



## Parallel Lives? Elena Ferrante's Naples and My West New Rochelle

**Bella Mirabella**

*Elena Ferrante's acclaimed Neapolitan novels, which trace the lives of two girls born in a working class district in Naples, Italy in 1944, can be read as a meditation on the role of the neighborhood in shaping class, gender and ethnic identity. In this essay, Italian-American scholar Bella Mirabella reflects on her own community of origin, West New Rochelle, New York, in light of the resonances she encountered reading Ferrante's books.*

Elena Ferrante's four 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*)<sup>1</sup> are a vast survey of life in Naples and Italy after World War Two. Telling the stories of the narrator Lenù and her friend Lila, born in August of 1944, the books encompass friendship, family, neighborhood, the Mob, gender and class politics, the burdens of poverty, the challenges of changing class position through education, and the radical movements of the 1970s. Having grown up in an Italian-American neighborhood in the suburban city of New Rochelle, outside of New York City, at about the same time, I was struck by many parallels: Southern Italian pastries on Sunday, a huge cast of familial and neighborhood characters, the presence of the Mob, hostility to education, complicated and fraught relationships between men and women, the male quest for a masculinity that will guarantee honor and respect, the power and all-seeing eyes of the family and the neighborhood, and the pervasive feeling of inferiority that results from the triadic pressures of class, ethnicity, and gender. Such pressures do not disappear; their presence exerts a structuring influence on lives even away from the neighborhood, and through a lifetime.

My neighborhood, West New Rochelle, was an enclave of Italians from Southern Italy, many of whom, like my mother's family, came from the Campania region, of which Naples is the capital. The central part of the neighborhood had an urban feel and was a collection of shops with apartments above; small, modest houses; and few trees. On the outer edges of the core neighborhood were more houses, where people had gardens and grew grapes, tomatoes, basil, mint, and zucchini; some neighbors had sheep and chickens.

All the shops were Italian: the barber, the butcher, the pharmacy, the gas station, the pizza parlor, and the candy store, including Cancro's funeral home, which everyone used.<sup>2</sup> My father's father, Michele Mirabelli, had come from Calabria and, like some of the characters in Ferrante's novels, was a shop owner. He had a grocery and a hardware store, which four of my father's older brothers ran. I grew up above the grocery store that my Uncles Nick and Frank had. But Michele's success did not help my father, and our family always struggled financially, as did most people in this working-class neighborhood.

As in Ferrante's novels, my parents knew everyone who lived in West New Rochelle. However, being known meant that you were subjected to the constant gaze of the neighborhood. I recall my Uncle Mike calling my mother to tell her that I had to stand up straight. Another time, when I was in

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Goldstein, trans., New York: Europa Editions, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The word *cancro*, ironically or fittingly, means "cancer."

the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, one of the really smart boys offered to walk me home and get soft ice cream on the way. When I arrived home, I found my mother at the kitchen table, smoking. “So,” she greeted me, “you had ice cream with Richard Conte?”

We lived in a world where I heard Italian and dialects spoken at home, in the streets, and in the shops. There was a steady flow of immigrants into West New Rochelle. I recall one day when my older sister, Joyce, came home to report that two newly arrived young Italian men were outside the grocery store. She firmly warned me not to speak to them, not even to gaze at them. But I did look, and I can still see them there, seeming afraid and out of place in their peasant clothing, trying to figure out how to make it in America and in this neighborhood that in many ways was similar to but so far away from their Italian home. The fearful look in their eyes said it all.

The Italians I knew in the neighborhood, including my own family members, never returned to their Italian home. But other Italians did return to Italy, some for a visit, but some to stay. When in the late 1970s my husband and I made the journey to Italy to find the families of my mother and father, I was the only member of both my families who had taken such a trip.<sup>3</sup> We made quite a discovery when we went to the town of Altomonte in Calabria in search of the Mirabelli family. Because we had given a hitchhiker a ride into the ancient town, we found ourselves in a small bar/café, where he wanted to buy us a coffee as thanks. The bartender asked who we were, When I told him, he asked me who my grandparents were, and then he quickly replied that Giuseppina Sperano and Michele Mirabelli had gone to America. I was astonished that that information was still known so many years after they had left. At this moment, one of the older men sitting at a table with his cronies playing cards, came up to me, took my hand, and asked me in Italian, “*Conosce New Rochelle?*” (“Do you know New Rochelle?”). Ignorant as I was about Italian migration patterns at the time, I was stunned and could hardly reply that this was where I was born. He then went on to explain how people from certain Italian towns settled in places in America that already had a population from the originating village in Italy. In this way they could approximate their Altomonte and create a protective enclave with familiar faces, practices, foods, and language. He had returned to Altomonte; many others, like my grandparents, had stayed in New Rochelle.

Later research confirmed this pattern for me, and I also learned that the women whose husbands never returned were called “white widows.”<sup>4</sup> I am not sure that the re-creation of Italian ways in New Rochelle allowed the families to retain “a much stronger identification with Italy,” as Charles Tilly has suggested.<sup>5</sup> In some ways this was true but in others not. My family was proud of being Italian, pointing out on TV who was Italian, or privileging Italian food over what my mother called “American food,” but I was always amazed that my relatives knew nothing about their place of origin, including the name of their Italian town. When Italian immigrants arrived in New Rochelle and to my neighborhood, they would encounter these contradictions—welcomed perhaps by family and friends, but also shunned by those who were suspicious and hostile.

The Naples of Lenù’s childhood is a rough place, with parental tirades that result in children being hurled from windows, and a shoot-out between balconies on New Year’s Eve. My West New Rochelle was not violent in this way. In Ferrante’s book, the question of who killed Don Achille Caracci—the owner of a grocery store, a dealer in the black market, and a loan shark—haunts the neighborhood. But the actual Mob remains in the shadows, as it did in West New Rochelle, except for a few reminders. My Uncle Nick, for example, “took the numbers” in his grocery store. The locals, including my family, would give Uncle Nick money to bet on a particular number inspired

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<sup>3</sup> A few years later, another cousin and his wife went to Altomonte. One of the major deterrents, of course, is the loss of the Italian language.

<sup>4</sup> On “white widows,” see Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945), trans. Frances Frenaye (London: Readers’ Union/Cassell, 1947); Levi used this term in his 1945 novel. Today, the term “white widows” also refers to wives whose husbands have died in work related accidents while abroad. See also Linda Reeder, *Widows in White: Migration and the Transformation of Rural Women, Sicily 1880–1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 150. Tilly discusses a similar arrangement between the town of Mamaroneck in Westchester and Roccasecca in Lazio.

by a dream or event with the help of a book that explained the significance of the numbers. It did not seem strange that my uncle was cutting Parmesan, selling pasta and olives, while also taking bets. Or there was the usher at the local church whom everyone said was a member of the Mafia. Or the father of one of the more wealthy families in the much nicer area of the neighborhood who everyone said worked for the mob. We were actually related to him through marriage; my sister was friends with his daughter and had even gone to the forbidden home. My mother often suggested that my Dad contact him so that he could get a job; my father always firmly declined, and my sister and I yelled at my mother for having such thoughts.

Much of the violence in the Neapolitan novels is directed towards controlling women. The beginning of Book 2 is a deeply disturbing description of Stefano Carracci's brutal sexual and physical conquest of Lila, the "brilliant friend" of Book 1. Throughout the novels, we are reminded that a real man is one who has control over his wife, that "a real man puts a woman in her place" can "train her" and make her do "everything" (Book 3, p. 169). And in Ferrante's novels, for women, doing "everything" does not include an independent education. The struggle to finish high school is enormous for Lenù, who must overcome continuous anger and resistance from her family. One of the great frustrations of the novels, for narrator and reader, is that Lila, the "brilliant friend," chooses marriage instead of education, which was the choice for many in my neighborhood as well. Although my father longed to be educated himself, when I wanted to go to college, he did not support my decision, nor did he counter my mother's philosophy that: "Girls don't go to school; they get married." When I finally did manage to get into college, my mother echoed the sentiments of the neighborhood with "You'd do that? You'd leave me?" And when I told her that I would pursue a PhD, she responded: "Haven't you had enough?"

For the working-class Italian Americans with whom I grew up, as with Lila and Lenù, education was not a ticket to a happy future; it was a threat to home and neighborhood. It was treason, a betrayal in favor of a hostile world, whether that world was Northern and Central Italy or bland white America.<sup>6</sup> While Lenù goes beyond high school to the prestigious University of Pisa, and to novel writing and fame, she is never confident of her accomplishments. In Book 2, when Lila and Lenù are invited to the home of Professor Galiani, Lenù is thrilled by the intellectual conversations, and her ability to have an opinion and "utter sentences."<sup>7</sup> But Lila viciously attacks her friend as a "puppet" from the neighborhood, who performs well enough to be invited to the Galiani home but who has abandoned her origins. Lila mocks Lenù, calling her a parrot who mimics the conversations she hears on the working class, hunger, war and peace, while wanting, as she says, "to leave us alone in our own shit, cracking our skulls."<sup>8</sup>

Like Ferrante's narrator, while still in graduate school, I married into a well-to-do family; my father-in-law and my husband were professors. While the family was clearly charmed by my Italian ways, I always felt out of place, and was embarrassed by my class origins, and by my parents and aunt and uncle when they visited. I eventually married another professor from a working class background; we entered the academy together and understood each other's struggles. But working class academics do not easily divulge their origins; it was only very recently that another of my colleagues and I realized that we had similar pasts.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Gambino, *Blood of my Blood: the Dilemma of the Italian Americans* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), p. 245, who writes that in a 1969 survey of Americans aged 35 and older "only 5.9% of Italian Americans complete four years of college."

<sup>7</sup> *The Story of a New Name*, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> See Bella Mirabella, "The Education of an Italian-American Girl Child" in Janet Zandy, *Liberating Memory: Our Work and our Working-Class Consciousness* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 162; see also Barney Dews and Carolyn Law (eds.), *This Fine Place so Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) for reflections on growing up in the working classes, being the first generation to get an education, and the consequences.

Today my old neighborhood is no longer Italian, and no one I knew in my early years lives there. All my relatives moved away to Westchester or Connecticut. It is beyond the scope of this essay to ask why the neighborhood could not sustain its Italian population. Perhaps West New Rochelle served its purpose for the original Italian immigrants who established a new home in a foreign land, and as Tilly says, held on to their Italian identity. But perhaps for the second and third generations, the neighborhood was more a staging ground, a place from which to enter the larger American culture, which differentiates it both from Lenù and Lila's Naples neighborhood and from many poor and working-class urban neighborhoods in the US. In order to attain that, however, it seems that my neighbors had to leave many aspects of their ethnic origins behind. Even if one retains a name, expressions, or a few foods, the reality of the Italian villages, centuries of history and culture, and a way of life are gone.<sup>10</sup> The elderly gentleman I met in Altomonte many years ago, who had returned from America, did not want to lose all he knew of Italy and of being Italian, despite what he had suffered in Calabria. But my Grandfather Mirabelli, who became an American citizen before my father was born, had rather quickly made his decision to leave Italy behind.

Lenù and Lila return to their Neapolitan neighborhood in the Ferrante novels—perhaps out of guilt for abandoning those left, but perhaps because they also do not want to lose their culture, their home. Although I sometimes cringe when my son detects and remarks on the echo of my neighborhood in my voice, perhaps I should honor Tillie Olsen's advice from years ago when, on a panel about working-class academics, she said, "Do not let them take the working class out of you." Ferrante's novels are concerned with class as well as ethnicity and gender—and in this way they resonate with me and help me further understand the experience of growing up in West New Rochelle. I have taken Olsen's advice, and tried to keep the neighborhood within.

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<sup>10</sup> See Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1981).