

# THE NOVELIST WHO INSPIRED ELENA FERRANTE

*In the almost eight hundred pages that make up “Lies and Sorcery,” Elsa Morante wrote about women’s lives without apology or fear of ugliness.*

**By Jess Bergman**

November 8, 2023



Illustration by Virginia Gabrielli

 Save this story

**I**n September of 1943, Elsa Morante and her husband, the novelist Alberto Moravia, fled their apartment in Rome with little more than the

clothes on their backs and some canned sardines. Benito Mussolini had been deposed by his own Grand Council, and German troops had taken over the Italian capital, beginning a nine-month occupation. The two writers had plenty to fear: they were both of Jewish descent, and Moravia, who was an outspoken critic of Fascism, had learned that he would be imminently arrested. The couple's journey eventually led them to a one-room hut built on a mountainside outside the city of Fondi. They brought only two books with them: the Bible and "The Brothers Karamazov," the latter of which they resorted to using as toilet paper.

In need of warmer clothes as the weather began to cool, Morante returned in October to their apartment in Rome to pack a suitcase of supplies. Her courageous errand had an ulterior motive: when the couple ran, she had left a manuscript of a novel she was writing in the hands of a friend, the filmmaker Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, and she wanted to insure its safety. Satisfied by what she found, she returned to the hut, where she and Moravia remained in hiding until being liberated by an American lieutenant the following spring. Four years later, the novel Morante had been working on was published as "Menzogna e Sortilegio," or "Lies and Sorcery."

---

### **The Best Books We Read This Week**

*Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.*



---

Now, for the first time, "Lies and Sorcery" is available in full in English, in an electrifying new translation by Jenny McPhee. (An abridged English version, which Morante considered a "mutilation," appeared in 1951 as "House of Liars.") On first glance, it bears few traces of the historical conditions in which it was produced. At the time the novel was published, Italian literary culture revolved around neorealism. The practitioners of this

style, including Moravia, spurned elegance, artifice, and the pomposity of Fascist propaganda, using plain language to convey the devastation of the war and the fractured society it left behind. “Lies and Sorcery” is in many ways neorealism’s inverse. The novel, a melodramatic saga of social climbing and doomed romance, is a deliberate anachronism in both its themes and its style. Its Belle Époque setting, sweeping cast of characters, frequent asides to the reader, and grandiloquence place it firmly in the tradition of the nineteenth-century novel. It is not concerned with truth but with lies: glittering surfaces, concealed identities, and foolish pretensions.

As Morante reminds us again and again, however, appearances are often deceiving. Despite its nineteenth-century veneer, “Lies and Sorcery” could have only been written in the twentieth century. The novel is animated by Morante’s hatred of the selfishness and superficiality that she saw in her countrymen. In their masochistic worship of hierarchy, tendency toward idolatry, and susceptibility to kitsch, its characters embody the traits that she believed had enabled Mussolini’s rise.

**M**orante’s novel is narrated by Elisa, a young woman who claims she’s been fed a “script full of lies” by a family with “a mad predilection for baubles.” Though born without wealth or status, her mother and grandmother maintained a tragically delusional belief in their social importance and a stubborn attachment to a class system that was designed to exclude them. This conviction has ravaged them in various ways, fraying their minds and their ties to others. And it has ravaged Elisa, who does not share her forebears’ loftiness but has inherited their uneasy relationship to the truth. From an early age, she has preferred the company of her own invented stories to that of other people; this begins as an idle habit of make-believe and eventually transforms into an all-consuming parallel fantasy life that insulates her from reality.

The book opens with an ambivalent turn of sorcery, a conjuring act that is

also an exorcism. Elisa has recently been orphaned for a second time by the death of her guardian, Rosaria, a minor courtesan who took her in after her parents' untimely deaths. The loss triggers in Elisa a flood of memories about her relatives, rich with details she could not have observed firsthand. She interprets her newfound clairvoyance as an imperative to record these stories "like a faithful secretary." But writing, for Morante, is an art that mingles betrayal and devotion. Elisa's goal is not preservation. Rather, by retracing this family history, she hopes to extinguish the "lunatic ravenousness" that destroyed the lives of her ancestors.

The first of the novel's many victims of illusion is Elisa's grandmother Cesira, a governess who seduces a local nobleman named Teodoro with the aim of rising above her station. Beguiled by Teodoro's extravagant façade, Cesira fails to pick up on the obvious signs of his dissipation, such as his shabby, drunken coachman, until it's too late. After their marriage, his family disowns him, and emboldened creditors descend. The couple, who had planned to live in a villa on the Corso, is soon reduced to a tiny apartment beside railroad tracks. Evicted from paradise, Cesira stands before window displays of items she can no longer afford, "like Eve before the closed gates to the Garden of Eden."

Morante's disdain for such mercenary aspiration is palpable. Cesira's circumstances may be pitiable, but her character isn't. When Teodoro loses the privileges of his rank, her resentment is so great that it leads to her emotional and physical disfigurement. Her resulting monstrosity is amplified by the baroque maximalism of Morante's prose: "She seemed intoxicated by this poison, her thin blue veins swelling under her delicate skin, her pupils dilating, as if bewitched by the image of her own hatred."

Anna, Elisa's mother, inherits Cesira's hatred and desire for preëminence. Despite being "a perfect female specimen of the paternal line," she is systematically denied its privileges—a degrading situation that, like her mother, she finds intolerable. This shared grievance does not make them

allies; Cesira makes her daughter a target of her suppressed rage, frequently squeezing her fingers or digging her nails into Anna's wrists. Meanwhile, Anna sees her mother as the cause, rather than a victim, of her father's ruin. She dreams of the day her deprivation will be remedied and she will ascend "into the superhuman regions of ladies and gentlemen who rode in carriages on the Corso and lived in mansions." This story being, as Elisa warns us from the outset, "a grotesque and inconclusive case" in lieu of a redemptive one, Anna is destined to *descend* instead—but not before an affair with her cousin Edoardo, the scion of the illustrious family that cast out Teodoro, whets her ill-fated hopes of prominence.

Morante's depiction of Italy's class system is equally informed by her leftist sympathies and her resistance to dogma. Poor characters in "Lies and Sorcery" are not romantic heroes but almost uniformly miserable, vulgar, and covetous. The rich are sadists, and none more so than Edoardo. Raised by an almost incestuously doting mother, he has internalized a sense of his innate supremacy. His "instinct to dominate often led him to love those lower than himself": puppies, governesses, girls like Anna.

Anna interprets Edoardo's romantic attentions as proof of her own exalted status. But he has no intention of improving her position in the eyes of the public through marriage, or by any other means. Instead, he longs for her to "mentally absorb her lowliness, so that he could see that proud person submissive and quivering before him." In one excruciatingly drawn sequence, he burns her cheek with a curling iron so that no other man can enjoy her unblemished beauty. More disturbing than the casual brutality of this act is the almost erotic pleasure Anna takes in her "searing pain" at his hands.

When Edoardo inevitably tires of Anna, jettisoning her to the trash heap of unfortunate women who imagined themselves to be his lover, she is undone. In desperation, she agrees to marry Francesco, a poor student from the countryside who has fallen under the spell of her affected patrician frigidity. He wants nothing more than to "prove himself worthy of her and facilitate

the glory for which she'd been born." But the couple's shared belief in Anna's eminence guarantees their unhappiness. Anna cannot forgive Francesco for his low birth, nor for not being Edoardo. The discrepancy between the man she married and the life she wanted eventually drives her insane. And Francesco, in his exaltation of Anna, rejects the love of a woman who doesn't care about his ignominious origins: Elisa's eventual guardian, Rosaria. Absorbed by their respective fantasies, Francesco and Anna pay little attention to their only daughter.

The accumulated folly that Morante describes has consequences that reverberate well beyond the family. It is antithetical to solidarity of any kind. Morante offers a mordant commentary on the fragility of political ideals in the face of self-interest through the character of Francesco; before his entanglement with Anna, he had spent his free time in taverns, proselytizing Marxism to anyone who would listen.

For Morante, Francesco's lack of resolve was symptomatic. Days after Mussolini was assassinated, in 1945, she wrote in her diary that his power had depended on the fact that, if made to choose between their duty to one another and the chance for personal gain, Italians would choose the latter every time. It is not until her mother's illness, following the death of her father, that Elisa grasps the true cost of her family's self-imposed solitude. "To set herself apart from the humble neighborhood in which she'd found herself, my mother had erected a cold and resentful wall around us," she thinks. "If a similar tragedy had befallen another family in the building, the pilgrimage of acquaintances to the door would have begun immediately, and our rooms would have resounded with wails of grief." Morante's point is clear: by yearning for the acceptance of institutions or individuals who would never grant it, the characters she depicts ostracize themselves from those with whom they might have found common cause.

**T**hroughout Morante's oeuvre, such loneliness tends to weigh heaviest on women. Often, isolation drives them to act out in ways that confound

readers' understanding. Morante's representation of women, especially mothers, has divided critics. Some argue that the "bad" mothers in her novels evince a low opinion of other women, others that she sought to reveal femininity and idealized motherhood as social constructs. "Lies and Sorcery" is typically ambiguous on this question. The novel's women, most of whom are mothers, all suffer, but their misfortune does not make them more inclined to sympathize with other women. Instead, they rage and sulk; they sink into denial; they neglect their daughters and fetishize their sons. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Morante had a difficult relationship with her own mother, Irma. Morante reportedly once slipped a note under her mother's door that called her a *maledetta* ("accursed one"), only to later return with a second note that referred to her as a *benedetta* ("blessed one").

The ambivalence toward mothers that permeated her life and work did not stop some Italian feminists from claiming Morante as one of the "mothers of us all," in the words of an influential volume published by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, in 1982. The most famous of her symbolic daughters is undoubtedly Elena Ferrante, whose pseudonym is often speculated to be an homage to Morante. Ferrante has said that "Lies and Sorcery" was "the book through which I discovered that an entirely female story—entirely women's desires and ideas and feelings—could be compelling and, at the same time, have great literary value." What she seemed to take from Morante was permission: to write about women, ambitiously and at great length, without apology or fear of ugliness. It isn't hard to find traces of her predecessor in the Neapolitan quartet. Ferrante's frank depictions of violence and poverty in "the neighborhood" recall the exacting attention Morante pays to the squalor of Elisa and her family members' lives in "Lies and Sorcery," their ragged clothes and garish knickknacks. Both works are attuned to the allure of ersatz luxury in conditions of material deprivation, as well as the social and emotional effects of chronic lack.

It's possible, too, that Ferrante's infamous reclusiveness owes something to

Morante, who objected to biographical readings of her work despite borrowing freely from life. In a 1972 interview, Morante insisted that “the private life of a writer is gossip and gossip no matter about whom offends me”; she left little personal writing behind, as if to preemptively foil any snoops. Although she didn’t deny that there were elements of herself in her novels, she insisted that “it does not matter how the facts occur in life, it matters how they are told. In books, the facts always have a disguise, conscious or unconscious, but that disguise is their truth. . . . As far as I’m concerned, I don’t want to be considered a living person.”

This statement casts Elisa’s fate in “Lies and Sorcery” in a different light. Taking refuge in fiction, understanding it as more honest than reality—the novel presents this as a psychological coping strategy with grave personal and political consequences. But, as Morante knew, fantasy is also the basis of literature. Elisa’s matrilineal inheritance—what she refers to as her “insanity”—is precisely what compels her to write. “To become a devotee and disciple of deception! To fix your every thought and all your knowledge on lies! . . . Such was my existence!” she bemoans in the book’s opening pages. Invention is a compulsion from which she never really manages to free herself. But what committed novelist would want to? ♦