

The Story of the Lost Child Study Guide

The Story of the Lost Child by Elena Ferrante

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Plot Summary

Ferrante closes out her Neapolitan tetralogy with *The Story of the Lost Child*, which picks up Elena's and Lila's story around age 30 and follows them until the day Elena mentions in the very beginning; when Lila walks away without a trace at the age of 66.

The story begins where the third novel stops, with Elena flying away to a conference with Nino Sarratore. She has loved Nino, a successful political writer, since childhood, and even when he chose Lila over her when they were teens. Elena and Nino begin the novel in France after Elena has left a hasty note for her husband and daughter.

Several years pass in narration in which Elena juggles many things: disappointment from all quarters for destroying her marriage, moving forward with Nino, raising her daughters, and promoting her book with a fledgling publishing house in France. She makes a conscious decision in this period to choose Nino and her career over her young daughters, who spend these formative years with Pietro's parents in Genoa. After an insurmountable fight with her mother-in-law, Elena moves to her sister-in-law's in Milan, having left Nino when she hears that his wife—whom he has not left—is seven months pregnant. While living with Mariarosa, Elena spends some time with her ex-lover Franco Mari and eventually finds his body after his suicide.

Following this stark event, which so deftly shows how fleeting success and influence is, Elena finally flees to Naples. There, Nino has set up an apartment for her in a nice part of the city, and for years she lives a half-life with him while trying to write and raise her daughters in Naples, but not of the neighborhood of her youth. During this period, Elena sees Lila often, but is not truly allowed in the fold of the neighborhood. Elena also continues to juggle—at times unsuccessfully—her lover, her children, and her career.

Elena becomes pregnant, and a happy time ensues during which she and Lila, who is also pregnant, enjoy a close rekindling of true friendship. They experience an earthquake together and work together through Elena's mother's illness. Days after Elena's third daughter is born, Elena's mother suffers a hemorrhage that eventually takes her life. Lila's third daughter is born soon after, and the women and babies slowly grow through life together.

During this period Elena continues to write but cannot lay her hands on her next real project, one which she has already promised to her editor. When her third daughter is a baby, she returns home unannounced and finds Nino making love to the servant in the most demeaning way possible. She throws him out and enters a period of vast difficulty. Leaving him is hard and she is trying to keep the girls happy while finding a new voice. On a whim she submits an old manuscript to her editor—one she wrote a decade earlier while still living in Florence. The story skirts around the issues in the neighborhood, the fight between the Fascists and the Communists, and implicates while not naming the Solara brothers.



Elena's editor loves the novel, specifically stating that moving to Naples and being part of the problem has improved her writing. Buoyed by his confidence, she moves into the apartment above Lila so she can truly rejoin the neighborhood.

For the next several years, the women fall into a rhythm of tending to one another's children while Elena writes and Lila runs her computer business with her lover Enzo Scanno. Elena's novel, when published, causes a huge stir in the neighborhood with its oblique references to the Solaras. They pressure Carmen to sue Elena and threaten her. Although she is frightened, Elena continues to write, hoping that her public face will protect her. She and Lila come together and write down everything they feel the Solaras should be arrested for, but the lawyers and editors feel it will not do any good.

For a while the tension grows quiet. Elena feels like her youngest daughter is developing poorly because of her lack of a father. She arranges for Nino to come spend the day with her, but Lila takes over the day, sending her Tina to visit as well. Everyone descends into the market to enjoy sweets, and in the midst of the chaos, Tina disappears. For days, weeks, months, Naples is mobilized in efforts to find her, to no avail. It is the hinge on which the book swings.

Lila cannot recover. She is sad, then manic, then cruel, then depressed; Elena helps as she can but is still writing and needing to travel. Her older daughters are in their teens by this point and she begins to see the fruits of her constant travel in the form of disobedience and a lack of respect. The novel rapidly dwindles in action in this period; many people die either naturally or are murdered. Lila and Enzo sell their business and split up. Elena's daughters both fall in love with Lila's son and cause a huge family rift which results in both daughters eventually moving to the United States. Nino slowly fades from relevance in Elena's life. Elena's writing career steadily grows more and more successful.

The novel closes when the women are old. Elena has moved to Turin while Lila has remained in the small Naples community. Elena eventually writes the story of Tina's disappearance, and Lila cuts off all contact from her, and eventually walks away from her life forever. In the epilogue, Elena receives a strange package—it is the dolls Tina and Nu, that belonged to her and Lila when they were six, thought lost for the past six decades.



Maturity: Chapters 1-8

Summary

In Chapter 1, the novel opens with Elena telling the reader that she will eventually return to Naples, but that she will not immediately rekindle a close relationship with Lila. Lila disapproved strongly of Elena's affair with Nino and challenged her choice, appealing to Elena's role in the lives of her two daughters. Lila's warnings go unheeded, as Elena feels that Lila has no right to criticize her parenting.

Chapter 2 continues the theme of Elena looking back on that pivotal place in her life, and Lila's intermittent criticism of Elena's parenting, and her defense of Elena's daughters. She looks back from the end of her life, when she is trying to write about Lila and their friendship, noting that it is still difficult to define Lila without defining herself.

In Chapter 3, Elena returns to the end of *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, in which she, leaving only a note behind, climbs onto a plane with Nino, bound for France. She recalls the feeling of escape that accompanied that vacation more than anything else. They attend a writer's conference and meet other people, and only several days in does Elena call Pietro to talk to her children. He responds very coldly.

In Chapter 4, Elena goes to Nino's hotel room to tell him about Pietro, and hears him on the phone with someone. A long fight ensues in which she questions his love for her. They decide to extend their trip for a few days so Elena can visit her publisher.

In Chapter 5, Elena and Nino travel through France with a couple they met; they visit Elena's publishing house, a small outfit run by two older women in Nanterre. They ask her about Mariarosa and particularly about her breakup with Pietro. Elena is determined to claim her due: her career, her love with Nino, and anything else she desires.

In Chapter 6, Elena returns to Florence, where Pietro has installed his mother, Adele, in the house to help him with the girls. A silent battle begins between Elena and the two Airotas. Almost as soon as she arrives home, she leaves for Naples to see Nino, and also plans a long trip to France to see her publishers. The time in Naples with Nino is sweet until he tells Elena that Lila has summoned them.

Chapter 7 details a long argument between Elena and Nino in which they discuss their "impossible" situation with their children and relative spouses. Elena is already jealous of Nino and Lila having one conversation without her.

In Chapter 8, Nino and Elena visit Lila, who apologizes for criticizing Elena and then asks her many questions about their plans. She and Nino spend some time arguing about politics, and she urges Elena to return to Naples. As they try to leave the café, Lila urges them to stay, saying that Enzo is on his way with her son Rino and Elena's oldest boyfriend, Antonio Cappuccio.



Analysis

Ferrante's final installment in the Neapolitan series begins with a warning from the future: an elderly Elena is writing this story from her sixties, after Lila's disappearance, in an attempt to reclaim some clarity about their lives, and specifically about her. Blurry, ambiguous boundaries is a repeated theme in this novel, and Elena begins the novel proclaiming that in order for her to understand herself better, she must write about Lila. She must define herself in terms of Lila. In essence, the line between the two friends is always difficult to define. They are often referred to together as one complete person, and as Elena struggles to pull herself out of the narrative from the future, the reader sees her struggle to live her life independent of her friend's opinions.

Already Lila is critical of what is, to that point in her life, Elena's crowning achievement: attaining Nino Sarratore's love. Staying away from criticizing Nino directly, Lila appeals to Elena's role as a mother to try to dissuade her. She implores Elena that the children will suffer if she stays with Nino. Children are held as a symbol of innocence in this story, unspoiled, and as the novel progresses, Elena time and again makes decisions that chip away at her daughters' innocence. They are pushed to the margins as Elena plows ahead towards her career and her lovelife.

The bulk of Chapters 1-8 detail Elena's spontaneous trip with Nino, in which they travel to France for a writer conference. Elena immediately says that the trip to Montpelier was an escape, and for the breadth of the novel, travel will be a symbol for escaping one's daily home duties. Elena will travel often during the narrative, and it is always a relief for her to get away from her children and home life. On their journey Elena and Nino meet a French couple, intellectuals, with whom they have an interesting interaction. Ferrante chronicles several arguments between Nino and Elena only in this short time; his vagueness about the wife he left behind in addition to his fondness for the opposite sex are seeds the author plants to foreshadow the drama that will characterize Nino's and Elena's relationship.

Another interesting thing to note is that the French couple only sees Elena as Nino's lover, and therefore not worth notice, until she tells them that she has her own book coming out soon. Immediately she is interesting. Ferrante's characters value intellect and achievement; only the intelligent are seen as worthwhile in her world.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Lila appeal to Elena's role as a mother when she urges her stay with Pietro?

Discussion Question 2

What are some early indications that Elena's relationship with Nino will not be without strife?



Discussion Question 3

How does Ferrante use the connections between characters to advance the plot?

Vocabulary

contempt, modify, taut, audacity, hostile



Maturity: Chapters 9-16

Summary

In Chapter 9, Elena is happy and curious to see Antonio. Lila describes his life working for the Solara brothers as well as his beautiful German wife and children. Lila also warns Elena that Enzo, Carmen, and Alfonso were waiting to see her. The meeting between Elena and Nino and the old neighborhood friends is slightly awkward.

In Chapter 10, Elena ponders the collision of her old and new lives. Everyone urges her to stay in Naples and reestablish old connections. Antonio warns her that Lila says Nino is not trustworthy. As she is leaving the shop, it occurs to Elena that Alfonso resembles Lila.

Chapter 11 returns Elena to Florence, where she fights with Pietro and Adele about the current state of the children and her marriage. Almost immediately she leaves for France to see her publishers. She is happy to go but feels the burden of so much indecision. The trip is successful for her career. She attempts to get home for Christmas but the trains are delayed. After pushing herself to arrive home to her family, Adele finds that Adele has taken the girls to Genoa.

In Chapter 12, Elena is forced to discuss things with Pietro while the girls are gone. She proposes moving to Naples and sharing the girls on the weekends. Pietro flies into a rage and, to avoid hitting Elena, slams his fist into the wall and breaks several bones. After a trip to the hospital, Pietro confesses with satisfaction that he has called Elena's mother to come to Florence and straighten her out.

Chapter 13 sees the arrival of Elena's mother. She is violent to her daughter, demanding that Elena apologize and return to Pietro. When Elena refuses and mentions Nino, Mrs. Greco attacks Elena and calls her names. It is clear that Pietro did not expect such drama to arise from his actions.

In Chapter 14, Elena finds that her mother's visit had the opposite effect, and she and Pietro amicably visit a lawyer to work out the details of the divorce. Elena calls Adele to make a plan to get the girls back. Adele offers to keep Elena's girls for a while and let Elena work on her career, specifically challenging Elena to ponder what she is able to keep and what she must give up.

In Chapter 15, Elena is determined to fetch her daughters when her publisher calls and requests an article for a journal. In the process of staying in Florence for a few days to write, Nino calls and begs her to meet him on the coast, and she goes. They spend a languid few days together. He confesses that when they were children, he did not submit an article of hers to the school paper because it was so good and he was ashamed. Rather than anger her, Elena is moved that he would confess such an old sin, and feels she can trust him. She has all that she desires except her children.

Chapter 16 sees Elena's return to Genoa to finally get her daughters back. She has various cold and cruel exchanges with her in-laws.

Analysis

For a decade Elena has lived away from the neighborhood, and in the space of a few hours Ferrante brings the small but pungent community back to the front of Elena's mind. The neighborhood is chaos and doom itself, and Ferrante makes that clear in the short morning visit that Elena and Nino share with its inhabitants. The reader learns from Carmen that her brother Pasquale—on the run for many years after being accused of terrorism and murder—is rumored to be nearby. He is a cause of great worry, and also embodies the varied mix of good and bad that make up all of Ferrante's characters. A kind, passionate man, and also a terrorist; Carmen whispers to Elena about him with great anxiety.

On the walk from the café to the Solara shoe store, Lila takes Elena's arm, and Elena notices the place where their arms touch blurring together as if they are the same. This physical action is a reminder of the thread of ambiguous boundaries that runs through this narrative. Seeing Antonio is a literal collision of past and present for Elena; he seems a more stable version of himself than when he was young. In another flash of foreshadowing, he warns Elena that Lila says Nino is not trustworthy. This is both a mention of Nino's questionable character, and of Lila overstepping her boundaries as a friend.

Another consistent thread the reader sees particularly in Elena's writing is people's tendency to create one another, particularly men and women. As she sees her old friend Alfonso, who has long ago admitted to her that he is a homosexual, Elena notices the change in his looks. She first recalls how bright he was as a student—a reminder how important intellectualism is to Ferrante's main characters—and as the visit continues, notices that he looks more like Lila, that he has slowly transformed himself into someone that resembles Lila. This fact is both a nod to Ferrante's focus on gender and foreshadowing to a deeper example of people creating and transforming others.

As Elena leaves her children in Genoa for a long period of time to pursue her career, it is evident that she is sacrificing their youth and innocence for her career; also that her daughters will continue to exist on the margins of her life while Nino and her writing will occupy the center. When she returns to Genoa to get them back from Adele, her in-laws attack both Elena and Nino at the place that is most important to Ferrante—intellectualism. The Airota's claim that both Elena and Nino are fake intellectuals because they have no tradition of excellence to back their claims.

Discussion Question 1

What are some physical examples of Alfonso's slow transformation?



Discussion Question 2

What did Adele mean when she said that Nino was "intelligence without tradition"?

Discussion Question 3

Is Elena's struggle any different from that of modern women?

Vocabulary

monopolized, vividly, chaotic, elusive, patter, stint



Maturity: Chapters 17-24

Summary

In Chapter 17, Elena finds that leaving the girls with the Airotas is a necessary evil. She travels often and leaves them. Because her relationship with her sister-in-law is still stable, she spends some time with her. She sees Franco again. She asks the girls where they want to live, and they say with the Airotas.

Chapter 18 opens with Elena's statement that it takes two years to wrestle her career into a place where she can mother her girls again. Her books are published and republished despite Adele's attempt to block their successes. Lila tries to track Elena across Italy by calling the Airotas and even Nino and Nino's wife. Nino finally has to find Elena to tell her that Carmen needed her; with Pasquale still at large and his former love, Nadia Galiani, safe and free, Elena must use her influence to keep Pasquale safe.

In Chapter 19, Elena ponders Lila's life, which is narrow and has a firm perimeter. Only the neighborhood, or its people, interested Lila. By contrast, Elena continues to travel, often with Nino. Her works, which are fictional, brush up against the changing political climate and often require her to speak on the shifting powers between parties. She and Nino have run-ins with foreign police, and Elena considers whether or not Pasquale is languishing in foreign prisons.

Chapter 20 continues seeing Elena and Nino flirting with danger and politics. Elena claims she has no interest in the meat of politics, and yet at times her opinions cause trouble for her.

In Chapter 21, Pietro is attacked on campus by some revolutionary students, and Elena rushes back to Florence to see to his care. He has a young, pretty graduate student with him. Adele arrives with the girls. Elena decides it is time to establish her own home and get her children back. When she mentions the possibility of moving to Naples to Adele, a violent quarrel ensues.

In Chapter 22, Elena and Nino make a firm plan for her to move to Naples with the girls. She sees Carmen to tell her she has no news on Pasquale. Lila comes with news about Nino, whom she has had followed. According to Antonio, Nino has not left his wife and son; what is more, he was recently given a job in his father-in-law's bank.

In Chapter 23, Elena confronts Nino. He confirms what Lila reported. Nino claims his wife was mentally unstable and he had to live with her at least part-time, although she knew all about his life with Elena. His plan is to live with both women some of the time. Elena tells him it is over and returns to Genoa.

Chapter 24 sees Elena trying to extricate her daughters from her former mother-in-law. One night they fight cruelly and Adele throws her out, commanding her to take the girls



with her. Elena is erratic and difficult and does not know where to go next. She ends up at Mariarosa's house in Milan.

Analysis

The theme of ambiguity, of blurry boundaries, is very prevalent in Chapters 17-24. Elena, while she travels so much for her career, is both thrilled to be away and guilty that she has left her children. She says she is happy and unhappy at the same time. Another very interesting example is when Elena ponders her mother and Lila, how they used to be diametrically opposed to one another; now, united against Elena's choices, the two women have mingled together in Elena's mind. Elena constantly ponders what is good and bad for her, for the girls, for Nino, and for her career. Weighing her choices and options takes up constant space in her mind, and there is no defining each category. Perhaps the most notable example of the lack of boundaries is that Nino has carried on both his marriage to Eleanora and his affair with Elena for more than two years. Elena hears this from Lila, who, overstepping the boundaries of her friendship with Elena, had Antonio follow Nino about town. When Elena confronts Nino, he admits that it is true, but that he cannot extricate himself from his marriage. This arrangement between Nino, Elena, and Eleanora will continue for many years.

Elena refers once to Lila's sharply defined "margins." Notably, that Lila will not leave the neighborhood nor show any interest in anything that is not strictly related to the neighborhood or its inhabitants. The most popular neighborhood resident in this time is surely Pasquale Peluso, who himself is a symbol of corruption, goodness gone bad, a mix of admirable and deplorable characteristics, and also carries with him a sense of impending doom. It is not until late in the novel that the reader actually sees Pasquale again; however, for hundreds of pages his name evokes fear, shame, and regret.

The loss of Dede's and Elsa's innocence is a common refrain through Elena's mind; Elena feels guilty that she has pushed them aside, even admitting that she loves Nino and her career more than her children. Her mother-in-law echoes this accusation with her jabs to her former daughter-in-law. Indeed, Adele's greatest fear is that her granddaughters will grow up to be like their mother. For her, as for Elena, the girls' innocence must be protected.

Discussion Question 1

Did Lila act inappropriately when she asked Antonio to follow Nino? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why are the neighborhood residents so obsessed with Pasquale?



Discussion Question 3

Did Elena overstep her boundaries in her parting comments to Adele?

Vocabulary

calibrate, conciliatory, devotion, insinuated, evasive, intractable



Maturity: Chapters 25-32

Summary

In Chapter 25, Elena confesses that she lives with Mariarosa for months. Without Nino back in Naples, and having burned bridges with Adele, she has few options. Her sister-in-law treats her coolly but allows her and the girls to remain. Nino tries to get her back but has not promised that he has left his wife.

In Chapter 26, Elena languishes in guilt and indecision. Her daughters revel in the lack of school and the great excitement their aunt's home affords. Her sister-in-law slowly grows more critical of Elena and puts her in a difficult position.

Chapter 27 sees the narrator trying her best to assimilate her children into her career. She finds that Mariarosa's sometimes live-in lover and Elena's college boyfriend, Franco Mari, cares for her daughters on a regular basis, and the girls adore him. She marvels at the great change in him from his youth. Eventually, Nino appears at Mariarosa's to beg for Elena to return. He cannot live without Elena, and yet he cannot leave his wife, because she is seven months pregnant.

In Chapter 28, Franco takes over the discussion and speaks logically to Elena asking, what if "this" is all Nino is capable of? Is it enough? Franco, Nino, Mariarosa, and Elena argue. Eventually Elena sends Nino away, saying she has to learn to live without him.

Chapter 29 details the ultimate reason why Elena leaves Milan. Mariarosa leaves for a conference and begs Elena to stay close to Franco in her absence. She sits with him nightly, discussing her career and Nino. Towards the end of Mariarosa's absence, Franco shoots himself. Elena stays around for as long as she is needed, then packs up her girls and leaves for Naples.

In Chapter 30, Elena takes up residence in the apartment Nino rented for her on Via Tasso. She is able to resist their relationship for a short time, but soon they are lovers again. Life is as difficult for her there as it was in other cities. The burden of the children and their schooling, her writing, and Nino are overwhelming. Dede and Elsa dislike school strongly and mount a campaign against their mother. She at times loves her life, and at other times can barely live with herself.

Chapter 31 sees Elena taking the girls to visit her mother and father. Her father and brothers are not home, and her mother is violent and rude, showering love and affection on the girls but treating Elena cruelly. She compares Elena unfavorably to her sister Elisa and worse, to Lila, who bought a house for her own parents and ordered everybody around.

In Chapter 32, stung by her mother's rudeness, Elena takes her children to see her sister Elisa. Elisa is very pregnant and lives with Marcello Solara. She too is rude to Elena, belittling her sense of importance and especially demeaning her role in the



neighborhood. Elisa finally criticizes Lila, saying that she should be careful, and that she cannot treat Marcello the way she treated Michele.

Analysis

Chapters 25-32 are largely narrative in nature, focused on pushing forward the plot rather than exploring issues and themes. Elena continues to deal with boundaries as she entertains Nino's offer to love her while staying married to his wife. When she finally does move to Naples and rekindle her relationship with him, she operates inside a place in her mind in which the arrangement is not demeaning and ridiculous. She tells herself that he loves her more than his wife, and her children more than his own. "Naturally it was all true and all false," she says (114).

The truth is that for Elena, who has struggled with self-esteem for her entire life, Nino helps her feel important. More than once she revels in being seen with him, in having a public life with the attractive and well-known writer, even if their private life is not perfect. More than her successful writing career, she needs Nino to help her feel good, and although it requires more strength of character to leave him, she takes the more abominable path for the way he makes her see herself.

After behaving abominably to Adele, Elena must impose on Pietro's sister for a few months. This interlude is important because of her interaction with ex-lover Franco Mari. Franco reminds her often of Pasquale, with whom Ferrante reminds her readers of innocence lost due to politics and corruption. The reader ultimately sees Franco take his own life because he cannot stand what he is reduced to, and in the days that follow Elena constantly thinks of Pasquale. It is his death and the subsequent effect on Mariarosa's patience that drives Elena back to Naples and to Nino.

Chapter 32 ends with Elena's sister Elisa reminding the reader of the looming sense of danger that characterized the first three novels: the Solara brothers. Long known as the head family of organized crime and local corruption, the older brother Michele was a key villain in the second novel of the series. Torn by his obsession with Lila and need to possess her, he mysteriously fades from the scene in the third novel, and his brother Marcello takes his place. Elisa says, in a sense of foreboding that always accompanies the mention of the Solaras, that Lila should be careful.

Discussion Question 1

Has Nino made any sacrifices on Elena's behalf?

Discussion Question 2

How does Elena ultimately decide to take Nino back?



Discussion Question 3

How is Elena's mother's and sister's treatment of her a reflection of the neighborhood as a whole?

Vocabulary

intimacy, animosity, ruinous, rancorous, effervescence



Maturity: Chapters 33-40

Summary

In Chapter 33, Elisa is just about ready to usher Elena to the door when she has a momentary change of heart, and pulls Elisa aside to give her 20,000 lire. Once back on the street, Elena is directing her daughters when Carmen catches sight of her and invites her in for lunch. Carmen almost immediately calls Lila, fearing Lila would be angry if she knew Elena had stopped by without telling her.

In Chapter 34, Elena is nervous but decides to be direct when Lila arrives. Calm, respectable conversation ensues. Lila and Enzo run a computer business. The group gets on for a while in conversation; Carmen confesses that they have seen Pasquale. He is well and healthy, but very sad that his pure ideas have not taken root, and that corruption has. Elena asks about the Solaras. Lila replies that they are finished, that Michele is crazy and Marcello a lot of bluster. As they are readying to leave, Lila requests Elena's phone number and Elena gives her the wrong number on purpose. She is not yet ready to have Lila fully back in her life. Lila asks if she will have a child with Nino.

In Chapter 35, Elena struggles with Lila's question. It causes a host of anxiety among her girls, and starts an unwelcome train of thought in Elena as well.

Chapter 36 finds Elena visiting the neighborhood regularly, particularly when Pietro is in town with her daughters. She tries to rekindle her relationship with her family, and also some of the neighborhood friendships. Lila's presence in the neighborhood is a force. She is truly the author of all things for the residents. Her company is thriving and she gives jobs and money to anyone she is able to help. When she sees Elena, she urges her to move back.

In Chapter 37, Elena and Nino are invited to the United States for two weeks, and out of desperation Elena is forced to ask Lila to take her girls while she is gone. Lila is delighted to help. The trip abroad is very satisfying for Elena, who feels she is pregnant with Nino's child but does not say so. When she returns to Italy the first thing Lila confides is that she is pregnant with Enzo's child.

In Chapter 38, Elena is hurt to find that her daughters had fallen in love with Lila in her absence. She is afraid to tell them that she is pregnant, but then Dede offers a reasonable explanation for how Lila has a husband (Stefano) and another man (Enzo), to the conclusion that Lila's stomach belongs to her, not someone else's last name. This explanation is so pleasing that Elena feels relief and welcomes growing close to Lila again.

Chapter 39 sees the two women rekindling their friendship, in particular bonding because they are both pregnant. As with their other children, Lila has a difficult



pregnancy while Elena's is kind to her. Enzo manages to tell Rino about the development, and with Lila's help, Elena finally tells Pietro and the girls. However, she is afraid to tell Nino. Carmen and Lila provide both encouragement and challenge as they tell Elena that Nino should be thrilled, and if he is not, they know who is more important to him. Elena tells Nino, and he is happy.

In Chapter 40, Elena deals with the complications that the pregnancy brings. Nino wants to take her to see his parents, along with the girls, to tell them the news. Pietro's book is published to glowing reviews, and Nino is jealous. In fact, Nino is very high-maintenance, and Elena realizes with clarity that she is a slave to him. When she raises the point, he cowers and apologizes and begs her to stay; he tells her that she is his true wife, not Eleanora. When they visit the Sarratore family, Nino's father Donato has grown old and wistful, while Alfonso looks more feminine than the previous time Elena saw him.

Analysis

In Chapter 34 the reader sees a glimmer of the good of what the neighborhood could be: Carmen's kind and welcoming attitude, Lila's treatment of Elena as if she was a prodigal returned home, and a return for all three women to the feeling as if they were girls again. The mention of Pasquale brings a hush to the room—almost with reverence Carmen tells that she has seen him. Pasquale embodies purity of heart gone sour, and indeed Carmen communicates that Pasquale, though healthy and free from the law that hunts him, is saddened by a similar transformation: his beloved Italy, pure and perfect, made chaotic by corrupt politicians. For him, the pollution of his ideals is even more abhorrent than being wanted by the law. The sense of foreboding returns as Elena asks about the Solaras', but Lila, as has been her custom for the first the novels, dismisses their threat claiming Michele is crazy and Marcello does not know how to do anything. They are, she proclaims, finished; however, throughout the narrative the Solaras have always been a symbol of greed, corruption, and evil, as well as good antagonists for the story.

Chapter 34 ends with Elena making a split-second decision to not give Lila her phone number just as Lila oversteps the bounds of their friendship once again by rudely asking if Elena and Nino will have children.

In Chapter 34-40 Elena's daughters reconnect with Lila's son, Rino. Dede in particular is obsessed with him and proclaims her desire to marry him. The Airota girls have been relatively innocent up to this period, but as Elena moves them back to Naples they have more of a force of personality. Rino, although Lila's son, lacks the intellectual fervor and power of his mother; yet he is easily able to capture the fancy of both of Elena's daughters. Their innocence, which is prized by Ferrante, will be compromised, in part by Rino.

Elena's fragile self-esteem is called into question late in Chapter 39, as she considers how she is used by Nino. He has given up nothing, she notes, while she has given up



everything. And yet, she is pregnant with his child. He offers to give his name to their child, and she is placated for a time. Their relationship is a mess of ambiguity.

In Chapter 40, Elena and the girls go with Nino to see his parents for lunch. Two notable things occur there: one is that Donato, Nino's father, reminds Elena that it was he that inspired her to write. Writing is a symbol for memory in this story; because Elena lost her virginity to Donato when she was 17 (a fact nobody knows), his statement is a confluence of fact and memory that leave her stunned and only able to nod in acquiescence. Moreover, Alfonso is there because his wife Marisa is Nino's sister; to Elena he looks, if possible, even more feminine than he had before. Making and remaking is a strong theme in this novel, particularly with gender in mind, and Ferrante returns to it with Alfonso over and over again.

Discussion Question 1

What does it say that Carmen welcomes Elena and her daughters to lunch, a courtesy neither Mrs. Greco nor Elisa would offer?

Discussion Question 2

How does Ferrante hint that the Solaras' are not, as Lila claims, "finished"?

Discussion Question 3

How is Dede's attachment to Rino similar to Elena's childhood fascination with Lila?

Vocabulary

squabbling, tranquility, duplicity, laconic



Maturity: Chapters 41-48

Summary

Chapter 41 opens with Elena's sister Elisa bearing a son to Marcello Solara. With Mrs. Greco being ill and unable to help, Elena helps with her sister's new baby until Mrs. Greco falls ill and is taken to the hospital. Nobody is able to help care for her but Elena, and she takes the job willingly. Her mother is hostile at first, but eventually a new intimacy forms between them.

In Chapter 42, Elena's mother begins to tell her daughter long held secrets. She confesses that she has no real feeling for her other children - only Elena. Furthermore, she complains that the three younger children are all in the Solaras' hands and begs Elena to help get them out, although she feels that Elena cannot do it without help from Lila.

In Chapter 43 time moves along for Lila and Elena. One day they run into Gigliola Solara, Michele's wife. She takes them into a café and discusses her husband's faults for a length of time, in the end praising Lila for making him suffer.

Chapter 44 sees the pregnancies moving along slowly but surely. Elena and Lila visit the doctor together regularly. One day they revive the dolls of their youth—Tina and Nu—forces from the first year they were friends. The doctor is sure that Lila will have a boy, and Elena a girl. After their appointments Elena goes back to Via Tasso, and Lila to the neighborhood. The fact that Elena does not live in the neighborhood presents a continual barrier between the women; Lila will not confide in Elena about anything that is going on with Enzo or the Solaras.

In Chapter 45, Elena recognizes the barrier between them but is not ready to remedy it. On Via Tasso, she and Nino have a good life despite its strangeness. She visits Pietro in Florence and her publisher in Milan. Elena enjoys her double life, but regrets the loss of refinement when she enters the neighborhood. It is obvious that the neighborhood people view her as an outsider.

In Chapter 46, Elena asks Lila for a job for her brothers, but Lila refuses, saying that her brother Rino is enough. There is an air of something unsaid in the conversation, as if Lila wants to know how much Elena knows about her brothers' affairs with the Solaras. Later the women go shopping with Alfonso and a friend of his, and Lila encourages Alfonso to try on a dress for her. Elena is struck with how much Alfonso looks like Lila, particularly when he wears women's clothing. He is at once a copy of her and also more beautiful. Lila buys the dress and sends it home with Alfonso. Elena is struck again that there is an undercurrent between Lila and Alfonso.

In Chapter 47, the women go back to the doctor for another visit, one during which Lila falls ill. The doctor says Lila's body is fine, but her head is too wrapped in the



pregnancy. She goes on to say that Nino praised Lila's mind to her thoroughly. Elena asks about the doctor's statement, but Lila responds that Nino is no friend of hers.

In Chapter 48, Elena travels to Lila's house. She wishes to ask her what she knows about Nino, but instead asks first about the Solaras'. Lila begins by saying that Marcello tries to intimidate her, but cannot. She proclaims that Michele is obsessed with her and with sex, and that Marcello is angry that Lila has reduced his brother as such. They go on to discuss the illegal affairs of the brothers—drugs, mostly—when Elena recalls an image of Alfonso dressed as a woman with Lila's words, "the shadow of my shadow." Suddenly the conversation is too intense for Elena: drugs, men with men, and the thought of Lila making and unmaking everything, drives Elena up and out of the house. She is at the door when an earthquake hits.

Analysis

The idea of making and unmaking is prevalent in Chapters 41-48. Particularly in Chapter 48, the reader gets the sense that Lila, and not the Solaras, is the architect of the neighborhood, with her ability to bring the rulers to their knees and restore people to a place of financial solvency with her generous company. Again, it is most obvious in the case of Alfonso Carracci. To this point in the novel Ferrante has hinted at his resemblance to Lila. Here, in Chapter 46, the allusion is heightened when he models clothing for her. It is, to Elena's eyes, a regular game; Lila appears as the benevolent one, Alfonso is the happy recipient of her gift. The allusion becomes even more expansive when Lila tells Elena in Chapter 48 that Michele is so obsessed with her that he will "chase the shadow of my shadow." While she does not explicitly say that she made Alfonso over in her image and sent him to satisfy Michele's obsession with her, it is strongly insinuated, and the reader is already acquainted with the results, in that Michele has, to an extent, taken leave of himself.

It is during the tail end of Chapter 48, when Elena is literally overwhelmed by the sense of power that Lila seems able to possess, that the beginnings of an earthquake occur. The actual event and its ramifications are not borne out until further chapters, but it is fitting that just as Elena feels the eerie power of her forceful friend and wishes to immediately get away from her, that the ground begins to shake. The earthquake, which only occupies a few chapters in the narrative, comes at a time when Elena sees her friend as an unstoppable force of nature, and Lila and the earthquake are spoken of in similar terms.

Chapter 44 reintroduces Tina and Nu, the dolls that Lila and Elena played with when they were young girls. They were lost to Don Achille Carracci, who was later killed when the girls were in elementary school, and never returned. As middle-aged adults, the girls always return to the discussion of Tina and Nu when they are enjoying each other most. The dolls help them remember their long friendship through good and bad, and although Ferrante has not mentioned the dolls for hundreds of pages, they are a crucial symbol in this last narrative.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss how Lila was able to "make" Alfonso over.

Discussion Question 2

Is it reasonable for Lila and Carmen treat Elena as an outsider simply because she lives in a different part of town?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Elena's mother suddenly ready to treat her daughter with intimacy?

Vocabulary

apprehension, inexorable, cultivate, tactical, denigration, oscillation



Maturity: Chapters 49-56

Summary

In Chapter 49, Elena and Lila go through the earthquake together. As the apartment shakes and crumbles, Elena tries to get her hands on Lila to pull her out of the building. She seems to be relatively in control, while Lila is frozen with terror.

Chapter 50 continues to describe the earthquake. Elena manages to pull Lila outside, and the world around them is chaotic. Although the first and largest tremor had passed, the women still feel as if the world is shaking, and they can see the sea boiling, the cemetery upended, the sewer broken and spewing, and people clamoring and screaming. They manage to get to Elena's car, but they have no keys so they sit in the car and wait for it to pass.

In Chapter 51, Elena is frightened but calm, while Lila cannot bring herself to believe that everything will be fine. She is illogical and experiences great anxiety, and a phenomenon she refers to as "dissolving boundaries." For Lila, people and items visually lose their solidness and melt together, and it frightens her because she cannot tell what is real.

Chapter 52 continues this theme. Lila reminds Elena of when they were girls and they watched fireworks from the Carracci home, and the Solaras retaliated with an even grander display. That evening was her first episode of dissolving boundaries. She goes on to tell Elena that the problem is not the world, but only the disquiet of her own mind, which must assert itself and break and remake what is happening around her. She mentions examples: Alfonso, Michele—she tangled their boundaries and mixed them together. She fears love of her child.

In Chapter 53, Lila falls asleep. Elena feels fine physically; her baby is moving as is Lila's. She ponders Lila's words and marvels that Lila's entire personality can be attributed to her need to hold things together.

In Chapter 54 the women wake to a new world. The tremors have passed. Lila apologizes to Elena for so much talking nonsense, and they emerge from the car and pick their way back to Lila's apartment. They spent time trying to call various neighbors and loved ones. Lila slowly allows her mind to knit back together while Elena tries to recall all of the terrible knowledge and power that her friend possesses.

In Chapter 55, Elena sulks because Nino took his family away to the mountains; likewise, Marcello Solara had taken her sister and parents away to safety. Life returns to normal, but the long night of uncertainty is stamped on the minds of Lila and Elena.

In Chapter 56, December arrives and it is the last month of the pregnancies. Elena is in a terrible mood to everyone. Her mother is pressuring her to find a job for her brothers. Recalling Lila's insinuations about Marcello Solara selling drugs, Elena agrees but



cannot find a way to convince Lila. She tries to appeal to her brothers, and then to Elisa; both respond with anger and condescension.

Analysis

Chapters 49-56 are almost completely taken up with the earthquake, and Ferrante's theme of boundaries and the ambiguities therein, runs consistently throughout these chapters. Ferrante's language to describe the earthquake itself has an undulating quality, which allows the reader to take part in what Lila is experiencing. The tremors are described as waves rather than shakes. The entire result of the earthquake occurring on the heels of so many profound revelations about Lila's character is a very effective meld of language use and plot development.

Many of the relationships in this novel are ambiguously defined: Nino's and Elena's, Elena's and Lila's, and Alfonso's and Michele's, as examples. These are people who are unable to create and adhere to emotional boundaries. Thus, it is natural for Lila, who grasps for control in all things, to experience anxiety characterized by "dissolving boundaries." She spends the bulk of the earthquake in fear not of the quake itself, but of the emotional state brought on by revealing so much truth to Elena only seconds before. Her control of the Solaras, of Alfonso, of her son and Enzo, threaten to melt away, and the prospect is a frightening one.

The question of Alfonso and Michele slips out in the tumble of Lila's unorganized thoughts. Again, she confesses to "tangling their threads together," the effect of which breaks Michele. Furthermore, Lila confirms the idea of making and molding—another prevalent theme in this novel—by admitting to Lila that the only way she can deal with the uncertainty around her is to break and mend over and over again. Lila is by far the most enigmatic character in these novels, and these chapters give the reader a glimpse into her complex and frightening mind.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how Ferrante uses the earthquake as a chance to peek into Lila's psyche.

Discussion Question 2

Explore Elena's complicated feelings after hearing everything Lila had to say, from the revelations in her kitchen to her ramblings during the earthquake.

Discussion Question 3

Which of Elena's life choices are strong, and which ones are weak?

Vocabulary

calibrate, frenzied, elucidate, nebulous



Maturity: Chapters 57-64

Summary

In Chapter 57, Elena finds herself even more embroiled in the affairs of the neighborhood. She goes to see Lila at her office one day and finds Alfonso there with Michele Solara. It is awkward and she cannot shake off what she thought Lila insinuated the day of the earthquake. Alfonso talks of leaving Marisa, who is with Stefano, and Michele talks of being with who you need to be with. Elena asks Michele to stop employing her brothers, and he suggests she talk to Marcello. Lila appears and takes Elena away. First, Elena tries to ask Michele if “he and Alfonso” would have her over for dinner. He does not take the bait. Lila chides Elena, saying that she cannot live away on Via Tasso and try to involve herself in neighborhood affairs.

In Chapter 58, Elena takes Lila’s advice and lies to her mother, saying that Lila will employ her brothers. Days later she finds that her lie was truth, that Lila called her mother promising to find jobs for them. In the same conversation Elena promises her mother to name the baby after her.

During Chapter 59, Elena is angry at Nino for being away for too long. When he appears she prods him about his other children, his other lovers. He attributes her irascibility to Lila. Soon after she goes into labor.

In Chapter 60, Elena has a little girl, and is happy that her bitterness and bad mood of the past month is gone. Nino is attentive and helpful. They name the baby Immacolata Sarratore, or Imma for short.

During Chapter 61, Elena realizes the separation between herself and the neighborhood. She has never invited anyone to her home on Via Tasso, and nobody came to visit her except for Lila, who brings Elena’s mother. They joke that if Lila has a boy they will trade. During the visit, Elena’s mother starts bleeding down her legs.

In Chapter 62, Lila and Nino take Mrs. Greco to the hospital because Elena must care for the baby. A family argument ensues; Elisa and Marcello wish to be in charge of where Mrs. Greco is treated, while Nino is acquainted with several doctors in town and wishes to help as well.

During Chapter 63, the battle for where Mrs. Greco is treated becomes a battle for control. Nino comes home to help Elena with the baby while Mrs. Greco is supposedly treated at the hospital. Hours pass; Nino takes Elena to the hospital with the baby, but when they arrive her mother is gone.

In Chapter 64, Elena finds that Marcello and Elisa had taken her mother from the public hospital to a private clinic. As much as they wish for the benefit of her care, it is also a battle of who is more important and influential. Nino is very distraught that his efforts to



arrange the best doctors are thwarted. It is stressful for Elena, with her mother's illness and the new baby and her older daughters. Mrs. Greco recovers at the luxurious clinic.

Analysis

In Chapter 64 Elena deals with the tension between the neighborhood and the city. In this, unlike the rest of her life, there are firm boundaries. She visits Lila to discuss the Solara drug business and her brothers possibly being involved. When she sees Alfonso and Michele at Lila's office, she cannot help but recall Lila's insinuations of what she orchestrated between the two men. There is clearly awkwardness and discomfort between the three of them. Lila warns her again that she cannot involve herself in the affairs of the neighborhood—even those of her family—and then go back to her house by the sea. It is ironic that here Lila draws a firm line, although there is certain ambiguity again between Alfonso and Michele.

Elena's conversation with Michele reminds the reader of how insidious and powerful the Solaras' still are, and how firmly they wield that power. Ever the symbol for an undercurrent of evil, Elena cannot get straight answers from Michele about her brothers or Marcello, and is reminded that she is not a player in the important conversations.

This effect of being kept at arm's length damages Elena's self-esteem, which the reader knows from previous stories, is fragile. Elena feels untrusted and ineffective from her perch on the sea, but is still unwilling to take the step over the boundary into the neighborhood.

In the birth of her child, Dede and Elsa are pushed to the margins again, stowed away in Florence during the drama of the birth and the ensuing drama of Elena's mother's illness. That entire episode is another study in boundaries: both Nino and Marcello would like to establish their dominance as the decision maker behind Mrs. Greco's treatment. The argument at the hospital resembles a territory war. In that, Elena is pushed to the margins as other people have to fight it out.

Discussion Question 1

What are the arguments for and against Elena's rejoining the affairs of the neighborhood?

Discussion Question 2

What are some indications from the scene in Lila's office that Michele Solara is indeed "subdued"?



Discussion Question 3

Is there truth to Nino's assertion that Elena's dissatisfaction with their relationship is Lila's fault?

Vocabulary

agitation, infidelities, imprecise



Maturity: Chapters 65-72

Summary

In Chapter 65, Elena continues to watch her mother improve at the clinic. She sees her sister and father often, but still does not have a good relationship with either of them. Elena notices that her brothers invoke the name "Solara" to ensure their mother is treated well. Others come to the clinic, and one day Elena sits with Alfonso for a time and he tells her how he would have died if Lila had not taught him "clarity" about his feelings for "a certain man." Lila helped him define himself. At times both Alfonso and Carmen gently ask Elena for her opinion and involvement in their affairs.

During Chapter 66, Elena mentions that Nino and Lila never visited her mother. Nino refuses to be a part of Marcello the "Camorrist." Instead, he remains behind to help care for Dede and Elsa while Elena helps at the clinic. She also finds that he ends up helping Lila, who is still pregnant. This reveals a still-tender place in her mind where she continues to fear for Nino and Lila falling in love again.

In Chapter 67, Lila has her baby, a girl. It was a long labor, made more difficult because Lila argued with the doctor for most of the time. They name the baby Nunzia after Lila's mother—Tina for short.

In Chapter 68, Elena and Lila find themselves spending more and more time together because of their daughters. Elena points out that Lila named her baby the same as Elena's doll from their youth. Mrs. Greco's condition takes a turn, and Marcello arranges for one of the hospital doctors to travel to the clinic to see her. She worsens again. On her deathbed she begs her sons to stop working for Marcello and take the job offers from Lila; she also begs Elisa to marry Marcello so that their union is sanctified. Soon after, she passes away with Elena by her side.

During Chapter 69, Elena tries to cope with her mother's death. Her mother's parting words to her give her confidence and inspire her to start taking care of herself again. Because her publishing company had already paid out some money for a new novel, Elena's editor asks to see her. Of course, there is no new novel yet, and Elena grapples with what she can show him. After a space of awkwardness, Elena promises to have a novel ready for him.

In Chapter 70, the editor leaves and Elena is worried and fearful. Nino tries to soothe her but she blames him for the long-standing ill of not supporting her. He promises to pay for a housekeeper so Elena has time to write.

In Chapter 71, Elena decides to focus on her career with an aim to be financially independent from Nino. She continues to love him, but also sees his flaws and realizes where she cannot depend on him. He becomes more embroiled in politics, a practice that bores Elena. His overblown political theories begin to bore her.



During Chapter 72, Elena has more time to write thanks to Silvana, the housekeeper Nino hires. As the months go on, Elena's regard for Nino starts to wane. She sees cracks in his politics and his intellect. What is more, she sees how solicitous he is to women. At first she wonders if they are his lovers, and then she realizes that much of his fame and fortune has come at the hand of a female helping hand.

Analysis

The common themes and symbols in this novel are very prevalent in Chapters 65-72. In Chapter 65 the narrative continues with Mrs. Greco's declining health. Elena asks Nino for help with her doctors but he refuses to work with a "Camorrist"—a word for someone involved in Italian organized crime, or one who trades political support and money for certain favors and leeway. The glaring human condition is symbolized by the rampant corruption in these novels, and Nino's mention of the Camorra is a reminder that, just as the reader should remember that the Solaras' are corrupt people, humanity as a whole is a damaged work of creation. As much as the mention of the Solara name opens doors and paves paths—as the reader sees in the hospital how well Mrs. Greco is cared for—those gains feel as if they come at a dear price. In the case of Elena's brothers and Antonio, their influence is bought by the ill deeds of the Solara brothers.

Also in Chapter 65, Alfonso quite clearly describes how Lila "made him over" in her image for the benefit of Michele Solara. In Alfonso's words, he "distorted" her, which brings to mind the dissolution of boundaries, a concept so prevalent in this novel. He also attributes his own acceptance of his sexual orientation to her. This story again reflects the author's emphasis on our ability to make and unmake people as we wish.

Another reference to boundaries comes from Mrs. Greco. On her deathbed, she calls her sons to her side and asks them to leave the employ of Marcello Solara and take a job with Lila instead. For her, there is no distinction between Lila's power and Marcello's power; and the question of how correct or incorrect she is an interesting one to explore.

Lila has her baby and names her Nunzia but calls her Tina. Tina, Elena reminds her, was the name of her childhood doll that they played with as girls. In this instance, the doll is referenced as a symbol of the pure friendship the girls once shared; however, it is to be noted that Tina was the name of Elena's doll, not Lila's. The fact that the dolls and their owners are swapped is foreshadowing, with a parallel coming later in the plot.

Chapters 70-72 detail Elena's waning appreciation for Nino, which sets up the eventual end to their relationship. For the first time in nearly a decade, she can see a way to live without him. Her fervor to be financially independent is a hint in this direction. One of her problems with him is how intellectually superior he sees himself; this is a nod to Ferrante's theme of intellectual elitism.

Discussion Question 1

How is Lila's power over the neighborhood different from Marcello Solaras'?



Discussion Question 2

What purpose does Ferrante achieve in removing Michele Solara as the main villain and replacing him with his brother Marcello?

Discussion Question 3

What is the catalyst for Elena's loss of affection towards Nino?

Vocabulary

affectionate, complexity, atrociously, imminent



Maturity: Chapters 73-80

Summary

In Chapter 73, Elena theorizes that Nino's respect for female intelligence can be traced back to Lila.

In Chapter 74, Elena ponders this further: why had she not allowed Nino's choosing Lila all of those summers ago on Ischia remove him from heart? She is turning this thought around one morning while the older girls are at school and Silvana has the baby. On her way to the library she recalls that Imma needs diapers; after completing the errand she rushes back to the apartment to leave the diapers with the housekeeper. She catches Nino and Silvana making love in the bathroom.

During Chapter 75, Elena has a difficult time reconciling what she saw, and finds she no longer has any grasp on who Nino actually is. She realizes with dismay that he is who he is—weak.

In Chapter 76, Elena calls Lila and asks if she can come over. She picks up the older girls from school. Their volume and erratic behavior work on Elena's nerves and the more she considers what Nino did, the angrier she is. She arrives at Lila's with a deep hatred for him.

During Chapter 77, Elena takes comfort in Lila's happy domestic home. She feeds Dede and Elsa, changes the babies, and listens as Elena tells her about Nino and Silvana. It is hard for Elena to consider losing him and living as a single mother of three, trying to juggle a career. She wants to forgive him. Lila urges her to leave him, and the women quarrel. Elena finally asks Lila what she knows about Nino. Lila swears that Nino has asked her to come back to him countless times. "He has the worst kind of meanness. That of superficiality" (247).

In Chapter 78, Elena returns home to wait for Nino and end their relationship. Eventually Antonio shows up, having been sent by Lila to watch over Elena. He tells Elena in great detail of all of Nino's lovers, whom he treats in the same fashion: a few meetings, no definitive break. Antonio wishes to beat Nino, but Lila has forbidden him. Elena ponders how she has been wronged and feels ill. She sits with Antonio to warm herself, and he holds her for a while. They both feel the need to make love in a way that they had both wanted to when they were 16, and they take that moment to forsake the life of "now" and return to a moment 20 years before. When they are finished, Nino calls and says he is coming right away. Elena tells him she will see him the next day.

In Chapter 79, Elena details the long effort to extricate herself from Nino. He denies having ever made offers to Lila and hedges on the list of other lovers. He tries to blame biology and the male's need for constant sexual contact. Nino stops paying rent on the apartment and Elena is desperate for a new start. Lila offers the apartment above her



own; inexpensive, and definitely part of the neighborhood. However, Elena feels that moving back to the neighborhood would be hitting the bottom. She is drowning in what to do, pulled in too many directions. Her publisher calls and she tells him she has finished her book. She sends him a manuscript she wrote years ago that neither Adele nor Lila had liked much.

In Chapter 80, Nino shows up again. Elena complains that he has not helped her with money, and he promises to do so immediately. He goes on to proposition her to make love, mainly because he is curious and territorial. She throws him out and feels a definite break in her feelings for him. A month later the publisher calls with glowing reviews for the manuscript.

Analysis

The break with Nino finally arrives in Chapter 74. Even in Chapter 73, Ferrante highlights the extreme intellectualism that pervades her main characters, giving Elena a glimpse into Nino's intelligent but weak psyche. That his greatness may be traced back to Lila is really too much for her. The juxtaposition of Elena rushing around in the morning, trying to be a mother and a writer, to take care of her library research and get diapers for Imma, while Nino is unabashedly making love to the servant in the most glaring, non-tender way possible, is brilliant. Ferrante really wishes to drive the image home, and remind her readers just how broad the gap has been in Elena's life.

As she drives around in anger, Elena ponders what Nino's intellectual justification for his sexual relations with the servant would be, again highlighting Ferrante's emphasis on intellect in her characters. The fact that he and Silvana were carrying on while Imma sat naked in her playpen reminds the reader of how innocent and precious the young girls are in the story. Indeed, as Dede and Elsa grow older and develop their own personalities and criticisms of their mother, the contrast between them and sweet baby Imma is even more pronounced, the loss of Elena's time with them even more heartbreaking.

The author returns to her theme of ambiguous boundaries when Antonio speaks of Nino's many lovers; specifically, that he will not break with any of them, leaving all of the affairs undefined and nebulous.

As the story progresses through Elena's breakup with Nino, she experiences a moment of profound despair. The reader shares in her plight: the need to make money, the lack of a mate with which to share her load, the need to write, and truly being pulled in too many directions. She is truly overwhelmed when she decides to send her editor an old manuscript, one that she showed only to Adele and Lila at the time it was written. Once again, Elena has pulled from her memory in order to produce a viable manuscript, and her editor loves it.

The reader experiences a bit of making and unmaking in the love scene between Antonio and Elena. Although it feels tawdry for her to make love with Antonio only hours



after breaking with Nino, the reader realizes that for the couple, it was a remaking of a moment 20 years ago and not the beginning of a fresh affair. Antonio even says that their lovemaking belongs to a moment before he was married, before he had a wife.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it so much easier for Elena to leave Nino for good, after years of being treated poorly?

Discussion Question 2

What are some hints in this section that Elena will take the apartment above Lila's?

Discussion Question 3

What does Lila mean when she says Nino's "has the worst kind of meanness--that of superficiality"?

Vocabulary

revulsion, tranquil, obscure, philistine, vilify



Maturity: Chapters 81-88

Summary

In Chapter 81, Elena immediately feels revived from her editor's praise. Her mood improves and all feels right again. The editor specifically says that living in Naples "gave free rein" to her talent (259). Elena feels more authoritative than anyone who had discounted her—Nino, Adele, and Lila. With this new love for her origins in mind, she takes the apartment above Lila with her daughters.

In Chapter 82, Elena moves into her new apartment. Some people are excited, some are not. Pietro is able to approve because it came from the split from Nino. When Lila asks what made Elena decide, she replies that she is trying to knit her life back together. Her friend disapproves of this reason, saying that her life is in pieces and so Elena's will be as well. The women agree that they are strong in different places. Elena is uncomfortable with how bright Tina appears to be in comparison with Imma, although Lila is apt to criticize Gennaro.

During Chapter 83, Dede seeks to defend Gennaro often to his mother. She is completely besotted with him and seeks to see him anytime she can. Soon Elena's life turns around for the better. With Lila nearby, she has somebody to mind the girls while she reads and writes. She does not miss Nino, and her relationship with Pietro is good. Even Lila has decided that Pietro is a good man, and the feeling is mutual. Only in the children's education do they feel remiss, and decide that it is the neighborhood's fault.

In Chapter 84, some good times begin for a while. The women spend a lot of time together and grow close. Enzo is very good to Elena's daughters as well as his own. Lila and Elena discuss politics and intellectuals. Lila wishes Elena to be in' the neighborhood, but not be "of" the neighborhood. She wishes Elena to still hold a position of intellectual authority. Elena finds that she is more able to reflect when she has these long, rambling conversations with her friend.

In Chapter 85, Elena realizes that her position in the neighborhood is paving the way for her new novel to be well-publicized. Living there is certainly not ideal, and sometimes she feels like she will leave as soon as the final draft is out. Elena has only to look around to see the effect of the neighborhood on her children and her childhood friends; it is rife with violence. Elena wonders if changing the neighborhood is possible, if even Lila resorts to her own methods of getting things done.

During Chapter 86, Elena attends her sister's wedding to Marcello Solara. Michele appears, and seems to be completely himself again, which lends an air of concern and doom to the event. He is incredibly rude to Lila, in front of everyone, and Elisa is overjoyed at the change. Elisa, too, seems more tranquil after her marriage to Marcello is achieved; however, she does accuse Elena of choosing Lila over herself.



In Chapter 87, Elena sees Alfonso's decline in the wake of Michele "returning to his senses." He is depressed and drinks often. He approaches Michele at the coffee bar, who beats him senseless.

In Chapter 88, Elena finishes her edits as publicity is stirring about her new novel. A local magazine asks to come to Elena's apartment to photograph her, but when they do come they come without warning; she is in her shabby apartment with the two little girls. The magazine photographer takes several photos of Elena around the apartment and with the girls.

Analysis

Chapter 81 immediately reminds the reader how much Elena's self-esteem is tied to others. After previously feeling overwhelmed and totally despaired the day before, the praise from her editor has completely restored her equilibrium. She specifically feels like her editor's good opinion lends her freedom from Lila. "I felt strong, no longer a victim of my origins but capable of dominating them, of giving them a shape..." (260). This language also evokes the idea of making and shaping, of which Ferrante is fond.

Continuing in the theme of Elena's fragile self-esteem, she mentions how being aligned with Lila—such an important figure in the neighborhood—validates her own existence and work. Being an "upper class" person living in the lower class of the neighborhood is important to both women; Lila's approval of Elena's career bolsters her confidence. There is also evidence that Elena also worries about Imma's self esteem in comparison to Lila's daughter Tina.

In Chapter 84, the women have a long discussion on the intellectual elite. Ferrante certainly values intelligence; however, she does draw a line between intellectuals like Nino, who are overblown and at times false, and Lila, who has a quick and active mind. Elena actually tells Lila in their conversation that many intellectuals do not think for themselves, only poke fun at other people's ideas and comments. Having an original idea, Elena points out, is rare. These opinions all stem from Ferrante's quest for real and true discourse about ideas, rather than overblown statements only made to be quoted and discussed.

Chapters 86 and 87 remind the reader of the insidious character of Michele Solara. Ferrante mentions that Lila's expression in regards to Michele had gone from annoyed to concerned, an indication that she has not written him off as before. One person very much affected by the change is Alfonso, who, Ferrante has made clear, made himself over in order to satisfy Michele's lust for Lila. About him Elena says, "in whose face, in whose habits, the feminine and the masculine continually broke boundaries with effects that one day repelled me, the next moved me, and always alarmed me..." (272). She mentions the boundaries that Alfonso and Lila toyed with, and in her last statement, even leaves the reader with a bit of worry about what may become of Alfonso in the future.



With Elena back in the neighborhood physically, the reader can see firsthand how vile and violent the place is. Alfonso is beaten daily for his proclivities. Ada, who took Stefano from Lila, has in turn lost Stefano to Marisa; this triangle is a source of great strife in the neighborhood. Elsa swears with alarming skill, in dialect. Lila admits to having clients beaten by Antonio if they do not pay their bills. Elena, coming from Florence, has a respect for the law; in the neighborhood, Lila is a law unto herself.

Discussion Question 1

Is Elena's use of the neighborhood, and Lila, to clarify her mind for writing an unfair practice?

Discussion Question 2

What are some indications from the text of Alfonso's decline?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Lila wish Elena to be in a position of intellectual authority in the neighborhood?

Vocabulary

paradoxically, dispassionate, precipice, brawny, volubly



Maturity: Chapters 89-96

Summary

Chapter 89 opens with Elena focused on the release of her book. She is walking back to her apartment when the Solara brothers appear in their car. Michele is furious that Elena has written terrible things about the neighborhood and its people. He shows her the magazine. Elena notices only that there is a photo printed of her and Tina; the caption states that Tina is her daughter. As they pull away, she hears Marcello tell Michele, “Lila manipulates her and she doesn’t even realize it” (282).

In Chapter 90, Elena reads the article and indeed finds that the writer spoke at length not about the novel itself, but about the shabby neighborhood held hostage by the Solara brothers. It speculates about their legal and illegal activities. Elena finally sees the neighborhood for what it is—a place of great corruption and terror, laid out in detail in the magazine—rather than an invention for a work of fiction.

In Chapter 91, Elena goes to Lila with the events of the day, protesting that she wrote a novel, a work of fiction. Lila replies that the events in the novel were clear parallels to actual events. She goes on to say that the novel is written, it is out, and Elena should enjoy it because she cannot retrieve it. Lila basically tells Elena not to worry about the Solaras.

Chapter 92 is a reflection on the success of Elena’s novel. Looking back, she feels many of the accolades overblown. She attempts to give a copy to Lila, but Lila refuses it.

In Chapter 93, an undercurrent of tension begins to flow between the two women. Elena feels like she is overburdening Lila when asking for help with the girls; on the other hand, Lila will not allow her to pay a babysitter. Elena is very public; she attempts to be balanced in her interviews and television appearances. Her career is going very well. Adele calls and they have a cordial conversation. Nino asks her to lunch and proposes they become lovers again. She laughs at him.

In Chapter 94, travel responsibilities increase and Elena finds herself gone for longer and longer stretches of time. This brings a mixture of guilt, relief, and justification. Once while gone Imma comes down with pneumonia, and Elena cannot decide if she should be angry with Lila or herself. When the strife about Imma’s health calms down, Lila informs Elena that Carmen is bringing a lawsuit against her.

Chapter 95 finds Elena trying to talk to Carmen. She is not home, so Elena searches for Antonio and finds him at the barber. He tells her he is taking his family back to Germany. He goes on to warn Elena that she should take her children and leave Naples. He says Lina believes the two women are invincible together, and the Solaras are angry; they are behind Carmen’s lawsuit.



In Chapter 96, Elena calls her publisher, who tells her that the lawsuit is good press. Lila confirms this, telling Elena that writing is her weapon against the Solaras; the more she writes about them the more ammunition she has. Elena's editor publishes an article on her behalf in a local paper about the lawsuit.

Analysis

The Solara brothers pulling up next to Elena in their fancy car evokes an image of the exact same event from the first novel. It is amazing, Ferrante is saying, how some things are exactly the same. The expensive car, the intimidating, insidious men, and the easily intimidated Elena—despite 25 years in passing, these are all the same. Michele's anger also serves to remind the reader that the novel is not only to be concerned with Elena's illustrious career; there are still scores to be settled in the neighborhood.

Marcello's parting comment, "Lila manipulates her and she doesn't even realize it" (282) is a sly suggestion that perhaps Lila is making Elena into what she wants her to be. This possibility is borne out in Chapter 91 and again in Chapter 96, when Lila encourages Elena to fight the Solaras by writing about them. Lila loves to devalue her own intelligence, although the reader knows that is untrue; however, it does serve Lila's purposes against the Solaras for Elena to be a very public, well respected, person of influence who can use her pen to bring the Solaras down.

As Elena travels more, her daughters are pushed to the margins again. In Chapter 94 she mentions the tension between her career and her children. She seems to feel the guilt in the very beginning and the very end of a trip, with the middle of the trip serving as pure enjoyment. The travel to other cities, where she thinks she might like to move, serves as an escape from the pressure of the neighborhood.

When Elena's article is published in the Panorama magazine, the photographer mistakenly prints that Tina is Elena's daughter, and leaves Imma off of the pages altogether. For the time being, this mistake is mostly problematic for Imma herself, who suffers from low self-esteem at the innocent hands of the more vivacious Tina. However, as Elena becomes more famous, and more infamous—drawing the anger of the Solaras—the reader should take note of the mistake.

Discussion Question 1

What are some indications that Lila is "making" Elena?

Discussion Question 2

What is the deeper issue beneath Lila's irritation at being asked to watch Elena's daughters?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Nino wish to rekindle his relationship with Elena?

Vocabulary

dominion, borderland, refinement, attributed, initiative, imprudent



Maturity: Chapters 97-104

Summary

In Chapter 97, the editor's article about Elena comes out; he defends her right to be a writer, and skillfully avoids naming the Solaras or the neighborhood. Elena is relieved, but Lila is disgusted; she feels that Elena should be braver. She accuses Lila of hiding behind the big newspapers and publishers.

During Chapter 98, Elena hunts down Carmen, who tells her that Marcello threatened to expose Pasquale if she did not bring the lawsuit against Elena. Elena feels like the best way to protect Pasquale from the Solaras is to give him up to the police. Of course, Carmen disagrees.

In Chapter 99, the fervor seems to settle; Elena gains some financial breathing room and the pressure from the lawsuit eases. Lila remains distant, however. One night finds needle-marks on her son's arm and fires her brother from her computer business, believing Rino to be responsible. Furthermore, Alfonso completely loses his composure; he is late to work, or does not show up at all. Eventually he disappears, and is found dead several days later.

Chapter 100 details Alfonso's funeral. There is very low attendance. Surprisingly, the Solaras are there, and after the service Lila drags Elena over to speak to them. She and Michele immediately start arguing and threatening one another. The discussion ends with Michele threatening to "take away everything you have" and punching Lila in the face.

In Chapter 101, Elena is paralyzed by Michele's action. While Lila spits out blood and screams threats at the brothers, Marcello warns Elena that they have "truly stopped loving" Lila. Elena is very hard on herself for not showing more bravery towards the Solara brothers; she feels like the writing she has done thus far is only posturing and has not affected real change. After begging Lila what she has on the brothers, the two women spend days pulling together evidence against them. When they are finished, they print it off Lila's computer and send it to Elena's publisher.

During Chapter 102, Elena's editor calls and reports that while what she and Lila wrote together is magnificent, it is not sufficient to put the Solaras away because they are mired in local politics, able to buy whomever they wish. He encourages her to publish it anyway, but she is hesitant. When she takes her concerns to Lila, Lila is angry that Elena will not go ahead and publish the work in the newspaper. A few weeks pass, and then Elena finds that Lila has submitted the article for her. They quarrel, and Elena accuses Lila of hiding, while Lila accuses Elena of not using her fame to the best ends.



In Chapter 103, it is clear that nothing will happen. Neither will the Solaras be arrested for their crimes, nor will they retaliate against Elena. Marcello stops her in the street and tells her he is not angry at her, that the writing is not her idea.

During Chapter 104, Lila withdraws, almost depressed that her action against the Solaras was useless. Lila stops helping with Elena's children and sends her mother instead. Nunzia is not very kind to the children.

Analysis

Much of what is happening in Chapters 97-104 has to do with making, which is a strong theme in this novel. All of the creating here is attributed to Lila, whose mind Elena says is so active it must always be creating, undoing, and creating again. The first effect of Lila's "creating" the reader sees is Alfonso's demise and death. For a time, he loses his femininity, and with it his grip on reality. This is directly tied to Michele Solara's "coming back to himself," although it is not directly stated. At Alfonso's death, however, Elena feels Lila is directly responsible: "with her mania for forcing others by mixing everything up, she overwhelmed him. She has obscurely used him and then let him go...He had offered himself to her like a living material and she had molded him" (305). This quote reflects Elena's claim that Lila used Alfonso to satisfy Michele Solara, and then abandoned him when he was no longer useful to that end.

There is further evidence that Lila molded Elena for her purposes. From the very beginning, did Lila scheme to get Elena into the neighborhood so she could be the mouthpiece for the people, the vehicle which would eventually take down the Solara brothers? "She had sent me out to risk everything and counted on that bit of fame I had to win her war, to complete her revenge, to silence all her feelings of guilt" (316). Lila basically wrote the lengthy article against the brothers and submitted it to the newspaper behind Elena's back.

The reader is reminded again in Chapter 101-102 about the Solara brothers, with their hand in corrupt local politics and their evil ways. Michele's act of violence against Lila is a high climactic moment; he has clearly been saving up his rage against her for reasons the reader does not know. The punch is accompanied by a very clear threat of taking "everything she has," which should give the reader pause. Lila does not show attachment to much in her life; what would cause the greatest blow to her? Ferrante leaves this bit of a question hanging for future chapters, although the tension is building in Chapters 102-104 towards a climax with the Solara brothers.

Discussion Question 1

Is Lila somewhat responsible for Alfonso's death? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Does Elena deserve the treatment she receives from Lila and Carmen?

Discussion Question 3

Is Lila only a cold, calculating user of people, or is there evidence she has real feelings behind her actions?

Vocabulary

amplified, prevail, indeterminate, opaque, malaise



Maturity: Chapters 105-110

Summary

In Chapter 105, Lila becomes spiteful and difficult. She criticizes Elena's parenting and insists that Imma has problems—she feels fatherless and Elena is gone too much. Upon reflection Elena does find that Imma is very submissive; also that she seeks out paternal attention at every opportunity.

Chapter 106 finds Elena writing to Nino and begging him to take more interest in his daughter. It takes a while for him to respond, and in the meantime Elena calls his wife Eleanora and inquires after him. Eleanora reports that her children have not seen him in months - he does as he pleases. Eventually, Nino calls Elena and makes a plan to come for Sunday lunch.

In Chapter 107, despite the fact that Elena asks Lila to keep away from the house when Nino comes, Tina arrives early, looking perfect. It is a chaotic morning. Finally, Elena gets Imma dressed and hurries to make herself ready to see Nino again.

During Chapter 108, Nino arrives with great fanfare. He showers Imma with attention and praises Dede and Elsa as well. Tina, accustomed to the larger share of attention, cannot seem to reconcile why Nino is focused more on Imma. It causes a big stir. Finally, Nino tells Tina that she looks exactly like her mother, and takes all of the girls outside to see his car.

In Chapter 109, Elena ponders their strange family links while Nino is outside with the girls. When lunch is ready and she has cleaned up the apartment, she walks out into the market to find everyone. She sees Dede and Elsa, poking around in a stall while eating cotton candy; and is enraged to see Nino chattering away to Lila, who is holding Imma. Elena is angry that Lila would push herself into the conversation on the one day she can get Nino to show up. Then everyone notices that Tina is missing.

In Chapter 110, everyone standing nearby is mobilized to search for Tina. Nobody can find her. Rumors surface that a truck had swept through at full speed and took her with it.

Analysis

Elena's constant pushing of her daughters, away to the margins of her life, has come around. Lila, in characteristic unsympathetic fashion, announces that Imma has problems that Elena should look after. It is true that Imma has no father to speak of, and that Elena is often away. These observations are tied to Elena's own constant search for self-esteem: "I had recognized in her features of mine that I didn't like. She was submissive, she gave in immediately out of fear of not being liked, it depressed her that she had given in" (320).



It is uncanny, and due to Ferrante's skill, that Imma would suffer at Tina's hand the way Elena has constantly suffered at Lila's. Often Elena remarks that it is not Tina's fault she is lively and vivacious and intelligent. Here the author reminds the reader how special the innocence of a child is. Tina is not to blame for Imma's issues, and Elena realizes this in a way where she does not necessarily see the parallels in her own life.

Even as Nino takes the girls onto the street for sweets she wonders if Lila is interested in catching Nino's eye. Surely, she should have stayed away that day, should have allowed Elena and her daughters to have a day with Nino. To Imma especially, it is important to be the most loved child in the room. Yet Lila sends Tina up to Elena's house early in the morning; the reader must ask why Lila insisted on being part of a day with a man she almost always criticizes.

For the plot's purpose, it is key that Lila makes this self-centered move; because Tina is out with Nino in the street, the opportunity comes for someone to take her. For the remainder of the novel, Lila will go through all the stages of grief and blame, but never will she blame herself for even having Tina out that day when she should have kept her home, out of Elena's and Nino's way.

The innocence of young children is highlighted in Chapters 105-110 in so many ways: in Imma's fragile self esteem, her need for her father, and most pointedly in Tina's disappearance. The event is the climax of the novel, the unforgettable turning point in the life of the neighborhood, and the reason for the novel's title.

Discussion Question 1

What could be Lila's reason for sending Tina up to Elena's apartment when she knows Nino is coming?

Discussion Question 2

How is Elena so generous to forgive Tina, yet cannot easily forgive Lila, for stealing the spotlight?

Discussion Question 3

How does Elena's conversation with Eleanora Sarratore support what everyone has been saying about Nino?

Vocabulary

peddler, mobilize, deafening, torment



Old Age: 1-8

Summary

In Chapter 1, Elena looks ahead from 1995, when she leaves Naples for Turin. (Tina disappeared in 1984.) Naples has not, as promised, ever revived, and an offer to run a publishing house in Turin lures Elena away. She reveals that eventually her daughters will move to Boston, where Pietro is teaching at Harvard, and there is little reason to stay in the neighborhood any longer. She goes on to reveal that in the year 2000 Imma goes to college in Paris and she is eventually pushed out of her publishing job. Alone and lonely, Elena visits Naples often, and in 2007 writes a short novel about Tina. It is well received, and after its publication she never hears from Lila again.

Chapter 2 describes Lila's rare form of grief. Without a definitive end, it is difficult to grieve for Tina. For a time she sits at her window and stares outside; then she goes back to life, although unwillingly. She is difficult to get along with. She talks of Tina all the time, and then not at all.

In Chapter 3, Elena describes the efforts to find Tina. Nino, of course, is no help at all. Antonio is the greatest help, and is visibly backed by the Solaras, who order him to find the child at all costs. The brothers themselves come to Lila's house to share condolences; Enzo accuses them of being behind her kidnapping. They receive the accusation with equanimity and go on their way. The police arrest and release Stefano, Rino, and even Gennaro. Elena rekindles a friendship with Armando Galiani, the son of her old high school professor, who is a local television journalist. He wishes to follow up on a rumor of a truck hitting Tina. He tells Elena that it is Lila's lack of vanity that has lost her daughter.

Chapter 4 lays out the possibilities of Tina's disappearance. Enzo believes it is the Solaras. Lila believes an old client from the computer business took her. Most of the neighborhood believes her dead. Carmen notes that many of the locals who had previously revered Lila have stopped. Lila is somewhat mollified by playing with Imma, but she is unstable. Elena feels like Lila is using Imma to assuage her guilt for looking away from Tina.

In Chapter 5, Elena escapes Lila and the sadness in her job. Lila fights with Stefano over her son Genarro, who is taking drugs again. Everybody wants money from her, and she will not comply. She fetches Genarro and brings him back to her apartment.

During Chapter 6, Elena grows concerned for all of the fighting in the apartment below. Dede mentions that Lila wants to rid her life of everyone close to her because she does not love anyone. Dede and her sister quarrel over Gennaro's merits. Lila is impatient with the girls because they put on airs. Once when Elena is in Milan, Lila fights with the girls. Dede accuses of her "losing Tina" and Lila slaps her.



In Chapter 7, Lila's brother Rino disappears and is found a few days later, dead in a car.

During Chapter 8, after a respectable time of grief, Rino's widow Pinuccia shows up at Elena's house, asking if she can take over watching the girls. She talks at length of how Lila ruined Rino's life. Lila's grief changes after his death. She is still irascible, but does not seem to need Imma anymore. She speaks well of Rino although he did not deserve it, and she looks at pictures of Tina all the time. At one point she urges Elena to leave Naples.

Analysis

The discussion of the period following Tina's disappearance is a distinct examination of the neighborhood. How different would things have been if Tina had disappeared in Milan? Rome? Paris? The residents of the community allowed the police involvement but did not trust it. The reader can see the backwards way things are done in that the police never even glance at the Solaras, despite their many threats against Lila and the fact that Marcello was at the market minutes before Tina's disappearance. Corruption is a common symbol in this novel, and the police's inability to find Tina is reminiscent of the community's inability to accomplish any progress in the decades of the narrative.

The Solaras' calmness in the face of Enzo's screamed accusations in Chapter 3, seems suspicious. However, the Solaras are not upset by the accusations; on the contrary, they launch a massive effort to find the little girl. Even Lila is skeptical that they were involved.

The reader witnesses continued examples of the violence and backwardness of the neighborhood, in the screaming fights with everyone Lila knows. Even in the wake of her daughter's disappearance, her relations blame her for their financial problems and demand money from her. Gennaro falls back into drugs and Lila holds up her brother as a poor example for living. Soon her brother is dead as well. One wonders if anyone can be happy in the Naples neighborhood.

Tina's disappearance has 'unmade' Lila. Any power or sway she held over the community has disappeared. She appears, instead of a capable woman of power, a madwoman. It is dramatic irony that, as much as Lila has created people in her image throughout this novel, Tina's tragedy has unmade and unraveled her.

Ferrante does not forget that Imma is also affected by Tina's disappearance. At the very least, Imma lost her best friend. In addition to this, the little girl—in every way different from Tina, according to Elena—is confused, both by Tina's sudden absence and by Aunt Lila's erratic treatment of her. One minute she is holding Imma, the next she is pushing her away. One minute they are together speaking fondly of Tina, the next Lila is cursing in dialect. Imma is the picture of innocence shattered in these early chapters. If she was a fragile being before Tina's disappearance, the period following is even more difficult for her.



Discussion Question 1

Regarding Tina's disappearance, what is the evidence for and against the Solaras?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is Lila's grieving process unusual?

Discussion Question 3

How might the reverberations of Tina's disappearance been different in a place away from the Naples neighborhood?

Vocabulary

coagulate, ascertain, cessation, reverberated



Old Age: 9-16

Summary

In Chapter 9, Lila seems to settle, although she is not any easier. She is critical of Enzo and Elena all of the time. With Antonio gone, the reports of Tina dwindle. Elena tries to push Lila into blowing up, expressing all of her range and anger about her daughter, but Lila will not engage in that way.

During Chapter 10, Elena notes how difficult Sundays are. She cannot get Lila out of the house. Enzo apologizes for Lila's behavior and promises she will soon get past it. Once when Elena does get Lila out on a Sunday they see the Solaras. Michele praises Elena for her good breeding and intelligence, and then goes on to say that when a person stops studying they become malicious, like Lila. It is an awkward moment; he grabs Elena's wrist for emphasis and breaks her mother's bracelet.

In Chapter 11, Enzo goes away for a few days and asks Elena to check on Lila often. She and her daughters have the flu and she is under deadline, yet she does so anyway. Lila appears wild, dressed strangely and with tons of makeup on. However, she speaks mostly lucidly; she braids her hair and asks Elena if she thinks Tina will resemble her at her age, 42.

Chapter 12 finds Elena remaining with Lila in the apartment due to the rarity of her willingness to speak openly. She stays for a while, long enough to feel the release in her thinking that often comes from conversations with Lila; she has to return home to tend to her sick daughters. When she goes to check on Lila again, she is in pain and bleeding everywhere. Elena goes out to the pharmacy to see what she can do for Lila; on the street she hears that the Solara brothers have both been shot.

In Chapter 13, Elena mentions the period after the murder, in which she is called upon by all quarters: by her sister, who lost her husband. By journalists, who wish to know her opinion of the murder, and by Lila, who has to enter the hospital and have her uterus removed.

During Chapter 14, she describes the Solaras' murder. They were shot in front of the church of their youth. Nobody could recall having seen anything. Elena learns that the brothers were involved in many more criminal enterprises than she and Lila exposed. Outside journalists implicated everyone in the neighborhood for allowing the brothers to succeed. It is altogether troubling to ponder their almost mythological origin and power. Later, Elena receives a package containing her mother's bracelet, repaired, with a note from Marcello saying only "Sorry."

In Chapter 15, Lila is home and recovering from her surgery. Elena tries to involve Lila in discussions about the men but Lila will not engage. She never returns to work, but mainly wanders around the neighborhood.



During Chapter 16, Lila and Enzo discuss what to do with the computer business. Lila tells Elena that she wants to be alone, away from Gennaro and Enzo both. Enzo accuses Lila of not wanting her life to improve. Lila gives Elena a computer and tries to re-engage with Dede and Elsa and Gennaro. Dede's kindness to Gennaro helps him improve.

Analysis

The theme of boundaries is again revived in the discussion of Lila's grieving process, in Chapters 9-16. In many ways Lila grieves like one would expect: she pulls away from people, from work, and from being seen in public. However, due to Lila's enigmatic personality, there is also an element of the theatrical in the years following Tina's disappearance, as is evidenced when she appears to Elena heavily made up as if in costume. Lila is at times completely lucid, and at others, indistinguishable from a crazy person. The reader can see when she tries to re-engage with Elena's children (recall that children symbolize innocence; in effect Lila is trying to re-engage with the innocent time before Tina was lost), the children are unwilling. Lila appears to them too crazy, too insubstantial. They will not trust her again.

The biggest plot development in Chapters 9-16 is Michele and Marcello's murder. For the reader that wished for a big confrontation with the brothers, even a scene in which they admit to taking Tina away, their demise is disappointing. The brothers, whose evil and corruption extended further than Elena and even Lila understood, were ironically murdered with the least fanfare: shot in front of church with no witnesses. Even their wives and children could not tell who did it. What follows is an almost mythological discussion of the villains. People outside of Naples blame the community for such an epic rise to power. In effect, the brothers "made themselves" in the wake of Don Achille's death, so many years before.

Before they are killed, Ferrante circles back again to an early scene in the novel. Just as the brothers approached Elena by car as they did when she was a girl, in Chapter 10 Michele grasps Elena's wrist so hard he breaks her bracelet, just as he did when she was a girl. And yet it is Marcello, not Michele, that wrote the apology note some time before their murder.

Ferrante returns to the theme of intellectualism, even in the midst of Lila's grief. Elena has long admitted that talking to Lila, when she is at her best, helps her write better, her thoughts become clearer. When she finds Lila erratic, strangely dressed, with her face made up, many hours of conversation ensue from which Elena draws mounds of inspiration for her own work. Elena has already shared with the reader that she will, at 63, write about Tina. It is not an accident that so much of Elena's narrative success is based on the enigma of Lila's life circumstances.

Discussion Question 1

How is the Solaras' fate a kind of disappointment?



Discussion Question 2

What does Enzo mean when he says Lila "wasn't doing anything to redefine the situation" (380)?

Discussion Question 3

How is Lila's grief understandable? How is it highly unusual?

Vocabulary

laconic, pasty, debilitated, anguished, contiguity



Old Age: 17-24

Summary

During Chapter 17, Lila's hysterectomy catches up with her. She becomes very difficult and often spends the entire day out in Naples, alone. Rino is the cause of many problems, because of the time he spends with Dede and Elsa. Further strife arrives when the neighborhood hears that Nadia Galiani turned herself in. Carmen is frantic about what will happen to Pasquale. Lila theorizes that Nadia will not be treated as harshly as Pasquale would.

In Chapter 18, Lila is gone more and more often. She leaves behind a business that cannot run itself and a son that cannot raise himself. She urges Elena to leave Naples regularly.

During Chapter 19, Elena goes through a time of indecision. She feels her daughters need more stability. Nino was elected to public office and has moved to Rome, while Pietro is talking of leaving Italy. In the midst of her worries Lila accuses her of trying to keep Dede away from Rino. Dede, Lila believes, is in love with Rino.

In Chapter 20, Elena asks Dede what stands between her and Rino. Dede reports that after exams she will offer herself to him in love and they will go away to Bologna, if he will have her. Rino is not what Elena wanted for Dede, and although Elena does not argue with her daughter, neither does she approve. She also realizes how much trouble things will cause with Lila if she protests.

In Chapter 21, Elena calls Pietro to ask for his intervention. He agrees that Dede should not be settling for Rino. Elena asks him to visit and discuss it with them. Pietro arrives for a long visit with his daughters and Imma. Elena marvels at how much better she likes him now than when they were married.

During Chapter 22, Pietro relays his conversation with Dede. She plans very firmly to graduate, present herself to Rino, and run away with him. The evening goes on and they talk of many things, kindly. He chides her for her position in politics and towards Nino. She agrees that she was senseless when they were married. They discuss how to help Lila, who had told Pietro that she spends all day in the big library in Naples, which is a surprise to Elena. Pietro reminds her that Lila feels trapped and will always resent Elena for her freedom. They end up making love. In the morning when he leaves, Elena gets the paper and learns that Pasquale has been arrested.

Chapter 23 is consumed with Pasquale's story. For her part, Elena is not sure how to feel; either Pasquale is better off in the hands of the law, who may be able to help him, or he will be treated poorly. Violence is either terrible or necessary. She only knows how important it is to be helpful.



In Chapter 24, Elena decides to visit Nino in order to invoke his help with Pasquale. He is quite the important man in Rome, and he showers attention on Imma when they see him. Nino promises to look after Pasquale, but does insist that Pasquale cooperate with the law. Nadia implicates Pasquale and others in a heap of unsolved crimes in order to better he own situation. Nino tells Elena to warn Lila that Nadia has always hated her.

Analysis

With the Solara brothers dead and the neighborhood upset over their murders and Tina's disappearance, Ferrante loops back another story arc that has been absent throughout this narrative: that of Nadia Galiani and Pasquale, who disappeared over a decade ago in the wake of several violent terrorist-type crimes. Chapter 16 opens with the news that Nadia has turned herself in. Immediately there is speculation that, with her influential family, she will be treated easily. Her deal is reminiscent of the corruption that is a part of daily life in Naples. Later, in Chapter 24, Nino confirms that Nadia has exchanged information—possibly false—for a lenient sentence. She implicates scores of people in scores of crimes, and Nino warns Elena that Lila may be on her list. In regards to the violence they grew up with, Elena cannot fathom whether or not Pasquale should stay hidden or take his chances with the police. Pasquale himself Ferrante's example of how good kids can be led astray by bad situations. He is by no means innocent, and yet everybody in the story behaves as if he is. His situation is held aloft of an example of bad leadership and corrupt politics; his own crimes are, in the eyes of his friends and family, not important. In Chapter 22 the reader learns that Pasquale has been arrested, and the stage is set, where Ferrante will reveal whether two people implicated in the same crime will be treated equally.

Lila is pretty much finished with everybody. She resumes her appeal for Elena to move out of Naples. "She wanted to remind me that I hadn't met her expectations, that my living in the neighborhood was only an intellectual pretense, that in fact for her, for the place where we were born—with all my studies, with all my books—I had been useless. I was useless" (385). This statement both speaks to Lila's dearth of patience and regard for anyone. Further, it speaks to Elena' uselessness as support that Lila had indeed used her; that Lila had goaded Elena and used her for her own purposes. Elena always strives to feel useful, needed, and worthwhile; here her friend clearly communicates that she is not.

Discussion Question 1

What has changed in the way Elena sees Pietro?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Pietro certain that Dede's mind will not be changed?



Discussion Question 3

How is Elena of two minds regarding Pasquale's situation?

Vocabulary

inoculation, insubordination, maudlin, anarchism, ostentatious, frivolity



Old Age: 25-32

Summary

In Chapter 25, Elena reflects on Nino. Once again she ponders that every woman he follows has something to offer his career... except for Lila. Lila, she muses, will never be reduced by anything. Even in her pain and annoyance, she is not reduced. After moments of pondering the idea of Dede throwing away her vast intelligence on begging with Rino, she suddenly understands why Nino uses women to social-climb, and why Pietro's mother was ashamed that he married her.

During Chapter 26, Elena returns to Naples and reports Nino's findings to Lila, mentioning his warning about Nadia. Lila reports only that Rino has run off, without Dede.

In Chapter 27, Elena arrives at her home to comfort Dede, only to find that Rino has left with Elsa. Lila did not know, but thinks it is funny. They try to track down his friend in Bologna, and Elena discovers that Elsa took most of Elena's jewelry with her.

During Chapter 28, Elena calls the friend in Bologna, but he knows nothing. Lila accuses Elena of being a poor parent; Rino has his failures, but Elsa is actually a thief and a liar. Enzo drives Elena to Bologna. She is not angry at Rino, just worried for Elsa, and wishes to get her back so she can leave the neighborhood immediately. Enzo defends Lila: for her, the world collapsed and left only the whole where Tina was. She is mean because when she is calm she cannot abide the world without her daughter.

They arrive in Bologna in Chapter 29, but cannot find Rino and Elsa. Elena calls home and talks to Dede, who reports that Elsa and Rino are at Adele's house in Genoa.

In Chapter 30, Elena goes on to Genoa alone. She is both relieved that Elsa is safe and livid at her daughter. Elena forces Elsa to stay in Genoa with Rino all summer, saying she will go back to school in the fall and Rino can live in their apartment. While she feels she is punishing Elsa, her daughter is thrilled with the arrangement.

During Chapter 31, Elena shares the solution with Lila. She feels as if Lila deliberately upsets the equilibrium of her own life, even more so since Tina has gone.

In Chapter 32, Dede readies herself to leave for the United States to stay with Pietro. Elena tries to stop her, but other than a single moment in which she breaks down into tears, she will not hear of staying.

Analysis

With Nino's parting words about Nadia and Lila, Elena ponders both women in light of Ferrante's focus on Intellect. Nadia, for all of her good breeding and good family



connections, has been reduced to nothing. "Nothing" in terms of her station in life--a wanted criminal--but also in terms of her character. In order to make her situation better she attributed all of the murder and foul deeds to a poor bricklayer (Pasquale) instead of taking her punishment with courage. For a resident of the neighborhood--violent and corrupt--Elena finds Nadia's choices more criminal than anything else. Furthermore, the entire neighborhood still sees Pasquale as an innocent, shining example, when he was actually involved in several acts of terror and murder.

By contrast, Lila, uneducated, from poor circumstances, will "never be reduced" in Elena's eyes. Her character may not always be good, but it does not vary and she does not change who she is to make others happy. Elena feels that even she and Nino were "reduced" by the many games they played and hoops they jumped through to receive their education and be accepted in the intellectual world. Lila's intellect has a form of purity because she did not go through the mill that Elena and Nino did.

Most of Chapters 24-32 are consumed with the fact that Elsa ran off with Rino. There are some very interesting points here about parenting and how much a parent can influence a child's choices. Elena even tells Adele that Elsa is in love and there's nothing to be done about it; yet the entire event causes tension between Elena and her daughters, Elena and Lila, and between her daughters themselves--because Dede was in love with Rino before Elsa stole him. The only person that comes out of the situation without strife is Lila. Dede leaves Naples to stay with Pietro in the United States, and her parting words to Elena remind the reader that Elena was faced with the hard choices as a mother, and that she pushed her daughters to the margins for her work: "It's impossible to have a real relationship with you, the only things that count are work and Aunt Lina; there's nothing that's not swallowed up inside them, the real punishment, for Elsa, is to stay here. By, Mamma" (418).

Discussion Question 1

Is it circumstances, or the women themselves, that are the cause for the now-constant friction between Elena and Lila?

Discussion Question 2

Is Lila correct when she says Elsa's faults are worse than Rino's?

Discussion Question 3

Is Elena correct when she accuses Lila of purposefully upsetting her life to feel better about her own?

Vocabulary

preening, anomaly, cultivator, tawdry, denuding, renunciation



Old Age: 33-40

Summary

In Chapter 33, Elsa and Rino move in to Elena's apartment, and it is difficult. He is a nice boy, but depresses Elena rather than makes her happy. And Elsa is defiant. Likewise, Lila is unsympathetic and suggests Elsa, not Rino, is the problem. Finally, Lila demands Rino return to her house, although she does it rudely in a way that embarrasses her son. Elena invites him back out of sympathy for him.

In Chapter 34, Rino does try to get along better and help keep the house clean. Elena decides to stop talking to Lila about it altogether. Lila and Enzo are fighting more often. Elena often hears them fight, Enzo explode, and Lila leave the house to wander the city for hours. One such night, the police arrive and take Enzo away in handcuffs.

During Chapter 35, Lila focuses her energies on Enzo. It seems, although nobody knows for certain (not even Nino), that Nadia implicated Enzo in some long-ago involvement with him and Pasquale and the Communists. Pasquale as, to this point, said nothing to the authorities. He is happy to remain quiet in prison. Enzo confesses that he idealizes with the Communists but is innocent of all the charges. Lila mobilizes expensive lawyers to argue on his behalf. Throughout the months of her incarceration, Nadia informed on nearly everyone in their circle, except for her brother and Lila. After two years, Enzo is set free. Due to the dwindling nature of the business and Enzo's new reputation as a terrorist, he and Lila are forced to sell their computer business, and he leaves for Milan.

In Chapter 36, Elsa and Rino's relationship starts to disintegrate. Elsa carries on with other men off and on again. Rino is upset. Lila encourages Elena to try to talk to Elsa. Once when Elena is away, Lila comes to see Elsa and accuses her of being a hurtful person with no regard for others. This hurts Elsa and calms her for a time. For the next year she visits Dede, makes up with her, returns home for another year of study, and finally joins Dede and Pietro in Boston. Her parting words to Elena are high praise for Lila.

In Chapter 37, Rino stays on at Elena's apartment and becomes a great help to her. She reminds him to care for his mother as well, but he reports that Lila is seldom home, or she is writing. Elena wonders what Lila writes but does not concern herself. She is in the height of her own career, and very successful.

In Chapter 38, Elena is saddened that her daughters are gone. Although she has a good relationship with them both, she recognizes that they have less conflict with their father. Lila suggests she send Imma to Rome to live with Nino so she can say she did the same. Lila gently criticizes Elena for focusing on writing for so long rather than her children. Nino is running for reelection and Imma would like to support him publicly, but



Elena will not have her fame used to support Socialism so she refuses, and Nino loses his election.

During Chapter 39, Pietro's father is investigated for corruption. Elena calls Mariarosa to be kind, but she is rude. She both condemns and defends her father. Guido is acquitted, but his reputation is ruined. Elena calls Adele and expresses her sympathy. Nino is listed among the corrupt politicians in the Socialist party.

In Chapter 40, Nino is arrested but nobody can find anything out about him. Elena keeps quiet in her opinions about him, but Imma is very upset.

Analysis

Much of what happens in Chapters 33-40 are concerned with corruption and politics, two themes that run through all four of Ferrante's Neapolitan novels. One reason the thread is so prevalent is due to the setting: the 1960s and 70s were a large period of upheaval across the world. In Italy particularly there was a lot of changing ideologies and power swapping back and forth between parties. From the tale of Nadia Galiani, it is evident that the basic political ploys of a youth playing at social change can come back as an adult. In order to save herself, Nadia implicates nearly everyone in the small Naples community. That Enzo is arrested is the final blow to his and Lila's already floundering business and relationship. It is a testament to Enzo, one of the most honorable characters in 1,600 pages, that he never tries to save himself by dragging others down. Never would he implicate his friend Pasquale (who to this point in the story has said nothing) or Lila in any crimes. He simply told the truth, which was that he was innocent.

For all of Ferrante's emphasis on education and intellect, she reveres those of lower-class origins higher than their wellborn counterparts. Enzo and Pasquale are honorable sorts, while the upper class Nino and Nadia step on everyone to put themselves forward. The most potent example of this is, of course, Lila. For all of her sharp tongue and bad character and questionable morals, she comes out of the story as the most admired among almost everyone in the story. Elena, who has one foot in the neighborhood and one in the upper class, can never gain the respect and traction that her friend has.

The question of blurry boundaries comes up again in Chapters 33-35, when Lila and Elena effectively swap families. For several years, Rino lives with Elena. Even after Elsa leaves him and follows her sister and father to Boston, Rino devotes his time and energy to Elena rather than his own mother. Moreover, when Lila sees the need to intervene in Elena's parenting strategies, she does so without hesitation--at one point she tells Elsa exactly what she thinks of her, calling her a whore.

Lila, for all of her questionable choices and prickly nature, is very nearly a folk hero in the story. Loved, feared, and respected by everyone that comes into contact with her,



the treatment Ferrante gives her in the end--quite literally walking away into obscurity--is the stuff of fairy tales.

Discussion Question 1

How are Elena's daughters so defiant and difficult, while Rino is docile?

Discussion Question 2

How does Lila manage to be held in so much regard, when she dispenses hurt and criticism to everyone around her?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways has Elena missed obvious truths about her children?

Vocabulary

submissive, coy, gaudy, impudent, incongruous



Old Age: 41-48

Summary

During Chapter 41, Nino languishes in jail and Lila spends the bulk of her time with Imma. She takes her all over Naples, while also writing a very large and important project.

In Chapter 42, Imma repeats and discusses the various histories of Naples that Lila teaches her. She shares that the city is cyclical and things always turn around again. Elena stresses that people should still try to do good work to make things better. Imma asks if Nino will return to Parliament. Elena says she doubts it, but that Imma can love him whether or not he is an important person.

In Chapter 43, Nino emerges from the charges against him, and begins to write again. In 1994 he regains his seat in Parliament. Imma tells Elena that she cannot “see the future the way Aunt Lina does.”

During Chapter 44, Elena tries to get Lila to confide what she is working on, but she will not. Lila is fascinated at the churches and monasteries in Naples that were erected atop fields of violence and killings. Elena, rather than appreciating Lila’s happiness and intelligence, is consumed with what she is going to do with it. Surely it has kept her happy, with Tina, Enzo, and the Solaras gone... and Elena is planning to leave soon, with Imma.

In Chapter 45, Elena gets ready to move to Turin. She and Lila are talking; Lila reminds Elena that in the magazine photo years ago, the caption attributed Tina to Elena. Lila feels that Tina was taken because Elena was famous. Elena is shocked that this has consumed Lila for a decade. At the conversation’s close, Lila is very kind and thankful for their close friendship, and how they have loved each other’s children.

During Chapter 46, Elena ponders Lila words, at once recalling that Tina had the same name as Elena’s doll from long ago. She tries to deeply ponder the well that is Lila, but cannot. She realizes only that Lila will not, as Enzo said, have a quiet old age.

In Chapter 47, Elena moves to Turin. Still obsessed with the idea that Lila is writing, she asks her about it, and sometimes Rino. She never gets a straight answer.

In Chapter 48, Elena lists what has happened to others in the neighborhood: who has died, moved away, and remarried. Elena asks Lila again if she is writing and Lila says no, that to write means you want something to survive you; she does not even wish to live. The talk of Lila “eliminating herself” begins in the late 1990s.



Analysis

It is no surprise that at this point in the novel, the denouement, that both women are feeling the effects of old age. It is also no surprise that they are feeling them so differently. In her fifties, after three decades of writing success, Elena feels more insubstantial than ever. The theme of Elena's worth and value has dominated her personality for more than 1,600 pages, and in the very end of the narrative it resurfaces. Elena has struggled to raise three daughters, fought her way through an impossible relationship with Nino, supported Lila when Lila was very insupportable, put up with intellectual and class snobbery from her inlaws... the list goes on of what should make Elena proud of her character. Yet, at the mere mention that her friend Lila is writing something secret in her own apartment, Elena's self-concept shatters. For the first time in 30 years, she wishes she knew so many things about her birth city, as Lila does. Elena is reduced to the 12-year-old child of My Brilliant Friend, because she worries that Lila will, with her superior intelligence, write something that eclipses her.

In one of Lila's excited ramblings about Naples, she mentions to Imma how the violence and progress run around each other in cycles. In many ways, this cyclical format was the basis for Lila's and Elena's own lives, when they were young. One was on top, at the expense of the other; and then they would swap positions. One of the many ways Ferrante has highlighted the blurred boundaries in these novels is that the reader never can tell which is the better friend. Who is "My Brilliant Friend"? Lila or Elena? Each woman both reveres the other and also hopes for her failure at different points in their lives. Like the beautiful sites in Naples that are founded upon bloodshed, the friendship between the two women, ever-changing, blurring together at the edges, blossomed through violence, bloodshed, ill-feelings, arguments, and sometimes even hatred.

At their last meeting before Elena leaves for Turin, Lila reveals that she always thought that whoever took Tina took her because they thought she was Lila's. Ferrante did not mention the mistaken caption in the magazine photo lightly--it is a possibility that consumed Lila for a decade and explains why, at times, Lila was so solicitous to little Imma. Elena recalls the innocence of Tina and Imma, and the fact that Tina was named as Elena's childhood doll was. She finds she cannot wrap her mind around Lila's thoughts, and leaves them aside. Lila's parting words to her are some of the nicest and most sincere words she has uttered, and even they demonstrate the blurred lines between the two women: "You forgive me, too... Go, go do better things than you've done so far. I've stayed near Imma also out of fear that someone might take her, and you loved my son truly also when your daughter left him. How many things you've endured for him, thank you. I'm so glad we've been friends for so long and that we are still" (450). With a few sentences, all of the anger Elena--and perhaps the reader--has stored up against Lila has disintegrated.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it that "Aunt Lina can see the future"?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss Elena's successes as a parent.

Discussion Question 3

Explain the paradox in which Elena, with her successes, feels so insubstantial compared to Lila.

Vocabulary

exerted, grizzled, tempestuous, ebb, espoused, extemporaneous



Old Age: 49-53

Summary

In Chapter 49, Elena reflects on her life circa 2002. Her older daughters live in the U.S., Imma in France. They visit annually and beg their mother to visit in the United States. Elena is proud of how she fought and pushed her way without giving up. Once she hears her girls almost poking fun at one of her novels, and she wonders what exactly she has to show for all of her hard work. She falls into a depression about the level of her work; what if Lila has something better?

During Chapter 50, Elena daily fears that Lila will call her with a manuscript that eclipses her own. The years bring her good fortune; then in the year 2005 she goes through a time of leanness and worry. She visits Lila and they find Gigiola dead in the gardens. The death hits Elena hard because she feels a sort of futility of life. In contrast, Lila is still vital.

In Chapter 51, Elena's vacillation between expecting a masterpiece from Lila and stepping away from her envy and seeing her friend as a friend to love. She wonders if Lila will write about Tina, and she ponders all of Lila's limits in her life. In this period she realizes she would like to write about Tina.

Chapter 52 details Elena's writing a book called *A Friendship*, which is mainly the story of Tina's disappearance. At the time, Elena knows she is violating Lila's trust, and that Lila will not forgive her. At the time, Elena is invested in the book and thinks it is her best. She recognizes how much she needs Lila as a muse. It is published and well-received, and Lila never speaks to her again.

In Chapter 53, Elena reflects on what could have upset Lila about the book. In the novel she mentions that Lila was trying to get Nino to pay attention to Imma, and as a result ignored Tina, and Tina disappeared. What makes the novel very readable is what is probably the most hurtful to Lila. She reduces the book to a way to provide closure and a structure for Lila.

Analysis

The weight of Elena feeling her age is apparent in the closing chapters of the novel. She really struggles with comparison to Lila at this stage, more even than when she was a teenager. For Lila to be accomplished as a business owner or an engineer was fine; but for her to possibly be writing a novel is impossible. Elena both cannot abide by Lila eclipsing her in her own art form, and at the same time is positive that Lila's work of writing would eclipse her own. Elena owns fully in Chapter 52 how much she has relied on Lila for writing inspiration through the years. Likewise, she acknowledges that it is the bone-deep depression and anxiety that her life work has been for naught that she



writes *A Friendship*, a linear, supposedly fictitious account of her and Lila, their dolls, and Tina's disappearance.

Moreover, Ferrante skillfully returns to politics in these closing chapters, with Elena's realization that her books lack impact in the 2000s, when the young people of the world have forgotten the class struggle and the fight for social justice. It is no wonder that Elena feels that her body of work lacks longevity. Not even her daughters, who lived through it, find it meaningful.

Elena's daughters are, of course, very accomplished professors in high academics, which is a nod to Ferrante's emphasis on intellect and education.

The idea of travel defining a person's sense of escape, and of a person living in very narrow margins, is revived in Elena's comments about Lila in Chapter 51. She notes that Lila has never used a train or an airplane. As the world opens its borders to become more travel-friendly, Lila has narrowed hers, living inside the "strict perimeter" of the neighborhood. If Lila is trying to shrink herself into non-existence it would not surprise.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Elena, at this stage in her life, so obsessed with the idea of Lila writing?

Discussion Question 2

What does Elena's adult relationship with her children say about forgiveness, maturity, and redemption?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the tragic characters in the novel with the heroic ones, particularly in the end when everyone's fates are decided.

Vocabulary

rowdy, splendid, ineffectual, inferno



Epilogue: Restitution

Summary

In 1, Elena looks at the pages that the reader has just finished, the 1,600 pages that comprise the tetralogy. Elena notes that although Lila was the muse for much of her work, these pages are for her. Lila is gone from her home. Elena sees her home when she visits Naples for funerals. She sees old friends, even Nino, who still strikes her as a useless self-promoter. She visits Pasquale, who in prison has earned his high school diploma. She finds him serene and happy, with no regrets. They laugh and share thoughts of Lila. Pasquale theorizes that the Solaras took Tina. Elena cannot tell if he is serious or not. As she walks the neighborhood, nobody knows what became of Lila.

In 2, Elena receives an unmarked package. It is the dolls from her childhood—Tina and Nu. Elena recalls that when they were six, they threw the dolls into the grate that connected to Don Achille's cellar. Their first act of shared bravery was knocking on his door to ask him for his dolls back, but instead he gave them money. Elena experiences at first a longing that Lila will emerge from the corner with a smile. Then, she wonders if Lila has manipulated her for the past 60 years, using her to tell Lila's story, while her friend held puppet strings. Finally, she wonders if the gift only means that Lila was thinking of her.

Analysis

The epilogue is written wistfully, with the assurance that Lila has arranged the end of her life precisely as she wishes. Reminding the reader that corruption is still a thing even in modern-day Naples, Elena mentions that when she visits the neighborhood for her father's funeral, a shooting occurs on the steps of the library. She layers the irony: the very building where the children without privilege hungered for books is the sight of a grisly gang murder, a very product of underprivilege. The very next paragraph details Elena's discussion with Pasquale, who has risen above what the corrupt system wished to do to him—he has experienced a life of peace even in prison. He has studied and received his diploma.

Did the Solaras take Tina? Ferrante will not share the truth. Even Pasquale's comment is prejudiced, and the reader cannot believe it any more than they might believe Pasquale shot the brothers in retaliation.

The book ends poignantly, with an old Elena living alone, waiting and hoping for her friend's return. At the close of the book, Lila has not returned, only sent Elena their two childhood dolls. This is a ghostly sort of image on which to end the book; the dolls were thought lost 60 years ago in Don Achille's cellar. How did Lila come by them? Did Alfonso give them to her? The image of two small girls as friends are the last image the reader sees, and even Elena has trouble making sense of their life together.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the possibility that Pasquale was telling the truth.

Discussion Question 2

Is Ferrante trying to tell a true story through so much ambiguity?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the effectiveness of Ferrante beginning and ending the series with the dolls.

Vocabulary

hairsbreadth, clandestine, fissure



Characters

Lenuccia "Elena" Greco Airola

Elena narrates her fourth plot in *The Story of the Lost Child*, and although she ages more than 30 years in this novel, she still carries much of the immaturity that characterized her view of the events in the stories. As a narrator, she continues to view Lila through a critical lens, unable to give her friend any credit without fearing it takes something away from her. In this, she is an unreliable narrator. It is difficult for the reader to know how true are the events that Elena reports in these stories.

The main character's career flourishes in this last installment. She seems to find her stride in the difficulties and strife that life throws at her, in the form of an unsatisfying marriage and particularly a move back to her home city and her home neighborhood. As the story closes, she has more than a dozen published works to her name, although it is clear that she has chosen her career over her role as a mother.

Similarly, as Elena's career is successful, her romantic life trickles to nothing by the novel's end. Although the story begins with her finally running away with the supposed love of her life Nino Sarratore, that relationship is doomed from the beginning and only worsens as the years go by. The reader wonders if the self-absorbed Elena would be capable of a truly healthy romantic relationship. After all, she only gains true respect and regard for Pietro after they are divorced for many years.

Rafaella "Lila" Cerrullo Carracci

Lila finishes Ferrante's tetralogy on her own terms. In the first paragraph of the first novel, she disappears without a trace, and the series ends with Elena attempting to make sense of her life with her enigmatic friend. This novel is sharply divided by the disappearance of Lila's young daughter Tina. Before the event, Lila is capable, running a lucrative company and handling the world of the neighborhood strife. After Tina disappears, Lila effectively falls apart, as if the thread of humanity that has provided her with self-control and kindness completely unravels.

As in the other three novels, she provides balance, motivation, and discomfort to her counterpart Elena. At any time in the novel, the reader cannot tell who is on top and who is not. Who is the leader and who is the follower? Who defines whom? The enmeshing between the two characters is the heart of the tetralogy.

Lila's defining characters remain consistent across four novels: she is intelligent, brazen, bold, fierce, and independent. She is also cruel, plagued by anxiety, and both capable and incapable of real love. Her life events across the course of four novels have been outstanding and unbelievable, from humble origins to the creative force behind an innovative new company to an old woman, alone. As a main character, she is practically undefinable.



Nino Sarratore

Nino is, in a narrow way, the true love of both Elena's and Lila's lives. Because Ferrante believes in dualism in her truths, this can be true about Nino despite his spotty character. For Elena, he is a feckless lover, by no means devoted to her despite the many years they live together some of the time, and the fact that they bear a child together. Nino's only real love is himself, and all of his decisions reflect this truth: his inability to leave a woman, his dependence on other people's contributions to his career, his narcissism, and his abhorrence of criticism.

Lila's affair with Nino was short in duration, in comparison with the rest of their lives. However, Lila insinuates more than once that her love for Nino was true, in that it was free and did not come with strings or burdens.

Every character has a weak place and a fatal flaw, and Nino is Elena's, at least for the decade or more of her life that she was obsessed with him. She gains strength and much needed self awareness when she is finally free of him.

Enzo Scanno

Enzo's character remains constant throughout the quartet of novels. He is always the steady, calm, hardworking man that sprouted from the son of the vegetable seller when he was a youth. In this novel, he and Lila own and run a successful computer business. Enzo has been as devoted to his education as a self-taught engineer as he has been to Lila, whom he has loved since they were children. As a man, Enzo is one of the outliers of Ferrante's male characters: Enzo is kind, dependable, calm, and humble. These characteristics are generally hard to find in the rest of Ferrante's men.

It is only after Tina's disappearance that the reader sees Enzo's devotion to Lila flagging; of course, the dissolution of a couple is a normal - albeit terrible - side effect of losing a child. One wonders, by the end of the story, if Lila was actually capable of a long and close relationship, and perhaps Enzo did the best of anyone.

Dede Airota

As Elena's oldest of three daughters, Dede is the straightforward, black and white, honest presence in Elena's life. She is, oddly, more similar to Lila than she is to Elena herself. Elena is terrible at self-examination and humility, while Dede is honest about everything and everybody, especially herself. For these reasons she presents another foil to Elena, another presence in her life that is constantly challenging her decisions. Throughout the novel Ferrante makes it clear that Elena's choice has been for her career rather than her children, and the results of that choice are evident as the daughters lose respect for their mother day by day.



Elsa Airola

Elsa is Elena's second daughter, and is the complete opposite of her older sister. Perhaps the most visible result of Elena's slight neglect of her girls, Elsa is sneaky. As a character, she is a foil to Dede and also to her mother. She shows one face to adults and then does what she wishes. Her actions are underhanded. The most crucial plot event in which she is involved is when she runs away with Gennaro, Lila's son, at the age of 15. Although she eventually returns and finishes school, there is a protracted period of drama and stress for everyone that is involved: Dede, who had proclaimed her love for Gennaro many times over, Pietro's parents, who housed them for a time when they ran away, and of course Elena.

Gennaro "Rino" Carracci

Gennaro (called Rino once his namesake and uncle dies of a drug overdose) is Lila's son by her husband Stefano Carracci. Although bright and gifted as a youth, Gennaro goes somewhat astray as he reaches his teens. School is hard for him. He does odd jobs and has problems with drugs. Despite these obvious disappointments to Lila, Gennaro is a sweet young man that makes himself available to Elena for a time. It is clear, though not directly stated, that he suffers from the loss of his younger half-sister, Tina. Lila is obviously so overwhelmed by her daughter's disappearance that there is no maternal feeling left in her. As a plot device, he is a love interest for Dede, who loved him truly, and Elsa, who probably just went away with him to make her sister angry.

Marcello Solara

Marcello eclipses his brother Michele as the main villain of this novel, at least for a time. And due to his relationship with Elena's younger sister Elisa, he is for a time a kinder, gentler villain. The reader does not see the extreme rage and violence from Marcello. It is only rumored but never witnessed in the novel. However, for all of the times he appears in the novel he still provides a feeling of impending doom and darkness. By the end of the story, Michele has "regained himself" and resumes control of the family businesses. The reader immediately sees scenes of anger and rage: he screams at Lila during Marcello's wedding and also beats Alfonso (his possible former lover) cruelly.

Michele Solara

Michele fills a dual role in this novel. After playing the main villain for three novels, in this installment he takes a figurative backseat for three-quarters of the plot. The characters say in muted tones that he has 'gone crazy' or 'lost his mind.' Ferrante hints strongly that in Michele's great obsession with Lila, he was willing to take on Alfonso Cappuccio-- a very feminine copy of Lila--as a lover. Lila alludes to making this arrangement to "break" Michele. The arrangement appears to suit Alfonso very well as well as Lila; however, at some point in the story Michele pulls away from the relationship, and



emerges with a great rage against Lila. Whatever did occur, it allows his brother to lead the family affairs for a time, although Michele is still an embodiment of evil and disregard for humanity. It is only fitting that he and his brother are almost casually gunned down in plain daylight toward the end of the novel.

Alfonso Carracci

Alfonso is a tragic character across this narrative. A childhood classmate and friend of Elena's, from their youth he is suspected to be a homosexual at a time and in a place where that lifestyle was dangerous. He marries Nino Sarratore's sister Marisa, but the marriage is very quickly questioned, as she starts bearing children that are attributed to either Michele Solara or Stefano Carracci, Alfonso's brother. At times across the series the reader sees him, and he is for the most part, happy. He attributes his peace to Lila, who supposedly encouraged him during her marriage to Stefano to act on his desires and be who he wished to be.

In *The Story of the Lost Child*, however, Alfonso's life has taken a dark turn. The reader returns to the action of the neighborhood to find Michele Solara out of commission, "crazy," and Alfonso looking incredibly feminine and exactly like Lila. Various conversations point to Lila pushing Alfonso to appear like her and enter into a relationship to Michele to satisfy his obsession with her. While succeeding in removing Michele as a threat to the community, this manipulation on Lila's part severely damages Alfonso. Ferrante clearly shows his mental decline when Michele is finished with him, and he dies a tragic death.



Symbols and Symbolism

Travel

For Elena, whose life grows increasingly narrow as the story progresses, travel is a form of escape. In the early stages of the story when her relationship with Nino is new, they travel together and experience a bliss of leaving their lives behind. As the years go by Elena still travels frequently for her career, and always looks forward to it with excitement and only a little regret at how it affects her young children. Several times she mentions how she is allowed to live a different life when she travels.

By contrast, Elena looks down on Lila, who lives in the confines of Naples, or the narrower circle of the neighborhood. She does not travel and in Elena's eyes, does not experience life or escape her duties.

The ultimate demonstration of this link is that by the end of the series, Lila has literally escaped without a trace, and is presumably traveling as she has always wished to do.

Writing

For Elena, writing is consistently linked to delving into her memory. Although by the end of the novel, Elena has published a dozen works or more, the specific ones on which Ferrante focuses are specifically pulled from the recesses of Elena's memory. What is more, they revolve almost exclusively around Lila, as if Elena has been merely orbiting around Lila her entire life. This link goes beyond the fact that a writer often calls upon his or her experience for inspiration; Elena specifically uses a host of stories from her life and refits them for publishing purposes. Elena, who is bright and intelligent and book-learned, is not good at self-examination or self-investigation; for this reason writing these novels is always a chore for her.

Children

When Elena and Lila were young, getting pregnant and bearing children were symbols of health and prosperity. As the women age, however, the children are viewed as the epitome of innocence. Elena's children are young and fresh and innocent, and Elena's life choices slowly chip away at that beauty until, as teenagers, they are surly and hardened by circumstances. Perhaps the most vivid demonstration of this is Lila's daughter Tina, who is kidnapped or killed when only four--she is immortalized as an innocent for the remainder of the novel and, what is more, her disappearance is the beginning of Lila's unraveling.



Tina and Nu

Lila's and Elena's dolls are the very first image the reader gains from the first lines of *My Brilliant Friend*; they are also practically the last image in *The Story of the Lost Child*. They are the pristine, immortalized symbol for Elena's and Lila's fractious bond. They are the reason the girls become friends when they are six years old, and they are the last reminder to the reader that although Lila has moved on, figuratively or otherwise, to another plain of existence, Elena is still close to her mind and heart.

The neighborhood

In the other novels, the neighborhood was the source of violence and corruption and decay; it is the same in *The Story of the Lost Child*, although in this plot it serves as Elena's wellspring for her writing. The grit and hardness of the neighborhood lend flavor to her career; living in such a hard place gives her authority that her posh life in Florence did not. Anything that is hard and rough and inexplicable can be traced back to the neighborhood, whether that is a person or an attitude or an event. Whether or not its effect on Elena is positive or negative changes at the author's whim. While in one circumstance it makes her third novel a great success, by the time she reaches her forties she wonders if Lila and the neighborhood are too closely linked; that if getting space from Lila means she must leave Naples.

The Solara brothers

Although in the beginning of Lila's and Elena's story, Don Achille Carracci was the great, looming ogre of the neighborhood, the idea of a looming and impending darkness is actually symbolized by the Solara brothers. Technically, the two families are on opposing sides of the neighborhood's turf war, and when the children are young Don Achille is murdered, opening the door for the stronger family to step in. And step in, they do. Throughout four novels, Michele and Marcello embody so much evil and anxiety and doom that when they are murdered towards the end of *The Story of the Lost Child*, the main characters, as well as the reader, collectively breathe a sigh of relief.

Corruption

Ferrante's series is rife with corruption, which is a parallel for the human condition. Just as corruption is an underlying thread of wrongdoing and wrong thinking beneath a shiny, good, veneer, Ferrante makes it clear that each of her characters, no matter how polished or intelligent or financially solvent, is likewise crooked deep down. Furthermore, because the plot events are set in a time of radical political change and governmental corruption, the author has plenty of real comparison on which to base her parallels. Late in the novel, several main characters are implicated in political scandals.



Pasquale Peluso

Pasquale Peluso fills two rolls in this novel. He symbolizes a purity of character that has been wronged by circumstances. The neighborhood holds him aloft as a person pure in heart and character that was directed astray by politics. Nobody in the neighborhood judges him or fears him for his possible part in murder and terrorism; on the contrary, he is an example of a good young man that society turned away. Furthermore, he is held in contrast to Nadia Galiani, who, when she is arrested, immediately implicates dozens of people in the acts for which she is implicated. Due to her good background and her willingness to tell on her friends, she gets away from the law easily and launches an investigation that lasts years. On the other hand, Pasquale takes his arrest with honor and never says a word to implicate anyone. He is willing to go to jail peacefully and lives out his days there in study.

The earthquake

The earthquake that occurs midway through *The Story of the Lost Child* is, like Lila herself, a symbol for a force of nature: strong, untameable, not always on its mark, and prone to leave a path of destruction. Ironically, the literal earthquake in the novel temporarily reduces Lila to a place of childlike dependence and vulnerability; however, the earthquake and Lila share many characteristics.

Education

For Ferrante's characters, education is a vehicle to stability, right or wrong. One can see this truth in the fate of Elena's daughters who, despite their tumultuous youth, end up living stable lives in the United States as a result of their education. Moreover, it could be argued that the emphasis on education in their lives was passed on from their parents, for whom education was a priority. Thus, the stability can be seen throughout generations. The Airotas are another example of this, and the Galianis. For other characters for whom education was not a focus in the home, education had to be chased down and grasped. Enzo is an example of this.



Settings

Naples- Via Tasso

When Elena first moves away from Florence and back to Naples to be closer to Nino, he sets her up in an apartment in a nice part of town, on the Via Tasso. However, after she and Nino break up, she feels a need--at Lila's not always gentle urging--to move back to the neighborhood.

Naples- the neighborhood

Elena moves into the top floor of the apartment building in which Lila lives with Enzo and her son Rino. This living arrangement is the basis for an important time for both women, as they actually get to experience life together for the first time. It is the setting for the bulk of the narrative, and is easily the most important decade in the lives of both women. They are only allowed to share lives and experience the high and lows together because of their close proximity.

Florence

The novel begins while Elena is still living in Florence with her husband Pietro Airola. Although she has all but left him for Nino, she still shares his apartment for a time while she is trying to figure out her next stop. It is an important time as she awaits her next move and tries to live peaceably with the man she has just shattered.

Genoa

Genoa is the home of Pietro Airola's parents, Adele and Guido. For more than two years, Elena actually leaves her daughters there to live with their grandparents while she works to promote her second book and establish her new relationship with Nino. It is important because during these two years of spacious absences, Elena's daughters separate emotionally from their mother.

Milan

Milan is the home of Mariarosa Airola, Pietro's sister. After fleeing with her daughters from the home of her in-laws in Genoa, Elena spends several awkward and fractious months in Milan with Mariarosa, who is on the fence about Elena's treatment of Pietro and Adele. While there, Elena interacts with her first lover, Franco Mari, and eventually witnesses his suicide.



Themes and Motifs

Making and Unmaking

The plight of women has been a recurrent theme in all of the Neapolitan novels. All of the stories to this point have explored how difficult it is for women to have the same opportunities and successes as men, particularly in the time and place where the plot is set. Furthermore, the men in these stories have had excessive amounts of freedom in comparison to the female characters: to work how they wish, to sleep with whom they wish and when, and to spend whatever money they desire.

In the fourth of the Neapolitan novels, however, Ferrante draws a finer line than merely claiming women have less freedom and opportunity than men. In this plot specifically she claims that men define women--which is the topic of Elena's second book and is borne out in the last installment: Nino keeps various women in metaphorical boxes, keeping them around only in order to bolster his career and self-esteem. To his eyes, they do not exist as independent beings but only as vehicles to augment his greatness. Michele Solara, with his strange devotion and obsession with Lila, spent a decade creating his own definition of who she should be: his muse, his lover, his inspiration, his support. When she does not fall into his image of her, his mental state unravels.

Perhaps the most specific example in this plot is the story of Alfonso Carracci, who was suspected to be a homosexual in the first two novels and confirmed this in the last two. Only in the third novel does he seem at ease with his choice--his marriage is a sham in which both parties do as they wish. He works in Michele's upper-class shoe store in Naples and is every bit the posh, urban effete. However, in the end of the third novel Ferrante alludes to how much Alfonso resembles Lila, and throughout the fourth novel she insinuates that Lila has made Alfonso over in her image, allowing him to imitate her and dress as she would dress. The aim of this redefinition is to satisfy Michele Solara's obsession with Lila by 'gifting' Alfonso to him. The author hints that Alfonso and Michele were lovers for a time, and that this fact contributed to Michele's mental breakdown.

Margins

For Ferrante, and her narrator Elena, one must choose which parts of life are most important, and everything else slides into the margins. Elena spends most of the novel trying to focus on her career, which only leaves room for one other place-holder. For a while that person is Nino, and after she leaves Nino, Lila fills the void. For a decade or more Elena juggles her career and her one primary relationship, and effectively fails everybody else in her life.

She specifically says this early in the novel, that as she travels to support her writings, Dede and Elsa fall into the margins. Her own family--her mother, father, sister, and two brothers--barely have any relationship with Elena to speak of because she has no



space for them. By the end of the novel, when Dede leaves Elena to join her father in the United States at the age of 18, she specifically tells her mother that she has only ever had room for her career and Lila.

By contrast, Elena condescends Lila by thinking that Lila is defined by a "perimeter," and that Lila is only able to live in the confines of the Naples neighborhood rather than travel and see the world as Elena has. However, as the plot continues the reader sees that Lila is the one who has made a discernible impact in the world. Lila who has time for everybody, who knows everybody, who has gained the respect of the sphere in which she lives. By pushing her family to the margins of her focus, Elena may have notoriety as an author, but ends the novel alone, without any family close in either proximity or relationship.

Self-Esteem

Elena's struggle for affirmation has been at the heart of her personality, and thus is a continual theme in all her novels. As a youth she struggled to define herself in relation to Lila: she had to experience what Lila did, or must have Lila experience her own life, for it to make sense and to count.

As Elena grows into an adult and develops her own career, this tendency does not abate as much as shift focus. For a time, she is no longer dependent on Lila for affirmation, but Lila as a source is replaced by the academic and writing community she serves. Any writer would crave the good reviews and support of their readers, but it is crucial to Elena's self-image. She constantly must redefine what type of writer she is in order to fit some sort of preconceived notion.

When she becomes more mature, and lives in sync with Lila for a time, she is inspired by Lila's quick and active mind. She admits to herself that Lila helps her to think more clearly and write more proficiently. Yet she is able to draw a line between needing Lila's thoughts and merely accepting the clarity they give her. It is constantly difficult for Elena to simply admit that Lila may be more intelligent than she is.

Perhaps the height of this struggle is when Elena compares Nino's history of lovers and sees Lila as a standout; the only woman in his past that he did not use to augment his career or his own fragile ego. She wonders if Lila is a sort of one true love of his past, and despite her own success and the fact that Nino's and her relationship lasts for years, this thought reduces Elena to a place of childlike fear and petulance.

Intellectual Elitism

For Ferrante's characters, intellect equals power. However, intellect does not equal education. Lila, arguably the most intellectually superior character in the series, was only educated through elementary school, and this is further borne out by the clever but uneducated Michele Solara. Other characters that are educated and financially solvent



are Enzo Scanno, the self-taught computer engineer, and Elena's estranged husband Pietro Airota, the professor and author of renown at the university in Florence.

It is clear in the neighborhood that the ignorant and unintelligent are stuck. Sometimes being stuck is a function of being poor, such as the case of Lila's brother Rino, who bounces from relative to relative to support him. Never as savvy as his sister, he stays poor and dies a sad death. However, some characters are well-off financially, but figuratively stuck with no way out of a bad situation--an example is Gigliola Solara, wife of Michele. The woman is no intellectual match for her cruel husband, and lives a life of wealth and success, yet supreme unhappiness and helplessness.

These comparisons are neither universal nor stereotypical. A character who is not very intelligent or educated, yet manages to live a life of relative happiness and financial solvency, if not wealth, is Carmen Peluso; she marries the local owner of the gas station. Her life is small, not flashy or dramatic, yet it is stable and contented.

Despite a few outliers, Ferrante's characters rarely fare well if they are not reasonably intelligent, whether by gift or by education.

Ambiguous boundaries

For these characters, the boundaries get muddled. It is difficult for them to stay distinct in the world of the neighborhood, where politics mixes with corruption and morality, where money mixes with power, and where good mixes with bad. One of Ferrante's most clever reminders to this end are the many names she calls her main characters. Is it Elena? Lenuccia? Or is it Rafaella, Lina, or Lila? Indeed, in some cases one can mix "Elena" with "Lina." Another example is the blurring line between the Italian language and the more local "dialect." Often throughout the series, Lila in particular floats from one language into another, something almost nobody else does.

The reader is also reminded that when Lila experiences an anxiety attack, she refers to the episode as one of "dissolving boundaries," in which she cannot discern the shape of things in her life anymore.

Perhaps what is most true is that, as a reminder of humanity, most of Ferrante's characters are an alarming mesh of good and bad, with no discernible personality trait to emerge. A few characters have a preponderance of good--Enzo and Carmen, for example--however, the rest of the characters display enough 'mostly good' and 'mostly bad' characteristics so as to make definition impossible.



Styles

Point of View

Like the first three of Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, *The Story of the Lost Child* is written in first-person and narrated completely by Elena. Also like the other three novels, Elena reminds the reader that the entire tetraology is written from the benefit of hindsight. The first novel begins when she and Lila are 66 years old, and Lila walks away from her life in Naples without a trace. Throughout the novel, Elena inserts herself from the future; this also gives the author the ability to jump forward in time and be very direct in her foreshadowing. Although for the most part the story reads in a narrative style, there are enough such departures from the timeline to allow the reader, as well as Elena, to see the novel from the far future.

Language and Meaning

Ferrante's writing evokes the tumult of the plot. It can go for paragraphs in a very straightforward, direct manner, and then all at once pull and sway with lengthy philosophical passages that draw the reader into the drama of the neighborhood. Indeed, when Elena is narrating her own story, the writing is very straightforward. However, when the narration is focused on Lila, the language often grows convoluted and winding, much like Lila's erratic and powerful brain.

Structure

Unlike the previous three novels, which move straight through the narrative without breaks, *The Story of the Lost Child* is actually divided into three sections: Maturity, Old Age (*The Story of Bad Blood*), and an Epilogue entitled *Restitution*. Ferrante most likely departed from the norm in this final novel because all of the narrative as pointed to the disappearance of Lila's young daughter, Tina. This even happens at the end of the first section, Maturity, and is a sharp dividing point for Lila's life, a strict 'before' and 'after.' The Epilogue is a short discussion on Elena's life after the last time she sees Lila, how she ends her days, the absence of Lila forcing Elena to write about her to give her some sort of form.



Quotes

I began to feel, with pleasure, that I was far beyond my margins.

-- Elena (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: Elena uses the word "margins" many times in this novel. There is an idea of mixing boundaries and pushing unimportant things aside that is prevalent. In this case, she refers to being away from her former life with Pietro and her daughters.

I'll take what's mine, and I musn't live in fear of losing Nino, I mustn't worry about Dede and Elsa. I'm fortunate, he will always love me, my daughters are my daughters, everything will work out.

-- Elena (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: This sentiment is uttered early in the novel, when Elena ultimately pushes aside all thoughts of reality in lieu of what she hopes and believes will be true. The narrative bears out that things do not happen as she wishes they will.

It was humiliating to admit that a little fame, and love for Nino, could obscure Dede and Elsa. And yet it was so.

-- Elena (chapter 17 paragraph 3)

Importance: It is a prevalent theme in this novel that Elena pushes her children aside in order to pursue her affair with Nino and her career. There is no judgment on Ferrante's part, just acknowledgment that it is so. Ferrante would say such is the plight of women.

In what disorder we lived, how many fragments of ourselves were scattered, as if to live were to explode into splinters.

-- Elena (chapter 17 paragraph 3)

Importance: Calling upon a theme from the third novel in the series--disorder--Ferrante drives home her point that a woman like Elena is constantly pulled in a dozen directions, constantly under stress from every corner.

So calm down..what do you expect the Solaras to be? Your novel is done: you wrote it, you rewrote it, being here was evidently useful to you, to make it truer, but now it's out and you can't take it back. The Solaras are angry? So what. Michele threatens you? Who gives a damn. There could be another earthquake at any moment, even stronger. Or the whole universe could collapse. And then what is Michele Solaras? Nothing. And Marcello is nothing. The two of them are merely flesh that spouts out threats and demands for money...The Solaras will always be dangerous beasts, Lenu, there's nothing to be done.

-- Lila (chapter 91 paragraph 2)

Importance: The Solaras, curiously docile for much of the story, come to the forefront of



the narrative after Michele "returns to himself." Elena's book makes them angry, and with this quote Lila puts them in perspective.

My entire life would be reduced merely to a petty battle to change my social class.
-- Elena (chapter 49 paragraph 1)

Importance: This sentiment is the result of a manner of a depression that comes from Elena overhearing her children making fun of her novels. Her novels, which in her eyes attempted to address social causes, sound banal in the 2000s, when the world has forgotten about class struggle.

She wanted to eliminate herself, cancel all the traces, because she couldn't tolerate herself.
-- Elena (chapter 51 paragraph 2)

Importance: Elena speaks of Lila in this passage; from the opening chapter of the series the reader knows that Lila wishes to erase herself. The author brings that theme back around, here in the closing pages.

She pretends to be a kind and affectionate person, but then she gives you a slight nudge, and she moves you a tiny bit, and she ruins you...She had managed to bring out into the open a secret tremor that in general I tried to ignore, as one ignored the twitching of an eyelid.
-- Elena (chapter 35 paragraph 2)

Importance: Much of Elena's and Lila's relationship hangs on an element of mistrust, and also on the fact that Elena is never sure if Lila is her friend or her enemy. At times she feels that Lila is out to ruin her, and then she will turn around and be incredibly giving, generous, and helpful. This tension is at the heart of their relationship.

Lenu, I'm truly content now, it's only you I'm worried about, but you are you and you've always been able to arrange things as you liked, so I have confidence.
-- Mrs. Greco (chapter 68 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote is Elena's mother's last words to her daughter before she dies. After many years of a difficult relationship, Mrs. Greco, over the course of her failing health, confesses her love and regard for her oldest daughter. The closure is a great help to Elena as she makes her way through adulthood.

Maybe that's why I sought her out. She continued to emit an energy that gave me comfort, that reinforced a purpose, that spontaneously suggested solutions.
-- Elena (chapter 84 paragraph 4)

Importance: Part of Elena's attraction to Lila is because she is a bit of a muse. Lila's energy and intellect serve to direct Elena's own sometimes aimless efforts at writing. Elena admits countless times that she needs Lila to help her think more clearly.



And the chains of motherhood weakened, sometimes I forgot to call Lila, to say goodnight to the girls. Only when I noticed that I would have been capable of living without them did I return to myself, did I feel remorse.

-- Elena (chapter 94 paragraph 1)

Importance: A running theme in this novel is Elena's difficulty balancing motherhood with her career. Further, travel is always a bit of a respite for Elena. In this quote she mentions how in her travels, she easily forgets her life back home. In this particular plot point, Elena forgets to call home; when she returns, she finds that Imma has pneumonia.

Life now is this and can't be other.

-- Elena (chapter 30 paragraph 2)

Importance: During the period of living with Nino in Naples, Elena struggles with the tension between preaching feminism in her books and yet truly being 'kept' by Nino. At the urging of her ex-lover, Franco, she has to decide if she is willing to have Nino as-is without demanding more; and for many years, she is.