

*From newyorktimes.com*

ROME — In Italy, literary fiction has long been considered a man's game. Publishers, critics and prize committees have dismissed books by women as chick lit and beach reads. They scoffed at Elena Ferrante, the author of "My Brilliant Friend," as the writer of mere page-turners.

Then Ferrante's Neapolitan novels became an international sensation, selling over 11 million copies, inspiring an acclaimed HBO series and cementing her reputation as the most successful Italian novelist in years. Her ascent, and the rediscovery of some of the last century's great Italian female writers, has encouraged a new wave of women and shaken the country's literary establishment. Women writers here are winning prestigious prizes, getting translated and selling copies. Their achievements have set off a wider debate in Italy about what constitutes literature in a country where self-referential virtuosity is often valued over storytelling, emotional resonance and issues like sexism or gender roles.

"Once we were more reluctant to write about certain topics, fearing they could be labeled as 'women's stuff,'" said Veronica Raimo, author of the novel "The Girl at the Door," an exploration of marriage, pregnancy and sexual assault allegations that was translated into English this year. "There was this idea that stories told by women couldn't be universal. But that's changing." In the past two years, novels by women have accounted for roughly half of Italy's top 20 best sellers in fiction — nearly double the percentage from 2017, according to data released by *Informazioni Editoriali*, which surveys sales in the country's bookshops; in interviews, Italian authors, editors, critics, translators and publishers said that women writers have gained extraordinary attention. Some call it "the Ferrante effect."

"My Brilliant Friend" and the other Ferrante novels showed that "there is a market for fiction by women," said Daniela Brogi, a contemporary literature scholar at the University for Foreigners of Siena. "And they also gave literary dignity to fiction about women." Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels have sold more than 11 million copies worldwide: establishment critics were previously quick to disregard stories about the bonds between women. That has changed. Three much-discussed recent books delve into mother-daughter relationships. Donatella Di Pietrantonio's "A Girl, Returned," released last summer in English, is a coming-of-age story set in rural Southern Italy. Claudia Durastanti's "La Straniera" recalls her upbringing in a dysfunctional family between Brooklyn and Basilicata. Nadia Terranova's novel "Addio Fantasmì" tells the story of a 30-something woman facing her painful past on a trip home to see her mother. Both of those are being translated into English.

Raimo, the author of "The Girl at the Door," said that younger readers in Italy have become more open to women writers partly as a result of having read women in translation. "They know there are countries in which having someone like Jennifer Egan or Zadie Smith is normal," she said. But many of the new wave of women writers attribute their momentum to the pseudonymous Ferrante, who has guarded her anonymity even as her books have become best sellers. (Some people speculate that Ferrante could be Anita Raja, a prominent literary translator married to the novelist Domenico Starnone, and they have looked for evidence of his hand in her work.)

Beyond the guessing game, Ferrante has generated international interest in Italian writers overall.

"There's a global buzz about contemporary Italian writers, including many women and even minorities, and we owe a lot to her for that," said Igiaba Scego, a Somali-Italian writer. Her novel "Beyond Babylon," which explores the traumas of the immigrant experience through the eyes of two women, was translated into English this year after being published in Italy a decade ago.