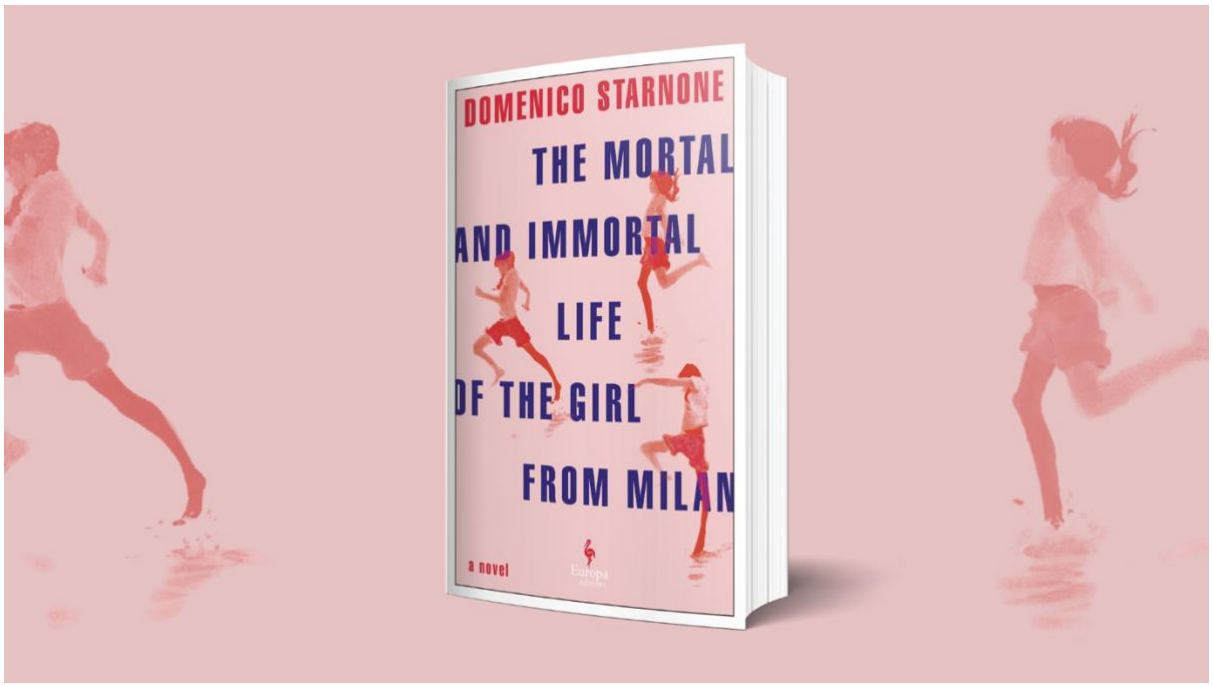
WHO'S THAT GIRL?

A Reader's Guide for *The Mortal And Immortal Life of The Girl From Milan*

by Oonagh Stransky



Domenico Starnone, born in Naples in 1943, is one of Italy's greatest living authors. His name is often mentioned in connection to the mysterious figure of Elena Ferrante because of their shared interest in certain themes and the city of Naples. But we won't be talking about that here.

The Mortal and Immortal Life of the Girl from Milan is a work of auto-fiction in which narrator Mimí, a writer, dives into his childhood, recalls his first young love, and traces the impact she had on his life through his university years and into adulthood. Drawing inspiration from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice (where Orpheus tries to bring Eurydice back from the underworld but fails) and from Dante's devotion to Beatrice (who acts as his guide in two books of the Divine Comedy), Starnone weaves a story that is tender, amusing, brilliant, and devastating.

Mimí grows up in working class Naples, loves graphic novels, and listens attentively to the peculiar stories his elderly grandmother tells him about heaven, hell, and her deceased husband. He and his best friend invent games to test each other's courage and win the attention of the "Girl from Milan," who lives across the street, and represents everything he is not. Her sudden disappearance leaves an emptiness in his life which he will forever try to heal. Mimí works hard at school but thinks he has to erase his natural dialect to get ahead in life; he wishes he could speak in perfect standard Italian. But eventually, at university, he realizes that this form of language and even this way of being – so beautifully embodied by his grandmother – is a gift, and he ultimately makes skillful use of it to surge ahead in his professional life.

The Mortal and Immortal Life of the Girl from Milan is the second book by Starnone that I have been privileged to translate. To celebrate its release, I wrote a reader's guide that explores some of the themes through the lens of translation.

The Complete Reader's Guide

1. What is the "pit of the dead"? And what does it represent to the narrator?

The opening lines of the book refer to a vague, dark space that will be mentioned repeatedly in the pages to come. Finding just the right phrase for it in English was the first of many challenges I had to resolve. I kept telling myself that it would be simpler and easier to understand if I could just call it the "land of the dead" or "the underworld," but the original is actually *fossa dei morti*, with the word *fossa* meaning grave, trench, or sewer. I couldn't use "underworld" or other terms referring to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, because they come up a few lines later, so that was a non-starter. I needed to find a way of describing a space that could stand up to the grandmother's long and detailed description of it, which comes a few pages later:
"…you raise the cover…then go down some steps…into a stormy cloud of dirt with thunderbolts and lightning and rain that comes down in buckets and stinks like rotting flesh… there's the constant sound of hammering and chiseling from all the dead people in their tattered shrouds…"
The relevance of the pit to the story can't be overemphasized: the narrator's mind is deeply imprinted with his grandmother's words, with his perception of the place going on to shape his later choices, his relationships, and his very existence.

2. How is the grandmother described? What role does she hold within the family unit?

Before offering a direct answer to this question, I just want to state something that may be very obvious to some of you: translators bring their personal histories to the books they translate. Mostly we let our experiences fade out, but occasionally I think they make us better translators. I believe this was the case for me with *The Girl from Milan*, with its focus on the narrator's relationship with his grandmother. Growing up, I spent long periods with my paternal grandmother (an elegant and austere lady) and short but intense moments with my maternal grandmother (a dynamic and spontaneous woman). My daughters' paternal grandmother was highly intelligent, devout, the backbone of her family. These days I am a grandmother to a three-year-old with whom I hope to enjoy a long and open relationship. This book allowed me to reflect on the impact my grandmothers have had on me; it's one of the reasons I enjoyed translating it.

Actually, I see *The Girl from Milan* as a tribute to Mimí's grandmother much in the same way that *The House on Via Gemito* is a paean to his mother, Rosa. Here, Mimí is tied to his grandmother's apron strings both affectively and linguistically, and he's not at all ashamed of it. On the contrary, his ability to understand, express, and take advantage of their relationship moves this book forward.

Generally ignored by the rest of the family, always dressed in her widow's weeds, responsible for cleaning and putting meals on the table, and speaking only in dialect, Mimí's grandmother dotes on her firstborn grandson. She opens up only to him, and he to her.
"What I liked about my grandmother was that I never felt shy around her, mainly because she loved me more than her own children—my mother and uncle—but also because she held no authority within our home. We treated her like a wordless servant, whose only task was to obey our orders and work. As a result, I'd ask her endless questions about whatever subject crossed my mind…. I was practically mute back then, always on my own, somber, both at home and school. I only opened up to her, and she was as mute with others as I was. She kept her words deep inside, using them only with me, if at all."

In terms of translation, bringing the grandmother's voice from Italian to English was one of the book's great challenges. It was hard to find the "right" English for her, to fit her into English—because she simply can't be contained. Consequently, I chose to keep many of her terms of endearment for her grandson in Neapolitan; this helped convey her voice and its uniqueness. Some of her word-phrases were untranslatable, like "nuncestanientecaèbellәcommәnuvasә." Sometimes she speaks in spoonerisms, and occasionally Mimí replies to her in her way of speaking, mirroring her. I tried to use English as best as I could to capture all these nuances, but it wasn't easy.

Essentially, I see the grandmother as a powerful gatekeeper, first because she holds precious information about the netherworld that no one else has or can give the narrator. Then, her use of dialect can be considered a currency that she exchanges with Mimí, allowing him to advance through university. Her religiosity (her penchant for lighting electric candles at the cemetery in memory of her husband) leads Mimí, and us, out of the drudgery of daily life and down paths that lead to considerations of immortality—whether the afterlife exists.

3. What does "the girl" represent?

The girl, who lives across the street from Mimí, stands for everything that the narrator does not have in his life, and which he desperately yearns for: a happy home, grace, genteel manners, words carefully spoken in standard Italian, not shouted in dialect. "*The sun never shone in our house, it always seemed to shine at the girl's. Her balcony was filled with colorful flowers, my windowsill was bare, at the very most a grey rag hung from a metal wire after my grandmother used it to mop the floor.*" The girl, and her brilliant light, will lead us into the darkest depths of this enchanting story.

The girl also represents desire and inspiration. She fans the flames of masculinity and sets the boys to dueling. She is mystery incarnate: Mimí does not know who her parents are. She might live in the neighborhood, but she is not quite part of it. Her grandmother "dressed entirely in navy blue with pearls around her neck, she had silvery-blue hair, rosy skin, perfect posture, and played calmly with the girl until the sun went down," while Mimí's had a "nose like a bell pepper and a permanently absent gaze."

The girl's sudden absence represents a rupture, one that leads to change, a sudden painful growth spurt, adolescence, and maturity, but something of the girl will always remain in him. *Her* absence-presence develops into an unresolved issue that will become *his* identifying trait: a longing to return to the boy he once was, complete with all his vivid dreams and natural talents, a boy who teeters on the cusp of success and degradation.

4. Let's talk about the duel that takes place between Mimí and Lello.

After Mimí is wounded in "Courage"(the bicycle game he plays with Lello), they argue about who will get to marry the girl from Milan—their shared object of desire—and eventually agree to duel to settle all disputes once and for all. Lello wants them to use the walking stick swords that belonged to Mimí's grandfather, which Mimí had told him about. Mimí initially refuses, but when Lello offends him by criticizing his Italian spelling skills, he changes his mind and gets his brother's help to craft two swords out of knitting needles sheathed in painted cardboard.

And then, in typical Starnonian fashion, there's a sudden shift. What starts out as an innocent, childish game suddenly turns dangerous, deathly, deceptive. Mimí instructs his brother to sharpen the tip of his own "sword" but to render Lello's dull. Mimí changes the location for the duel to the area just below the girl's balcony, where she courts death by dancing on the ledge, in

order to attract her attention and distract Lello. And in fact, when Lello glances up at her, Mimí inflicts his "mortal" wound.

5. How does the narrator's perception of his grandmother change as he gazes at the old photograph of her with her husband?

Looking at the photograph of his grandparents, Mimí admits to having a "kind of brain seizure." He is less interested in his grandfather, because he never met him, but still absorbs all sorts of fascinating details about the man's clothes and his walking stick-sword. Instead, when Mimí finally notices his grandmother and compares the pretty, bejeweled, fashionable lady in the picture to the whiskery, hunched old woman next to him, he is entirely confounded. I love the way Starnone writes about bewilderment, of being at a loss, thunderstruck, wordless. Here he captures how a young mind grapples with the puzzle of time; the child even wonders if his "real" grandmother, the one in the picture, might have been kidnapped and substituted with the ugly, old one by his side, as if part of an overarching ploy.

6. What does the world of the university represent to the narrator? To his family?

This novel tackles another theme dear to Starnone: how people move from one economic class to another. While we hear little about Mimí's father and mother, we know the family lives in a working-class neighborhood. Therefore, the narrator's decision to attend university—"a mysterious place where none of my relatives had ever set foot, not even by mistake"—is a bold one. After some false starts, he chooses literature: it "seemed like the fastest way to become the greatest writer on the planet." Eventually, he enrolls in two abstruse courses, mainly "to signal my cultural elegance to friends, relatives and my new girlfriend." But it's hard to make the transition. Mimí feels out of place, he wants to achieve success, but it feels like the cards are stacked against him. "I lived in a constant state of anxiety, as if I were hanging from the top of a glass wall by my fingertips, always on the verge of sliding down into a dark pool of sludge with a horrifying screech." Change is hard, and the risks are deathly.

7. How does the author use humor?

Starnone manages to balance out heavy themes (growing up, maturity, death, first love, betrayal, ambition) with lightness—with light—through skillful use of irony. We are amused and then gobsmacked. I think of how Mimí and Lello play at hurting each other with bikes and swords when they're young, only to go on and wound each other gravely later in life. Or, how the narrator "uses" his grandmother's words for a university project, only for her to then lose her ability to speak. Starnone is like a spider spinning a web: he uses humor to trap us, and then chews us up and spits us out.

8. How would you describe the narrator's relationship with his girlfriend, Nina?

The relationship with Nina is like a double-faced card: it represents "adulthood" to the narrator, but it is merely a pantomime in which he knowingly engages. He's happy to have a girlfriend because it makes him look good and seem smart, and it allows him to be coddled; when he looks back on those moments with hindsight, he says they were just playing their parts. The rug gets pulled out from under the narrator's feet when the roles are inverted, and his girlfriend dumps him for Lello.

9. Italian, Neapolitan, and… phonetic language

To some degree, the key struggle at the heart of this novel is linguistic. How will the main character—who grows up speaking Neapolitan, wishing he spoke standard Italian, and dreaming of becoming a writer—manage to shelve his home language and learn to use the "proper" one, which he needs to possess to move forward in life? How can he "elevate" himself without erasing or denigrating his origins and the people who cared for him with love? Enter: phonetic writing and etymology. Breaking apart words into their sounds and studying the historical/geographical origins of place names are two inspiring activities that also allow the protagonist to move the story forward.

From a translating perspective, I found the original Italian of *The Girl from Milan* almost more complex and experimental than *Via Gemito*. The original version of this book contains five kinds of language: standard Italian, Neapolitan, hybrid conversations with a little of both, academic writing, and phonetic language. My translation has three, possibly four, linguistic layers:

- I translated the narrator's "standard" Italian into "normal" English;
- I translated the majority of the conversations that take place in Neapolitan into standard English, without using any cultural parallels so as not to stereotype or weaken the discourse;
- as with *The House on Via Gemito*, I chose to leave some words in Neapolitan intact for texture, history, culture, or simply because they don't need translating;
- with regards to the phrases in the original that rely on a combination of standard Italian and Neapolitan, I have tried to retain a hint of this hybridization, which may or may not be noticeable to the general reader;
- finally, because the phonetic alphabet is used in the original for both single words and longer phrases, I thought it was important to leave the phonetic signs and so I merely translated them. Including the joke.

10. How does the narrator's perception of the girl from Milan change over the course of the novel? What does this tell us about him?

Initially, the girl is doll-like, and Mimí wants to protect her; he says he'd even be willing to descend into Hades to save her, just like Orpheus did for Eurydice. When he discovers the truth behind her death, he is devastated, but his illusion of the girl is only partially shattered. He will continue to adore her, his version of her—through a scrim of time. She morphs into a fleeting appearance, a symbol of innocent dreams and desires; she represents the purest form of idealized love, and this sustains him. A little.

11. So, what is this book about?

To me, this story is about lateral shifts and vertical climbs. It's about aging, growing up, obtaining success or recognition, and moving up and out of the working class without betraying the women who raised you with love. At the same time, this book is about risks, dangers, setbacks, failures, sliding back down, and relapses. I'm no mathematician, but, to my visual mind, this story is eminently graph-able, with the X axis devoted to the passage of time, and the Y axis for how well the narrator perceives his success or failure at any given task. In my head, I try and plot (the perfect word!) the ups and downs of his birth, his years at school, adolescence, university achievements, relationships, and early attempts at becoming a writer in Quadrant I and Quadrant IV of the Cartesian plane. The grandmother's existence gets plotted in Quadrant II, as it is a negative. (Again, given the importance of the photograph, no better word!) Imagine with

me the rising and falling line of the coordinates. Can you see it? I'm elaborating a sketch of it now. Basically, this is a story about life.

12. From math to myth, to hell and back

Someone else might have started this reader's guide with the wondrous power of mythology—and they would have done well to do so—because the reference to Orpheus and Eurydice is clear and present from the outset, and the dramatic tale reappears throughout the book. The literary reference to Dante's love for Beatrice as told in the *sommo poeta*'s work, *Vita Nova*, is also incontrovertible. But, as you may have surmised, I like taking the long road with Starnone; when you're not really looking, you discover all sorts of things. Unquestionably, those two literary love stories are at the foundation of this book, but they don't happen in a vacuum. While Laura and Eurydice are precious models of immortality for the girl from Milan, Mimí would never have seen her, met her, or experienced her if it had not been for his grandmother. She—with her bell-pepper nose, faded beauty, and hidden secret—is at the nexus. If his grandmother is indeed a gatekeeper, she is also the key to love. Thanks to superpowers acquired from her, Starnone throws the portal wide open.

BOOK INFORMATION

The Mortal and Immortal Life of the Girl from Milan
by Domenico Starnone

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Advance reviews:
Reading in Translation
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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

For a closer exploration into all things Starnone, readers would do well to visit the Reading in Translation website, which offers a range of articles about the writer.
Keywords and hashtags: Italy; Naples; Neapolitan; contemporary; family; literary; Strega Prize; infatuation; memory; grandmother; family drama; childhood; friendship; growing up; coming-of-age novel; short novel; novella; slim; Italian; translated fiction; prize-winning; death; drowning; best book of the year; most anticipated; editors choice; Domenico Starnone; Oonagh Stransky

Other works by Domenico Starnone also available in English and published by Europa:

The House on Via Gemito (2023), translated by Oonagh Stransky (Long-listed for International Booker Prize, short-listed for the Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize and the ALTA Italian Prose in Translation Award)

Trust (2021), translated by Jhumpa Lahiri

Trick (2018), translated by Jhumpa Lahiri (Finalist for National Book Award and PEN Translation Prize)

Ties (2017), translated by Jhumpa Lahiri

BIOGRAPHY

Oonagh Stransky has been translating Italian writers for more than two decades. Her first translation was a noir set in Bologna, *Almost Blue* by Carlo Lucarelli (City Lights 2001). Since then she has translated fiction and non-fiction by writers as diverse as Pontiggia, Saviano, Pasolini, and Pope Francis. Recent translations include *Butterfly of Dinard* by Eugenio Montale (with Marla Moffa, NYRB 2024), *Abandonment* by Erminia Dell'Oro (Héloïse Press 2024), and *The Throne* by Franco Bernini (Europa 2024). Her translation of Starnone's *The House on Via Gemito* was long-listed for the International Booker Prize and short-listed for the Oxford Weidenfeld Prize and the ALTA Italian Prose in Translation Award. Stransky has also translated Starnone's *The Old Man by the Sea*, forthcoming in 2025 from Europa. Born in Paris, Oonagh grew up in Beirut, Jeddah, London, New Jersey, and Boston. She studied Book Arts and Comparative Literature at Mills College, and Italian at Middlebury College, UC Berkeley, the Università di Firenze, and Columbia University. She currently lives in Italy.

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