



MY BRILLIANT FRIEND

By Elena Ferrante

A modern masterpiece from one of Italy's most acclaimed authors, *My Brilliant Friend* is a rich, intense, and generous-hearted story about two friends, Elena and Lila. Ferrante's inimitable style lends itself perfectly to a meticulous portrait of these two women that is also the story of a nation and a touching meditation on the nature of friendship.

The story begins in the 1950s, in a poor but vibrant neighborhood on the outskirts of Naples. Growing up on these tough streets the two girls learn to rely on each other ahead of anyone or anything else. As they grow, as their paths repeatedly diverge and converge, Elena and Lila remain best friends whose respective destinies are reflected and refracted in the other. They are likewise the embodiments of a nation undergoing momentous change. Through the lives of these two women, Ferrante tells the story of a neighborhood, a city, and a country as it is transformed in ways that, in turn, also transform the relationship between her protagonists, the unforgettable Elena and Lila.

Ferrante is the author of three previous works of critically acclaimed fiction: *The Days of Abandonment*, *Troubling Love*, and *The Lost Daughter*. With this novel, the first in a trilogy, she proves herself to be one of Italy's great storytellers. She has given her readers a masterfully plotted page-turner, abundant and generous in its narrative details and characterizations, that is also a stylish work of literary fiction destined to delight her many fans and win new readers to her fiction.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is Don Achille such an important character? His presence looms over the whole novel; what does he represent?
2. Throughout the novel, Lila earns her reputation as “the misfit,” while Elena comes to be known as “the good girl.” How do the two live vicariously through one another, and what is it about their differing personalities that makes their relationship credible? Which girl, if any, do you most easily identify with?
3. Domestic life in the outskirts of Naples in the 1950s is depicted as conservative, challenging, and at times, even severely violent. Ferrante uses the girls' early “child play” to emulate the

- callous undertones of the town. Why is this analogy so successful? What is so important about Tina and Nu?
4. Why is Elena so invested in her education? Is it a means to an end, or an end unto itself? If a means to an end, what end? And if a means, is she being realistic or is she fooling herself?
 5. What is revealed of the girls' characters on the day they decide to skip school? Do these discoveries surprise you? How does this effect their relationship (or our sense of their relationship)?
 6. Ferrante returns, once more, to the theme of "mother-daughter relationship" in *My Brilliant Friend*. What are the abiding characteristics of this relationship? Who do you feel suffers the most—mother or daughter? Why?
 7. It can be assumed that Elena's voice is behind the title of the novel, referring to Lila as "her brilliant friend." However, toward the end of the girls' story, it is Lila who praises Elena, and encourages her to be "the best of all, boys and girls" (pg. 312). Is this dialogue between the two girls symbolic of Lila's surrender? Are you surprised by Lila's words?
 8. Lila's rustic personality and crude comments sometimes come off as hurtful and malicious. Furthermore, although both families struggle with poverty, it is the Cerullo family who appear to be the underprivileged of the two. Why, nonetheless, does Elena remain a highly devout friend? What does this say about Elena?
 9. What do the shoes that Lila designs and makes represent symbolically? What undertones do the shoes help to evidence in the latter half of the novel?
 10. How would the book be different if told from the point of view of Lila or another character? Is Elena's point of view the most appropriate? Why or why not? Explain.
 11. Page 282: "Do you love Stefano?"
She said seriously, "Very much."
"More than your parents, more than Rino?"
"More than everyone, but not more than you."
Lila's personality seems to have grown warmer by the end of the novel. What can we attribute this change to?
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elena Ferrante was born in Naples. Though one of Italy's most important and acclaimed contemporary authors, she has successfully shunned public attention and kept her whereabouts and her true identity concealed

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