My Brilliant Friend

by Elena Ferrante



About the Book

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

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

Discussion Guide

1. Why is Don Achille such an important character? His presence looms over the whole novel; what does he represent?

2. Throughout the novel, Lila earns her reputation as ?the misfit,? while Elena comes to be known as ?the good girl.? How do the two live vicariously through one another, and what is it about their differing personalities that makes their relationship credible? Which girl, if any, do you most easily identify with?

3. Domestic life in the outskirts of Naples in the 1950s is depicted as conservative, challenging and, at times, even severely violent. Ferrante uses the girls? early ?child play? to emulate the callous undertones of the town. Why is this analogy so successful? What is so important about Tina and Nu?

4. Why is Elena so invested in her education? Is it a means to an end, or an end unto itself? If a means to an end, what

end? And if a means, is she being realistic or is she fooling herself?

5. What is revealed of the girls? characters on the day they decide to skip school? Do these discoveries surprise you? How does this effect their relationship (or our sense of their relationship)?

6. Ferrante returns, once more, to the theme of ?mother-daughter relationship? in MY BRILLIANT FRIEND. What are the abiding characteristics of this relationship? Who do you feel suffers the most --- mother or daughter? Why?

7. It can be assumed that Elena?s voice is behind the title of the novel, referring to Lila as ?her brilliant friend.? However, toward the end of the girls? story, it is Lila who praises Elena, and encourages her to be ?the best of all, boys and girls? (pg. 312). Is this dialogue between the two girls symbolic of Lila?s surrender? Are you surprised by Lila?s words?

8. Lila?s rustic personality and crude comments sometimes come off as hurtful and malicious. Furthermore, although both families struggle with poverty, it is the Cerullos who appear to be the underprivileged of the two. Why, nonetheless, does Elena remain a highly devout friend? What does this say about Elena?

9. What do the shoes that Lila designs and makes represent symbolically? What undertones do the shoes help to evidence in the latter half of the novel?

10. How would the book be different if told from the point of view of Lila or another character? Is Elena's point of view the most appropriate? Why or why not? Explain.

11. Page 282: ?Do you love Stefano??
She said seriously, ?Very much.?
?More than your parents, more than Rino??
?More than everyone, but not more than you.?
Lila?s personality seems to have grown warmer by the end of the novel. What can we attribute this change to?

Author Bio

Elena Ferrante is the author of THE DAYS OF ABANDONMENT (Europa, 2005), which was made into a film directed by Roberto Faenza; TROUBLING LOVE (Europa, 2006), adapted by Mario Martone; and THE LOST DAUGHTER (Europa, 2008), soon to be a major motion picture directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal and starring Oscar Award-winner Olivia Colman. She is also the author of INCIDENTAL INVENTIONS (Europa, 2019), illustrated by Andrea Ucini; FRANTUMAGLIA: A Writer?s Journey (Europa, 2016) and THE BEACH AT NIGHT (Europa, 2016), illustrated by Mara Cerri. The four volumes known as the *Neapolitan* quartet (MY BRILLIANT FRIEND, THE STORY OF A NEW NAME, THOSE WHO LEAVE AND THOSE WHO STAY, and THE STORY OF THE LOST CHILD) were published by Europa Editions in English between 2012 and 2015. "My Brilliant Friend," the HBO series directed by Saverio Costanzo, premiered in 2018. Her most recent novel is THE LYING LIFE OF ADULTS (Europa, 2020).

Critical Praise

?One of the great novelists of our time.?

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