a topos of motion and emotion.

Enrica: What a great question! So much of the plot unfolds as Gina is in the car, both in 1980 and 1987. The atmosphere changes depending on the car and the situation. We have cars full of smoke, confusion and mystery in which the children are led to meet their fugitive father at a farm outside Rome; cars running on the motorway shrouded in a silence full of unanswered questions when Gina, as an adult, meets her father in 1987; cars driven by plain-clothes police officers as terrifying as the most hideous criminals. And then we have the small but vibrant Fiat 500 during the trip to Calabria, where the girls are singing and laughing with Sofia or suffering with her in solidarity when the engine breaks down. Almost every dramatic scene or section of the plot is punctuated by a specific car scene that becomes the stage of a distinctive emotion.

Stiliana: Can we expect to read your book in English?

Enrica: I certainly hope so! Translation rights are available and I am looking forward to seeing the book translated into English and other languages.

Stiliana: What are you working on now, Enrica, both in terms of your creative writing and your scholarly work?

Enrica: In terms of my scholarly work, I am delighted that two chapters – one on Natalia Ginzburg and one on Elena Ferrante and Catherine Dunne – are in print. My two works-in-progress are: a special issue on Critical Posthumanism in Italian Cinema for the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* which I am co-editing with Russell Kilbourn; a volume of collected essays on Italo Calvino and World Literature with co-editor Claudia Dellacasa.

In terms of my creative writing, I have a few ideas and thousands of words written already. One story is set in Naples during the late 1980s and early 1990s; the second story spans over thirty years and is set between the island

of Procida, Dublin, and Madrid. One is written in Italian and another in English. I'll say no more but I am hoping to complete the draft of my new novel very soon!

Stiliana: Thank you for this interview and good luck with your new projects! I look forward to reading you in Italian and in English!

Tags: Enrica Ferrara, Enrica Maria Ferrara, Fazi, Mia madre aveva una cinquecento gialla

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