

My Brilliant Friend

Elena Ferrante

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Praise for *My Brilliant Friend*

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

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

'Elena Ferrante will blow you away.' *Alice Sebold*

About Elena Ferrante

Elena Ferrante was born in Naples. She is the author of three other novels: *The Days of Abandonment*, *Troubling Love* and *The Lost Daughter*. She rarely gives interviews and never appears in public. Whatever her true identity, Elena Ferrante is one of Italy's most acclaimed authors.

A reader's introduction to *My Brilliant Friend*

This insightful and unsparing portrait of a complicated friendship between two girls has much to say not only about friendship but also about the forces that determine our lives.

The narrator Elena tells us of her friendship with the girl she calls Lila, a friendship that sprang out of a competitiveness begun in first grade and forged through tests of courage. Elena describes it as 'a continuous game of exchanges and reversals that, now happily, now painfully, made us indispensable to each other.'

There are rumours that Elena Ferrante is a pen name, perhaps for male author Domenico Starnone. The first book in a planned autobiographical trilogy, this volume traces the friendship from the time the girls are around six, to the night of Lila's wedding when she is sixteen.

Lila is preternaturally intelligent and, as she grows up, becomes almost irresistibly attractive to the young men around her. Elena constantly defines herself in terms of her friend, feeling lesser, like she always comes second, like she 'left no mark'. To Elena, Lila seems indomitable, determined, the strongest person of anyone she knows.

As a child Lila continually flouts rules, both spoken and unspoken, seemingly indifferent to any consequences. If anyone is likely to escape their destiny it seems it will be Lila.

But it is Elena who, we learn in the prologue, when she is an adult, has left their native Naples and is living in Turin while Lila has never left the city of her birth. Elena is the one who was able to attend school into middle school and beyond, while Lila was not allowed to follow an academic path.

Set in 1950s Naples, the novel is also an intimate depiction of the poor neighbourhood the girls live in and how this sort of environment can determine one's life.

Questions for discussion

1. Elena starts writing 'all the details of our story' as a way of making sure that Lila can't eliminate all traces of herself, and in doing so, of 'winning'. Is the narrative ultimately an aggressive act?
2. Elena and Lila's friendship is characterised by rivalry. Obviously there are changes and subtleties in the power relationship, but is there a dominant partner in the friendship overall? Is one of them a stronger person? Is the friendship beneficial to either of them?
3. Discuss the moment when Lila describes Elena as 'my brilliant friend'. Did this catch you by surprise? Did it change your understanding of their relationship? Lila says those words while encouraging Elena to continue with her education. Why is Lila so invested in this?
4. Elena often uses uncomplimentary words to describe her friend Lila: ruthless, cold, determined, terrible, inhuman, dangerous. Does the narrator want us to dislike Lila? Does the author?
5. Is there any rational basis to the girls' friendship?
6. Lila is often described as determined. What is Lila determined to do? How and why does this change as the novel progresses? Where does her determination get her? What of her uncertainty on the day of the wedding: 'What's going to happen to me?'

7. How much power do Elena and Lila actually have in determining their own lives? What else determines their fate? Is it possible to find the exact causes of changes in their lives? Why is it that Lila 'is chained in a glaring way to that world [of the neighbourhood], from which she imagined that she had taken the best,' and that Elena is able to realise that she must escape?
8. This is a generally realistic novel. How, then, is the reader to understand Lila's disappearance as Elena describes it in the prologue?
9. What do you make of Lila's experience of dissolving boundaries, the 'impression that something absolutely material, which had been present around her and around everyone and everything forever, but imperceptible, was breaking down the outlines of persons and things and revealing itself'? How and why does the experience change her?
10. Why has Ferrante divided the novel into 'Childhood' and 'Adolescence'? Apart from the different times of life that they are describing, what are the defining differences between those chapters? Do they mirror the life stages on which they are based?
11. While the novel never idealises childhood as a time of innocence, and in fact does the opposite, in one way Elena and Lila have been innocent: of what came 'before'. What do they learn about what came before, and how does it affect each of them?
12. Obviously the friendship between Elena and Lila is at the centre of the novel, but Ferrante acutely depicts many other relationships. Discuss some of these, such as that between Elena and her mother, or between Lila and her brother.
13. Does Ferrante make us question Elena's reliability as a narrator? If so, how?
14. Why would the author use her own name as the narrator's first name? Or if Elena Ferrante is indeed a pen name, why would the author give the narrator the same first name as his/her pen name?
15. Naples is more than a background to the story. How does the girls' neighbourhood function in the novel?
16. Naples changes as the 1950s progress. Do the changes that Elena and Lila experience through childhood and adolescence mirror those happening in or to Naples?
17. When Maestra Oliviero discusses the plebs with Elena, the teacher is clearly damning Lila as someone who wishes to remain a plebeian, and exhorting Elena to try to raise herself above her station – and above Lila. Maestra Oliviero obviously sees education as the key to raising oneself. Does the novel endorse this position? In the prologue we have learnt that Lila has never left Naples, while Elena is living somewhere else and is comfortably off. Did Lila wish to remain a plebeian?
18. Lila tells Elena she will not read Elena's writing again because it hurts her. Does Lila regret the path she is on more than she publicly acknowledges?
19. Why does Lila marry Stefano, especially given that she knows that it's possible she is making a mistake? Is the incident in their childhood when he threatened to prick her tongue with a pin a sign of what is to come or an empty, childish threat? Is it significant that Lila interprets his intentions in having the New Year's Eve party as a wish to 'get out of the before'? Especially when it is apparent that his real motivation may have been less worthy? What of his answer to the question of whether he is 'really different' – that 'the intention is there, but I don't know how it will end up.'
20. Stefano has sworn to Lila that the Solaro brothers won't attend their wedding. Lila blushes as she sees them swagger through the crowd; goes pale as she sees that Marcello wears the handcrafted shoes. What will she do next?